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# The Price of Water

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THE PRICE OF WATER

By

Ajani Sebastian Burrell

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2009

## SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Ajani Sebastian Burrell is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE PRICE OF WATER

By

Ajani Sebastian Burrell

This collection contains fifteen short stories and a novella. The short stories range in length from three pages to thirty, while the novella covers almost seventy. Variances in length are not the only trait that distinguishes them from one another. The narratives share no singularity of place or time, nor do they rely on a particular point of view or set of characters. The characters that populate these pages are young and old, affluent and poor, educated and ignorant, American and foreign, urban and provincial, and male and female. It is my hope, however, that the characters embody more than just a rigid half-set of binaries; that they take on the complex roundedness of people we might meet at the grocery store or gas station.

While the particulars of any two stories in the collection are different, they do share some fundamental characteristics. All attempt to depict characters living with, acting on, or working against human desire and its attendant emotions. Often this desire takes primacy over all else, and the decision to act or not comes with a price. The collection also seeks to examine the intersection of the present and past and the role that intersection has in the moment to moment living of life. All the stories are told in a narrative mode and voice that favors the characters and their machinations over an authorial or narratorial presence. This is done in the hopes that however readers might find these stories, their reactions are shaped by their relationship with the characters first, and the author last.

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*This collection is dedicated to William and Elisabeth, my parents, whose unerring and unwavering support has made it all possible.*

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Manual and the Department of English.



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## INTRODUCTION

After reading a good short story, I always find myself paralyzed. Book or journal, magazine or printed sheets loose in my grasp, I wait for the effect to wear off. A good short story takes something out of you and puts something in, usually in unequal amounts, so a few minutes are required to regain equilibrium. It is, above all else, an experience.

Sometimes, once the initial effect – let’s call it shock – wears off, I will dwell on the characters. What might have happened to them? Where did they come from? Or I’ll ask myself how in the world the author managed to create it all. I’m usually sad afterwards, primarily because the story is over, but also because I’m wondering how in the world *I* am supposed to manage that. If a good short story is an experience, it’s usually a humbling one.

It wasn’t until my second year of graduate school that I happened across Raymond Carver’s essay “On Writing,” in which he presents his laconic and critical ethos on crafting fiction. In the essay Carver expresses the sentiment that there should be “No tricks” in fiction (1607). I tend to agree with him on this point, as well as later when he goes on to say that writers must “also want to stay in touch with us . . . want to carry news from their world to ours.”

It becomes clear exactly what Carver means when one examines his stories. Though often existing, as A.O. Scott says, “outside history and politics . . . [and] psychology,” Carver’s characters and the world they inhabit are nevertheless made intimately real to us (1625). It is the people and their plights, their battles with themselves

and their lives, which Carver renders starkly accessible. This access and its attendant experience are why, when I finish reading “Cathedral,” “A Small, Good Thing,” or “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” I am struck by awe.

On more than one occasion I’ve asked myself how Carver manages to accomplish his particular brand of narrative. In most instances it probably begins by focusing the story on an event decidedly lacking in triviality. In “A Small, Good Thing,” the event is the hospitalization and subsequent death of a young boy, but the essence of the story is two previously fortunate parents coming to terms with the loss of their son. To heighten the effect, Carver strives to do more by doing less. In his own words:

It’s possible, in a poem or short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things – a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman’s earring – with immense, even startling power . . . If the words are heavy with the writer’s own unbridled emotions, or if they are imprecise or inaccurate for some other reason . . . the reader’s eyes will slide right over them and nothing will be accomplished. (1608)

Reading Carver’s work, one notices that the author (whether actual or implied) is largely absent from the narrative. Carver allows his characters to bring the story to life through their actions, thoughts, and speech, and all through what would seemingly be their own words. A sound illustration comes from the final paragraph in “A Small, Good Thing.”

Near the end of the story, the parents – suffering from the shock of their son’s death and the callous behavior of the baker commissioned for the child’s birthday cake – make a vengeful pilgrimage to the baker’s shop after his last harassing phone call. The three eventually come to an understanding, and the parents are able to accomplish their

first small steps back to the living. They experience the warmth and sights and sounds of the baker's establishment, and in an act of compassion he compels them to eat, since "Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this" (*Short Cuts* 121). The story ends shortly thereafter on this note:

"Smell this," the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. "It's a heavy bread, but rich." They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the florescent trays of light. They talked into the early morning, the high pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving. (*Short Cuts* 121)

The paragraph is dominated by sparse, declarative sentences; an appropriate choice given the numbed disposition of the parents and that of the humbled baker. Together the sentences form a methodical cadence, broken up first by the simile in the second to last line, and then more so in the last line – both the parents' and the reader's point of departure – in which a compound sentence gives the final paragraph lift. This coupling of sincere circumstance and sparse prose complement one another, and allow the reader to experience the emotions more directly.

Even more significant to the success of the story is the absence of any discernable presence of the narrator. The diction and syntax of the narrative is consistent throughout, and the only judgments the reader will take are not thrust upon her by the author or narrator, but rather those she sees fit to extract from the moment to moment events and in the text as a whole. Without a true narratorial or authorial presence in the text we are allowed to sink into the moment, to experience it as closely as we can with the characters.

And when that experience is over we feel at least some small part of their pain drumming around in our own hollow bellies.

“A Small, Good Thing” is also intriguing because of the diminished role of “voice” in the narrative. Voice is a shifty, difficult concept to pin down, but it seems to have risen in prominence over the last several decades. Part of this voice is often the “tricks” which Carver derides in “On Writing,” but voice goes beyond merely that, to include pace, authorial presence, narrative distance, and a host of other fictional elements. In both his measured prose and inconspicuous narratorial stance, Carver reminds us of Hemingway (to whom he is often compared, and from whom he drew a great deal of inspiration). While any voice of the narrator is often muted in favor of the narrative itself, it is not to say that Carver does not have an aesthetic. His aesthetic merely gives precedence to the world, the characters, and their lives over all else.

With this in mind, “A Small, Good Thing” is also notable because it marks a point of departure from a strictly minimalist (and heavily Hemingway influenced) style, to stories that, according to Carver, are “fuller, more generous somehow” (Naughton 1615). “A Small, Good Thing” is a later version of a previous Carver story titled “The Bath.” If we ignore for a moment the often controversial role of Gordon Lish, Carver’s editor at Knopf during the early part of his career, we find what is perhaps the “real” Carver in stories written or revised after “A Small, Good Thing.” This “real” Carver reduces his reliance on minimalist prose, expanding and enriching the stories to give them a greater sense of place and complexity while maintaining the artful distance of the author and narrator from the narrative.

The result then, is a shift to a narrative mode which strives to transmit more effectively the “world” Carver himself lauds in “On Writing.” This world is one meticulously (though not excessively) rendered, precisely described, and deliberately narrated. The reader is able to immerse herself in the story and engage it at the most basic experiential level. Certainly other writers have written in this vein – from Anton Chekhov to Tobias Wolff – and it is no surprise that Carver’s work is often compared to that of the great Russian short story writer.

Comparisons to Anton Chekhov are also made for another contemporary author, Andre Dubus. If the short stories Carver wrote after “A Small, Good Thing” mark a turn toward richer, more expansive narrative, then Dubus’s go a step further. While the writing of both men share certain fundamentals of focus – emotional undercurrent, gravity of content, preference for the characters and their world over the machinations of authorial/narratorial input – Dubus’s writing seeks to render more fully this world and the lives of the characters. The writing in Dubus’s *Selected Stories* epitomizes the notion of a deliberate, measured narrative, and after reading each story I have to pause to let the experience of living with the characters sink in.

Much of Dubus’s prose is characterized by large blocks of descriptive text balanced between establishing both external and internal setting. Externally, Dubus’s stories clearly and thoroughly present the actions, events, and locations that comprise the narrative skeleton. Whether the quaint Boston apartment shared by Miranda and Holly in “Miranda Over the Valley” or the tumultuous small town life of the eponymous main character in “Anna,” Dubus creates a world for us rich in sensory detail, local flavor, and concrete imagery.

Through such meticulous backgrounding, the stage is then set for us to immerse ourselves in the lives and consciousnesses of the characters. A large part of this immersion hinges on effectively portraying the characters' internal settings, the manifestation and depiction of their psyches that provide emotional weight and complexity. Such a dimension is necessary given the arduous psychological or sociological conditions under which the characters often operate. We must understand by living and experiencing the traumas of being "The Fat Girl," just as we must know intimately the thoughts and feelings of Edith as she has an extramarital affair with a dying man in "Adultery," an affair endorsed by her husband as part of their ongoing pact to maintain an open relationship.

Much the way Carver does, Dubus accomplishes his craft by allowing the characters to speak for themselves. With the third person, which is by most accounts his preferred mode of narration, Dubus propagates the narrative using a fluid, limited omniscience focalized through the protagonist. The stories often start with a simple and distanced point of view, epitomized by candid opening statements like "His son wore a mustache" (249), "Her name was Anna Griffin" (262), or "The campus security guard found her" (359). Others, like "Miranda Over the Valley," begin with more complexity: "All that day she thought of Michaelis" (1).

In each of these instances, we are introduced to the character first, with a minimum of authorial presence. "Miranda in the Valley" continues: "as she packed for school in Boston and confirmed her reservation and, in Woodland Hills, did shopping which she knew was foolish: as though she were going to some primitive land, she bought deodorant and bath powder and shampoo and nylons and leotards for the cold"

(1). Dubus maintains this mode of narrative discourse throughout, and allows us to become increasingly intimate with the protagonist. After we find that she has gotten pregnant and been convinced by her parents to have an abortion (the reward for which is an unrealized trip to Acapulco with her boyfriend), we follow Miranda through the torments the experience creates:

She could not see blood in movies anymore. She read the reviews, took their warnings, stayed away. Sometimes when she saw children on the street she was sad; and there were times when she longed for her own childhood. She remembered what it was like not knowing anything, and she felt sorry for herself because what she knew now was killing her, she felt creeping death in her breast . . . and so she wanted it all to be gone . . . to be a virgin again, to go back even past that, to be so young she didn't know virgin from not virgin. She knew this was dangerous. (13)

We travel with Miranda through these times and others as she has a brief sexual encounter with her roommate's lover (bred of a simple desire to be touched again, feel human, and whole once more), and later as she makes love to her boyfriend (the father of the aborted child) for the second, and last time before telling him about the sexual liaison she had. We watch her grow and come to realize – as she does – that while she will be okay, she will never be whole again. With Dubus's mode of narration, we are able to experience this with her and through her, without the authorial interruptions that more intrusive forms of narration and point-of-view management affect. And when the story is over, one must take a deep breath and wonder, what now will happen to Miranda.



The previous quote from Dubus's story can also serve to illustrate two other points. The first, and this exhibits congruency with Carver's work, is that the management of prose, particularly syntax and sentence structure, plays a principle role in the effect a narrative can have. Much like the excerpt from the end of "A Small, Good Thing," Dubus's excerpt reveals a certain cadence, predicated on the repetition of words and sentence structure that despite differences in length and content, serve to reinforce the emotional tenor of the moment. In Dubus's excerpt the juxtaposition of an extended set of declarative statements with the short final line provides power, and emphasizes the danger inherent in Miranda's disposition. The matter comes to a sharp point there and speaks to something Carver himself mentions in "On Writing," a quote taken from the Issac Babel short story, "Guy de Maupassant": "No iron can pierce the heart with such force as a period put just at the right place" (1608).

The other point to be drawn from the Dubus excerpt characterizes much of his work. Inherent in the quote are elements of fictional craft that in some ways have become passé by contemporary standards. The piece is reported in a non-dramatic mode, relying more often on indirectly reported speech and interaction of the characters rather than directly reported dialogue or action. Such a mode tends to focus on enlightening the reader to the protagonist's state of mind. It is full of what we sometimes derisively refer to as "filters," those words which convey the unspoken processes of sensation and emotion ("saw," "wanted," "knew," and "felt"). The narrator, through Miranda, is telling us what she feels, rather than showing us. What often seems forgotten is that the whole nature of narrative is to tell (from the Latin, *narrāre* – to relate, tell, say). For my part, I'd rather be told stories of emotional heft and psychological import than to be shown stories

of triviality, or shown stories in which the narrator takes precedence over the characters. I would rather, for a few minutes, have the world of Dubus and Carver.

Though they vary greatly in subject matter and length (from three pages to almost seventy), the stories in this thesis collection strive to uphold and continue the traditions set forth by Carver and Dubus, traditions founded on the influences of writers like Chekhov, Flannery O'Connor, and Hemmingway. My preference is for stories that give primacy to the characters rather than the author/narrator and favor a more objective presentation of their plights. Much like Dubus's, the overwhelming majority of the stories in this collection is transmitted in a mode of third-person narration that operates with a limited focalization through the protagonist. Such a mode, I hope, allows the character's world and the characters themselves to be presented without many of the inflections and shadings that telling the story in their "own" words (first person) or the words of the implied author (akin to third-person omniscient) would generate. In third-person limited, the story takes precedence. This is not to say, however, that there are not times when the first-person voice is preferred and serves the story better than would a more objective and distanced third-person voice, and several of the stories in the collection operate under this personalized first-person voice.

Though it was largely an unconscious choice, I have also tended to write stories which take graver topics as their subject matter. If Dubus's work can be considered almost spiritual in tone (owing in some part to the repeated inclusion of religious imagery, theme or character), I would say mine is reverential. I am in awe of characters and the hardships they often undergo and more often than not survive, the decisions with which they are often faced, and the actions (sometimes conscious, sometimes not) they

will or will not take in pursuit of what they want. It is my hope that the characters in my work seem real. In “With These Hands,” a single mother is faced with the unenviable prospect of contributing to her son’s own demise or risk letting him continue destroying the family. “South of Sixteenth Street” tells the story of a young man torn between two life-long friends, one of whom is accused of raping the other, while “Old Lion’s Syndrome” depicts a middle-aged man acting on his unconscious desire to move beyond the ashen remains of his marriage and actualize his primal desire to have children. In each of these, and the majority of the collection, the characters are faced with a choice, one that has grave consequences.

Given such a focus, I also find it imperative, much the way Dubus, and Carver in his later work did, to create a world for these characters that includes a portrayal of both their internal and external landscapes. In trying to create this world, hopefully, I give just due to the psychological dispositions of the characters, as well as place them in the context of their world, so that the reader may journey and experience with them. Consequently, the reader is privy to both the thoughts and impressions of the characters. Sometimes these thoughts are frightening, as in the case of the narrator and protagonist in “Into the Cellar,” when we learn he has a vision of himself pushing his pregnant young wife down the stairs. To finish the job, the narrator tells us “I have to go back down and gently pick her up and bring her to the top again, stand her up and tilt her forward and let her fall, again.” Though the content of such disclosures may be reprehensible, they are the characters’ own, and the substance of these disclosures is honestly portrayed. For a story to have any import at all the characters must be treated and depicted honestly, and

the reader must be granted access or the narrative will struggle to achieve emotional resonance.

While I share a certain aesthetic with Carver and Dubus – in form and content – the specific themes on which we write and some of our approaches to craft are divergent. The stories in this collection are characterized by their almost unerring attention to the nature and need of human desire. In realizing and understanding this circumstance, I owe a great deal to Robert Olen Butler (among others, from Aristotle to Janet Burroway), who reveals through his short stories in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, and in his didactic text *From Where We Dream*, the importance of placing human desire at the heart of narrative conflict, which is to say at the heart of character and the story *in toto*. I have long been intrigued by the nature of human desire, and find it interesting that very often human desire supersedes human need, in such a way that what people *want* often becomes a more powerful impetus for action (or inaction) than what people *need*, so much so that *want* actually becomes *need*.

Almost all of the stories in this collection take their cue from this elemental aspect of life, probably none more so than the title story, “The Price of Water.” This story, one of two in the collection that are set in Albania, depicts a man who wants a woman and will go to great lengths to get her. This circumstance isn’t in and of itself novel, and it embodies a corollary posited by Chekhov and used by Carver as the epigram for his poem “The Ashtray,” which says, “the man and woman are always the two poles of your story. The North Pole and the South. Every story has these two poles – *he* and *she*” (1612). While most of the stories operate on this maxim, “The Price of Water” situates the desire within a conflict whereby the protagonist Martin will forsake even his moral

standing for the opportunity to be with her. The early portions of the story depict the protagonist as one who deplors base morals and finds it hard to operate in the ambiguous ethical circumstances he encounters in Albania. Despite this stance the protagonist will set aside these long held beliefs for the chance – and it is only that, the chance – at being with the woman he desires. In his own words, when faced with the accusation from this woman as to whether he would actually give up a piece of his soul to be with her, Martin says, “Maybe I would sell a piece of my soul for you . . . then . . . hope to God I could get it back.” In this moment he has made a choice and has admitted to it. Whether he knows it or not, he has in most respects lost the standing to make claims based on the moral high ground. It is a heavy price to pay for desire.

This brief synopsis also reveals another major theme of many stories in the collection, though in an ancillary role in the title story. Part of Martin’s conflict is predicated on a set of beliefs he has long held. While we do not know the origins of those beliefs, we can be sure they have their roots in some past experience(s), and they have played a role in how he engages and reacts to the world around him. Such a circumstance often goes unheeded or unnoticed in life, but I’ve found it a great intrigue to examine in fiction how the past intersects the present. Every action we take is usually, in part, affected consciously or unconsciously by experiences of the past. In many of the stories this intersection takes a primary role in the narrative.

In “Inter Vivos,” the main character fears that his interactions with people, and one woman in particular, have been unduly influenced by prior experience. He questions whether he has fallen in love with this woman because she resembles in several significant ways his ex-fiancé and the first woman he ever slept with. In dealing with this

conflict, he must also address the profound effect of his past on his actions in the present. Similarly, in “Exposed,” the protagonist/observer who narrates the story realizes that his interest in the scene unfolding on the street below him (and his desire for one of the principles) is predicated on the past experiences he’s had with, alternatively, his now grown daughters and a college coed for whom he was once a professor. The story “Hairgeist,” takes as its principle conflict a young man’s desire for attention, acceptance, and a place in the world, while dealing with the racial dynamics of his early childhood which in many ways compel him to go as far as he does in attaining what he desires.

These stories, and others in the collection, focus on the role of the past in the present moment, but perhaps none take on the theme as singularly as “This Day.” The longest story of the collection, and the only novella, “This Day” depicts the journey of Edward, a writer and professor of literature, through the frightening potential of Alzheimer’s disease or some other form of memory loss, to the realization that he has a particular affliction whereby he rewrites his own past. In doing so, Edward finds that the past as he has known it, as it has actually happened, is largely lost to him forever. The ramifications of this development are widespread. He can no longer be sure of who he is, of how he became the person he is. His relationship to his children and his wife are subsequently redefined, and the outlook for his future is destabilized without the balancing effect of a clear and relevant personal history. In coming to accept the realities, Edward must focus on the present, a circumstance that will surely prove difficult given the degree to which he has relied on the past in both his professional and personal life.

The narrative form and import of “This Day” also indicates additional departures from the influences of writers like Carver and Dubus on my work. While “This Day” is

the longest work in the collection, I tried to limit the present moment action of the narrative to the span of a single day. Given the significance of the past, much of the narrative relies on reported stories and flashbacks to establish the incongruence of the present moment recollections of those events. It is in this story, as well, that I've taken my greatest departure from the relatively limited omniscience and presence of the third-person narrator. Though the injections of a greater authorial presence into the story are subtle, a close read will reveal that there are indications that some entity (the author) is operating on the text, and that in ways narrative in and of itself is artifice. At times the story relies on parenthetical asides to convey information. At other points the narrator makes references to things the point-of-view character would not or does not know, such as "Edward opened his mouth to say something he'd regret, but shut it."

Going a step further, the narrative also comments on the nature of story. As Edward sits in the basement watching commercials, the narrator says, "Edward almost wanted to laugh – almost. Were someone writing a story about this very moment, the commercials would have been too ironic to be true." In the context of the story, such a statement and disposition is plausibly attributed to the character. He is a writer by trade and, like most people, is often aware of the little ironies life has in store. Nevertheless, the direct reference to the writing of a story in the midst of a story begs the question of what the author is actually trying to accomplish. Later, in response to a question about the distinction between fiction and nonfiction that his son poses, Edward says, "That's a question that hasn't really been answered yet." Here as well, the plausibility of such a conversation occurring is evident, but readers would also probably find themselves asking whether the author is consciously working on the story to his own ends. Near the

end of the story, the final paragraph adopts a shift in tense from past to present, which co-opts narrative convention (and markedly disrupts the continuity of the piece) to further reinforce the circumstances of Edward's new condition. The final lines of the story are indicative of some questions – both about the characters and about the narrative form – the novella hopes to raise: “Edward is glad for sleep to come. He fears what tomorrow will bring, his feet tingling under the covers, the impression of the razor still sharp on his skin. What would he write? He would not write the story of the past sixteen hours – that he is sure of. But if he doesn't, what then, will he remember of this day?”

What should be noted here, however, is that the questions raised about narrative form are secondary to the story and its associated experience. I did not want to disrupt the narrative with questions on form to such a degree that those questions would overshadow what should be a story about a man losing his past. It is my hope that the narrative can be read and enjoyed for being a story and experience first, and later examined for the questions on form it poses.

In a similar fashion, I've also noticed other developments in my writing that speak to a desire to go beyond the primary act of narrating a story. Recently, I've found myself intrigued by intertextuality, both as a bi-product of writing stories more frequently in which the characters have a connection to literature, and the inherent connection I see between all forms of literature. Such intertextuality occurs frequently in “This Day,” as Edward is both a literary scholar and writer. From the books on his shelves (“arranged alphabetically, from Achebe to Zola”) to literary references (“He preferred Herrick, and *Upon the Nipples of Julia's Breast* to *Corinna's Going A-Maying*, primarily because he appreciated nipples and breasts more than mornings and sunrises.”) to comparisons to



other writers (“even going so far as to spice his morning coffee with rum like some clichéd reincarnation of the Lost Generation”), the story seeks to place itself within the larger context of literary pursuit while maintaining a dominant focus on narrative experience. Intertextuality also presents in the story “He Comes Bearing Icons,” a piece of speculative fiction about a struggling young writer who – in his desire to secure his own place on the literary landscape – feels he must kill his idol, Anton Chekhov.

Some of the stories in the collection also contain imbedded signs, subtle reinforcements of the primary text that also provide an element of playfulness (even if only for me, the author) should anyone look carefully. For example, in “Coming Home” the narrative begins by describing the main character standing at his sidewalk for the first time since being taken to a mental institution several months before. The character notices that it takes exactly nine steps (the number of circles of hell in Dante’s *Inferno* – the same number of “steps” one would need to get to the center or escape hell altogether) to reach his front door, and later we come to find that his daughter’s name is Sybil (the name of many oracular seeresses in Greek and Roman mythology, one of whom Aeneas speaks with before his journey into the underworld in Virgil’s *The Aeneid*). In “Acts of Renovation,” a story which relies heavily on symbolism to reinforce the conflicts of the characters, the names of the two male characters begin with ‘A’ and ‘Z,’ while the two female characters’ names begin with letters from the middle of the alphabet – ‘M’ and ‘N.’ These names were not randomly chosen, but rather done to reflect the relative nature of the characters (the two males are essentially complete opposites, yet they both focus on and in ways meet at the middle with the two women). These aspects, and others, such as the decision to write “The Night Shift” in second person, are rendered in such a way

as to be unobtrusive and not to detract from the act of narration but rather to add another dimension to the story in place.

From Carver, Butler, Hemingway, et al, I've also come to appreciate the power of symbols in short fiction. Carver's artful metaphorical import of religious structure in "Cathedral" in part illuminated to me the effective manner in which the symbolic can add additional layers of meaning to a story. In a form as compact as the short story, symbolism and metaphor provide a concise yet multi-functional component that can reconfigure the way a story is interpreted. Few short stories have so fully realized the power of the metaphor – in this case dominant or ubiquitous metaphor – as Andrea Barrett's "The Littoral Zone." Virtually every facet of the story, from point of view to narrative time, ebbs and flows with the dominant metaphor of the littoral zone.

In reviewing my work, I've found that I tend to incorporate the symbolic or metaphorical into my short stories. In "Tourist Attraction," the main character Harold's fascination (and near obsession) with large, man-made marvels is representative not only of his desire to somehow escape the limited timeframe of his life, but also, unbeknownst to him, is indicative how his life has momentarily become static. The setting and immediate concern of the characters in "Acts of Renovation" attempt to provide clear metaphorical or symbolic parallels to the characters' hidden psychological pathologies. Most of the stories contain some element of the metaphorical, whether overt or submerged, and such constructions include spatial arrangements, symbols, and simulacrum. While such an attention to the metaphorical is not a requirement of complex, moving fiction, I find that in attempting to accomplish it, I am at least aware of the

potential for the multiple meanings with which a story can be endowed, even if those attempts vary in their success.

The arduous and enlightening work of accumulating, assembling, and later arranging the stories for a thesis collection has also been revelatory in other ways – as a writer and student. It is unavoidable that the author’s own preferences and prejudices and phobias will present themselves in his writing. The most humorous, and at times startling, are those operating so far beneath the surface that one is unaware of them. A great many of the stories, in accordance with Chekhov’s “two poles” corollary, take as their subject the interactions of men and woman. Of these, many of the women have been abused – either emotionally or physically – in their pasts, and many of the men seek both redemption and absolution through women.

Many of the stories also turn on a kind of mirroring between people, in which people are mistaken for others because of some similarity, or can see themselves in others. I imagine such a focus holds importance for me because matters of race and identity have played a profound role in my life, and consequently those of many of my characters. I am intrigued by how we fashion our self-identity, and this ties in closely with the significant impact I believe our pasts have on our immediate present and future.

Above all, I believe the stories in this collection present characters in an honest and accurate light as the narratives seek to depict the process of living one’s life and dealing with the hardships that arise out of attempts to actualize what one desires. This is, after all, what humanity is all about. We are needy, desirous creatures, and for this we should be loved because it makes us human. It is our one common ground. In the words of Joel Mathers, the wayward poet of “The Weight of Snow in Winter,” as he tells of his

desire to uncover other peoples' secrets and continue violating of their privacy, "The worst part ... is that I just can't stop myself."

## THIS DAY

Edward Sheppard sat on the deck, hard at work preparing for his own surprise party. The pen scratched across the notebook page, then stopped. He crossed out the second of two lines, rewrote it, crossed the rewrite out, then leaned back in the chair massaging his temple. The party his wife had been secretly planning for his fortieth birthday was probably going to happen tonight, and he itched with the discouraging sensation that the anecdotes he'd been trying to prepare – anecdotes to share with friends and family – weren't going to come off. For the life of him, he couldn't figure why this had to be so damn difficult. He'd been at it in the mornings for the better part of the past week. On Wednesday they'd started coming easily enough, the first things he'd written in more than two months just bursting from the pen like pee from a swollen bladder (and that – as he saw it – was clearly symptomatic of a wider problem; if that's the kind of simile he was going to come up with, how was he supposed to shape a decent anecdote?). No, at this point the anecdotes were coming along like kidney stones. Little details got lodged somewhere along the way or hovered just out of reach. He'd hoped to have a set of twelve finished to read at the party, but if this kept up...well, if this kept up he didn't want to think about how poorly the evening could go.

Light from the kitchen window angled over his shoulder onto the notebook. The dunes and beach and rest of the house were dark, but on the eastern horizon traces of dawn teased the sky red. The first crescent of rising sun made Edward think of Donne's poem, and then Donne's lesser-esteemed contemporary, Robert Herrick, both of whom he'd taught last semester in his 17<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry class. He preferred Herrick, and *Upon*

*the Nipples of Julia's Breast to Corinna's Going A-Maying*, primarily because he appreciated nipples and breasts more than mornings and sunrises. His wife Virginia would still be in bed, her breasts and body warm under the bed covers. He preferred hers to any other pair he'd seen or touched. Perhaps he should go back upstairs and see if she wouldn't let him hold them in his hands for a moment, put them in his mouth, and maybe, just maybe, they might make love for his birthday. His birthday was still three days away, but that was a fact he was willing to overlook.

In the shrubs around the deck, small birds chirped at the new day. The pen grew heavy in his hand. It had been a gift from his children, Amanda and Jacob, for his thirty-fifth birthday. He loved the sterling silver fountain pen, a stylus that resembled a dagger or a feather depending on how you held it.

He stood and walked to the end of the patio, shaking the pre-dawn chill from his muscles. Mornings were cooler here on the shores of Grand Traverse Bay, some five hours north of their Chicago home. Behind him his tracks in the dew were uneven – half a foot here, just the heel or toe there. The waterproof sealant had begun to break down. Before the end of the summer they'd have to reseal the whole thing.

The past couple mornings while they were still in Chicago, Edward had gotten up earlier than usual and left Virginia sound asleep in bed, chocolate brown hair – or was it some other brown? – framing her head on the pillow, mouth slightly agape. She would roll over and settle back in. He would tiptoe downstairs to his basement office.

Edward shuffled back to the chair. The cushion was still warm. That she'd been able to hide the truth about the party from him at all was circumstance, since his birthday this year fell on the weekend of their annual Independence Day get together up here with

friends and family. He wanted desperately to ensure that his knowledge remained hidden, that the party seemed a surprise. Virginia loved planning these affairs, so in addition to the anecdotes he'd been practicing looks of shock and surprise in the mirror.

The door to the deck opened with a vacuum-packed pop and Virginia stepped out in a terry-cloth robe and summer moccasins. She put her arms around him, kissed his ear. She smelled of sleep, equally fresh and sour. "What are you doing out here," she asked.

"Virginia, I'm fine," Edward said.

She straightened up, her hands lingering on his shoulders. "Hon, I didn't ask *how* you were doing. I asked *what* you were doing."

"Just enjoying the sunrise."

"With a notebook?"

"It's inspirational sometimes," he said. They both stared out over Lake Michigan. The red horizon had already mellowed into tangerine, broken up here and there by gauzy clouds.

"You see the birds?" Virginia asked.

"What birds?"

"Just below the sun."

For him, the lower half of the sun was obscured by a sand dune. He stood next to Virginia. "I don't see them."

"They're gone now," she said. He stared at the sun and pretended he didn't see her eyes searching his face. "I've got to pick mother up at the airport in a couple hours and we need to get the rooms ready. Everyone should be arriving soon."

“Sure thing,” he said. The notebook sprawled in the chair, its blank face peppered with sunspots.

In the kitchen, Edward refilled his coffee mug and added milk. With a swirl of his spoon black coffee and white milk dissolved into a muddy brown. Virginia stood at the sink with her back to him. “You should eat,” she said. “The kids won’t be up for a while, but I can make oatmeal or something.”

There wasn’t anything he’d like less than a bowl of mushy oats, so soft one didn’t even need teeth to eat them. He shuddered. “I’m okay,” he said. “Thanks, though.”

She cut off the water and sighed.

“What is it, Virginia?” He sensed she’d intentionally shut the water off before sighing.

“Nothing.”

“Virginia.”

“Did you *really* not see the birds outside a minute ago?”

“Why would I lie about that?”

“Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Edward, stop playing games.”

“No, I didn’t see them.”

Virginia picked up a towel and deliberately patted her hands dry. “Are you having trouble seeing?”

He should have just lied and said he’d seen the damn birds. He really didn’t want another argument. “They were still there?”



She nodded. “A flock of ducks or geese or something, flying in a V-shape just under the sun.”

“That’s strange. It seems like the wrong time for migrations, right?”

“I don’t know.” She looped the towel through the door handle on the refrigerator.

“Will you promise me something?”

“What?”

“Just promise.”

“How can I promise if I don’t know what it is?”

“Please?” Her robe hung open near the neck, exposing the inner curves of her breasts.

“I promise,” he said.

“Will you go see a doctor when we get home?”

Heat flashed across the back of his neck and spread over his ears. “For what?”

“Edward, you know for what. You’ve been –”

“Stop! Stop right now. There’s nothing wrong with my head. For the love of God, I’m forty years old.”

“You promised,” she said quietly.

Edward opened his mouth to say something he’d regret, but shut it. “You said we needed to get the rooms ready. Which ones should I do?”

Virginia stared.

“Which ones?”

“The first floor and the basement,” she said, counting them off on her fingers.

Edward stumbled down the steep staircase to the basement. Grey light filtered in through the half windows. Virginia had set out fresh linens on the arm of the sofa-bed, and probably some in the extra bedroom too. The cool close air was like that in his study at home. With help from their parents, he and Virginia had bought their place in suburban Chicago twelve years ago. "I'm thinking my office is going to go right here," he'd said, about the small room adjacent to the larger one where the water heater and furnace hulked side by side like two aging brothers.

"Really?" she'd asked. "It's so dark down here. And tight. The kids will each have a room of their own and we'll still have two extra ones upstairs. Or you could use the attic."

The attic in Chicago was spacious and open, slanting wooden beams under the roof giving it a peculiarly dusty smell like the undisturbed corners of a closet. Angled windows spread light and offered an unobstructed view of their backyard and the neighbor's. But he'd frowned at that. He didn't want to be disturbed while he was preparing for his classes or writing. "Women work in attics," he said. "Men work in basements." As a child he used to love going down to his father's workshop, filled with tools that could sever a finger or put holes in things, rife with the smell of sawdust and grease. His father would build all sorts of stuff, some the family needed, like a step-stool for the kitchen, but mostly things they didn't, like the miniature Dutch windmill he'd made for the backyard when Edward was ten. He'd listen to Tigers' games on the small transistor radio while hunched over the workbench, a piece of wood in the vice or on the table before him. Every once in a while when Edward opened the door to his own basement, he could almost smell the wood and grease and tobacco smoke of years past.

“Edward?” Virginia called from the top of the steps. “Edward.”

“What,” he said, stretched across the sofa-bed trying to hook one corner of the sheet over the mattress.

“Could you check the bathroom too, please? Make sure there’s soap and toilet paper and towels.”

How did she keep track of all this? “Yeah, I’ll check.” He got off the bed and went to do that immediately, before he forgot. He could just see her face now, embarrassment stealing across her cheeks as she looked accusingly at him while someone called out in misery from the bathroom – stuck on the toilet with no toilet paper. No, better to just be safe about it. Of course, the bathroom was already outfitted with everything their guests would need. Under the sink extra bottles of liquid hand soap and plump rolls of peach-colored toilet paper in neat rows. And just in case, extra feminine hygiene products – little bullet-shaped tampons, a stack of plastic-wrapped pads – and peroxide and band-aids. He guessed several additional sets of towels were lurking somewhere too.

Virginia had a knack for keeping everything straight, unlike him. He’d inherited his mother’s haphazard method (he’d once come down empty-handed after a hopeless search for sleeping bags. His mother’s response: Oh, honey, they’re not with the camping stuff, they’re next to the boots. Why boots, he’d asked, and she looked at him as though he’d asked why dinner before dessert).

This approach dominated his office at home, which presented the appearance of order but had become bloated over the years with more than the room could reasonably hold. The far wall had three six-by-four bookshelves full of books arranged

alphabetically, from Achebe to Zola. He'd read most of them, and had designs on reading them all, but accepted he never would. There was never enough time for all those old books, and every month more seemed to sneak onto the shelves there and at his campus office, such that a fourth shelf – for which there was no room – or some substantial purging would soon be required.

Near his desk gaped an old fireplace he'd refurbished and gotten working with his father's assistance. Paranoid about carbon monoxide poisoning, he'd only had two fires in it in eight years. Besides, it just didn't seem right to have a fire during the day. On the wall hung his academic credentials: BA in History from Michigan, MA in Creative Writing from NYU, PhD in Comparative Literature from Northwestern – weighty documents all, preserved under glass panes in tarnished brass frames. He kept them there instead of his office on campus because, as he was quick to tell people, the displaying of diplomas seemed like pompous overcompensation for academics, the way fast expensive cars and shiny Rolexes were for Gold Coast entrepreneurs. The real reason they were locked away in his basement was because he felt he hadn't attained the lofty goals associated with degrees from such glittering institutions. Sometimes, after a bourbon or three too many, he'd open up to the fear that he might never reach those heights.

Though his doctorate was in Comparative Lit, Edward considered himself a writer. With a small independent press in Alabama he published the book – a novel – that had become the key to getting a gig teaching writing at universities. He had also published a number of stories and essays, but the unpublished manuscripts piled on every available flat surface of his office attested, he felt, more to his failures than his successes.

At last count his book was somewhere around number two million on Amazon's best sellers' list.

Edward stepped back from the sofa-bed. The bedspread bunched at the corners and the sheet still hung unevenly over the sides. Clearly his competencies weren't in the domestic arena. Recently, he hadn't been sure where his competencies lay. While he'd never considered himself a wildly successful writer, at least he always felt as though he was working toward something. That was until two months ago when he'd come down to his study one morning and turned on his computer only to stare at a blank screen, the cursor blinking steady as a heartbeat. Despite his earnest attempts to work through it – even going so far as to spice his morning coffee with rum like some clichéd reincarnation of the Lost Generation – the cursor had mocked him every day since.

Of course, it was no surprise that the struggles had coincided with Virginia's subtle intimations that he was losing his mind. Though she hadn't said the word yet, he could virtually see her trying out the syllables of Alz-heim-er's on the tip of her tongue as she instead asked him "what's the matter." Edward plopped down on the edge of the remade sofa-bed and flicked on the television. A cable news show panel was discussing something at a round table. *It's preposterous*, one commentator yelled. *How can we restrict personal use of fireworks? It's unpatriotic*. Three or four other voices chimed in, all clamoring to be heard. *What's fireworks got to do with patriotism?* shouted one. *The legislation is in direct response to an alarming increase in fireworks-related accidents*, screamed another. *You might as well burn up the Declaration of Independence if you ban fireworks. What's next, legalizing flag-burning? Don't you people remember how this country came to be? What we fought for?* The bickering, over what Edward still wasn't

sure, was worsening his freshly blossomed headache. *It's just preposterous!* He put the television on mute as the program went to commercial.

Watching the commercials, Edward almost wanted to laugh – almost. Were someone writing a story about this very moment, the commercials would have been too ironic to be true: first two pharmaceutical ads – one for some strange balm you rubbed on your forehead in the event of a migraine; the other for an impotence pill – and then a commercial featuring old people playing some sort of video game. Edward turned the sound back on to seniors and baby-boomers gushing over a hand-held device that helped sustain memory and, according to the narrator with a manic, amphetamine-laced voice, *keep your brain sharp!*

His college friends had a long-standing joke that his memory was horrible, since he could only vaguely remember many events of their campus days. Mr. Memory until his Ph.D., then Dr. Memory, and up until a month ago he'd still laughed at it with them. Edward figured he couldn't remember because of his relatively liberal consumption of drugs and alcohol during those years. And he was pleased to find out in grad school that, according to some well-known author or another, writers must above-all have short memories. Edward was pretty sure Alzheimer's wasn't what they had in mind.

One evening in May, he and Virginia had dinner with another couple and they got around to talking about the births of their children. As Virginia told of the difficulties of having Jacob, Edward interjected. "He came out blue, from lack of oxygen. I couldn't believe it."

Everyone looked at him. Virginia's face clouded over. "What are you talking about?"

“Jacob had the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck, right? I was terrified.”

“Edward, you were there. You don’t remember?”

Virginia said little else to him at dinner, and at home ignored him completely until they got into bed. He cut his bedside lamp off, still perplexed by how he’d confused his own son’s birth.

“Was that one of your bad jokes?” Virginia asked.

“No,” Edward mumbled. His wife’s teeth clicked together in the silence. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t know where I got that. Maybe I’ve read too many stories about dead children.”

“Edward! That’s just grotesque.”

The next morning Virginia started asking him how he was feeling, which only made it worse, and he stopped asking questions like ‘have you seen my \_\_\_\_\_,’ even though he’d always asked them and Virginia almost always had the answer. About a month ago he’d mixed up parts of their honeymoon. According to her, she hadn’t been looking at the woman on the beach – least of all not out of some sort of *aesthetic appreciation* – only he had, and she’d caught him at it. Oh, and it wasn’t a sea urchin that ruined the second to last day; she got stung by jelly fish – two of them, in fact. And no, he hadn’t peed on her leg to ease the pain, just for the record. He could only look at her and ask why the hell would he make up something like that if it hadn’t happened? Now *that*, she’d said, was the million-dollar question.

This rather egregious mix-up had her strolling into the kitchen the next morning with a homely smile on her face while he sat at the table reading the *Tribune*. “Honey, I bought some vitamins yesterday,” she’d said.

“Vitamins? If you pull out a bottle of Centrum I’m leaving.”

“No, nothing like that,” she said sweetly. “Something better.” She took a bottle from the pantry and held out two clear capsules filled with a liquid the color of Fireweed honey.

“Garlic oil?”

“Fish oil.”

“Do you have any Flintstones vitamins?”

“Edward, be serious.”

“I am. I’m not taking any fish oil pills.”

“They’re just pills.” Her happy-go-lucky countenance had vanished. Tears pooled in her eyes. “Please.”

“Virginia, really. Everyone forgets things from time to time. Just the other day didn’t you forgot Jacob’s parent-teacher conference? I’m fine, trust me.”

“You know that’s not the same. And none of this is fine. You can’t remember our honeymoon or the birth of our son or where your brown loafers are. How can you not be concerned?”

The glass in Edward’s hand trembled. “You have no idea. That’s all I think about. I haven’t been able to write anything in a month.”

“That’s what you’re concerned about?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“That’s what it sounded like.”

“Okay, it’s not what I meant.”

“Then why’d you say it?” she asked.



Edward sighed and took the pills. They didn't seem to have any effect. He still forgot things and still couldn't write. Then, he got wind of the surprise party. Just like that he had something to write. He started planning which anecdotes he'd share. Down in his basement office as he waited for the computer to boot up, an unease welled up in his stomach and he felt faint. Everything before him blurred. He swallowed hard, then took a sip of coffee. Amidst a fear that had drummed in his mind all day and night for two months and ceased only when he was able to fall asleep, he put his fingers gently to the keyboard. The cursor blazed across the page, chased, at last, by words he hadn't seen in what felt like ages.

Upstairs the front door slammed shut. Virginia was off to pick up her mother. He quickly dressed the other bed, to moderately better results, and went upstairs to the den. As the old desktop computer churned through its whirring and beeping routine, Edward peeled an orange. This white box filled with wires and chips and a ponderous cathode tube was the modern day oracle. "Oh muse," he said. "Tell me what you know." He dropped an orange slice in the wastebasket. The basket had been empty, and the piece of orange lounged, alone and miserable, looking like a severed ear. He had just thrown a perfectly good orange slice into the garbage. For what, a sacrifice to the computer Gods? He retrieved the piece of fruit, blew on it, muttered a childhood invocation – God made dirt and dirt don't hurt – and popped the slice into his mouth. That was better.

He wondered if running dialogues with oneself were a symptom of Alzheimer's. Or, for that matter, not seeing things, vision loss. Nope and nope. But a single person conversing was proprietary of those unfortunate enough to suffer from schizophrenia. As

far as he knew no one had yet diagnosed him with that. The checklists for Alzheimer's revealed that at worst he suffered from four of the ten common symptoms: memory loss, difficulty performing familiar tasks, misplacing things, and changes in personality. The memory loss thing was most troubling: the first symptom on every list and an *early sign* of the disease. His only difficulty performing familiar tasks had been his writer's block, and while he often didn't know where his loafers or favorite tie were, he hadn't *put an iron in the freezer or a wristwatch in the sugar bowl*. Did they even own a sugar bowl? Of course, supposing he was suffering from Alzheimer's, it was likely he really wouldn't be able to remember if he'd been misplacing things or having difficulty remembering. He used this discovery to cross #6 – *problems with abstract thinking* – off the list. Surely paradoxes were a form of abstraction.

He also had problems – or perhaps just reservations – with the *changes in personality* bit. He was more suspicious these days, and fearful, but this could just as easily be a symptom of the *potential* of Alzheimer's as of the disease itself. He decided to cross this one off, leaving him with only two symptoms. This briefly emboldened him. But a disclaimer further down the page said *there's no clear line of demarcation between typical age-related memory changes and Alzheimer's indicators, and scientists don't entirely comprehend what causes AD. AD begins slowly...at first, the only symptom may be mild forgetfulness*. And to top it off, the only verifiable way to know was the presence of *plaques* or *tangles* on the brain, which would be fine except doctors only checked for them during autopsies. So basically, you'd never really know if you had Alzheimer's until you're dead, which he found to be a fantastically ridiculous Catch-22. Why didn't

they simply leave that info off? He'd just wasted a half-hour when he could have been working on the anecdotes.

He jabbed the power button and went down the hall. Jacob sat in the kitchen, engrossed in a book as he ate a bowl of cereal. "Hey Champ," Edward said.

Jacob looked up, his large eyes startled behind his glasses. "Hi Dad. Where've you been?"

"In the basement straightening up. Your aunt and uncle and the others should be arriving soon. What's that you're reading?"

Jacob shrugged. "Just something I got from the library." He closed the book and put it on his lap. Edward couldn't make out a title on the spine, and the generic black cover had no writing on it.

"Where's your sister?"

"Down at the beach."

"Already? It's barely nine o'clock."

Jacob nodded solemnly. "Dad, I'm worried about her."

"Why?" His son seemed so delicate, and frail, with his thin hairless arms and large head that hadn't waited for his body to catch up. A lock of blond hair fell over his forehead. He brushed it aside and readjusted his glasses. He looked like Edward at thirteen.

"She's going to get skin cancer."

"Jacob!"

"I'm serious. She never wears sunscreen. She's outside all summer. In the winter sometimes Mom takes her to the tanning salon."

“The tanning salon?”

“You didn’t think that was her natural color all year round, did you?”

Virginia had been allowing Amanda to go tanning? “Jacob, I think your fears might be a little exaggerated, don’t you? Your sister’s only fifteen.”

“Melanoma is the second most common form of cancer among young adults. Until age thirty-nine women are twice as likely to get melanoma. In the last three decades the incidence of melanoma has risen three percent in those under twenty. Mel—”

“I get it. Come on, the sun’s not all bad.”

“I know. It provides Vitamin D, an essential nutrient, blah, blah, blah. Sunlight’s still dangerous if it’s not properly absorbed.”

“I’ll talk to your mother about it.”

“You should talk to Amanda.”

“I’ll talk to your sister, too. Is that book you’re reading about skin cancer?”

Jacob shook his head. Edward considered this newfound morbidity of his son’s.

“What do you know about Alzheimer’s Disease?”

“It’s a form of dementia, characterized by protein plaques on the brain,” Jacob said matter-of-factly. “Why?”

“Never mind. I was just testing you.”

Jacob squinted at his father, who was suddenly very afraid of his son’s perceptive powers. “Dad, you feeling okay?”

Had Virginia been consulting him? Confiding in him? *Who* was this sage-like little thirteen year-old? From time to time he’d discover Jacob in the strangest places at home: sitting cross-legged in the broom closet, standing between the furnace and water

heater in the basement, entombed in an empty bathtub with the curtain drawn. When he'd found Jacob out back hacking at the ground with a spade, chest heaving and face sweat-slicked, he told Virginia. She wanted to take action. Edward wanted to let it run its course. He'd had a similar phase as a child, undertaking experiments much like the one Jacob claimed he'd been doing, some sort of investigation into the composition of the Upper Soil and Mineral Soil Horizons.

“Dad?” Jacob asked again.

“Sure,” Edward said. “I feel great.”

“Are you excited about your birthday?” His son's eyes gleamed – inordinately in Edward's estimation – with the question. He wished he could tell his son the truth: at some point birthdays simply aren't what they used to be; cake and ice cream and unnecessary presents lose their glamour. One wonders what all the fuss is about, and realizes that birthdays, if they're anything, are actually the better suited, more apt celebration of Mother's and Father's Day. Eventually, you stop counting up with birthdays, and instead begin a disturbing sort of countdown.

“I am excited,” Edward said.

“Me too, but now that you're turning forty there are some things you should be more aware of.” Jacob looked down at his lap. “You know, for your health and all.”

“Thanks, Jake. I'll be fine.”

“Dad, seriously. You've got to be on the lookout for BPH, and increased LDL – bad cholesterol – levels, and high blood pressure.”

“BPH?”

“Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia.”

“In English please.”

“Enlarged prostate, basically,” Jacob said, shrugging. “When you’ve got a going problem that’s actually a *growing* problem.”

Jesus Christ, his son sounded like those asinine commercials on television! Edward would have to figure out if it was possible to set the parental controls on the TiVo to block pharmaceutical advertising. “Jake, go outside and get some fresh air, okay?”

Jacob stared at him. “I’m serious,” Edward said. “I’ll come out in a little and we’ll toss the Frisbee, assuming, you know, I can still walk and all. My rheumatoid arthritis and degenerative osteoporosis have been acting up lately.”

Jacob grinned. “Real funny, Dad. But you shouldn’t joke like that. Those are serious illnesses. Though they affect women more than men.”

“Outside, please. Fresh air.”

“Okay, I’m going.” Jacob put his bowl in the sink and headed out, book clutched under his arm. Edward stood at the kitchen window. His son climbed one of the dunes and lay down on his stomach in the tall beach grass. Only the blue soles of his sandals peeked from the hilltop. Crisp sunlight revealed greasy smudges on his glasses. When he removed them to wipe on his shirt the scene outside turned blurry, dunes and glittering lake devolving into an indistinct amalgam of light and dark.

The front door opened. “Well Mom, home sweet home,” Virginia said.

“I suppose,” Elizabeth said. “I do believe it’s almost five years now since I’ve been here.” Her voice rung with a southern drawl. For years it’d only pop up here and there, usually when she’d had too much white wine. After living on the East Coast for

nearly forty years, she'd had managed to rid herself of it almost entirely. With her husband Theodore gone for a decade and a return to her roots in North Carolina, Elizabeth was witness to the triumphant return of the tobacco-road accent Virginia never had. The words lolling pleasantly from her mouth startled him. It seemed like she'd spent the last couple years listening to language lessons on CD: *How to Speak Southern, Advanced Series*.

Whenever he saw Elizabeth he always thought of Theo. An imposing man, broad across the shoulders with large leather-worn hands, he'd jocularly slap Edward across the back in greeting. Edward always thought Theo slapped his back harder than everyone else's, and even ten years on Theo's presence seemed ubiquitous – nowhere more than here in Traverse, where they'd spent part of every summer since their mid-twenties.

He met Elizabeth and his wife in the foyer and brought the bags in. She stood on her tiptoes to give Edward a kiss – on the lips. He hated that, but she'd been doing it since he and Virginia's wedding day, when she'd put her hands on both his cheeks and planted one on his mouth. Why does your mother do that, he'd asked Virginia once. She'd giggled impishly and said that's just her way.

“Welcome back,” he said. They walked into the living room. Elizabeth's gaze followed the staircase up to the exposed hallway of the second floor. The house was enormous: six bedrooms, three and half baths, a game room, den, living room, large kitchen, dining room that could seat twelve. He'd always been uncomfortable here without Theo and Elizabeth around as owners. He and Virginia could never have afforded such a place right on the aqua waters and white beaches. Even the property taxes were too much, but Theo had taken care of that as well, setting up an escrow account with

enough money in it to cover the taxes for twenty years, and some left over to account for inflation and inevitable repairs. Not to mention there was a clause in his will dictating that the place must not be sold, but passed on to Edward and Virginia's children.

"I still marvel that he built this thing himself," Edward said. The house had been fashioned to resemble a log cabin. Inside and out just about everything was cedar.

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed, bounced between him and Virginia. "Ed, what are you talking about? Theo couldn't build this thing himself. He did design it, but build? Please."

Edward scratched his head. He felt like he was in a cartoon or silent film. Where'd he get that idea from then? He was sure Theo had obsessed for years over the house, occasionally hiring help for impossibly laborious aspects like setting the trusses for the roof, but overseeing it every step of the way. "Really?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm quite sure," Elizabeth said. "But if that's what you want to remember, then you go ahead. By all means, float your own boat."

Virginia stood behind her mother glaring at him. Her lips were pressed tight, red rising on her cheeks. Edward felt light-headed, the floor shifting and bobbing beneath him.

"Mom, should we eat breakfast?" Virginia asked. Elizabeth nodded and the two went to the kitchen. Edward said he'd be there shortly, he just needed to use the bathroom.

He gently closed the door behind him and rested his head on the towels hanging from the hook. The iambic lub-dub of his heart thumped in his ears. What was happening



to him? He thought of Jacob and Amanda, not being able to remember who they were in a couple years, and how they would look at him – wary, weary, pitying, regretful – a grown man no more cognizant than a baby.

He closed his eyes. The den, drinking scotch with Theo, this must be twelve years ago, he hadn't even come around to liking the smoked-oak of scotch yet. They'd been talking about something, maybe ambitions – Theo's, his own, Virginia's, who can say – and the room had grown silent. He asked Theo a question about the house, still new enough that wood was the dominant scent. He asked again, but Theo didn't answer. Didn't even stir from his thoughts as he stared at the unbroken amber surface of his drink. Theo? Theo? Edward couldn't move. His mouth wouldn't work anymore. He tried again and nothing.

Edward put a hand to his face – sweat. What the hell, he thought and leaned over the sink. He splashed on some cold water. The water helped somewhat, cool on his skin, now beading as the excess ran off. The towel, its soft cotton weavings under his fingertips. But there in his mind was a black hole where the memories of Theo should have been. He'd just made a mistake was all. As if to confirm this he looked his reflection in the eye and said it again. Elizabeth was right. Theo hadn't built the house. He soaped up, and half-way through realized he hadn't actually used the bathroom. He finished washing anyway – he always liked the clean feeling on his hands afterwards.

At the table with his wife and mother-in-law he sat but only half-way listened. He ran through the line-up of anecdotes, figuring which he should (or could) keep and in what order they should come. Several whose truth was likely compromised he cast out, even though images vivified the recollections. He felt a hand on his forearm. Elizabeth's

large diamond wedding ring shined up at him, its luster no worse for wear after forty-some odd years. A blue vein snaked along her finger and under the ring, down around bony knuckles and under loose skin marked haphazardly by occasional liver spots. He envisioned his son peering pensively at them through a magnifying glass and pronouncing them malignant. He'd really have to talk to Virginia about him.

“Edward,” Elizabeth said.

He looked up. “What?”

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes, no. Sorry. Just thinking about something.”

“Virginia tells me you're having trouble remembering things.”

His wife was aghast, but Edward knew better. Mothers and daughters talked about things. Virginia mouthed the words *I'm sorry*, and he could see in her face that she meant it. He realized, for the first time perhaps, how much this weighed on her. As witnesses to this revelation, a few strands of grey, recent additions, stood out amongst the waves of her thick hair.

“Not really,” Edward said. “I just mixed up the details.” Elizabeth stared at him, her pencil-thin eyebrows arching. “I'm serious. Nothing at all to worry about. Just a mistake.”

Elizabeth's mouth opened, then shut. She and Virginia shared a look. They came to a resolution, as though his wife had shrugged and said they'd discuss it later, when he wasn't around. “So, how's work?” Elizabeth asked. “The university? The writing?”

“The university is good,” Edward said. “The writing is okay.”

“He says he hasn't written anything in weeks,” Virginia said.

“Really? That’s a shame.”

Edward waved his hand. “It happens. All writers suffer writer’s block.” That’s what he’d heard, anyway.

“You know,” Elizabeth said. “I was thinking of you the other day. Odd. Just out of the blue. And I realized I’ve never read any of your work. Can you believe that? Fifteen years and not a single story. That’s what you write, right? Stories?”

“Among other things.”

“Maybe because of that comment you made once, while you and Virginia were engaged.”

“What comment?”

“About the kind of books I like to read.”

Edward’s face warmed. He definitely remembered that. He’d mentioned off-handedly that romance novels weren’t literature. In grad school then, his mind stuffed full of idealism, he’d wondered aloud why people read “such garbage.” What a mistake.

“Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay. I agreed with you. Theo was never fond of them either. It was my own little guilty pleasure.”

“What?” Edward grit his teeth against the floating sensation rising in him again, like he’d stood up too fast.

“Of course, I never told you that.” Elizabeth clasped her hands before her on the table. Edward felt himself settle, the wooden chair hard against the bones in his butt. “But you know,” she said. “I thought maybe I should read some of my son-in-law’s work. I’d like to.”

Across from her mother, Virginia was frowning. “No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I think I do.”

“Trust me,” Virginia said. “You don’t.”

“Why?”

“Virginia doesn’t like my work,” Edward said.

“You know that’s not true. I love your work, just not when I’m featured in it.”

Which was half-true. When they first met she read his work religiously, though he knew she found it difficult to accept. There was something misanthropic about the characters and all the *bad things*, to use her words, they did.

After they’d been together a while it was inevitable that Virginia would work her way into his writing, or more importantly, that she’d see herself in it. He couldn’t remember when they’d first argued about it, but he was keenly aware of the first time he realized it would always be something between them. “Virginia, I don’t feature you in my writing.”

“Tell my *mother* about the prostitute story then.”

Edward sighed and gazed out the window. Jacob was careening down the dune toward the beach and his sister. He’d written that story ten years ago, maybe more, about a man who falls in love with a prostitute. After she read it Virginia was furious.

“Virginia, you weren’t the prostitute. You were never the prostitute. You weren’t the inspiration for the prostitute.”

“Edward, what do you know about prostitutes?” Elizabeth asked.

“Uh, nothing.”

“Hm, that sounded convincing.”

“Let him finish, Mom, I want to hear this.”

“Virginia, it was merely coincidence that she had brown hair. Half the female population has brown hair.”

“Chocolate brown hair,” Virginia said.

Edward swallowed hard. “Okay, chocolate brown hair,” he confirmed.

“And the strawberries?”

Edward really didn't feel like discussing this in front of her mother, but hell if he was going to be able to get out of it now. In the story a man brings some strawberries and cream to a prostitute, and he requests that she eat them naked. She does, and he watches enraptured. At one point some of the cream drips on her chest and down her breasts, and for a moment is suspended from her nipple. The man is overcome, wants to rush to the prostitute and press her body to his, but has an aneurism and on his first step keels over, dead. The man had known all along he was unfit to tolerate such stimulations – let alone sex. His doctor had warned him repeatedly of his ill health and risk factors, but he'd gone ahead and done it anyway. Edward could go on for hours about what he was *trying* to do with the story, but he was glad he'd removed the part from the story that the man had a wife who loved strawberries, but she never ate them naked, even though he asked and asked and asked.

“Yes,” Edward said. “The prostitute in the story ate strawberries and cream.”

“Not cream, yogurt,” she said.

“The story says cream, Virginia.”

“Same difference. Tell her why I was so upset.”

“I’d often told Virginia that I love watching her eat strawberries and yogurt. The way she delicately folds back the little green leaves. The way she dips the strawberry carefully into the yogurt and brings it to her mouth, following it with her eyes until it’s before her face. And then sinks her teeth into the strawberry with such relish, the whole time completely absorbed in this ritual. Sometimes, a bit of yogurt will be left on her red lips or the corner of her mouth, or some strawberry juice will trickle down her chin. In that moment I’m just done for. And...well, I don’t know. Little things like that just remind me how much I love her, that’s all.”

The kitchen was silent except for the high twinkle of wind chimes wafting in from the deck.

“Well,” Elizabeth said. “Hmm. That’s just, well...that’s touching.”

Virginia’s face had softened. “Can you see now why I was upset?”

Edward nodded. He had thought long and hard about what effect it would have and did have on her, why he wrote it, and what it said about him. More than the fact that he was a man who’d once – just once – slept with a prostitute in Amsterdam during the summer he and his college friends backpacked Europe (he didn’t fall in love and she didn’t eat any strawberries), his stories always had antecedents from his life or the lives of people around him. He’d struggled with this since early on, and most days felt like a fraud (since his “imagination” wasn’t up to the task of creating vivid characters from scratch).

“This is all fine and dandy,” Elizabeth said. “But what’s it got to do with memory loss?”

Edward and Virginia glanced at one another. “Nothing,” they said quietly, together.

“That’s what I thought,” Elizabeth said. “Now, as I was saying, there’s this neat little computer you can hold in your hand – like one of those Gameboy-things the kids love so much – that helps you improve your memory. I was thinking about getting one, but I think my mind is still pretty sharp.”

Edward steeled himself as Elizabeth droned on about the ridiculous handheld device and a special magnetic headband and an audio CD one could listen to while sleeping and several other things he’d never heard of and damn sure didn’t want to. He watched as his son passed back and forth in the space between the two dunes. Eventually he said he’d promised Jacob he would throw the Frisbee, so he got up from the table and went outside.

After the fresh air and exercise Edward felt better. His talk with his daughter about sun exposure hadn’t gone as he’d hoped, but she’d made the concession that if he bought some SPF 4 sun block she’d use it instead of the SPF 2 stuff. But they’re the same thing, he’d said. No they’re not, Amanda had replied, one is SPF *two* the other is SPF *four*. He’d shook his head and thought seriously about buying two bottles and filling the SPF 4 one with something stronger, like SPF 50.

Inside, he went upstairs to the bedroom with his notebook. When he opened it his thumb left a faint, moist imprint on the first page. Reading through the twelve anecdotes, he was sure about half of them. Two he definitely couldn’t be certain of the actual events. He leaned back on the headboard. The other four came to him, punctuated by pivotal

images that for whatever reason didn't seem to fit. It was like seeing a commercial on television, then flipping to a different channel and seeing that same commercial, only further along or back in the narrative. The harder he tried the more the proper image evaded him. He closed the notebook and laid it on his lap. He hoped the party was tonight. He wanted to be done with all this.

A car pulled into the driveway, and then the sonorous voice of his older brother Max called out to him and Virginia. Edward put the notebook back in his bag and went downstairs. The kids said hello and rushed out the back door to their cousins. The adults followed them out. Soon afterward, Edward's parents arrived, then Jerry Williamson – a good friend from high school – and his family, and the Delmonds. Virginia's brother Alex, visiting from LA, was the last to arrive. Then the house was full.

Saturday afternoon on Fourth of July weekend was always reserved for golf. Sometimes couples would go, but Jill Delmond had left her clubs behind and Virginia said she wasn't up for it, so the men piled into Max's minivan and headed for the course.

In the minivan on the way back Edward was elated. Golf courses always invigorated him. Though there was something peaceful about the whole process, and it allowed him most of the time to think of nothing else but the next shot – not his work or writing, the kids or Virginia. On the course alone his mind came as close to being blank as he would ever get, more so even than for the few seconds before he fell asleep or right after an orgasm. Today, with his father and brother and several friends, it hadn't been like that, but he'd shot an eighty-four, his best score up here in years.



His score, plus six light beers and a blazing sun that had turned his cheeks tender, left him content. He settled into the bucket seat as they pulled from the parking lot. Max drove, his father reclining in the passenger seat. Edward sat directly behind his father, with Jerry next to him. Alex and Jack Delmond were in the very back.

“You remember when we used to sneak onto the golf course back home?” Jerry said.

“Sure do. Free range balls straight from the machine,” Edward said.

“Yup. With that token we tied to fishing line.”

“Whose idea was that anyway?”

“I think Jason told me about it,” Jerry said.

“That’s right,” Edward said. “Your brother was always going at things that way.”

“Nothing’s really changed,” Jerry said, in a low voice that made Edward not want to ask what else had happened. They’d learned how to smoke pot with Jerry’s brother, got their first porn mags from him, and once he’d almost gotten them all killed drag-racing down Woodward Avenue. Some things seemed inevitable, even back then, and one of them was that Jason Williamson was always going to be caught up in stuff he shouldn’t be.

Edward’s father was shaking his head in the passenger seat, a wry smile on his face. “And when we were older we used to take our dates out there with a couple six packs. You never knew that, did you Dad?”

“I didn’t,” his father said, “but I’m not surprised.”

“We’d take blankets and set up on the elevated green at eight and drink Schlitz or PBR and look up at the stars. When it finally got around to more than just looking at stars

Sue and I would go over to eleven, and Jer and what's-her-name would stay there. What was her name, Jer?"

"Christie."

"Yeah, Christie. Whatever happened with that?"

"With what?"

"When she got pregnant."

"Pregnant?" Jerry said.

"You two had to go into the city to, you know, get it taken care of."

"Edward," his father said. "Do we really need to talk about this?"

"Dad, relax. This is over twenty years ago. What's the harm now?"

"Why do we need to talk about *that*, is all I'm saying."

"Don't worry, Dave," Jerry said. "There was no *that*. Dr. Memory here has embellished the story a little bit, haven't you Eddie?" Edward felt like they were kids again, and Jerry was helping him navigate out of trouble. He didn't understand. The incident was ancient history. Who cared now anyways? Besides, Jerry had never been bashful talking about the things he'd done, even if their fathers were old school, blue collar conservatives.

"What do you mean?" Edward asked. "I thought that was the situation."

"You really don't remember?"

"I could've sworn she got pregnant. I even gave you part of the money, eighty dollars I think, to help pay for the damn thing."

"Are you losing it? We *thought* Christie was pregnant. We were scared as shit because her period was like a month late. The pregnancy tests didn't tell us anything and

eventually the damn thing came – the period, not the baby. But an abortion? Christie was as Catholic as they come. If she'd gotten pregnant, I'd probably be holed up in Skokie or Marion or Grand Rapids with her, six kids, and a busted liver."

"I think maybe Eddie's been spending too much time in that basement of his," his brother said. "How about you, Pop?" Edward's father nodded gravely and the three of them broke out laughing.

Alex leaned forward and whispered to Edward. "You know, I've got these pills that could help you remember. Or pills that will help you forget everything," he said.

Edward laughed. "Thanks, Alex. I think I'll pass." He chuckled again for good measure, but sweat was already slickening his hands. Out the window, dunes rose and fell along the road like the oscillations of a sound wave. At each trough sparkled deep Lake Michigan blue, its expanse stretching endlessly to the horizon. How could this be? The memory was *so* clear he could almost touch the four twenty-dollar bills he'd given Jerry, could feel them, moist and wilting from being in his pocket on a hot day, could smell the stench of fear on Jerry. He'd been in awe of Jerry back then for going through with it, and remembered comparing Sue to Christie and realizing that Sue would still be whole (even if she wasn't a virgin either), while Christie, had lost something she'd never get back.

He was still puzzling over it when they pulled up to the house and he took his first shaky steps, as though regaining his land legs after the half-hour drive. Max had the trunk open and Edward's golf bag already in hand. "I'll put them in the garage," Max said. "Why don't you rustle us up some drinks, I'm about ready for another."

Edward nodded and went to the door. He stood for a moment, his hand on the cool brass handle, appreciating the solidity of it, the fact that it was there and real and

reciprocated the pressure of his palm. It swung open and for a split second he was looking at the gleeful faces of a roomful of people he knew. Their mouths moved but released no sound, until a second later their voices somehow caught up. “Surprise!” The collective weight of their excitement, their giddy, unnaturally loud voices like wind rushing over him. He took half a step back and grinned sheepishly. His brother, father and the others were leaning on their golf bags watching. Virginia threw her arms around his neck. “Happy Birthday, sweetheart.”

Elizabeth offered a drink and a hug, and the rest of the people packed into the foyer and living room crowded around, pumping his hand and slapping him on the back. A twenty foot ‘Happy Birthday Edward’ banner hung from the bookshelves in the living room. Brightly colored canary and cherry and orange streamers draped the banister and light fixtures, carnations and tulips of the same colors filled vases that adorned every tabletop in sight. In the midst of it all, as people slowly made their way back to the deck, Edward found himself wondering what the hell everyone was congratulating him for. It was, after all, only a birthday.

Edward sat on the deck under another identically styled birthday banner. A few younger children kicked a volley ball around on the beach near the water. Jacob wasn’t one of them. Edward’s mother and father were sitting at the table eating, and Elizabeth, Jerry and his wife, and Gil and Mildred, a couple from the neighborhood who’d been friends of the family since the house had been built. Virginia had a plate of food at the place next to his, but hadn’t gotten around to finishing it and was again in the kitchen doing something or another. The half-eaten steak had gone cold and rubbery, its juices

mingling with the salad dressing. His stomach lurched and he covered the soggy mess with a napkin.

“Well everyone,” Gil said. “How ‘bout a toast for our birthday boy?” Edward couldn’t remember if he, too, was supposed to raise his glass.

“To Edward,” Gil said.

“To Edward,” the table chorused.

“And to the Fourth of July,” Gil continued.

Edward raised his glass, happy he didn’t look like a fool halfway-toasting himself on his birthday. “To the Fourth of July,” he said with everyone else except Jerry, whose mouth puckered in a smirk.

“Gilbert, why’d you have to go and throw that toast in there with Edward’s?” Mildred said.

“What? I can’t be patriotic now?”

“Of course you can be patriotic,” Mildred began. “But it’s Edward’s birthday.”

“And Fourth of July is still two days away,” Jerry said.

“So’s my birthday for that matter,” Edward said.

Gil turned to Edward. “Eddie, you have a problem with me toasting the Fourth *after* I toast you?”

“Not at all, Gil.”

“See, Millie. Not a problem by Eddie. That’s the trouble these days. A man just isn’t allowed to be patriotic for the hell of it. Ain’t that right, Dave?”

Edward's father pondered a moment. Edward could almost feel his father's sense of duty and brotherhood rising up against his better judgment. They'd both served in Korea – Gil as an officer, his father as infantry. "Sure enough, Gil," Edward's father said.

Edward knew from experience what would come next. Like clockwork every year, Gil managed to say:

"After I got back from Korea..."

Edward stopped listening. His father hated to talk about the war, or patriotism, or VA benefits, or anything of the sort. In fact, though his father had never mentioned it, Edward was sure his father hated when guys like himself who'd been there rolling around in the Korean or Vietnamese muck and had done the deeds – good and bad – felt like they needed to tell everyone what they did and why. To Gil, everything that happened back then was noble, a source of pride. His father, though, his father figured a patriot did what he had to and came home, end of story.

"...and nobody seems to understand this nowadays." Gil was still talking. "I mean, look at how them boys over in Iraq right now are getting treated when they come home."

"War doesn't necessarily make a man a patriot, Gil," said Jerry, who was eying Gil as hard as Gil was eying him back. "It's not their fault we've got a bunch of monkeys running the damn government, sending young boys out to die for, for...for I don't know what."

"You're just lucky you missed the wars, *sonny boy*," Gil said, raspy voice laced with contempt.

“I know,” Jerry said. “And I’m not the least bit ashamed of that. If my country needed me, I’d be there. But this notion that you’re only a man if you went to war makes me sick.”

“I didn’t say that,” Gil said.

“Gil, honey—”

“No Millie, hold on, I want to make this clear.”

His father sat stone-faced, knife and fork poised over his plate. His mother was looking down in her lap. All the woman were looking in their laps or over at the kids on the beach, all except Elizabeth. She was studying him, one eyebrow arched, as though telling him he needed to say something. He figured he should, but was curious about where this would lead. He’d known Jerry over twenty-five years, and in that time had often seen him get hot-headed, but for all Gil’s annoying sentimentality, Edward had never heard Jerry go off quite like this. And he wasn’t even drunk yet.

Elizabeth picked up her glass and brought it to her lips, her eyes still on Edward. Clearly it was his job now to deal with rancorous stuff like this since Theo wasn’t here.

Edward cleared his throat. “You know, speaking of patriotism,” he said, the tenor of his voice a little too loud, as though mocking the proceedings (which he supposed, in a way, he was). The collective weight of everyone’s gaze fell on him, which only seemed to magnify the utter ridiculousness of what he was going to say. “I heard this morning on television that there’s legislation in place to increase the penalties for personal fireworks use. Even on the Fourth.”

“Why the hell would they do that?” Gil asked.

“I don’t understand,” his mother said. “What’s that got to do with patriotism?”

Edward shrugged. “Not really sure. I just heard someone on TV mention it.”

Elizabeth smiled, and a childish confidence surged through him. “Fourth of July seems like one of those natural flashpoints for such debates. I thought the discussion on TV was rather inane, but that’s just me.”

“It wouldn’t be such a bad thing,” Mildred said quietly. And then, even quieter, “Remember that little boy?” Slowly, as if emerging from a fog, the features of people’s faces started to clarify, hardening as the nature of what she was alluding to dawned on them.

The table grew silent. Edward’s sense of victory floated away, the last puff of smoke and steam from a doused fire. He couldn’t curse the little boy, so he cursed the damn television show for putting that little nugget in his head.

“My God,” Gil said. “That must’ve been what, ten or twelve years ago?”

“Less,” Mildred said. “Eight, I think.”

“Just horrible,” Edward’s mother said. “That poor little boy. Where were his parents?”

“They were right up the beach,” Edward said.

“One of the neighbor’s kids.”

“If you can call a one-month summer rental a neighbor.”

“No wonder they never came back.”

“How’d the kid get his hands on fireworks anyway? He couldn’t have been more than eight years old.”

“He was older than that, nine or ten – old enough to know better.”

“I’m not so sure. Where’s Alex, he’d know.”



“Alex wasn’t here that year. He was away at soccer camp. Besides, why would Alex know, he was sixteen already. He wouldn’t have anything to do with the children. Except Amanda, he’s always had a soft spot for Amanda.”

“Maybe Amanda knows then. She would have been around that age.”

“Let’s not. She had nightmares for months afterwards.”

“Where were his parents? I mean really,” Edward’s mother said. She bit her lip. “That poor little boy. To be disfigured for the rest of his life. He lost most of his hand.” His mother was on the verge of tears. Why’d she always have to do that? Lord knows it was horrific, but she didn’t have to make it sound like the kid had lost his entire arm. It was bad enough already.

“He didn’t lose most of his hand,” Elizabeth said. She was staring off over Edward’s shoulder. She could have been looking at anything, or nothing, you couldn’t tell it from her face. The words fell slowly. “He lost his index finger and part of his thumb – down to the first knuckle. Theo never forgave himself. He’d bought all those fireworks that year. That night, before we went to bed, I walked into the bathroom and he was crying. Crying for the first time since Virginia had been born.”

Edward felt himself splitting in two. Something was wrong with what Elizabeth was saying. Not that part about Theo, that he could believe. For all his rough jocular, Theo had been a sensitive man. What Edward couldn’t understand was the little boy. Edward had been closest when it happened. The flicker of the wick, and he turned in time to see the little boy wind up to toss the firecracker out over the water. He’d mistimed, and as his hand went over his head the firecracker went off. When Edward got to him, the boy was already on the ground in shock, staring up at nothing, body trembling. Edward pulled

off his bloody t-shirt and wrapped it around the hand. Amidst the pulpy flesh and blood streaming onto the sand were three stubs where fingers used to be – only a ring finger and pinky remained intact.

Everything after that was a blur. Edward couldn't say who was first to kneel beside him, or when the parents came, or when Theo had gotten there, or how long it took the EMTs to arrive. He only remembered that the rest of the evening was wretched, and that every summer since they'd done without fireworks on the Fourth of July. And he saw the innocuous package he'd hidden in the trunk, filled with fireworks – a surprise for the kids – which he was now certain would stay there or be thrown away when no one was looking.

Everyone at the table hushed up. Elizabeth stared off into nowhere, and Edward felt anger building, anger directed at her and carried on a wave of confusion. It was like he was holding two similarly etched transparencies up to the light – one with his recollection and one with hers – and try as he might he couldn't get the figures to overlap. He was in no position to dispute her, he knew that. He couldn't even say for certain to himself she was lying.

“That must've been hard, Elizabeth,” his father said.

She looked at him and smiled sadly. “It was.”

Virginia came bearing a tray filled with drinks. Max was behind her. “Here you go everyone,” she said, setting the tray on the table. “I think I got them all right.”

“That's what this table needs, more alcohol,” Jerry said. “Should liven us right up.”

“Oh, stop it, Jerry,” his wife said. And something in the simple domesticity of the exchange struck the table and then everyone was laughing.

Edward’s father stood up. “Bathroom time.”

“Right on cue,” his mother said.

His father gave a little bow. “Yes ma’am.”

“Why was everyone so quiet?” Virginia asked.

“Just reminiscing,” Edward said. “Where’s Jacob?”

“He’s down on the beach.” Virginia came around the table and leaned over the back of his chair, a drink for him in her hands. He felt her lips against his temple, her finger tracing his ear. Virginia’s hair tickled his neck and he could smell summer on her, a soothing mixture of sun-browned skin and moisturizer, and he wanted more than anything that she wouldn’t leave his side, that she would go upstairs with him and they could lie alone together for a few minutes, maybe even make love, but if not, just lay there in one another’s arms and not talk.

But this wouldn’t happen. Not with a party, Virginia’s party for him, in full swing.

“Having fun?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Wonderful. Thanks for doing it.”

“You’re most welcome.” She kissed him again and straightened up. “Now, don’t you have a speech or something to prepare?” Edward turned. His wife was smiling at him. “Oh that’s right, you didn’t know this was coming, did you?” She winked, but his chest tightened, his own smile suddenly unwieldy on his face. She stared over toward the dunes, her face growing serious. A hoard of kids raced up the path to the house. Virginia

went to cut them off. “Kids, can you brush all that sand off before you go in the house, please?”

Yes, he’d forgotten about the anecdotes. He finished his drink, got another and went to the bedroom. The door clicked shut. Edward sat on the edge of the bed with the notebook. He was sure of almost nothing on the list anymore. With a trembling hand, he crossed several out. The rest pertained to his family, one each for his wife, brother, mother, father, and two children. Only one was he absolutely certain of.

His mother cutting vegetables; setting him on the counter to watch; cutting her finger; rushing to the sink; him leaning over and picking up the knife; a sharp sting in his hand and then her screaming; taking the knife; the two sitting on the floor; him between her legs, his back to her chest; towels pressed to their cuts; a trail of blood along the linoleum – the images washed over him, piling one on top of one another until a composite congealed in his mind. He was surer of this one than any of the others, but he’d been three years old then. He had no other memories from that age, none before five years old, yet this one was swimming-pool clear because his mother told it to him *at least* once a year. That scene was full, rich. Her muslin dress rough against his skin. Slippery blood between his fingers. Sharp onion-tingle in his nose. How could this be? He’d created these images – or more frighteningly had pulled them from some subconscious space – to accompany what his mother had told him. Did that make them his? Hers? What had she left out? He might not have believed it all, but had the scar to prove it: a small crescent arcing a metacarpal knuckle under the pinky on his left hand. The mark had become distorted and faded as he’d grown, but the white scar tissue on his hand was smiling up at him now as the walls of the bedroom closed in, pressing the memories

together, colors and sounds swirling closer and closer until he couldn't pull any of them apart. He felt faint. The book slipped to the floor. "Dad," a voice called to him from somewhere in the darkness, "Dad, where are you?" He was afraid to answer. Someone knocked on the door and Edward's head snapped toward the sound.

"Dad," his daughter's voice called softly. "Are you in there?"

Edward took a deep breath and wiped his hands over his face and then on his shorts. "Come in, honey. What's up?"

"Dad, everyone's downstairs. Mom's looking for you."

"Is something wrong?"

His daughter eyed him warily. "I don't know," she said. "Is there?"

"No, everything's fine. Does your mother have the cake ready?" Amanda nodded.

"Well," he said. "We should probably go downstairs then, right?"

"Sure," she said. "Whatever you say."

Edward picked up the book, set it on the nightstand and followed his daughter. In the hallway he stopped at the door to the kitchen. Across the room Virginia stood at the counter, concentrating. An errant lock of hair hung in the light as she bent closer to push more candles in. The rest of her hair was tied in a bun, and the smooth white track of her neck stood out against the dark blouse she was wearing. She was humming, a vague lullaby she used to rock the children to sleep with. The scene was so peaceful, idyllic – a mother in her kitchen. And he was about to ruin it.

"Dad," his daughter said. She stood at the deck door looking at him. "Come on."

Virginia was so absorbed in the cake she hadn't heard Amanda. At his daughter's back candles flickered in the evening dusk, and happy voices streamed down the hallway.

Virginia had taken a step back from the cake and was studying it, hands on hips, arms akimbo, head cocked to the side. His daughter held a hand out to him. Edward took one last look at Virginia and went to the door.

Outside the people were still gathered around the tables. The children had come in from the beach. Some sat on their parents' laps; others ran around in the lingering light. Gil was laughing hysterically, one hand on his wife's shoulder. His parents and brother and the others watched amusedly.

"Gilbert," his wife said. "What is so funny? You've had too much gin."

"No," Gil said between hiccups. "I was just thinking, oh gosh, of that one party we had. This must be thirty years ago if it's a day. We'd all had too much gin and you thought it would be a great idea if we all went swimming naked."

"Oh brother," his daughter muttered.

Mildred's cheeks flushed. "Gilbert, that's absurd. We never went swimming naked. Well, I didn't. I can't speak for everyone else."

"She's fibbing," Gil said to the table. "Not only did she go, she'd had more gin than anyone. It was her idea."

"Stop it," she said and swatted him on the arm. "Okay, we did go swimming, but it wasn't my idea. That much I know. You must've tricked me somehow."

"Sure," he said. "You were so worried the next morning that everyone from church would find out."

Mildred huffed and crossed her arms. "No I wasn't," she said quietly.

"I think I'm going to go sit over there," his daughter said.

"Good move," Edward said.

“Hey Eddie, you’re back,” Gil said. “You’re not going to write a story about what I just said, are you?”

“I’ll try to keep away from that goldmine, Gil,” he said.

“Good, good. That’s great, Eddie. That’s swell.”

Twilight was settling over the bay, western clouds in the distance painted purple and pink like carnival cotton candy. Candles enclosed the deck in a soft warm glow. Virginia had put them in glass jars so they wouldn’t be blown out. Edward had been watching them, intermittently wondering when the first would go out and what Gil had meant. His father sat beside him, and they talked about the Tigers’ disappointing run in to the All-star break. The adults joked and laughed in that leisurely way that comes from a good day of sun and too much food and drink. His father had just asked what he thought about trade possibilities for the team when Virginia walked out carrying the cake, a three-tiered number large enough there’d be leftovers for days. The candle flames – forty plus one for good luck – bent toward his wife as she maneuvered through the tables and chairs.

Edward sat uncomfortably as everyone sang ‘Happy Birthday.’ In forty years of birthdays he’d never once been able to just sit and enjoy the attention. He counted the flames and fidgeted with the change in his pocket as everyone sang, then a deep breath to blow the candles out, a smile and thank you, before getting to the business of cutting the cake. He was the first to get a piece but the last to sit down to eat it. Plates went around and kids streamed past. Edward waited until everyone settled back in.

He stood, cleared his throat and thanked everyone for coming. He turned to Virginia. “I’d also like to thank my wonderful wife for putting this fantastic surprise

together.” She nodded graciously, but in her eyes was an apprehension that made Edward stumble over his next few words. He regained his footing and began the story of him and his mother in the kitchen. “My first memory,” he said. His mother was wistful, the way mothers are when they think of their children as babies. Her face registered no objections to his account of the event. Emboldened, he moved on. “My first lesson in right and wrong, the first one I remember anyway, came from my father.” Everyone turned to his father. Edward had set the carpet in the living room on fire as a ten-year old. After he’d been told repeatedly not to mess with the fire, he’d removed the grate from the fireplace and took a half burning log out. His father caught him, and after putting the fire out had tagged Edward’s backside something fierce with his belt. In his room sobbing, Edward waited. At the sound of his old man’s footsteps in the hall, Edward leapt to his underwear drawer and stuffed as many pairs into his pajama bottoms as he could. He needn’t have. When his father opened the door he seemed older, shrunken, eyes red-rimmed as though he’d been sitting in front of a smoky fire. As he’d tucked Edward in his hands trembled, but he had said nothing.

Edward looked triumphantly, lovingly, to his father. His father had turned to his mother, a question on his lips. A cloud of confusion rose in his father’s face as he ran through his stockpile of memories and came up with none that matched what Edward had just described. Shit, Edward thought to himself, shit, shit, shit, shit! Shit!

“Thanks Edward,” his father said. “That means a lot.”

Edward’s right knee twitched feverishly. He quickly started the next one. Junior year at college he’d had a nervous breakdown. He’d never told his parents, only Max, who came and took care of him for a month. One night when Edward was almost better



he'd heard Max and one of his roommates, their voices filtering up to him through the house's old ventilation system. His roommate had asked why Max was still there, since it seemed like Edward was getting better. His brother said, as Joyce's once had, that as long as he was able he would be his brother's keeper, and Edward his. "Now, I am certainly no Joyce, but what I do know—"

"Was Joyce the homosexual?" Gil asked.

"Gilbert Samuel Johnson, if you don't shut up we're leaving," Mildred wailed. "You're embarrassing me."

*The homosexual, Edward thought. What world was Gil living in? "You're probably thinking of Oscar Wilde," he said.*

"That's a great name," Gil said.

"Shut up, Gilbert."

"Sorry, Eddie."

His brother seemed not to have heard any of Gil's nonsense. He was staring at Edward with a happy smile on his face and water in his eyes. Edward almost couldn't believe it. "What I do know," he continued, "is that Max rescued me from myself. And for that I'm eternally grateful."

Max nodded. "Well taken, Edward. Well taken. I wouldn't have had it any other way."

"Thanks, Max. For everything." Edward took a deep breath and turned to his wife. "Now, what to say about this lovely woman." His wife fixed him with a cold stare, her head shaking imperceptibly. Her rigid posture practically screamed 'don't do this,' the fear that seeped from her to him making his skin grow cold. He thought about sitting

down, but he had to know. He had to be able to stand here in front of everyone and speak the truth. For both of them. Had to. “A few days before my twenty-fifth birthday, I met Virginia for the first time. We were at the student rec center on campus, both of us grad students. I was riding the stationary bike, watching as this woman powered around the track on long, beautiful legs.” At the table, Virginia’s skirt rode up her thighs as she crossed her legs, still lithe, wonderfully tanned. He wanted to reach out and run his hand along them. “She wore those little nylon track shorts. Her hair billowed behind her. Grace in motion.” His wife blushed and sipped wine, the unease in her face dissipating. “I was already hooked. As she came out of a turn she stumbled and fell. Crashed to the ground really.” Edward waited for the laughter to die down and their guests to stop looking at her. Virginia, who stared icily at him, and his mother, who was watching Virginia apprehensively, weren’t laughing. Without question he was failing, miserably. He hurried on. “What made me fall in love with her, however, is what happened after she went to ground. She sat for a moment or two, checking the scrapes on her hands and knees, then got up and continued running. Faster than before. The whole time she never once looked around to see who’d seen her fall. I thought to myself, I need to know that woman. We went out for the first time on my birthday a few days later. That was seventeen years ago, to the day almost. To Virginia,” he said, and raised his glass.

She picked up her glass, and for a moment Edward feared she might hurl it at him. She forced a small smile and drank with everyone else.

Edward sunk into his chair. “Who needs another drink?” Virginia asked before disappearing into the house. As he gazed around the table it seemed no one would meet his eye, except Gil, who grinned and raised his glass. Mildred was studying the linen

table cloth, probably estimating its thread count. His mother and father were talking in low voices. His mother would glance furtively at him from time to time, but Edward pretended to be absorbed in the candles on the balcony rail: two had gone out already. Over at the next table Amanda was listening to Alex, her face turned up to him in reverence until she caught Edward watching. The voices on the deck seemed to rise, lifting and mixing on the wind until they were nothing but babble. Beyond the dunes, breaking waves crested in whitecaps on an otherwise black surface. Chairs scraped on the wood deck as Gil and Mildred stood to leave.

“It was a wonderful party, Edward,” Mildred said. “Thanks for having us.”

“You’re welcome,” he said. “It was all Virginia.”

Gil put his hand out and Edward took it. “Happy Birthday, Eddie,” he said. “It’s one helluva way to make a living.”

“What’s that, Gil?”

“Telling stories.” Gil was momentarily clear-eyed, and staring as though the disheartening resolution to Edward’s anecdotal attempts had penetrated even his addled mind. Edward felt his head nodding, but little else. Gil and Mildred left, and Edward stood until their voices and Virginia’s came from the kitchen and the front door slammed. A gust of wind blew over the deck, flickering the candles and snatching up a napkin from the farthest table. The napkin turned and rolled and bent and writhed as it fluttered higher into the night sky and out over the water until it was only a fleck on the horizon. Then it was gone, to be drowned and eventually dissolved in the cool waters of Lake Michigan.

\* \* \*

The party was almost over. People in possession of small children had either left or went to bed. Only a few of those who were staying at the house remained on the deck drinking and talking quietly. Edward gathered dirty cups and plates and forks and carried them inside. He set them on the counter. At the sink Virginia was scrubbing the large serving trays that wouldn't fit in the dishwasher.

“Why don't you leave that stuff, I'll do it later,” he said. “Or tomorrow morning.” Virginia kept at the dishes – scrub, rinse, stack, repeat. She'd ignored him for the last two hours. He loaded the other dishes into the dishwasher, took a clean towel and started drying the serving trays. He stacked them on the table. He didn't know where they went and didn't feel like asking. “Virginia, I'm sorry.”

Her hands stilled and let the tray slip from their grasp. It floated for a moment in the sudsy water and then sank. Virginia blew a wisp of hair from her face. “Sorry about what, Edward?”

He turned a clean serving tray over in his hands. “About telling the story.”

“Damn it! I don't have a problem with you telling a story.”

“That story?”

“Any story. I have a problem with the lies.”

“What lies?”

“Inaccuracies then.”

“What inaccuracies?”

Virginia braced herself against the sink and sighed. Edward handed her the towel and she wiped her hands. He reached out for her.

“Don’t touch me,” she said. “Don’t you dare. I’m so angry I could hit you with one of these stupid serving trays.”

“All this over a story, really?”

“Edward, none of what you said happened. It’s all made up. Everything. Do you have no idea at all how we met? That business about me falling and you watching. All nonsense.”

“You’re saying it never happened?”

“I’m saying that’s not how we met. You didn’t see me fall. How could you forget how we met?”

“Didn’t we have our first date on my birthday?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t we meet at the gym?”

“Yes.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“The *problem*, is that I *told* you about me falling at the gym when we had dinner the first time. You weren’t there.”

“Okay, so I just mixed it up.”

Virginia swung the towel and hit him in the shoulder with it. Edward felt the blow fall somewhere much deeper.

“Stop saying that! This is more than just mixing stuff up. What are we going to do? The kids, Edward. Me. How are we going to fix this? I feel like our life is dissolving before my eyes, like you’re disappearing.”

Her voice was frantic, on the verge of cracking. She was right, of course, but as he stumbled around in the dark trying to figure out why, he found nothing to grab onto. He went to put his arms around her, was surprised when she let him. Her body was stiff and unwieldy. “We’ll figure it out. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with my head.”

Those words, even to him, sounded false.

“Edward.”

“What?”

“Let go of me.”

He did. She held the towel out to him. He reached for it. She let it go and walked from the kitchen. She hadn’t once looked him in the face. He filled an old-fashioned glass with ice and whiskey. In the den, the only room without any occupants for the night, he turned on a small lamp and slid into the easy chair.

When he opened his eyes he thought he was hallucinating. A small boy with glasses stood before him. Himself as a child.

“Dad?”

Edward shook the vision from his head. “Son, what’s up?” He sipped the whiskey. It still burned, even at this late hour. Jacob’s face had changed. He seemed older, as if in a few hours he’d gone from adolescent to adult. His shoulders sagged slightly and lines formed at the corners of his eyes as he squinted at Edward. He shuffled his feet on the carpet. “Dad, you okay?”

A terrible wave of guilt rushed over Edward. How could he put this burden on his son? He wanted nothing more than to be able to answer the question honestly. “I think so. Have a seat.”

His son settled gingerly on the sofa; Edward moved to sit beside him.

“So tell me, what you got there?” he asked, motioning to the book in Jacob’s hand.

Jacob colored, deepening the red of his sunburned face. “Um, it’s yours.”

“Mine?”

“The one you wrote.”

Edward chuckled. “Where’d you find that?”

“Dad, you’re a writer. I Googled you. The book came up. I got it at the library the last time I was there.”

“Your mother know about this?”

Jacob turned the book over in his hands, pondering what the right answer might be. “No,” he said simply, looking Edward in the eye. “Don’t tell her, okay?”

“Why?”

Jacob shrugged.

“Why, Jacob?”

“I dunno. I just thought it could be something between us.”

Edward almost dropped his glass. It wasn’t so much what his son had said, but the soft, resolute timbre of his voice. It spoke to a sentiment shared, something all sons shared with their fathers. His son, however, had the courage and honesty to make that plain to him, while he, as a child and adult, had loved his father’s basement workshop, and loved trying to create things – different things, but creation all the same – in his own basement, but had never said a word of it. Edward searched and calculated, his mind rocketing along, considering and discarding a thousand possible responses in the blink of

an eye, and then, his mind went clear. The correct response came to him unbidden and it was easy. “It is something between us, son.” And his voice even sounded the same as Jacob’s had. He felt no artifice in it.

Jacob smiled, but already hesitancy pulled at the corners of his mouth. Edward wanted to reach up and touch his own face to be sure he hadn’t been frowning. Jacob’s hand was stroking the cloth cover of the book, his fingers tracing the recessed letters of the title, *This Life’s End*, the paint long since faded.

From time to time, Edward wondered about what he would and wouldn’t want his children to read from his hand. He wasn’t naïve enough to think it wouldn’t happen at some point, but was nevertheless disconcerted that his son now had a copy of a book which at points rather graphically depicted sex, sometimes bordering on the lewd, and what he felt were honest representations of how people sometimes hurt one another.

He gulped a mouthful whiskey. “So, what do you think about it?” He’d never imagined that question would be so hard.

“I like it,” his son said. “I’m almost done.”

His son was being truthful, and though part of his truth was surely and unknowingly motivated by a desire to please his father, to not hurt his feelings, a larger part, Edward felt, was genuine. “That’s great, son.”

“I read a part of it today that was pretty interesting. I was gonna ask you about it.”

“Oh, well. Son, you see, sometimes people—”

“Dad, not that! Man, relax. I’m not a little kid anymore, remember?”

“Oh, right.” He was relieved he didn’t have to have that discussion now. “Okay, so what was it?”



“You remember the story you told about Mom earlier?”

Edward swallowed hard. Maybe the sex talk would have been better. “Yes.”

“Well, there’s a part in here that’s just like that story.”

The energy left Edward’s body. He watched a gnat crawl over his knee, battling its way through the hair. “Really? Let me see that,” he said. But he didn’t need to see the text. Now that he’d been reminded of it, everything came back – the chapter, where he’d been when he wrote it and which computer he’d been working on, even the approximate page numbers.

He took the book from Jake, who was so excited about having his discovery verified he didn’t even notice his father hadn’t opened it.

“But I’m confused,” he said.

“About what?”

“It’s a novel, right? Which means its fiction – we just learned about fiction and nonfiction this year. But if it’s fiction it’s not supposed to be true, right?”

Edward felt his mouth open, stomach and diaphragm contracting, but somehow it wasn’t him laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“That’s a question yet to be answered. I made a mistake earlier, that’s all.”

“Then what really happened?”

Edward turned the book over in his hands. The black cover wasn’t the original he’d chosen, and on the spine were call numbers from a library. There was a box of the originals somewhere in the house in Chicago, the attic probably, where Virginia would

have stored them. He could have just given Jacob one of those, but then none of this would have been the same.

Edward flipped through the first few pages. A momentary elation swelled inside him. Here was the source of his confusion. How simple an explanation! The book was, after all, largely autobiographical in nature, and most of the stories he'd told today were right here on its pages, concrete and immutable.

“Dad?”

Edward looked up.

“What really happened?”

Edward thought back. The only images that presented themselves were from the story he'd told today, the same story he'd written almost ten years ago, complete with a vivid, full color picture reel of Virginia falling at the gym. As he tried to push through those he came to a black hole, a hole that started small and grew, until he was inside it, stumbling around in the dark. Fleeting images would surface and resubmerge before he could grasp them. His memory held no account other than that described in the book. There was no memory of her telling him about the fall at dinner that night. Virginia's version was nowhere to be found. Christ, he thought miserably, it's gone, completely gone. As he pressed harder, the space where this more accurate version would have been stored seemed to shrink away. Every detail he searched for as he blindly groped around was speculation, and when he finally had something, he knew he'd made it up, and it slid through his fingers like so many days, hours, minutes, seconds, lifetimes.

Edward's mouth was dry and he brought his watered down whiskey to his lips. Above the racket drumming in his head he heard himself say, "Your Mother told me about the falling story at dinner that first night we went out. I didn't see it."

His son stared, and Edward saw his body tense in anticipation of another question. Jacob's hands fidgeted in his lap as question after question blossomed and then wilted. Jacob was pardoning Edward by letting it go, so that he wouldn't have to see his father lurch around in a place that had no answers. This made Edward love his son more than at any time he could recall, even more than a few minutes before, and this love seemed to pour forth into the empty spaces left in his memory, filled the cracks, and for a time calmed him.

"I should go to bed," Jacob said, his face serious. "Tomorrow's a big day. Fireworks."

Edward nodded, aware that his reliance on his son's magnanimity was a weakness, and growing disgusted at himself for asking that of Jacob.

"Dad, can I have the book back?"

Edward looked to his lap. His hands had tightened on the book, knuckles white beneath the skin. They weren't his own. He handed the book back, gave his son a hug and kissed the top of his head. Jacob stopped at the hall. He looked back, his face heavy with worry. "See you tomorrow, sport," Edward said and Jacob disappeared into the darkness. What had his son seen as he looked at his father? What would he remember of this?

"Happy Birthday, Dad." Amanda leaned around the doorway to the den. Edward's whiskey glass was empty, his mouth sticky and bitter from the last swallow of his drink.

How long had he been sitting here? “Dad?” his daughter said again. Blond hair framed a face very much like Virginia’s – high cheekbones, a narrow jaw and small mouth – but still in full possession of the firmness and elasticity which his wife seemed to lament losing almost every morning in front of the mirror. “Dad, you’re creeping me out.”

Edward smiled weakly at his daughter. He would have given anything to have her say what she just said in her normal tone, full of sarcasm and exaggeration and the false indignation of a teenager. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. Come sit for a minute.” He motioned to the spot beside him. “The end of the party earlier, that was kind of weird, huh?”

His daughter shrugged, fidgeting with a loose thread from the seam on one of the cushions. “I guess so.”

“You know why?”

“Everyone was drunk.”

Edward laughed. “Probably,” he said. “Anything else?”

“Why are we talking about this?” Amanda said quietly. “The party’s over, right? Why can’t we just forget about it?”

He settled into the couch and sighed. Amanda turned to look at him. “Dad, come on, what was that for?”

Edward had to smile, his wife was alive and well in his daughter. “Amanda, you know I love you and your brother very much, right?” She nodded slowly, but looked elsewhere, her eyes roving the books stacked along the wall. “Can you do something for me?”

“Maybe,” she said, the corners of her mouth breaking upwards. “I already got you a birthday present, so you might be out of luck.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “Your brother has a book I’d like to take a look at.”

“I *knew* there was something strange with that book. What is it? Voodoo? Torture? Plagues? Jacob scares me sometimes.”

“Stop that. It’s nothing like that. It’s my book. The one I wrote a few years ago. Did you ever read it?”

“I started once, but I ended up losing it somewhere and never got to the end. Something happened and I just forgot. Sorry.”

Edward laughed. “That’s fine. That’s not why I asked. Read it when you want. Or don’t. Either way’s fine. But I was hoping you could go grab it for me.”

Amanda looked at him. “You want me to *sneak* in and steal *your* book from *him*?”

“Pretty much. I’m going to give it back. I just want to look at it.”

“Why?”

Good question, Edward thought, a chill cascading down his backside. How to explain this? “You remember that time I caught you lying on your bed with that boy last year? The door to your room was closed and I walked in without knocking.”

“What boy?” Amanda’s face flushed.

“I don’t know. Mark, I think. Or Paul maybe.”

“You mean Shaun?”

“Sure.”

“Dad, he wasn’t even my boyfriend. We weren’t doing anything.”

“Maybe not.”

“Besides, you never caught us. I mean, if we even did anything. Which we didn’t.”

They'd done something all right. Amanda was looking at the doorway, a longing for escape evident in the straining muscles of her neck. Edward was sure he didn't want to know what had gone on. It made him queasy just thinking about it. "Well, that's the problem. That book—"

"Can we stop talking about this, please? You want the book, I'll get the book."

"Thanks."

His daughter stood and smoothed the front of her jeans. "Dad, you're weird," she said.

"I know."

"I'll be right back."

And she was. A couple minutes later she returned and held the book out to him.

"Was Jacob still up?"

Amanda nodded. "He's always up. I don't know what he's always doing, or when he sleeps. He's weird," she said. "Like you," though this time her voice was playful, more assured. "Night, Dad."

"Night, 'Manda."

His daughter left him alone in the den, and he stared down at the book, his hand trembling. He would need another whiskey.

He sunk back onto the couch and drained half the liquor from his glass. Opening the book, he flipped leisurely through, as though the mere attempt at relaxation might dull his nerves. Page after page slid from his thumb. Most of what he'd mistaken today was there – Virginia's father and the Traverse house on page two-twenty-eight, the abortion episode with Jerry on page one-fourteen, a father spanking a child for lighting the house

on fire on three-seventy-two, and on and on. The names were different from those of the real life people who'd inspired the characters, but they were all there. Some things weren't there, but he could see them just as clearly, roosting on the pages piled in his office at home, or on the pages of journals that had published his work. Even the story he'd just started to talk about with his daughter was on a manuscript that sat on the far left corner of his desk. He could see the manuscript for pete's sake, the pages held together by a small black binder clip. All of these experiences now trapped by the very words that made them real. And here he was, searching for something, anything, that would dispute those accounts. In his mind, clear and sharp as glass were images of him walking in to find that boy's hand under his daughter's shirt. He'd bellowed at him to get out of his house as his daughter shrieked. This hadn't happened; Amanda's reaction earlier established as much. But if that didn't happen, what did? What *really* happened?

The crushing weight of uncertainty bent his neck, pressed his chin to his chest. He was having trouble breathing, the muscles in his biceps, neck, forearms and hands wouldn't stop twitching. The book had fallen open to a random page. The words on page one-eighty-one seemed to pour into him without his having to read them, and once he'd gotten far enough he no longer needed the words, the images took off of their own accord and he was watching a scene with his character as a nine or ten-year-old. A scene he'd agonized over because he'd known at some point his children would read it.

He sat on one side of the small island-countertop in the kitchen of his parents' house. The babysitter was on the other side, leaning over as she studied a recipe in one of his mother's cookbooks, a finger pressed to her lips. Her blouse hung low and he could see the round bulbs of her breasts, nipples just out of sight in the shadows of her shirt.

What are you looking at, mister? she asked. A soggy lump of sandwich idled in his mouth. Nothing, he mumbled. Nothing. You want to see what's there, don't you? He shook his head, at least he thought he did, and she smiled. Danielle tucked a long lock of reddish-blond hair behind her ear and fingered the top button on her blouse. Her hair stretched past her waist. This was the early seventies and she was some sort of hippie, though he didn't know that then. He had no idea what a hippie was, only that Danielle smelled like Patchouli, and sometimes garlic. If you say you want to see them, then I'll let you, she said. A child is naturally curious and that curiosity should be allowed, encouraged even. But only if you say you want to see them. He knew what curious meant, he'd even read Curious George books with Danielle when he was younger, but that meant nothing at the moment. I want to, he said.

Danielle came around the island, her hands working the buttons on her shirt. She didn't have a bra on, she never did. She stood before him and pulled the shirt back. Well, there they are kiddo. Nothing really special about them, now is there? He was mesmerized by the smattering of freckles across her chest, and struck by the heavy appearance of the breasts, two sandbags held upside down. The light pink ring around each nipple was of a tone and color he'd seen nowhere else, the nipples themselves strawberry tips covered in cream. Do you want to touch them? He nodded. You have to say so. I do, he said, his hand reaching slowly, as if pushing through water to get at them. She was large-breasted, his hand small by comparison. They felt like angel food cake. Do you want to taste them, she asked. Yes, he said. She stepped closer and he leaned forward on the tall stool. His lips closed around the nipple and it seemed the most natural thing in the world, so natural he felt neither shame nor stimulation. They tasted slightly salty like



his finger, like any skin. She pulled her breast from his mouth. So now you know, she said, and closed her shirt up. She went back to the cookbook and he to his sandwich, though he tasted nothing of it.

Edward looked at the pages and the entire memory was there, all the words – some he would have known as a child and some, like *areolas* or *avail* or *stimulation*, he might not have. He stared at them and cringed. His son had read this, and his wife probably, too. And his mother, though she'd never mentioned it. He had the full view of that experience in his mind, and searched and searched for something that would say it hadn't happened like that. He came up empty. He was the product of all these experiences, but of his imagination too. That was his truth. Was that experience with Danielle why he was so partial to breasts? Why he favored Herrick over Donne, and the Julia poems over all Herrick's others? Christ, he thought, it can't be. He'd been intrigued by Danielle's breasts before she'd shown him, but he couldn't even be sure if it had happened. He definitely had a baby-sitter, and she'd had large breasts, and even though her name had been Erica and not Danielle, this fictional name seemed more fitting. Now, because those words were on the page, they'd happened. They had happened.

He stood. He wanted to rush to his parents' room, to ask them if he'd ever mentioned anything of this as a child. Ask his mother for some semblance of the truth. He tiptoed down the hall and stood before their door. From the other side came the obstructed in and out of air through his father's respiratory passages. No light seeped from the crack at the bottom. He went to knock. Wait! Had he lost his mind? No really, completely lost it? What was the point? The whole exercise was ridiculous. Of course he hadn't said anything to them. He probably would have been in counseling 'til he was

eighteen, and Danielle or Erica or whatever her name actually was would have gone to jail. None of that had transpired, so it didn't much matter now. Nothing would ever dispel the memory of that day, faulty or otherwise. He could burn every single copy of the book, but still the memory would linger and the original version would be lost.

He took a deep breath and leaned against the wall in the dark hallway, his arms limp at his sides, book still clutched in his hand. Who knew how long he'd been standing there before the toilet flushed above him, the rush of water through pipes on its way to somewhere unknown.

The house was still, and as he made his way up the hall to the stairs his father's low rumble gave over to the steady flow of water from the bathroom faucet. The stairs seemed steeper. Edward took them one at a time. In the bedroom, he gently set the book on the dresser. He was sitting on the bed when Virginia came out of the bathroom. She gasped, frozen in the doorway, a hand on her chest. 'Edward, you startled me.' She studied his face. "You look exhausted." Her feet were bare, toenails beaming the deep fuchsia polish she'd applied earlier. She wore the bottom half of a satin pajama set he'd given her a few years back. The white cotton T-shirt might have been an old one of his, but it looked much better on her, tight enough to follow with clarity the slim cut of her shoulders and supple outline of her chest. Her face seemed fresh without makeup and earrings, which were probably dangling from the small stand next to the sink. Her eyes were tired, wary. She ran her hands through her hair, wrapped a pajama drawstring round and round her finger.

"They're gone, Virginia."

"Who?" she asked quietly.

“They’re gone and I won’t get them back.”

“Who, Edward? What are you talking about?”

“The memories,” he said, his head in his hands to fight off the dizziness. He could only see his wife’s feet, toes stretching unconsciously into the rug. He wished for those feet to be nearer to him. “I’ve figured out why I forget things so often. You’ll be disappointed, I’m sure, to know it’s not Alzheimer’s.” He shouldn’t have said it like that. He hadn’t intended to be sarcastic.

“Edward, stop this.”

“I’ve been downstairs for the past two hours trying to reconcile the stories I remember and the ones everyone else does. Every few seconds I wanted to flee here, to you, to hear you tell me what actually happened. Because I don’t have it. It’s gone.”

“Snap out of it, please,” she said. “You’re being excessive.”

“Virginia,” he said. He was scared, terrified, the muscles in his chest constricting. She moved toward him and stood between his legs. He leaned forward, his face near where she’d carried their children inside her. Her hand came to rest on his head. The other reached tentatively for his neck. The skin of her palm and fingers was warm, still damp from the bathroom, and softer than he could imagine: as soft as Amanda’s when she’d been born.

He swung an arm around her legs and pulled her closer, trying to sink in the smell of her shirt and warmth of her belly.

“Why didn’t you come to me?” she asked.

“It wouldn’t have made a difference. At best it would have made the reality real. But it doesn’t matter, there’s enough evidence now. I tried and tried to draw up an

accurate memory of when we met, or the time you left for two days without telling me, or when Amanda almost blinded Jacob, or the first time I had sex, or anything I wrote that even remotely stinks of something that happened in real life, and I can't. I only have what I wrote. A history revised. The real memories have been overwritten."

"I don't believe this."

"I don't expect you to."

"People forget things all the time. Little things, big things. They see things the way they want to see them. Everyone does."

"Not like this."

"This...this...I don't know what to say. My God, Edward. Do you remember the first time we made love?"

"On that roof in Bucktown? After we'd fought about not making love on the roof."

Virginia laughed. "Yes," she said, laughing still. "See?" The vibrations of her throat ran headlong down her body into the percussions of her stomach reverberating in Edward's ears. He filled with hope and squeezed tighter, then it was gone.

"But I never wrote about that. I've written a lot about my life, your life, the kids, our friends, but not everything. Everything would be impossible. But a lot. And I can never get them back."

"Edward, this...this doesn't make sense. You're saying whatever you write replaces your memories?"

He nodded.

"And you can't get them back?"

“Yes.”

“That’s not possible. There’s something else going on here. Edward. Edward!”

She took his head in her hands. “This isn’t happening. Our life together, it isn’t gone.

That’s not possible.”

“You want me to show you the book? Take a look, it’s right over there.”

“I don’t need to see the damn book! I’ve read it. I see the parallels, I don’t doubt that. But our memories? They can’t be gone. They can’t.”

“They are.”

“How are you just realizing this now? You’ve been writing for twenty years.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “It’s always just one project after another. You finish, you move on. It just kind of gets buried like everything else until it’s brought before the light again, like..like...”

“Like memories.”

“Yes.” They were silent for a moment, the room, the walls, seeming to vibrate. “I don’t know what to say. At least we have an explanation.”

“This is not an explanation. I don’t know what it is, but it’s not an explanation. You *need* to go to the doctor.”

“Virginia, what would a doctor say that would make this better?”

“They would say it’s not Alzheimer’s.”

“So what. I know it’s not Alzheimer’s. Jesus, Virginia, *you* know it’s not Alzheimer’s. I won’t be able to get them back. I could read and read and talk to everyone I know, but they’re gone. I want them back, but they’re gone. I could even rewrite them, change them so they’re like the original events, but they’d never be the original events.”

“No.”

“What no?”

“I don’t want to hear talk like that.”

“Like what?”

“Rewriting the past...again. That’s just nonsense and I won’t have any of it. This has gone on long enough. I want my husband back, and I want him back for good. For the long term.”

Edward stared up at her. Had he really just said he could rewrite them? Maybe he could. Given all that had happened, it didn’t seem so impossible.

“Edward, you hear me? I don’t want the past, I want the future. I couldn’t care less about the past.”

“You know that’s not true. I know it’s not true. Think about who I am, not as a writer, or your husband, or anything else. Just as a person. How can I be sure of who I am, or how I got to be this person, without those memories?” He grasped her by the hips. “How can I understand how I got to this moment? Think about the implications of this: all of them. I’ll never be able to talk with someone about the past without worry. I’ll never be able to tell Amanda about when I was in high school. Or Jacob about my own childhood. Oh, and Jacob. All day today, even the past few months, I’ve felt so much like he was my son. Like I could see me in him, some of my eccentricities in his. But what am I to make of it now? It seems possible I could have written all about my own childhood in such a way that I really only *think* his resembles mine. And here, now, I’ll never be able to fully understand why I might say or do certain things but not others.”

“But Edward—“

“Wait. Don’t tell me this doesn’t mean anything. I saw it in your face this evening. For Christssake, I saw it in my father’s face. He looked at me like he was lost, like he was looking at a ghost, his mouth moving, mustache twitching, but no words came out, and he had to turn to my mother on the verge of tears and silently ask her ‘who is that standing up there? Is that our son?’ Don’t tell me this doesn’t mean anything.”

He was panting, and sweat had broken out at the small of his back, trickling into the waistband of his underwear. Virginia was leaning back, body rigid, pulling weakly against his grip on her pajama pants. Then, a certain calm settled over her. He could feel the muscles in her thighs and stomach slacken and she came back to him. When she spoke her voice was even, steady. “Honey, I didn’t mean that. I just meant—“

“Virginia,” he said, suddenly very tired. “I know what you meant.”

“Good. Then I want you to stop with this doomsday prognosis. All I’m *trying* to say is that maybe it’s not so bad, right? Is that possible? You’ve got your novel – okay – and it’s mostly based on your own memories – fine – and there are probably a number of other stories and things like that too. Okay. But you said yourself it was impossible to write about everything, and you probably haven’t even come close to that, right?” Her voice had lost just a touch of its calm. “Edward, right?”

He pulled her close to him again. Her stomach grumbled in his ear, and behind that thumped her heart. “Virginia, today wasn’t an anomaly.”

“What?”

“Most of the stories I told, or tried to tell, weren’t accurate. That’s not a mistake.”

“It could have just been today’s events though. A birthday, all the people from the past. It’s nothing, really. Just a few mistaken memories is all. It could happen to anyone. It was just today. Nothing more.”

“Virginia, are you kidding? Look at how many I screwed up. Almost all of them. One or two here and there were accurate, but really. Can you be serious right now?”

“Yes. I say it’s not a big deal. Not at all.”

Edward sighed. “When was the last time you were in my office at home?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Just answer, please.”

“I...a couple months ago, I think.”

“So you saw the stacks of paper everywhere.” Her fingers dug into his shoulder. “Virginia, most of those are unpublished manuscripts. There’s at least a couple thousand pages scattered around my office or on my hard drive. I’ve cannibalized almost everything. Cannibalized it and turned to my own purposes.” His hands slipped from her body. He looked up at her. “So much so, that I can no longer separate fact from fiction.”

Virginia took an unsteady step back. He let her go. “Edward, how could you? How could you do this?”

He shook his head. “How could I have known? I just realized all this today. Maybe it’s not so bad, I don’t know. Most of the details are there, it’s just certain stuff, usually the important stuff, that has changed.”

“You mean been changed by you.”

“Yes.”



“And what about today?” Her face had grown hard all of a sudden, a firm thin line where her mouth used to be, the bulge of contracted muscle in her jaw.

“Today?” he asked.

“Today,” she said. “Are you going to write about today?”

He studied her face, searching for a sign of what the answer should be, but he needn't have. He could see it etched in her eyes and the grim, straight posture of torso, her arms crossed over her chest so she seemed a perfect rectangle. She wasn't asking him about today, she was asking him about every day after this. She was asking him to give up what he'd been doing for the last two decades. “Virginia, I'll go see a doctor.”

“That's no answer.”

Edward inhaled deeply, and whatever it was he exhaled along with his breath seemed to pull his gaze to the floor. How could he do that? What would he do with himself? “I'll try.”

“That's not good enough.”

Beneath the firm veneer of her voice uncertainty flickered like a speaker with a faulty wire. She was blinking and her mouth had softened enough to take up her lower lip between her teeth. “I won't write about today,” he said.

She sighed, and now they both had left something of themselves lingering in the air. He held his hand out to her. “Can you come to bed now, please?”

Her steps were cautious until she got to him and fell into his lap. She wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed. “We'll be okay,” she whispered in his ear. “We will. Maybe now that you know about this, things will be different.”

“Maybe,” he said. “There’s only one way to find out. Tomorrow. And the day after that. And every single day after that.”

“It’ll be okay,” she said.

He mumbled his agreement into her shoulder, though he wasn’t sure he believed it. They lay down for a moment before he moved to go to the bathroom. She pulled him toward her. “Honey,” she whispered.

“What?”

“You’re still going to go to the doctor, right?”

He leaned back and looked her in the face. She was serious, so serious he couldn’t help but laugh.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“You. You’re unbelievable. Amazing.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Of course not.”

“So?”

“Jeez Virginia, yes, I’m going to go to the doctor. Anything else? Should I check into facelifts or something? Maybe a gym membership?”

“No, that’ll be all. Just the doctor.”

“Good. Now that I’ve signed away everything, can I go to the bathroom?”

“Yes, you may.”

He stood and straightened his shirt.

“But hurry back,” she said. “I have something for you.”

He was going to ask what, but she’d already ducked under the sheets.

\* \* \*

When Edward cut the light off darkness enveloped him. He crept from the bathroom to find Virginia had turned off the bedside lamp. She was asleep, life whispering softly, methodically past her lips. He chuckled to himself. Had he really been in the bathroom that long? Perhaps, the minutes had fallen away as he stared at his face – both new and old – in the mirror while he brushed his teeth. And her day had been long. Almost as long as his. He could feel the leaden weight of eighteen holes of golf resting comfortably on his hamstrings and quads and back, and the not so comfortable potential of a life revised. The early morning moon cast a faint glow through the open window. He went over and stared out beyond the dunes to the placid black waters of Lake Michigan.

He followed the moonlight path cutting across the water to its very end. The world fell away around him and he stood, alone, hovering above the water in the middle of nowhere in a pin-prick of light. From there he could see his life en masse and then en minutiae and then en noir, as the individual memories were swallowed by the dark lake. His feet hurt and he looked down to realize he was standing on the razor's edge that separates each infinitesimal moment in the present from the black expanse that is the past. There was no future, and in its universal largesse there is no past, only the razor's edge cutting into his feet.

Virginia stirs in bed, a low moan escaping her as if she too feels sharp metal. He turns and watches her face, pallid in the moonlight. It is a violation to intrude upon her like this, her hair covering her jaw, mouth slightly agape. He is looking directly onto her soul, wants to be part of it rather than just watch, to be as near to her in this moment as possible. He slips his shirt over his head and lets it fall to the floor. He crawls into bed,

slides his arm under her, and is surprised, and then pleased, to find she took off the T-shirt. Gone too, are the pajama pants. His hand runs the length of her warm side, down the dip of her waist, up over the swell of her hip and bunched elastic underwear band. He draws her close to him, close enough that no distance separates them. Warm breath pools on his neck, her breasts push against his chest. The moonlight in the room dwindles to nothing as a passing cloud takes up an interloper's stance. Edward is glad for sleep to come. He fears what tomorrow will bring, his feet tingling under the covers, the impression of the razor still sharp on his skin. What would he write? He would not write the story of the past sixteen hours – that he is sure of. But if he doesn't, what then, will he remember of this day?

## HE COMES BEARING ICONS

Aleksei Gregorovich Voronin arrived in Yalta drunk, the sky the color of pigeon feathers. This was not how he imagined it would be. The train trip had been wretched. He could not sleep, nor eat. And he suffered a pain in his mouth. Back and forth his tongue traced over the jagged and rotten tooth where the pit of a cherry had left its mark. The wretched thing should have been pulled years ago. He wondered momentarily what manner of conveyance he would have utilized one hundred years from now, if whatever replaced the train would move above the tracks rather than squeal irritatingly along them. The thoughts were of little consequence. On this bleak day in nineteen hundred and four, he was sure he could sense the soot from the locomotive lodging itself in his lungs.

Across the aisle a woman had sat facing him. She glanced fretfully in his direction. “Do you find me queer,” he had asked, “because I talk to myself and cannot control this tick in my hand?”

The smooth slope of her brow cleaved. Aleksei found this sad, to mar such a countenance. Her face was delicate, high full cheeks the ruddy color of wine diluted with water. She had a small mole on her chin, but this was also beautiful. Without such a mark she would have been so beautiful as to be ugly.

Though Aleksei stared she did not turn away, and he would have thought she hadn't heard him but for the wine condensing to crimson on her cheeks.

“No,” she said. “I don't find you queer.”

“What is your name?”

“Why?”

“Because I’m about to tell you something.”

She glanced up the aisle. Their end of the car was empty and she was worried.

What has she to worry about, he wondered. He would not hurt her. And why is she traveling alone? She is escaping, he thought, but what exactly she was fleeing he couldn’t deduce. The unbroken contours of her hands and propriety of her dress meant no work had ever been foisted upon her. No wedding ring in sight. And there she was glancing around again like a bird, squinting at everything. Aleksei could see them then, the cracks at the corners of her eyes, an accumulation of worry. But over what? Surely, she must be hiding something.

He decided he didn’t care and took another long pull from the bottle he’d carried since leaving Volgograd. “What I have to tell you is very important,” he said. “Do you understand?” She studied him with a supple lower lip caught between her teeth. It seemed she was troubled now, as he’d been troubled for so long. He was aware something in him had become unmoored, shifting around in the dark like a buoy at sea. Others were more aware, among them his mother, who wrung her hands and did hopeless things like hang icons on the bare walls of his room when he went to the tavern. But Aleksei merely had the vague sense of a man who has long fasted, feeling only a mild sinking in his stomach and a grumble as the organ churns upon itself.

In his room at the back of his mother’s house, he’d been gazing upon one of the icons with despair, and couldn’t help but chastise himself for such a disposition. Just a small wooden crucifix, he thought, carved by some peasant handworker. He needn’t have anything to fear. But the four icons on the walls oppressed him, and seemed to weigh on the room like humid summer air. Before him, the notebook sat open on the table. The

page had not been graced with so much as the date, for he knew nothing would come of it. Later, he'd have to open the book and hear the laughter of its empty spaces echoing in his mind.

Most of his adult life had been spent cloistered in this damp room. In his estimation he'd written more than three thousand pages (not including transcriptions) to send to editors. Dozens of notebooks stacked neatly in the corner bore witness to this fact. Lately he marveled at the way his body had contorted itself to his work. Not yet thirty and already his back sloped as though he were a beast of labor strapped to a yoke. His eyesight had faded in the dim candlelight of long nights, and his hand was now irrevocably curled into a talon fit only for pens. He couldn't even hold his penis with it.

He poked at the wrinkled flesh around his eyes. The blank page seemed to grasp his throat, squeezing until he lurched back and realized he'd stopped drawing breath. It was a feeling surpassed only by the utter shame that cut through him as telegram after telegram came back from papers and periodicals with little more than a note saying they had no place for his work.

He hurled the notebook into the corner, toppling a stack of books almost two meters high. They came crashing down, followed in short order by the icon on his eastern wall. Exhausted, he slumped back into his chair. The talon-hand throbbed. His breath ushered forth in shallow bursts. Perhaps he was dying. But there was little chance of that. His mother was already six and forty years old, and fit as a bull. They all thought her mother was two and sixty (really, no one knew for sure), and she still plowed the fields and forced milk from the udders of her anemic cows. His father was long dead, considered so anyway, since he'd left many years before, when Aleksei was eleven. All

his grandfathers lived still, harvesting beets in Kursk or fishing in the Caspian Sea. No, he was not dying. That would be far too easy.

Outside his room, eastern darkness chased streaks of magenta and rust westward. There is nothing like a Russian sky, he thought as he chewed the nails on his thumb and fingers.

“Alekskin,” called his mother from the hallway.

“I’m busy,” he shouted. “Leave me be.”

The door opened and Anna stepped in, her tread stressing the floorboards. “Don’t be that way, Alekskin.”

He turned from his desk. “Can’t you see I’m working? What do you want?”

“Working, eh?” His mother gazed around the room. “Yes, I see. And very good work it is.” She picked up the icon and put it on the bed.

“Just leave that damn thing,” he said. “It’s worthless.”

His mother scowled. With her face bunched like that she resembled a potato. “The letters have come,” she said.

“So what.”

“So, a telegram and a magazine have come for you. I didn’t read the telegram, I promise. But the magazine, well, I opened the magazine. There’s something new from Anton Pavlovich.”

“I don’t care,” he said. Of course she’d read the telegram, she wouldn’t have come otherwise. “Throw it out. All of it. Don’t bring me any more post.”

“Alekskin, what has come over you? Are you going mad? I shall summon the doctor if you don’t pull yourself together.”



“I am together.”

“You don’t want the magazine, then?”

He shook his head.

“Or the telegram?”

He sat, mute. Anna shrugged and turned to go, muttering under her breath.

“Wait,” he said. “Give me those damn things. I’ll take them.”

His mother dropped the items on the floor and left. Aleksei considered them, a tremble in the fingertips of his crippled hand. He stood and staggered to his cot. Across the room, fire burned brightly in the iron stove. Too brightly, he thought. It has grown hot here. But he liked to leave the hatch open and watch flames lap at the logs until they charred. It seemed to him that man was always paying for one pleasure by sacrificing another.

The sky had grown dark, colorless without the yellow moon and shimmering stars. He forced himself off the bed and sat back down with the post. He crumpled the telegram and threw it at the open hatch. The ball of paper fell woefully short; it carried too little weight. In the magazine he found Anton Pavlovich’s piece. *The Cherry Orchard*, he read aloud. He began it but stopped. I don’t want to read about cherry trees, he thought. Chekhov is a damn fool. Anyone could write an idiotic play about cherries.

Aleksei convulsed. Wracked by spasms, he curled up on the bed. When they subsided, a pain pierced his gut. On his lips was the metallic taste of blood. I must go, he thought to himself. I must. After all these years, words that should come so easily, from a mind comparable to Chekhov’s or Dostoevsky’s, Turgenev’s or Gogol’s (but not Pushkin’s, for Aleksei knew he was no poet), these words that should fall from his pen

and break upon the people such that they are in awe, these words failed him. I must kill him, he said. I must or I shall go mad.

“So, what is it?” she asked. “You wished to say something. Something significant, perhaps...” She seemed different now, as if in a single moment she’d sniffed him out and knew he was nothing to worry over.

“What is your name?” he asked again.

“Anna Dementieva. Now tell me.”

Aleksei blinked. Of course her name would be Anna. Suddenly, he didn’t want to tell her anymore. She waited, staring at him now, willing him to continue with her expectations of his failure, his inability to make good on his earlier fervor. “I am on my way to murder a great man,” he said. “No, not a great man, not yet anyway, but one who will be considered truly great.”

She laughed, not the stilted chuckle that one makes out of courtesy, but a deep, gut wrenching bawl that rattled Aleksei’s insides and seemed to shake the train. A peasant’s laugh. Just like that she found him amusing, *charmant*.

“Bah,” he spat. “Stupid, capricious woman. You know not what greatness is.”

This too, she found funny. So he had turned to the window, drank vodka, talked with himself, and watched the station at Yalta roll up on them.

As they alighted from the train, Aleksei hurried up to her. “One day,” he started, his voice low, “if you are lucky...” But he stopped. The air around her was laden with a musky scent, alive, like the close quarters inside a stable where a mare is giving birth. There was another smell too, which he couldn’t place but found fabulous. She turned to him and waited, clutching at the small beaded bag in her hand. He wanted to say that if

she were lucky, a moment would arrive when all would become clear to her, but the joints in his jaw had become inflexible.

“You stink of vodka,” she said finally, and turned on her heel.

Aleksei commissioned a livery cab to take him to Anton Pavlovich’s. He kept his crippled hand in the pocket of his trousers, and almost fell into the gutter trying to mount the vehicle. Once aboard he asked the driver about Anton Pavlovich Chekhov.

“He receives many visitors,” the driver said.

“I’m sure,” said Aleksei.

“These days more than usual.”

“Why is that?”

“The great man is sick, they say. He is dying, they say.”

Aleksei frowned. A pointed end of the crucifix in his pocket jabbed his leg. He wondered why he’d even brought the stupid thing in the first place. “It cannot be,” he said. “It is not his time.”

The driver cocked his head as though pondering this, and then turned to him.

“You are right. It is never time for men such as he, wise brother.”

Aleksei began to protest but thought better of it. The man may only be an ignorant driver, but his voice is as capable of sounding an alarm as anyone’s, save for that woman from the train.

The driver rambled on. “They have all been here,” he said.

“Who?”

“Tolstoy, Gorky, Rachmanimov, Stanislavsky, others. Some of the best that Russia has ever offered her people or the world. Young writers also, whom I don’t

recognize or care for. They seem too sharp to be any good. They take, even when all is already offered.”

Aleksei’s fingers trembled and he clutched at the icon. Bile or vodka pulsed at the back of his throat. He leaned over the side and pondered the dirt road passing underway. It blurred. He tips forward. The dirt rushes up to greet him and his hand clasped tight around the stem of the icon is stuck in his pocket as the pointed crossbar snags in the fabric. His skull collapses against the road and all goes black.

“You should sit back,” the driver said. “It is a foolish child’s game to lean over the side of a moving taxi. One bump and you’re finished, just like that. Before your time.”

Aleksei couldn’t keep his eyes open without feeling nauseous, and so missed the tranquility around him. Despite the gloom above, laurel and magnolia trees blossomed in the spring air. The rich, almost-placental smell of briny sea water reached him, and for a moment the drumming in his chest quieted. Flickering shadows took shape. He and Tolstoy, eating grapes and deriding Nicholas’s action against Gorky. He and Gorky, cooled by a sea breeze, salt gracing their lips, discussing women and the scourge of syphilis. He and Anton Pavlovich, in Moscow or Petersburg, strolling through a bazaar. Anton’s cane taps against the cobblestone as they both stroke their beards. Aleksei cannot hear what Anton is saying amidst the din. Desperate, he stretches his head towards Anton Pavlovich and is on the verge of comprehension when the image vanishes, chased away by a burning in his throat.

He sensed they were approaching Anton Pavlovich's house even before the horses began to slow. The air thickened and Aleksei had to work to fill his lungs. What is wrong with me, he wondered, hoping the driver thought nothing of his infirmity.

The white house occupied a small well-maintained plot shaded by oak, pine, and palm trees. The sun broke through and Aleksei cringed. It is good to be Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, he muttered. He is not dying, idiotic driver. How could a man die in such a place? He will live for many years, and this house will still stand, so that future generations will come to see the place where the great man lived.

He hobbled through the gate and knocked on the front door. The knife in his coat pocket carried a weight that seemed to tip him to one side. His crippled hand curled around its base.

A woman answered. "Yes?"

"Good afternoon, Madame," he said. "I am Aleksei Gregorovich Voronin. I am here to see Anton Pavlovich Chekhov." Her eyes ran the length of his person, which was not long, before settling on his face. It was clear she didn't trust him, so he hunched a little more and smiled sadly. "I'm sorry to bother at such an hour, but I was under the impression I could have an audience with the Master of the house."

"Really?" she said. "I do not remember your name passing Anton's lips."

Aleksei's fingers teathed at the knife handle and a coil of malice unwound inside him. Sweat poured from his back into his trousers. "I am sure it has not. My name is of little value, yet. Perhaps one day." His gaze dropped to her feet.

She shifted her weight. When Aleksei returned to her face, her features had softened considerably. "You are Anton Pavlovich's sister, yes?"

She nodded.

“Yes, I can see the sharpness in your eyes also.” They were beautiful eyes, deep set and chestnut, with a slight slope to them. There, too, was a certain weary resentment that comes from being the lesser of two siblings. What ways had she unwittingly undermined Anton Pavlovich while serving as his greatest champion? Perhaps she has sought to put her life on hold for his, and this burden drives her mad, he thought. If that were the case, then perhaps she would be an ally of his.

Behind her he heard a male voice. He considered fleeing. “Anton is not here,” she said. “I am sorry.” She moved to close the door. Aleksei staggered under a fit of coughing. From his coat he pulled a handkerchief. When he had regained control of his chest he held the cloth out before him. Fresh blood was spattered across its white surface.

She had already moved out onto the porch and grabbed his arm. When she saw the blood they looked at one another. She sighed, and her eyes dimmed, as though she’d been troubled by a blow to the head.

“It is okay,” he said. “This happens all the time, but it’s nothing, really.”

Her lips trembled on the verge of speech, but then her nerve left her. She led him into the house, where she told him that Anton had gone to Germany. She would have the servants prepare him a basket of food for his travels back home.

Aleksei required every ounce of energy to return to the train station. With most of the money he had to his name he purchased a first class ticket to Badenweiler, Germany, on the southwestern edge of the Black Forest. He collapsed into his seat and into a trance, half delirium and half sleep. His mother laughs at him when she finds him at his desk

writing at the age of fifteen, the first story he'd read by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov open beside him. Gusev, Gusev, where are you, he calls. His mother laughs again. He has said that Anton Pavlovich inspired him. That he will do what Anton Pavlovich does, only better. She laughs. You will only come to ruin she says, working on the inspiration of others. It is like saying you love a woman simply because you see another man so love a woman. Gusev, he calls. How are the fish, Gusev? Shall I eat the fish? His mother laughs again, in the same manner as when his father left and she threw the fruit bowl at the door and cursed his existence. She laughs and laughs, always laughing. How?

“Sir,” a man said. “Sir, you must exit the train.”

Aleksei heard this voice in the distance, coming to him slowly through a medium thicker than air, than water even. He blinked and rose gradually to the surface, his vision blurry as when one has been swimming with one's eyes open. The man before him was nothing but an indefinite swirl of color in the shape of a stooped human being. “I'd prefer not to,” Aleksei said calmly, thinking he would stab the conductor if they tried to make him leave the train.

“Sir, but you must.”

“I will be quiet.” They would not throw him from the train, even if he was ranting in his sleep. He had purchased a first class ticket.

“It is not that,” the official said. “You must switch trains to reach Germany.”

Aleksei eyed the man, who had now grown a hooked nose and ridiculous little moustache, before turning to the window. How many times, Aleksei wondered, has that hideous sliver of hair crisscrossed the continent? They were pulling into a cavernous

central station. The artful writing on the walls was Hungarian. They must be in Budapest. He grabbed the basket and exited.

Aboard the next train he ate, slowly grinding the hard black bread and spicy sausage. He thought not at all about going to kill Anton Pavlovich, but rather what it would mean when he was gone. Between fits of bloody coughing he drank. His head throbbed miserably, in seeming cadence with the wound on his leg. The crucifix had managed to puncture his skin through the trouser pocket. With a grunt, he pulled it out and turned it over in his hands, caressing the smooth backside. The window above had a latch, which he could have easily opened and tossed the icon from, if he wanted, ridding himself of it forever.

The train rolled through the Bavarian countryside and entered the Black Forest. Verdant hills and dense trees and shaded woods that seemed almost too alive called out in low, rumbling tones, his only respite the periodic lulls when the forest seemed to turn into itself and slumber with the labored breathing of the elderly or obese. It reminded him of the countryside near his home, and for a moment he dwelled on his mother. Sorrow welled up in his breast and he wanted to cry. With a likeness before him in the train window he could see the land of his home, but his mother's house, even her potato face, would not come. A haze obscured from view his little desk and the notebooks once stacked, now fallen in a heap. He wept. He wished he had told his mother he was leaving. She would be worried. He remembered the icon in his hand and stared at it. The years had been unkind to the small bronze figure fastened to the posts, and the features of the face and hands were all but worn away. Perhaps, Aleksei thought, that is a good thing. To



always stare down such sorrow makes one miserable. He was still clutching the crucifix when the train ground to a halt.

Finding Anton Pavlovich Chekhov in Badenweiler posed no difficulty. Aleksei inquired at the first hotel he came to, and by his third inquiry found that Anton Pavlovich had been at the Hotel Römerbaden, but moved to another a few days prior. “He is a very sick man,” the concierge said. “We forward his post to the Hotel Sommer.”

Aleksei’s lips trembled furiously, like a dog in the bush waiting to snap at partridges. He wandered the streets consumed with anxiety. The silence oppressed him and he felt often the urge to scream. Something curious marked the air, lighter than anywhere else he’d experienced: it tasted of fresh water. He grew thirsty, and after several drinks from the bottle in his overcoat, finally went to go see Anton Pavlovich.

It turned out to be no more difficult finding Anton Pavlovich’s room than finding his hotel. Aleksei sat on a bench across the street. From above came labored coughing. Trepidation toned in Aleksei’s gut, and sent a shiver cascading up his body that dead-ended in his ear drums. He shook his head furiously as if to loose water from it. The doors from which the coughing emanated led onto a balcony with a small white table and chairs. Remnants of a meal, and empty bottles and glasses, littered the table.

The day grew oppressively hot, and while Aleksei sweated in the sun and swallowed vodka to quell his nausea, the coughing from above grew more and more pitiful. On the balcony there was movement: a waiter or servant of some sort, and a woman. The woman motioned disdainfully at the dishes. She picked up an ashtray and thrust it at the waiter. The moment drew on interminably, when both held the ashtray

longer than was necessary and shared a look that made Aleksei question whether she was Anton Pavlovich's wife.

And then, like a light switch her gaze turned to spite. Aleksei felt the waiter go limp and deflate. The unpredictability was frightening, and he sympathized with the man. The woman went inside and the breath escaped Aleksei's lungs. On the balcony the waiter glanced around and then bent to pick something up. He studied it, glanced around again, and slid some keepsake into his pocket. He is a thief, that waiter. Aleksei thought of the icon.

He was thankful when the waiter went inside and closed the balcony doors. The miserable coughing had clawed at him such that he wanted to clear his own chest. Moments later the woman strode from the hotel, accompanied by a man carrying a large black satchel. Aleksei stood. He turned back to the bench, surprised, as though it had forced him from his place with a kick. A man in a bellhop's cap left the building. Aleksei went in quickly, then slowly traversed the steps to the first floor.

It didn't take long to find Anton Pavlovich's room. His ragged, rasping cough could be heard from one end of the hall to the other. Aleksei hobbled, worried his body had gone numb. What if he grabbed the knife and it slipped from his hand because he couldn't feel it?

Aleksei stopped before the coughing door. He knocked. I will show him, he thought. I will make clear to him I am worthy. That my name should and shall stand beside, or before, his.

"Enter," came a reedy voice amidst a series of spasms.

The strange image of grass blades trampled under boot struck Aleksei. He pushed the door open and strode into the apartment, trying in vain to erect his contorted body. “Anton Pavlovich Chekhov,” he intoned as he walked into the room, “I have come to—” He pulled up short inside the entrance.

The room seemed to sag under the fungal stench of decay. Aleksei frozen at the sight of Anton Pavlovich. He was taller than Aleksei had envisioned, and made to seem all the more so since whatever extra girth he at one time might have carried had disappeared. His was a body all bone and loose skin, his eye sockets two dark cavities behind wire-rimmed spectacles, a feeble beard and thinning hair. Swathed in a robe, Anton Pavlovich daubed blood the color of a wood thrush’s back from his lips and chin.

He slowly turned to Aleksei. “Who are you? I didn’t call for a priest,” he said.

“A priest?” Aleksei questioned. “I’m no priest.”

“Then why do you come bearing an icon? No man of God is needed here. Did Tolstoy send you?”

Aleksei looked at the icon in his hand. How did this get here, he wondered. The floor seemed to hiccup, and he had the sensation he was standing on the deck of a ship. “No one sent me.”

“Who are you?”

“Aleksei Gregorovich Voronin. I have come to end your life.”

Anton Pavlovich tittered and then howled in amusement. Aleksei watched him, anger constricting his ribcage.

After several moments Anton Pavlovich recovered. “No,” he said. “I imagine Tolstoy did not send you.”

“I said that already. I am here to kill you.”

Anton Pavlovich suppressed a laugh. “You’re a little late for that I’m afraid. My good man, I’m already dead.”

Aleksei blinked. Could he be hallucinating? Was he too late?

“Don’t look like you’ve just been slapped with a trout,” Anton Pavlovich said. “You’re not hallucinating.”

Aleksei reached into his pocket and withdrew the knife. Anton Pavlovich murmured and struggled to raise his body into a sitting position.

“You’re a writer, aren’t you?” Anton Pavlovich said wearily.

Aleksei hesitated.

“Funny that I haven’t heard of you.” Anton Pavlovich wiped his mouth again. “Don’t color up like that.” He sighed. “I knew this day would come.”

The tightness in Aleksei’s gut expanded, warming his insides. “You knew?”

“Yes. But I didn’t think it would come so soon. I thought I had a few years yet.”

“I thought you great, Anton Pavlovich,” said Aleksei. “But now I don’t. I fear that you will rise too high and choke the rest of us, as you’ve choked me. The world shall sing your praises as genius. They will say that your insight and form defies what we had known, spawning a million imitators. They will be blind, snowed under an avalanche of praise created by the falling of a few snowflakes. Well, I am not blinded. I do not think you all that great. I have toiled in obscurity studying your texts and writing my own, at your behest, and all the while there exists no room but for you and your disciples.”

“So you must destroy me,” said Anton Pavlovich. “And by so doing assume my place.”

Aleksei stared into the empty fireplace, the pile of ashes unsettled now and again by an errant draft from the chimney. The room had grown infernally hot.

“Remove your jacket, Aleksei Gregorovich. Relax. I find you a superb fellow and am saddened we couldn’t have met sooner.”

“We don’t know the same people I suppose. Don’t bother trying to lull me or cry out. I have come with a job and I intend to see it through.”

“You needn’t worry. I don’t think I could put a man such as you off his task. Besides, the people here have grown deaf to my calls.”

Aleksei felt a supreme tiredness infecting his bones. He wanted desperately to open the balcony doors, but was not ready to come any closer to Anton Pavlovich.

“Aleksei Gregorovich, I would be remiss if I didn’t ask one more question.”

“What question? You already know why I’m doing this.”

“Yes, that’s quite clear, but there’s another.” Anton Pavlovich clasped his hands in his lap. “Have you considered that you might not be a very good writer?”

Aleksei seized up, his hands tightening around the icon and knife. He staggered to the fireplace and leaned on the mantle. Breath rasped from his mouth. The room blurred and Anton Pavlovich levitated above his bed. From the distance the stark caws of crows in an olive tree jeered at him. “No,” Aleksei mumbled. “I am not even a decent writer. I am nothing at all.”

“Aleksei Gregorovich, sometimes people talk themselves or others into more than they should. Forget all that and tell me a tale. I am soon to be dead and would like one last story. I would pay you for it, but I haven’t any money.”

The cackling ravens swallowed their tongues. Slowly, the walls stopped their vacillating. Aleksei could focus again and his eyes fell to the icon. He noticed, for the first time, that the crucifix was made not of wood, gem or stone, but of bone. He imagined this to be bone from the man imprisoned on the icon. As he rubbed his fingers along the pointed ends he felt the bones of Christ, bones composed of the same material that supported his own misshapen body, and that of Anton Pavlovich, and of all men. Aleksei felt his bones shed the tiredness that had been building for hours and years, and his thin lips stretched across his face. "I'll tell you a story Anton Pavlovich. It will cost you nothing now. You will pay later."

"I believe I shall. Go ahead, tell."

Aleksei thought a moment and began, "A young man seeks out a doctor, complaining of severe pain in his chest. The old doctor purses his lips. He looks like a tortoise, and moves like one too, his head slowly stretching forward and back as the young man talks. He uses instruments to inspect the young man's chest. 'Your heartbeat is regular and there is no fluid in your lungs. You are young and fit as a stallion. Nothing is wrong with you.' The young man doesn't have the heart to protest. The next week he returns. 'The pain is worse,' he says. The doctor does more tests and his nostrils quiver, as if some wretched scent has reached him. 'You're fine,' he says. 'Perhaps this is a mental condition. Take this elixir and see me if it persists.' The young man comes back several times, and each instance the pain is worse and the doctor is at greater loss. Finally, his darkened countenance brightens. 'I think,' he begins, 'we will have to perform a surgery.' He expects the man to protest, to ask what kind of surgery could possibly be called for, and is preparing his carefully structured argument when his

assistant walks in. The old doctor, who has hired her because she is full-bodied like a ripe teenage peasant, and the young man, who would like to look at anything but the doctor's liver-spotted face, both follow her movements as she collects some instruments. She leaves and the young man turns to the doctor, who is studying him. A shadow has chased his hopeful gaze away. 'How's the pain?' the doctor asks. The young man puts a hand on his breast. 'It is there still,' he says, 'but not as sharp.' 'Interesting,' the doctor says, scratching a bushy eyebrow. He takes a deep breath and exhales slowly, which seems to the young man a sort of capitulation. 'Why didn't you tell me your wife had died?' the doctor asks. 'When?' The young man hesitates, his fingers caressing the wedding ring on his hand. 'Six months ago.' The doctor murmurs to himself and scrawls on his pad. As he holds the prescription out his face is at once giddy and sad. The young man's hands stay at his sides and he becomes aware the doctor, in spite of himself, has chosen what was best for the patient, though finds some pleasure in it still. The doctor leans forward as far as his crippled muscles allow, as though willing the man to take the paper. He takes the trembling slip and reads it. 'Whorehouse?' he questions. The doctor nods, his eyelids falling and then rising with the motion of his head. 'It won't cure you,' he says, 'but it will make you feel better.'"

Aleksei knew Anton Pavlovich was listening, knew the story had affected him, for he was clutching his chest. "Anton Pavlovich?" Aleksei said. "Anton Pavlovich?"

An unintelligible croak escaped the sick man's throat. Aleksei rushed to his side, fumbling to put the knife back in his overcoat. "What's wrong?" he asked. He put his hand to the sick man's head; it was smoldering. "This infernal heat," cried Aleksei. "Wait Anton Pavlovich, I shall summon a doctor."

Anton Pavlovich's lips moved.

"What?" Aleksei asked, leaning closer.

"I am a doctor, and that's what I would have told the young man, only sooner."

He chuckled hoarsely, and convulsed without end. Everything in Aleksei's vision slowed. Before him Anton Pavlovich seemed to draw deep gulping breaths, and with each gasp from the dying man's mouth Aleksei's breast constricted.

"Anton Pavlovich," he uttered before his voice broke under a swell of remorse so acute he could taste it like blood on his tongue.

"Aleksei," Anton Pavlovich said. "I am not dying, I am laughing." He loosed one more chuckle and his mouth gaped as if to get more air. His eyes bulged in their sockets. "Aleksei," he whispered.

Aleksei feared Anton Pavlovich's soul was escaping his body, not from his eyes but from the gaping mouth that opened onto the dark passages of his bowels. How strange that a man's soul resides not in his head or heart, but in his gut. "What is it Anton Pavlovich?"

"The young man should go to the whorehouse," the dying man whispered.

"He will. He will." Aleksei did not know why he agreed, or to what, but a sentiment inside compelled him. He could not have refused.

Anton Pavlovich shuddered, and after a last convulsion his eyes closed.

Aleksei gasped and stumbled backwards, yelling that Anton Pavlovich must wait while he summoned the doctor. He ran from the room and down to the concierge station. The woman from Anton Pavlovich's balcony was there with the concierge. She frowned



at Aleksei, a bottle of champagne in her hands. “Anton Pavlovich is dying,” he screamed. “Get a doctor!”

The bottle slipped from her grasp and shattered on the floor, the pungent liquid splattering across their legs. A second bottle stood unmolested on the concierge’s desk. The woman moaned. The concierge ran out into the street. Aleksei followed him but went the other direction. Tears filled his eyes as he made his way from the hotel. At a bridge he reached into his pocket and threw the knife into the river. To the west a red sun hovered just above the trees, so large it filled the horizon. He turned to go but stopped. In the place where the knife went under an image was rising to the surface. Aleksei froze as the face of the young man appeared, his skin tinged blue by the opaque waters but his features endowed with a clarity such that Aleksei had never before experienced. Though the image of the young man had sealed lips, the voice of Anton Pavlovich escaped his throat and rose up to Aleksei, “the whorehouse, the whorehouse, the whorehouse,” until he couldn’t stand it a second more.

From his other pocket he took the icon. He felt it grow heavy in his hand, and struggled to bring it to his face, where he pressed it to his lips. Then he flung it too, into the river.

## HAIRGEIST

How had he gotten himself into this? He'd passed the little Japanese girl on his way out of the train, and for some reason he couldn't quite pin down had turned back to watch her board, Hello Kitty backpack bouncing with each jaunty step. She'd turned, their eyes met, and she charged back out of the car.

"Oh my God," she'd said. "You're him, aren't you?"

Rijkaard just stared as she repeated that over and over in a strange incantation, her face beaming up at him like she'd just been told by the cartoon Gods that she'd have a blessed life, full of riches and fame and a happy family, that she would suffer none of the dysfunctions that plagued everyone else. Sorry to burst your bubble kid, he thought, but it ain't gonna happen. People milled about or stood impatiently checking their watches every fifteen seconds, as if that would somehow make one of the perpetually late MTA trains come barreling through the tunnel. Some people smiled knowingly at him; others watched with suspicion, skeptical New Yorkers probably thinking he was some sort of damn pedophile.

"Wow!" she said. "Mr. Seymour, can I have your autograph? Please?"

He nodded, wondering where her embarrassment was. Wasn't she Japanese, or at least Japanese-American? Shouldn't she have been even a little abashed at intruding on his personal space? This was getting out of control – he wasn't Richard Seymour. Ironically, his first name was the Dutch version of Seymour's, a name he always had to repeat three or four times to people and patiently explain that it's pronounced 'Rye-card,' like the grain and credit card. More than that was the fact he just looked like the guy, and

now there was this kid damn near begging him for his autograph. Well, not his autograph exactly, but still. He should have just fessed up and told her the truth.

“Please, please, please,” she continued.

“Okay, okay,” he said. “Calm down. You have a pen?”

She squealed and jumped around like a seal. Christ, this was terrible. What was he doing? Seymour wasn't even anyone really famous. It'd be one thing if people were mistaking him for Lenny Kravitz or somebody like that, but Seymour was just some bum on a reality show.

The girl dug out a Hello Kitty pen and notepad, probably both Chinatown knockoffs like the backpack, and held them out to him, her hands trembling. She was fixated, her almond eyes rounded wide. It scared him. She'd do anything he told her to, he was sure of it. And now he'd gone too far. He didn't want to sign, but he'd let it get to this point and didn't want to see the disappointment on her face when he told her he wasn't Seymour. Two days earlier he'd been sitting in Washington Square Park minding his own business when a little kid came up and asked him if he was that guy from *American Idol*. “No,” Rijkaard replied. “I'm not. Sorry, little man.” “Why not?” the kid deadpanned. A future comedian, that one. Rijkaard stared at him dumbfounded. The boy couldn't have been more than seven years old. How the hell was he supposed to explain it to him? So he said he didn't know why not, and the kid actually looked at him with disgust and stomped off, angry his chance to meet someone from T.V. had come to nothing. Yet another seven-year old introduced to the disappointments of the real world. So Rijkaard signed for Hello-Kitty-girl, and she gleefully clutched the pad to her chest.

“Oh my God! They're never gonna believe this at camp.”

Rijkaard agreed. Who'd believe this?

“Thanks a ton, Mr. Seymour, I think you're great and I'm gonna vote for you fifty times next week.”

He thought about that. Maybe he was actually helping Seymour by doing this. She grabbed up her bag and got on the next train. Rijkaard sullenly left the station.

He walked to the coffee shop on Bleeker Street with eyes cast at the sidewalk. But he couldn't really be upset, now could he? He was the one who, a week after finding out about the show and being stopped on the street every day since, had went to Seymour's website to find out about him. After the mishap with the little kid in Washington Square Park, he was the one who'd found Seymour's autograph and practiced it when his roommate had gone to bed. And he was the one who'd just signed Richard Seymour's looping John Hancock for the girl in the subway.

At the coffee shop Rijkaard stood in the long line and waited.

“Wow, your hair is incredible,” someone behind him said.

Rijkaard turned.

“Oh, I'm sorry,” the girl said. “Sometimes I kind of talk without thinking.”

He forced a smile. “It's okay. Thanks.” He tried to think of a compliment. It should have been easy. She was cute, more than cute actually. Freckles smattered across high cheekbones and the smooth white slope of her chest. Inky black hair to her shoulders. The hair was probably a dye job, but a good one, not a root in sight. He imagined her reclined in a salon chair, head back and small mouth closed, content. Full and lustrous, her hair looked like it could withstand a tug or two.

“It’s pretty incredible,” she said again. Busy baristas called out exotic drinks above the din of voices and noise in a place too small for so many people. The uneven tiled floor was filled with café tables, old chairs, a couple worn sofas, and some end tables all shoved too close together. Just about every seat was taken.

Rijkaard shifted his weight from one foot to another and thanked her again. He skipped the *quid pro quo*. It always came out too fast, like he’d pressed a button marked “compliment.”

“So,” she said, leaning in, her voice low. “Are you a musician?”

Rijkaard’s eyes narrowed, unsure if she was putting him on. His experiment as a nine-year-old trumpet player had ended in failure. The school music teacher and the owner of the used instrument shop had recommended to his mother that he try the trombone, since its large mouthpiece would accommodate his full lips. He’d refused and tried the trumpet anyway. Turns out he wasn’t musically inclined, lips or no lips.

For a moment, Rijkaard thought about lying. “Sadly, I can’t play to save my life,” he said. Her head cocked to the side, studying him. She asked if he was a model, then a writer. He was neither. So what do you do, she asked. He was just a teacher.

As she talked and they inched their way forward in line, her eyes darted to his hair. His eyes kept coming back to her chest, the shiny lavender bra peeking out from under a tank-top.

“Well,” the girl said. “I’ve got a question for you.”

His body stiffened.

“I go to the Fashion Institute and we’ve got a show the weekend after next. It’d be great if you modeled for us. You know, if you’re interested.” Another glance at his hair.

Rijkaard exhaled. “I think I’m working that weekend,” he said.

“Oh, that’s too bad.”

“Maybe I can figure something out though.”

“Okay. It’s on Saturday if you’re up for it.” She grabbed her iced latte, he his double espresso. On her way out she turned. “Love the hair.”

Rijkaard watched her leave, the long cotton skirt billowing behind her. He looked down at the tan napkin in his hand. Elena, scrawled across the top in purple ink, below that her phone number. If he called her he’d have to describe himself or their encounter – he hadn’t given her his name, and she hadn’t asked.

Rijkaard stopped fiddling with one of his curls and went to the bathroom at the back of the coffee shop. He put both hands on the sink and leaned toward the mirror. Who are you, he muttered to his reflection. At twenty-five you should at least know that, shouldn’t you? Hair sprouted from his head and hung about his face and ears like the leaves of a potted fern. About a year ago, when he was last home, his mother had asked why he couldn’t just get rid of it. When he shrugged she put a hand on his shoulder. Did he really want to attract attention to himself his whole life? He should be happy that father of his wasn’t around to see this, she’d said.

He was and wasn’t happy his father wasn’t around. He’d disappeared when Rijkaard was still a toddler, after having brought him and his mother to America from the Netherlands, where he had spent time with the U.S. military. Rijkaard had gotten the occasional card from him, postmarked in foreign lands, to go along with the lips and

angular jaw he'd inherited. Since his sixteenth birthday he'd been throwing the cards away without reading them.

Rijkaard pursed his lips in the mirror, then pulled them into a line, like his mother's when she was angry. Whenever he left hair around the house, long light brown curls coiled spring-like in the sink or collected around the shower drain, her face would pucker in distaste. Rikki, she'd say, really, it's disgusting, that hair lying around. Can't you do something about it? What *exactly* was he supposed to do about it? He sure as hell wasn't going to cut it. Studying his reflection, he found errant strands among the curls and jerked them loose, each popping like built-up static electricity. Someone knocked and Rijkaard shook his hand. Pieces of hair fell into the sink. He washed them down the drain.

The heat outside the coffee shop caught Rijkaard by surprise. Cool traces of morning had evaporated, replaced by syrupy air heavy with exhaust. He maneuvered his way through hoards of summer tourists. It was mid-June and already the city was a kiln, heat wavering above the streets and yellow cabs like a mirage.

He went down into the subway. On the platform others waited, sluggish as fat summer flies. The station sat just below the street, and the sun beating down on the black asphalt above made it unbearable. Dead and still, the air was permeated by industrial grease and mold, the decaying innards of the city's hundred year old transit system.

Rijkaard boarded and found a seat amidst the early afternoon collection of kids on summer vacation, mothers with children, fanny-packed tourists, and ragged-faced immigrants. He always marveled at the immigrants, who went unnoticed in the hustle of

the city, and yet, were everywhere – behind lunch counters and bodega windows, cutting fruit and flowers at corner stores, working under-the-table construction jobs, cleaning and servicing at all hours of the day and night the bars and restaurants that lined Manhattan’s streets. At the end of the row across from him sat two dark-haired, leathery Mexicans, their faces creased at the eyes and mouths. Their green canvas clothes were as worn as the vacant expressions on their faces. One sat placid, his back bowed; the other slept, head back, mouth open, eyes closed, content.

Rijkaard took out the *Times* he’d bought at the corner and opened it to the Op-Ed section. The train’s hydraulic brakes hissed, and he checked the station. Across the aisle, two doughy teenagers, a boy and girl, were staring. He smiled. They turned to each other in silent discussion and then back to him. Over a week of this sort of stuff and he still hadn’t gotten used to it. New passengers were steadying themselves and reaching for a grip as the train pulled off. All the old passengers looked at him – except the two Mexicans, who paid him no mind.

He studied the paper but didn’t read it. Inside him boiled an urge to stand up and shout that he was not Richard Seymour. He told himself to calm down. Maybe it was something else drawing their gazes. In the darkened glass of the train window his eyes were simply two black holes, but his bushy eyebrows were there, and his pronounced brow, one of only three clear similarities he could find between his and the stern face in pictures of his father. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

Rijkaard studied his hand, the caramel complexion equal parts mother and father. His breath got caught in his chest. He was eight years old again, at a new school in the small Wisconsin community where his mother had managed to find work. The first day a



frowning secretary ushered him to class after his mother left. A sea of tiny white faces watched as he was introduced to his teacher and led to his desk in the last row. After a full day under the inspection of his classmates, in the room and halls and on the playground at recess, he came home to find his mother standing at the kitchen counter, the knife in her hand coming down with a rhythmic *thwack-thwack-thwack* as she diced vegetables into ever smaller pieces. She asked how the day had gone.

“Good,” he said, eager to tell her what he’d learned. “I have nice skin.”

Her arms stopped moving and she lifted her head. But she didn’t turn around. He waited, fidgeting with his backpack strap in the growing silence. She wiped her hands and sat at the small kitchen table. Her eyes were moist, haunted by something flickering behind their smooth surface.

“Oh Rikki. Who told you that?”

“My teacher. We were talking about Native Americans and she said I had skin like them. Nice skin.” He paused. “No, bea-u-ti-ful skin, like a suntan,” he said, mimicking his teacher, Ms. Swan.

She took his hand and pulled him into her arms, tucking his head under her chin, rocking as she said “You do honey, yes you do,” over and over again. There in the kitchen, air sharp with the scent of red onions, her heart beat in his ears and the force of her embrace made him want to cry.

The train jerked to a stop. Eyes seemed to crawl all over him. Shakily, he got to his feet. Heads turned as he passed, cascading like dominoes until he reached the door and exited. He climbed the stairs out into Columbus Circle. Across the street sat Central

Park, tranquil compared to the busy sidewalks arcing around the Columbus monument. The light turned and people surged forward.

In the foyer of the building where his company's classroom space was located, Rijkaard leaned against a wall. The heat and noise of 72<sup>nd</sup> Street faded. He stayed for a moment, breathing heavily, the marble cool against his sweaty back. At the desk in the lobby a security guard took his ID without a glance, a small radio from somewhere underneath broadcasting a baseball game. One team, the Yankees probably, had just turned a double play. The guard scribbled on a clipboard and looked up.

"Mr. Richards, is it?" he asked, as though he hadn't seen Rijkaard dozens of times before.

Rijkaard nodded and held out his hand.

"What's your first name mean?"

"It's Dutch for 'Richard.'"

The guard grinned as though that was the funniest thing he'd heard in weeks.

"Richard Richards?"

Rijkaard nodded.

"That's hilarious."

"Yeah, hilarious," Rijkaard said. "That's me." The guard returned his ID and gave him a nametag. In the elevator he crumpled the nametag and shoved it in his pocket.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> floor the excited chatter of his students spilled into the hallway. Fifteen Upper West Side kids, all white, whose parents had forked over almost two grand each so someone could teach them how to score well on the SAT.

As he walked to the front table everyone fell silent. “So,” he said. “We left off last week with simultaneous equations, where we identify equations with two or more variables, stack them on top of one another and manipulate them to find our desired solution.”

Someone giggled in the middle of the room. Others followed. “That’s not the way you put it last week, Mr. Richards,” Jodie said.

Rijkaard stared at her, and she held, smirking. She was right. “Jodie,” he said. “You don’t need to call me Mr. Richards, remember? I’m not that much older than you all.”

Jodie nodded.

“The simultaneous equations then. Questions from the homework?”

“Hey Mr. Richards,” said Derrick, who sat next to Jodie and spent more time looking down her shirt than at his books. “You see the show last night?”

“No Derrick, I didn’t. How’d I do?”

“Pretty sweet. You sure that guy isn’t your twin or something? I mean, Jesus, it’s freaky.”

Rijkaard could find no better description than Derrick’s for the resemblance, or the attention it garnered. “We’re of no relation as far as I’m aware.”

“You sure?” someone else asked. “You know, maybe like long lost twins separated at birth or something?”

Then the whole class was off on it until Rijkaard put his hand up. “Enough. Celebrity time is over. We can discuss this at the break. Does anyone have any non-*doppelgänger*-related questions about the homework?”

“Doppel-what?” Derrick asked.

Rijkaard frowned. Of course they didn’t have questions about the homework.

The following Thursday he and James sat in a bar down the street from their apartment. They’d been roommates for two years and spent at least a couple nights a week there. James was a researcher for the online arm of VH1 Music, where his job was mostly to read celebrity news all day. Rijkaard had concluded that a second part of his job description was then to come back to the apartment and report every single Seymour sighting and Seymour-related event of the day. Rare was the evening James came home to say that nothing had come across the wire.

Tonight James had a press release photo with him and presented it to Rijkaard. Gee thanks, he’d said, before inspecting the headshot.

“So you still think I look like him?” he asked.

“Are you kidding?” James said. “You could be his twin.”

“Seriously though, with that chin?” Rijkaard asked, pointing. “That’s a weak chin. And he looks like he got a nose job.”

“Rick,” James said. “So do you.” He stood. They’d each had several more beers than planned, and James headed to the bathroom. He put a hand on Rijkaard’s shoulder.

“This is going to be great. The show is huge.”

“But why?” Rijkaard asked. “And why this guy?”

“Wish I could tell you,” James said. “People love this stuff. They get to participate in creating a star. And your twin is the odds on favorite to win it all.”

Rijkaard stared at the photo.

“Hey, have the waitress get us the check when she comes,” James called out on his way back to the bathrooms. The waitress had been watching them, him, since they’d gotten there. When he turned she was already on her way over. He flipped Seymour’s headshot face down on the table.

“Can we get the check?”

“Sure thing, sweetheart.” She went to the bar and came back, bill in hand.

Rijkaard looked at the bill and then up at her. She’d charged them for two each. They’d both had three times that many, at least. She winked and he didn’t know what to say. Was it really this easy?

He paid and thanked her. The tip came to more than the bill itself. James came out of the bathroom.

“You get the bill?” he asked.

“Paid it already, let’s roll.”

“Really? What’s the occasion, you feeling ripe from your reality T.V. windfall?”

Rijkaard handed him the bill and they went outside. James whistled. “Well my friend, we just got ourselves a deal. Nice work. At least five free drinks each, maybe more.”

“Nothing’s free,” Rijkaard said. “You know that.” He’d gotten similar treatment several times over the past few days. Free food at the *Cosi* sandwich shop around the

corner, women smiling at him in Macy's. Though he was reluctant to admit it, a part of him could definitely get used to this sort of thing.

"Wait a minute. Look what we have here." James handed him the bill. On the back was her name and phone number. And below that 'Call Me' with a smiley face next to it. He told James about Elena, the girl from the coffee shop. How he'd called twice and left a message once but hadn't heard back.

"Look man," James said. "Forget her. Try this number."

"You know who this number is for. Maybe the other girl didn't know, or didn't care. But she never called back."

"So what," James said. "I say just take advantage. Every guy would kill for this. I mean, you know you're not him, they don't. That's all that matters, right?"

Rijkaard looked at the number. "Maybe." Even if there was a resemblance, Rijkaard was pretty sure people knew the odds favored him not being Seymour, as if the guy would be in some random bar or on the subway. Somehow people just talked themselves out of remembering that fact. They wanted to believe.

Upstairs James sprawled on the couch, feet up on the table, watching T.V. Rijkaard sat in front of the computer, pretending to check emails.

"Hey Rick, you're on."

"What am I doing?"

"An interview."

"This is unbelievable. I've gotten emails from everybody I know. People I haven't heard from in years."

"So?"

“Little girls run up to me on the streets screaming.”

“Cool.”

“Not cool. It scares the shit out of me, sounds like someone’s getting fucking murdered.”

“Imagine how it is for him,” James said.

“You know I signed *another* autograph today?”

“Another one?” James asked.

Rijkaard leaned back in the chair, face to the ceiling. “Been signing them all week.”

“*All week?* Whose name?”

He looked down at his lap, his face growing warm, and then over at James. James had sat up and slid to the edge of the couch.

Rijkaard shook his head. “His.”

James leapt off the couch. “That’s what I’m talking about. Are you ready to use this or what?”

“Use what?”

“The persona.”

“The persona? You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope. You’re famous now. You might even be able to get him into *Page Six*.”

“*He’s* famous. I just look like him.”

“So what? He’s just some D-list celebrity who sings other peoples’ shit on a reality show. *Carpe diem*, my friend.”

“If he’s a D-list celebrity,” Rijkaard said. “What does that make me?”

James shrugged. “I don’t know. A Z-list celebrity?”

“Great.”

“Take it easy,” James said. “It’ll be over soon.”

Saturday night they were out on the street, ambling down Varick towards Bowery. James had it all planned out. They would meet some friends and head to a trendy new lounge in Tribeca. Rijkaard would lead the group and wait for the doorman to recognize him. If there were any problems James was to be his PR person.

“You sure this is going to work?” Rijkaard asked. The city had finally begun to cool off, the streets were full.

“I work for VH1, remember?” James said. “I’m a professional. Look at all these people. They think you’re him. It’s perfect.”

They stopped at a bar on Broome Street. Friends were clustered around a couple cocktail tables near the window. After ordering drinks at the bar Rijkaard walked up behind a woman gathered with James and the others. Black high heels made her three inches taller, grey slacks rode the curve of her ass, no underwear line. At the space next to her he set down the drinks with a thump. She turned and a long moment passed – time enough for recognition to startle her easy smile. He blinked and it vanished. Maybe he hadn’t seen anything after all. Maybe he was just getting too paranoid.

“Those all for you?” she asked in mock-seriousness.

Three tequila shots with lemon, and a beer. “They are,” he said.

“It’s one of *those* nights, huh?” She was smiling, laughing almost, and a certain tension drained from his body.



“These days it’s always one of those nights,” he said.

“You poor baby. Life is hard, isn’t it?”

With her easy Southern drawl, probably from the same town in the Florida panhandle as James’, it was difficult to take her question too seriously. Everyone was talking, exchanges punctuated with glasses to mouths or trips to the bar. James was gesticulating about something, arms flailing close to faces and beer bottles. Her mouth had grown mischievous, a red frame around glittering white teeth. It seemed this woman he didn’t know, a woman with a tiny silver stud in a short nose Rijkaard somehow found irresistible, was making fun of him. Or challenging him. “You want one?” he asked, holding out a tequila shot.

She considered the amber liquid for a moment, tucked a wisp of blond hair behind her ear, and took the glass.

“To us,” he said. “And one of *those* nights.”

As the noise in the bar rose they moved closer together, resting elbows and forearms on the sticky tabletop. Steffi was a friend of James’ sister, and in from Chicago for the weekend. An event planner. He asked if they didn’t already have enough event planners in Manhattan. She laughed and put a hand on his wrist, saying event planning wasn’t why she was there.

James announced it was time to go and the group walked down to Tribeca. As they passed the line of people waiting outside the lounge, Rijkaard kept his head down, concentrating on the cracks in the sidewalk to overcome the trembling in his gut. He hated this. Not so much the deception, or even the role playing, but the possibility of

being called out as a phony, a low-budget imposter, in front of all these people. The sensation seemed to well up and choke him.

People stopped talking, heads turned. They collected at the entrance, off to the side where the fortunate few whose names were on the guest list waited, Rijkaard in front, James to his left, the rest of the group packed in behind them. The doorman, cocaine-thin with eyes enshrouded beneath a fedora, called to one of the bouncers and motioned at the velvet rope. On his way in Rijkaard gave a slight nod to the doorman, who tipped his hat in return.

They got a spot in the corner off the small dance floor. Rijkaard got drunk and swayed to the music, enjoying the attention. It was better than what he was used to getting before all this madness started. Normally people likened him to cartoon characters, a carrot-topped comedian, or a dead reggae musician. He could never understand the Bob Marley references, since Marley'd had dark skin and waist length dread-locks. But being called Bob Marley was better than people mistaking him for an obscure jazz musician, which was better than people simply staring at him, which was better than strangers walking up and touching his hair, as if they couldn't help themselves.

As the night wore on and bottles emptied, the flow of people coming up to him intensified. Some wished him well on the show; others said they thought he would win. He laughed and said he'd try his best. One guy stumbled over, threw an arm genially around his shoulders and told him that his last performance had sucked. That he could do better. He agreed. Another guy asked if he had slayed any of the chicks from the show yet. He hadn't, but said it was in the works as he gave the guy a knowing nudge in the

midsection. Two girls came over to the corner table and sat down, one on either side. They looked like sisters, twins almost. Their accents and make-up screamed New Jersey as they leaned in close. Would he come home with them? Smiling, he said he would like to, but later. Right now he was exploring his options. A twenty-something couple asked for autographs. He signed with a flourish, wondering disdainfully how these people had been allowed in the lounge.

Rijkaard mixed himself another Vodka tonic from the bottles on the table and went to the bar. Sitting on one of the stools he swiveled around to face the dance floor. Steffi shook in time with the music, her hair starting to cling from the sweat. She noticed him and his face warmed as she beckoned. Holding up his drink, he shook his head slowly. She was almost a foot shorter than he was; dancing would have been even more awkward than usual. A few minutes later she was at the bar next to him.

“You want something?” he asked.

She looked over at him.

“Something to drink, I mean.”

Brushing away the hair in front of her eyes she nodded and he ordered her a rum and Coke.

“Not a dancer, huh?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“Come on, I bet you can dance. You look like you can dance.”

“Trust me, I can’t.”

“Well, you’re pretty popular regardless now, aren’t you?”

“The trappings of fame.” He raised his glass.

“I saw your two friends over there.”

“Which two?”

“Bridge and Tunnel.”

“Oh, yeah. I told them I was waiting for someone.” He winked, she laughed. Her eyes went to his hair.

“You want to touch it, don’t you?” Rijkaard asked.

“Can I?”

He bowed his head and leaned forward. She put her fingers in and her nails reached his scalp. Tiny hairs on his neck stood up. She pulled her fingers out and plucked at the curls.

“That’s incredible,” she said. “What do you do to get it like that?”

“Nothing,” he said. “That’s how it was when I got it.”

“I wish I had hair like that.”

Rijkaard bit his lip and released it. “No,” he said, “you don’t.”

“Sure I do. I’ve never seen anything like it. How can I get mine like that?”

“Unprotected sex,” he said. “With a black man.”

A hesitant smile stole across her face. “What?”

“Sex. Unprotected. With a black man. Get pregnant. Have a baby.”

“Funny.”

“Then you’ll have a kid with hair like mine. A kid like me. Or like –” He stopped.

“That’s the only way.”

Steffi took a long pull from her straw and they watched each other over her glass.

“Why don’t I just have sex with you instead,” she said.

*Instead.* The word rung in his ears. Instead of what? Of who? He didn't know how many he'd had, but he was drunk. "Mine's empty," he said, tipping his glass toward her. "We should go."

Steffi put hers on the bar and nodded. While she waited, he found James in the corner with a few of the others and told him he was leaving.

"Already?" James asked. His head lolled to the side, trying to locate the watch on his wrist. "It's only three o'clock."

Rijkaard nodded.

"Why?"

He motioned at Steffi with his head.

"Oh, I see," James said, grinning. "You lucky dog. It's never been so easy, has it?"

They took a cab. A pair of eyes in an African face hidden by shadows watched them in the rearview, their mouths pressed together, tongues searching. Rijkaard slid a hand under her shirt and pulled her closer. Vinyl squeaked from the front seat as the cabbie shifted. Up in the apartment they never made it to the bedroom. They started on the couch and ended up on the floor, on new carpet installed a few weeks earlier. She was beneath him, legs around his waist. He lowered himself onto her and was inside.

Her hand went to the back of his head, nails pushing through curls to the skin at the base of his skull. She drew his head closer, their cheeks grazing. His lips found damp skin near her temple and he tasted salt. She moaned quietly, a long ways off.

His mouth reached for her ear, her breath tickling the curve of his jaw.

“Oh,” she murmured. “Oh, Richard.”

Rijkaard froze. His eyes flashed open and he rose up on his elbows. In the stray light cutting from the hallway he could make out half her face. Eyes closed, mouth pressed together. She was somewhere else. Her stomach, sweaty against his, was heaving.

“Not yet,” she said breathlessly, and pulled him further into her, the nails at his back sharp.

Rijkaard propped his head in his hand and grit his teeth. Beneath her perfume he smelled melon. She was holding her breath as she moved his hair away from her face.

“What’s wrong,” she whispered. He felt himself shrink inside her. Muscles contracted and pushed him out. Exposed to the air he felt small, cold.

“Hey,” she said. “It’s okay. It happens sometimes.”

“It is definitely *not* fucking okay.” Rijkaard rolled off and pushed himself to his feet. On the floor she was still, arms wrapped around her chest, legs closed. “What did you just call me?”

“What?” she said quietly.

“The name. A second ago you whispered a name in my ear. What was it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You called me ‘Richard.’”

“Richard? Where would I get that?”

“Don’t fucking lie to me. I heard it.” He stomped to the bathroom.

“Are you out of your mind?” she said before he slammed the door shut.

He stood naked on the cool tiles, panting in the dark. After a moment he flicked the switch. Halogen light flooded the white bathroom, forcing his eyes closed. They inched open and he staggered to the sink. Leaning forward, he stared into the vanity mirror. His skin seemed sallow, the summer color drained from his face; pinpoint pupils surrounded by a sea of empty blue. The curls were matted on one side, unsettled on the other. Gritting his teeth he turned to the shelves above the toilet and searched amongst the bottles and band-aids. In the cabinet behind the mirror he found an old pair of shears.

Steffi was in the hallway, calling to him and tapping on the door. “Hey, what are you doing in there? Seriously, if I said that it must have been an accident. It doesn’t mean anything.”

He picked up the shears and the long blades emitted a metallic hiss and click as they snapped open and closed.

“Oh God,” Steffi moaned. “What was that noise? Really, it’s no big deal. Are you listening? Please, don’t do anything crazy.”

Crazy, he thought. Crazy? He wasn’t fucking crazy. The door handle rattled and Rijkaard pushed the vanity mirror back in place. He took a fist full of hair and pulled it taut. The scissors came up and he pressed them to his scalp. Blades sliced closed and stuck. He sawed his way through. He clenched the clump of curls in his hand, then his fist opened and the hair wafted downwards, lighter than expected, into the sink. Harmless.

A dull thud came from the other side of the bathroom door, then silence.

He kept cutting until his head was naked, crisscrossed by uneven white lines. Blood glinted where the blades had nicked through skin, bright and red and seemingly more alive for having risen to the surface, escaping the barrier that held it from the world

and experiencing oxygen firsthand. The sink was full of hair. Hair that couldn't be washed down the drain. He left it and went to the door.

She sat there, knees clenched to her chest, head on her arms. Goosebumps crawled over her body and she was shaking. Blinking, she looked up at him. She sucked air in through her teeth. "Goodness, what have you done?"

He said, "My name is Rijkaard."



## THE WEIGHT OF SNOW IN WINTER

Mathers found the key on Tuesday. By Saturday he'd basically gone mad. I'd met him almost two years before, during the hiring process for the English Department's Romanticism position. His perpetual sighs made it clear he wanted nothing to do with the hiring committee. Throughout the process he'd called me Ms. Belmont, and after I got the job he began rolling the 'Miss' into 'Mizz.'

A couple months after I got to campus he stopped at my office and leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed over his Argyle cardigan. His face tried to suppress an impish grin.

"So, Belmont," he said, "how you like your new digs?"

He'd left the 'Mizz' off, and worse, he'd winked at me. I groaned inwardly. He was one of those egomaniacs who don't fit the academic stereotype: usually writers, male and fully tenured, who've had some success and believe themselves to be God's latest gift to mankind, or womankind.

"Well, *Mathers*," I said, "the new digs are just fine." The cinderblock walls and institutional mauve paint were certainly better than the office I'd shared with two other PhD candidates at Indiana University the past four years, so I told him as much.

To the chagrin of much of the faculty, he called everyone by their last name, without titles. I think they looked past the professional slight because he was a wayward poet. That, or the fact he'd had more books published than anyone else in the department. Either way, their only recourse was to reciprocate in kind. As he and I spent more time in each other's offices, we became something of a joke around the department – Mathers

and Belmont, like some sort of TV detective duo. Whenever the department head walked by he'd stop and poke his head in. "So, how's my crack didactic team doing," he'd say, chuckling, "you guys teaching the tough cases?"

One evening about halfway through my three-year appointment I was home, staring out the window at falling snow. By dusk the snow was piling up, the kind of soft powder that quiets footsteps. Everything was hushed, even the old house with its anatomy of sounds – no creaking of the front porch as the wood planks shifted in the wind, no ping of the steam heating pipes I'd once burned my butt on bending over in the bathroom to pick up a towel, no mice scurrying in the walls.

Someone knocked on the door and I jumped. Almost midnight. On a Wednesday no less. He often just showed up unannounced. I ran a hand through my hair, flipping it one way and then the other. My face could have used some sun. I puckered my lips and thought about grabbing gloss or something from my purse.

Mathers stood on the porch in a thin flannel coat, his lips blue in the dim porch light. His hands were stuffed in his pockets. Melted snow plastered his hair to his head.

"My God." I pulled him inside.

"Hey Belmont, what's up?"

I can tell when he *really* means to know what I'm up to and when he doesn't.

"Where's your jacket? It's like ten below out there."

He just stood, breathless, cheeks flushed. "Guess what," he said.

"What?"

“I’ve found it.”

I shook my head and went to get us some wine from the kitchen. “That’s great.” He was always talking about signs and codes, accessing submerged regions of the brain. Honestly, if he wasn’t a poet he would have ended up a televangelist or a shrink. “What’d you find this time?”

“Come look and I’ll show you,” he said from the foyer.

I put the wine bottle down and imagined him in the hallway shirtless, tracing the blue veins snaking around his body in some intricate, nonsensical pattern.

“Belmont, come on.”

I heard him hanging up his coat and moving into the living room. His fist was out in front of him, palm up. He had pushed his sleeves up, so there were veins to be seen, and his watch. He wore it with the face on the inside of his wrist. I’d asked him why once. He’d shrugged and said it was easier to see the time that way, it required the most natural physio-kinetic movement.

“So,” I said. “What is it?”

“You ready?”

A couple seconds passed as we looked each other in the eye. When mine dropped first (and they always dropped first), they fell to his now-open fist.

“Wow, *a key*,” I said.

“This is much more than just a key.”

“Of course.” I went back to the kitchen. He followed me.

“It’s a sign.”

“A sign?”

He gazed out the kitchen window. “I just don’t know of what.”

We sat in the living room drinking Austrian *Riesling*. I rambled on about the department, the snow and frigid cold, an upcoming ski weekend down state, and how my period was late this month. He didn’t hear any of it, not even the last part, which was a joke. He just sort of nodded, his body swaying, fingers turning the key and pausing periodically to stroke the smooth brass grooves. I’d seen him like that before. We all get a little antsy up here. That’ll happen when one hundred-fifty inches of snow falls every year and you’re shut up inside all winter. By late-February drastic measures are needed.

Mathers was worse than most. For a man of forty-five his vigor, the intensity, was astounding. Rather than enjoy the effects of fire and wine against the cold banging on the windows, he sat pondering a key and its metaphysical import in the cosmos.

“Alright,” I said, “tell me about the key.”

His face brightened. “How I noticed it I really can’t be sure. Maybe divine intervention. I was rushing out of Scott Hall. My first step sent a shiver up my legs that dead-ended in my groin. You know how sometimes unease or fear makes your scrotum shrink?”

A smile broke at the corners of my mouth and I shook my head.

“No, I guess you wouldn’t. In any event, I thought it just the cold air and took another step. Something made me turn back around. There lay the key, innocuous and sublime, shimmering in the artificial lights of the building. Belmont, the whole scene was surreal. The sky had turned vermillion. The key shined more like gold than brass – the only source of color in a sea of white. At first I thought it a cross dropped by a Franciscan

monk. When I went to retrieve it the damned thing seemed stuck. I had to dig it out, but my hands never got cold!

“It resembles the six or seven other institutional ones on my key ring, but doesn’t *feel* like them. It seems to weigh something more. It had been pointing towards the department, so that’s where I went. In my pocket the key siphoned warmth from my leg. I held it in my hand, and it seemed to calm. Can you imagine me of all people finding this key? Everyone else had surely stepped over it on their way from Scott Hall. What confluence of circumstances must this have required?”

“You’re kidding, right?” I asked.

He snapped from the reverie. “You don’t understand,” he said, pulling some sort of cellophane bag from his pocket.

The bag was unmarked, filled with a resin-colored gel the viscosity of motor oil. “What’s this?” I asked.

“Soap,” he said.

I squished the liquid around inside the bag. “Where’d you get it?”

“From the janitor’s closet at the department.”

“You broke into the janitor’s closet?”

“I didn’t break in.” He held the key up between us, code stamp – AER 53 – facing me. He clamped one eye shut and peered through the keyhole. “I had *the* key.”

“Oh, yes. I’d almost forgotten.” I pushed myself up out of the armchair and stood before him. “You sleeping here tonight?”

His gaze fell back to the key sitting flat against his palm.

“What other doors does it open?” I asked in my most seductive voice, which wasn’t really all that accomplished.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled as he slowly got to his feet.

I reached out for the key and his hand snapped shut. “Protective, are we?” I undid two buttons on my shirt and leaned into him. “What’s it going to take to get that key from you, Professor?”

“An awful lot, I think.”

We’d played games like this before, so I undid more buttons and strolled down the hallway to the bedroom. I slid between the sheets and waited. And waited. A few minutes later the door slammed.

I sighed and threw the covers off. We’d been sleeping together on and off for about a year. Sometimes we were already naked, or on our way back to the bedroom, or kissing in the kitchen like hopeless teenagers, and he’d freeze. I have to go, he’d say. The first time stung. After the third or fourth time I asked him where he was going, and he said, to the office. I followed him, and sure enough that’s where he went. I always assumed he was going there to write, and the next time, as we lay on the cusp of sex and he said he had to go, I blurted out, what’s more poetic than this? Maybe you’ve got a point, he said. He stayed. I felt like I’d won something.

Most of the time he didn’t leave and we enjoyed ourselves, the strange charge he carried infecting me, making me do things I never thought I would. From the nightstand I took my *kleiner Soldat*, and his quiet hum and thoughts of Mather’s hands on my body served as a functional, if unfulfilling, substitute.

\* \* \*

The next morning snow had stopped falling, and the fierce wind that rushes in off the lake had died down. On my way to the office streets and houses and trees hunkered down under several inches of snow. Mornings like these made me not regret coming to this remote outpost, made bearable the nomadic pursuit of a tenure track position. I could settle here, maybe even start a family. My breath frosting before me, I thought of the bastard of an ex-husband I'd left behind in Bloomington, friends in several college towns before that, my family in Virginia before that. My ex-husband hadn't really been a bastard, just a man I'd stopped loving. We shouldn't have gotten married at twenty. By the time our ten-year anniversary rolled around I was hollowed out, our last five years together an endless cycle of him on the couch ranting at the Hoosiers or Cubs and me in our cramped office or bedroom reading. Before I killed him or fucked someone else I told him I was finished. It was the right thing to do.

I finished prep for my morning class. I expected to see Mathers in his office, almost hidden behind the piles of books, unread manuscripts and dozens of empty little bottles of a liquid yogurt drink he said aided digestion. His door was closed and locked.

After class I was back in the office. My hands wouldn't sit still, didn't want to hold the papers in front of me. Where was he? I'd checked his office door half a dozen times – no answer. He had an early afternoon class and almost without fail would be in his office several hours before it started. He was never planning lessons (few things he hated more), but at least he'd be there.

I went home and hit the cross-country ski trail that ran along the river to the lake, veered up into the nature preserve and then looped back around. When I got back I felt a

cleansing sort of exhaustion, my body crying out for nothing more pleasurable than a glass of fresh water.

The next morning I was back in my office. I didn't have class, but there were a slew of papers waiting. I checked Mathers' door on my way in and then got down to work.

"Belmont."

Mathers stood in the doorframe, his voice a whisper. I gasped, I couldn't help it. It was clear he hadn't slept a minute since leaving two nights before. Eyes rimmed red, cheeks stubbled. His silvery hair that rivaled Anderson Cooper's was a mass of cowlicks. He wore what looked to be the same turtleneck as the other night, but I couldn't be sure since he always bought clothes in multiples.

"Belmont," he said again in a whisper. He still sounded like his old self. He'd often come into my office and whisper, as though requiring confidentiality, only to ask some inane question like 'what kind of apple is that,' or 'what's two plus two?' When I answered – Macintosh or four – he'd grin and say, nope, it's not, and leave. I'd follow him out and ask him what he meant. Sometimes he had answers, sometimes he didn't.

He stepped inside and closed the door – a complete violation of the tacit 'open door policy' we'd agreed to. Neither of us wanted to feed the department rumor mill. We'd both sworn we hadn't told anyone else about our relationship (if that's really the right word). I'd talked to my sister and a couple friends in Bloomington about it, but they didn't count since they were so far away. I was sure he'd mentioned it to someone, too.

"Where've you been?" I asked.



“Busy,” he said, still whispering. Not exactly an answer to the question, but there wasn’t any deception. He always gave the truth. It was the same last summer when he mentioned he was going to spend time with bears. I scoffed and he didn’t bother trying to convince me. Two days later he was gone. Summer dragged on miserably without him around. When he came back he seemed shaken. I never asked, but I saw it – felt it – in his work. I was one of the few he’d let read before it went to print, poems full of shamans and the frailty of humans. He went for bears, and found some, but found a whole lot more besides. The poems sent me scurrying for an extra blanket on warm autumn evenings. I wasn’t so sure he knew what he’d been writing.

“Why are you whispering,” I asked.

“I’m not,” he said in a normal voice. “You going to be home later?”

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” he said. “You going to be home later or not?”

“I thought I might go to a reading in town.”

“Oh.”

“But I’m not.”

“I’ll swing by then.”

“Okay.”

At the door he turned around. “Belmont, I put the soap back,” he said with a wink and left.

Thank goodness he hadn’t stolen the stupid soap. He could get carried away when he started a new fixation (he’d say it was a project). The last was the bears, before that it was hieroglyphics and writing backwards, and before that it was, ironically, gummi bear

research. He was convinced you could glean information about people's character from their gummi bear preferences. If you liked green you were one sort of person, red another, and so on. If you liked them all the same that meant something different; a complete hierarchy of preferences meant something else; and if you didn't like gummi bears, well, then God help you. I happen to love all gummi bears, except the clear ones.

Midway through my third glass of wine Mathers arrived, wearing his warm jacket this time. I got him a glass and we sat on the sofa in the living room. He lay my legs across his, slid his hands between. A chill seeped through my jeans. "What have you been doing the past two days?"

"Investigating the key," he said. "Its reach and possibilities."

I laughed. "What is this, *Lord of the Rings*?"

He winced.

I took a long drink, the dry wine smooth at my throat. "Sorry. So what does that mean?"

"You know what kind of key it is?"

I stifled the urge to lob *a magic key* at him. I shook my head instead.

"A master key."

"It opens more than the janitor's closet?"

He drew the key from his pocket and rubbed it between his fingers. "A lot more."

The way he said it made my skin pucker.

"It opens every door in the building," he said.

"It could just be a master for our building."

He put his hands together and leaned back into the couch, like suddenly he was very tired. “Maybe. I haven’t had time to check the others yet.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I wish.” He stared at the fire. “We’re going to need some more wood for that,” he said, as if to himself.

“You’ve been spying on people in our building?” The English department shared the building with the Sociology, History and Psych departments. “What did you find?”

He turned from the fireplace, and I felt his midsection tense. “I started up on the third floor, the animal psych lab. You’d think the animals would go nuts when someone came in. I figured they were sleeping, but when I got used to the dark and went closer I realized they were awake. Every single animal – chimpanzees, rats, pigeons – they were all up, eyes wide, looking at me. Horrifying. I almost opened the damn cages and set them free.

“In one of the offices up there – Campbell or Campball or something like that – I found five pairs of women’s underwear. All different sizes. Belmont, this was a male professor. And the underwear had been worn.”

“How’d you find that out?” I asked. “Uh, never mind.”

“And *this*, this isn’t the half of it. A couple doors down in an associate professor’s office I found a stack of printed emails. Fifty or more, between her and one of her students. I know we’ve all thought about it, it’s impossible not to, dealing with dozens of young, vibrant – hell, sexy – students every day. A group of eighteen-year-olds who actually listen is a terrible thing to resist. The emails were...graphic. I looked the student

up in the computer. Freshman, only seventeen years old, an early bloomer I guess. And he's in her class right now. He was also in one of her classes last semester."

I gulped wine. "That's a serious breach of university policy."

Mathers laughed bitterly. "That's the least of her concerns," he said. "The last email intimates some sort of problem."

"What kind of problem?"

Mathers turned to me. "You know what kind of problem."

I couldn't believe I hadn't heard anything. Rumor spread epidemically in this town. But each department was its own little fiefdom. Mathers had turned to the fire again. People surely knew we were seeing one another. And if that was the case, I wondered, why had we been sneaking around all this time? Part of it, I suppose, was a desire for privacy. What else though, I wasn't sure.

"You know," Mathers said, still turned to the fire, "I always thought we English faculty were a troubled bunch, but those nutcases in the Psych department have us beat hands down. Among the twenty or so offices I checked —"

"Joel! You went through *twenty* offices? Twenty?"

He nodded. "I couldn't help it."

I could barely hear his whisper above the crackle of the fire. He went over to the wood pile, put a few pieces into the fireplace and replaced the grate. He remained there, motionless, as the fire started in on the new logs. I emptied my glass and refilled it. Eventually, he sat back down.

"So, what was in the...twenty or so offices you broke into?"

He reached for his wine glass. “Over half had open bottles of liquor in the drawers. Over half. Never mind that university policy forbids alcohol in the buildings. You know me, I couldn’t be less concerned with university policy, but it seems so...depressing.”

“People drink up here. There’s not much else to do.”

“You have a bottle of whiskey in your office?”

“You didn’t check my office?”

He looked down into his wineglass.

“Joel, did you check my office?”

“No,” he said, “I didn’t.”

“Are you sure?”

Mathers looked me in the eye, anger flickering in his own. “I’m sure,” he said.

The anger dissipated, like snowflakes caught in a warm hand.

I didn’t – couldn’t – hear the next few things he said. What was in my office? No underwear, that much I was sure of. No whiskey bottles, no emails (I wasn’t sleeping with any students). The journal I spent so much time writing in was on my nightstand.

“Seriously,” he said. “I didn’t look in your office.”

“Whose did you look in then?”

“You really want to know?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. If you say so.” He seemed to grow years older. The wineglass trembled in his hand, reverberating along the couch and up into my chest.

“In Roberts’ office,” he said. “I found a pink dildo. The kind with – how shall I put this – two heads.”

“Which Roberts?”

“Good question, Belmont. It smelled like Beth.

“I know that’s disgusting. I can see it in your eyes. And contempt. And, dare I say, arousal?”

“There was also Professor Brille, our surly linguistics researcher with an affinity for darts. He had a stack of faculty photos with the eyes poked out. And Dixon, who collects wrestling magazines. And our resident feminist, Hedgecock, had two drawers full of tarot cards and astrology books.”

“What about the TAs?” I asked.

“That was strange. The TAs had nothing in their offices. I mean, one of them has an absolutely hideous stuffed robin in his desk. Another had some condoms and a pamphlet on herpes. I’d be worried if one of them didn’t, but there was nothing incriminating. They share space, and have no expectations of privacy. The faculty though, most have locks on their desks but don’t use them. They think they’re the only ones with a key to their office.”

“They’re the only ones who are *supposed* to have a key.”

“I know,” he said. “But whether I have it or not, the key exists. Besides, the secrets would exist with or without these relics stolen away in their drawers. I’m sure you have some, even if you don’t have anything more than metaphysical remnants to show for them.”

“Do you?”

“We all do. Some more than others.”

“And they fit the pattern of the ones you’ve found in other peoples’ closets?”

“They do. Isn’t it amazing how obvious the patterns are? Everything is sexual. And if it’s not sex related, or even if it is, it’s happiness related, or better, unhappiness related. One of the offices on the third floor had a drawer full – I mean completely stuffed – with pills. Pills for everything: antidepressants, stimulants, painkillers, anti-anxiety, barbiturates, tranquilizers. More pills than any sane doctor would ever prescribe a single patient.”

“Who was it?” I asked. “No, forget it, I don’t want to know.” I was sinking under all this this, the weight literally pressing my chest so I had difficulty taking a full breath. I could understand why Mathers suddenly looked so old, and why he’d come. The same reason that most shrinks end up meeting with other shrinks as patients. One drowns under so much collected misery.

“Cassie,” he said. “Cassie, are you going to be sick?”

I didn’t realize at first that he was talking to me, didn’t recognize my name on his tongue. He looked uneasy. I didn’t have an answer to his question.

I slid over and onto his lap, and pulled his face to mine. “Joel,” I said, “why don’t you just give me the key and forget about this mess?” Beneath me I felt his excitement. Something about these invasions had turned him on. How long had he been sitting there like this? It was terrifying, and yet, excitement quivered along the insides of my thighs. He seemed to sense it, and pressed his mouth forcefully onto mine.

I awoke under the heavy warmth of the down comforter, alone with a hazy recollection of Mathers saying he'd see me later and sliding from bed just after dawn. I didn't want to get up. The room seemed alive with remnants of our talk and sex. I bit my lip and ducked under the blanket.

I couldn't bring myself to leave the house. My email account was bloated with dozens of messages from building services, the provost's office, various department heads, even the university president, the subject lines all caps and bold face type, alerting the campus to a lost master key. They asked that everyone keep an eye out, since if it remained missing the university would have to begin changing every single lock on campus. Apparently, Mathers had until Monday morning.

By that evening I couldn't sit still. I'd called him ten or fifteen times. He hadn't called back. Finally, I strapped my boots on and walked over to his place. Underfoot the snow seemed to protest, each of my steps accompanied by the high-pitched crunch of dry, super-cold snow. The wind whistling in off the lake stung the exposed parts of my face. When I got to his place I had one of those headaches you get from eating ice cream too quickly.

As I crested the small hill where his house sat my heart was hammering around my chest. The house was completely dark. Inside my mittens a ring started to chafe where I'd been turning it with my thumb. Tenured faculty could get away with a lot, and a relatively renowned poet could probably get away with more, but not this. Mathers was breaking and entering. And stealing things so much more valuable than material possessions.



I walked the mile or so to campus. In a few buildings lights were still on. Friday nights the campus was pretty much deserted. In which of those lighted offices was Mathers rummaging?

Eventually the cold got the better of me. At home I opened a bottle of red wine and lay down by the fireplace. The wine didn't work, and I lay there most of the night, haunted by visions of Mathers and myself sneaking into people's homes, their lives. It got worse when I forced myself to bed. For the first time since childhood I slept with my bedside lamp on.

The next morning was frigid. Somehow the pilot on the furnace had gone out. Mottled grey clouds darkened the sky and made me think of rain. Rain would have been nice, but that possibility was remote. If anything fell, it would be snow. I got the furnace going and spent the rest of the day cleaning, starting in the drafty attic and working my way to the cellar. When I finished I was exhausted. At the back door sat several large black garbage bags full of things I'd decided to throw out. I'd just deposited the last bag when Mathers rapped on the front door.

His eyes sat deep in his skull, mapped in red by burst capillaries. He seemed gaunter, even, than two days prior, his puffy purple lips too large for his face. When he smiled faintly the disproportion made him seem ghastly.

"Hi Belmont," he said, his voice raspy and low, blending in with the wind whipping through the pines. He didn't make a move to come in.

"Jesus, Joel. I've been worried sick." I half dragged him inside. He took his jacket off and sat on the couch. As near to the fire as possible, he rubbed his hands together slowly, taking time to stretch each finger.

In the kitchen I went for wine first, but opted for a bottle of Old Grand-Dad. In the living room I filled two old-fashioned glasses. He'd drunk half of his before I even dropped down onto the couch. We sat for a long time, Joel staring at the fire and drinking whiskey, me watching as something vague and fearful slammed around inside me. He finished the first glass and half of another. We sat long enough for me to try and gird myself for what he was going to say, what I was going to say. Long enough to realize I had no clue what either of us was doing. The bottle sat on the table, already two-thirds empty.

"So you've been at it all this time?" I asked.

He took his time turning from the fire, and even then he didn't come all the way around. "It hasn't been good," he said.

He'd been smoking again, and a lot, after he'd tried so hard to quit a year ago.

"I can't believe what I've seen," he said. "A drawer full of Nazi memorabilia. A fucking SS gas mask and a signed copy of *Mein Kampf*. Correspondence between department heads and university admins trying to get a tenured history professor fired for no good reason. And pictures. Pictures of things we don't share with anyone, that don't go into albums. I found a drawer full of pictures of myself. Pictures I hadn't taken or ever seen, pictures that weren't in my office but someone else's. Someone I'd had something with once. Something I'd forgotten. But they were recent pictures, cutouts from conference agendas and book-signings. Actual snapshots of me walking on the streets as recently as two months ago."

My hand went to my chest, as if that pressure would help steady the turbulence.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m not hallucinating. I’m coming apart at the seams but I’m not hallucinating. You can trust that.”

I did trust him, but at the same time didn’t.

“And there was Jackie Lebeau.”

“What about Jackie?” I said. “You went in Jackie’s office? For Christ’s sake, Joel. I don’t want to know. Just stop.”

He wasn’t listening. He balanced on the edge of the couch, the glass of whiskey gripped in his hand, the words rolling from his mouth. “Remember that story she wrote? About a young mother who’d given up her child for adoption because the family was against abortion and the father was someone her parents could never accept? And the baby was one her parents could never accept? Of course you remember. We thought it was uncanny how acute, how painful, how powerful the story was. We bet on whether she’d actually gone through that, just knew someone that had gone through that, or had made it up. I believed she pretty much made it up. Jackie’s good at what she does. You thought she’d lived it. You were right.”

“There was a diary that began by all appearances on the day after she’d given the baby up. She was nineteen, and hadn’t been home to see her parents since the pregnancy started to show. In the birthing room, alone with the baby for a few minutes before someone came to take it away – she’d already signed the papers – she made the mistake of feeding it. Its small mouth searched for her nipple and tiny hands clutched at her breast. She felt the suction of hunger, a pull greater than ocean undertow, and wished for the rest of her life that she hadn’t.”

“Joel, don’t do this, please. She doesn’t deserve this. I have to look her in the face every day. I’ve never asked you for anything, but I’m asking you now.” Any energy I had left seeped from my body, pooling on the floor beneath the couch.

“She lactated for weeks after the baby was gone. Sometimes she drank it herself. Every time she poured the milk down the drain she vomited. When the milk stopped coming she kept trying to coax it out, until her nipples were bruised beyond recognition.”

Nausea welled up in my stomach. I don’t know if it was real or not, but my own nipples were pulsing. I closed my eyes.

“The diary goes on for years, through attempts to locate the child, the difficulties of trying to conceive again. Pages upon pages filled with so much sorrow it made her consider ending it all on a daily basis. And it always came back to this: ‘Worse than the act itself is that I knew the act to be wrong, not morally wrong, just wrong for me, and that I was too weak not to go through with it. Every day I harbor this alone, and die a little more.’”

He turned toward me, wobbling on the verge of tears. Beneath his eyes hung crescents like swollen, ironic smiles.

“Joel, you should have fucking left it alone. Why didn’t you just leave it be?”

“I’m sorry.”

The acidic bite of vomit pushed at the back of my throat.

“Cassie,” he said softly. “You know the worst part?”

I shook my head, horrified. And yet, no words would come. My mouth was woolen, vocal chords dried and brittle.

Joel stared at his palm. With the glass still in the other hand his forefinger traced the lifeline. “The worst part,” he said, “is that I just can’t stop myself. Each night I go back, and it all seems more and more terrible. Eventually I get home and these people and their secrets haunt me, follow me, every single one of them, screaming and moaning and wailing like the wrong side of the River Styx. I can’t sleep and leave the house again at first light. And as soon as it’s dark, I go through more offices.”

“Why?”

He shook his head and reached for the bottle. “I don’t know.” He refilled his glass and topped mine off, emptying the bottle. He took a long swallow and sighed. “I still hear them now, every minute, even as I talk to you. I don’t for a second want to close my eyes.”

“And now what?”

“Who knows. All I’m sure of anymore,” he said, “is that some things we just shouldn’t know.”

Oh, how I agreed. How I wished I didn’t really know now what I knew about him. And yet, I wanted to grab him and pull him to me and not let go. “Why don’t you just stop,” I said, my voice cracking. “Stay here tonight.”

He tensed, and something cold descended over him, like condensation crystallizing on one side of a window. “No.”

“You’re scaring me. Don’t go.” I wrapped my arms around him. He was so much thinner than a couple days before. “This is going to end badly.”

His lips touched the top of my head and he moved to rise.

“Joel,” I screamed. “Stop this. Give me the goddamn key.”

“I can’t,” he said. “They’re going to start changing the locks tomorrow at midnight, and after that I’ll only have a week’s time.”

He stood up and I grabbed him by the sleeve. “You can’t do this. I won’t let you.” I tried to pull him back to me.

“I can’t,” he said. “I can’t.”

“I’ll call the police.”

A maniacal, silly grin rose on his face. “Cassie,” he said, “I know you want to call the police.” He put his hand to my cheek. “But I also know that you won’t.”

I stepped back, my hand coming to where his had been, as though I’d been slapped, the shock of it running up and down my body. I blinked at him once, twice. His words hung in the air until his eyes dropped. He turned. I reached for him, my muscles languid. I pulled at his jacket as he tried to put it on. He left without it. Left me there, my mouth open but no words coming, my mind screaming his name out into the frozen darkness.

Monday morning a dawn light pierced the crack between my curtains. I’d been in bed for almost thirty-six hours. The wood floor was cold against my feet. Pushing the curtains open revealed another day covered in white. It had snowed most of Sunday and all night into Monday, and everything seemed still and heavy. The light bouncing off the snow throbbed through my head. I had to turn away.

My phone was on the nightstand. From bed I’d made a dozen calls over the past day and a half, mostly to Joel. I’d tried to call the police several times, even getting as far as hearing someone say ‘campus security’ before hanging up. The house was haunted by

inanimate sounds, and above me the roof seemed to sag under the snow that had accumulated.

I'd done nothing to stop him; even a scalding hot shower wouldn't wash that away. After the shower, I trudged to the office. At the department my steps slowed. Approaching Joel's door I stopped, my palms slick. It was open. I peeked in. He was sitting at his desk, head bent towards something in his lap. I shuddered. "Hey," I said.

His head rose. He seemed different. His face still registered some of the iciness I'd seen Saturday night, but it was also heartier, as though he'd slept and eaten. A shadow of recognition flickered across his face. Then the veil descended. He stared right through me, and turned back to whatever was in his lap. I went down to my office. My hand trembled as I desperately tried to open the lock. I slumped down into the chair and turned slowly, trying to remember how my office had looked the last time I'd been there. No image came, and everything seemed, or rather felt, in place.

For some reason my gaze, and then my hand, was drawn to the middle drawer on my desk. I tugged and inside was a small manila envelope, sealed. The envelope was unmarked, save for some shaky writing in the upper left corner. It was dated from last night, Sunday, and below that a time, nine-thirty-seven PM. The handwriting, though unsure, was unquestionably Joel's.

I felt a solid mass inside, something weightier than a mere piece of paper with words written on it. A key. He'd been in my office. I was going to put the envelope back into the drawer when I turned it over. On the back, in his small, shaky script, Joel had written, 'Cassie, I didn't touch anything. Your secrets are still safe.'

Almost safe, I thought to myself. There were now parts of ourselves we'd both exposed, whether we intended to or not. It was something we'd have to deal with eventually. Joel had been right, there were things we just shouldn't know. But he'd been wrong, too. Some secrets we should know. I wanted to go down and ask him if in all his searching he'd found anything good or decent in those offices. I was half-way out of my chair when I stopped. I knew what he'd say. He'd study my face for a moment and then nod. Cassie, he'd say, you have the key, don't you?

I swiveled around to the window. Outside, the sun had climbed higher. A premature spring thaw was on the way, and melting snow already dripped from the ledge above the window. Sheets of the stuff fell from trees, exposing long, spindly branches that sprung upward once freed. The rest was soon to follow.



## ACTS OF RENOVATION

Alex ate and read the paper. Miranda looked out the kitchen window over the sink, coffee mug in hand, gritting her teeth every time his spoon clinked against the ceramic bowl. She didn't think this made her a bad person, or a bad wife. Take this morning. She'd woken before Alex and slipped from bed. He'd asked if she could wake him in fifteen minutes. She glided downstairs, made coffee and set one of his favorite cereals on the table. Back upstairs with fresh coffee in hand, she'd slid into bed to wake him. She'd let twenty minutes pass, not fifteen.

Outside, the sun was already burning off last night's dew. Another hot, dry day seemed likely. She'd put the sprinklers on before leaving for the advertising agency where she worked. Two weeks of blistering temperatures had turned the grass the color of harvest wheat. A couple more days without water and they'd have to wait until next spring to see green again.

A construction company pickup truck pulled a cement-mixer by, more than likely on its way to Zachary and Naomi's place up the street. They seemed to have work done on the house every summer, workers crawling all over the property like ants in sweat-stained ballcaps and paint splattered t-shirts. Just yesterday Miranda had driven by and they were erecting scaffolding out front. What were they doing with scaffolding *and* a cement-mixer?

"Maybe we should have some work done on the house," Miranda said.

"What?" Alex said.

Miranda turned around. "You know, make some renovations."

His brow furrowed. A spoonful of the oat and marshmallow cereal hovered over the bowl. He chuckled, his open mouth bunching the skin around his eyes. The wrinkles made him appear more his age, since at thirty-seven he somehow managed to still look twenty-five. Meanwhile, she looked every day of her thirty-four years. “Why do I feel like I’ve just been set up?” he said. When they were younger that smile always set her at ease. “So that’s what last night was all about, huh?” he said.

Miranda stared into her coffee mug. “Not really.” She wasn’t sure what had woken her in the middle of the night, a slippery unease in her stomach and her cotton panties damp between her legs. It certainly wasn’t fantasies of new shingles for the roof or waterproofing for the basement. Alex’d woken up as she slid her hands into the fly of his boxers, and they’d had feverish, dreamlike sex. This morning when she got out of bed she felt sore down there. My god, she’d thought, had it really been that long? A month? Six weeks? And when was the last time she’d woken up Alex, or anybody for that matter, in the middle of the night to have sex?

“What do you want to have done?” Alex asked.

“I was thinking maybe we could get the floors refinished.”

Alex studied the pinewood planks on either side of him. Under the table one of his feet tapped lightly. “Sure,” he said. “I guess we could do that.”

Four years ago when they bought the house the floors had been one of the old farmhouse’s principle charms – that and the small lake out back they shared with a dozen other families. The varnish had been gone for years, so the soft pine was prone to nicks and scars, and soaked up stains like carpet. The worn wood exuded a certain warmth, but

many of the planks were loose, and you couldn't walk anywhere without it moaning in protest.

"Alex, if you don't think we should do it, just say so."

"What's gotten into you now?"

"Nothing's *gotten* into me."

Alex's chair scraped across the floor. He stood before her. "I didn't mean it like that." Miranda leaned into his chest and the familiar hibiscus and sandalwood of his aftershave. "Can we discuss this before rushing headlong into something we may not want to do?"

Miranda pressed closer to him. "Okay," she said.

Alex put his lips to her forehead and went back to the table. His Adam's apple dipped steadily as he drank the leftover milk. On his way out he checked his tie for stains.

Miranda poured the last of her coffee in the sink. Something tasted funny about it. She'd have to get different beans ground next time; these left the espresso too bitter. The espresso machine sat on the counter, still shiny in all its fifteen-hundred-dollar glory almost a year after Alex had bought it for her birthday. They'd gone to Italy for their five-year anniversary, and he'd remembered how much she loved drinking cappuccinos and lattes in the cafes of cobblestoned Venice and crumbling Rome. When she got the machine she'd cherished it, but by now she only used it once or twice a week, preferring instead to simply look at it and think of her and Alex meandering through seaside streets under a warm Tuscan sun.

"Zach and Naomi still coming over on Saturday?" Alex asked from the hallway.

"What?"

“Zach and Naomi. Dinner. Saturday?”

“I guess so,” Miranda said. Alex said he’d see her later and the screen door slapped shut behind him. They’d been friends with the other couple for two years now. He and Zachary were roughly the same age, and she liked Naomi. They made the plans while golfing a couple weeks ago, but Miranda had forgotten, or pushed it from her mind. On the 18<sup>th</sup> hole Zachary had slid by her as she was pulling her driver from the bag. There was room between the two carts for him not to have touched her, but he did, his hand resting on her hip for a moment as he went past. She thought nothing of it until Zachary stopped at the edge of the tee box and looked back: first at her face, then her hips, then back to her face. She hadn’t told Alex, and now she had to buy a bunch of steaks and labor through a damn barbeque.

After dinner the four of them sat on the deck as the sun fell over the horizon.

“Zach, another scotch?” Alex asked.

Zachary looked from Alex to her and then to the watch on his wrist. “Got an early tee time tomorrow, but what the hell.”

“Naomi?” Alex said.

“Gin and Tonic, please,” she replied, smiling.

“Hon?”

“The same.”

“Righto,” Alex said.

Silence descended on the table until he returned. Miranda drank her G & T and finally looked directly at Zachary. His face cut right angles at the forehead, cheekbones

and jaw. His torso carried no trace of extra flesh. Reading him was almost impossible, but you knew he was taking everything in. From time to time his face would break open, laughter spilling from his mouth like a frog's tongue before he reined it in.

“So, you guys are having more work done on the house?” Miranda asked.

Naomi looked at Zachary. “Lots of work. It's got to be done, I guess. An addition to the back, fresh paint for the front. But next summer we're not having anything done, right?” she said, putting her hand on his.

“Right,” he said.

He was so imperious. Miranda couldn't imagine being his wife or one of his patients. Thankfully, she'd never needed any proctologic examinations, and even if she did, she damn sure wouldn't go to him.

“You guys should stop by and see it sometime,” Naomi said.

Miranda emptied her glass and sucked on an ice cube. The sun was almost gone, so she got up to light the Tiki torches and candles. “Anybody need a drink?”

When she came back the first words she heard were from Naomi: “He cut his penis off and *ate it*?”

She'd been gone less than five minutes, what had they gotten into? Naomi's face had taken on an ashen pallor. Zachary nodded, his eyes locked on Miranda's. Alex stared up at her too, his round face ruddy from the sun and four Scotch-and-sodas. His eyes glistened in the flickering torches.

“Honey, Zach was just telling us a story he'd read about.”

“A story-story, like fiction, or a real story?” she asked.

“Does it matter?” Zachary asked.

Miranda shrugged. "I guess not." Yet it did matter. A story that had actually happened was so much more depressing.

"It doesn't," he said, "but for your edification, it is an account of actual events."

"He ate it *raw*?" Alex asked.

"*They* ate it," Zachary said. "Together. Sliced it, diced it, fried it, ate it. Then the dismembered gentleman expired."

"Holy shit," Alex said.

"Good God," Naomi said. "I just ate half pound of beef tenderloin. Remind me again why we're talking about this?"

"Why the hell would they do that?" Miranda asked. She set the drinks down and everyone absentmindedly reached for them.

"They're insane," Naomi finally said. "Or at least the victim was."

"Victim?" Alex questioned. "What victim? He got what he wanted."

"I don't care," Naomi said, "it's just plain nuts."

"Maybe," he said. "But it's something more than that. If anything it was love."

Miranda turned to him. "You've got to be kidding."

His eyes cleared for a moment. "What else could it be *but* love? It's not so far from insanity."

Zachary seemed distant, his mind composting it all. This must be how he was in the laboratory or office at his practice: disconnected, methodical, calculating, as he peered into the microscope at a piece of human tissue. And all of a sudden she didn't see a microscope under his hands, but herself. She looked out at the purple sky, her face warm.

“I mean,” Alex went on, his speech slower and thicker, “that’s what love is, isn’t it? You give someone what they want, and in the process give up a piece of yourself.”

“Great fucking pun, Alex.”

“Sorry. I’m drunk. I couldn’t have come up with that if I wanted to.”

Everyone took another drink. On the cedar table the glasses left behind dark, circular stains from the perspiring beverages.

“Alex may be right,” Zachary said.

“Oh come on,” Miranda said. “The *doctor* is buying into this too?”

“I’m not buying into anything. I was going to offer a qualification.”

“And what would that be?”

“I think Alex is misconstruing want for need.”

“Need?” Naomi echoed.

Zachary cocked his head in her direction as if he thought he’d heard something but couldn’t be sure. “When what we want is so essential to our fundamental fabric, it’s not actually desire but need – something we *can’t* live without.”

“Really?” Miranda said. “Is that what we’re talking about when we talk about love? Need?”

Zachary nodded.

“I don’t buy it.”

“Why?”

“Love isn’t about need, or shouldn’t be,” Miranda said. “It’s about desire, about wanting to give yourself to another person, wanting to be with them, a choice.”

“Ask yourself if you really believe that. People learn to live without the things they want but can’t have. But need never goes away, and like air or water or food, without it we are miserable.”

“Zachary,” Naomi said quietly, but he silenced her with a wave of his hand. Miranda concentrated on the power of that hand and his self-assured words, power that despite her resistance made something shift around inside her, like the gravity that draws tides up onto shore.

“Take our two German phallophiles. The victim needed to have his penis cut off and eaten. And his partner needed to oblige him. Rest assured the victim had tried dozens, if not hundreds, of times before to find someone whose needs matched his. When two people share those needs, then we have love.”

Miranda couldn’t turn away.

“Love itself,” Zachary was chuckling bitterly now, “seems like a mental defect.”

Miranda heard not so much the words as the latent force and emotion behind them. It scared her that this was turning her on. Alex snorted and drained his glass.

“So what do you need?” Zachary asked. Her throat seemed obstructed. Alex came to her rescue.

“You know what *I* need?” he said.

“Let me guess,” Zachary said. “A drink.”

“A blowjob.”

They fell silent. Everyone stared at Alex, who tried to keep his lips from quivering but couldn’t. “And a drink,” he said and laughed uncontrollably. Zachary



followed, and then they all ended up clutching their stomachs, tears streaming down their faces.

Over eggs Florentine and Canadian bacon Miranda told Alex that a few contractors were coming by next week to make estimates. The muscles in his jaw bugled and then slackened. He concentrated on the food. “I thought we were going to talk about this?”

“They’re just estimates. We don’t have to do anything with them.”

He continued eating. She’d almost never seen him really angry. Only once, and even then, when she’d shattered an empty coffee mug against the wall behind his head, he didn’t yell or scream or threaten to smack her. His fists clenched and he turned and left. The door slammed and she threw another mug against the wall and collapsed to the floor. When he came back around dawn, he lay on the sofa in the living room. She hadn’t slept, and the joy that bubbled up in her at his return quickly soured into an anger she couldn’t source. She wished he’d stayed away longer.

Alex set his knife and fork perfectly parallel to one another on his empty plate. “You’re right, we certainly don’t.” He’d picked up the utensils habit from his grandmother, who’d said in her heavily accented German that they did it in the old country to let the host know you wanted no more food. She’d essentially raised him, with his father’s help. His mother had died shortly after his tenth birthday. “Why do we need to do this?” he asked.

Always with the questions. The first word he’d ever uttered to her was ‘why,’ when he came across her sitting on a bench in Boom Island Park crying into her scarf. He

sat and consoled her, a perfect stranger, and had never really stopped. She knew she had problems, suffered periodic bouts of depression, and made life miserable for them both. Her immune system sometimes failed because of the Lyme disease she'd contracted running through the north Minnesota woods as a fourteen year-old, and Alex was an able-bodied and attentive nurse. He seemed not to mind, thrived on it actually, and when he came home sometimes and realized the winds had changed for the better, he was giddy, light on his toes as he'd take her by the hand and twirl her around the living room. In those moments she was almost overcome that she could make him so happy, and it was an utterly confusing paradox then that her joy would be followed by grief and guilt over the misery that was seemingly a requisite precursor to these happy times.

“It would make the house so much more beautiful,” she said. “Let’s just have the estimates done and see what they say.”

“Do I need to be here for this?” he asked.

“Not really.”

“We’ve got foreign investors in town this week at work so it’s going to be tough. But I’ll try, okay?”

She nodded and Alex went outside to work on the small old sailboat he'd gotten on the cheap at auction last summer. He was in the process of refurbishing it. She looked around the kitchen, her hands idly turning her coffee spoon round and round. Finally she picked up the phone and called the mobile number of the last contractor on her list. He said he could come by on Wednesday.

\* \* \*

On the way home from work Miranda drove by Zachary and Naomi's. It was after six and the workers had packed up their tools and empty lunch coolers and gone home.

The house looked empty and somehow weakened behind the scaffolding.

Miranda didn't like the unease that had settled in her stomach on the way up the street. She'd wanted to just drive past Zachary and Naomi's and then head home to Alex, who was surely waiting and had more than likely started dinner. Tonight was his turn to cook since she almost always got home late on Thursdays. Now that she'd turned off the car she couldn't bring herself to start it again. Besides, it would look ridiculous if someone was inside and she just drove off.

She glanced in the mirror and slapped the flap shut, then strode up the long, arching driveway. She knocked. Zachary opened the door eventually, his lean frame accentuated by a form-fitting golf sweater checkered in royal blue and white.

"Hello Miranda," he said. "What a nice surprise."

"Hi," she said. It didn't at all seem like he was surprised.

"Come to see the renovations?"

She nodded. He stepped aside and she walked into the foyer. Slate floors and dim lighting made the house frigid.

"Something to drink?" he asked. "It's warm outside, isn't it?"

"Sure."

"I'm having a Martini."

"That'll work."

He mixed the drinks, and they went out onto the back patio. To the right gaped a hole in the ground. She stepped off the patio and over to the hole. The walls were dirt,

about eight feet deep and perfectly straight, like they'd been cut with surgical precision. No framing had been erected yet, but a ladder was propped in one corner.

Zachary was behind her. She hadn't heard him approach, hadn't noticed until she felt his presence off her left shoulder. When he put his hand on the small of her back she wasn't surprised, but her legs and back tightened and she had the unexpected sensation, a vision almost, that he would push her over the edge. "Where's Naomi," she asked.

"I don't know." He stepped forward, and his hand slid slowly over the curve of her butt. She didn't turn to him, just stared down into the hole. His grip tightened ever so slightly, as if checking the quality, the firmness, of a side of beef. "You know," he said. "Sometimes I climb in and just stand there. It's like being in your own grave. For a moment I can understand what it would feel like to be buried. I stayed down there for an hour once."

She cocked her head toward him. She didn't think he would be frightened by anything.

"It's not what you think," he said. "The frightening part is climbing back up the ladder. When your head breaks ground, and you're faced with single blades of grass, each of which you can see clearly, and then beyond that the lawn, lake and trees and sun or moon, you realize you feel more alive for having envisioned death, for experiencing some small part of it."

Miranda shivered. Despite the sun shining over the lake behind them, all she could feel was Zachary's cold hand sliding farther down her backside, his fingers now idling between her legs.

"You want to go down in it?" he asked.

An image of Alex filtered up from her subconscious, sitting at the kitchen table in their first apartment, a bottle of wine and a vase of chrysanthemums before him, his face hopeful as she came through the door. They'd had a fight, about what she couldn't remember. That night, after they'd made up, Alex mentioned her father had told him once he was special for being able to deal with his daughter. "What did he mean?" he'd said, pulling her close. "Special like mentally challenged? Or special like insane?"

"Go down into the hole," Zachary said. His voice was low and soft, but behind it was all the force of a knife-edged command. His fingers moved slightly, an almost imperceptible signal to start her moving, and she was shamefully, happily, relieved to have the decision taken from her hands.

She descended the ladder and did not ask herself why on God's earth she was climbing into a hole behind this house. Her body moved as if of its own accord. She stood in the hole and waited.

His body cast a long shadow. He watched her for a few moments. She wouldn't have been surprised if his shadow moved toward the ladder, if he got behind her and bent her over, if her pants slid soundlessly to her ankles, and the sharp sound of his zipper reached her ears. She wouldn't be surprised to gasp as he entered her, to hear her sounds echo around the earthen tomb.

But when she looked up Zachary hadn't moved. With his back to the sun his face was dark. There was a faint bulge at the groin of his pleated trousers and when he saw that she had seen it his face changed. It said: 'I am in control here, and nothing happens without my approval.' As if to emphasize this, he turned from the hole.

\* \* \*

At home, Naomi's car was in the driveway next to Alex's. She smiled to herself, her lips feeling out of place stretched across her face. She half-heartedly hoped Naomi was inside fucking her husband. That was enough to make her get out of the car and go inside. If Naomi's car hadn't been there she would have kept on driving.

Alex and Naomi were laughing in the kitchen. They sat across from one another, coffee mugs on the table before them. When they saw her standing in the doorway the laughter stopped.

"Hey you," Alex said. "Home already?"

"Hi Miranda," Naomi said. "I just stopped by to say hi."

"You okay?" Alex asked. "You look worn out."

"It's been a long day," she said.

"I should get going," Naomi said.

"It's okay. Relax."

Alex was studying her. "Have you been crying?"

She shook her head and stared at the floor. Crying? Maybe. The car ride home seemed all fog and haze. All she wanted was for Alex to get up and wrap her in his arms, like he'd done on hundreds of occasions before.

"Miranda?" Alex said. "Miranda? Are you hungry? We got carried away here but I was just about to start dinner."

Naomi looked at her watch. "I'm going to head off," she said. "Zachary is probably waiting for me."

Their eyes met. They both knew that was a lie. He'd never waited for anyone in his life.

“I’ll stay a little while,” she said. “He’s probably still playing golf.”

“Probably,” Miranda said.

After Naomi left and they’d eaten dinner Alex turned to her. The kitchen was warm and still smelled of basmati rice and teriyaki. “You don’t look well,” he said.

Miranda went and wrapped her arms around him. “I’m okay.” Her head on his chest, she could hear the steady lub-dub of his heart.

Alex stroked her hair. “So what did the contractors say?” he asked.

Miranda laid all the pamphlets and brochures and estimates on the table. Alex sighed at the sight of them. “I think this might be our best option,” she said, holding up one of the estimates. “But you know what, one of them recommended we should consider replacing the floors with new wood, particularly if there’s any sort of water damage or something.”

“Miranda, really. Replacing the floors?”

“It’s not really that much more expensive.”

“And how would you know that?”

“I asked one of them. Most companies do both kinds of work.”

“We don’t need new floors.”

“I think we do.”

Alex shook his head and got up from the table. “You’re unbelievable,” he said.

The following week Miranda got a call at work on her cell phone. I want you to come over, Zachary said. Okay, she replied. He’d called once that week already, on Tuesday, and when she’d arrived all he wanted was for her lay on the sofa with her head

in his lap. After twenty-minutes, her body quaking as the muscles in her neck and back knotted, he'd said that was all and she could go.

Looking Alex in the face at home afterwards had been next to impossible. She was afraid he'd see the energy bounding around inside her. In the car she couldn't bring herself to check the vanity mirror, yet leaving Zachary's a strange sense of freedom had surged through her. She couldn't reconcile this with the fact that when she came home she felt more attracted to Alex, desirous of his touch.

Another contractor, this one specializing in hardwood flooring, was coming by the house tonight, so she left work an hour early and drove to Zachary's. The house was dim and cool. She shivered as her heels echoed off the slate in the hallway.

She followed him into the living room. "I have something for you," he said and took a little boutique bag from the table.

"What's this?"

"Just take it," he said. "I want you to wear it."

From the bag she pulled a sheer black bra and panties. The letters 'ZLS' were stitched into the fabric of both with purple thread. His initials. She turned to go put the lingerie on.

"No, here."

She didn't look at him, but dropped her purse on the sofa. Her fingers shook as she slowly unbuttoned her blouse. He sat in a chair and watched. She didn't cover herself as she took off her own underwear and bra, but let him see her completely naked for a few moments before putting his gift on. As she slid into the new underwear her hands no longer shook.



His eyes roved her body and settled on her face. She waited, thinking at any moment he would come and touch her. She saw nothing in his cold eyes.

“Very good,” he said. “You can get dressed now.” At the front door he grabbed her arm and leaned closer to her ear. “I do not want you to sleep with your husband until you see me again. Do you understand?”

She nodded and he released her. She was still wearing the black lingerie. Hers was stuffed in the purse. Outside the evening sun continued to beat down on the lawns and sidewalks, but she did not feel it. The sunlight only hurt her eyes.

Alex didn't get home until very late. He undressed in the dark and when his hand reached out to her under the covers desire flooded through her. She pretended she was asleep.

On Saturday afternoon Miranda walked into the den where Alex was watching a Twins game on television. “Are they winning?” she asked.

He nodded and gulped from the beer bottle in his hand. She sat down in the armchair and handed him a piece of paper.

“What's this?”

“A proposal from one of the flooring companies.”

“Jesus Miranda, I'm watching the game. Do we have to do this now?”

“All you have to do is sign it.”

Alex muted the television and looked at her. “Is that so?”

His eyes scanned the paper. “Sixteen-thousand dollars? New cherry wood floors? A month’s worth of work?” The muscle above his right eyebrow twitched. “Have you lost your mind?”

“They’ll only be here while we’re at work.”

“It’s still a full month of inconvenience.” His eyes flashed to the television. The Twins had just hit a home run. Everyone at the Metrodome was on their feet.

“I know, but they’ll just do one room at a time. Can we afford it?”

“I don’t know. I think so.”

“I spoke to an appraiser about the house.”

“What!”

“Zachary said new floors would increase the value of the house by several thousand dollars. The appraiser confirmed it.”

Alex flipped the paper onto the table. “I don’t give a shit what Zach or a fucking appraiser said. This is ridiculous.”

“Honey, please.” She placed her hand on his forearm. He slumped back into the couch, stared at the ceiling. In the silence hummed the faint static of electricity running through the television.

“Why didn’t you tell me about all this,” he asked. “It almost seems like you’ve been sneaking around behind my back making all these plans.”

“You said we could do it. You were busy, so I took care of it. What’s the problem? If we can’t afford it then we won’t do it.”

“That’s got nothing to do with it. You know as well as I do we can afford it. It’s a sound investment. I’m not denying that. I just...never mind.” He watched as the Twins

hit into an inning-ending double play and then slid his arm from under her hand. He leaned forward, picked up the pen lying on the coffee table and signed the contract. He stood. “Congratulations. You just got yourself a new floor.”

Miranda heard the sliding door to the patio open and close. Alex walked into the backyard and stared out over the lake. She looked at the paper, his looping signature. She’d gotten what she’d wanted. Why then, didn’t it feel like it?

She let him burn off steam outside and then went to where he was sitting on the patio steps. She kneeled behind him, put her lips to his neck. His body stiffened in her arms. “Thank you,” she whispered in his ear. He didn’t respond. “We’re supposed to be at Zachary and Naomi’s in an hour for dinner.” He studied his hands. “I’ll go get changed,” he said.

They walked the two miles to Zachary and Naomi’s, a space between them as their sandals slapped along the street. The air had grown heavy, saturated with the scent of impending rain. Miranda’s skin slickened in the humidity. To the East, beyond Minneapolis and St. Paul, gathering clouds darkened the sky.

Her every attempt at conversation went ignored. Alex was somewhere else. “I’m sorry,” she said. “We don’t need to get the floors.”

“Forget it. You did it the way *you* wanted,” he said. “I hope it makes you happy because things have to change.”

At the house Alex warmed slightly. He joked with Naomi and the four of them had dinner, grilled sea bass and asparagus, and drank dry white wine. Miranda felt

uncomfortable. Her clothes seemed to scratch and irritate on her skin. Zachary's cool appraisals weren't helping either.

The rain seemed soon in coming so they moved inside to the kitchen. She went to the bathroom and when she came out Zachary was standing by the pantry door. He motioned for her to go in. At the other end the door that led to the kitchen was closed. Light from the other side seeped through the crack at the floor.

"It's locked," he said quietly. He pushed closed the door nearer to them but didn't shut it. "Get on your knees," Zachary said. She did.

Naomi and Alex's laughter could be heard ringing from where they sat at the kitchen table. He told her to unzip his pants. Take it out. He wasn't wearing underwear and his penis was soft and pliable in her hand. She let it hang there. Her knees were burning. Small pebbles or grains, rice maybe, were scattered across the floor. They pressed into her skin.

"I wonder where Miranda and Zachary are," Naomi said.

Miranda's heart slammed around in her chest. Through the door she heard his reply, clear as a knife against crystal. "Who cares? They're probably looking at the new addition and planning how to next renovate *my* house." She'd never heard her husband's voice quite like that. 'My house' rung in her ears.

"Does it hurt?" Zachary said.

He was talking about her knees, she thought. He'd probably dropped rice on the floor in the pantry on purpose. "Yes," she said, her voice barely audible, the word caught in her throat. His penis twitched and became engorged.

Surprised, she looked up at him, as though for the first time. A sliver of light from the doorway fell on his face. His eyes knew nothing of love. They were empty but for a glint of malice. She saw Alex's face from this afternoon, his resignation, and the loathing for himself and for her that was budding behind it. A constant reminder would be in every room and under their every step until the floor – or something similar – drove them apart. She realized with anguish that Alex would bend and bend and bend, and he too, like everyone, would eventually break. But still he would not change. He would be okay, would still be Alex. She, not he, would be the one left in pieces.

She rose from her knees and reached for the door. Zachary put a hand on her arm. "Where are you going?"

"Home," she said, and shook his hand off.

When she walked into the kitchen Alex and Naomi turned and stared. "Alex, I don't feel well. I need to go home."

Before suspicion, doubt, vengeance, or anger, Alex's face registered concern. "What's wrong? You look like you've just seen a ghost."

"I feel faint. I'm sorry Naomi. Alex, can we go home, please?" She had trouble getting the words out. She needed to leave this house. It was suffocating her.

"Yes, yes, of course." Alex rose from the chair. "Naomi, tell Zach we had to go. I'm sorry."

"Can I give you guys a lift?"

"No thanks," Miranda said. "I think the fresh air will help."

Halfway home the rain came. Large, soft drops splattered in the dusty street and on the brittle grass and on their heads. “We should have borrowed an umbrella,” Alex said. “I don’t want you to get sick.”

“I’m okay,” she said, pressing herself to his side. “I won’t get sick. Besides it’s a warm rain.”

A peal of thunder clapped behind them and rolled up the street. Miranda felt the sonic pressure of it in her stomach. “I’m going to cancel the floor order,” she said.

“What? Why?”

“I don’t want it. Our old floors are fine. I think I’m going to refinish them myself, room by room. I don’t care how long it takes.”

“You’re going to sand and seal and buff and all that?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“You’re nuts.”

“I know.”

The rain fell harder and by the time they got home they were soaked. Miranda opened her mouth to catch a few drops as they stood on their front porch. “Maybe I’ll help,” Alex said.

She nodded and kissed him. “Only if you want to,” she said.

Alex smiled and unlocked the door. They went inside, their soggy footprints leaving marks on the wood. The groans of the old floor trailed them down the hall. It would take a lot of work to get it in order.

## INTO THE CELLAR

The muscles in my arms and back twitch whenever I hear those kinds of stories. Like that boy out in California who threw his pregnant wife over the side of a boat, or that black boy in North Carolina who'd stuffed his pregnant girlfriend in the trunk of his car. I'd have no problem killing them. Even said so to my father once that I'd like nothing better than to get my hands around them boys' throats and squeeze. He just sort of looked at me sideways and didn't say nothing, like he agreed but didn't believe me.

Now I got a wife, with a kid on the way, and it's something I never really planned on. At seventeen she ain't but a kid herself, young enough almost to be my child. She's standing at the door to the cellar, everything about her so skinny except her stomach, which stills shows though the giant T-shirt she wears like a dress. We been married four months, she's been pregnant seven. What choice did we have? Her thin legs run straight as a board from the T-shirt to an old pair of my hunting socks she's got on. Her mouth is moving, and I think she's saying something but I can't hear the words. All I can see is mouths to feed, a lifetime bare cupboards and empty promises.

For a moment I'm stung by something. The kind shock that comes on in a flash and before you know it you're already doing something stupid. Like on the highway behind a slow-ass driver, your teeth grinding, hands gripping the wheel, so you punch the gas and are halfway by before you come to your senses and realize how foolish it all is. Just like that. And she's asking if I need something from the cellar, and I see me get up and walk over to her, one hand on the doorknob, the other supporting her belly, and tell her that I do. She turns, and as her foot finds the first step my hand reaches her back and I

push. I see her falling, bouncing on the stairs, but I don't hear her scream. Maybe that's what it was like for them boys out in California and North Carolina. You can see but can't hear. And she's laying knocked out cold at the bottom of the stairs, and to make sure it's finished I have to go down and gently pick her up and bring her to the top again, stand her up and tilt her forward and let her fall, again. And all the while the world's quieter than hell.

Slowly the sound returns, and from a distance I hear her voice, and there's fear in it, like a child trying to wake a drunk father because the postman's at the door.

"Reggie," she says. "Reggie?"

I come back from wherever I was and she's still standing there, her hand really clutching the doorknob now. I can see a chill running up her bare legs.

"Reggie, you okay?" she asks.

I nod.

"You need anything from the cellar?"

I stand and walk over to her. I reach for her cheek and it's hot against my cold palm. I let it sit there for a moment, absorbing her warmth, before bending over and putting both hands gently on her stomach. It's swollen round, the skin beneath the T-shirt stretched to the point of breaking, and I cup her belly like one of them globes we used to have in primary school.

"Reggie what's wrong?" she asks.

"Nothing," I say. And the breath that's been caught up in my chest for so long is finally freed and I can breathe again. Inside her I feel our future kicking around.

"Marianne, I don't need nothing from the cellar."



She don't say nothing, just waits until I take my hands away. When I do, she turns to go down the steps. "Reggie, you scare me sometimes," she says.

But she goes down into the cellar on her own two feet. The passage is dim, the darkness musty. Water keeps leaking in and I'll have to make some repairs down there eventually. I stand there watching her waddle down, shifting her weight back and forth in some great big balancing act. And I wait until she see-saws back up, hoping and praying the whole time that she doesn't stumble. That none of us stumbles.

## THE NIGHT SHIFT

It was just the two of you. You in the worn armchair, feet up on the ottoman, your father on the couch, beer in hand as he followed the little baseball players on television. Every so often your eyes would cut over to him, linger, and go back to the game. Bedtime had passed for younger brothers, but he didn't say anything when last light crept off behind the horizon, so you stayed put.

You were ten. Old enough to have graduated from tee-ball to parent-pitch to fast-pitch, to take the bus to school instead of getting dropped off by mom. *Boy, come and sit over here*, he said. *Like we used to, before you got too grown to sit next to your old man.* You narrowed your eyes and sunk farther into the seat. *Still mad about the other day*, he asked. *You had that coming. Shit, you knew better than to be lighting them damn bushes on fire.*

You rubbed at the bruises on your butt and legs, still tender three days after getting caught and getting the belt. Still rubbing, you jumped when that loud boom came from down the street. It rung in your ears, like the sound of a garbage truck emptying a dumpster.

When the ringing stopped he was sitting up straight, stock still. Outside, the July night was quiet. The howling neighborhood cat, perpetually in heat or lonely, had gone mute. Even the hum of the highway had vanished. It was just you and him, and you shivered, in spite of the warm air breezing in through the screen door.

He was staring out into the darkness over your shoulder, a faraway look on his face. And then he said it. *Your mama*, in a voice just above a whisper, like he was talking to himself. He wasn't, but you wished he was, wished you hadn't heard it.

There was an edge to his voice you'd never heard before, even that time you stole a twenty from his wallet and bought candy with it – all of it – at the corner store in the old neighborhood. Worse still, it was calm, his voice. Dead almost.

He didn't need to say anymore. You'd seen enough movies to know what that sound down the street was. And even though you were old enough to watch your brothers for an hour after school, you'd never thought about your mama being hurt, that she could be taken away from you. That kind of world hadn't existed.

One afternoon a week before, she had come downstairs dressed in weird blue clothes and shoes so bright white it had hurt to look at them. A little bag sat on a chair, folders and a stethoscope on the table. Her face was a strange powdery white, her lips lined in maroon. Your brothers had giggled at the outfit, and one of them asked what that costume was. As she made an after-school snack for the three of you, same as every other day, she told you she was going back to work at the hospital, the night shift. The giggling stopped. The youngest had asked why, and she picked him up with a sad smile on her face and cradled him against her chest. Over his shoulder she looked at you and said that she had to. It was time. She packed the rest of her stuff, said she'd be home soon, and went out to the car. The back door slid closed with a click, and the three of you gathered at the window, watching as the brake lights came on and she pulled out. The youngest clutched at the window sill, struggling to see. It had been the first time she wouldn't be

there to put you to bed, tucking you in so tightly that the next morning the covers seemed not an inch out of place.

Your father stood, grimacing as he stepped into his house shoes. At the foot of the ottoman he stopped. *Stay here boy, I'll be back.* He disappeared into the darkness, the door left open behind him.

You tip-toed down the driveway. His shadow ran long beside him, and you flitted over the grass, cool blades leaving dew between your toes. From ten yards back you saw his giant hands clenching, and snuck along in the shadows so he wouldn't catch wind of you following. He never looked anywhere but forward, but you kept out of sight all the same.

At the end of the block a car had run headlong into a lamp post. The odd angle and blinking lights pushed you to a flat out run.

Your father crossed the street and walked around the smashed up station wagon. When you skidded to a stop beside him, up on the grass next to the curb, he was staring, legs spread, hands on hips, at the driver's side door. You adopted his posture.

Inside, a head covered with blond hair slumped against the steering wheel. Your mother's hair was blond. Your father looked down at you, and you took your first breath since stepping from the house. The head wobbled upright and looked around. You'd never seen eyes so big, so round, so empty. The door creaked open and the car seemed to spit him out onto the grass. Your father stepped to him and leaned over like he was sniffing at something, then backed away. The man got up off his knees and stumbled out into the road. In the streetlight the grass looked blue, the blood brown.

*Ain't we gonna help him pop, you asked. Shit, your father said. We'd be helping him and everyone else if we just let his drunk ass get hit by the next car that comes this way.* The drunk weaved down the road and collapsed on the grass, his moans reaching up and down the street. Mixed in with leaking gasoline and antifreeze, the scent of whiskey seeped from the car. You pointed at the empty bottle that had tumbled out of the car with the drunk. Your father nodded toward the house. *Let's go home.*

As the two of you walked he put his arm around you, resting a big hand on your shoulder. It was heavy but you didn't shrug it off. Halfway home tears streamed down your face. At the start of the driveway, newly laid concrete glowing in the moonlight, he paused and gently squeezed your shoulder. He was staring up the drive, and in a low voice hushed by rustling leaves he said, *Your mama'll be home soon.*

Inside he called the police. You stood at the edge of the couch watching, waiting, until he came and sat down. You didn't know quite what to do and you glanced once, twice, at the armchair before he threw one arm over the couch and said, *Let's watch the end of this game like we used to, like we're in the stadium.* You went and sat on the cushion next to his, and five minutes later had wriggled as close as possible to his broad side. He put his arm around and pulled you close, head resting on the soft part of his chest. But you couldn't sit still. Every few minutes, when a car drove by the house, your head would pop up and check the driveway. You tried to stay awake, but couldn't, and the next morning woke up in bed, covers tucked tight around you like a cocoon. A faint ringing in your ears flooded you with fear, moistening the soles of your feet as you tried capturing the origin of the vague feeling shifting around in your belly. You knew it was

there, but couldn't find it. The last thing you remembered was the Tigers leading the Royals. Two to one in the bottom of the ninth.

## WITH THESE HANDS

Her fingertips pressed against the cheek where Johnny's hand had caught her. Beth didn't know which hurt worse: the blow itself, still smarting so much her eyes were watering, or the wasted gravy. Gravy wasn't supposed to be on the wall. Certainly not hers, a recipe from her own mother, and certainly not gravy that had, only a minute before, been in the cherished antique gravy boat she'd gotten at a garage sale but was now nothing more than ceramic shards strewn about the kitchen. The water in her eyes, or the wall playing tricks on her, made the gravy appear alive, like it was shimmying down the cheap yellow wallpaper.

"Mama, oh my god, Mama. Are you okay?"

Beth turned to Desiree, her eldest daughter. "What?"

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. Everyone else?" she asked, searching the faces in the kitchen.

The faces nodded solemnly, their eyes downcast.

"What's wrong with him, Mama?" Desiree asked, and repeated the question quieter, as though to herself.

"Desiree, take the kids in the living room. You all go on now, I'm going to clean this mess up."

Desiree turned to her sister Jessie Ann, younger by a decade but a mother twice over already, and asked her to take them. Jessie Ann nodded and herded the rest of the kids, those who hadn't already fled the kitchen or had finished eating, off to watch TV.

"Mama, sit for a minute. Put some ice on that," Desiree said, stepping to the refrigerator.

“It’s okay,” Beth said. What a Thanksgiving. Far and away the worst yet, and all because of Johnny, her only boy, the only man in the house.

Desiree leaned against the counter and looked sadly around the kitchen. “Well, at least we know he won’t be around for a while.”

“I suppose,” Beth said. Johnny always just up and disappeared for a few weeks whenever he’d do something awful to her or his sisters. It’d been this way since his twenty-first birthday, when she’d refused him the money he thought was rightfully his. Those disappearances were the only calm times around the house. She worried more over him when he was gone, but in a way, Johnny had never really been all there. “Come on, let’s take care of this mess.”

She and Desiree threw away Johnny’s beer bottles, labels all scratched and peeled by his restless hands, along with the food gone cold on everyone’s plates. On her knees in front of the gravy, Beth thought the cracks in the linoleum floor seemed large as veins. His raw, almost feral scent still lingered in the kitchen. Who knew the last time he’d had a bath. “Happy Thanksgiving, Mama,” Desiree said, and Beth laughed because she knew her daughter was joking, trying to make them both feel better.

A few hours later, Beth sat watching the clock click round. Something terrible was going to happen to Johnny. She just didn’t know when, didn’t know how she was supposed to stop it. The kitchen was almost back to normal, but the walls seemed to throb with the abuse they’d suffered. A heavy lump of pain had settled in her stomach, one she’d been trying to shake for weeks, months, years, but hadn’t noticed at all for the couple hours before Johnny had blown up (over what no one was exactly sure). He’d been killing himself for a long time, though the calendar hanging on the wall gave notice



to a minor miracle: his twenty-fifth birthday two weeks away. The clock ticked past midnight. It felt a hell of a lot later than that.

Jessie Ann had taken her kids and gone home. In back, Desiree tended to her three kids and Beth's youngest, Simone. That was her given name, but as the last child everyone had just called her Baby and the nickname stuck. Beth hoped to God her capacity to have children was finally finished at forty-seven. Baby knew she and Desiree were sisters, separated by twenty five years and two fathers, but she wouldn't let the 'Auntie' business go, kept calling Desiree that.

One of the little girls squealed. They should have been in bed already, but Beth found herself saying that most nights. Maybe that's why they were so stubborn in the mornings. Beth, too, had grown less and less inclined to crawl from the warm covers, even though she was by nature an early riser. Going back to school at her age played a part, but she looked forward to classes almost as much as coming home to her daughters. Thirty years had passed since she'd last been in school, when she got pregnant with Desiree at fifteen. When her belly got too big she'd dropped out, thinking her and Will were going to live together and raise a family. She'd been wrong about that, of course. Will was better at starting a family than raising one. The years had taught her that this was as much her problem as his, since she'd made the same mistake with five different men. It had always been just her and the girls. And Johnny.

Beth tried to focus on the stern fatherly face of Charles Darwin staring from the pages of her book. The Biology 101 class had started evolution the week before Thanksgiving break. Professor Morehouse had told them that evolution, and Darwinism in particular, was his area of expertise. She could see it in the old man's face, the gleeful

smile behind his graying beard and moustache – so clearly an imitation of the great scientist's. *Origin of Species*, he'd said, holding up an ancient copy of the text. Survival of the fittest. Darwin's crowning achievements. The professor hadn't been nearly as excited rambling about asexual reproduction the week before. The class just sat there, uninspired by his exuberance. Your final paper, he said, is going to be about Darwinism. Remember, I've spent my whole life studying him, so you'll have to be on your P's and Q's with this one, which sounded an awful lot to Beth like he was saying he knew everything there was to know about the man. If that was the case, she wondered now, why the heck did he need to hear from her about it?

She closed the book. Desiree stood in the doorway. "Mama," her daughter said. "You can't seriously be trying to learn anything right now."

"I'm not. It wasn't sticking."

"Thinking about Johnny?" Desiree asked.

She was. Her own fears etched Desiree's face, creased by wear and worry at thirty-two. Beth could only imagine how *she* looked.

Desiree came and started kneading her back. "I can't believe he hit you. I just can't."

The bruise on Beth's cheek throbbed. "He didn't mean it," she said. "You know him. He doesn't know what he's doing when he's like that." The pressure her daughter applied to the knots made Beth cringe.

"But," Desiree said. Her strong angry hands pressed harder. "What are we going to do about him?"

"I don't know, child," she said. "I just don't know."

She had loved him fiercely. Not any more than she loved the girls, just different, him being the only boy in a family desperate for men. The girls, especially his oldest sisters, had coddled him, protected him, made him the center of their lives. Dawn and Desiree had never needed dolls for Christmas, they had Johnny. Maybe that was what had turned him, when he grew old enough to realize his place and at ten or eleven started acting out. You could see it in his face, cheeks lit red like the bulbs strung from the family's plastic white Christmas tree every time Beth or one of his sisters pulled him close. Maybe it had all been too much, what with everyone calling him their 'little man' all the time.

“Well,” Desiree said. “You know what Dawn thinks.”

Beth's shoulders tightened.

Dawn was second oldest, one of the four kids who hadn't moved away. Of the girls, she had taken it the hardest when he started pushing them away. His name alone screwed a scowl onto her face. When Beth had told her Johnny was coming to Thanksgiving dinner she stared. Who? she asked. Beth played along. Your brother, silly. I don't have a brother, Dawn replied. Then she said she wasn't coming – a good thing, too, as it turned out. Who knows what Dawn might have tried to do to him for that nonsense.

“She thinks we should just cut him off,” Desiree said. “Like she's done. He isn't even allowed over at her place. I can't believe her sometimes.”

Beth bowed her head. “That feels good, child. That spot right there. Press a little harder for me.” Desiree had found the largest knot. Pain seared through Beth's body, pulsing all the way to her toes. She shivered. The pain felt good.

\* \* \*

Beth awoke with a start, the small bedroom shrouded in the darkness of a late fall morning. Three days after Thanksgiving and her cheek still pulsed. She waited as the shadows came into focus. She'd been dreaming about Johnny, that he had died, and felt his presence in the room with her. She'd awoken before to him rummaging through drawers or searching the house for valuables. A few months ago it was the slapping of cupboard doors in the kitchen. She'd crept into the hallway. From the darkness came the steady dialogue Johnny kept with himself, muttering, "where's it at, where you hiding," as his shoes scuffed across the floor. Then, his voice, clear, flowing as from an apparition in the corner. "Mama, where's the fucking money?" Beth put a hand on the wall to steady herself. A glass shattered on the floor and she flicked the light switch. Johnny blinked, breath rasping from his chest, face sallow. "I'm not giving you the money," she said. He took a step toward her, his giant hands tightening into fists. A second glass clenched in his left hand snapped under the pressure, the pieces cascading to the floor. She stepped back, clutching the robe around her throat. Johnny stared at the blood running down his wrist. "I'll be back, Mama," he said. Long after he'd gone, the words hung in the kitchen like a ghost.

But this morning the townhouse was quiet. On the dresser perched the lamp, hiding the money she'd been saving for him since childhood. She'd done the same for each of her children, two or five or ten dollars at a time. Sometimes there wasn't even enough for food so she couldn't save anything. It was never much, a couple hundred usually, when she finally gave the sums over after having exchanged the small worn bills at the bank for crisp larger ones. When she gave the money to her daughters they almost

couldn't take it. Desiree had actually said no, told Beth to keep it. But she wouldn't let them give it back.

Johnny was the only one who hadn't gotten his yet. The money would've gone right into his veins. She couldn't have that. So she'd continued to save even after his twenty first, hoping he'd turn the corner.

She got up and stood in the bathroom, her feet alive on the cool tiles. She turned on the light. Johnny's bruise was yellowing around the plum-colored center. Why she'd tried to grab hold of him after the gravy was already running down the wall she couldn't say. Didn't help anything. She was taller, and heavier by at least thirty pounds, but when he shrugged her off his large hand caught her face.

In the kitchen she put coffee on and opened the book. This Darwinism assignment was the last of her first semester at the community college. Her professors put comments of praise on her papers, but it seemed to her they were surprised. The faces of her classmates said it all, a raised eyebrow here or there as she gave answers that only forty-seven years of living could provide. It was no different at the mall, where people would look at her with a kind of pity she hated, a woman who had once been pretty now hidden under a tough layer of skin and fat. Perfect strangers would stare at a life wasted as she led her gaggle of kids through the Northland Mall like a junior United Nations delegation, but without the dignitaries. Her kids were mostly brown-skinned like their fathers, and people wondered what had happened to that sad woman as she walked by holding the hand of a feeble little boy with the same milky complexion as hers.

She couldn't stand it. She'd never asked anyone for anything. So when Desiree moved back in and could help out, Beth finally went back to school. She'd spent years

taking her children to the county health clinic, researching their coughs and rashes because she distrusted the county doctors' care. When she saw Pre-nursing in the community college bulletin, the decision was really no decision at all. Now, after almost two weeks of procrastinating, she had to turn in a five-page paper later that day.

She scrawled a few sentences in her notebook. The house was hushed. Desiree and the kids wouldn't be up for another couple hours. Up until he was ten or so Johnny had been like most children in the neighborhood. He played the same childhood games they did with the fierce intensity required against combatants always bigger and darker. In a neighborhood that was almost all Blacks and Hispanics, Johnny would often come home bruised and bleeding. Don't worry, the doctors at county health said to Beth's questions about why he was so small and why he couldn't sit still for more than ten seconds. He's perfectly fine, they told her, just let him grow into himself.

He had grown into himself all right. It had started, or perhaps she had noticed it first, with his hands. Johnny had always had large solid hands. On a man they would have been comforting, protective. On a ten-year-old they looked comical. Protruding knuckles and long fingers, a profusion of veins, constant motion – thumping the table, turning over the salt and pepper, tugging at his sisters' hair.

As a child of eleven he had come home from school one day with blood on his hands. Beth dropped the knife she was holding and ran over to him. "Johnny," she said. "What happened, child?" His hands were sticky and red and smelled of iron. She shook him. Hard.

He looked at her. "What, Mama?" His eyes were vacant, searching.

Beth held one of his bloody hands up before his face. "What is *this*?"

“Oh that,” he said.

“Of course that! What did you do?”

Johnny balled the hand into a fist and then opened it, waggled the fingers. “I found a cat,” he said.

“What?” she shouted. He’d found a stray just hit by a car, picked the creature up and cradled it as blood poured from its small body.

“I thought I could save it,” he said.

“Why? How?”

Her son just shrugged. Beth finally dropped his hand. A chill ran over her scalp and puckered the loose skin on her arms. What was her son doing playing with a dead cat? “Go wash your hands,” she had said. Then, almost an afterthought as he went down the hall, “and throw that T-shirt away.”

Longhand, Beth wrote on the primacy of survival in animal behavior and dynamics. Those weren’t her words; she’d found them in one of the dusty books she’d checked out from the library. *Everything an animal does, everything an animal is, it seems, is designed for the sole purpose of survival, both individual and species.*

She looked at what she’d written. She wanted to throw it away and start over. In an hour the kitchen would hum with bodies, and shortly after that was work. What she had started would have to do, but when she put pen to paper again she found herself going in another direction. *Humans, she wrote, defy this notion. We as a species speak to the fundamental breakdown of Darwinism, a species which has overcome its fate, can in many ways rewrite it.*

She was a prime example, she thought. How she'd managed this long was sometimes beyond her. And if she wasn't necessarily fit for survival, God only knows what so many others were doing. People who couldn't even tie their damn shoes were having babies as she had. People with genetic defects and terminal illnesses were wheeled up ramps they couldn't climb with their own two feet. People who couldn't procreate in nature could do so in the lab, and pass their DNA on whether they should or not. There was even talk on the news the other day about a pill soon to be available that would let everyone live until they were ninety years old. No, this was not like any of the Darwinism she'd read about.

She mentioned the video the class had watched last week about lion prides in the African savanna. When an injured or sick member of the pride could no longer contribute, it limped off into the sunset alone, to die. Females mated with the dominant male, the one who had shown himself bigger and stronger than the others. Ironic. The lions who had fathered her children had almost all been large, strong and violent. Their contribution to species survival had ended with insemination, which to her didn't seem the best way for ensuring survival but sure as hell was working for the lions. Afterwards they went about their way to lie in the grass and lick themselves, or find other males to fight or females to have sex with.

In a way Beth was thankful; her children were all hearty and robust. Except Johnny. His father had been a lonely man, quiet and unpredictable. Later, Beth would find that he'd never lived in any one place for longer than a year, including Detroit. Silent for days, evil burned behind his watery blue eyes. Johnny's hands were his father's – too large for his small frame and feminine shoulders. Hands that moved quickly and with



dexterity. With them Robert had given Beth great, quivering pleasure as they rolled around in bed naked. One more than one occasion, they had also found their way to her throat.

Beth finished her paper on an image from the video that had been hanging on her for days. In the final scene a blind cub had been born. The mother cared for it at first but seemed to understand that the cub was crippled. The narrator remarked that researchers did not know how exactly, or when, the mother realized the cub was blind. She had some sixth sense. The mother took her cub out into the rippling grass far from the pride. The faces of Beth's mostly female classmates, women of a different generation, flickered in the screen's glow. Anguish pulled at their mouths. One woman with short blond hair and the face of a bird and who turned every class discussion into an argument on feminism, simply covered her eyes. Beth had felt part of what they felt, but watched the lioness with empathy, not sympathy, for she understood, but knew most human mothers would do no such thing. They would fight and scratch and claw, like lions, to do the opposite, to save something that perhaps they had no business saving, but couldn't help themselves.

Beth turned back to the screen. In the distance the female was heading back to the pride. Slow plodding steps, a red sun large on the horizon above. From the abyss behind her the cub's bleating rang across the plains. She did not look back.

Beth could understand that too, but that's as far as it went. She'd kill over her children. She'd let herself die before she let anything happen to them that she could prevent. She put the pen down, exhausted but satisfied. Darwinism had been rankling her since they started the unit, and she felt better now that she'd washed her hands of it, even if the grade was probably going to be poor. She didn't care. It seemed off to lump people

in so completely with animals. Leaving children behind, she scoffed to herself, that's just ridiculous.

Quick footfalls slapped down the back hallway. Baby stopped at the door, blinking in the yellow light, before hurrying up into Beth's lap.

"What's wrong, love?" Beth asked. Baby trembled, tiny fists clutching at her old nightshirt. Beth tucked the child's head under her chin. The scent of sleep rose from her, and Beth stroked her hair.

"Mama's here," she said.

"I went to your room," Baby said. "You weren't there."

"I'm right here. You have a bad dream?" The little head nodded between her breasts. "You want to tell me about it?" The head said no.

By degrees the trembling stopped and they sat in the quiet kitchen, the periodic click of the cheap clock marking time. Beth's chest grew hot where her daughter's warm breath collected in her shirt.

"Mama," she said, face still buried.

"What is it, Baby?"

"Is Uncle Johnny gonna die?"

Beth exhaled. "Baby, he's your brother, not your uncle. You know that."

"I know. But is he?"

"Of course not. You know better than that."

Her daughter tensed and Beth felt her little mouth open to ask another question. Exhaustion weighed on her like a wool coat. Even in his absence Johnny was having an

effect. A seven-year-old, haunted by nightmares of her brother's death. How had they gotten here?

Desiree came in, sleepy-eyed and yawning, thankful for coffee. Baby slid off Beth's lap when her older sister said it was time to get ready for school. At the kitchen door she stopped and ran back. She reached her hands up to Beth's face.

"It's gonna be okay, Mama," she said, a defiant child's smile on her lips.

Beth kissed her and sent her to get dressed. While Desiree woke and fed the other kids, she got ready for work.

She'd had so many jobs over the years she couldn't remember them all. She'd driven a bus for the city and later for the local school district, cleaned offices and delivered packages for DHL, held countless temping jobs, and for years had run a small unlicensed day care. But nothing had ever really allowed her to give up the government aid – chalky cheese and food stamps. Eventually she had to start hiding the food stamps. Johnny would steal them and sell them for twenty cents on the dollar to go buy drugs.

Today was the pet store, where she watched the register and cleaned cages, over on the East side near the community college. Outside, the remains of a fallen Detroit greeted her at every halting stop of the bus. Plots of land large enough for subsistence farmers held sprawling and abandoned houses captive behind rusted fences, unchecked weeds. The decay blurred together, and Beth dreamt about days when she could work for the first time as a professional, when she'd no longer have to clean up reptile shit to make ends meet.

Beth opened the store and got to work. Seven hours later she asked her boss to leave early. With a reproachful nod he agreed, and she went to type her paper. When it

came time to hand it in, her walk to the front was slow. She avoided Professor Morehouse's eye when she laid her paper on the pile with the others.

At the door to the apartment Beth stopped. The angry voices of her two oldest daughters clashed and tumbled out into the hallway. Should she just turn and go to the bar around the corner? Let them finish what they'd started? They were arguing about Johnny, same as always. As she walked into the kitchen the girls quieted into an uneasy truce. Dawn's olive skin beamed crimson, Desiree's seemed pallid. So much like twins when they were younger, the two couldn't have been more different now.

"Hi Mama," Dawn said first, her eyes still on Desiree.

"Well, it certainly is good to come home to my loving daughters."

"You're not going to believe this," Desiree said. "But my *sister* just said she wanted to kill Johnny. And not in a joking way either."

"Because of Thanksgiving?" Beth asked. Dawn vented often, and no one believed for a second that she meant it. But something in Dawn's face hit Beth like a blow. She sank into the chair between them and touched the bruise. "Dawn wasn't even here, and I told you all to just forget it," she said quietly. "Johnny didn't really mean it. It was an accident."

Dawn snorted. "An accident. Right."

"It's got nothing to do with Thanksgiving," Desiree said. "Tell her, Dawn."

"He broke into my fucking house yesterday! While the kids were home. Scared the shit out of both of them. When I came home they were hiding in a closet."

Beth sighed. Johnny was back already. Somehow she wasn't surprised, but it made her want to just close her eyes all the same.

"But why would they hide in the closet?" Desiree asked. "They know Johnny."

"Desiree, get a clue. They didn't know it was him – none of us know him anymore. And that's beside the goddamn point."

Her eldest paused, studying her hands before talking again. "I understand. Lord knows I do. But Johnny isn't right. Something's wrong in his head. He needs help."

Beth listened half-heartedly as her daughters tore into one another. Part of her left her body and rose up in the kitchen, looking down at the three of them separated by impossible distances in the tight room. The last time she'd ever held her son in her arms, he was fifteen and had crashed her car. At the hospital, Johnny swathed in bandages and sedated, she was able to cradle him in her arms. The doctors said he had a chemical imbalance, which was why he never seemed to sleep, always roaming the apartment at night like a spirit. They gave him medicine but he almost never took it, saying that the pills made him feel dead, and bloated, like a corpse fished from the river. After that he started to find his own medicines.

"Mama!"

"What are we going to do?" Desiree asked.

"What *can* we do," Dawn said. "We've tried everything. He's been to jail three times, rehab. He's crashed five damn cars. Seriously, five? Fucking unbelievable. He won't take his medicine, quit the drugs, or go see his counselor. He's made Mama broke trying to help him, and for what? She hasn't had a car in years. She's gotta take the damn bus everywhere."

“Well, you certainly could’ve helped with that,” Desiree said. “You could’ve tried to do something.”

“I did try, just as hard as you. But I’ve got my own family, my own problems. I’m done trying.”

“He’s still your brother.”

“No,” Dawn whispered, “he’s not. I wish he’d just die already.”

“Are you out of your goddamn mind?”

Dawn’s head dropped. Beth’s heavy body shuddered. “Desiree, let your sister have her own opinion.” She put her hands on the table. “She’s got a right to that.”

No one spoke. Even the kids, who were probably hiding right around the corner, didn’t make a sound.

Dawn was the first to speak again, her voice echoing in the kitchen. “I just don’t understand. Why does he keep doing this to his own family? Why couldn’t he just do it to strangers?”

The next morning Beth’s heart pounded irregularly in the silence. She’d been having the same nightmare for years. She was lying on the beach, naked. Behind clouds the sun inched from east to west. A wave of cool water breaks over her toes and recedes. She starts to sink. Far along the beach a lone figure walks. Each wave breaks higher – kneecaps, then thighs, hips, stomach. The figure draws closer. A weight presses on her lungs as the water, now frigid, crashes down and submerges her – the rush of water in her ears and nose, faint taste of earth and iron at the back of her throat. Lake water. The wave recoils and rises again, towering at its highest point, then barrels down so quickly she has

only a moment to scream before water fills her mouth. Then back in bed, awake, clutching at her chest.

She'd started having the dream around the time Johnny disappeared, two days after his twenty-first birthday. He still lived with them then, and when she came to the kitchen the morning of his birthday ready – like a fool – to bake his favorite German chocolate cake, he was asleep at the table. His face looked pummeled. Chances were good that under his jacket the shirt was blood-stained. She went to stroke his hair but stopped; something seized up in her chest and made her gasp. Later, he opened the envelope she gave him for his birthday to find a gift certificate to DJ's Electronics. He'd seen all four of his older sisters get the money on their birthdays. She braced herself for fury that never came. The next night he vanished.

As far as she could tell he took nothing with him, and for the first few days she just figured he'd gone to a friend's place. Within a week she was hovering by the phone, waiting as the police searched disinterestedly, endlessly twisting around her finger the old silver ring from her mother or cleaning the house over and over like a maniac until one of her daughters flipped. Mama, the place is freaking clean, she'd said, let it go! A month later the phone rang. One of the girls had poked her head into the kitchen and then picked it up, staring pensively at her. "Mama, why didn't you pick up the phone?" Beth stared out the window until her daughter stopped asking. The next day Johnny was asleep on the porch, half frozen. He never spent another night in the townhouse.

Now he hadn't even left town after what happened on Thanksgiving. He throws a bowl of gravy and hits his own mother, then breaks into his sister's house while his own

niece and nephew hide in the closet. It was almost too much. This, more than anything, made her want to stay in bed – all day.

Throwing back the covers, she creaked out of bed, brewed coffee and sat in the kitchen staring at the calendar. Desiree came in, filled her cup and sat across from her.

“Jesus, Mama.”

Beth studied her oldest daughter.

“You look like you didn’t sleep a minute.”

“I slept.”

“Why don’t you go back to bed? You’re off today, right? I’ll get the kids ready before I go to work. You rest.”

“Desiree, I’m fine.”

“Mama, please.”

“Just get those kids up. It’s time they got ready for school. I’ll fix the lunches.”

Desiree hesitated, but her reluctance meant little to Beth. After breakfast, Desiree left with the kids. She was alone in the apartment. The walls seemed to close in, her heart forcefully resuming its irregular beat.

A knock at the door. It was Johnny, like clockwork. She tried to rise from the table, but her leaden limbs wouldn’t allow it. Johnny could let himself in. He always had.

“Hi, Mama,” he said from the doorway behind her.

Beth didn’t answer and he came around the table and sat next to her. It took a long time to get up the courage to look. Johnny was motionless. Even his hands had grown dull. They rested on the table, large skeletons of bone and sinew. He’d never really grown into them, but now they seemed lifeless, skin draped loosely over the knuckles,



pockmarked with scars and scabs. Fingernails chipped and split and grimy. Veins that had seemed on the verge of bursting when he was younger were all but collapsed. Beth followed the dead tracks up his arms. Did he even have a jacket to protect him against the brutality of another Detroit winter?

She looked him in the face. He stared back from eyes hooded behind drooping lids.

“Mama, I need the money.”

She wanted desperately to believe this was not the voice of her child, her only son, a flat monotone run aground by traces of malice and desperation.

“Mama,” Johnny said again. His hands moved sluggishly over the table. “I need the money. It’s mine, you saved it for me. Please.”

There wasn’t an ounce of shame in his face. How could she have not at least taught him that? “Jonathan.”

“What?”

She fought to control her voice, but it was no use. “How can you do this?”

He looked down at his hands.

“Look at me. I’m your mother. Look at me dammit! How could you? After all that we’ve been through.” She was screaming now. “You’re destroying us. You hear me? No, of course you don’t.”

Her son raised his head and their eyes met. Beth gasped and took a step back, her hand over her mouth. It wasn’t her son. His body resembled her son’s, so did his hands, the crooked slant of his mouth. But it wasn’t him. His eyes, oh God those eyes, were empty, soulless. He didn’t even recognize her. Nor she him.

She turned and went back to her bedroom. Johnny's "where're you going" trailed her down the hall. "Mama, I need that damn money," he yelled. At the lamp she unscrewed the bulb socket and lampshade. In the recessed cavity the money had stayed hidden so well it was about the only thing Johnny hadn't been able to steal. More than five hundred dollars in fives, tens, and twenties rested in her palm. The money didn't seem like much balanced against the years.

In the kitchen she held the money out to him. For a moment the haze covering his eyes cleared and she could see surprise. "Take it, Johnny. It's yours."

He took the money gently. Once it was in his grasp he jumped up and wrapped his arms around her. "Thanks, Mama, thanks. Thanks, thanks, thanks. I won't do nothing bad with it, I promise," he said fiercely, his mouth next to her ear. He believed it, too.

"Mama, I gotta go meet some people. Thanks for this."

"You're welcome, Johnny."

"Mama," Johnny said. "I'm really sorry about hitting you. I don't know why that happened. I didn't mean it." He put his hand to her cheek.

She thought she saw genuine sorrow in his eyes. For a moment she feared she'd given him the money too soon.

"I gotta go. I'll be back soon, okay?"

Beth nodded faintly, her chin coming to rest on her chest. "Johnny," she said quietly. He stopped. She walked to him and took him in her arms, rested his head against her chest and held him. Her lips found the top of his head as she stroked his hair. She held on as long as she could against the nervous energy swelling in him. With a final squeeze she let go.

Johnny walked to the door and stopped. “Bye, Mama.”

“Bye, Johnny.”

Then he was gone.

Monday two weeks later Beth sat in class, staring off into nothingness as Professor Morehouse droned on with his final lecture. Afterwards, his teaching assistant handed back the papers. Beth had forgotten. Hers felt heavy in her hand. Flipping to the last page she read Morehouse’s comments, scrawled in ink the bright red of oxygenated blood. He praised her work, and this praise was reflected in her grade, the highest, he said, of anyone in the class. It was clear, he said, that she understood the concepts of Darwinism as it related to evolution. Despite the praise, Beth couldn’t muster even the slightest sense of accomplishment. On her way out she stopped at the garbage can near the door. She held the paper in her trembling hand for a moment, then changed her mind and put in into her bag.

At home Desiree sat in the kitchen. “Hi, Mama. How was class?”

“Okay.” Beth eased herself into the chair at her daughter’s side.

“I guess Johnny forgot his birthday,” Desiree said quietly. “We won’t see him for a while, will we?”

“Probably not, child.” They hadn’t heard anything from him, and she hadn’t really expected to. Desiree sighed, and Beth reached out, put a hand over hers and squeezed.

“Mama, look,” Desiree said, nicking her chin at the clock. “Damn thing just stopped.”

Beth turned and gazed at the old clock, purchased at one of those dollar stores years ago.

“Batteries must’ve died,” Desiree said. “I’ll pick up some new ones tomorrow.”

Beth stood and pulled her chair over to the wall. Stepping up she gently took the clock off the wall. Dust and stickiness from years of kitchen grease had accumulated everywhere but the back. The dust covered her hands as Beth turned the clock over and smoothed her fingers across its face. She stared at the timepiece.

“Mama,” Desiree said. “What are you doing?”

“Forget it, child,” Beth said. “When I’m ready we’ll buy a new one. When I’m ready.” She walked over to the garbage and dropped the clock in. She ran her hands, grey and covered with dust, under water in the sink. The grime swirled round and round and down the drain. Bits of wet dust clung here and there to the chipped white porcelain. Not everything could be washed away.

## OLD LION'S SYNDROME

On the back porch I settled into one of the pine chairs with my whiskey. The sun had just disappeared. Ambient light cast shadows on the forest floor. Winter was a few months off, but September days had already become noticeably shorter, and evenings pushed a chill wind through the trees. I always looked forward to winter, the heavy, insulating snow, warm fires, and ice fishing – the low whine of the an drill boring through layer after layer of water frozen solid as concrete.

Spawning season was underway and I was busy most weekends guiding tours. Brook and brown trout had started their fall runs a few weeks ago, and non-native salmon species – Coho, Chinook, and Pink – would start soon. In fertile stream and riverbeds, females congregate to lay eggs and males poke around depositing semen. Sediment rises from the bottom as fish frenzied by primeval impulses churn the water to a murky brown soup. People usually caught enough to be pleased with the money they'd spent, but even if they hadn't caught anything the thrilling energy of the fish seemed to rise from the rivers like morning fog and cover everyone with a sense of contentment. During a trip a couple weeks before, I was kneeling on the riverbank with a teenager and showing him how to gut a fish – run a sharp knife lengthwise along its underside from tale to tip; don't cut too deep. He marveled at how easy it all was when you held the knife properly and the blade was sharp. I couldn't put my finger on it then, but all of a sudden something had felt wrong about it all. Sitting on the porch in near-darkness, it struck me. How unjust it was to coerce a hook into their mouths and yank them from the river as they engaged in creation.

Off in the woods around the cabin the air popped and crackled. Something heavy – a deer probably – was stepping on the brittle leaves that littered the forest floor. Birches leaned like ghosts in the fading light. Silence again, thicker now after the noise. Against the quiet pushed memories of this morning, a span of time less than five minutes long. Out on the lake I'd saved a little boy's life. Not so strangely, I felt terrified and blessedly alive, like when you've just missed crashing on the highway and that charge pulses through your fingers and toes and makes them itch like hell. Every cell in your body swells with the desire to live for just a few seconds more.

Coming home after that had been torture. The cabin didn't seem like mine, but my ex-wife's. I moved from one room to the next, my hands wondering over the walls, the knotted mantle, the worn brass doorknobs, until I was out in the woods walking 'til dusk. Technically, she was still my wife. We never bothered finalizing the divorce papers, even though, or maybe because, I hadn't seen her in four years. I could almost understand her needing to leave. More than anything she wanted children. When we couldn't have them it almost killed her. But wherever she went she wouldn't be able to have kids, which makes me think she left me more than anything else. Every day I half-expected her to prance through the door, light and free and stripped of the years so that she was the woman I knew before.

The last of the whiskey slid down my throat. I didn't want to sit there any longer and didn't want to be in the house. I went inside just long enough to use the bathroom, then I headed into town.

On the way I passed J.R.'s, the bar I go to most nights. Trees rose up on either side of the road until I got closer to town and I passed the coal power plant, the football

stadium, and the medical services building where students hard up for cash sold their plasma. In summer it was almost like the university didn't exist and Marquette went back to being just a town. By the end of August, though, students swelled the dorms and apartments and buildings like streams flooded with spring snow runoff.

The students weren't like the ones I remembered from the two years I spent at Pomona Community College almost twenty-five years ago. Sure, they were younger and of a different generation, but there was something else too. You could see it in the four-wheel vehicles propped on sport suspensions and oversized tires, caked in dirt they'd picked up mudding in shallow riverbeds or offroading in the backcountry; you could see it in the mass exodus the first weekend of deer season, as droves of young men in flannel shirts and wool caps left town for camp, their lips bulged with chewing tobacco; you could see it in the women who preferred hiking boots to high-heels, their waist-length hair plaited in thick braids.

I turned my truck down a street that led towards the lake. The bar was at the other edge of town and this was sort of out of the way, but I didn't care. I slowed down along the curve that ran by Lower Harbor Park. From May to September, people gathered here for picnics and Frisbee or touch football. A pavilion stood in the middle, and to the right, closer to the water, a little playground. The whole thing was about ten feet above the water and formed the third side of the harbor. Small sailboats and motor boats bobbed along the water's edge adjacent to the street, and on the other side loomed the giant, rusted oar dock.

The park was empty except for a lone couple walking the perimeter. Earlier it had been alive with people. I'd been sitting on the edge, my legs hanging over the side. The

little blond-haired boy had wandered away from the playground and was leaning over the drop-off, mesmerized by the sun glittering on the water. Who knows where his parents were.

The lake was choppy, waves reaching two, sometimes three feet up the walls. A strong gust of wind below over the grounds and pitched him over the side. I'm sure he screamed, but the wind carried it off. I was running even before he fell, adrenaline overcoming the knock of bone-on-bone in my knees. The place he went over was a good thirty yards off. I screamed at the people, but they just stared like slack-jawed statues at a middle-aged man running faster than he should. Nobody'd seen him fall. He was bobbing face down in the water just a foot or so from the wall, rising and falling with the waves. I dove in with my clothes on, scooped him up, made it to a ladder a few feet away. At the top, bystanders held out their arms, but I kept him clutched against my chest. I kneeled and cradled him in my arms. His eyes finally opened. Blood ran down his forehead from where he'd scraped against the wall, but he wasn't crying. His green eyes were wide and empty, everything chased away by shock. Then he blinked.

I pressed him to my chest and the sounds around me started to return. The mother came up, wailing. She clutched at the child but it took a moment for my muscles to work. "Give me my baby, please, let him go," she said. So I did.

There in the car, the lake black and the wind blowing the earthen scent of fresh water through the window, I had to bite my lip against the sensation of having him in my arms. It was as though my muscles had retained a precise imprint of his weight and shape. They tensed of their own accord and curled into a cradle. I didn't know how or



why they'd made that pose, but knew that if he were in my arms again he'd be safe, and I'd be whole.

The Dry Dock Tavern was full but not crowded and I found myself a stool at the bar. I sipped Crown Royal and watched people. I knew some and recognized a few others. Mostly students filled the tables while locals sat at the bar. The wooden tables, chairs and bar made the place like a cabin. Bob Seger tunes streamed from a jukebox against the wall. Beside me two people left and the chairs sat open for a while. Eventually, two girls I'd seen before slid onto the seats.

It was always just the two of them. They'd usually sit at a corner table talking, their heads close together as they drank one of the dark microbrews the bar had on tap. After a few beers the taller one's boisterous laughter would ring above the din. They'd hug one another. They'd touch frequently – grazing a forearm here, moving a lock of hair there. I thought they might be lesbians.

I sipped my third whiskey and listened to their conversation. They were graduate students at the university, in English I was pretty sure. The one sitting farther from me, with shoulder-length curly black hair and a small jagged scar on her chin, had just broken up with her boyfriend, and the two of them were raking him over the coals. They were going camping for a long weekend coming up. The one closer to me had long brown hair that hung like a horse's tail straight down past her butt, switching to and fro as she flicked her head. A familiar scent wafted from her. It wasn't patchouli – we had enough hippies in town for me to know the smell a little more intimately than I might have cared to – more like fresh herbs and flowers crushed together in your hand.

I motioned for a refill and rolled another cigarette. Her long hair brushed against my arm as she swiveled in her chair. “Do you think I could have a cigarette?” she asked. I pushed the bag of tobacco towards her. “I don’t know how to roll them,” she said.

“No problem.” I rolled her one. Her friend didn’t smoke.

“This is Justine,” she said, “and I’m Callie.” She held out her hand.

“Malcolm. ‘Callie’ short for something?”

“Calliope,” she said.

“Like the muse?”

She paused and cocked her head at me. “Yes, like the muse,” she said.

“Homer’s one of my favorites,” I said, shrugging.

“Really?”

I nodded. “It gets dark early in winter.”

She pursed her lips. “Interesting.”

“Why’d your parents name you that?”

“No idea. My mother is nuts, basically. I think she might have heard voices while she was pregnant with me.” She blushed and ducked her head. I had the bartender get them another round. “Can you take your hat off,” she asked.

“Huh?”

“If I’m going to accept a drink from you and we’re going to talk, I need to see your face.”

“Can’t you see my face now?”

“No, there’s a shadow over it. C’mon, just for a second.” She reached for the lighter on the bar and relit her cigarette for the fifth or sixth time. She seemed to forget about it as she talked and gesticulated.

I removed my worn Tigers’ cap, ran a hand over my head. Her eyes settled on mine. “Hmm,” she murmured. I wondered what the hell that meant. “Interesting,” she said.

I started laughing. “What?” she said. She repeated the question, a falsetto ring in her voice.

“Never heard anyone describe my face as ‘interesting,’ is all,” I said. “When people use that word it always seems to describe something they don’t like but won’t say so.”

“Well I don’t,” she said. “I mean it denotatively, for things that interest me. Go it?”

“Go it,” I said.

She stood and went to the bathroom, clogs scraping against the wooden floorboards. A long skirt, worn over a pair of corduroys, swished at her ankles.

I turned to Justine. “Should I feel offended, or feel like I just offended her?”

Justine grinned and shook her head knowingly. “That’s Callie,” she said, as though that explained it.

Callie came back and got a cribbage board and some cards from the bartender. We played cribbage and drank and talked until close. I hadn’t played in years and got beat pretty bad the first couple games. It started to come back to me though, and I almost won the fourth game. Justine won the other three and Callie the last, and then we

stumbled out the door. In the morning I woke up bleary-eyed and on the couch. Out the window I could see my truck parked crookedly in the front yard between two oaks that towered over the cabin.

On Friday I took a group of hobby anglers out for a long weekend. We set up camp in the Ottawa National Forest and hiked upstream along the middle branch of the Ontonagon River. The name of the river comes from the Chippewa Indians and means 'lost bowl.' Legend has it that a young Indian girl was washing dishes in the river when the current swept a bowl out of her hands and down river. When I told the group the story everyone fell silent. Randy, a large father of two strapping boys, asked "We're not gonna get swept away, are we?"

"Uh-uh," I said. "The current's pretty tame this time of year. Nothing to worry about."

We were set to go back Monday, and that morning I work up early and ate breakfast by myself. The forest was quiet, a sanctuary filled with old-growth white and aspen pine and maple and hemlock that had somehow escaped the logging boom of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. As I walked to a small tributary to wash my dishes, only my footsteps and the occasional marauding chipmunk disrupted the silence.

I got footing on a few slippery stones and reached into the cool water. While I rubbed the food from my utensils I thought of the young Chippewa girl, her dark braids stretching to the water, their wet tips drawn to a point like the bristles of a paint brush. How old was she? Was she surprised when the rippling current snatched the bowl from her unprepared hands? I wondered if she'd grasped at it as it was carried off, or if she just

let it go. Was she sad? Did her parents punish her? Did she eventually have children of her own? I hoped she had, and when they suffered a mistake not really of their making she did not scold, but rather drew them near and told them it was okay. Because she had learned something in losing the bowl.

The next few nights back in town I ended up heading to the bar. I guess I was hoping to see Justine and Callie. Both times I drove slowly past the harbor, and on Wednesday I even parked and walked around the pier in the fog that had descended with nightfall. I stayed until my eyes hurt from straining to see the hazy shapes spread across the pavilion.

At the bar, I'd already had a few whiskeys when the front door slammed open. The two of them stood there a moment before staggering in, arms draped over shoulders as though propping one another up. They were drunk and grinning. They ended up on either side of me, their warm bodies pressing up against mine as they leaned over the bar.

“Hey, Malcolm,” Callie said. “Where ya’ been?”

“Right here,” I said.

“Waiting for us?” Justine asked.

My face warmed, but it shouldn't have. They were already on to something else and then something else: what to order, how beautiful it was outside, what they'd done all day. They beamed excitement, eyes and hands flickering with an energy that even overcame all the alcohol they'd clearly had. Their breath and voices came in rushed gasps. They'd been out in the sun most of the day, and their pale cheeks burned red.

“What’s got a hold of you two?” I asked. They looked at me as though amazed I didn’t know. “I mean, something’s gotta have you two so...giddy.”

“Nothing,” they said at the same time.

“Nothing?”

They shook their heads and broke out laughing. Three whiskies arrived and they handed me one. We toasted to nothing and swallowed the warm Jameson.

By last call I couldn’t recount how many shots of the Irish we’d had, or the beers to chase them with. Somehow, the two of them were still unfazed. I was losing my legs.

“We should go swimming,” Callie announced.

“Definitely,” Justine said.

Callie turned to me. “Malcolm, you coming?”

“Where we swimming?”

“The lake, silly, where else?”

It had been unseasonably warm all week, and Thursday was the hottest day yet, with the temperature reaching close to ninety – a dry heat that made you smack your lips for a cold beer. But that meant nothing. Lake Superior had her own temperament. I knew as well as anyone she was still very, very cold.

“Come on, let’s go,” Callie said, taking my hand and pulling me to my feet.

We went to Lower Harbor. The fog had lifted. Justine and Callie skipped along ahead of me, holding hands, hair bouncing at their backs. I stopped at the place where I’d held the little boy. A pint of whiskey from my truck in hand, I looked over the edge at the water below and brought the bottle to my lips. It came rushing up on me: him falling, me jumping, my head breaking the water and going under for a moment, the sharp prick of

cold water on my skin. I didn't have much time to dwell on it. The girls were singing my name from beyond the circles of light that fell from the lamps.

By the time I caught up they were already half out of their clothes. When Callie went to unclasp her bra, I turned away. Justine picked her way along the boulders of ancient volcanic rock, some of the oldest on earth, her creamy body glowing in bas relief against the obsidian surface. Callie followed, and gliding over the rocks then were two ghosts with smooth round buttocks.

I sat on a picnic table and watched them slide into the water. They both gasped and disappeared from view. Fear crept up on me when I heard nothing but the gentle slap of waves against rock, but they soon started splashing and shrieking. Slowly I removed my boots, pants and shirt. In my underwear I walked to the rocks.

A full moon beamed down, and here, beyond the lights that lined the harbor, you could see its white streak on the placid waters of the inlet. Out to the break wall the bay only rippled, and beyond that the vacuous waters of Superior rolled gently with the warm wind blowing inland. I took a slug of whiskey from the pint, twisted the cap on and tossed it on the grass. The liquor didn't help one bit. Jumping in was a shock, everything from head to toe seemed to tighten. Between my legs it felt like an ice pack was being pressed to my balls. After twenty some years living near the lake and swimming in her waters, she still had the capacity to surprise. I lasted all of two minutes.

I was sitting on the picnic table when the two of them scrambled back up the rocks. They'd lasted about five. Callie climbed up first, her long limbs and sharp hips fluid. The muscles in my hands clenched and twitched. I didn't feel cold anymore. My soggy undershorts started to swell. She stopped a few feet before me, goosebumps on her

skin, the cold invigorating her nipples. A curly brown triangle beckoned from the middle of her otherwise pale body. She collected her long hair, pulled it over her shoulder and began ringing it out at my feet as though unaware of my presence.

You're beautiful, I thought. She looked up at that moment and saw me. For a second, I feared I'd said it aloud. Apprehension chased away the tranquility of a moment before. She looked bashfully to the ground. This temporary vulnerability made something ache inside me.

Justine came and sat on the bench near me, a pleased sigh escaping her lips. "That was incredible. I don't even feel drunk anymore."

Callie stepped over to Justine, pushed hair from her face, leaned down and kissed her on the mouth. Then they looked at me.

"We're not lesbians," Callie said.

"I didn't say anything."

"Who wouldn't want to kiss this face," Callie said, her hand cupping Justine's cheek.

Looking at hers, I thought the same.

I woke up sweating, a sliver of light warming my face right down the middle. I was in my truck, the empty pint-bottle on the passenger seat. I was again parked between the two trees on the front lawn, and would have laughed at my new parking spot, but my head throbbed horribly. The cab was directly between the trees so I had to move forward a few feet to get out. Pain shot through my hip as I stepped down. Outside I found why



I'd slept in the truck: the door was dented from repeated knocks against the tree. Jesus Christ, what the hell did I think I was doing?

I went inside, swallowed four extra strength aspirins and made the biggest, greasiest breakfast possible – six eggs, toast, almost a pound of bacon. I ate it and went to the hammock out back.

That night I was at the Dry Dock again. When I'd woken up in the hammock, the house seemed haunted by twilight shadows. My wife's voice poured from the walls. I could see her writhing in a fit on the floor before the fireplace. We'd just come from the gynecologist, who'd told her she would never be able to have children. This was after the third miscarriage, the worst one, six months into the pregnancy. She'd set the crib up in the corner of the living room months before, after she'd made it past the first trimester, a success in its own right given that the other two miscarriages had come early. At the time, and ever since, I've tried to understand what it must feel like to know your body rejects the one thing you want most. How could she not have felt somehow responsible for that?

When she saw the crib she snapped and went to yanking at the bars. This was after only a couple days in the hospital. I was shocked by the feral scream that came from her mouth, at how fiercely she went at the crib. I had to pin her to the ground to keep her from really hurting herself. Maybe I should have just let her go the distance, but we stayed like that – me resting as much of my weight on her as I dared – until she stopped thrashing about and was just whimpering like a wounded animal. I forced a couple tranquilizers past her lips. She swallowed them and went to sleep.

She was never the same after that. We were never the same. We managed to hold on for a while longer, each day like the last, two shells gliding around one another in an

empty, childless house. That night as she fitfully slept under Valium's guiding hand, I dismantled the crib and took it into the woods, where I buried it all in a hole. Almost two years to the day she disappeared. I missed her, but in a way she'd been more or less gone since the day she broke down.

So when I came inside and heard the whimpering, felt her looking down on me from the paintings she'd done but I'd never removed, I had to leave. Where else would I go but the bar? I ordered a double Crown and a draft lager and headed to a small table at the back. I smoked one cigarette after another and vaguely watched the people around me come and go, talk and touch. Justine and Callie weren't there, and I hadn't really expected they would be. They must have been in rough shape this morning too.

A while later Callie came in, alone. She stopped at the bar and then walked directly over. Her expressionless face and Justine's absence worried me. What had I done last night? She sunk heavily into the chair.

Silence built between us. "Where's Justine?" I asked.

"Working."

More silence.

"Malcolm," she said, and then nothing.

"What?"

"I think I'm an alcoholic."

I laughed. "Stop it."

"I'm serious," she said. The rise in her voice lightened my spirit. She was okay.

"Tell me a story," she said.

"I'm no good at stories."

“I’m sure you are. You read a lot.”

“What kind of story?”

“Any kind. Whatever you want. You don’t have to if you don’t want. People sometimes get mad when I ask them, but I like to hear stories. It’s okay, never mind.”

“So there was this guy, a fisherman,” I started.

“What was his name?”

“Benedict,” I said.

“Okay.” She leaned back into her chair and settled in.

“Benedict had always fed his family with fish. One day, he brought some home and his wife and three children got sick. Benedict felt a little nauseous also, but nothing like what was happening to his family. Things got worse. Benedict didn’t know what to do, so he took them all to the hospital. The doctor’s tried everything they could. His wife fell into a coma. The children died.”

Callie sat silently staring at his hands. “Jesus Christ, Malcolm. You sure do know how to pick’em.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know where that just came from. I told you, I’m not good with stories.”

She swirled the last of her beer around in the glass. “It’s not true, is it?” I shook my head. “Malcolm, what happened to you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You have this great big weight hanging from your neck. It’s kind of scary actually.”

“I don’t know,” I said. But I did. I told Callie about my wife – ex-wife – and how a couple years after she left I got a call from her. She’d wandered around for a while and eventually got put into one of those hospitals. She’d gotten out and was doing okay. “I’m sorry,” she’d said. I said I was sorry too. Then she hung up.

Callie was looking at me now, intently, smoke pluming from her mouth. “That’s almost as bad as the other story,” she said.

“I know. I didn’t even recognize her. I mean I recognized her voice, sort of, but it seemed to be coming from far away. I didn’t know who she was.”

“Do you still love her?”

I shrugged. “I don’t think so. I love the memory of her. But that’s not the same.”

She relit her cigarette. “And what happened to Benedict?”

“Benedict? Shit, nothing. There is no Benedict.”

“Come on,” she said. “Finish the story.”

“Well, he...” I started to say, but had to stop and catch my breath. “He didn’t know what to do. He holed up in his cabin and spent most of his time alone in the wild. For the longest time he felt he’d done something wrong, that somehow he could have prevented it from happening.”

“And now?”

“And that’s it. I don’t know about now. Now is still kind of fucked up, I think. Maybe it always will be.”

I rolled us both another cigarette. We’d just finished one and I didn’t even feel like smoking another, but I had to do something with my hands, with my eyes. Callie was

staring at me with a strange look on her face, a look I couldn't read but was scared of. Imagine that, a grown man frightened of a girl almost half his age.

“You've never told anyone that story, have you?” she asked. I shook my head. She rested a hand on my forearm. “Malcolm, who are you?”

“A fisherman,” I said.

She smiled faintly. “I'll say. Should we have another drink?”

I shook my head. “I think we should go home.”

She twirled a lock of hair around her finger. “Okay.” We got up and went to my truck and back to the cabin.

In the dark I guided her to the bedroom with a hand at the small of her back. Just past the threshold she stopped and backed up into me. I felt her behind pressing against my groin and a rush uncoiled inside me. When she leaned her head back on my chest and murmured – so close the smell of her hair filled my nostrils – the coil split me open. We stayed in that position as our clothes dropped to the floor and I guided us to the bed. She tipped forward and her hair whipped around as she landed on her back. I fell on top of her and in a moment, a few short thrusts, an instant it seemed, it was finished.

In that time it felt as though she was clawing at me, and as I lay on the bed, my chest heaving, I reached to my face and felt something moist and sticky. My face burned where salty sweat from my fingertips mingled with exposed flesh. She stirred beside me and then got up, pulling the sheet off the bed with her. Slowly, the thumping in my ears resided.

Her shadow moved through the moonlight and then disappeared again. A low moan escaped her lips. With a shaky hand I stretched to flick the bedside lamp on.

She stood in the corner, leaning against the wall, her head down. I waited, unsure what, if anything, I should say. "I'm bleeding."

"I'm sorry for scratching you," she said. "I just wanted you to get a condom."

A condom? I hadn't heard anything. I didn't even have any condoms. Sound and thoughts and feelings had all fallen away under a balm of numbness. For those few moments there had been nothing, not even her under me, just a blank spot somewhere in the very recent past. I slid to the edge of the bed and put my feet on the floor. Flecks of blood colored my hands. Between my legs my penis had more than flecks, it was covered in dark, almost purple menstrual blood. I stared at it, and a sinking feeling rose from my stomach to my chest, growing like a bubble. I had wanted her, but more than that I'd wanted her to get pregnant, to carry inside her something from me and bring it into this world.

"My God," I said. I put my head in my hands. "I'm so sorry. I don't know why I did that."

"Old lion's syndrome," she said quietly.

I raised my head. Her eyes were studying the far ceiling, or maybe something beyond it. Wrapped in the sheet and her hair flung over her shoulder, she looked like an ancient Roman.

"What?"

"Old lion's syndrome," she said again. "That's what I call it anyway. I should have known. I did know. It's probably why I came back here with you. Well that, and I like you." Her hands were clasped in front of her and her head bowed. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm attracted to older men, sometimes married men, often men

carrying pain and hurt, but mostly older men who want to get me pregnant. I wish I knew why.”

“How do you know they want to get you pregnant?”

“Some have asked before they tried – real winners those. Others haven’t.” She looked at me. “Usually I can just feel it. There’s something about them. And even when I can’t the pattern is so consistent it’s pretty much a given at this point.”

“So...you’ve been through this before?”

“Oh brother.” She stared straight ahead. I thought she might be rolling her eyes. “You know, once or twice,” she said. Then I saw her shaking.

“Could you come back to bed?”

“You promise not to molest me again?”

I searched the floor and my face warmed. Her feet appeared in my frame of vision.

“I was just kidding,” she said. Her hand came to rest gently on my head. “You didn’t molest me.”

I exhaled and something more than air seemed to leave my body. Her hand on my head felt like forgiveness, and I figured this must be what it’s like to be in church, and have the priest put his hand on your shoulder and tell you everything is alright. I don’t know church, or God, but I recognized this feeling from somewhere. It took a few moments of searching and then I found it. That instant when you’ve pulled the barbed hook from the mouth of a fish and with your own two hands bring him back to the water, and you feel the life flow back into him as he wriggles in your fingers, and his slippery skin slides past yours and in a flash he’s gone, back down into the river’s depths. I slid

off the bed and onto my knees at her feet. I wrapped my arms around this young woman's thighs and pressed my head to her stomach and listened. Her name was Callie. I thought her a goddess.



## TOURIST ATTRACTION

Walking along the lower Hudson, Harold and his wife approached Manhattan's southernmost point. He ambled like an old John Wayne in one of those Hollywood westerns, a camera bag jostling on his shoulder. Next to his, Maggie's easy stride threatened to outpace him.

"Harold, you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "The old legs don't move like they used to is all."

Near the end of the pedestrian walk they stopped just past two men on a bench, the deep hue of their skin almost purple. Harold turned quickly and held his arms out before him. "Now this," he said, "is why we came to New York." In the harbor the Statue of Liberty rose straight from the water, reaching skyward.

Maggie shielded her eyes from the sun and studied the horizon.

"Incredible," he said. Beyond the statue's right shoulder, the red sun was about to dip into the skyline. Years ago he'd seen such a sun from his office in Lagos, the headquarters for his employer's African operations. Almost daily the sun had set in bloody splendor, reminding him of a Sanguinello orange's fleshy insides.

Maggie simply nodded. Harold knew she'd prefer tennis at Flushing Meadows, or the moist crush of Chinatown with its stinking fish and people relentlessly hawking goods, or maybe a spa treatment and one of those trendy Asian Fusion restaurants packed to the hilt, then a nightcap at a piano bar in the Theater District.

During their two weeks away from London they'd done it all already. He went along, albeit reluctantly, as they climbed from the bowels of various Manhattan train

stations into streets teeming with people. He went along because he owed Maggie. Hell, he owed a lot of people, Maggie probably more than most. Her happiness meant a great deal to him, but often he felt choked as they went on open-bus city tours and played golf, which he had no business doing and no business enjoying.

“What’s that face?” Maggie asked.

“What face?”

“Harold, please. You know the face, like you just saw God or something.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said.

“Really, it’s just a statue,” she said. “They’re all just giant statues.”

They were more than that. Harold couldn’t give a damn about religion, but there was something holy in the massive structures. The *Christo Redentor* in Rio, the eternally unfinished spires of Gaudi’s *Sagrada Familia*, China’s Great Wall, a gleaming hundred foot Buddha in Thailand.

Behind Maggie the two Africans leaned together, talking in hushed conspiratorial tones. They were probably talking about him, he thought, a white man on some petty vacation. One was dressed like a westerner, tight jeans and a white T-shirt; the other wore a tunic and a box cap with a tassel. The older one with the tunic looked familiar, like so many of the Nigerian politicians he’d dealt with for the company. One day Marcus, his boss, had called Harold into his office. Harold hated the South African, the blooming red face of an alcoholic, fat jowls and glib smirk, but didn’t know why exactly. Got an assignment for you old boy, Marcus had said. He gave Harold an envelope and told him to pass it to the appropriate person, who happened to look like the African on the bench. Back in his own office Harold opened the envelope and counted ten grand in brand-new

one hundred dollar U.S. notes. An inky stench rose from the new bills and made him nauseous. He tried washing the scent off his fingertips but couldn't, and had walked around the office for most of the day with his hands shoved in his trouser pockets.

“Well?” Maggie said. “What about the statues?”

Harold shrugged and handed her the tourist guidebook. “Everything you'll ever want to know is in there.”

She puckered her lips. It was the same look from that morning at breakfast after he'd said he wished the World Trade Center was still there. And then a slight shake of her head, expecting him to say more. He didn't, just went back to his runny eggs Benedict as her eyes searched the top of his head.

“Harold,” Maggie said. “The statue moves.” She had the guidebook in hand, finger pointing to a paragraph somewhere in the middle. “It says, ‘the iron skeleton underneath is not uniformly attached to the copper skin. The statue moves three inches in strong winds, the torch six.’”

“I don't buy it,” he said.

“Harold, it says so right here,” Maggie said, her finger tapping on the page. “You're just being stubborn.”

Maybe he was, but he didn't like the idea of that hulking structure moving. It had stood there for over a century, firm against the elements and a changing world. It had been there before him and it would be there after, and if it could move, even just an inch, what was to stop it from crumbling onto itself and disappearing altogether?

Harold stared at the motionless hemline of Lady Liberty's robe. The common places on their respective travel wish lists always seemed to have at least one man-made

marvel. After the first few trips – Paris, Washington D.C., Italy – eighteen months into their marriage, the second for both of them, Maggie had asked with a wry smile if he was trying to tell her something. Eiffel Tower? Washington Monument? Leaning Tower of Pisa? He'd shaken his head, confused. A year later he had prostate cancer.

The pedestrian walk in both directions was empty. The Africans were still talking, the bracelets on the younger one's wrist tinkling as his arms moved. On his way to deliver the money Harold had seen a woman with bracelets like the young African's. He and his driver had just gone through a checkpoint guarded by men with red-rimmed eyes. AK-47s hung from their shoulders, their uniforms either Nigerian military or some local militia group. It didn't much matter, as his driver had rolled down the window and handed the guard an envelope filled with cash. Hot, thick air poured in, rife with the stench of burning rubber from a distant plantation. The driver said a few words in Yoruba or Pidgin English; the only one Harold understood was 'refinery.' It was a lie. They were nowhere near the refineries.

The car bumped over potholes large enough to snap a wheel axle. To the west ran tropical bush lands that had been cleared for farming and timber, only to be reclaimed by wild grasses through disuse. They passed a woman hacking at the grass with a hoe. Two small children lolled in the shade of a palm sapling a few yards away. The woman straightened up and leaned on the tool. She wiped sweat from her brow, the bracelets sliding down her arm. The other arm had no bracelets. The hand was missing, ending in a nub just below the elbow.

Harold had shuddered, as he did every time the car passed one of the hovels crammed amongst the buildings in the capitol. Energy drained from his body. The place

could do that to you if you let it, and Harold understood why he'd been offered such a lucrative package to come the year before. It was worse there than in the goddamn Middle East.

Maggie stared at the travel book, her face pinched into her 'deductive' scowl. A lock of her auburn hair, the color alive in the sun, curled from her head. At forty-two, sixteen years his junior, Maggie still looked young. Without intending to, she often made him think of his daughters, where they were and what they were doing. He had no clue what his daughters were up to. He wondered if he had married Maggie because she reminded him of them.

Her youthful appearance was remarkable given the difficult years she'd spent with her first husband, her face unlined save for a small scar above her lip. From the stories she told, he figured there were more scars, ones he couldn't see, but Harold felt ill-equipped to help her with them. When she trembled at a man hitting a woman on the telly or an argument between a couple in the street, the best he could offer was to hold her.

Maggie looked up. "What?" she asked.

"Nothing," Harold said. It's hard to tell what prostate cancer, or maybe any cancer, does to a man. He can't even pee right, let alone make love to his wife. He'll stand at the toilet five, ten, fifteen minutes, waiting for something, anything. After surgery, Harold had to sit across the dinner table from her with an incontinence bag and catheter that caught the urine leaking from his bladder. But Maggie had tried to disavow the misery. She'd made jokes about how he wasn't so full of it anymore, and forced him

to laugh so hard the wound between his legs pulsed. When the time came, and the pipes were working again, they had made love.

“You know,” Maggie said. “The copper skin is only three-eighths of an inch thick.”

As if on cue, one of the Africans moaned plaintively, the wail carrying out over the water before dying. The skin on Harold’s scalp tightened, and he turned to see the younger one slump back against the bench.

“Is he okay?” Maggie asked.

Harold turned back to the statue and was kneading his hands. “I don’t know.” He wanted to move farther down the pedestrian walk, away from the Africans, but the sun would have been directly in the camera’s eye, ruining the pictures he planned to take.

Maggie stared until something shook her loose and she turned back to the guidebook. Her finger traced the small print as she read. “‘The green color is a product of oxidation.’ If they were to scratch the surface or put some caustic agent on it, you could see the original copper.” She eyed him square-on, like when she’d come from work and find him in the darkroom he built in the basement a few months after the surgery, pictures of statues he’d developed motionless in his hand. She always asked if he’d been inside all day. Of course not, he would reply, and detail some trip to Hyde Park or the Food Corner that hadn’t happened.

When the oncologist told them in his office that no trace of the tumor remained, she’d grabbed his arm so tight he grimaced. He felt her grip more than anything the doctor said. It made him uneasy that he couldn’t muster any emotion at having survived.

A few weeks later he parted with almost two thousand pounds for a new camera, the first he'd ever owned.

“Why don't we go sit down,” Maggie said. “We can see from there, and you can rest a little.”

Her face was enough to tell him he looked ragged. Red blotches dotted his forearms, his polo shirt sweat-stained at the pits. On the next bench over the younger African had come back to life.

Maggie took his hand. “Come on.” She sat beside him and bent into the travel book. Water lapped at the concrete below. Where the river opened onto the harbor the sun had painted a long orange streak running just beyond the statue. He closed his eyes and watched sun spots dance on his eyelids.

That was how he had told Maggie about the prostate cancer: eyes closed. They had been lying in bed and she'd been reading a book. The thumping in his chest was so loud he couldn't be sure if he'd actually said anything. He expected her to get hysterical. But she said nothing.

Her hand had clenched the book, knuckles red and white under pale skin. She exhaled and her grip eased. I'm sorry, he said, but he didn't know why. It just slid out. She'd put a hand on his cheek, looking at him but not really, her eyes on a place somewhere past him. Her hand was warm and Harold shifted his weight. Maggie came back. I guess I shouldn't have married such an old man, she said, a sad smile on her lips. Her hand slid down to his chest and she moved closer, warm legs against his. No, he said, you probably shouldn't have. Her smile broadened. Seconds later they were laughing uncontrollably, tears streaming from their eyes. Maggie had ended up with the hiccups.

After the hiccups they took their time removing each other's clothes. Maggie slid onto him, her head back, murmuring. As Harold's eyes followed the smooth length of her throat to the translucent pink of her nipples he almost cringed, the whole time fearing, stupidly, that he was somehow going to pass the cancer to her, as if that was how it really worked.

Harold set the camera bag on his lap. Farther down a couple groups clustered around viewing machines. He gently pulled the camera out, its weight solid in his hand. "No, no, no," said one of the Africans, his voice deep and husky and forceful. The Canon in Harold's hand grew heavier.

"Harold, you promised, remember?" Maggie said.

"What's that?"

"You promised."

He paused. "We'll get some with us in them this time. I just want to get a few of the statue before the light goes." Maggie hated the photos. Once, she'd gathered them all up and hid them, like a mother who'd stumbled on her son's dirty magazine collection. When he found them all gone he asked about it. She stood arms across her chest, tight-lipped. The next day the pictures were back, but the two of them didn't speak for over a week. She first started talking again only after he'd promised to take pictures that included more than just the statues.

Harold went about attaching the telescopic lens, adjusting the light intake and shutter speed. Through the sight he could see the statue more clearly. Adjusting the zoom brought the points of her crown into focus. In her hand gleamed the torch, gold leaf paint



reflecting red. The wind carried errant words from the Africans, 'home,' 'long,' 'death,' in heavily accented English. At each word Harold would concentrate harder on the statue.

In the weeks leading up to the surgery, Maggie had amazed him. Something came over her that reeked of determination, or desperation, he couldn't tell which. She would wake before him and make breakfast. He could count on one hand the number of times they'd eaten breakfast together. Maggie usually had early class to teach, and frankly, she wasn't a breakfast person. She made a calendar with all his doctor's appointments, medication schedules, and everything else and put it on the wall, bold as day. He objected. Her response: forget it Harold. I'm not letting you miss a single appointment. Not one.

He had never heard her voice go more than one octave above her speaking pitch – not when they talked about her abusive ex-husband, not during sex, not when she caught a foot full of sea urchin quills in Mexico. Two days before he was to spend the first night in hospital, she found her full range. She caught him in the kitchen, pouring out the bottled water she'd bought and rationed for him to drink every day. His back was to the door, and he didn't hear her footsteps above the glug-glug of water going down the drain. But he heard her scream, so piercing he dropped the bottle and looked at the window above the sink. He thought it had cracked. Forty-eight hours later he was on his back in a Kensington hospital room heavy with the scent of disinfectant.

Across the river Jersey high-rise shadows crept into the water. The sun had sunk halfway into a row of buildings and light shined through the side windows in the statue's crown. Harold wished he could see her face.

Maggie put a hand on his knee. "Can I take a few pictures?"

"Really?" he asked.

She nodded. Her brown, ochre-flecked eyes searched his face.

He gave her the camera. "You know how it works?"

"I can figure it out."

At the rail wind kicked her long summer skirt across her narrow hips. These hips hadn't borne any children. She'd never said anything about wanting kids. They talked about his two kids sometimes, and he would tell her in halting phrases what little he knew. As they sat down to supper a few months before the cancer showed up, Maggie asked why they'd never visited his daughters. Curried rice tumbled from his fork. They don't want me to, he had said.

Maggie held the camera out in front of her, trying to figure out why it hadn't taken a picture. Above her the statue towered, the torch dimmer in the growing dusk. Harold eased back into the bench, figuring he still had about fifteen or twenty minutes to take pictures before the light disappeared.

The camera shuttered five times and Maggie moved to a different position for another shot. A voice rose sharply from the bench where the Africans sat.

"The *bastards* chase me!"

Harold's spine tensed, the breath pushed from his gut.

The young one stood abruptly. "That why I leave," he said. "You know what it like to be chased? By men with machete and pistol? They no take me to prison, they want kill me."

There was no one else around. Maggie had stepped several feet farther south.

“I left ‘cause I had to, and my family, my family pay for it. Wife, children, mother – all gone. The only one survive is brother, I think, but I no hear from him for months. Months!”

The words seemed to strike Harold like a blow, and he tried to focus on the statue. He’d done the same in the hospital, where a poster of the very same statue had hung on the wall of his room. For the long hours between last visits and lights out, he would lie in bed and absorb himself with the still torch and crown, trying to postpone night, when he could no longer see, when he was left alone to his own devices. Under the heavy hand of painkillers his mind wandered, and instead of the Statue of Liberty splashed on the wall he’d see the faces of his twin daughters, around age eight, throwing a Frisbee in the backyard. And Helen, his wife, face pulled into a frown, eyes narrowed as he told her he’d have to go abroad again, Africa this time, for another work assignment. The constant ringing, ringing, ringing of a telephone. She’d tried him at the rented apartment in Lagos but he was never there. Her voice was flat when she told him she’d filed for divorce, told him that he’d fucked it all up by taking the position. Which was a little short of the truth. He’d screwed it up long before that. It didn’t matter that the girls had been almost ready to leave for college, that it was supposed to be temporary, that he would be coming home soon.

His response had been as muted as hers. How could it not be? For the two weeks before she called, all he’d thought about was the corpse. He couldn’t for the life of him get that damn image out of his mind. On the way back into Lagos after another of Marcus’ greasy-palm assignments, the car passed a body lying face up in a ditch. Was that a body, he’d asked his driver. No, no, no, the man replied heartily, no body. Harold

knew bloody-goddamn-well it was a body. The eye sockets were hollowed, mouth agape, exposing two rows of teeth bleached white by the sun. A portion of the skull was also white, missing the parched brown skin covering the rest of the body. Two days later Harold put in for early retirement.

In the mornings, when the pain killers had worn off a bit and he was lucid again, all he had was the haunting reality that his ex-wife and his daughters hadn't called. And they wouldn't. He hadn't seen them in years. Hadn't tried really. And questions. Where had it all gone? Is this what he was to leave behind? That's all he had had on those bright Kensington mornings at a hospital outside London, all he'd had until Maggie would come first thing when visiting hours started.

The older African had his hand on the other's wrist, obscuring most of the brass and copper bracelets. The younger African stood with his back to the river, to the statue. "Maybe better this way," he said. He looked down at his companion, as though waiting for confirmation. His companion nodded, his torso rocking slowly. The young African continued, "Better quick death than slow death. We all dying slow."

"Harold, are you eavesdropping?" Maggie asked. He turned to her. She put a hand to his forehead. "Are you okay?"

"Just tired, I think."

She sat down beside him. "I think we need a drink." Harold agreed.

"Why," the younger African said. He shrugged. "I know not why. Hard to understand. So much land, so much money, so many people starve. They say at home people make politics for money, not help the people. If you have money already you do business. They take the money and buy house, Mercedes, villa, army. And people no

grow own food. So we starve. I ask why, say we should grow own food. Start new. They kill my family. Try kill me. So now I here.” He slid his hands into his pockets. “Maybe not so hard to understand.”

“What’s he saying?” Maggie asked. “Wait, what am I saying? Harold, stop listening to their conversation!”

Harold gazed out at the statue, pretending he hadn’t heard her. Shrouded in dusk, the sun now behind the horizon, her torch had almost disappeared against the purple sky.

“Aren’t you going to take a few pictures?” Maggie set the camera in his lap. “It’s why we came, isn’t it?”

Harold felt the camera’s weight on his thighs, like the feeling he’d carried around in his groin for so many weeks after the surgery.

He shifted in his seat. The older African stretched forward, his mouth moving. Harold strained to hear. The younger African listened intently.

“What must I do?” the younger African said. “I must go back. Go home. I must. I must.” His head bobbed each time the words were repeated. “I must.”

“Harold, stop it! Take some pictures already, it’s almost dark.” Her voice was high and tight, and the Africans looked over. Strangely, he didn’t look away. The two Africans stared for a moment. The younger man was surprised, his mouth startled round. The seated one squinted through two slits, wary, hostile. The Africans looked at one another, then at Harold. They stood and walked away. Harold watched as they receded into the darkness and cut into Battery Park, disappearing altogether.

Maggie had picked up the camera and was holding it out to him, her arm shaking with the effort.

He took the camera and looked up at her. She fidgeted with a button on her blouse, trying to fit it with trembling fingers back into its hole. He thought she was going to cry. A vague pressure banged around inside him. The scar between his legs throbbed. He didn't want her to cry. If she did, he was pretty sure to follow.

"Harold," she said. "You look terrible."

He started to apologize but stopped. A smile cracked Maggie's dry lips and Harold couldn't help but chuckle sadly. "I know," he said. He stood, the worn cartilage of his knees cracking in protest. It felt good to stand, to shake the stiffness from his legs. The wind pulled at Maggie's skirt and auburn hair. To Harold she didn't look angry, but fierce, the lines of her face and straight shot of her legs standing rigid against the wind. She looked older in that moment, as though her age had caught up to her some. Harold felt his chest expand with a deep breath. Consciously, he took another. "Why don't you stand over there," Harold said, pointing to a spot on the railing directly between him and the statue.

"What?" she said.

"I'm going to take a picture."

Her head cocked and she studied him. "Harold, you have something you want to tell me?"

Harold figured he did, but it could wait. "Right there." He pointed again.

She took a step and then stopped, a question on her lips.

"Maggie, the light's just about gone and I didn't bring the flash." He raised the camera and focused. The floodlights had gone on, casting the torch in light somehow brighter than the sun, yet untrue with its artificial yellow tinge. Harold paused. He

thought he saw her swaying in the wind. And then it struck him. His girls, pre-teens, barreling down the driveway to greet him as he stepped from a cab, their pigtails bobbing and thin legs pumping. The solid feeling of pavement beneath his feet and then rough against his skin as he kneeled to embrace them. He wanted that feeling again, of having them in his arms, of being their father, and it burned in his chest so sharply that he almost fell to his knees.

He steeled himself and brought the camera back to his face. He adjusted the optical lens. In the background the torch blurred. Maggie, leaning easily on the rail, came into focus. His finger wavered on the button for a moment, then he pressed.

## SOUTH OF 16<sup>th</sup> STREET

Gabriel sat at the back, rocking with the MTA bus as it sped up and slowed down in the traffic log-jammed along 14<sup>th</sup> Street.

“This fool’s gonna get us killed,” muttered a fat man wedged in two seats over. “He can’t even see where he’s going.”

Gabriel stopped chewing his lip and looked up from the floor, where melted snow ran back and forth in rubber grooves. Flakes flew at the windshield, the wipers whirring in vain to keep the window clear. This is just like her, he thought. So goddamn unpredictable.

The bus was half full, people hunched in thick coats occupying seats as far away from one another as possible. Most heads were angled down; there was nothing to see out the windows. The woman in front of him wore a fur coat, bald patches peppered across the shoulders. Her black hair, salted with grey, peeked out from underneath a felt hat adorned with three peacock feathers.

A peacock feather. It was the first thing he had seen when Sandra opened the door that day, a month after she had left his place for someone else's. The feather arched out from a headband that was part of her costume: a jagged cut of suede wrapped around her waist, another around her chest, wooden beads and bangles everywhere. Her side of the threshold, with its plumage reflecting the little light inside the loft, seemed so much brighter than where he was standing. Iridescent blue and green tendrils on the feather trembled in the hallway draft. Each strand seemed alive.



She always had a costume on, different faces for different days. Around her navel radiated a black sun, a henna tattoo, smiling at him. "Welcome to the Empress' Palace," she had said. She too, was smiling.

Gabriel unzipped his jacket and tugged at the neck of his sweater. Warm air blasting from the vents on the bus had him sweating. The phone in his hand buzzed.

"Hey," he said.

"Are you coming?" Sandra asked.

The bus slowed and Gabriel braced himself. "Yeah, relax. What's the big deal?"

"When?"

He rubbed at the fog on the window next to him and peered out at the street. "I'm at –"

"Avenue A," the driver squawked over the loudspeaker. "Next stop, Avenue B."

"I'm getting off now. It's all this snow. I'll be there in about ten minutes. You're there already?" She was never on time for anything. Been there an hour, she said.

"Don't you think this is a bit much?" he asked.

"I'll see you in ten minutes," Sandra said and hung up.

Her voice had never seemed so cold. As children playing in the dirt patches behind their parents' houses she'd always managed to fall and cut herself. Even then she never lost the mischievous titter that rang with everything she said, as though it was all a secret. That was still true when she arrived at his apartment, breathless and burdened with an outsized backpack. It was a week filled with bruising sex. Again and again they'd gone at it, desperate and unforgiving, to exhaustion. Every couple days they'd notice new scratches and yellow-tinged black and blue marks on each other's thighs and shoulders.

When they couldn't do it anymore they'd lie around and talk of their childhood. In a voice flush with excitement she would tell him stories. Tag, hide-and-seek. Playing doctor. Hidden away in the little fort they had fashioned from a space between two pine bushes they played, touching each other in places no longer private, giggling at their differences. "You put your finger inside me once," she said. "I told you to. You were only four or five maybe so you did what I said." She said this last part quietly. He didn't believe her.

After a week at his place she left and they stopped sleeping together. A month later he started getting random calls much like the one requesting his presence at 6<sup>th</sup> Street and Avenue B. Whenever she called the tips of his fingers tingled, expecting some fantastic summons or request. The first time was for the performance. Her as a beautiful warrior princess with a peacock feather headdress in a dirty Williamsburg loft, barefoot and swinging from a makeshift trapeze as she went through an array of aerial acrobatics. His role? An assistant, along with three other guys dressed in loincloths and beige g-strings who lifted her up into the harness. He almost left when she gave him his costume. She almost slipped through his sweaty hands as they held her aloft. After that there were gay baseball players in an off-Broadway production, frantic accounts of incomprehensible dreams, a vegetarian Thanksgiving, anything. And there was always the art, regular invitations to small SoHo or Meat Packing district art galleries, or non-denominational cultural centers, where her paintings were on display. Broad strokes and sharp slashes of color filled the canvases. The vivid abstractions made little sense to him. Looking at them he always felt unsure. Yet, every time she called he would answer.

Somewhere inside him a thing burned, a thing beyond sex, a thing outside himself. He was glad for it.

But not this. Not a call on a Friday morning in the middle of a blizzard while he had work to do. A call surely about nothing, some difference of opinion or an argument that had upset her. Her calls the last few weeks were always about the ongoing problems with Sergei, her latest roommate. Gabriel accepted these complaints, though reluctantly, since the roommate was an old friend of his. In a way he had brought them together. The problems seemed little ones – Sandra encountering the random women Sergei had brought home as she tried to use the bathroom; Sergei's insistence on leaving his sweaty workout clothes in the bathroom to air dry – but their frequency said something more. He had gotten calls from Sergei too, ones that were almost accusatory, asking why Gabriel hadn't told him what she was like. He didn't have an answer for that. It hadn't been his idea for them to move in together. He was just the person-in-common.

Turning left on 6<sup>th</sup>, Gabriel walked down what seemed a white tunnel, his the only footprints in the blanket of snow. The grime of the East Village had been buried. Idle white lumps lined the street, waiting to be brought to life and turn everything on the ground a brackish grey.

At the entrance to the park Gabriel paused. He cupped a hand above his eyes. Sandra leaned against a white object that held the shape of a slide, wearing the same layer of snow as the other amorphous shapes on the playground. To her left sat a see-saw frozen in place, balancing a foot or so off the ground.

His feet fell quietly, but Sandra lifted her head with a slow, deliberate movement, as though sensing his approach. A white sheet avalanched from her cowboy hat. He

stopped and stomped his feet, brushed the snow from hood and jacket. “So, what’s this all about?” he asked.

She stared at the middle of his chest, as if seeing right through to something else behind him. Gabriel looked quickly over his shoulder. There was nothing.

“Hey, what’s up?” he asked. The down parka puffed her frame, arms set off from her body like the branches of a Christmas tree. “Why are you just standing there? Say something.” He chuckled, imagining her legs straining under the weight.

Sandra brought her leg back and kicked snow at him.

“Can’t you just *tell* me what’s wrong?” The words just out of his mouth, Sandra scooped up a handful of snow and let fly. It plastered his face. He doubled over, coughing out a piece that had flown into his throat. “What the hell was that for?”

“He raped me,” she said.

“What? Who?” Gabriel asked, taking a step forward.

“Sergei.”

Gabriel jerked to a stop. The name echoed across the empty space. It had never sounded like that. A low breath escaped his lips like air from a punctured tire.

His skin tightened beneath his clothes. He didn’t know what to say, where to look. Shoes. Stairs of the slide. The fence at the playground’s far end. The see-saw teetered.

Sandra whipped the hair from in front of her eyes and crossed her arms. They took turns pawing the ground, scraping their way to the black asphalt underneath.

“Do you have a place to stay?” he asked finally.

“A place to stay?”

It wasn't the right question, her voice told him as much. "Somewhere you can go."

"I'm not going anywhere."

His head popped up.

"You heard me."

"Somebody's got to go."

"I'm going to a friend's for a couple days. Then I'm going back. And besides, I'd never fucking stay at your place again."

Gabriel ran a hand over the back of his neck, rubbing the sweat between his fingers until only stickiness was left. "Where is he?"

"How the fuck should I know? In jail hopefully. I went to the police this morning."

"This morning? When did it happen?"

"Three days ago."

"Three days ago?"

"Stop fucking repeating me."

"Why didn't you..." His voice trailed off.

"What, call you?" She stared at him. "Would it have been any different?"

Gabriel strained to see through the snow.

"I didn't think so," she said, shaking her head. She circled him and walked away, leaving Gabriel to call her name in the empty playground.

He sat down on the edge of the slide and watched Sandra disappear into the swirling mess, thicker now. He could barely make out the row of apartment buildings

pushed against one another across the street. He pulled out a cigarette. It trembled. The lighter flickered and went out. Shit. He couldn't fit Sergei and Sandra in his head at the same time. They had done just about everything together, he and Sergei, since the summer before their fourteenth birthdays. His eyes flashed open and he blinked, expecting flakes that had stopped falling.

Gabriel slipped his way home on icy sidewalks as the city dug out from under the snow, slowly at first, then all at once: shrill brakes, shovels scraping concrete, the Q express. He had never really figured her out. Though he'd known her since he was three years old, it was more like he had known of her. They went to the same nursery school in Cleveland and their parents became good friends. Three years later her family moved, and they never stopped moving, eventually settling years later in northern Wisconsin. Every couple years the families would get together for the holidays. The last time she was sixteen, a woman. He was fourteen, wide-eyed with lust as he watched her eat, breasts shifting beneath a white t-shirt as she cut up her food. She still ate meat then. Since, he had heard snippets about her travels and adventures from his mother, who heard it from her mother. Indonesia, Thailand, Brazil, Cuba, and other hot, moist places where it is nicer to be naked than not. When her first call came, unannounced from a pay phone at JFK, he was surprised. Always surprised.

At 16<sup>th</sup> Street and Avenue of the Americas Gabriel stopped. People behind him stumbled onto his heels, then stepped around and continued moving. The diner was on the corner. They had sat there once, Sandra next to him, Sergei across the table. The two

of them had both been looking for apartments, and as Gabriel started into his Rueben, Sandra said that she and Sergei were looking for a place to share.

Gabriel chewed the food in his mouth slowly, studying the sandwich. “Really?” he asked.

“You get so much more for your money that way,” Sergei said. “And there are so many more two bedrooms available. Mostly railroad, but still.”

“It’s actually pretty lucky that we’re both looking for a place right now,” she added.

Gabriel didn’t think it was lucky. Sergei and Sandra had known each other for all of eight weeks. “Yeah, studios are pretty expensive,” he said instead. He put down his sandwich and Sergei and Sandra rambled on about which neighborhoods they might want to check out and how much they could afford. Eventually, they would all pay.

Outside on the sidewalk the after-snow cold was descending, chilling his sweat drenched shirt. In the diner window his transparent reflection wavered and then disappeared. He didn’t want to be part of this, wanted it all to go away.

In his building the faint scent of marijuana greeted him. Adam was home, rummaging through the refrigerator.

“Hey,” Gabriel said.

Adam jumped. “Christ man, ya’ kinda freaked me out.”

“You didn’t hear the key?”

“Uh-uh. What’s up? You look like you just saw somebody get run over or something.”

Gabriel shrugged. “What are you doing home?”

“The markets were dead. The big boys all headed back to Westchester for an early weekend.”

Gabriel walked into the living room. Adam followed him out and sat in the armchair, his plate clattering on the glass coffee table. Gabriel winced and dumped himself onto the couch.

“Dude,” Adam said through a mouthful of beef and ketchup. “Take it easy on the old couch. The old girl hasn’t done anything to you.”

Gabriel studied his hands a moment before grasping a finger and bending until a knuckle cracked. He did the rest of one hand, one finger, one knuckle at a time.

“Come on, cut that shit out. I’m trying to eat here. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Gabriel said, rubbing his eyes. “It’s so fucked. Sandra said she was raped.”

“What?”

Gabriel glanced at the alcove loft above them. His bedroom.

“Didn’t you bang her while she stayed here?” Adam said.

Gabriel looked toward the kitchen. He thought of his mother, frowning.

“She’s out there,” Adam said. “Came down that first night in that green satin teddy-nightgown thing while we were all sitting around watching T.V.”

“Adam.”

“Asked if she could sleep on the couch. Who sleeps on a couch in that? Man those tits though. Those tits were awesome. She was h—”

“Adam!”



Gabriel remembered the satin teddy, spaghetti straps slipping off her shoulders, skin pouring out the top and bottom. Their animal sex, stains everywhere. Her confession that he was the first person in three years. Him actually laughing out loud. Her turning to him, voice low and serious, asking why that was so unbelievable. Her leaving.

“Sorry man. That was fucked up,” Adam said. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

Gabriel nodded.

“What happened?”

“She said Sergei did it.”

Adam let out a low whistle as he leaned back in the chair. “Hey man, you want to burn one? You know, take your mind off?”

“Not a good idea. You know me.”

Adam cleaned the slide and rolled a nugget between his fingers. “What are you going to do?”

“What the hell am I supposed to do?”

Adam shrugged, mouthing the bong as he flicked the lighter. He vacuumed smoke in and let it wind out, down his chest and over his gut. “I don’t know man. It’s a shitty position to be in.”

Adam flicked and pulled again, torpedoing the smoke to the ground.

The smoke wound around Gabriel’s feet under the coffee table. They didn’t seem his, as though separated from his body by the pane of glass. Adam finished the leftover chips on his plate and went to the kitchen.

“You know what man?” Adam said, walking back into the living room, bong still in hand. “Don’t take this the wrong way or anything, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I gotta tell you, I know Sergei was, like, your best friend for all those years and everything, but I wasn’t surprised when you said he did it. I would have been more surprised if it was some stranger off the street. Don’t really know why, just don’t like him. He always gave me the creeps.” He paused. “Sorry.”

Adam leaned against the doorframe that led downstairs. Gabriel nodded. Adam said sorry again and lumbered down the steps.

Gabriel sat in the same spot on the couch staring out the window as afternoon trickled into dusk, and then darkness. He needed to talk to Sergei. Damn sure didn’t want to, though. Knew what both of them would say. They had grown up together. Same schools, same sports, same women. They shared their first sexual experience. Christine, a girl they met somewhere, somehow, who went to a private school for rich kids a few miles from their neighborhood. Two or three times a week for months during junior year they arrived at a darkened side door of her parents’ sprawling house, where she would lead them to her room in the basement. The three of them would drink wine from the cellar, swallow whatever Valium, Xanax, or lithium she had laying around, and have sex until it was time to go to school. They took to doing it outside, in the woods behind the house, on her parents’ boat at the lake, their asses itching the next day from all the mosquito bites.

He and Sergei had even started planning positions and points of entry, like strategic assaults on an unmanned fortress. I’ll go here, then you go here, lift here, turn

here, we both go here, until one night she didn't answer when they tapped on the glass window of her room, pale orange light filtering through the closed blinds.

Gabriel stood up, reaching a hand out to steady himself on the couch. He put his coat on and walked out of the apartment. He passed the bus stop without a glance, head bent against the wind tunneling crosstown. The streets were full of people, storefronts shined out garish light, reflecting off the snow so it seemed like the day hadn't ended. Everything was under repair and Gabriel stood impatiently at the scaffoldings arching the sidewalks of Broadway, 10<sup>th</sup> Street, and St. Marks, waiting for a break in the stream of people so he could continue.

In front of Sergei and Sandra's apartment, he hesitated. The front door sagged in its frame, propped up on one side by the faces of two new deadbolts. The peephole was blacked out. Gabriel looked up and down the hallway before pressing his ear to the door. He leaned back and thumbed the ringer.

The door opened and Sergei stood, eyes flicking around the hallway and back to Gabriel's face. They stared at one another until Sergei took a half step back.

"Hey Gabe."

"Can I come in?"

Sergei moved to the side and Gabriel walked in. To the left Sandra's door was closed. A pile of dishes sat in the sink and a clean set upside down in the rack on the counter. Her paintings were gone. The acrid scent of burnt toast lingered. Gabriel walked to the counter and rested his weight there, arms folded across his chest. Sergei settled on the other counter, one leg up, the other on the floor. Gabriel examined the red blotches over the back of his cold fist.

“You spoke to her?” Sergei asked.

Gabriel studied Sandra’s bedroom door and then turned to Sergei. “What happened here?”

“Nothing,” Sergei said, shrugging his shoulders. Sergei’s jaw jutted from his face. The red slash of his mouth was pinched straight.

“Nothing? Are you kidding me? Something happened. Whatever this is, it ain’t nothing.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then clarify it for me,” Gabriel said, raising himself off the counter. “Because this, this is fucked.”

“You have no idea what it was like living with her. She’d walk around here damn near naked, telling me she was going to the bathroom to masturbate. And then she’d go and do it. Moaning and groaning in the tub. She’s fucking nuts.”

Gabriel could barely hear over the pounding in his head. “Did you have sex with her?” It didn’t sound like his voice.

“What the fuck kinda question is that? What, you believe her?”

“Did you rape her?”

Sergei’s eyes narrowed. “Did you?”

Gabriel felt heat rush to his face. Sergei stood, his eyebrows raised, waiting for an answer.

“It’s not the same,” Gabriel said quietly.

“Oh really? The fuck it isn’t. You can tell yourself whatever you want. You’ve done the same shit in the same places.”

Gabriel shook his head. “That’s not gonna cut it this time.”

“Spare me. Have you forgotten the last twelve years? All the shit we’ve done. All the shit *you’ve* done. And now you want to come over here and ask me if I did her?”

Sergei leaned forward, eyes wide. “Fuck – you.”

“I’ve never gone this far.”

“Oh, really?” Sergei said. “How the hell would you know? How many times have you crept away from some bitch’s bed in the middle of the night? Huh?”

Gabriel bit down on his lip, jaw muscles twitching.

“No names, no phone numbers, no nothing. Some broad, you know the type, some club, some party. And she wakes up the next morning with her parts all sore and you gone. Except there’s nobody around for her to cry to so you’re home free. Shit, you don’t even remember half the fucking time.”

“That’s what they wanted. I’ve never taken anything from anyone,” Gabriel said. But he didn’t believe it.

“Neither did I, friend. Neither did I.” Sergei leaned back against the counter with a satisfied smirk.

Gabriel pressed his eyes closed for a moment and then opened them, exhaling deeply. “We’re finished here,” he said, walked to the door and left. Sergei’s dismissive ‘whatever,’ followed him down and out into the thin air of 4<sup>th</sup> Street. He fell back against the brick wall next to the door. The cold felt good, real. Too good. Gabriel wrenched himself off the wall with a grunt.

It had started snowing again. Flurries that fell harmlessly on the avenues gusted into his face along the streets, blinding him. At every turn there was another sickening

memory. He walked past one of the many fruit vendors, packing his wares into boxes and a waiting van. The two of them at fourteen, stealing watermelons from a local produce store, doing unthinkable things to them in the dark by the pool at the apartment complex where Sergei lived with his parents. Gabriel stepped into steam pluming out of the city's filthy underbelly through a century-old manhole cover. A smoke-filled Florida motel room on the last leg of a trip to check out colleges, them and two girls drinking Southern Comfort bought with fake IDs. Naked flesh, a half-hearted no, more alcohol. Maybe we should just go, Sergei had said to Gabriel as a simple ploy meant for the girls. No, no, stay, please, they replied. More alcohol. Coercion. Sex. Some video Sergei had made of an unsuspecting partner. Gabriel walking out a Tribeca apartment before dawn, a look over his shoulder falling on a woman curled in the fetal position, mouth agape, naked, snoring. He went back and pulled a blanket over her before tip-toeing out the door. He never knew her name.

Gabriel stopped. He didn't know where he was. Shadows crept along a path. Long thin tree branches sagged, covered in white. To the South, the Virgin Megastore's red cursive stood under a digital billboard that had counted down to New Year's Eve, but for some reason had never stopped and was now counting up. Union Square Park. On either side of the park amber light wove its way among the trees, falling short of the path and two park benches up ahead.

He walked closer. The outlines of two sleeping bodies occupied the benches. Something scurried, little claws scraping on frozen snow. A rat disappeared into the shadows beneath one of the benches. Another stayed, seemingly unconcerned with his

presence, its body stretched long on hind legs, mouth reaching, gnawing at a toe that protruded from a hole in a shoe.

Gabriel stepped toward the sleeping form and the rat fled. A chill ran down his backside. Sergei was capable of what Sandra said he'd done. Whether it had happened or not Gabriel wasn't sure, but Sergei had it in him.

Saturday night, unable to sleep, Gabriel nursed a bottle of scotch and watched hour after hour of National Geographic, lesser species eating one another and mating, until he passed out. A dull pain that felt like he had slept on the bottle awoke him. He tried calling Sandra. The first time the recording came up he listened, her low voice mirthful behind a strange accent that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere. Scotch and bile burned his throat and he lay back down. Next time he counted the rings and hung up before her voice came on.

His mother called for what seemed like the hundredth time. He imagined the nervous clicking of a lacquered nail against her tooth as she waited for him to explain. What could he tell her? That one of his friends had probably raped another? That he really wasn't sure who to believe, but knew that he had played some role in the sordid affair? She had known Sergei as long as he had, Sandra longer. Knew them as well as any mother could know her child's friends. Or her child. Which was to say that she knew nothing at all. He left the phone on the table and turned back to National Geographic.

The sharp rap of metal on metal at the door startled him. He hovered over the couch, and when the knock didn't repeat, went to the door, each step more reluctant than the last.

Sandra stood in the doorway. She seemed smaller, shrunken. Gabriel looked down and stepped aside. She collapsed into the armchair in the living room. Minutes passed. He tugged loose skin from his cuticles, drawing blood. She leaned back and stared up at the grey curtain that separated his loft space from the rest of the apartment, as though seeing it for the first time. He realized she hadn't been back to his apartment since the day she left at the end of that first week.

“Gabriel,” she said. “How could you not tell me?”

He tensed. Sweat broke out at the small of his back.

“How could you be friends with someone like that?”

“There's no easy explanation.” Gabriel said. “Only that he and I have been friends since we were fourteen. We've grown up together, almost like brothers.”

“He's not your brother.”

“I know,” Gabriel said. “But I'm no better than he is. Worse maybe. He and I are probably more alike than I care to admit.”

She frowned and shook her head. “It's not the same. What you and I did, happened because I wanted it, because we both wanted it.”

Gabriel looked from his hands to her. She was staring off into the darkness at the other end of the room.

“Afterwards, I realized how you are, that sex for you is some sort of strange emotionless exercise. A quest maybe. I don't know. But I wanted to sleep with you. Not him. He just...” Her shoulders fell. “He just took it.”

It sounded to Gabriel like she wasn't talking to him, but to herself.



“When I said I was worse,” he said quietly. “I wasn’t talking about what happened between us.” Gabriel rested his head on the cushion and closed his eyes. After a deep breath he turned to her. She shifted away from him, as if to lessen the exposed area of her body. His stomach seemed to hollow out. There was a hand at his throat.

“He’s done it before. He’s done it before, and I didn’t tell you.”

She fell back into the chair and put a hand over her face. Gabriel looked away. He felt her sobbing, and his own chest tightened.

“I’ve done a lot of things,” he said. “Things I’m not proud of. I don’t know why I didn’t say anything. It never crossed my mind, any of it. Maybe it was buried under everything else, I’m not sure.”

“I trusted you,” she said.

“I trusted me too.” His arms were heavy, saturated. He wanted to reach out to her but couldn’t. Next to him on the couch the phone rang. Gabriel looked down and grit his teeth as she started for the door.

“Sandra wait, please.”

She turned and took one last look at the apartment. Everything but him. Then she left.

The door gaped open in her wake, an ugly light from the hallway pushing at the dim corners of the apartment. He took a step to follow but stopped. “I’m sorry,” he said, to no one in particular. He did not pick up the phone. He let it ring and ring and ring.

## COMING HOME

The walkway was four rectangular slabs of concrete, each separated by a thin crack, five in all, and three steps up to the porch. From where he stood to the front door required exactly nine steps. Nine steps were all that separated him from where he'd been wheeled out eight months ago in a gurney with restraints. The doctors had told him he needed to stop worrying about little things like the number of steps from his sidewalk to the door, that the only meaning in that information was the meaning he ascribed to it, and over the past few months they'd repeatedly discussed a plan with him for gradually reintegrating into his life. They even offered some anti-anxiety meds. Just in case, Gary, they told him. What they hadn't told him was *how* he was supposed to go home. Was he just supposed to walk up to the door, put the key in and go inside? Should he adopt an air of calm and pretend he wasn't scared as hell? Or run like a banshee up to the door and crash his way in to scare off whatever might be waiting for him? This was his most powerful impulse, but he would not be running up to the door screaming. As scared as he was, he'd be right back at the sanatorium if anyone saw him do that.

The cab had dropped him off a few minutes ago and sped away. Mailboxes rode the curb as it question-marked around the cul-de-sac. Kids were at school and people had gone to work, their tracks visible in the layer of dew frosting the lawns. Driveways and houses and street – silent. Only the brisk spring wind made a sound as it rushed past his ears and ruffled his hair. Low fast-moving grey clouds swept across the sky toward the big lake, and when he looked directly up it felt like he, not them, was moving.

Before, he would have envisioned the clouds being pushed by the very hands of God, to be concentrated at the heart of Lake Superior where he – God – would squeeze rain and lightning from them. But he'd improved just enough to manage without medication for the last three months, so while he thought that about the clouds now, the significance didn't actually pulse in his chest. Maybe that was the cause of his unease. He'd expected to feel more when he got here. More of *what* he wasn't sure, but something other than the vague uncertainty that made him raise his right foot three times and bring it back down three times.

Gary took keys from his pocket and bounced them in his palm. The modest Colonial seemed smaller than before. The green clapboard shutters needed fresh paint; the gutter over the garage was slightly askew. Otherwise, the outside of the two-level home where he and his wife had raised their two children until the divorce was unchanged. The clouds had settled into a steady drift and the wind had died down. In the newfound quiet, Gary took a deep breath and went up the walk.

In the brass knocker his distorted reflection peered back at him. The knocker had been his wife's idea. Even distorted, his face showed health he hadn't seen in a long time. The psychotropics had made him gain weight at first, but after he stopped them and began taking regular walks the bloated flesh around his eyes and jaw had slowly disappeared. The key trembled in his hand and scraped at the face of the deadbolt as he tried to unlock the door. He sighed, but stopped and said to himself: there's no need for your hands to shake. But that was untrue. How could they not after months of white hallways and walls and white-coats, after pouring out so much to Dr. Faust and Dr. Smithsonian that he felt a hole in the center of himself? And the best they could say in

return was it's okay to keep secrets sometimes, not to tell everyone he felt like going to the lake with a backpack full of rocks and sinking slowly to the bottom. Which helped as much as it didn't. The things ailing him had seemed minor, and had festered unseen, turning his mind to dust like the fire that makes ash of charcoal. He'd had no major traumas to justify a breakdown. Sure, Abigail got custody of the kids, but it hadn't acrimonious, and he'd seen them often. Sure, his father had died, but that was ten years ago. Eventually, everyone's father dies.

With two hands the key was almost steady and he managed the lock. He slid into the house and gently leaned back until the door shut behind him. His eyes closed. The heavy stillness was a distant memory, comforting and uneasy. The air in the house smelled of furniture and dust. He'd told everyone he'd be coming home next week, so he was, as far as he knew, the first person here in months. It had to be that way.

The silence was a welcome surprise. In the months before being institutionalized, the questions he'd been posing to himself became a running dialogue, and then a cacophony, with voices too numerous to be all his own. The voices are normal, Dr. S. told him at Swallow Lake Mental Health Center, they were his own. Gary had sat beneath a ceiling fan in an office that resembled a kitchen. He recognized the tight-lipped sorrow the psychiatrist accorded him. He'd adopted it himself on several occasions at the hospital where he used to work as an obstetrician, when he'd had to take a stillborn baby from its mother's arms for the first, and last, time. He knew what the doctor told him was probably true, but it was hard to accept. Back then the voices had grown so loud and incessant that every object and wall and corner had blazed with speech and Gary had

started referring to himself as ‘we’ rather than ‘I.’ He breathed deeply into the silence. Then he heard it.

His heart seized up. An almost imperceptible tick coming from the study to his left. The indefinite bulk of the leather couch squatted in the shadowy room. Their tiger-striped tabby used to sit on the couch’s arm and watch everything, her body still, eyes going to and fro like a pendulum. He’d throw the cat from the house, but somehow she’d be back in the same spot a few minutes later. And when things got really bad her eyes would click...click...click, a metronome marking every moment of their existence. That sound now echoed in his ears. He went unsteadily to the door of the study. The sound grew. His hand reached for the light switch and flicked. No cat. In the corner was the dwarf grandfather clock Abigail had purchased years ago. He knew the clock had always been there, and when his mother had come to help she tried explaining that to him. What’s that damn cat doing there then, he’d asked. What cat, she’d answered. *Gary*, what cat? He turned off the light and stepped from the room. He closed the door and waited. The ticking was gone.

Relieved, he put a hand to his face, his fingertips slick with sweat. He wiped them on his coat and walked down the hall, his hand running along the wall. At the staircase, cherry wood steps darkened by the years ascended to the second floor. His hand rested on the orb at the end of the banister and lingered there. The wood was worn smooth, almost oily, with the lives of everyone who had touched it.

Should he go upstairs? Upstairs was the master bedroom he’d shared with Abigail, then with the three women he’d dated in the five years since the divorce, and then with the voices. Down at the end of the hall was his daughter Sybil’s room, where

Gary had taken to sleeping for some reason, and where his mother had slept beside him in the other twin bed.

He felt sheepish about that, his mother padding around in house shoes and her flannel pajamas, tucking him – a forty-five year old man – into bed and sitting beside him, stroking his hair with her soft hands, growing older before his eyes because of him. His mother had seen him cry then, and she cooked him food that he couldn't bring himself to eat as he wasted away. What's wrong, Gary, she'd asked in the pleading tone only a mother can accomplish. He could sense she felt failure. I'm sorry, Mother, he'd said. She screamed at him never to say that again.

Only later did he understand saying sorry implied her presence was something he didn't or shouldn't expect, that it was unreasonable for her to help her boy. It was the worst insult he could have offered. She calmed down and asked him again what was wrong, asked him dozens of times, until she called the EMTs and they came and took him away.

Even now he didn't know how it had all gone wrong. The best he could do, after some two hundred hours of therapy, was speculate. He'd gone through his whole life with the doctors, beginning with his childhood in a tiny town in Michigan's thumb, and ending with as much description as he could recall about what the voices had been screaming all those weeks and months.

On the surface it all seemed good: nurturing nuclear family, a family of his own, no molestation anywhere, a caring ex-wife and kids, a respected obstetrician. That was him, good. Even when things weren't good he made them good. He and the doctors didn't find any conscious repression, but a consistent pattern, a lifetime of trying too

damn hard to appear happy. What they couldn't find was a trigger. What about when your wife took the kids, Dr. F. had asked, fingering his beard. Gary shook his head. He'd been in bed when she came to pick up the kids. She pulled the covers back. He hadn't been sleeping, yet hadn't heard her come in. Michael and Sybil must've been calling his name from the bedroom door, but their voices were just two among many. Abigail said she was taking them and never bringing them again. That's wise, he'd said, we fear for them in this house. I meant the first time, Dr. F. said, after the divorce. Gary had thought for a second. He was pretty sure he'd been okay then.

Those episodes, like all the others, fell before or after he'd started unraveling. There was no singular breaking point. For no good reason the dam had cracked and split wide open and the years spilled out, tumbling his mangled viscera across the wood floor. In the end, without the drugs, he only stopped hearing the voices when he accepted that some things simply don't have an explanation, accepted that the voices just are, and always will be.

Before he left, the doctors, men he would have once called peers, told him he must be vigilant and watchful for the voices, for signs of collapse – but not too vigilant. He'd thought that the most terrifying thing he'd ever heard. Now, in the silent house, with its spaces waiting to be filled, he knew the terror to be true. His hands twitched, waiting for some sign of what they should do. He would not go upstairs today. He was not strong enough for that. Tomorrow, maybe. For now it was enough just to see it clearly from down here.

## INTER VIVOS

Bridget just left. I'm lying on the couch fingering a necklace, her necklace. She's probably outside on the street by now, the doorman helping her hail cab uptown, to where I'm not sure. I have no idea, about anything, even where she was *supposed* to spend last night. All I know is that the memory of last night is settling like a stone in my mind – smooth, heavy, conspicuous.

I get up off the couch. Two empty brandy snifters sit perilously close to opposite edges on the coffee table. The glass surface is sticky. A third snifter is tipped over, a crack running the length of its goblet. Everything seems foreign – the suede couch softer, the curtains by the balcony door slightly bowing the curtain rod – which is only natural in the morning light. It's not even my place. An old friend let me use it last night since I was just in town for a visit. He slept at his girlfriend's, or rather a girlfriend's, over on the Upper East Side. I feel guilty having slept with Bridget in his bed. But this doesn't stop me from throwing the covers back and sinking to the sheets to smell of her. Her florid shampoo, vaguely undercut by cigarette smoke, still rises from the pillow. Near the middle of the bed is a spot still damp with her and I. Keys jingle out in the hallway and I jump up. I could probably explain sleeping with her in his bed to my friend, but not why I was back there after she'd gone, sniffing at our remains.

It wasn't him. I try to remake the bed as she and I had right before she left but give up. I'll have to wash the sheets anyway. Decorum demands at least that much, and probably a nice bottle of scotch too.



Such a gift *could*, I suppose, be a basic expression of intimacy between friends (though not in this instance, since I'm not going to tell him why). As I strip the sheets off the bed, I can't figure if my time with Bridget was more or less the same.

I met her and a friend on the corner of 18<sup>th</sup> Street and 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Time: shortly after four a.m. Temperature: cool but comfortable. Blood Alcohol Level: under the legal limit (which in New York is 0.10). Disposition: wanting. I was eating what had been the last slice of pizza behind the glass display at the pizzeria up the block. The old Italian woman – a grandmother for sure – must have taken pity on me. She smiled and threw some extra garlic knots in the bag, saying “Eat, eat.”

Before that I was with friends at one of those velvet rope spots in the Meat Packing District where you can bump coke in the bathroom and smoke cigarettes under red strobe lights, even though both activities are illegal in New York these days. My friends had left eventually, but the dance floor was still full. I stayed. People gyrated back and forth, coming closer and pulling away, grinding up against one another in a sort of sexual simulacrum. I headed out, past the people milling around in the cordoned off street, through the nut vendor's acrid smoke and the fetid steam of a hotdog cart.

New York had been an impromptu decision – one I'd started regretting even before the plane had touched down that morning. I'd used a month of my summer vacation from the university to hike some of the Sierra Nevadas, but came off the trail unready to back to school. I cashed in the last of my frequent flyer miles and came to New York, where most of my old friends lived. I was still on West Coast time, and it felt early, too early yet for any reasonable chance at sleep.

Two women were walking cross-town, towards the Hudson River. They stopped at the corner. “Hey, do you know any bars that are open around here,” one of them asked. She was outfitted in motorcycle boots, black jeans and a leather jacket. Under the jacket was a tight T-shirt emblazoned with ‘Suck on This’ and a giant hand and middle finger extending up between her large breasts. She stood almost as tall as me, a shade over six feet. Beneath her gruff voice hid a foreign accent.

“Most bars close at four,” I said.

“Well, that sucks. In Sweden bars are open all night.”

That was Ginger. The other was Bridget, honey-colored dress fluttering at her calves, and blood-red high heels doing little to mitigate her striking resemblance to an adolescent. Both had the white-blond hair of Swedes, but Ginger’s only at the roots of a black dye job. Bridget’s accent was stronger, the words rising and falling under a rhythmic cadence. Around her neck hung a thin chain. A small gold cross dangled just above the cleave in her breasts. What the hell were these two were doing together, barhopping at this hour, on a Sunday no less, some three thousand miles from home?

“There might be some places still open in the Village,” I said.

“Is that where you’re going?” Bridget asked.

I hadn’t planned on it. “Yup, that’s where I’m headed.”

Sheets balled up under my arm and Bridget’s necklace tucked away in my breast pocket, I step into the elevator. The doorman pretends he doesn’t see me as I head out and over to the Chinese Laundromat. Behind the counter the young Asian gives me look like he’s fully aware of what I’ve been doing. I know how it seems – me bleary-eyed in last night’s wrinkled button down toting a bundle of random linens – but I want to tell

him it isn't like that. He's all business: "Medium starch?" I pay and gave him my friend's info. He hands over a claim stub. On the back is a fortune: *A mistake is worth a million words*. I wouldn't have been able to figure out what that meant on a good day, but I put the stub in my pocket anyway.

Monday morning Manhattan is chaos. Yellow taxis careen through the intersection, horns tooting and engines throttled. People pile up at the walk signal. The sun is just a hazy ball to the East, but it's already warm out for early June. Where is Bridget right now? Showering? Sleeping? What is she carrying around with her? I know she didn't forget the necklace. She left it behind on purpose, next to the lamp with the jade cover on the nightstand. When I came out of the bathroom she was smiling mischievously. I asked her what was so funny. She just giggled.

She said something about her and Ginger going to D.C. today, which was why she took off so early. I really wish she hadn't. Standing on the corner again is strange. The three of us stood there a few hours earlier under an eerily silence – the Village in the dark hours of morning. When we got there no bars were open, so I told them I had a well-stocked liquor cabinet at "my place" if that's what they were interested in.

Ginger was less than thrilled. In the daylight it feels like Bridget had it all planned. That night though, I was pretty unaware as I calculated my good fortune. Bridget smiled, two rows of straight white teeth, a faint red lipstick smudge on one of the incisors. "Let's do it," she said.

We went to my friend's building. The doorman, a fifty-something Hispanic with a gold-capped canine tooth, let us in. He winked at me, and while we waited for the elevator he gazed in our direction.

A cab almost mows down a bike messenger in front of the Laundromat – that’s why I left Manhattan for Brooklyn, and later left New York City entirely. The place is madness. I wait for a Brooklyn-bound train out to Park Slope, where I was *supposed* stay with friends the night before. As the doors on the train close a girl comes running, blond hair bouncing, in danger of going to ground with her purse and shopping bags. I hold the door open amidst the automated *Please Stand Clear of the Closing Door* announcement. She ducks in under my arm. On the air coming with her is a whiff of perfume, jasmine and vanilla rose. *Please don’t block the doors* squawks the conductor, *There’s another train right behind this one*. The girl smiles bashfully, bats her long eyelashes, mouths *Thank You*. I smile back, unable to meet her eye. The train barrels along under the East River. I feel ridiculous. What did I think, that Bridget went shopping and then followed me into the subway with a hand full of shopping bags? Get real. We spent a grand total of four hours together.

Yet something had already taken hold as Ginger, Bridget, and I entered the apartment. I opened the balcony door and went to make drinks. No sooner had I turned my back they started talking in hushed tones. If it was the other way around – two guys and one girl – there’d be no need for talking. A couple shared glances and a nod or two would suffice.

Perhaps they’re talking about something else, I thought as I poured brandy into three snifters. I didn’t expect any strange stuff to go on, and didn’t really want any. In the living room something had been settled. Ginger sat straight-backed on the edge of the couch, tight lips resonating displeasure. Bridget reclined into the plush pillows, a smile on her face. I handed them each a glass.

Ginger put her nose to the snifter. “Brandy? Who drinks brandy?”

“You want something else? There’s just about everything imaginable in the kitchen.”

“Never mind,” she said.

“Nice place,” Bridget said.

I looked around the one bedroom apartment: grey carpet, mauve walls, vertical book shelf, a 40-inch plasma television and accompanying electronics on one wall.

“Yeah, it’s okay,” I said.

Ginger no longer wanted to be there, and we finished our drinks in several quick, fiery gulps. I took the empty glasses to the kitchen. The front door slammed. I refilled two brandy snifters.

“Your friend left?” I asked. Bridget nodded. Slowly, deliberately, she slid out of her shoes and tucked her legs under her. Smooth knees peeked out from under the skirt. Her eyes, the color of an acetylene flame, searched my face.

“Are you going to give me a drink?” she asked, voice so low I wasn’t sure I actually heard it. Maybe I hadn’t, maybe I hadn’t seen her lips move. It seemed like the question just appeared in my mind. I brought the brandy to my lips. Mouth full, I set the glasses down and leaned over her.

Her eyes followed mine until we were only inches apart, then fractions of an inch, and then no distance separated us as her face reached up to mine. She sucked the brandy from my lips one at a time, and slowly, drop by drop, I fed it to her, traveling with the liquor as it burned her tongue, the back of her throat, and descended into her stomach.

Park Slope is a far cry from chaotic Manhattan. Flatbush Avenue near the subway station is hectic enough, but calm reigns along tree-lined Seventh. People who have jobs are at work, the kids at school. The neighborhood has been left to mothers, nannies, and their respective charges. I marvel at all the children in Maclaren baby-strollers. Seems like every woman in the neighborhood is pregnant or just was. At a coffee and muffin shop a group of them talk and laugh, pausing from time to time to look lovingly into their strollers. One woman breast-feeds an infant right there in front of the coffee shop. The baby's tiny hands grasp for breast, cries quieting when it finally locates the pink nipple.

I stay in Brooklyn for another couple days and then catch my flight back to Chicago out at JFK. During take-off the heavy sinking sensation in my stomach is discomfiting, the physical sensation of departure magnified by the feeling that I am leaving something behind. Almost a year prior, I took a similar flight. At Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport I said good-bye for the last time to my fiancé – ex-fiancé as of two hours before. It's a shitty way to fly, recently finished. I spent most of the trans-Atlantic flight in the bathroom retching. It had nothing to do with food or air travel.

We met while both living in New York, spent a year there together, and then a year doing long distance, then a couple years in Amsterdam and another year of long distance. I would show up after a few months away and she'd meet me at the airport. Her fragrance would be the same, as would the softness of her skin, but her motions and mine, the way we touched each other, and the wariness in our eyes, said we weren't. It would take weeks to be fully at ease, the kind of ease one understands from seeing every day how the other wakes up or slices bread. Just when we were operating smoothly again

our time would be up. We'd stand at the airport in Amsterdam or Chicago, and she'd say 'I hate you.'

She didn't mean me (I don't think), but the circumstances. Those circumstances made short work of us, and shattered it all for good the spring before we broke up. She'd gotten pregnant. How can we do this, I asked her. We can wait for this. She'd been waiting a couple years already, she said. Why not go with it? Did you do this on purpose, I asked. I suggested an abortion. She hung up on me. Rightfully so, I think now. Two days later, her mother called. Julia had miscarried. I flew out immediately, but the first forty-eight hours of the aftermath she was on her own. Those were the longest two days of my life. I can't imagine how long they were for her. At Schiphol I cleared customs and walked out into the arrivals terminal. People hugging, crying, shaking hands. Excited voices rung around me. I looked around the waiting area. She hadn't come to pick me up.

I spent the last two months of my summer vacation that year with her in Amsterdam, and when it was time for me to go back to school the good-byes were permanent. Foolishly (but what choice did I have, I would have foundered otherwise), I drowned myself in work, and when I resurfaced eight months later with another long summer stretching out before me, a summer with no her and no Amsterdam, I cracked and headed West for the Sierra Nevadas.

The flight back to Chicago seems much shorter than usual. "Where to, buddy?" the fat, swarthy cab driver asks. I answer and his flinty eyes study me in the review mirror. He looks like he hasn't slept in days; in this we are equals. "Where?" he asks again.

"What do you mean, where? I just told you."

“Listen buddy, I don’t have time for any shit. You want to tell me where you’re going, or you want to get the hell out of my cab?”

“Wicker Park.”

“Why’d you say ‘Sweden’ then?”

I stare for a moment. I don’t remember uttering ‘Sweden,’ but the guy seems too riled up to have been full of it. It’s only ten p.m. when I get home, but I’m exhausted. I’ve been away for almost a month. Even so, sleep won’t come. The darkness seems to swell and thicken and I’m back in New York, my head resting on Bridget’s chest, her heart thumping in my ears.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“What?” I said.

“You’re about to lie,” she said.

“No I’m not.”

“You heard the question clearly, no?”

“Yes.”

“And instead of answering you ask me ‘what’.”

“How does that mean I was about to lie?”

“You’re doing it again!”

“Seriously,” I said. “How do you know?”

“I’m a wise old woman.”

“Like hell you are.”

“Hey!” she said, laughing.



“Wise I can buy. Old – that’s a different story.” I pinched the firm skin of her shoulder to prove it.

“I’m almost old enough to be your mother.”

“And how old is that?”

“Guess.”

“I’m not guessing. I can’t stand that game.”

“Thirty-nine.” I didn’t think that was true and told her so. “I am,” she said.

“You got ID?”

“You’re kidding, right?” she said, her small mouth pulled wide with good humor. Her laughter was wonderful, but I wasn’t trying to be flattering. I’d had a few drinks before meeting them on the corner, but could still see straight. If she was thirty-nine then I was forty.

She got up, naked and unabashed, the toned curves of her backside and dusting of tiny hairs on her arms and shoulders catching the light angling in from the street. She turned, and at that distance, with her small hands and delicate fingers and the barely visible blond pubic hair, she seemed a little girl. Her conical breasts were perky, and in that moment her nipples, engorged with blood and standing starkly against her soft body, seemed incongruous. A mild guilt that I’d taken advantage of a child crept over me. I bit my lip as she came back and triumphantly dropped her passport on the bed. I wanted to make love to her all over again.

In my bed in Chicago my face warms as the words ‘make love’ float across my mind in bubble-shaped letters. It sounds silly, *to make love*, but I don’t have any other words for it. Making love is (though perhaps ‘was’ would be more accurate now)

generally not my forte. I'm halfway decent at screwing, humping, fucking, having sex, or whatever it is that people do in the dark with their clothes off. Most of the time I'm just pretending to make love. Most men often are. We slow down, touch more and push less, caress, but only because we think we're supposed to. And women usually know it's an act. If it's not fooling us, it probably isn't fooling them. Most of the time they let it go, because the effort itself is enough; it shows we want to be close, even if we never really can.

I flipped the passport open. "You believe me now?" she asked.

"I do."

She slid into bed and pressed herself against my chest.

"You're crying," Bridget said.

"What?" My fingers reached for my face but found no tears. "No I'm not."

"All of a sudden you're so sad. Why? You're upset because I'm thirty-nine?"

"You're smarter than that."

"Come then," she said. "Out with it."

I don't know why I told her. Even thinking about it makes me sweat. But there was something in her that made it okay. It was more than the brandy, more than the fact that we'd just made love, more even than that she was older. I was being absolved. Surely, part of this was because she seemed both sensible and sensitive, but mostly because she was still very much a stranger. And yet, she didn't feel like one.

She was silent as I told her about Gabrielle – Gabbie. The first girl I'd ever been with. A weekend away from home with my AAU baseball team. She was just around, one of the sisters from some player on another team. We'd ended up alone in my dorm room

and had clumsy sex. Afterwards, I fell asleep. I woke up and she was gone. Alone, I cursed her as a slut, but when I found out she was only thirteen, two full years younger than me, I just felt she was lost, and I an idiot. A sports watch my father had given me was gone too. It was a silly little thing – a digital face and lots of buttons, functions and settings I never knew how to use and never would. I'd taken it off so neither of us would get scratched by it.

I was a teenager and the watch didn't really mean all that much. I just couldn't understand why she'd taken it. It was as if whatever I'd done with her wasn't enough. I'd have given it to her, and gladly, but to take it without asking and then disappear like a ghost made me fear that none of it had happened. That it, and I, were nothing. A dream.

“You think too much,” Bridget said.

I chuckled. “Sometimes.”

“Men do that all the time. More than we give you credit for. But sometimes, I think, you should shut that damn brain off and just feel.”

She was right. I start my summer teaching assignment and try to get down to business on my thesis. But I can't shut it off. It's not in me. The students in my Intro to American History discussion stare at me wide-eyed when I stop – sometimes in mid-sentence, hand poised at the chalkboard – and stare off into space. Um, Professor Jasper, one of them says hesitantly, and I come back from some memory of Bridget. I'm not a professor, I say.

Near the end of the summer session, I'm at the kitchen table, books and notepads spread before me, working on my doctoral prospectus. Shortly after seven in the morning the phone rings. My palms moisten. It rings twice more before I finally pick it up. Hi

Martin, a voice says. I almost drop it. I recognize the voice, one laden with a coy European accent. It's Julia, calling to wish me happy birthday for my thirtieth. Did you forget again, she asks. I tell her I haven't. The line grows silent.

"I would have called later but I'm going out of town and won't have the chance," she says.

"It's okay," I say. More silence. She says goodbye.

"Julia," I say. "When did you know you loved me?"

She is quiet a moment. "Martin, do we have to get into this? What does it matter now?"

"I just want to know."

She sighs. "Remember the show we saw?"

"Lion King. First time we went out."

"By the time we left the theater I was pretty sure."

"Pretty sure?"

"After we'd walked arm and arm around Times Square and we shared that slice of strawberry cheesecake, I knew."

Hearing her say it hurt. "When did you know I loved you?"

"The same time. You kissed me. Your lips tasted like strawberries. We laughed and you looked into my eyes for the first time. I mean really looked. I could see there what I felt coming off you."

"Julia, I'm sorry about what happened. About what I said."

"It's okay. I never thought you'd be that way. It took a long time, but I finally realized I never really knew you. You never let me in."

I want to protest, but don't. We get off the line shortly after that. I put my head down on the table and think not of Julia. I think of Bridget. How at first I'd mistaken Julia for her on the phone, even though that was impossible. Fear wells up inside me that I felt the way I did with her that night and most days since because I conflated her with my ex-fiancé. That she is merely an *ersatz*, a simulation of someone I loved before.

I shifted so my head was still resting on Bridget's chest but I could look the length of her topography. My hand ran over her narrow hips and smooth abdomen. On the right side of her stomach was a small crescent-shaped scar. "What's this?"

"Appendectomy when I was seventeen."

I kissed my way down her stomach, lingering over the subtle difference in texture only a scar can have – soft and glossy, yet somehow taut.

"This isn't your place, is it?" Bridget asked.

"No."

"I figured. It didn't feel like you were at home here."

I'd felt more at home there with her than anywhere else in a hell of a long time. I put my ear to her stomach. The organ gurgled quietly, blessedly oblivious to all else but itself. She stroked my hair. We lay quietly for a while. "You know," Bridget said.

Her tone chilled me. "What?"

She exhaled, long and slow, something sad and terrible seeping from her body.

"If you're going to tell me you don't do this very often you needn't bother. I've heard it before."

She stifled a laugh. "I imagine we've both been here before. But naturally, I don't do this very often."

“Sure,” I said. “And?”

She gazed around the room. “I stopped taking birth control eight months ago.”

The air in my chest hitched. “Why?”

“I’m thirty-nine.”

“Okay.”

“That’s it? Just ‘okay’?”

“I wonder how much more I should know.”

“Do you want to know?”

I nodded.

“Say so then,” she said.

My mouth didn’t want to cooperate. “I do.”

“I’m going to have a baby.”

“You’re married?”

“No.”

“Boyfriend?”

“No.”

“You’re pregnant already?”

“No.”

“Then what are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” she said, looking at me squarely.

“I guess I do.”

“This time next month, I have an appointment for the first try.” Her hand went to her chest and began stroking the cross. “All the tests came back good. I’ve wanted kids for a long time now.”

“Why didn’t you have them then?”

Her hand stilled. “I wasn’t ready.”

“And now you are?”

“I think so.”

I sat there thinking, about what I don’t know. All I remember is a faint whistle in my ears, like wind through pine needles.

“That doesn’t have anything to do with this. I promise.” She laughed half-heartedly. “You’re probably glad for that condom now, aren’t you?” She looked over at me. “Say something.”

It should have been a relief that I’d worn a condom. It wasn’t. I felt colder still, my balls shrinking closer to the warmth of my body.

“I wasn’t trying to trick you.”

“I know.”

“I mean, I thought about it. Not about tricking you, but I knew from the first moment that I’d be okay with it. Don’t ask me how. I’d be happy actually, if that happened.”

She kept talking but I was only vaguely aware of her voice, like the low ambient hum of an expressway in the distance, foregrounding a response I hadn’t yet uttered as images flashed round and round in my head. They’ve been bouncing around in there every day since – at the office, teaching, in the library, on the El – everywhere except the

bar once in a while, where it's too loud to hear anything and the booze is plentiful enough to be brain-numbing, soul-numbing even. Daily, hourly, I run through the events that led us to that moment. The street. The bed. Her hair against my cheek. The spongy pressure of her insides and the buoyant arcing laughter from her throat. A wide-eyed giggle. My head cradled in her small arms. Her heart beating in my ears. Rapidly, then slower. Finally steady. A body at rest. Feeling a child. Being safe. A tide of contentment washing over me so that I almost fell asleep. "I would be happy, too," I said.

She gasped. Through the fingers covering her mouth: "You're serious, aren't you?" My answer: to pull her closer. She slid under me and I came down on top of her, the full weight of a single man on her slight frame, expelling the air trapped in her lungs. I braced myself and she drew a breath. Her eyes widened – big and round and curious. I pressed my lips to hers and warmth returned to my body, a heat transfer across the epithelial barrier. Something grew around us until it filled the room and pushed at the walls. I expanded against her; she shifted and took me up. Slowly at first, and then faster, all that had enveloped us seemed to concentrate, coalescing where our chests pressed together, until it came to a point that was unbearable and painful and could no longer be held back. She let go and her back arched, her pelvis pressing against mine. I lost my grip and plunged into the depths, and when I hit bottom, I exploded.

Emptied, I collapsed onto her, shaking and spent. Beneath me her chest rose and fell with effort. "Too heavy?"

"No," she said.

"You sure?"

"Stay," she whispered. "It's not too much."



Days and weeks give way to months, and details of my encounter with Bridget begin to fail me. I'm no longer sure of the little moment-to-moment things that transpired. But what lingers, hangs about me actually like the necklace and cross dangling from the lamp on my table, is that those moments had meant something in their own right, a certain awe that an encounter so brief has lingered so long, and a sense of shock that I'd done nothing more that morning than let her walk away.

I survive the holidays. An early thaw leaves Chicago's streets full of slush. It is March now. I sit at my desk and turn page after page in a near-final draft of my thesis. I don't see the words. At the window there is a ping, then another, then the steady tinkling of hail on glass. I nudge the mouse on my laptop. I open a browser and type her name as best I can remember. Bridget is easy, but the last name I only glimpsed for a moment in the dark. I know it starts with 'J' and has one of those strange Nordic vowels with a line through it. I try one combination after another. I'm only half sure of her country of origin by now. Denmark? Sweden? I try them both. Nothing.

She worked in the computer industry. IT? Sales? Software? It was a small firm, I remember that, and she held a high position, though I can't remember which. I try various combinations of all these things. Her birthday, of which I only remember the year, yields no narrower fields in which to search. I start out systematically, but as day darkens into evening and I turn on the lamp all the images and information and memories and feelings swirl together, settling and resettling over one another until it's difficult to make any sense of it. I begin to enter what little I knew of her at random. One hectic haphazard mix of words after another. Enter. Again. Enter. Then: A hit. On the third page of results,

halfway down, something rings a bell. Structured Solutions: her company's name. And her name. And a phone number. And I'm dialing.

## EXPOSED

She's moving as quickly as her high heels will allow, bent at the waist to lessen her height. She looks furtively over her shoulder as she weaves through parked cars, and my hand grips the balcony rail. Two floors above the ground in this small Albanian city by the Adriatic, I can see up and down the street from the hotel and past the buildings to the beach and boardwalk fifty yards away. She's trapped. She stops in the middle of the street and pulls off her shoes. For a moment she's frozen there, as if under glass. She's tall, but her long thin limbs and tight jeans make her seem frail, breakable. About twenty yards on is a triangular park wedged into a fork in the road. She moves like a ghost to the entrance and takes the steps in two bounds. The patch of grass is bordered on the north and east by four-foot hedges, and she pushes her way into the bushes. A fountain stands in the middle, adorned by a short statue that looks like the Venus de Milo, her white marble browned by the elements but missing only one arm, not two. I can't see the woman anymore, but she's there hiding, blood pumping in her ears like it is in mine.

I strain to detect what has her running through the night in some sort of grown-up hide-and-seek. The street is quiet again, and my initial anticipation at the sound of her footsteps is gone, replaced by worry. The sea slaps methodically against the boardwalk. Darkness hides the dusty streets, most of which are nothing more than dirt roads. The old women who bear water containers up the hills or lead produce-laden donkeys to market are asleep in their beds. On half-constructed hotels and buildings, the windows and doors that gape like giant wounds by day are now just black holes. Such is the beauty of Albania by night. Stars shimmer on the surface of the sea stretching out before me.

Mountains that run a rigid spine around Sarandë, the southernmost city of the so-called Albanian Riviera, loom as dark masses in the distance, and off to the right, near the small port where we're supposed to catch a ferry to Corfu tomorrow, a star darts across the sky. I doubt the young woman has seen it.

I'd bet she doesn't *really* know why, at shortly after midnight, she's hiding in those bushes – thin branches pricking her neck and arms, scratching her face. She doesn't know that any more than I know why I'm sitting and watching from a hotel balcony, in Eastern Europe of all places. My girls, spitting images of one another and their mother, are asleep in the room next to mine – away from the couple on the other side that has sex half a dozen times a day and were at it again as I readied for bed. When the girls started college I promised they could backpack Europe on my dime after graduation, and since their twenty-first birthday fell in the midst of those travel plans we arranged I'd meet them wherever they were. I was thinking Paris or Rome or something like that, but they had other ideas.

Part of me wants to go wake them and say look at this, you see that woman hiding in the bushes? No? Well, she's there, believe me. That should never happen. But I know better. A month after their mother and I divorced, Erin, the younger by six minutes, came home three hours past her and Jamie's curfew. I stopped her in the dark hallway outside her room. Where've you been? Silence. Answer me, I said. What the hell do you care, she replied, her voice faltering. I flicked on the light – pain knifed its way up my insides. Dried mascara on her cheeks, neck bruised with the unmistakable imprint of a man's hands. Who the fuck is he, I said. Where? My hands twitched with the need to get around his throat and squeeze until his face turned red, then blue, then dead. Go to bed, Dad, she

said wearily. I pressed her only so much. She's always been fierce, rebellious. I got nothing out of her. Not that night, or the next day, or in the month before they moved with their mother to Virginia. Or ever. Later, her sister went to her room and I stood outside the door listening to their muffled sobs. Back in my bed I didn't even feel like a man, let alone a father.

I can see the girl's vague outline in the bushes, but they are thick, thick enough hopefully to hide her from whatever's coming. On the edge of my chair, I'm almost overcome by an urge to stand up and call to her, to tell her she has safe haven here if she needs it. But I don't. This isn't my fight. And things are a lot different here.

I didn't pick up on it at first, but the girls did. As we sat in a café in Tiranë, the capitol, near the well-to-do diplomatic and university areas, Erin leaned toward me and whispered, Dad, you notice anything strange about all the people sitting here? I was thankful for my sunburned skin, because I thought she was going to start talking about how beautiful the women were. But she and Jamie talked in hushed tones about how the women are almost never by themselves. They're either with a grandmother or a man. Rarely, you'll see two young women walking or eating together. The place was full, mostly with groups of men or groups of women with a lone male, not a single female anywhere, and I started to tell them about the five centuries of domination, the Ottomans and the Axis Powers, under which Albania developed. And then the brutal forty-year dictatorship of Hoxha, the deranged communist whose hundreds of thousands of concrete bunkers stud the landscape as scars of his paranoia and isolation. Jamie laughed and Erin shook her head, and they said simultaneously, as they've done since they were children, Dad, stop with the history lessons please, we've seen the bunkers.

I check my watch again. Three minutes have passed. In the bushes her muscles are probably already starting to ache. This attractive girl and others I've seen in Tiranë and Sarandë remind me of students lounging in my classes or loping around campus at the small Midwestern college where I teach. Since the divorce a few years ago I've only had a couple relationships – one with a coed, an undergraduate with fiery red hair and pale, almost translucent skin who'd been in one of my classes. She had thin arms like that girl in the bushes. A year later she showed up at my office. Her tapered pianist's fingers danced on the edge of my desk as she said, "Professor Moore, would you go have a drink with me sometime?" She couldn't have been much older than twenty-one. We met the next evening, and after two bottles of Rioja we ended up in her bed at the apartment she shared with a couple other girls. For two weeks I engineered ways to meet her off campus, and spent as much time looking over my shoulder as I did staring into her eyes, which were the same aquamarine color – now that I think about it – as the frigid water bubbling up from the Syri Kaltër, the Blue Eye, a tectonic well-spring a few kilometers outside Sarandë that runs so deep divers haven't yet gauged the bottom. One night she and I stopped before the outdoor sports store on campus. She leaned toward the window happily pointing out oversized carabiners and the Camelbak hydration pack she'd like to have. Our images in the pane glass did not show a pair of lovers. Her animated face reflected a child's Christmas-y pleasure. Below that was the smooth cleave of her breasts. We went back to my place, but in the morning I told her it was finished. Her departure was less than tidy; she threw a book – something by Molière, I think – and called me a molester on her way to slamming out the door.

In Albania with my daughters a sticky sense of shame clings to me as my eyes pause on the fluid legs and curved bottoms of women in the streets. When they are home for holiday visits, Thanksgiving, Easter and a month in summer – their mother gets the rest – I give them space. I don't want to know how close their lives are to those of my students, or the girl down there. They sit at the kitchen table with friends, cold beers in hand, laughing at newfound experiences, bodies moving under their t-shirts with a dangerous power they are already all too aware of. These times I usually stay in my study. God forbid they notice my look linger too long on one of their friends. Under no circumstance do I go have drinks with all of them on these evenings, though from time to time just the three of us do.

I imagine her father doesn't know she's cowering in the bushes right now. Five minutes have passed and I'm starting to think this is a false alarm, that she has merely misinterpreted something. But she hasn't: footsteps sound up the entrance to the seaside promenade. My shirt has already started to soak through, as it had all day under the brutal sun as we explored the ancient Roman ruins at Butrint. Suddenly I'm thankful I didn't wake the girls. I've run through how this could all play out. Every scenario I imagine concludes with her in my room, long body stretched next to mine, our communication eased by uncommon languages.

A man saunters up the steps from the boardwalk, hands in his pockets. He seems older, perhaps my age, but I can't tell for certain in the strange orange streetlight. At the top he pauses and gazes around like a man simply deciding whether he should continue his nighttime stroll one way or the other. He is heavyset and short, a round paunch stretching his polo shirt. What kind of man pursues a woman in this fashion? His self-

assured calm makes me fear for the girl much more than if he'd come tearing up the street in a rage.

He lifts his watch to his face in a languid, almost bored motion. He walks to the middle of the street, stops, looks past the small park and then behind him. A few moments pass. He speaks. His voice is low, and he sounds comical lecturing to an empty street. Behind the words there is mirth, or amusement. Is this some sort of game they play? I don't know what he's saying, but the confident delivery sends a chill rippling down my back.

I glance at the balcony to Jamie and Erin's room. The door is closed, and I envision them in there, safe behind glass from the dusty air out here, their shallow breath warming the room as it mixes with their smells – hiking boots, briny sea water, wet towels and shampoo.

From his pocket the man pulls a phone. Moments later a light goes on in the bushes. She's about to be caught. But no sound comes from the hedge and the light disappears. He hasn't seen it and stares at the phone a while longer.

My muscles are heavy with shaky sense of shock that comes from almost tripping down a flight of stairs. You regain your balance, test your footing. Adrenaline twitches your nerve endings. You realize you've just avoided serious injury by nothing more than simple chance. She must be feeling a similar sensation. I silently tell her just stay put and stay quiet. If you move he will find you.

Voices come towards us from the right. The language is foreign, but the happy chatter of teenagers is recognizable. Four boys laugh and joke and shove their way up the street. From the direction they're walking they can see clearly into the grassy space



where she's hiding, and as they pass the park they stop jostling one another. They've seen her. In my head I beg them, please say nothing, please, and for some reason they don't.

They know something is wrong when a woman is on her knees in the bushes, in the dark.

The boys continue joking, but quieter. They approach the man, who's still holding his phone, and one of them says something to him in the mocking tone of a teenager with the upper hand on an adult. He replies curtly, his voice sharp enough that none of the four responds, even though they're young enough and big enough and numerous enough to fear nothing.

After their sounds recede into the night the man speaks again. His voice is gruff now, imperative, words punctuated by three short pauses. Silence descends on the street, stretching out and over everything until it becomes so loud I fear that when it breaks it will tear a hole in time and space. Even the sea seems to have stopped its perpetual motion. The bushes rustle – so quiet I almost don't hear it. The bushes move again, and she steps out. I want to scream at her not to, but she's already exposed. My head drops. All of a sudden I'm very tired. She looks at him a long moment and then slowly walks toward the steps, her shoes dangling from her hand. I pull myself to my feet. She takes each step gingerly, as if afraid she might stub a bare toe on the cement.

She's about the same height as him, but her shoulders hunch so she appears shorter. They stare at one another for a moment before she looks down at their feet. He says something I can't hear and her face lifts. His fist clenches then unclenches, and his arm raises up to strike her. She turns her head slightly to soften the blow. “*Jo!*” I say. No. My voice echoes down the street and I'm stunned at the sound of it. They are too. His

hand halts in mid-flight and they both look around, confused. *Jo*, I say again, struggling to remember other phrases that won't come.

The man's arm slowly falls to his side. "*Americano?*" he says. He looks at her and then squints back into the darkness where I am. His face is filled with rage. He turns in a half circle, arms raised and palms out, his eyes searching the darkness. I take pleasure in this momentary uncertainty in him. Finally, he finds me. We stare at one another and I can feel him probing. He wants to kill me, or at least a chance to hit me in the face. But it's got nothing to do with the girl. I could have told him not to spit on the ground and he would have given me the same look. I shift my weight on the balcony and his face breaks into a malicious grin. He mutters something to her, shakes his fist, and laughs. He looks up once more, then calmly turns and walks up the street.

I exhale, relief flooding my body. Until I notice her staring up at me. In the light she seems younger, even more endangered, than when I first saw her. Her body sags. "It's okay," I say, but it is far from okay. She looks up the street at his back, the distance between them growing with each step, his hard heels echoing on the cobblestones like a warning. A wave of guilt sweeps over me. I've stopped nothing. I've only made it worse for her, unless she chooses not to go back to him. I motion to the entrance of the hotel. Her face twists in anger and I bite my lip at the futility of trying to communicate certain things without words. "*Jo*," I say gently. Her features soften. She glances up the street. The man is gone and she turns to me. In clear, accented English she says, "Mind your own business, *Americano*." The resignation in her voice jolts me; it's so strange from such a young face. I'm still staring when she turns and takes off running. She bolts up the street after him, her black hair bobbing and shimmering in the lights.

I don't watch her turn the corner. Weak and tired I slump down into the chair. I glance at my girls' balcony and consider climbing over the narrow space that separates mine from theirs. I want to watch them sleeping, quiet and peaceful, like I did when they were toddlers. I would get out of bed while their mother was still asleep and go to their room, where they'd be huddled together in one or the other's bed, two small, soft children with wild blond hair strewn across the pillows, their little fists clenched, one's arms wrapped around the other, as though they were still in the womb together.

Across the street the vacant second and third floors of a building stare at me. The building looks like a jack-o-lantern with the candle blown out, its face twisted into a grin. It feels like a cruel joke. What did you think, the jack-o-lantern says, that you could protect them, protect her?

## THE CIGARETTE

A cloud blotted out the full moon. Across the courtyard the neighbor's apartment glowed like the crimson eye of a hearth oven. The pervasive damp-earth scent of Frankfurt in spring had disappeared. I was sure I could smell violets from the adjacent garden, vaguely resembling her perfume. She moved from room to room, long ebony hair dancing in her wake. I took a deep breath.

“So,” my wife said. “How was the cigarette?”

“What?”

Her fingertip caught a page's edge in her book. “Real smooth, Charles.”

“Oh,” I said. “It was fine.”

Michelle lay in bed behind me, the covers up to her waist, wearing the faded red Victoria Secret flannels I'd given her a few years back. The Christmas-colored underwear of the same gift had never made it out the box. Her voice was sugary. Had I not heard it so often I would've thought her happy. She slapped the book closed.

A silhouette of the woman's back posed in the window. My hand reached for the windowsill and I turned one ear to my wife.

“Charles,” she said, “you stink.”

My feet tingled as I searched for something else to look at.

“Really, if you're going to smoke, just do it. Don't pull this nonsense where you pretend you're emptying the garbage, then come up and wash your hands like it never happened,” she said, and followed with more of the same old standby – how I'm almost forty, how I smoke too much, how I'd promised to stop when we moved to Germany and

again when Jonathan was born. That was six years ago for Pete's sake. It should've been clear that promise was going to stay broken a while longer.

The woman turned to face the window. Directly above, a sliver of moon came from behind the cloud, lighting the courtyard.

I'd never seen her before, never met her until ten minutes ago, which was strange since we'd been in the apartment almost five years. I was downstairs searching my pockets for a lighter. From up the street came the staccato of heels striking cobblestone. It wasn't pumps or flats, clogs or boots, but the focalized click-clack of high heels coming home after midnight.

At the mailboxes in the entranceway she stopped. Her patent leather shoes glistened in the amber lamplight. "*Guten Abend*," she said, her key sliding the mailbox lock open.

I froze, half-full wicker basket in hand, paper recycling bin gaping open, the all-but-forgotten cigarette dangling from my mouth. I studied my watch and said, "*Oder vielleicht gute Nacht*."

Past the hair hanging over her shoulders I saw a smile, or thought so anyway. Her perfume couldn't mask the heady scent of whiskey. I imagined her putting a glass to full lips, wondering what kind she preferred. Single malt with a hint of smoke; neat, no ice.

Three jaunty steps past me she flicked her head and said in her best Queen's English, "I can smoke in my flat."

She went into her building. I lingered, smoking the cigarette down to the filter. On my way up I thought about what I should have said instead of the lame "Well, that's a plus," I'd offered in response. Taking the steps slowly, I avoided out of habit the one with

the loose baseboard between the second and third floors. I'd paused, hoping a few more seconds would disperse the leftover scent of smoke.

"Charles," my wife said. "Are you ignoring me?"

"No," I said. "I'm not."

"Charles, look at me."

I turned halfway. From under the covers she brought one leg, bare up to the hip, where a trace of emerald green lace peeked out. "I'm sorry," she said with the same smile as when she's let me win at chess, which is a slightly more sympathetic version of the one when she's beaten me. Her eyes followed mine to the lace band.

"Recognize them?" she asked.

"I do."

"I found them while I was straightening up the closet the other day," she said. A light blush rose in her cheeks, the same coloration of days gone by, when we were younger and I could make her blush more easily, without thinking about it or even meaning to. The blanket shifted, uncovering more fabric.

A phone pressed to her ear, the black-haired woman was sliding into the jacket she'd removed just minutes before. I envisioned her strolling into the lobby of a posh hotel, her steps fluid on the marbled floors.

"Don't even think about trying to go down for another smoke," Michelle said.

The woman's head tipped back, her mouth open. She was laughing. And then she wasn't. She went rigid. My face warmed, and a long moment passed as we studied one another from a distance. She cinched the belt of her jacket and turned from the window.

"What are you looking at?"

“The moon,” I said. “Can you see it?”

From the bed, directly opposite the window, she could see the giant orb alone in a dark sky. “It’s beautiful.”

“It is,” I said, turning to her after the heat on my face had subsided. The dull echo of the woman’s steps reached our apartment.

“Amazing,” my wife said.

A hiccup leapt in my throat. “What is?”

“How the moon seems like it’s right outside, so close we could almost touch it.”

I nodded faintly as the rhythms from the courtyard rose and fell, then disappeared.

“Charles,” she said. “Forget about the cigarette and come to bed. Please.”

I left the window open and pulled the curtains as far closed as they would go.

Through the space that was left, we watched together as the moon passed from view. We made love in the dark, the once-warm air cool at my back. Afterwards, Michelle curled into my chest. Her breath grew deep and I felt the telltale tremble of her leg against mine. She fell asleep, but I did not.

## THE PRICE OF WATER

This wasn't my dumpy hotel mattress. The sheets were soft, unfamiliar Egyptian cotton. Outside, the low street noise of Tiranë's Sunday slowly rose in pitch. Orjana lay on her side, knees tucked to chest, the back of her naked torso calling out to me. Her pale skin glowed smooth, except for a spot just above the sheet draped over her narrow waist, a four inch scar I'd never seen before, pink and frowning in the morning light. I realized disconcertingly that I knew almost nothing about her. Family – none. Work – secretary and foreign affairs liaison for the Transportation Ministry. Birthplace – a small village in the Albanian north, near the Croatian border. That was it.

Well, I knew other things. The way her small hands played across my chest. The way she twirled a lock of hair round her finger when she thought no one was looking. Her lilting, rhythmic accent. Her habit of watching me eat, fork poised above her plate. If away from her more than twenty-four hours, I started to experience a seasickness-like vertigo, even though I'd never been seasick in my life – not on a choppy Lake Erie, near where I grew up, not on the ferry ride across the Adriatic from Italy to Albania I'd taken several weeks before. Never. That, I knew.

I traced the uneven depression of her scar. Halfway through the short arc she gasped and I snatched my hand away. The floor was littered with pillows, some plush and squishy, others firm, square, round, a couple the size and shape of coffee cans. They'd gotten shoved off as we made love under a warm breeze drifting in through the window.

Afterwards, she'd trembled in my arms. I was no expert, but I was pretty sure it had little to do with my abilities to move her to orgasm. It was the kind of quaking that



comes when the body has grown too cold, and strange because the night was hot, our bodies slickened with sweat. I had asked softly what was wrong. *Nothing*, she'd whispered. *Darling, hold me, please.*

She rolled over. I pulled her to me and kissed her forehead. She spoke a few garbled words in Albanian. *Good morning*, I said.

*Good morning*, she said, and tucked her head into the crook of my shoulder. *You smell good.*

*We should go away next weekend*, I said. *Somewhere nice.* The muscles in her back tensed. *What's wrong?*

*Nothing*, she said quietly.

*It's just a weekend away. Nothing major.*

*I'm not ready.*

*Ready for what?*

*Can we not talk about this right now?*

We lay in silence for a few minutes. She'd been jumpy and anxious for the past week, but last night she let me sleep over and we made love, both firsts. And now she'd iced over because I suggested we go away for the weekend?

*You want some coffee, darling?*

*Coffee?*

*Let's drink coffee in bed.*

*Okay*, I said.

She left the room naked, bouncing on the balls of her feet like a little girl. She came back a few minutes later, her face composed, happy almost, but stiff. She set two mugs on the nightstand and slid back into bed.

*Is everything okay?* I asked.

*Fine. You want sugar?*

*Uh, sure.*

*How's the project going?* she asked.

*It's going, I guess.*

*Did something happen?*

*No, we're making progress. I just didn't think it would be like this.*

She giggled.

*I wish it were funny. Equipment has gone missing; a main line was severed the other day. Two or three people in the village keep pestering me to rig the system so they get more water – one guy even offered me cash and two chickens. What am I supposed to do with a live chicken?*

*Darling, this isn't America.*

*I'm starting to see that. Last week, some official came sniffing around. You know what he wanted?*

*Money.*

*Exactly.*

*You gave it to him?*

*Hell no.*

She stared at me. *Why not?*

*The guy was crooked as all hell. Just the sight of him made me want to punch something. The hand rubbing and fawning and – man, it was straight out of a bad movie.*

*You should have. You won't finish the project without it.*

*I won't do it. This is my project. I don't want it to go like that.*

*You're adorable when you're like this,* she said, taking my face in her hands. *So cute.*

*I'm not trying to be cute.*

*I know. Just have Nesti give him the money.*

*He probably already has. I don't get it.*

*You will,* she said. She took my hand and rested it on her stomach. *Do you miss home?*

*Pittsburgh?*

She smiled. *Yes, Pitt-is-berg,* she said. She bit her lower lip, then brought my hand to her mouth, kissed the tips of my fingers.

*Not when I'm here with you I don't.*

I hadn't wanted to come to Albania at all. I'd been minding my business back in February, trying to get work done in the Pittsburgh office when Rex sauntered over to my desk, thumbs hooked through his belt loops. Rex owned the firm. We did water treatment consulting. There were four of us, all engineers, and Rex's wife handled the books.

“So Buddy,” he said. “How you doing?”

“Good,” I said.

“I got a special project for you. Something I think you'll like.”

Whenever he came to me with this *buddy*-stuff talking about *special projects* and something he thought I'd *like*, I could pretty much count on some sort of shaft. "What's that, Boss?"

"I told you about that 'Boss' business. You ever been to Europe?"

"Europe?"

"You know – high culture, pastries, cheese, that sort of shit."

"I backpacked Europe the summer after I finished undergrad."

"Good, good," he said, nodding like I'd already agreed to whatever he was cooking up. "I've got a project for us in Europe."

"Where?" I asked, noting his judicious use of the word *us*. He studied a hangnail on his finger.

"Albania."

"Albania? What kind of *project* could we possibly have there?"

"Relax, Bud," he said. "Just listen for a minute, will you. It's something we can feel good about. Like humanitarian aid."

He went on to *brief* me about it. The idea – installing a water delivery and purification system – had come from Eddie, a friend of his in Pittsburgh who was originally from this village in Albania. The guy had run away from the People's Communist Army at seventeen, spent a week hiding out in the forests before sneaking into Greece and requesting asylum (they would have executed him on the spot had he gone back). Eventually he made it to America. He opened a Mediterranean restaurant, then two more, and said he wanted to do something for the people in his village, where his parents still lived (the Army had spared them, but killed one of his brothers).

“Why me?” I asked.

“Uh, you’re the only one that can really go for a few months.”

“A few months?”

“A couple months. You could be away for a couple months, right?”

I knew what he meant. I’d only been with the firm a year. I was the only one that wasn’t married or had kids. I rented my place and had recently called time on my girlfriend of three years. Kind of had to when I walked in to see her bouncing up and down on some guy’s cock like it was a pogo stick. A big pogo stick.

“And you’re young,” Rex said. “It could be an adventure.”

“Sounds shady. What the hell do I know about Albania? I can barely even speak the French I studied in school.”

“They don’t speak French there. We’ll have a translator for you. You’ll just have to consult, you know, kinda like what it says in your job description. It’ll be no problem.” Sure, I thought. No problem.

Of course there had been problems, and they’d persisted, which was why, after coffee in bed with Orjana, I was back at the village on a frigging Sunday. Nesti, the construction guys, and I stood above a narrow, four-foot deep trench that ran almost two hundred yards from the pumping station to the epicenter of the village.

I’d made the decision to bury the main water lines. No one seemed pleased with the idea – it hadn’t been in the original plans or budget. I was getting the feeling they just wanted to do this whole thing on the cheap. Nesti and the guys had been grunting and sweating for three days now, their faces caked in dirt and dust. When I’d told Rex he’d flipped.

“McMichael, what’s with this Boy Scout shit?” he said.

“Protocol.”

“Don’t tell me about *protocol*. Just get the damn job done.” This was after I’d told him the project was a week behind schedule. “You trying to stretch this thing out? What’d you do, find yourself a nice piece of trim or something?”

“It’s only the main line,” I said. “It’s the right move.”

“I don’t care. Finish this and get your ass back here. The whole thing is supposed to be done in a couple weeks.”

“Hey,” I said. “How long have you known Eddie?”

“What?”

“Eddie – how long you known him?”

“I don’t know. Ten years maybe.”

“Is he a stand up guy?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Nothing. I just don’t know why he’d associate with a guy like this Nesti character. I think—”

“Do me a favor,” he’d said. “Just finish. Is that too much to ask?”

“Okay,” I’d said, and had gone back to work.

Nesti and the others were sitting on one of the excavator’s steel tracks, drinking water and smoking. *So, when is that purification system supposed to come?* I asked.

Nesti said something to the other guys, who all laughed.

*Purifier?* I said, raising my voice.

Nesti's reptilian eyes flicked to my face for second, then bounced around the village before stopping at the ground at my feet. He shrugged.

*What's that supposed to mean?*

*Boss said forget purifier, he said. Do system without it.*

*That wasn't the plan.*

*No one ever said anything about a purifier.*

*That's why we tested the water.*

*The water is fine. People drink it for many years.*

*The arsenic levels are way too high, there are contaminants. It's not drinking water. The well doesn't lie deep enough. You know that.*

*I know what I'm told, he said.*

*And I'm telling you we need a purifier.*

*Then get one.*

*I'm going to call Eddie, I said.*

*Fine. I'll give you my phone.*

*You're going to get a purifier, or I'm done here. The deal was drinking water.*

Nesti shot from his perch. I stumbled backwards, my hands going up. The three workers stood up and looked at one another. A woman hoeing in a garden paused, the tool poised above her head.

*Listen, Chief. This isn't America. His breath, hot with the acrid stench of cigarettes, rasped over my face. You better understand that.*

*You're right, I said. Fuck this. You all finish this goddamn project yourselves. I turned away and started walking the village in a daze. The midday sun had grown*

mercilessly hot, the dusty air catching like pebbles in my throat. I stopped at the edge of a road, hands on knees to catch my breath.

I was somewhere on the outskirts of the village. The hillside sloped away from the road, tall grass and shrubbery below swamped in garbage. Blue and green and white plastic bags flapped in the wind; plastic containers, dirty rags and old tires lay everywhere; an archaic engine block was embedded in the earth like a man-made boulder. The dump reeked of waste and decomposition. Chances were, whatever was breaking down there was eventually making its way into the ground water.

The condition of the place almost didn't make sense. The village sat at the eastern base of Dajti Mountain, a mere fifteen miles outside the beautiful capitol city of Tiranë, but was borderline third-world all the way. Goats, cows, and chickens roamed freely. People lived in small cinderblock dwellings with corrugated tin roofs, and tended anemic gardens. When I first arrived I thought they were kidding. A few yards up the mountainside was a small shack with a pump to draw water from a subterranean collection basin. The pump's output hose split immediately into six other hoses of various sizes which snaked their way through the front door, down the incline and spread like tentacles into the village. The pump was easily half a century old and completely rusted over. The system was supposed to service the entire village, but everything – pumps, joints, lines – was forever dumping half its on the ground. So we'd installed a new pump, ran new lines through the village, and installed an underground line to the water-treatment building. Only now there was no purification system coming. I packed my stuff into the rental car and sped off.

\* \* \*



As I walked over to Orjana's on Monday night part of me couldn't believe it'd been almost six weeks, and a month since I'd know her. The first couple weeks had been painfully uncomfortable – no one to talk to, more or less ignored on the street, long grueling hours at the job – but lately it'd been pretty cool, except for the bullshit at the village.

When we'd first gone out, I'd found it charming that she insisted on having me over for dinner rather than going out. She'd opened the door and out wafted scents of cumin and tamarind that tickled at the back of my nose. We went into the kitchen and drank the wine I'd brought while she finished up the food.

She was perched on high heels, canary yellow, and just above the white crest of her foot began tapered jeans, which raced the round curves of her calves, up her thighs and over the supple bubble of her bottom. A silk blouse, an easy sort of aqua, hung from her shoulders. Two miniature ivory tusks dangled from her ears, swaying as she slid from refrigerator to stove to sink and back again.

*Todd, what are you looking at?*

*Huh?* I said.

*You just stopped talking.*

*Oh, sorry. You...you look beautiful.*

Color rose on her cheeks. *You're sweet. Thank you.*

The table was already set, and she brought three steaming dishes over. One held brightly colored vegetables – peppers, squashes, red onion, okra maybe – another some sort of meat in a brown sauce. The last was filled with rice. *What are we having?* I asked.

*Goat,* she said.

*Goat?*

Laughing, she said, *Yes, Mr. American, goat. Try it. I've never had anyone disappointed by it.*

*Goat it is.* Turned out it was good. Better than good, actually.

I climbed the steps to her apartment and knocked. No answer. A strange worry I couldn't source crept up on me. We'd spent more than half the nights in the past month together and she'd never not been there when I came by. I waited another half hour or so, left a note and went back to the hotel. It took half a dozen Heinekens before I could fall asleep.

Tuesday and Wednesday brought more hassles at the Village (still no purifier and the excavator had broken), and still no word from Orjana. By Thursday night I couldn't take it. I called the Colonel. He told me he'd be at Take Five, the only jazz club in the city.

The Colonel had introduced me to Orjana. I'd been walking the streets on a Saturday night the second weekend in-country. I passed a bar full of people, laughter streaming from the door when the music died down.

The place was all cocktail tables pushed too close together and people shoulder to shoulder at the bar. On a short stage next to the DJ booth a couple girls shared a microphone and sung a blasphemous rendition of *Come Together* by The Beatles. The crowd sang along. Words scrolled across a television screen to the girls' left.

The air in the room was warm and moist, heavy with cigarette smoke wafting through the stage lights. About three-quarters of the people were women.

*Pretty nice, eh?* An older guy with white hair and a sharp nose grinned at me from across a small waist-high table, his pockmarked face all pores in the hazy light. This was the Colonel, a heavily accented South African wearing a suit and cravat in a karaoke bar, looking every bit the evil arch-enemy in a low-budget action flick. *What's your name, mate?*

*Todd.*

*Stuart, he said. But you can call me Colonel. Sure is nice to meet a bloke who can speak proper English.* He told me he was doing security work for the government, and slid a card across the table. 'Colonel Stuart Koske' it read. *How's Albania treating you?*

I started in on how gorgeous the land was, but a couple seconds later we were already back on the women.

The Colonel scanned the crowd. *This place is pretty prime for that.*

*Fantastic to look at, maybe. Not so easy to talk to.*

He leaned in. *Takes a little while for'em to warm up. You want to speak to one?*

*No thanks, I'm cool.*

*Consider it done,* he said. He pushed off through the crowd. A couple minutes later he was back, a girl in tow.

*Hi,* the girl said. She held out her small hand. The delicate bones and soft skin felt strange against my calluses and thick fingers. Rich black hair cascaded past her shoulders, framing an alabaster face and high, rounded cheeks flushed rouge, a short nose under wide-set eyes, and lashes so long she seemed to blink in slow-mo.

Her mouth caught my attention – a small rosebud with perky crimson lips that pursed unconsciously every few seconds. I bent to her. *I'm Orjana*, she'd said, before the Karaoke music blasted away again and I'd lost the words coming from her mouth.

I hadn't spoken to the Colonel since. Frankly, the guy creeped me out. At Take Five he was where I'd expected: bellied up to the bar. *What's up, Colonel*, I said.

*Hey mate, have a seat.* He ordered us a couple scotches. *So how's life in Albania?*

*Not so good*, I said.

*A bit of trouble?*

*Kind of. It's Orjana.*

*The beautiful Orjana*, he said quietly, staring at the musicians setting up on stage.

*A fine woman. One of my favorites.*

*What the hell does that mean?*

*No need to get pissy. You seem out of sorts.*

*You could say that.*

*Over her?*

*Yeah.*

The Colonel frowned and took a swallow of his drink. *You'll get used to it.*

*It's not like that. I just can't find her.*

*Take it as a sign and leave it be.* He hunched over his drink, staring into the glass like an overgrown elf jaundiced in the bar lights.

*I can't. I haven't slept in two days.*

*Listen*, he said. *Just forget her. The earth is populated with lots of women. You want me to find you another one?*

*Christ, man! No. I just want to find her.*

He sighed and looked clinically at me. From the stage leapt errant, dissonant sounds – the low twang of a bass, a trumpet burst in E major, a medley of keys from low to high and back again on the piano.

*Give me a couple days, the Colonel said eventually. No promises though.*

*Thanks, I said.*

*Now drink your scotch. It'll make you feel better.*

I woke up the next morning sprawled across the bed, my head absolutely pounding. The cell phone rang unceasingly on the nightstand. It was America calling, so I shut it off. I got some water, gulped it down and passed back out. Later, after a shower and a lamb döner, I listened to my messages. Several from Rex indicating that if I didn't get my ass in gear he was going to fire me, and then a final one, in a quieter voice, telling me I'd gotten my wish: Eddie had OK'd the purifier.

I lumbered down to the car and drove to the site. Nesti and the others were in the village, the excavator arm raising, turning, dumping, digging. The trench was almost finished. I sat in the building going over the plans, alternatively wanting to puke up the döner and call Orjana, the Colonel, fucking Rex, anyone.

They came back to the building. The three workers nodded, tight-lipped, as they trudged past. Nesti stopped in the doorway. *Purifier comes Monday*, he said.

*Okay, I said.*

*Okay then.* He turned and left.

That evening I walked *Rr. Ismail Quemali*, with its pristine government buildings and quaint cafés, to *Bulevardi Dëshmorët-e Kombi*, the wide avenue that ran from the University district to Skanderbeg Square. I was consumed with thoughts of Orjana. It'd been less than twenty-four hours since meeting with the Colonel, but I'd heard nothing from him.

Evening had brought cooler air and throngs of people. Beneath a towering mural of Communist folk heroes that adorned the façade of the National History Museum, children and tourists zipped around the central square on miniature ATVs, the tires slipping on the dusty granite. People streamed in and out of the small bazaar at the far end. A woman entered a pay phone booth and stood, waiting, until the phone rang. The denizens of Tiranë, all of them it seemed, strolled by holding hands or sucking pleasantly on little cups of ice cream. A stray dog turned a corner. The teeming humanity swelled, countless voices and footsteps and car horns mingling into one momentous force. I climbed the stone steps of the Opera House and sat, the marble warm against my butt.

The phone in my pocket rang. I picked up. *Look here, Rex!*

*Todd, darling, is that you?*

*Oh my God. Orjana, where are you?*

*Vlora.*

*Vlora? Why?*

*I'm sorry, Todd. I had to leave for a few days.*

*I don't understand.*

*I know. I'm sorry.*

*Are you okay?*

*Yes.*

*I'm coming to see you, I said.*

*No. You shouldn't.*

*Orjana, please. I was worried sick about you.*

*You're sick?*

*No, no. I was worried. It's a figure of speech. But it wasn't, not at all. I'd felt queasy and weak for days. Never mind. Tell me where you are and I'll come.*

*Don't you have to work tomorrow?*

*Forget work. She told me the name of the hotel and the street. I'll be there in a few hours.*

*Todd?*

*Yes?*

*I'm sorry.*

The trip took longer than it should have. I blew a tire trying to avoid a goat on some miserable pot-hole infested road just outside Tiranë. Half a dozen wrong turns later, I finally arrived. Dawn had just surfaced, her pink fingers stretching into an iron sky.

The little *Pension* sat at the end of a narrow dirt road on a rocky drop-off overlooking the sea. A tight path wound down the front face of the hill to an isolated beach. I knocked. The curtains at the window moved ever so slightly, and the locks on the door clicked open.

I was shocked. She looked the same, almost. I'd been envisioning all sorts of possibilities, but not this, not her face beaming, blood red lips, eyes mascaraed, lined,

tweezed and whatever else, full hair flowing. I picked her up. She seemed lighter, and when I set her down I could see the gauntness in her face, cheekbones sharper, faint shadows peeking from the makeup under her eyes. *What's with the makeup, love?*

*I wanted to*, she said. *For you*. For me? I thought. *I was just sitting and waiting*, she said.

*Sorry it took so long.*

*I didn't mean it like that.*

*It's okay*. I kissed her. Her lips felt blessedly the same. *What happened? You've been here all week? Doing what?*

*Come, sit.*

The air was close, lingering perfume and shampoo losing the battle against the smell of worn carpet. *Why didn't you call sooner?*

*I couldn't. This is very hard for me. You have to understand. I, I...* She stopped and reached for my face, her small hand rubbing against the week-old beard.

*Orjana, please.*

Her head dropped. *My name isn't Orjana.*

*What?*

*Orjana is a name I took a couple years ago.*

*Why?*

*To hide from my husband.*

*Your ex-husband?*

She chuckled bitterly. *No darling, my husband. I'm married.*

I just stared at her.



*I was going to tell you. I just didn't have a chance.*

*Because you had to leave.*

*Yes.*

*Why?*

*I saw his brother in Tiranë. I was so afraid they'd find me.*

*Why would you be hiding?*

*If they found me I'd be dead. Or worse, I'd have to go back. Do you understand?*

*Not really.*

She slid farther up the bed and leaned against the headboard, legs folded under her. *I left my husband a couple years ago*, she started, her voice so quiet I could barely hear it above the whirring ceiling fan. I reached up and pulled the string. The air stilled.

*When I left him I was Dafina. Now, I'm Orjana.*

*Are you sure?* I said.

*Yes.*

*Did he hurt you?*

*What do you call being forced to have sex? Having no choice in anything? Living only to cook, clean, and have children?*

*Why did you marry him in the first place?*

*Todd, you are joking, yes? I had no choice.*

*You couldn't say no?*

*He bought me from my parents when I was sixteen. Bought! The only other choice was to become a sworn virgin.*

*That sounds like fun.*

*Big fun. You swear celibacy and can have most of the rights of a man.*

*What kind of place is this? Isn't Albania trying to join the EU for Christssake?*

*Forget the EU. What do they say in English, 'Old habits die hard?'* She gazed out the window. *It's the kind of place where my own brother would present a bullet to my husband as a wedding gift.*

My legs went all rubbery. What kind of family did that? What kind of man would want to keep this woman all bottled up. I couldn't fathom it. Take away her beauty, infectious giggle and wholesome sexuality, and what were you left with? A husk, a shell, an abandoned building. I sank back onto the bed. *A bullet, huh?* She nodded. *That's fucked up.*

She was crying, unabashedly. Her lips weren't trembling; no muffled sounds escaped her throat. Just hot, silent tears. I gently drew her to me, and we stayed like that until my back ached. When we parted, Orjana looked up at me and smiled. She wiped the tears from my face, and I felt no shame over them.

*We have to do something,* I said.

*Yes,* she said. *We must go to the beach.*

*The beach?*

She nodded, a faint smile on her lips. *Darling, I've been in this room for almost a week.*

*Uh, I didn't bring any swim trunks.*

I awoke in an empty bed. I called to the bathroom. Orjana was gone. Outside a gust of hot dry air rushed over my body – afternoon in Albania. I scanned the beach, went to the edge of the open-air walkway and checked the road. No Orjana.

I sank onto the edge of the bed. We had come in from the beach for a nap. We'd fooled around a bit, but when I went to remove her underwear she said she couldn't. *Oh, right*, I'd said. *I'm sorry. It's too soon.* *No, it's not that*, she'd said. *It's just that time.* We fell asleep, and now she was gone.

My phone rang. A U.S. number, but not one I recognized. "Hello?"

"Todd, it's Eddie. What's up?"

"Nothing much."

"I hear the project is almost finished," he said.

"Um, yeah, a couple more weeks I think. Look, Eddie, I'm in the middle of something. Can I call you back?"

"Don't worry, this will only take a minute. I'm thinking of expanding the operation," he said. What fucking operation? I was at the edge of the civilized world, the woman who was here when I went to sleep was gone to who the hell knows where, and Eddie's calling from the other side of the globe talking *operation* and *expansion*? "You there?"

"Yeah."

"Good. I was thinking of developing similar projects in other parts of the homeland. I'd like you to stay on, be my lead project manager. Rex is fine with it. You could even get your job back whenever you return."

My head hurt. I needed a drink, some water, but didn't know if I could trust what would come out of the faucet. "Uh, Eddie. Give me a couple days to think and see where we're at with the current project. I'll get back to you."

"Good. Do that," he said and hung up.

I was sliding into my pants when Orjana walked through the door. *Jesus, where've you been?*

*Sorry, darling. I just went to get us some food, and...* She reached into her purse.

*Underwear?*

*No silly. Swim trunks.*

She was holding some spandex contraption that looked several sizes too small. *Is that a Speedo?*

*What's Speedo?*

*Never mind. You want me to wear that, out on the beach?*

*It's all they had.*

*Why didn't you tell me you were leaving?*

*I don't have to tell you I'm leaving.*

*That's not what I meant. I was just worried.*

*You looked so peaceful sleeping. Come, let's eat and go down to the beach. It's hot outside.*

We ate and I squeezed into the "swim trunks." I was sure my junk was going to slip out with every other step. *Very sexy*, she said, giggling.

Under a full sun we waded into the water, washed away what felt like years of grime. We climbed out and lay on towels. Near the water's edge, a child was digging a

hole in the sand. Every few seconds a wave would roll gently up the shore, refilling the hole. He called to his mother, who replied encouragingly in Albanian. *Do you have any children?* I asked.

Orjana lay beside me, on her back, shoulder nestled against my chest. Eyes closed, she smiled. *I can feel your heart racing. No, darling, I don't have any children.*

*You want children?*

She nodded, eyes still closed. *When the time is right.*

*Did you get that scar on your back from him?*

She turned onto her side, her back to me so I could see the jagged curve. *It's from when I was younger,* she said quietly. I didn't believe her, but left it alone.

We were silent for a time. The child was catching water in his hands, throwing it up and letting it pour down on his face like rain. He took a handful of the sea and held it before his face. He looked furtively at his mother, now engrossed in a magazine, then brought it his lips. A moment later he gagged, water spewing everywhere as he bent forward, coughing. *You should come with me. We should go to America.*

*It won't work,* she said.

*It can,* I said.

*Todd, I don't have any papers. I'm still married.*

*We can get you a divorce. They have those here, right?*

*My husband doesn't know what that means. He'd rather see me dead.*

*Orjana, you can't keep living like this.*

*What choice do I have?*

*There must be a way. We could ask the Colonel, maybe he could help.*

*The Colonel. I didn't much like the sound of her voice when she said it. I don't want any more help from him.*

*But he'd probably be willing to.*

*For a price. His fees are high. He's not as nice as you think.*

*His fees?*

*Darling, let's not talk about it, please.*

I let it go, but later, back in the hotel room in bed, after we'd made love in the shower and she was lying in my arms, I couldn't help myself. *I have to go back to Tiranë tomorrow.*

She pressed tighter against my body.

*Will you come?* I asked.

*If you want me to.*

*I do. Is it safe?*

*No.*

*Orjana, then why won't you come with me to America.*

*I can't. It would just be the same.*

*I'm not like your husband.*

*I trust you, darling, I do, but look at where I'll be – a country I don't know, fake papers, no work, no friends. I'll only have you.*

*Isn't that enough?*

*Todd, I can't leave my home.*

*I don't want to control you. I just want to be with you.*

*Then don't go.*

How could I stay? The question haunted me all the next day, even as she sat beside me in the car, the two of us holding hands like lovers on the way back from a weekend in the countryside. We arrived in Tiranë after dark, and in front of her apartment she asked me to come up.

In the morning we woke up together, had breakfast in silence. I dropped her at the Transportation Ministry and waited until she was inside. At the job site, Nesti and the others were waiting. The three workers looked uneasily at me. Nesti studied the ground. *Let me guess, I said. No purifier?*

*This afternoon, Nesti said.*

*Well, there's still work to do. Let's go inside and look at the plans.*

*Some people are waiting for you, he said.*

Inside were four old men and three younger ones all staring coldly. The small room reeked of sweat and live animals. I went back to the door. *Nesti, come on, man.* His face was terror stricken. For a second I thought he was going to take off running.

As he entered the whole group started shouting at once. They seemed to press in on us until Nesti found his voice. *They want to know why.*

*Why what?*

*Why they have to pay for the water now.*

*What? What did you do?*

He put his hands up and shook his head. *Nothing.*

An old man stepped forward, the same one who had tried to give me the chickens. He shouted, his crooked, spindly finger wagging in my face, so close I could smell the

nicotine on his yellow-brown fingertips. All I could understand was the word *American* and the contempt in his voice as he spat it at me. Nesti said something to him. The old man pulled a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and waived it in my face. Nesti took it. *He says this morning a government official came around with this notice. They want to know why they must now pay for water that used to be free. They were told nothing would change. They cannot afford it.*

*What the fuck! Who's responsible for this? You know what, never mind. Tell him I don't fucking know how this happened. Tell them it's not my fucking problem! You hear me?* I turned to the group. **NOT MY FUCKING PROBLEM!**

Outside, I slumped against the car, blinded by a brilliant sun and a fury pumping so much blood through my head that the buildings and road and trees seemed to undulate. I vomited. Half-digested breakfast splattered over the dusty road. In an instant the dirt had siphoned away all the liquid, milk and bile and water alike, leaving only a handful of cereal grains in a circle of moisture-darkened earth.

I let myself into Orjana's apartment with the key she'd given me that morning in the car. She didn't say why, but I could see in her eyes she didn't want to have to answer the door should someone come knocking. *It's that bad?* I'd asked. She just put her hand on mine before checking the street up and down. Only then did she open the door.

The apartment was dimly lit by a few errant rays of a fading sun. I didn't think she was home. Then I saw her, curled up on the couch, her hands at her throat, staring vacantly across the room. I kneeled beside her. *What's wrong?* I asked. *Orjana?* I



touched her shoulder and her eyes flicked to my face and then away. They were red-rimmed and puffy.

*He's coming,* she said in a hoarse monotone.

The hollow voice tightened my skin. *How do you know?*

*He was outside today where you dropped me off.*

*Your husband?*

*His brother. I'm sure he's on his way, if he isn't here already.*

We needed to get out of there. I got her up and out of the apartment. She was slow, lethargic. We went to my hotel. The woman at the front desk gave me a quizzical, suspicious look, as if she recognized Orjana. I glared at her as we went up the stairs.

Orjana collapsed onto the bed. *You should sleep,* I said. *I'm going to go back to the apartment for a couple hours to see if anyone turns up.*

*Please don't leave me here.*

*We can't keep doing this,* I said. *Something has to be done. You'll be safe here. I'll only be gone a few hours. Try and rest.*

I had no intention whatsoever of going back to her apartment. I walked into Take Five figuring I'd probably have to call the Colonel, but it turned out he was there. Same seat, same drink.

*Hey Colonel.*

*Young American,* he said. *Your grim visage tells me this isn't a social call. Drink?*

*Whiskey,* I said. *Thanks for finding Orjana for me.*

*I didn't.*

This stopped me for a second.

*What can I do for you?* he asked.

*You helped Orjana get away from her family, right?*

Behind his veiled eyes something burned intensely before he quashed it. The rest of his slack face remained impassive. *I did.*

*Well, we have a problem with that.*

*I wouldn't concern yourself with things you know nothing about. Just serve your time and be off. It'd be better for you.*

*What are you talking about?*

*You should ask her that.*

*I did. I think her husband has found her. She's afraid.*

*Are you?*

*Who wouldn't be? I need this taken care of.*

*Is that so?*

*Can you help?*

The Colonel took a long pull from his cigarette then washed it down with Scotch, smoke billowing from his nostrils and into the glass as he swallowed. *Perhaps,* he said.

*I'll pay you.*

*To do what?*

*Whatever's necessary.*

*Whatever?*

*Yes.*

He swiveled his bar stool around and faced me. *Kid, I like you. I really do. So I'm going to ask you once. Just once. Do you have any idea what you're getting into? Any at all?*

I had no fucking clue what I was getting into. My skin was crawling and it felt like I hadn't taken a full breath in days. I didn't know why all this was happening, or what could or couldn't be controlled. I just wanted her safe. *Orjana said you could take care of this.*

The Colonel almost hacked up a lung laughing at that. I studied him, unsure what the hell was so funny. *I doubt that*, he said. *She's not a big fan of my methods or my brand of help.*

*Colonel, just take care of it.*

*Whatever it takes?*

*Whatever. I don't care if you break their legs or if they wind up—* I stopped. The Colonel's eyebrows arched.

He slowly shook his head. *Well, it's not every day I'm treated to a surprise like that.*

I nodded and turned to go.

*Hey, kid.*

*What?*

*You forgot something.*

*How much?*

*Five thousand, U.S.*

*Fine*, I said and walked out. I almost collapsed on the sidewalk outside. I had nowhere near five grand, but figured I knew where I could get it. I took out my mobile phone and dialed Eddie's number.

The next morning I called Nesti and told him I wasn't able to make it out, but would be there tomorrow. I hadn't reached Eddie the night before and he hadn't gotten back to me yet. We spent most of the day in the hotel room. Orjana didn't get out of bed. She'd grown pale, her dull eyes roving the ceiling or staring vacantly out the balcony windows. I brought her food and she would take a bite and leave the rest. I was fidgety as hell. Finally, at dusk, I told her I'd run to her apartment and get her some things. When I got back she was sitting up in bed.

I sat beside her. The phone rang. It was Eddie so I went out onto the balcony to take it, slid the door gently closed behind me. I told him I'd be staying on, but would need an advance on my salary. He said okay. No questions asked. When I turned to go back in, Orjana was standing on the balcony. I hadn't heard the door open.

*What have you done?* she asked.

*I told Eddie I would be staying.*

*Why?*

*I want to be here with you.*

*I thought you said you couldn't work for someone like him. That he was crooked and dishonest. That you felt sick over him lying to the villagers just to make money.*

*What else can I do?*

*You shouldn't have. It's too dangerous here. My husband...* her words trailed off and she looked out over my shoulder at the darkening sky.

*I don't think that will be a problem anymore.*

*How so?*

*I spoke to the Colonel. He's going to take care of it.*

She shuddered violently, as if someone had a hold of her and was shaking for all they were worth. Her face twisted in anger until I almost didn't recognize it anymore. She turned and rushed into the room and started repacking what little she'd already unpacked. I rushed in after her, tried to embrace her. She lashed out at me and scrambled over the bed.

*No! How could you?* She pressed up against the wall. And quieter, *How could you?*

*I had to. For you. For us. How else was this supposed to work?* I think I was shouting, but can't be sure. I had no sense of proportion, scope, distance. Though separated by only a few feet, we seemed as far apart as if I was back in America.

*You know what you've done for us? You've sold us. If he didn't own me already, he owns me now. And you, too.*

*What are you talking about? He doesn't own us.*

*Todd, the Colonel is a fucking mercenary, she shouted. He'll take everything. Oh god, how could you do this. I told you not to involve him.*

*I don't believe you, I said, coming around the bed.*

*Stay away from me!*

I'd never heard her voice like that. I'd never heard anyone's voice like that, except in the movies maybe.

*You're all the same, she said miserably. All of you.*

*Who?* I said, taking a step toward her.

*You! Nesti, the Colonel, my husband, this Eddie person – all of you. You'd sell your soul to get what you want.*

*Wouldn't you? Haven't you already? Look at where you are.*

That seemed to hurt her. *I have*, she said. *More than you'll ever know.*

*Orjana, please. This is crazy.* I took another step toward her and she seemed to shrink from me, terror in her eyes, as if I was some stranger out to mug her.

*You don't understand. You know how I've paid for his help? You have any idea? Sex, Todd. That's how.*

*What?*

*How else was I supposed to pay? He hid me, kept me safe, got me a job. What do you think I was doing at the Karaoke bar that night? It wasn't often, but sometimes he'd ask me to meet someone. Usually some cabinet official or visiting businessman. You – I think he was just happy you spoke English.* She was stuffing the rest of her things into the bag again.

*Stop it!* I said. *I don't care about what you had to do. I can live with that. I would gladly sell a piece of my soul for you.*

*Todd, you already have.*

Something in her voice shocked me. It was empty. No fear, no hurt, no anguish, just resignation. Inside me boiled a feeling I'd never felt before. It seemed to grow and

expand, pushing against my insides until it felt it would burst through my skin. *Then all I can do is hope to God I get it back.*

*I can't stay here,* she said.

*You're not leaving. We can be together now.* My arms went to embrace her. She shoved me in the chest with a force I didn't expect and broke for the door. I grabbed her wrist and pulled her to me, her back pressed against my chest. My arms locked. She struggled. *You can't leave me,* I said. *You can't.*

She writhed and kicked and screamed but I didn't let go. I was panting, chest heaving and muscles tightening, but I had her. She grew quiet and her body started shaking. She was whimpering, and I had to strain to hear her low voice above the blood pumping in my ears. *Please, Todd. Please, please, let me go. I can't do this. Please.*

Slowly, I felt my body uncoil. She grew still. I leaned in to kiss her, or maybe smell her hair, to tell her that I loved her. Her head ducked forward and then slammed back into my face. I saw nothing but black. The next moment she was gone, the door open in her wake.

I stumbled after her. Out in the hall she was running hard and fast. I took two quick steps, then stopped. The sight of her running, running as I'd never seen any woman do before, not the least from me, turned my legs to iron. They wouldn't go any farther. *Orjana,* I called.

At the end of the hallway she turned. She looked at me for a fleeting moment, and even from that distance I could see the terror in her face, and feel mine burning in shame. A moment later she was down the steps and out of sight.

I went slowly back to the room. For a long time I just stood there, blood running down my face, but feeling nothing at all, only a hollow emptiness spreading through and then beyond me. Outside, the sky was the color of damson plums. A cool breeze sifted in through the open balcony door, fluttering the curtain but bringing no sound from street. The room was silent. Then, somewhere above me a sharp creak, the release of a faucet and controlled rush of water through pipes.

I fell to my knees and followed the water as it snaked along the ceiling and down through pipes inside the walls. I studied the walls, wondering where the water in those pipes had come from, and what would become of it.



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