

January 2008

Looks

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LOOKS

A Thesis Presented

by

PATRICK ROBBINS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER'S OF FINE ARTS

February 2008

MFA Program for Poets & Writers

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For my parents

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Introduction

In 1979, Jello Biafra, the lead vocalist for the punk rock group the Dead Kennedys, ran for mayor of San Francisco as a prank, under the slogan “There’s always room for Jello.” His platform included banning automobiles from the city limits and requiring businessmen to wear clown suits during the workday. He wound up with 3 ½ percent of the vote.

Years later, Biafra spoke about the reaction his campaign stops got. “People would show up with signs like, ‘If he doesn’t win I’ll kill myself,’” he said. “My favorite; somebody showed up with one saying, ‘What if he wins?’”

*

“In most good stories it is the character's personality that creates the action of the story,” Flannery O’Connor once said. “If you start with a real personality, a real character, then something is bound to happen. You don’t have to know before you begin. In fact, it may be better if you don’t know what before you begin. You ought to be able to discover something from your stories. If you don’t, probably nobody else will.”

The first four sentences of what O'Connor said are just one indication why I could never follow in her footsteps, much as I'd love to. I've never been the sort of writer who knows everything there is to know about his characters before they ever appear on the page. I marvel at those who can tell you what the heroine keeps under her pillow at night without mentioning it once in the story. Their journey to the heart of the story begins with those in it, and it's a journey that I never learned how to take.

Fortunately for me, there are other starting points on the path of discovery.

Rather than invest myself in the characters and then invent a situation for them, I've always been one to invest myself in the situation and then invent characters to inhabit it. The idea of what's about to happen is what excites me and makes me press forward with the story. So many times, that idea begins with the words, *What if?*

One day I was thinking about the comic strip *Calvin & Hobbes* by Bill Watterson. The final strip showed the two of them on a toboggan, riding off into the sunset with the words, "Let's go exploring!" I thought how good it was of Watterson not to end the strip with Calvin outgrowing Hobbes, only able to see him as a stuffed animal, just like everyone else. Then I thought, *What if he did?*

The book *Educating Esmé* by Esmé Codell has a chapter where the author, a fifth-grade teacher in an inner-city Chicago school, trades places with one of her rambunctious students for a day. She makes all the trouble she can, and marvels at his ability to control the class, using all the catch phrases she'd used over the course of the year. The day was an absolute success. I thought, *What if it was a colossal failure?*

You'll find my answers to these questions on the following pages, along with many others.

*

One of the things I like best about the *what if* approach is the wide open freedom it gives me. I've entered the outlines of a landscape that I can color and populate any way I please. I can discover facets about my characters as they march through this predetermined world. The environment has just as much of an effect on me as it does on those who are caught within it.

Just as important for me is the way the question engages the reader. Any book on relationships worth its weight in kisses will tell you this:

- The best way to get to know somebody is to talk with them.
- The best way to talk with them is to ask them questions.
- These questions cannot be answered with a *yes* or *no*.
- Most importantly, you've got to *listen* to the answers.

The words *what if* lead very naturally to thought and consideration, followed by an answer that can't be less under three words long. The longer the answer (one answer in this collection approaches ten thousand words), the more captivated I become. The dialogue I have with the story I'm writing is thrilling to me, and I hope to pass on that thrill to the reader.

*

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the other question I like to ask myself as I sit down to write. That question is, *can I?*

I don't just like to challenge the reader of the story (myself included) with what the characters say and do; I like to challenge my abilities as a writer with experiments. Can I write a story with one word of dialogue? Can I write a story where each sentence

takes place earlier than the one before it? Can I keep a key character out of sight for the length of the story?

I can't imagine a reader would need to know about my desire to give every character a name that could be either a first name or surname, but the fact remains – it gives me a smile to try it and find out if it works. If it does, great. If it doesn't, I can always throw it out – I'm already dealing with far more pressing questions.

*

I feel very fortunate that my inside-out approach to writing stories still allows me ways to make discoveries. O'Connor's so right about that; if I can't make them, there's no way the reader can. So whenever a *what if* or a *can I* emerges, there's the excitement not just of an undiscovered country before me, but of the gift of being given another chance to explore the realm of possibility.

And now it's your turn.

Patrick Robbins
November 2007

The Day Denny Hudson Taught Fourth Grade

“Guess what I’m doing with my class today,” I said.

Joe Hull looked up from his newspaper. We were the only ones in the teachers’ lounge, so he figured it was him I was talking to. “What are you doing,” he said, the words rising and falling in a ho-hum cadence.

“I’ve got a little hellion, his name’s Denny Hudson,” I said. “You’ll have him next year. Talks out when he shouldn’t, won’t do his work, tries to get away with as much as he can. You have any kids in your class that you really just kind of need to keep a leash on?”

“What are you doing,” he repeated. He took a sip from his gigantic coffee mug, which had the words I HATE COFFEE embossed on the front.

“Well, yesterday I told him he wasn’t making my job any easier, and he said, ‘I didn’t think your job could *get* any easier.’” Joe chuckled; I suppressed a wave of irritation and went on. “Now everyone was laughing, and he had this I-just-stuck-it-to-

you look on his face. And then it hit me. And I said, ‘I’m glad you think this job is so easy to do, Mister Hudson. Because tomorrow, you’re going to be doing it.’”

I paused for effect. Joe took another sip of coffee.

“His face went as pale as a thing of yogurt. He went, ‘Aw, Mister Clifton, I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry.’ And I said, ‘Fine. Today you’re sorry. Tomorrow, you’re Mister Clifton. And I’ll be Denny Hudson.’”

Joe’s newspaper rustled as he adjusted himself deeper into the dirty houndstooth recliner. “He’s never coming in, you know,” he said.

“Oh yes he is,” I said, gingerly leaning forward – a night on the sofa had done a number on my spine. “I talked to his mother last night and told her what I had planned, so he wouldn’t try to fake being sick. And not only did she love the idea, she said she would drive him in herself. ‘He needs a strong male figure to show him a little discipline,’ those were her exact words.”

Joe’s eyebrows twitched up a little. “Divorced, is she?”

He was missing the point on purpose, and it annoyed me. “That’s got nothing to do with it,” I said, sitting back and folding my arms.

“Oh, no?” he said, and took yet another sip. When you have a gigantic cup, you shouldn’t be *sipping* from it, is my opinion. “You don’t think it says something that she’s looking for a strong male figure and you’re the one she looks to?”

“The one she talks to,” I corrected him. Actually, he was right; Carla had told me this in person, not over the phone, and there was a challenging glint in her eye when she did. But I wasn’t about to give Joe the satisfaction. My private life drama had been

playing itself out in front of too many of my colleagues as it was; no need to give them more reasons not to change the channel.

“I’m Denny’s teacher,” I went on. “I’m teaching her son. I see him every weekday. Of course she’ll look to – talk to me about him.”

“Of course she will.” His voice was a soft, dissolute echo. “You’re right, Perry. My apologies.” He put his feet up on the coffee table, which was covered with rings left behind by dozens of mugs and glasses over the years.

“All right,” I said, doubting that he meant it, and stood up. “I’m going to go wait for Denny in the front lobby.”

“If Beth comes in while you’re gone,” said Joe, “shall I pass along your regards?”

Beth was the kindergarten teacher at Rosewood Elementary. She was also my wife, and it was entirely because of her that the gossip-hungry staffers knew about all the nights we’d locked horns. Let’s just say it’s a good thing the kindergarten room is way the hell at the end of the south wing. She said it first, but I definitely agreed: out of sight, out of mind.

“Fuck you, Joe,” I said, just as Tracy Norris came in. She beelined to the coffee pot, muttering, “Dum dedum dedum,” failing to convince either of us that she’d heard nothing. Rather than explain myself, I made an *arrgh* noise and turned toward the door.

“Perry?”

I turned back. Joe had looked up from his paper for the first time and he was smiling at me. “I hope your little teaching experiment goes well today,” he said. “I’ll be very interested to find out what happens.”

*

When I told Beth my idea the night before, she was far less impressed than Carla had been. “I know you,” she said, her eyes bright as candle flames. “You’re going to show him up and destroy his self-esteem. And you’re going to feel so much better once you’ve proved to the world that you’re smarter than a ten-year-old.”

“I’m not in the destroying-self-esteem business,” I said. “I’m in the teaching business. If I wanted to destroy his self-esteem, I’d sleep with his best friend.”

She snarled. “You’re going to throw Louis in my face every time I don’t agree with you, aren’t you?”

“Why not? You threw him in mine.”

“You want to know why?”

“Not particularly.”

Everything degenerated from there, as usual, and in a few hours I was failing to get comfortable on the couch once again.

Now, waiting for Denny and his mother to arrive, I wondered what I could do to make sure that he would indeed get something out of the day. If this was just going to be something he had to get through, he wouldn’t be learning, and I wouldn’t be doing my job. But I had to be humane about it, too. I had to ensure I wasn’t the bad guy in this scenario. I would show Beth that I was right and she was wrong. I rubbed my mouth and watched the kids jumping out of the school buses, the teachers climbing out of their cars.

An off-white VW Jetta with one black door found a spot in the parking lot. Carla’s car. I watched her emerge, regal in her bearing, then lean down and say something to the inside of her car. A moment later the passenger door opened and Denny got out. I had to laugh when I saw him; his clothes were exactly the kind of clothes that I

wore. Black shoes, black suit pants, white shirt, red tie. If he hadn't also worn his ratty backpack, his ever-present University of Rhode Island cap, and a giant scowl, I might not have recognized him. I couldn't help wishing Carla had told me she would make him wear these clothes (there was no *way* this was his idea) so I could've worn my Yankees shirt and blue jeans.

Denny slammed the door, putting his whole body into it, and he and his mother walked toward the school. I came out of the lobby and met them halfway, next to the flagpole. "Good morning," I said.

"Hello, Mister Clifton," said Carla, keeping it very professional. Nothing beyond her usual warm smile. She gave Denny a solid prod in the shoulder.

"Hi, Mister Clifton." The words came out slow and heavy, as though each one needed its own boxcar to carry it from his mouth.

"Uh uh," I said, wagging my finger. "You're Mister Clifton today. And I'm Denny Hudson." And just like that I took his URI cap off his head and put it on mine. I've got to say, I surprised him – he went from resentful to stunned in nothing flat. Carla kept it under control, but I'd caught her off guard as well. Me, I was excited. I'd found the way to teach Denny his lesson – I'd be just as much like him as I could. I'd be a screw-off and a troublemaker. I'd make sure he knew he wasn't getting through to me. He wouldn't just have to teach today; he'd have to deal with Denny Hudson.

"The backpack, too," I said, holding out my hand. He was too stunned to do anything but comply, and I slung it onto my back with a soft *whump*. Turning to Carla, I said, "Bye, Mom."

She gave me a very peculiar look. Then she leaned down and kissed Denny on the cheek. "Have a good day, little man," she said. Then, to me: "Call me tonight and let me know how this went." She smiled again and headed back to her car. Denny and I watched her go for a few seconds, and then we headed toward the school. As we did, I untucked my shirt and started undoing the knot of my tie.

*

TODAY IS Friday, APRIL eleventh.

"This is stupid," said Denny, writing on the chalkboard.

"You're still thinking like Denny Hudson," I said, fine-tuning a lesson plan I'd made for Denny to follow. "You've got to remember to think like Mister Clifton today." I glanced up at the clock over the door; it was 7:53. "And you'd better start soon," I said. "The bell's about to ring."

He turned from the board. "Don't you think this is stupid sometimes?"

I shook my head. "Never."

He pointed at me and smirked. "See, you've got to remember to think like Denny Hudson today."

He had a point. But so did I. "Well, Mister Hudson," I said, "I hope today will change the way you think."

"Yeah, but tomorrow will change it back."

"We'll see." I handed him a sheet of paper. "Copy all this up on the board," I said.

He started to write, but only a couple of letters in, he stopped and looked over at me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

“Mister Clifton,” he said, “don’t say anything mean today, okay?”

I put my pen down. “If I’m in a situation where I think you would say something mean,” I said, “I’m going to say something mean.”

He turned his back to me and kept writing. “Still stupid,” he muttered under the clatter of chalk on board.

*

When the other fourth graders came in, they were amazed. I was wedged in at Denny’s desk in the back row, wearing Denny’s cap, tapping my teeth with my pen just like Denny did.

“Oh my Goh-wad!” said Sarah Castle. “He’s *doin’* it!”

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” I said. It was one of Denny’s pet phrases, and it got an astonished laugh.

“Okay, let’s get this show on the road,” Denny barked. That got a louder laugh, more astonished. I hadn’t realized how often I said that.

When the class settled down, Denny called roll; all thirteen girls and eleven boys were present. Nobody wanted to miss this. They were all leaning forward, watching Denny, watching me, waiting for something to happen. But he kept it very low key, very smart. When he called “Denny Hudson?”, I went, “Woo hoo!” There were a few titters, but he didn’t even flinch. Just said, “Lucas Jackson?” I’ll admit, I was impressed.

After the pledge of allegiance, we all sat in a circle on the carpet, and Shelly Karon, the student of the week, picked a greeting (“Salutations” – she’d just done a book report on *Charlotte’s Web*), and we passed it around the room. Then we went up to the board one by one to answer the problems Denny had written. Chad McGuire fixed the

spelling of “Their were three goats.” Lisa Macklin chose California as a state west of Utah. Jeff Bailey knew that hunger is to food as thirst is to drink.

“Water would’ve been okay, too,” Denny said. He was keeping pretty quiet, saying things along the lines of “Very good” and “Miss Castle?” and “No side conversation.” That last was directed at me, after I whispered to Shauna Krull how boring this was. She was too frightened to reply.

We got back in our seats and moved on to our math homework, where we were learning to convert fractions to decimals. Denny called on a student to give an answer, then another to confirm it.

“Number three. Miss Myers.”

“Point eight.”

“Mister Jackson, do you agree?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent.”

He walked around the room with his hands behind his back, chest puffed out, tie perfectly straight, eyes focused on the ceiling at the other end of the room. When he took a step, he’d let his foot dangle for a second before putting it down. It was like seeing myself in a funhouse mirror.

The kids kept looking back and forth between him and me. Just his being in charge was more of a distraction than anything I could have done, so I set aside my plans of disruption for the time being and waited for him to call on me. He never did.

*

“For English today,” Denny said, “I want you to write about something you hate.”

Hold on, I thought. We're supposed to do metaphors.

“One page about something you hate. We’ll read some of them out loud. And keep it clean. Right, Mister Hudson?” He glared at me, cold and crisp.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” I said. Nobody laughed.

Denny looked up at the clock. “Begin,” he said, and went to sit behind my desk. It came as some surprise to see how small he looked there. He came across much bigger when he stood in front of it, or walked around.

“Mister Hudson, you are here to *work*,” he said.

“Sorry,” I muttered, and opened his bookbag to get my notebook. The other kids were all writing, quiet and intent. Roger Connolly’s face was six inches away from the paper. Tanya McGee’s tongue kept edging in and out of the corner of her mouth.

I tried to think of something that Denny might hate. I didn’t think he hated me, so that was out. In fact, I wished he had specified that nobody could say they hated a person. There was a risk that somebody might say they hated a classmate – they might mention Denny, God forbid, and things would get out of control. But then, I couldn’t blame him for not thinking of this. He was only ten years old, after all.

It was also hard to turn off the stream of things that I hated. Injustice, filthy so-called “art,” my father when he was drunk, my wife’s cheating heart... none of it appropriate for this crowd. I decided to go with the rain, and how it meant I had to stay inside where there was nothing to do, and how hard it was to accommodate changes in the weather in my life. The trick was to write it the way Denny would. His answers tended to be blunt and simple. Did he even know what the word “accommodate” meant?

The door opened, and Joe Hull stuck his head in.

“Hey, Mister Hull!” I called out.

“If you’ve got something to say,” said Denny, “raise your hand.”

Joe looked at the both of us, nonplussed. I don’t think he liked not understanding what was going on. “Carry on,” he finally said, and backed out. Lisa Macklin giggled; Denny put a finger to his lips, and we all went back to our papers.

*

A couple of us read our papers out loud. Jamie Manuel hated not being allowed to watch PG-13 movies. Chris Hart hated having to go to bed at nine when she was *so* not tired. Denny nodded approval, collected the papers, and told us to line up so we could go to the library. Chairs scuffed back against the carpet and all the kids pattered over next to the door. I remained seated.

“Mister Hudson.” Denny loomed over me, as much as anyone four foot eight can loom. “The line is over there. I suggest you join it.”

He really had all my pet phrases down.. He’d absorbed everything I’d said, he’d held onto it, and today he was projecting it. Today, he *was* Mister Clifton.

So what did that make me?

“I’ll just stay here,” I said. “We’ll talk about how –”

“You forget.” He put one hand on my desk and leaned way into my personal space. His tie dangled, pointing at my lap. “Today you’re Denny Hudson. On Fridays, Denny Hudson goes to the library, to lunch, and to recess. Today’s Friday. So what does that mean you’re going to do?”

He straightened up and folded his arms. His expression held no pleasure at all, not a hint of it. I would have guessed that he would have gotten some satisfaction out of throwing that in my face.

“Mister Hudson,” I began.

“Mister *Clifton*,” he corrected me.

All the kids were watching us. Ben Freeman picked his nose as he waited to see what I’d do. They were all waiting. I knew I had to go along with it. This was my idea, and I had to see it through. I could only hope that he would respect my boundaries and not go through my desk.

“I’ll get in line,” I said, rising.

Denny nodded. “Very good, Mister Hudson. I’ll put two stars on your chart for that.”

*

“Hey, Denny, check this out.”

We were standing in line outside the library, waiting for Mrs. Roper’s class to leave. Jeff Bailey was next to me, holding a dollar bill like it was a secret document. He put his thumb over part of the phrase THIS NOTE IS LEGAL TENDER FOR ALL DEBTS, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE, so that the only words showing were TENDER AND PRIVATE.

Jeff grinned at me. Glinting eyes and knobby little teeth. “Huh?”

I shrugged. He didn’t like that. Shadows coasted from his eyes, darkening his face. “You probably don’t even get it,” he said.

“Course I get it,” I said, affronted. “I just don’t think it’s funny.”

“Whatever.” He pocketed the dollar and turned away from me, revealing Shauna Krull’s face brightening with glee.

I cursed myself. That wasn’t what Denny Hudson would have said. I needed to get a better handle on his thought process. Remarkable, really, how he slipped into the teacher role so smoothly and I was struggling at being the student. Maybe he was more complex than I thought. Or maybe I was simpler. Neither thought was particularly appealing, I have to say.

*

Library time was useless. I had to find a book by its Dewey Decimal number, and then answer a question about the book.

On page 38, what does “wink” mean?

That’s the part of *Johnny Tremain* where he’s just about to get his hand burned by the silver. I guess it meant the silver was kind of flickering light at him. Anyway, it was ridiculous. I never used the word that way and I didn’t know anybody who did. Useless, I’m telling you. Stupid.

The other fourth graders kept working. Somewhere over the course of the morning they had stopped constantly looking at me. I was just a student now, one of them. But they gave me a wide berth. Nobody sat next to me, or asked me for help. I wondered if it was because they didn’t know how to relate to me, or if they didn’t want to relate to Denny.

Off in the corner, I watched Jeff Bailey show his dollar bill to two other kids, who pointed and laughed. I looked back down at *Johnny Tremain*, refusing to acknowledge the blunt sting of jealousy inside me. Then it struck me – Jeff had been the only person

all morning to offer Denny – no, let’s be honest, to offer *me* – any sign of friendship. I hadn’t accepted it, so he’d taken it back, saved it for others who could and would take it with pleasure. It reminded me of Beth, and how all our arguments ended with her heading straight for the telephone. I hated that – I wanted to keep our arguments between us, just as I wanted to keep my meetings and phone calls with Carla between us. Tender and private, you might say.

*

I carried my lunch tray to the teachers’ lounge, ignoring the usual commotion around me. It was going to be a relief to drop this Denny Hudson shtick for a little while. Being somebody else for an entire day was not an easy feat; I was developing a whole new respect for actors.

I opened the door and found Joe Hull standing there, blocking my way. He had a big froggy smile, and rocked forward on the balls of his feet with no small pleasure. If I had to guess, I’d say he’d been waiting for me.

“Well, well,” he said, his voice slimy with amusement. “If it isn’t little Denny Hudson.” He came down hard on the D and the H.

“C’mon, Joe,” I said, trying to gauge a way to get past him. It was hard to maneuver while holding a tray in both hands. Maybe I could squeeze under his left arm –

“Oooo, sorry, Denny,” he said, blocking me. “You know the rules. No students allowed in the teachers’ lounge.”

“Joe, cut the shit, I want to –”

“Hey,” said Joe, amusement dead and buried in an instant. “I don’t want to hear that kind of talk from you, Denny. There’s no excuse for that. Now go and sit with the

other children. Or I'll have you spend your recess in Mrs. Clifton's room. And you know I'll do it." He stepped back and pushed the door shut between us.

Resigning myself to an extra 45 minutes of a child's life, I walked back to the tables, scanning them for a seat. Eventually, I set my tray down next to three girls from class, who were laughing with wide open mouths about something, and their laughter died, the light in their eyes snuffed out, the joy in their faces leached away. "Hi, Denny," said Lara Cook, sullen as mud.

Going along with it, I pointed at Tanya McGee's roll. "Are you going to eat that?"

She slapped her hand down on it, like it was a buzzer on a game show, and glared.

"Go away, Denny," Shauna Krull said. "We want to eat."

"But –"

She put her hand up and began looking around for a teacher. Lara and Tanya did the same. Their arms were like three stalks of wheat, waving slightly, buffeted about by the noise of the cafeteria.

I got the message. I stood up and took my tray over to an empty table, where I picked at my chicken nuggets and green beans. I tried to remember if I ever saw Denny hanging out with any of the other students. No one sprang to mind.

A couple of Beth's colleagues were on duty, and they made a point of walking past my table and not looking at me. I could only guess what stories Beth had been feeding them. I'm sure I came across as reprehensible, pushing her away, never even trying to understand her. Not like Louis. I'd heard it all before. I'd practically been inoculated. No petty little ignoring by Beth's friends was going to make me –

"Denny?"

I looked up. Dwight East was standing next to the table. He was a fat kid, with thick glasses and pudgy cheeks that pushed his lips into a constant pout. He held a red Nerf football, dotted with gray yellow where chunks of it had been pulled out.

“I brought my football,” he said, holding it up. “You want to play catch this recess?”

“Catch?” I looked into his magnified slits. “Do we usually play catch?”

He shuffled a little. “I thought you might want to today.”

I spent twenty minutes tossing around a Nerf football with Dwight East. Every now and then I’d throw one way over his head and make him run after it. He never complained.

*

When we were all back in our seats, Denny passed back our one-page papers. He’d corrected them. He’d actually taken the time to read them all and make corrections and comments. He’d even found a mistake in mine – apparently, it’s spelled “accommOdate” – and given me a check. At the bottom, he wrote, *Interesting. I like the rain, myself.*

“I got a check-plus!” Shelly Karon crowed.

“Of course you did,” I grumbled.

“Mister Hudson!” Denny boosted himself up to sit on the desk, right next to the cup full of red pens. “Why don’t you start off our science unit with your presentation on skin?”

Skin? Was that today?

“I don’t think I have it,” I said.

“May-be-you-could-CHECK.”

I bent down to get my bookbag, my face flushing, my back throbbing, and knocked my URI hat brim on my desk. It tumbled onto the floor. Somebody giggled. I grabbed the hat and jammed it back on my head where it belonged. I pulled at the zipper, but it had fabric caught beneath it and wouldn't budge. I yanked on it. The fabric wedged in deeper.

“This isn't fair,” I said.

“What's not fair?” Denny hopped off the desk. “Expecting you to have your homework done on time?” he said, walking toward me. “Would it be fair if I were to lower my expectations? Well, that's not why we're here, Mister Hudson. I'm not going to lower my expectations of you. You're just going to have to raise your expectations of yourself.”

I kept my head down, kept working on the zipper. “What are you picking on me for?”

Denny got in my face. “You think I'm picking on you?” His breath smelled shockingly of bubble gum. “You want to be ignored, is that it? You want me to forget you even exist?”

“I didn't do anything wrong!” I shrieked.

“You didn't do anything period! Let's see you do something right!”

“Yeah,” Shauna Krull muttered.

“Don't you yell at me like that!”

“Don't you yell at *me* like that!”

“Stop being such a jerk, Denny,” said Jamie Manuel, looking right at me.

“I knew he wouldn’t be ready,” Roger Connolly said.

“I could do *my* presentation,” said Shelly Karon, raising her hand.

I slammed my hand down on the desk, as hard as I could. “Fuck this!”

“*Hey!*” said Denny, pointing a warning finger at me.

“What gives you the right to be such an asshole?” I shouted, the words pouring out of me like lava. Denny took a step back, but I was too busy exploding to think about what that meant. “You are! You think anyone in this room actually likes you? With the way you act? Your mom? If she was writing that ‘things you hate’ essay, you know what she’d be writing about? You!”

Sarah Castle gasped. “Mrs. Clifton!”

Twenty-five heads jerked to face the door. Beth was standing there, one hand still on the doorknob. Her eyes and mouth were so wide open they shivered. She was wearing her white cotton cardigan, and it was all I could do not to run to her and bury my face in it.

Nobody moved for (going by the clock humming over Beth’s head) ten seconds. Then she pointed at me and said, “I need to talk to you.”

I looked to Denny, to get his permission. He was already shaking his head. “Not right now, Beth,” he said, his voice trembling but under control. “We’re in the middle of something here.”

She let out a shocked squeak. I gave her as helpless a look as I could, trying to show her it was out of my hands. Denny raised his arm and pointed out into the hallway. “I got it, Beth,” he told her. “Go.”

Not a sound from the classroom.

Not a motion.

Beth made two quivering fists for a couple of seconds, and then she flicked them open. “I don’t like this,” she said. “I don’t like any of this.” She spun away, slamming the door behind her.

Denny stood up straight, ran his hands down the sides of his nice white shirt to rest on his hips. He puffed his cheeks out with a sigh. “I’m sorry,” he said. He walked back to the chair behind his desk. “I apologize,” he said, sitting down. “I’m having some troubles at home.”

“What’s wrong?” Lisa Macklin asked, leaning forward a little.

“Ahhh.” He flopped his hand around. “She’s kind of seeing somebody.”

A swallow wrenched its way down my throat. Aside from that, I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even blink.

“He might be an okay guy, I guess, but she’s not thinking about me. She should pay more attention...” His voice trailed off, and he looked confused. “That’s kind of selfish, isn’t it?” he asked.

Dwight East coughed into his fist.

Denny sighed again. “I’ve done some bad stuff,” he said, eyes cast down to the desk. “Maybe I’m just getting what I deserve. I shouldn’t have...” His eyes squeezed shut, and for one god-awful moment I was afraid he would start crying. But he didn’t. He took a shaky breath and turned toward me. “I’m sorry, Mister Hudson,” he said. “I was wrong to raise my voice. I should never have tried to make you feel stupid. You never deserved that. I am so sorry.”

I felt my head nodding, heard myself say, “I understand.”

Denny sat back and let out a whoosh of breath. He glanced up at the clock. “You know what?” he said. “Class dismissed.”

Everybody shifted around a little. “What?” said Lucas Jackson.

“Class dismissed. You can go to the library, or the music room. Miss Krull, you live across the street, right? You can go home if you want.” He paused, and then gave us one firm nod. “Have a good weekend.”

Jeff Bailey stood up. He picked up his bookbag and marched out the door without a backward glance. Denny did nothing to stop him, and neither did I. A few seconds later, Chad McGuire left. Then Shelley Karon. And once the student of the week did it, everyone else seemed to realize it was okay for them to do it too. Two minutes later, the only ones left in the room were Denny Hudson and me.

We sat at our desks, hands folded, each waiting for the other to do something. Denny was looking at his hands, flicking glances at me, alone in the back of the room. Then he turned to the window. “Look at those clouds,” he said.

I did. They were charcoal dark, sliding over the horizon toward us, filled with threats of cold and lightning.

Denny got up. He walked up to me and picked up his backpack. Then he pulled the URI cap off my head and put it back on his, where it belonged.

“You’d better get on home,” he said. “I don’t want you getting caught in the *rain*.” He slung the backpack over his shoulder and walked out the door.

I sat there, crammed behind the desk, and wondered what was going to happen next. Beth would certainly have a few things to say to me. So would Carla, once Denny

got home and told her about his day. And there would be parents and administrators wondering how I could let these children walk out in the middle of the day. For now, though, Denny was right – I needed to leave before the rain started to fall.

I got up and tucked in my shirt. I went to my desk and pulled my tie out from the bottom drawer. I looped it around my neck, pulled the knot tight against my throat. Finally, I took my paper about the rain, crumpled it up, and dropped it in the trash. This school day was over: class was dismissed, and I was free to go out and face the world.

Mississippi

The thunderstorm was not entirely unexpected. Artis had heard the forecasts, and the clouds of iron gray that had eased into position overhead were tremendous. It was the intensity of the rain that caught Artis off guard. The raindrops, if you could call them “drops,” splatted against his windshield, their splashes covering the area of a small saucer. They pounded out a cavalry rhythm on the car roof. The tires cut through them, combining to make one loud hiss, like an angry teacher shushing her students.

Artis stretched his fingers, kept his palms pressed into the wheel. He was listening to Vivaldi on the car stereo; classical music was good for his soul when he drove in inclement weather. No sweat trickled down his face; no twitches pulled at his eyes. Neither he nor his windshield was touched by fog, and he silently rejoiced at the clarity of his vision.

An icicle of lightning stabbed the horizon, and Artis counted to six Mississippi before the clap of thunder came down hard on his car, and he rewrapped his fingers

around the wheel and let the boom roll over him and fall to the earth in his wake. The taillights of the car in front of him wavered a little, and he took his foot off the gas pedal to let the distance between them grow from two seconds to three.

The violins leapt about, bright and merry. Artis risked a glance at the clock; it was 10:36. He felt sure he would make the hotel by eleven, and he allowed himself a fleeting thought of the well-made bed awaiting him. Soon the day would be over, and soon another day would begin, another step forward would be taken.

The car in front of him continued to waver, and now its taillights were drifting to the left, so slowly, like the second hand sweeping around the watch dial. *Hydroplane*, Artis flickered, his foot jumping off the gas now, and he watched as the car left the road and went over the embankment. The incline was steep, and the car began to tumble. Its lights spun out arcs of red and white, arcs that came to instant halts as the lights shattered, one by one. All the sounds of steel bending and glass crunching were smothered by the rain, the night, the Vivaldi. As far as Artis could hear, when the car twirled across the grass, slammed into a tree and collapsed on its roof, it did so in absolute silence.

The antilock brakes on Artis's car worked perfectly, bringing him to a halt at the side of the road. He put on his hazards and backed his car into a position where his headlights could illuminate the scene. He then reached into the breast pocket of his coat and removed his cell phone, flipped it open and dialed. He did this methodically, his fingers swift and without panic.

"Nine one one, what is your emergency?"

"There's been an accident," said Artis, reaching out to turn down the music. "One vehicle has gone off the road." He gave the location and descriptions necessary and

promised to remain on the scene until help arrived. He hung, up, pocketed the phone and looked down at the hulk of the car, overturned beside the trees, tilted down into the earth. The music felt wrong now, and Artis turned it off. Now there was only the rumbling rain.

More lightning. Four Mississippis to the thunder.

He should get out, he realized. He should go down the embankment to check on the driver, let him or her know that help was on the way. His flashing hazard lights would not offer the assurance that his presence would. This was important, he knew. It was necessary.

He opened his door, and the noises of the storm rose in pitch. Wind blew the rain into the car, pack-pack-packing against his leg. He took a breath and climbed out, letting the outdoors try its level best to assault him, and proceeded down the slick grass of the embankment. He kept one leg bent and the other one straight to help his balance, and he was able to hobble down the hill at a fair pace without slipping and falling.

Steam was rising from the car – a green sedan, Artis could see now. His headlights and hazard lights danced off the wrinkles of the partially crumpled door, the remaining hubcap. The tree behind the sedan had a gouge taken out of it; the wood beneath the bark glowed unnaturally white.

“Hello?” Artis called. He approached bent over, letting his back take the brunt of the rain as he drew closer. He reminded himself not to touch the driver; that was a job for the paramedics. Assurance, he thought. Strictly assurance. He scanned the grass around the driver’s side, found it wet but relatively clear, and got down on his hands and knees. “Hello?” he called again, and lowered his head to look inside.

There were two people in the car, both of them up front, their seat belts holding them upside down. The passenger was a woman in her mid- to late forties, wearing a mustard yellow raincoat. Her eyes were closed and her head tilted away from her body at an unnatural angle. The driver was a young man, maybe as young as his late teens, twisted against the ceiling of his car. His face had blood on it, glossing his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. Beads of safety glass were embedded in his forehead, twinkling like a tiara. His eyes were trembling wide open at Artis. One eye was partially covered by a bloody lock of brown hair. More blood seeped out of his mouth.

“There’s help on the way,” Artis told him. “Everything’s going to be fine. Rest easy.” He searched his mind for comforting statements, looking for ones that would match the circumstances. “Hold on just a little longer,” he said.

The young man blinked up at Artis, causing his bloody forelock to jump back and forth. He pulled him into fierce focus. “Dad?” he said.

Artis froze. He took a moment to confirm it: this was not his son. His only son, Dale, was in his late twenties, at least a decade older. He was physically two thousand miles away, in upper Montana. And he never used the word “Dad.” From the first days of addressing his father, he would only call him Artis.

“My name is Artis.” He felt the rain drumming its polyrhythms on the back of his head, trailing under his collar and down his back. “I’m Artis and I want to help,” he said. “Tell me your name.”

The young man kept blinking, the reddened forelock kept twitching. “Dad,” he said. “I am tho, tho thorry.” His lisp sent a fine spray of blood into the car ceiling. His

gaze rolled back a little, and with a final twitch of the forelock, his lids closed over his eyes.

“Hey!” said Artis. “*Hey!*”

He knelt up straight, for leverage, and slapped the young man hard across the face. The blow turned his head, but his eyes remained closed. The blood on his cheek no longer had a uniformly smooth sheen; now it framed the blurred prints of Artis’s fingers. A helpful flash of lightning illuminated this, with the enormous boom of thunder following three Mississippis behind.

Artis took a breath. He couldn’t slap him again. He remembered now that it could do something to his spine, paralyze him maybe. He felt around in his pocket, found the napkins he’d pocketed that morning at the hotel’s continental breakfast. He touched one to the side of the car, soaking it through, and used it to clean the blood off the young man’s face. He wiped away the ridges his hand had left, pushed the hair away from those closed eyes. He wet down another napkin, half unfolded it, and laid it on the forehead, covering up the glass and the remaining traces of blood. The lightest streaks of pink faded into the napkin’s pure white.

Blue strobe lights began popping against the side of the car. Artis turned to see a police cruiser pulling up behind his car, its wipers working furiously. He got up and began working his way back up the embankment, one leg crooked, one straight. He slipped and fell only once, a real achievement considering how wet the grass was now. His mind touched on his mother telling his six year old self to run between the raindrops, and how on this night it simply could not be done.

“Two people inside,” Artis told the first policeman to reach him, the driver. He had to raise his voice to be heard over the pounding all around them. “Mother and son, I think.”

“All right,” said the policeman, his blue steel voice cutting through the elements. “Are they in bad shape?”

“They’re both unconscious,” said Artis. “The son was talking to me before, but now he’s out cold. He had a lisp,” he added, wondering why he found that piece of information worth reporting.

“All right,” the policeman repeated, as his partner joined them. Both policemen were wearing dark raincoats. The rain rat-a-tatted off of them, in a higher key than the thup-thup-thup it made as it sunk into Artis’s coat.

“You’ve done good work,” the first policeman said. “Why don’t you get back into your car and let us do our job.”

“Go on, now,” said his partner, and the both of them set off toward the wreckage, two dark shapeless forms closing in, looking more ominous than helpful.

Artis looked down at his hands. The right one had traces of blood in the wrinkles around the knuckles. The left one was still gripping the napkin he’d used to wipe the blood away.

Dad?

He dropped it, bent down and wiped his hands on the sopping grass, back and forth, back and forth. Some of the blades of grass came loose, stuck to his skin. He pulled out one more napkin, the last one, and wiped his hands clean. He used it to pick up the

other napkin, wadding them up together as he went to his car door and pulled the handle to open it.

But the door was locked. He had locked the door. He knew at once the keys wouldn't be in his pockets. He started to feel for them all the same, even as he saw them hanging from the ignition and swaying ever so slightly. They were distorted by the rain on the glass, bending in goopy, impossible ways.

Dad?

A gust of wind came up, and the rain that had been falling on his shoulders and head now peppered his face, his chest, his legs. He turned away, let the wind throw the cold raindrops at his back, let the drops roll down his face. He would wait. He had to wait – he couldn't interrupt the police, or the ambulance when it arrived. Others were in greater danger than he. There would be a tow truck eventually; they could get him in. He would wait for that.

There was a giant rumbling behind him, and an eighteen wheeler poured by, spraying Artis with pounds of road rain and grime.

Tho, tho thorry.

The two policemen were huddled by the car door, their faces not visible to Artis, the blue lights bouncing off their coats. Artis's own coat lay huge and heavy on his back. At this point, he knew – he *knew* – he couldn't get any wetter. Another car's headlights approached, and Artis circled around to the other side of his car, away from the road. His coat pulled down on him as he walked, and he felt the little thump of his phone against his chest.

His phone. Hey.

Dad.

More wind, more rain against his face. They weren't even drops anymore; they were streams of rain, long streams that landed on him and kept landing, thick streams that wouldn't rinse him clean. He spat at the rain, a single wad that fell to the ground, too weak to defy everything around it. He closed his eyes hard enough to wrinkle his brow, shunting several drops over to his temples. He took one deep breath, and finally pulled out his cell phone and dialed.

Ring. One Mississippi.

Ring. Two Mississippi.

“Hello?”

“Dale,” said Artis, tugging his coat collar up and crouching under it. “This is your father calling.”

“Artis.”

Dale's voice was flat, but expectant. After all of five seconds, Artis felt the need to justify himself. “It's been a while and I wanted to check in. Am I disturbing you?”

“Well, I don't have the nightmares anymore, if that's what you're asking.”

Artis nodded. “Good,” he said. “That's good.” His phone slipped a little against his wet ear. “I'm glad to hear that,” he said, turning away from his car and leaning back on it.

“Listen, Artis,” said Dale, two thousand miles away in upper Montana. “The reason ‘it's been a while’ is that you never bothered to call me, and I sure as hell wasn't about to call you. Now unless something's the matter with Mom –”

“I just saw a car crash and I wanted to talk to my son!” Artis roared. He could feel the tension in his body, squashed beneath his heavy coat. He wanted his Vivaldi.

“Is anyone dead?”

Dale’s tone changed. Artis could hear his concern for these strangers, concern he didn’t have for his own father. “I don’t know!” he said, hard as the pavement beneath his feet. “I don’t know.”

“Hey, you don’t have to shout.”

“No,” said Artis, scrambling back from his precipice of anger. “I do have to – it’s raining, it’s hard to hear myself –”

“You’re inside, though.”

“I can’t – I’m caught out here –”

Artis’s voice ran aground. He was in the middle of this maelstrom, sheathed in rainwater, and his mouth, tongue and throat were dry as fossils. He sucked the moisture off his upper lip and worked it around as best he could. Off in the distance there were flashing red lights; the ambulance was coming.

“Ah, geez,” said Dale. His tone of sympathy was gone again. “You know what, Artis, listen – I’m not up for this tonight, okay? Whatever it is you’re selling, I’m not interested. I gotta go. I gotta put the kids to bed.”

“How are the kids?” asked Artis. He heard the whine that had crept into his voice and he hated it, but he was desperate now to keep his son on the line.

“Yeah,” said Dale. “Fine. Thanks for asking. Night.”

“Son –”

Click.

Artis stood there, illuminated by the bright blues of the cruiser, the strengthening reds of the fast approaching ambulance, and the lazy yellows of his own hazard lights. He listened to the rain hitting the grass, the road, the cars, none of it able to mute the clicking his phone made as he folded it up and put it away. He lowered his coat back down to his shoulders, let it pull him back until he was staring up into the night.

Dad?

The rain pelted his eyes, shutting them, and fell into his mouth as he opened it, the clear taste rolling across his teeth. He took a deep breath, saturating his lungs with the dewy cold, and was about to unleash himself at the heavens when lightning and thunder filled the world at the exact same moment, and Artis fell, covering his ears and howling into the ground as the sky split open above him.

The Perfect Host

Even before the night of the child molester party, I had always considered Bob Laramie to be the perfect host. Perfection in hosting is an enviable skill to have, and Bob had it. Whether he was born with it or acquired it over the years, it was now a part of him, and for me, watching him wield his powers was the single most entertaining aspect of his social gatherings.

He was in his late forties when I knew him, with a ruddy face, graying hair, and a warm gentility to him that was very comforting, like a soft blanket you always wanted next to you. There was another side to him, one that you had to look for, that was firm and in control. You could see it best in the details of his parties. He made sure his house was comfortable and clean. His selections of food and drink were impeccable. And he was a master at putting guests at ease. If something was done or said that made someone anxious, Bob could sense it and rectify it in moments, often before anyone else recognized the discomfort in the air.

For example, there was one party where I was standing next to a painting and talking to a woman, and two other men joined us. The woman was only about five foot three, and the rest of us were around six feet. We loomed over her in a semicircle, and her back was to the wall. I hadn't even been conscious of the way we hemmed her in until later. I was in the middle of a story when I realized that Bob had somehow melted into our little group. He listened as I finished, then said, "Mmmm. Let's all have a seat." We all sat down, the men on a couch and the woman in a padded wicker chair, and Bob brought over a tray of pastries and told us a story about the audience at a movie he went to. That got us all started on our own audience adventures; all of us had something to share. After the woman had told us a great tale about her brief career as an usher, Bob excused himself to mingle with the other guests. It took a week for me to recognize that he'd taken the woman from a setting where she might have felt dominated and brought her into one where she could relax and contribute, and he hadn't left until he knew she was safe. It was a masterful performance, all the more so for its being both genuine and invisible.

One more quality I appreciated in Bob was his ability as a storyteller. He had a round, mellow voice, and I never heard him raise it, either in excitement or anger. Rather, he was a master at projecting; he could catch you at twenty feet with a few booming words and pull you in close to catch his whispers. Beyond that, his voice did all the work. Well, his voice and his words – the things he'd say were just as remarkable as the way he'd say them. He could leave you breathless with laughter or from getting the wind knocked out of you. You could hear twenty stories from ten others and you'd go home thinking of his one.

Yes, Bob was a great host and a great storyteller. And on the night he told us about the time he caught a child molester, I had the privilege of seeing him at his greatest.

*

There were six of us there that night. Besides Bob and me, there was Bert McConaughy, who ran an antique store and was constantly telling his customers how he felt like a bit of an antique himself; Delilah Andrews, who owned the Top-Shelf restaurant and its offshoot bakery; and Molly Logan, who taught second grade at the school.

There was also my wife Jane. We were going through the last of our difficult patches at the time; by year's end we would be living in separate houses, and the divorce papers came through shortly after that. I was a little caught off guard at how amicable the divorce turned out to be. It was certainly far more amicable than the marriage, for reasons I don't care to dwell on.

"Try not to talk just to hear yourself talk," she said as we were getting ready.

"If I've got something to say," I said, holding my socks up to the light, "I'm going to say it."

She tilted her head and kneaded an earring into place. "Whether anyone cares or not," she said.

"They'll care," I said. "It'll be a nice change talking to people who have the decency to listen."

I suppose if we weren't being so selfish, we might have had the common sense not to attend this little gathering in each other's company. The trouble was, neither of us wanted to give up the chance to be at a Bob Laramie party, however small. She wouldn't

cave in and I certainly wasn't about to. So we RSVP'd that yes, we'd be there by six.
Jane brought the flowers and I found a nice bottle of wine.

*

The Laramie magic began its work the moment Bob opened the door. "Barry," he said. "Jane." He gave Jane an exceedingly gentle hug, not troubling her dress in the slightest. Then he shook my hand, cupping my upper arm with his other hand. "It's good to see the both of you," he said, and we both glowed, forgetting for the moment how unpleasant it had become for us to see each other.

Bert was standing next to an open cabinet, admiring Bob's latest additions to his collection of china. Delilah and Molly stood by the spotless fireplace, each of them holding a glass of sherry. Jane went over to them, leaving me to step into Bob's library and once again admire his eclectic taste. Bob soon joined me, with Bert in tow, and he showed us a title he'd had for some years before finally having it autographed the week before. "He's every bit as good a human being as he is a writer," he said. This led Bert to tell us about an author he'd met who was a much better writer than a human being. I had a similar encounter to relate, and before I knew it I was engaged in a spirited discussion with Bert, a man I'd always considered thoroughly dull, and Bob was talking to the three women, his fingers in his pockets, and they all looked so vibrant and alive as they listened. I'm telling you, the man was a wizard.

*

Dinner that night consisted of Cornish game hen filled with spinach and cheese, sautéed mushrooms on the side, Caesar salad and sourdough bread still warm from the oven. Do I even have to tell you how good it all tasted? Bob accepted our compliments

with true modesty, telling us about a restaurant two towns over where the meat just fell off the bone.

All of us were in good spirits by meal's end. We all had something to offer, we all learned something new, and we all basked in our collective warmth. More than once I saw Jane laugh at something, or gesture with her fork, and it made me want to be with her. Then I remembered who we both really were, and I turned away before she could see me watching her face, her hands.

At just the right moment, Bob stood up and suggested we all settle down in the living room while he cleaned up a little. Delilah offered to help, but he wouldn't hear of it. "You go and enjoy yourselves," he said. So we all trooped off while he gathered up the silverware.

Did Bob make a mistake in sending us off where he couldn't monitor the conversation? I've given the matter some thought since that night, and I've decided he didn't. It's quite possible that we never would have gone as far down our particular conversational path as we did if he'd been there to guide us. But then, why should he have been? We were all adults; we didn't need to be watched every moment. Plus, we were all having such a good time; there was no reason to expect any tension to arise. So whatever you want to say about Bob, don't fault him for what happened next. The blame for that lies on the rest of us, and us alone.

*

We all sat down around the coffee table. Bert and Delilah had the wicker chairs, while I sat between Molly and Jane on the couch. "Well," said Bert, pulling his right

ankle up to rest on his left knee, “that was one exquisite meal.” Delilah and Jane both agreed. I rubbed my eyes and wondered what dessert would bring.

Then Delilah started the fateful ball rolling. “Did anyone else drive up here on 215?” she asked.

Jane and I shook our heads, and Molly, on our right, said, “Mmmmno.” Bert, on Delilah’s left, uncrossed his legs and raised his hand, giving her a knowing nod.

“You saw it?” she asked.

He nodded again. “Couldn’t miss it.”

“Miss what?” I asked. “What are you guys talking about?”

“Someone hit a fawn,” Delilah said. “It was on the side of the road.”

“Gutted,” said Bert. The one word fell out of his mouth like an old rock.

“Oh my God,” said Jane.

“It was horrible. The smear...” She shook her head, her earrings catching the soft lamplight. “It had to have been the most revolting thing I’ve ever seen,” she finished, her voice taking on a deliberate weight.

Then Bert said, “What, that?” He rested his forearms on his thighs and turned to face Delilah. He’d been facing the floor, so his gaze swung up, not over. “That was the most revolting thing you’ve ever seen?” he asked. “Ever? In your life?”

“Well... yeah.” Delilah wasn’t used to having her pronouncements questioned.

Bert sat back and stretched out his thin arms. “I’ve been around for a while,” he reminded us. “I’ve seen much, much worse, I regret to say.”

“Would the fawn make the top ten?” I asked. Jane narrowed her eyes at me. I don’t know why; I still think that was a perfectly valid question. We would learn Bert’s

scale, then get to gauge how much worse the other revolting things were. I made a mental note to myself to explain my reasoning to Jane later that night, something I never actually remembered to do.

“The fawn was gruesome, I’ll admit,” Bert said. “But for me to find something out and out revolting, I think I need the idea of the event to offend me even more than the event itself. My eyes may take it in, but my mind will turn away. Years can go by, and it will still turn away. In no small part because my memory of the event is just as vivid as the event itself, if not more so.” He leaned forward and reached into a dish of imported mints Bob kept on the coffee table.

“Well, I still say that fawn was the most revolting thing I’ve ever seen,” Delilah murmured. “I’m never going to forget that, and I wish I could.”

“For me,” said Bert, twisting the cellophane around the mint he’d selected, “it was watching my older brother break his leg. It flopped all around, and at the end one foot pointed up, the other one pointed down, and he was looking over his shoulder at me. Surprised, confused... really, really scared. I never looked at him the same way again. Would you be a dear and open this for me?”

He passed Delilah his mint, and she unwrapped it. Jane held out her hands, the left one pointing up and the right one down. After a moment, she switched it so the down one now pointed up, and vice versa.

“You had it right the first time,” said Bert, and he pushed the mint past his lips with one finger.

*

That's where it should have ended. It would have been so easy to go on to a different topic from there. Bert's brother, Delilah's earrings, the new Wyeth print over the roll top desk – all of them just waiting to be discussed. But I had a revolting story of my own to tell, and rather than just bark it out, I thought it would be good to bring someone else in ahead of me. I was trying to be a good host and involve everybody. But I'd forgotten that I wasn't the host here. More importantly, a good host would have recognized the consequences of such an action and not taken it. As it was, the good host – the perfect host – was cleaning things up in preparation for dessert. There was nobody to warn me against turning to Molly and asking for her most revolting thing. So that's exactly what I did.

“I don't know,” she hedged. “I guess if I had to pick one, it would be footage from the concentration camps. The way those people looked, and combine that with the whole idea of trying to wipe out an entire race...” She shuddered. “You're just left reeling.”

“Well,” said Delilah, “it's hard to argue with that.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Well, my moment's a lot smaller scale, but it's still pretty revolting.”

“Do tell,” said Bert.

“Can't we talk about something else?” Jane asked.

“No,” I said. “Let me tell my story.” I went on, ignoring her arctic glare.

“When I was five or six years old,” I said, “there was this huge rock out in the yard that I always liked to sit on. It kind of jutted out from the side of a hill, and it had a

flat top, like a platform. It was a great place to push my trucks around on, or just to sit and let my legs dangle.

“So one day I was sitting there eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and when I was about halfway through, I got up and wandered off to do something else. I came back a couple hours later; the sandwich was still there, and I picked it up and took a bite. But it tasted bad now, the bread was all dry. Then I lifted up one of the slices, and there was the peanut butter and jelly, swarming with ants. Their legs are stuck in the peanut butter and they’re writhing away, or else they’re dripping with grape.”

Delilah and Molly both gagged. Bert grimaced. Jane had heard the story before and didn’t react at all.

“I don’t even remember if I swallowed that bite or not,” I said. “That one shot of my sandwich crawling with life –”

“Uggghh!” said Molly. “Please!”

“ – blew everything else away,” I finished. “So that was easily the most revolting thing I’d ever seen, before or since.” I sat back, pleased with the reaction I’d gotten. I’d just lined their minds with the image that had lurked inside my head for decades, and now it was theirs forever.

“They’ll ruin a picnic, all right,” said Bert, and we all laughed.

*

Then Delilah said, “So what’s yours, Jane?”

I turned to my wife. She had something strange about her – it wasn’t a glow, and I’m not the sort who believes in auras, so call it an air if you like. Her focus wasn’t directed out at us, at the world, but into herself. Her inner light was there, but it had been

shuttered up. She was muted. She was not the same person I'd been sitting with at dinner. Then, in an instant, she snapped back into our world, ready to talk and contribute. Unfortunately for me.

“What’s my what?” she asked. “My most revolting thing?” She blinked and turned to me, and this ugliness scuttled across her face. I'd seen that ugliness before, when she was just about to lay into me, but this was the first time I'd seen it in public.

“You’re not going to like it,” she told me, her lips forming a dangerous smirk.

“Well, if it’s revolting I wouldn’t expect to like it,” I said. “Come on, just say it.”

It’s true – fools really do rush in where angels fear to tread. Jane had considered me a fool for months now, and as Bert, Delilah and Molly were about to learn, I was no angel.

“The most revolting thing I’ve ever seen,” she said, “is Barry’s rear end.”

Delilah gasped. Molly giggled a little. Bert said, “Hell, it couldn’t be any worse than mine.” I stood up and craned around to look at this source of revulsion.

“We were at a party,” she began. “Over at the Hendersons.”

I sat back down, realizing where this was going.

“I was ready to leave, so I went looking for the bedroom, you know, ‘cause that’s where they always put all the guests’ coats. On the bed. Well, I went upstairs and opened a door, and I see this naked rear end bobbing up and down over a woman, I can’t see her face, and she’s making all the little noises you’d expect. So as I’m ducking back out – kind of automatically, you know – I realize it’s my husband’s rear end.”

I studied my knees. “Birthmark,” I mumbled.

“I closed the door, very quiet. I went and found my coat, the next room over, and I went downstairs, said my goodbyes, went out and drove home. Somebody else dropped Barry off later. He wouldn’t tell me who.” She turned to regard me with the bitterest affection. “I still wonder sometimes,” she said.

I know now how a snakebite victim feels. You’re struck with barely any warning. The venom courses through you, paralyzes you, leaves you helpless. By the time anyone thinks to do something, it’s too late. All they can do is watch you trying not to die.

*

“Mmmm.”

Bob moved around from behind me to the head of the coffee table. I don’t know how long he’d been in the room, but I felt sure he’d heard Jane’s story. He carried a wooden chair with him, holding it by the top of its frame. He set it down, sat in it, and said to us in his rich voice, “Let me tell you about the time I caught a child molester.”

Well, that got everybody’s attention. Who cared if I’d just been publicly humiliated – this was going to be a knockout of a story. We all got settled in, and once we were ready, he began.

“I was in New York, so this must have been about twenty years ago. It was a nice spring day, and the leaves were out just enough that you could hear them rustle when the wind blew. I was sitting on the park bench; I’d been reading the paper, but now I was taking a break from that and just people watching. It’s a great city to watch people in, New York is. It’s a place where you’ve got to have real character if you’re going to live there, and everyone wears their character on the outside. When you know what to look for, you can know everything about a New Yorker in an instant.

“As I sat there, I felt this ripple of disturbance off to my left.” He arced his left hand in front of him, barely wriggling his fingers. “I turned and saw a man running toward me. He had on white jeans and a light gray sweatshirt, tight brown curls and a large, large forehead. He was pumping his arms, puffing his cheeks as he breathed, his head perfectly still over his body.

“Behind him, ten or fifteen yards back, was a police officer. Full uniform, except for the hat – that may or may not have come off before I saw him. His face was red, and he had his hand on his side, holding a stitch, I guess. From where I sat, he looked like he was about to give up the race.

“Well, I couldn’t let that happen. I knew nothing about this situation beyond the fact that a man was running from the law, but that was all I needed to know. Good versus evil. It doesn’t get any more clear-cut than that. I had three seconds to think of something, but I only needed one. I sprang from the bench.”

He stopped. None of us moved. We were all suspended over the unknown, clinging to his words. A huge wave of tension began to build up, and Bob was riding the crest of it. He said nothing and said nothing and just when I thought I couldn’t take the pounding silence a moment longer, he slipped back into his tale. God, could that man tell a story.

“I went low, for his legs,” he said, “and I timed it so I got out in front of him, tripping him up with my body. As I was hitting the ground, I turned to watch him fall. He must have been airborne about ten feet. His right arm went pinwheeling round, but the rest of him was still, and he just gradually dropped to the sidewalk. Landed on his left shoulder.

“Well, he used his momentum to roll himself forward, and he was ready to pick himself up and take off again, believe it or not. But I was ready for that as well. As he got to his feet, I dove. I wrapped my arms around his legs, and this time he went down to stay. The policeman was right there a second later, and he put a knee into the guy’s back. He just knelt there like that for a little bit, catching his breath. Both of them were really sucking wind. I didn’t let go of the guy’s legs until the cuffs went on him. Then I pushed myself back and got up on my knees to look around.

“A number of people had stopped to watch us – this was probably the most dramatic thing they’d seen all day, and they weren’t about to leave until it was all over. Then a woman and a boy came up through these people. They were moving right along. I suspect she had to be somewhere and didn’t have time to watch. She kept fixed straight ahead, and she pulled the boy along behind her. She had such a grip on his wrist. I could almost feel it on my own. The boy was eight or nine at the most, and he was walking sideways, keeping an eye on us. He had overalls and freckles and these beautiful golden bangs.

“The guy on the ground spotted him. I saw it happen. He was a defeated man through and through until he spotted that boy. He looked the boy up and down...” Bob’s voice dropped to a stunned, hoarse breath. “He was *appreciating* him. The way you appreciate a girl at the beach. His face went soft, like candle wax, and his lips parted just enough that you could see his teeth. Then I saw a glint in his eye, a cold metal glint, and he whispered, ‘Hi.’ I’m sure I heard him whisper that. He wasn’t aware of anything else around him but that little boy. It was like he’d escaped us after all, and he’d taken the boy with him. Awful.

“The cop pulled him up and said, ‘Let’s go, short eyes.’”

“Short eyes?” asked Molly.

“It’s prison slang,” Bob explained. “It means ‘child molester.’”

“Why?”

Bob shook his head. “I don’t know. But when he said that, I knew why the guy had looked at the kid that way. And I could figure out what was on his mind. That’s the closest I’ve ever come to seeing a child molester in action, and I don’t ever want to get that close again. I’m sorry to say that that look he gave that boy was truly the most revolting thing I’ve ever seen.”

He sighed. Then that slight smile crossed his lips. “Actually, I’m not sorry. Because the child molester went to jail. He never touched a hair on that boy’s head. The only person harmed by that look was me, and as you can see, I turned out just fine.”

He stood up and said, “Let’s have some dessert.” The five of us stood up as well, and we all went back to the table for some French vanilla ice cream and the best apple cobbler I ever tasted.

*

The following Saturday, Jane went out grocery shopping, a task that had come to take up the whole afternoon, so I had the house to myself. I started going through the books in the living room, checking to make sure mine had my name written on the title page. I was trying to remember if the unmarked collection of Avedon photos was actually mine or not when the doorbell rang.

“Hello, Barry,” said Bob Laramie. “May I come in?”

This was the first time I'd ever seen Bob outside his house. In this larger, unfamiliar context, he lost just a little of his power. I didn't like seeing him that little bit weaker. Then I remembered that the strength was mine now, that I was the host. "Yes," I said. "Yes, of course. Can I take your coat? Get you a drink?"

"I can only stay a couple of minutes," he said, walking past me and looking around. "Glass of water'd be fine. No ice."

"No ice," I repeated. I trotted into the kitchen and pulled a glass straight from the dishwasher. It was half full before I remembered that this load was still dirty; I dumped the glass and took a fresh one from the cupboard. Bob came into the kitchen, accepted the glass and put it down on the counter without taking a sip.

"Barry," he said, "was Jane's story the truth?"

I saw no point in lying to him. "Yes, it was," I said. "I'm sorry to say."

He bit his lip, then looked me in the eye. "My story wasn't," he said.

My eyebrows went up. "Excuse me?"

"It was all a lie," said Bob, his voice resonating with the kitchen's echo. "Every word. I've never even been to New York."

Jane once bought a second remote control for the TV, sneaked in behind me and started changing the channels. The picture went from the ballgame to a cooking show to the Serengeti, and I was sitting there on the couch, completely baffled, until I turned around and saw Jane laughing at me. Now, standing in here in my kitchen, I got that same disoriented feeling.

"Bob," I said. "Why?"

He picked up the glass from the counter and sipped from it. “I like having my gatherings, Barry,” he said. “It’s what I do best. I like my guests to enjoy themselves and be comfortable. So when your wife told her story, I knew it was important to take everyone’s mind away from it, to save you all from that tension. But I couldn’t just change the subject – the image Jane gave us was just too strong, it would have stayed with everyone. Also, it would have come across as a transparent ploy on my part. If you’re driving and you take a hard right turn, everybody notices. I couldn’t have that.” He set the glass back down with a bang.

“So I made up a story that stayed on the topic and overwhelmed your wife’s story. That’s what it was designed to do and that’s what it did. Nobody at the dessert table cared about your infidelities. They were thinking about my child molester, and taking comfort in the fact that he was caught and no harm was done. Maybe they thought about Jane’s story the next morning, but by then it wasn’t my concern anymore.”

“Well, you told it very well,” I said. It was hard to know what else to say.

“I had to. I’m the host – it’s my job.” He checked his watch. “Well, I don’t want to keep you,” he said.

“Bob,” I said, “why did you just tell me this?”

“You were the only one who needed to know.” He held out a perfunctory hand and smiled a smile far colder than the water I’d given him. “Thank you for the drink,” he said.

I summoned up all my hosting ability. “Well, Bob,” I said, shaking his hand as firmly as I could, “thanks for dropping by.”

*

Bob Laramie never invited me to another party. I think it's because he didn't like my screwing around on Jane, and he wouldn't have been able to hide his displeasure around me. After all, you can't be frosty to your guests if you're going to be the perfect host.

Since most of my friends were Jane's friends, I found myself getting a lot fewer phone calls once we were apart. Finally, I decided to move and get a fresh start somewhere else. I didn't move far; I'm two towns over, and sometimes I'll eat at that restaurant Bob recommended. He was right – their chicken is just fantastic.

It's not so bad being alone, but when I'm trying to get to sleep, when I don't have a book or a movie to distract me, I get a lot of memories going through my mind that aren't always welcome. Memories of the happy times with Jane that I'll never get back. Memories of the fights we had, the kitchenware we threw. Memories of all the things I lost. But the memory that stands out the most, the sharpest one, the one that's been whittled into my retinas, is the one of a young boy meeting a child molester. And I can't tell you how much it bothers me that my clearest memory is one that doesn't even exist.

Why He Did It

On Saturday, Reilly went to Morgan's house to play cards. This was only the second time they were going to be playing at Morgan's; usually they played at Caldwell's, but of course that wasn't going to be happening anymore. Now the gang played in Morgan's basement, with its purple shag carpet and its walls decorated with posters of the Dallas Cowboys, yellowing and curled at the edges. The stairs leading down to the basement were steep and dimly lit, with no handrails; Reilly touched the dirty walls on either side of him as he descended. The fifth step from the bottom still had a little blood on it, from when Brett caught Gordon cheating the week before. Reilly stepped over that and turned the corner to descend the last few.

"Hey," came Trevor's brick of a voice. As usual, he sat with his back to the wall, so he could see everybody who came in. Tonight he was sitting with Morgan, Parker,

Cole and Mackenzie. Morgan's kid was there, too – bowl cut, big eyes, somewhere around twelve, walking around the table and looking at everyone's cards.

“Reilly,” Trevor announced, pointing to the small refrigerator in the corner.

“Reilly, grab me a fuckin' beer on your way over.”

“Grab one for yourself, too,” said Morgan, not looking up from his cards.

Reilly grabbed two beers and took a seat at the table. “Thank God the sun's gone down,” he said, reaching for the bottle opener.

“Ah, fuck, it was miserable out there today,” Morgan agreed.

“Hotter than a dog's ass,” said Trevor, holding his hand out for the opener.

Morgan's kid's eyes grew big and wary, but he said nothing.

Parker rubbed the corner of his mouth with a poker chip as Trevor cracked open his bottle. “We were just talking about fuckin' Caldwell,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Cole. “We were wondering why he did it.”

“Two hundred,” said Mackenzie, pushing his chips in.

“Makes no fuckin' sense,” said Parker. “Think you know a guy, he turns around and look what he does.”

Trevor said, “Well, it's his life. He wants to fuck it up, I say let him. Call.”

Morgan's kid slipped around behind his father. A moment later Morgan tossed in his cards and said, “I'm out.”

“Hey!” Cole barked. “Your kid just give you a signal or something?”

“He never touched him,” said Reilly, who had a better angle.

“So why'd you fold just then?”

“Because on account of I had shitty cards,” said Morgan. “If that’s okay with you.”

“You believe this guy?” Cole asked, shifting his bulk toward Mackenzie.

Mackenzie considered the question. “I will this time,” he said. “Fool me once and shame on you, though.” He flicked a nod at Morgan’s kid, who stood rooted to the spot, eyes even bigger. Mackenzie had the gaunt, tight face of a mummy in the best of light; here, under the sallow glow of the one bare bulb hanging over their table, he looked positively ghastly.

The hand finished without incident; Mackenzie collected and Trevor shuffled the cards.

“Back to Caldwell for a minute,” said Parker. “Did anybody see this coming? What about you, Reilly?”

“Can’t say I saw it coming,” said Reilly. “Can’t say it surprised me, either.”

“Nothing surprises you,” said Trevor. “Fuckin’ college boy.”

Reilly winced. No amount of swearing, drinking, or brawling would ever make Trevor forget that Reilly had graduated from the state university. He could have a full beard laced with chewing tobacco and be driving a bulldozer down Main Street, and Trevor would point and say, *The library’s that way, book fag.*

“You don’t think he’s cracked?” Parker asked.

“He’s Caldwell,” Reilly said, as though that explained everything.

“He’s got a point,” said Morgan. “Tell me anything about Caldwell and it wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Caldwell nails your wife every Thursday,” said Cole.

Morgan shrugged. “Sure, why not.”

“Anyone that quiet has something going on,” said Reilly.

“Yeah,” said Mackenzie, “he always was quiet, wasn’t he?”

“Wouldn’t say shit if he had a mouthful,” said Parker.

“It’s the quiet ones you have to watch out for,” said Morgan, pulling out a pack of Winstons. “Here’s what I think. You’re Caldwell. You’re getting older. You’ve made a few mistakes in your life.”

“If he’s smoking, I’m smoking too,” said Cole, taking a cigar out of his shirt pocket.

“Oh, Christ,” said Mackenzie. “You and your shitty cigars.”

“Fuck you,” said Cole. “This is a different brand.”

Mackenzie tossed a green chip into the middle of the table. “Twenty-five bucks says it’s shitty.”

“I’m in,” said Parker, adding another one.

“Ha fucking ha,” said Cole, the smoke clouding from his mouth.

Morgan tossed in two green chips. “Fifty bucks says he takes that fucking cock out of his fucking mouth and leaves it out and doesn’t interrupt me again,” he said.

“All right, already, I give.” Cole stuck three fingers in his mouth, then pinched them around the cigar tip. “Jesus fuck.”

“Nothing wild,” said Trevor, dealing. Morgan, Parker and Mackenzie retrieved their chips, and Morgan’s kid began circling the table again as the cards settled in front of each player. Reilly picked up his hand – two threes, a five, an eight and a nine. He

wondered if Caldwell could have won anything with this hand. Probably – he was the best bluffer of the bunch, with a poker face like the Statue of Liberty.

“How do you do that?” Reilly once asked him.

“Just be indifferent to what you’ve got,” Caldwell said. “If you don’t care, and nothing can make you care... Apathy can be a very powerful thing.”

He could read people too, and not just at cards. He settled his gaze into them like a poultice, drawing out their thoughts and hopes and fears, and he took them all in and smiled and understood them a little better than they might want him to.

“Wow,” said Morgan’s kid, standing behind Parker and looking at his cards.

“I fold,” said Reilly, glad he didn’t have to play that hand.

“Me too,” said Cole.

Parker slammed his beefy forearms on the table. “Goddammit!”

“Kid,” said Morgan, rising, “come with me.” He took his son’s wrist in his huge hand and led him out of the basement.

Trevor drank from his bottle and set it down next to two empty ones. “That fuckin’ kid needs a spanking,” he said. “I don’t care how old he is.”

“Three queens I had!” said Parker. “Shit!”

“Your old man ever spank you, Trevor?” Mackenzie asked.

“Every chance he got. He’d hold back a little when he was sober.”

That got kicked around the table for a while. The consensus was that it was okay to spank a kid after the heat of anger had passed, and to dial it down a little when using a belt or a wooden spoon. This evolved into women who liked spanking, then women who liked other things. Cole was talking about the erotic potential of Aunt Jemima syrup

when Morgan came back down. “Won’t see him no more,” he said, lumbering into his seat.

“What’d you do?” said Parker. “Kill him?”

“Shit no. I taught him to jerk off.”

Trevor snorted. “Yeah, you probably did,” he said. “You fuck.” He tilted to his left and farted.

“Hey!” said Mackenzie, sitting next to him. “Point that thing somewhere else.”

“I’m being thoughtful. You can’t smell that cigar anymore, can you?”

“Hey, Trevor,” said Cole. “How’s about I fix you a nice tall glass of shut the fuck up.”

“Cards,” said Mackenzie, holding out his hand. Trevor gave him the pack and he began shuffling. The refrigerator kicked in, humming in two-part harmony with the light bulb hanging overhead.

“I gotta talk about Caldwell a little more,” Parker suddenly said.

“Why do you have such a fucking hard-on for Caldwell all of a sudden?” Cole asked.

“The guy flipped. I think he’s fucked up. I heard what he did, I didn’t know whether to shit or go blind. I wanna talk about it.”

“So talk,” said Morgan. “It’s a free country.”

Parker took a drink. “I gotta be honest here,” he said. “If he didn’t host poker night, I wouldn’t give Caldwell the time of day. I’m not saying he’s a bad guy, just that I wouldn’t have had anything to do with him. And then all this happens.” He waved his

arms around. “I didn’t see anything like this in the guy, and it’s making me wonder what else I missed. Where did it all come from, that’s what I want to know.”

“What’s his family think of all this?” Cole asked Reilly.

“How would I know,” Reilly said, putting down his bottle.

“Fuck, man,” said Trevor. “You live next door to a guy for six years, you’ve got to have met his family.”

“Or his ex’s family,” Mackenzie added, dealing the cards. “What do they think?”

“Guys,” said Reilly. “It’s not like we’re all up each other’s asses. They don’t come to me, I don’t go to them. Fuck knows what either one of them thinks. Not me.” He picked up his cards and the others did too. After a moment he threw them down. “I got three pair,” he said. “Nice work, Mackenzie.”

“Misdeal,” said Cole.

“That figures,” said Trevor. “Best fuckin’ cards I get all day and I don’t get to play them.” He farted again.

“So there’s this asshole who keeps calling me,” Parker said, looking at Trevor. “I don’t know what reminded me of that.”

“Kiss my fuckin’ ass sideways,” Trevor said.

“Hey!” said Morgan, rising halfway out of his chair and pointing. “I thought I told you to stay upstairs!”

Everyone turned to see Morgan’s kid, standing on the bottom step, his eyes puffy and his fists clenched. “Fucking I don’t want to stay goddamn upstairs!” he yelled.

For a moment, everyone was surprised into stillness. Reilly had time to think of Mark Twain telling his cursing wife that she knew the words and not the music, and time to quickly decide not to tell that story to the others.

“Listen to this kid,” Cole said, a note of approval in his voice. “Where’d you learn to talk like that, you little bastard?”

“Get his ass outa here,” Parker said. “He cost me enough money for one night.”

“Kid,” Morgan began.

“All of you guys,” said his kid, grimacing as he pointed, “can go and shit in hell!”

“Ah, go fuck yourself,” said Trevor. “Now that you know how.”

Without a word, Morgan raised his elbow and slammed it into Trevor’s face.

There was a muffled *crack*, and Trevor went “Awk!” as he fell backward. There were more muffled cracks as his chair shattered beneath him. His feet kicked against the table, making it jump. Several chips clattered off the edge and fell into the purple shag carpet.

Morgan had drawn himself to his full height and was pointing at the floor. “Not my kid, Trevor,” he said. “Not my kid.”

“Fuckin’ A,” said, Cole, nodding.

“We’re gonna need some paper towels,” said Mackenzie, craning his neck to look down at Trevor. Morgan’s kid turned and bolted upstairs.

Reilly was at the edge of his seat, hands on the table, the gears grinding in his head. He watched Trevor’s hand rise up and slap the table, and the rest of Trevor rose up after it. The skin under his nose was thick with blood, and his face was already beginning to puff up. He turned toward Morgan. “I guess I deserved that,” he said, his voice a squeezed honk. He held out his hand, and Morgan shook it.

Morgan's kid ran up to his father, a roll of paper towels in hand. "Thanks, kid," said Morgan, tousling his hair. "Now tell Trevor here you're sorry."

"Ah, he doesn't have to apologize," Trevor said, bringing a lawn chair up to take the place of the kindling he'd been sitting in a minute ago. "He's a good kid. Whose deal? Cole's, right?"

"Wait a minute," said Reilly. "Trevor, shouldn't you be going to the hospital?"

"For what, a broken nose? I can wait."

"Couple three hours either way's not going to make a fuck of a lot of difference, Reilly," Parker said.

"That's a fact," said Cole, card snapping against card as he dealt. "Let's play."

Trevor rubbed two fingers under his nose and picked up his cards, leaving big red blotches on the back. He caught Reilly staring at him. "Jesus Christ, Reilly," he said. "It's only a fucking game."

*

On Sunday, Reilly went to Caldwell's cabin in the woods, where Caldwell had been living for the last two weeks. It was more than a cabin, really, as it had electricity and indoor plumbing, but it was remote enough that Reilly had to leave his truck at the end of the dirt road and hike the mile-long path to Caldwell's door. The hike was actually quite pleasant – no bugs, a faint breeze, and the sun was nowhere near as oppressive as it had been the day before.

Reilly emerged from the shade of the trees and into the clearing where the cabin was. He briefly marveled at its size, then approached the door and knocked. There was a

brass *4-E* on the door; he was wondering if this meant something special or was just Caldwell's sense of humor when the door opened and there he stood.

He was wearing bib overalls and no shirt; on his right arm was a gauze bandage the same color as the cabin. He held a nylon-string acoustic guitar by its neck. Reilly looked down at his filthy bare feet, all shades of brown with flecks of red from scrapes and bites. "Hey, Caldwell," he said. "How you doing?"

He came outside, closing the door behind him. "Come on around out back," he said.

They went behind the cabin, where there was an unobstructed view of the rolling hills, rife with pine trees clear down to the banks of a river, where the water rippled and bulged as it moved, never quite becoming white water. A hawk flared down, slashed at the water's surface with its talons, and pulled skyward, a fish writhing in its grasp, rather less desperate than Reilly would have expected.

Caldwell raised his hands to the sky as if to bless the earth before him, the guitar swaying in his tenuous hold. "Look at this," he said, smiling. His smile was just as tentative as it was at the poker games, when Trevor or Quinn or somebody would make a crack at his expense, but now there was a tough glow around it, like the damp shine of a tree branch stripped of its bark.

Reilly nodded. "Incredible," he said, studying Caldwell. He was a little leaner now, maybe, a little less self-conscious. But that, Reilly thought, was it. What he'd done hadn't changed him, not truly. There was nothing wild in his movements, nothing frantic in his eyes, brown as wet paper bags. Even his hair was the same shortish length.

Caldwell gestured to a mud-red picnic table rested beneath a gnarled oak tree, and together they walked toward it. “You didn’t make this,” Reilly said without conviction.

Caldwell shook his head. “Came with the property.” He hopped over some thick roots that bulged through the earth and sat with his back toward the trees, and Reilly sat opposite him, brushing the grit off the tabletop as he did. The table was smooth and heavily lacquered. The smell went down his nose and collected in thick gritty beads at the back of his throat.

Reilly pulled a flask from his hip pocket and offered it to Caldwell, who shook his head and leaned back, the sun dazzling the copper buttons on his overalls. Reilly decided to wedge the flask back into his pocket. The echoes of old breezes floated around them.

“You missed a big fight at the card table last night,” Reilly said.

Caldwell put his guitar on his knee. “You know, you can almost tune a guitar to the note a refrigerator makes when it hums,” he said. “It’s not quite a B, and it’s not quite a B flat. It’s kind of a B natural.” His hand gamboled over the strings, and the instrument sang out with an introspective grace. He closed his eyes. “Listen to that for a minute,” he said.

Reilly listened, felt his back being warmed by the sun. He couldn’t tell his story to this affable folky soundtrack, and the longer it went on, the less he wanted to tell it at all. When Caldwell finished, it felt more natural to move to another subject. “Are you coming back any time soon?”

Caldwell opened his eyes. “Why should I?”

Reilly coughed out a laugh and drew out a long hum. “Well,” he said. “You probably don’t get much company up here.”

Caldwell tilted his head a little. “And the problem is?”

“Well –”

“I love it out here, Reilly,” Caldwell said. “It’s not like the house was. Everything out here is clean. The sweat, the dirt – everything.”

“Well, you always kept a clean house.”

“I couldn’t, though. The place was contaminated.” His entire face scrunched up for a moment. “You could sweep and scrub and soak everything in rubbing alcohol and it’s still going to come up contaminated.”

Reilly remembered the night he’d left the poker table twenty dollars in the black and decided to get Caldwell a little token of his gratitude, to thank him for agreeing to host these poker nights. When he came back a half hour later, with a carton of almond hazelnut swirl, he found Caldwell alone in the living room, rubbing furniture polish into the table in violent circles. This wouldn’t have seemed so strange to Reilly, but the table had had a tablecloth on it for the entire night.

“I wish you’d let us know,” Reilly said.

Caldwell picked out a few notes. “I don’t think it would have made any difference,” he said. “One way or another.” He bent his head and watched his chord fingers move up and down the fretboard, making merry little squeaks on the strings.

Reilly could sense the blocks edging closer, blocks that would quickly work to form a wall between them, and he decided he had to blow by them, and now. “Caldwell,” he said, “why did you do it?”

Caldwell stopped playing. He smiled. “Ah.”

“We’ve been wondering why you did it,” Reilly rushed on. “All of us. I mean, it’s nice you’ve got this bucolic setting out here –”

“Bucolic,” said Caldwell, putting the guitar down on the table. “Good word.”

“– but none of us can figure out how you came to the point where you had to wind up here.”

Caldwell touched two fingers to the bandage on his arm. For a long time he said nothing. Reilly was just about to repeat the question when Caldwell took a deep, hissing breath through his nose. “There’s a story,” he said. “Guy’s fishing, and he falls out of his boat. Another boat comes over and saves him. They say to him, ‘How did you come to fall in?’ Guy says, ‘I didn’t come to fall in. I came to fish.’” He pulled the bandage out a little, let it snap back into place. “I trust that answers the question,” he concluded.

“No, Caldwell,” said Reilly. “It doesn’t. Goddammit, it doesn’t,” he said, the cords of his neck rising to the surface. “You need to be straight with me, you – you fucker. Don’t you pull this hideaway shit on me. Step up. Be a man.”

“That’s Saturday night Reilly talking,” said Caldwell. “Today’s Sunday.”

Under the table, Reilly dug his fingernails into his knees. “I’ll ask you again,” he said. “Why did you do it?”

“Because of you,” Caldwell said. Steady, evenly.

“Me?”

“You and Trevor and Parker and Quinn and Elliott and all you Saturday night people. I never would’ve wanted to do it, but because of you guys, I did.” He leaned back and folded his hands behind his head. “You didn’t leave me any choice,” he whispered. “Did you?”

Reilly felt Caldwell's gaze sinking into him, drawing out the poisons. He hated what Caldwell could do with that gaze. He wanted to punch him in the nose and then shake his hand and have done with it. But Caldwell didn't speak that language, didn't understand the way the poker players saw the world any more than they could understand why he did it. Besides, the fact was the Reilly had never thrown a punch in his life. All he ever knew to rely on in a fight were words.

"Don't look at me like that," he said. "Stop it." He put his hand to his forehead, shading his eyes from the glare. "Knock it off, goddammit," he said. The curse word sounded foreign to him, out of place, an orange brick amidst a sea of red ones.

Caldwell looked down. He rubbed the bottom of his foot, raised his cupped hand to his face and sniffed it. "This is good earth," he said, pointing at the particles on his hand, the dirt wedged into the lines on his palm. Then he stood, picked up his guitar by the neck, and walked back to the cabin.

Reilly watched him go. Then he turned to look at the path that had brought him here. He had a mile of hiking ahead of him, but he wasn't ready for it, not yet. He wanted to stay on the bench for a while. He sat there, watching the shadows closing in as the sun rose higher, and he tried to think about Monday.

The Fat Mime

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen a fat mime before,” Anthony said.

We were sitting on a marble bench, the two of us, across the sidewalk from a fat mime. His big hairy belly, wet with sweat, stuck out between the bottom of his black and white striped shirt and the waistband of his black pants. His suspenders curved around his torso, like parentheses. Behind him was an upside down derby hat, a wadded-up felt shadow on the dazzling gray sidewalk; next to that, a plastic gallon jug that once held milk and was now three-quarters full of water. He blinked up at the clear sky, holding out a white gloved hand, and pretended to open an umbrella.

“Why are mimes always skinny, come to think of it?” Anthony asked.

“They need to be limber,” I said. “For a lot of the stuff they do. Plus the fact that they’re starving artists, usually.”

“Not this guy.”

“Well, he’s good at what he does.”

The fat mime's invisible umbrella got caught in a gale, tugging and yanking him backward. His upper arms wobbled as he fought the fantasy wind. He was good at what he did. I'd spent my lunch break watching his act since the first of June, dropping a couple of bills in his derby whenever he tried something new that really worked. I encouraged my workmates to join me, but no one ever did. When Anthony asked me to have lunch with him today, I told him we should have a couple of hot dogs in the square, and I was delighted when he agreed – it gave me pleasure to share the silent, overweight theatre experience with somebody.

Anthony would appreciate it too, I was sure. He was a good enough guy, troubled but sweet, and painless enough to run into every now and then. We used to play some three-on-three down at the gym on Tuesdays, until he stopped going in order to spend time working on his marriage with Barbara. Barbara was a great woman, a knockout. I'd shared the fat mime with her a few times, but I wasn't sure whether or not Anthony knew that. I couldn't help wondering if he'd called this little lunch to find out.

“So, Eric,” he said. “Tell me what's new since the last time I saw you.”

I shrugged and stretched my legs out. A breeze came up (a real one, this time) and sent a dirty napkin skittering past my feet. “Not much,” I said, watching it go. “Work is hell. My ulcer's giving me trouble again. Oh, and I lost ten bucks on the All-Star game.”

Anthony nodded, watching as the fat mime started his fly-hunting routine. “You under some stress lately?”

“Ah, I'm always under stress, you know that.” I watched the fat mime frowning, his bloodshot eyes darting about, trying to track down that source of irritation.

“I’m feeling it myself,” Anthony said, reaching back and patting his shoulder. “I’m getting all these knots, right up here. I wish I could get Barbara to rub them out for me. She could, too. She’s got the magic hands.”

“Have you seen her lately?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“Have you seen anyone lately?”

Another head shake. “I don’t think I can muckle on to somebody else until I let go of Barbara,” he said. “And I can’t do that.”

“Can’t do that *yet*,” I amended.

“Ever the optimist.” He raised his hands, one holding the half-eaten hot dog with mustard and relish. “Either way, it’s not about to happen.”

I nodded and took a good bite out of my own hot dog. The fat mime had reached the point where he was clapping in the air, huffing a little, trying to kill the fly in mid-flight. In a moment he’d follow its death spiral to the ground, then hold a teeny little funeral service and mime a bugler playing “Taps.” You could tell it was “Taps” by the rhythmic way he moved his head as his sweaty, grease-painted cheeks puffed out, in, out. The guy really did have talent.

I swallowed and said, “Well, next time you see her, give her my regards.”

“Sure. One box of regards, courtesy of Eric.” He drank from a fist-sized bottle of ginger ale, set it back down on the bench. “I can’t get over how fat this guy is,” he said.

“He is a big man,” I agreed, and drank from my own ginger ale. I’d said the same exact words to Barbara, same inflection, on this same marble bench. She curled into me and asked if I was a big man too. I took her hand and let her know that yes, I was. Then

she asked me to show her how big a man I could be, and I told her to come with me, and we got up from the bench, she and I, and the fat mime clutched his hands to his heart, fluttered his lashes, and puckered his inky lips at us. Later, as Barbara wrapped my arms around her and murmured and sighed and drifted, I stared up at the big white ceiling and tried to find his features in the cracks.

“Doug misses her,” said Anthony.

“Misses who?” I asked, my voice muffled with food.

He smirked. “Misses who,” he repeated, no enjoyment in the words.

“Oh, come on. You went from the mime to the dog. I think you can excuse me for not thinking of her first thing.”

I held my hand over my mouth as I talked, so Anthony wouldn't have to look at my half-chewed lunch. As I was swallowing, I happened to see the fat mime out of the corner of my eye. He was holding his fingertips in front of his mouth and making huge exaggerated chewing motions, his jaw going off at an angle like a cow chewing its cud. Then he pointed at me and threw back his head in silent laughter, his stomach wobbling, his neck lost behind a thick band of wet, rubbery fat.

I pointed back at him, then gave him the finger.

“You just said ‘you fuck,’” said Anthony. “You want to flip him off first and then point,” he said, demonstrating, “if you want to say ‘fuck you.’”

“No, it's okay,” I said. “Fuck is a noun in this case.”

“No, the flipping off *makes* it a verb.”

“It can mean both. Sign is a very flexible language.”

“Very dexterous,” said Anthony. His hands danced out a couple of nonsense phrases. Neither the fat mime nor the dozen or so spectators paid him any mind. They didn’t have any stake in understanding what he was trying to say.

“Anyway,” I said. “Doug the dog.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, Doug the dog still goes and waits at the door for her at quarter past six.”

“When she would come home from work.”

“Right. And Barbara still stops in enough that he knows she’s not dead or something.”

The fat mime had gotten tired of making fun of me and moved on to his next bit, walking a step behind people and mimicking them as they went on their way. A beefy guy, hunched over a newspaper as he walked; an old biddy’s mincing near-sashay; a suit’s ramrod march; an athlete’s loose-limbed jog. He did them all, and he did them well. Every now and then he had to pretend to lean against a wall so he could catch his breath. I watched him and smiled and waited for Anthony to try to get me to lay my cards on the table.

“So that’s good, anyway,” Anthony concluded.

I nodded, following him a little better this time, and finished my hot dog.

“I’m like any guy, Eric,” he said. “I just want her to be happy. Maybe in her time away, she’ll decide that it wasn’t me making her unhappy. Just life stuff. And maybe she’d rather face the life stuff with me than without me.”

I thought of her, of the times I’d find pretenses to visit the apartment, of the moments she’d walk in and light up when she saw me on the couch with Anthony, of the

way she laughed by leaning way forward and tilting her head way back at the same time, of her whispered thank-yous to my whispered compliments, of her fast blushes and slow shivers and sighs, and of how her happiness was just as important to me as it was to Anthony. “She deserves to be happy,” I said.

“She does. She does.”

More ginger ale for me, sparking at the roof of my mouth. The fat mime drank from his jug, leaving a black smear on it, and then began doing a bit with an imaginary camera, twisting an imaginary lens to sharpen the focus as he knelt in front of an ice cream cone someone had dropped, and the pool of black raspberry that surrounded it.

“I’ll tell you something, Eric,” Anthony said, turning to face me. “She does decide to leave me? God forbid? There isn’t a goddamn thing I could say or do to change her mind. She wants to be gone, pshhht – she’s gone.” His throat began constricting around his words, hardening them into slow-moving bullets. “Thing is, somebody else, they could change her mind. Like you. You’re a guy who, you want to do something, you just get up and do it. But I don’t work like that. I get pushed into everything I’ve ever done. I mean, I only started dating Barbara so my roommate wouldn’t lose a bet.” He took a quaking breath and grimaced. “You’ll never understand how much it sucks to be passive,” he said.

“Well,” I heard myself saying, as I put down my ginger ale. “My life’s not all you’re cracking it up to be.”

“Oh yeah?” he said, his face still contorted. “What’s one bad thing you deal with that I don’t?”

Oh, I don't know – hiding the fact that I sleep with your wife, maybe? To myself I said that. To Anthony, I said, “Consequences. You’re not a man who tries to deceive people. I am. That’s how sales works. And I’ve always got to worry that those people will find me out.”

That stopped him, and the softness flowed back over his features. “You’re right,” he said. “I wouldn’t want that. I couldn’t handle deceiving everybody in my life.”

“You stick with the truth, then,” I said.

He nodded. “Truth over consequences.”

The fat mime stepped in front of us. Still doing his camera shtick, he waved us to get closer together. We went along with it, getting closer and closer together as he kept waving us in, until our damp temples were pressed against each other, hard. At his prompting, we gave big stiff grins, and held them as he fumbled with the shutter speed and flash, until finally he was ready. He held up three fingers, then two, then one, then turned to face a college girl standing nearby and fake-snapped one of her instead. A woman behind him burst out laughing and started fumbling through her purse for a donation.

“Maybe she’s seeing him,” I suggested, edging away from Anthony. “Maybe she likes the strong silent type.”

“Ha, ha. He would never admit to it, is the problem.”

“True enough.”

There was a lot that he was never going to admit. I could say and do things in front of him and he would keep it to himself, like a priest in a confessional. I have to say,

there's a certain freedom in knowing for a fact that you can kiss a man's wife long and deep in front of another man and he would never say a word.

Anthony rubbed his mouth with a napkin. "Okay, well, it's back to the office for me."

"Wait," I said. "I thought you wanted to talk about something."

Anthony studied me. "We did," he said.

"Oh," I said. "Okay. Just getting everything out of your system."

"Well, not everything, I'm sure. But it was a help." He stood up and tossed his wadded-up napkin in a nearby trash barrel. I stood too, leaving my bottle where it was for the moment, and went for the manly handshake.

"Thanks for joining me," he said.

"Hey, I enjoyed it. Got to talk, dinner and a show..."

"You giving him something?"

"I did already."

"What? I got here before you did."

"Oh, well, I didn't give him anything today, if that's what you meant."

He smirked at me. "You're a bastard sometimes," he said, and gave me a punch on the shoulder, which I returned. "See you," he said. "And watch out for those consequences."

I gave him a fingersnap-point. He returned fire, then fished out his wallet and approached the fat mime, touching his shoulder and saying something in his ear. The fat mime listened, pulling idly at his suspenders.

I picked up my bottle and downed the remaining contents. Wouldn't it be funny, I thought, if I pretended to take out my wallet and pretended to give him money? I decided to do that the next time I was here with Barbara. She'll laugh, I thought. I'll be sure and actually give him money after I do it so I won't come across badly.

I tossed my bottle and knelt down to fiddle with my laces, the heat from the sidewalk filtering past my fingers. I'd finished the right shoe when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned, and there was the fat mime looking down at me, closer than he'd ever been before. The black stripes of his shirt were a shade darker with his sweat; the white stripes, a shade clearer. He smelled like salt and paste. His eyes were almost hidden behind the doughy folds of his face; the fat made him more inexpressive than a mime should be, I realized. It was his eyebrows, painted on with a perfect inquisitive arch, which saved his appearance from total blankness.

I stood. He jabbed two gloved fingers at me, cocked his thumb to make the familiar pistol shape, and turned his hand around to put the fingers in his mouth. A quick twitch of the thumb, and he violently flopped his head onto his shoulder, making a greasy white smudge across his neckline. His tongue lolled out and his eyes rolled back, and he crumpled to the sidewalk and lay still, a heavy puddle congealing at my feet.

I raised my eyes to see Anthony across the street, watching us, half of his right foot hanging over the curb. I shrugged at him; palms out, what-can-you-do. He shrugged back, a perfect copy of mine. *Consequences*, he mouthed. Then he opened an imaginary umbrella, smiled at me, and sifted into the masses of people making their way back to the office.

The Return of Mavis

Winston studied his hat rack. He had a number of hats to choose from, and he had to pick the right one. It could be the Cubs baseball cap, or the University of Arkansas cap, or maybe even the cowboy hat. The Cubs hat had the best fit, while the U of A hat had a longer bill for those especially sunny days. The cowboy hat had been a present from Mavis last Christmas – she knew he would look ridiculous in it, which was why she bought it. She was delighted whenever he emerged from the bedroom wearing it, and while he'd grump about it, he used to enjoy watching her delight. This evening, though, he went with the Gilligan hat. He set it on his head and went off to find the liquor cabinet.

Most of the windows at Winston's harbor residence faced the east. This meant the house got a lot of natural light in the morning, and that Winston had to start turning on the lamps before the local news. When it was cloudy he'd keep one living room lamp on throughout the day. Mavis used to complain that this was wasteful if they weren't going to be using the light, but Winston would assert his position as head of the household, and the light stayed on.

It was different now. Winston rarely saw a need to keep any of the lights burning. He would fix his dinner in the twilight and get ready for bed in the dark, feeling for his pajamas. Artificial light was too harsh for him now, too false, provided no warmth. He wished he could show Mavis, tell her how right she'd been. She'd probably tell him he was being ridiculous, that you shouldn't pretend you don't need something when it's clear that you do. She used to go back and forth on issues like this, and it used to drive him crazy.

The sun was setting now, and Winston poured himself a Cutty on the rocks to take out to the porch and savor as he watched the day end. His hand shook a little as he poured, and the mouth of the bottle tapped on the rim of the glass. Winston felt like a conductor at the podium, calling the orchestra to order. He recapped the Cutty and took his glass to the porch, stopping along the way to pick up his son's postcard, which rested on the felt top desk.

It was a warm evening, warm and quiet. There was one cloud on the horizon, vaguely pink from the sun and perfectly flat along the bottom, watching over the lake. Winston squatted over his lawn chair and dropped into it, rattling the ice in his glass like a percussion instrument. He took a slow sip, listening to the ice crackle and hiss, then set the glass down on the porch. For a while, he watched the cloud turn pinker through the shroud of netting that protected him from all those carnivorous insects. Then he took up the postcard. It was postmarked June 23, two weeks previous, but Winston couldn't bring himself to file it away just yet.

Dear Dad – It's Helen's mom's turn to see the kids, so we won't be up for the July 4th weekend after all. I think it's

great that you're at the Harbor this summer – it's good to be with your memories, and I'm glad you're not shutting them out. Besides, if Mom knew you weren't using the place she'd have a bird. Think good thoughts, Dad – Love, Tony.

The front of the card showed a picture from some time in the 1940s; a farmer leaned on his tractor and chewed a piece of hay. He looked irritated at having to stand around posing for pictures when there was work to be done. Winston smiled at the farmer, wondered what it took to get him to quit the fields. Illness? Old age? Or did his family push him out of it?

Winston had spent his Fourth of July morning watching the parade. A few of Mavis's lady friends walked over to say hello and express their sorrow for his loss. Mavis was a wonderful woman, they assured him. Winston already knew this. He waited for somebody to ask him how he was holding up. Nobody did.

In the afternoon he tried to call his daughter. First he got a recording telling him the number had been changed. He had to go find pen and paper, then call the old number back so he could copy down the new one. When he called the new number, nobody was home, so he left a message asking Becky to call him back when she got the chance. He stayed near the phone for the rest of the day, bringing it out with him on the porch when night fell. The fireworks were "beyond exquisite," as Mavis used to say; the netting cut down the glare, but Winston was still appropriately dazzled, sad, and a little bit proud of America. The phone didn't ring during the fireworks, didn't ring until the next morning. Becky was dashing off to work, so she couldn't talk long, but she wanted him to know

she'd call him early next week, when things weren't so hectic, and then they could talk as long as they wanted. Before she hung up, she told Winston she loved him.

Now the cloud was a mottled purple, and Winston felt a brief chill float inside him. He finished his Cutty and let the light, clean fuel warm him before he pushed himself to his feet. As he went inside and put his glass in the sink, he debated whether he should throw on a sweater or change into his flannel pajamas. He decided to hold off on any decisions until he got to the bedroom, where he could consider them both and really weigh his options. The hallway to the bedroom was always the darkest part of the house; he touched his way to the end, then grasped for the knob and turned it.

There was a whistling sort of noise in the room. This gave Winston a moment's pause; he knew of nothing in the room that might make that noise. It sounded like a radio between stations, but there was no radio in the room. Yet there was something familiar about the noise, something unwelcome. Winston stood in the doorway, his eyes roaming for clues, as the noise fell and rose again. Then it rose higher, and with it came the quick little creak of the house settling.

Winston's mind bucked, hard. His eyes darted to the jagged hole in the window, the hole he had just realized would be there, and the memory came roaring back. He and Mavis had just finished the long drive up, and he had shut off the motor and leaned back to admire the house, and in the middle of a happy sigh he spotted the broken window next to the door. He was out of the car in a flash, running up to the house, leaving behind Mavis's voice asking what the trouble was. As he feared, he didn't need his keys; the door had been unlocked. He took two steps in and froze at the sight of the beer cans and the cigarette butts and the ashes scattered in front of the fireplace and the scraps and

stains. He stood there, dumb, and the wind whistled through the hole in the window and flew around the room, mocking Winston with its empty laughter.

But Mavis hadn't been upset in the slightest. When she came in and saw what had been done, she simply went about cleaning things up. Her attitude was that some young people wanted to have a party, and that this was the house they decided to have it in. Boys will be boys, after all, and since no real damage had been done besides the window, why fuss about it? Winston pointed out the charred remains of Reader's Digest Condensed Books in the fireplace, but Mavis pointed out that he never read them, had no intention of reading them, and probably wished he'd come up with the idea himself. The wind blew through the hole, singing to Mavis as she cleaned, and Winston went back to the car to unload it and make room for the wood he'd buy from the hardware store, wood to make shutters that closed and locked from the inside.

The shutters he'd installed in the bedroom were all open, of course, now that he was here. He looked at them, pressed against the wall, and looked at the hole again. It was just below the window lock, shaped like a four-fingered claw. It wasn't there in the morning, when Winston was getting dressed, and it wasn't there when he came in to get his hat. He imagined it got there while he was out on the porch; his hearing wasn't what it used to be, and he wouldn't have been surprised if he didn't hear it at all. He could picture a gloved hand punching through the glass, reaching up to the lock...

That was when Winston realized he might not be alone. Whoever broke the window could still be in the house. Could be waiting.

It gave him a bad, sinking thrill to think this. It sent him to the closet door. He threw it open. Nothing there. Nothing but a couple of his dress shirts, for the fancy lawn

parties he and Mavis sometimes went to, and a few of her dresses. She loved the magenta one. Whenever she tried it on, she would never ask Winston how she looked. She would strut around the room, making exaggerated pivots, secure in the knowledge that she looked divine.

He took a sleeve between two fingers and brought it to his nose to smell. But there were no smells left, nothing but dust. It only made him have to sneeze; he jammed his lips together to suppress as much noise as he could. He gave one quiet snort, then another. That done, he eased out of the bedroom, looking for huddled shadows, or maybe a flashlight beam playing on the walls.

The house had only one floor to it, which cut down on both hiding places and search time. Winston went through the living room, kitchen, and dining room, seeing nothing. He tossed a glance at the porch, just in case, then doubled back on his tracks to the kids' rooms. He hadn't been in either of them since their last visits; Mavis had been the one who aired them out and cleaned them up, so now the rooms were stale but tidy. Tony's bedside table had a lamp, a courtroom thriller, and a picture of him and Helen during their engagement, in a stand-alone plastic frame. Becky's table held an unplugged phone, a travel alarm clock, and a clear, slim vase of plastic flowers. Mavis used to secretly fill the vase with water, then tell Becky she was glad to see her taking such good care of her flowers. Becky would roll her eyes a little, Winston would laugh, and Mavis would give her husband a sly smile. He never lost appreciation for her off-kilter sense of humor. It was with her to the end – the last thing she asked for was a glass of iced tea, saying it could be her last cold drink, depending on which way she was going. Winston promised her she had nothing to worry about in that regard, and was in the middle of

listing the reasons when she died. He never got the chance to bring her that glass of iced tea.

Now the room was empty, any water in the vase had evaporated, and there was no sign of any intruders. Winston backed out, pulled the door closed in front of him. He turned to his door, which was ajar – but he'd left it that way, hadn't he? Maybe someone had ducked back in there while he searched the other rooms. What he would have given for two good ears. He stood there, wanting to feel silly for all his worries but unable to convince himself they weren't well-founded. He wondered how Mavis would handle it. She'd probably join him in the search, and when they came up empty she'd kiss his forehead and tell him he was so brave.

Winston edged back into the room; it looked the same, right down to the open closet door. Then he had an inspiration. He eased himself into a squatting position to look under the bed. There was nobody there. He could see the shards of glass under the window, and...

And a lump. A lump of some kind. It was hard to know what it was in this light, from five feet away. He pushed himself to a standing position and moved around the foot of the bed to get a closer look. Some of the glass crunched under his right foot as he stopped. The lump, he saw, was a bird. It was a bird that made the hole in the window, and now Winston got to feel the embarrassed relief he'd craved for the past few minutes. There was nobody else in the house. He was alone. Him and the bird.

He leaned over, pressed his right knee with his right hand and picked up the bird with his left. It was small, fitting easily into his palm. It was black and orange, and its eyes were closed. Winston took its beak between his thumb and two fingers, the way he

gripped a pen, and moved it around. The bird's head lolled in every direction. A broken neck, clearly. Still holding the beak, he signed his name in the air. *Winston*, he wrote, going back to dot the *i* and cross the *t*.

Winston didn't know much about birds. He could recognize a blue jay up close, and he knew what a chickadee's call sounded like, but that was it. Mavis would have recognized the breed straightaway, he was sure. She'd brought binoculars and a field guide up to the house one year to teach herself, and she'd gotten pretty good. Winston built birdhouses and put together feeders, and the birds would come, and she'd hold up her binoculars and study them, watch them eat and fly. Before the end, she could tell if it was male or female by its plumage or the rings around its neck or some such. Anyway, that book was probably still in the house somewhere.

Winston put the bird down on Mavis's old pillow, on its back. The claws were straight up and the head straight back, making it look unnatural, if relaxed. The white pillowcase started to remind him of the lining of a coffin, and then his mind was whisking him to a funeral parlor. Before it could arrive there, he moved quickly to rearrange the bird. Now it was on its stomach, its head curled down as though it was napping and content. Winston sighed and went out to look for the bird book.

There weren't too many books on the shelves that weren't condensed by Reader's Digest, so he picked it out right away and leafed through the introductory pages as he returned to his room. By now the light was quite faded, and he thought that he really should turn on a lamp or something. But no, there was enough for him to look at pictures by. He sat on the bed, half on and half off, and began to flip through the guide. He

reached a snapshot of the kids in their teens, used to bookmark the hummingbird section. They really were beautiful kids. He smiled at them and went back to looking.

The picture he stopped at was a Baltimore oriole, standing in a nest. Winston looked back and forth between the page and the pillow. The black, the orange, the beak – yes, it was all there. He had a dead Baltimore oriole on Mavis’s pillow, its eyes closed, its spirit gone.

Winston closed the book. He stood up and began to undress. It was dark enough now that he could go to bed. Day is done, gone the sun. He would sweep up the glass in the morning; he never went on Mavis’s side of the bed anyway, so he wouldn’t cut up his feet. He rubbed his hands across his chest; they slid a little in the sweat. The mosquitoes would smell him now, he knew, and they’d be coming for him through that hole. No, wait – the shutters. He climbed onto the bed, closed one shutter and then the other, cutting off the empty whistling noise and filling the room with total blackness.

Winston felt for his pajamas, put them on in silence. He got under the covers and lay still for a while. As he felt himself beginning to recede from the day, he reached over and felt for the oriole’s beak. When he found it, he stroked its head. “Mavis,” he whispered, and soon he was asleep.

Reverse Zoom

At the moment, nobody's talking to me.

The last person who would talk to me was Dave Dunn, my agent, who hung up on me not thirty seconds ago. He hung up when I told him where he could shove his advice. He'd advised me to forget about Lisa. "Seeing as how she's forgotten about you," he said. At least, she said that was on her agenda just before she walked out the door. Anybody who could do what I did to her little sister deserved to be forgotten, she yelled as I lay there, clutching my head. Apparently anyone who could do what I did also deserved to be clocked with an empty wine bottle. Tawny port – I recognized the label on the bottle as Lisa swung it at me. It was the same bottle that hit her sister Audrey in the back as she ran down the flight of stairs two hours before.

I'd flung the bottle down at her in a rage, cursing her name and everything bad about her. I never would have thrown it if I hadn't been holding it when she ran out. She'd burst out sobbing, called me an evil slag, threw open the door and took off. Caught me in mid-swig. I never even saw her put on her shoes.

My telling her she was worse in bed than her sister is what set her off. We had only this one session, but that was enough for me to know. She was all constricted inside, severe in her movements. She wasn't that way when I undressed her. Hell, she wasn't that way when I opened the door and saw her with a bottle of tawny port and a smile, the one part of her that reminded me of Lisa.

I had called her that morning to invite her over. My friends were disgusted with me when I ran the idea by them. It still seemed a good idea to me, though, right from the moment I had it. I was leaving their driveway a week ago when it occurred to me. Audrey's shy goodbye kiss prompted it. Also, she told me over coffee that she'd love to see where I did my writing.

Lisa didn't hear this; she had just left us alone to use the bathroom. Maybe she told Audrey she was going to do that, as they cleared the dessert dishes together. I figured something was up – I spotted Lisa's secret smile during dessert when I praised the homemade tiramisu and Audrey couldn't stop giggling. I think Lisa liked watching Audrey talk with me throughout dinner. I guess I brought out the stars in her eyes. Lisa knew that before I did. "My little sister's got a crush on you," she'd warned me when she extended the dinner invitation two nights previous. "She spent all yesterday afternoon buying the ingredients to make you tiramisu."

I saw Audrey before, at a seminar I gave; she said she couldn't believe her sister was going out with her favorite filmmaker. The only other time we'd met, the first time, she stood mute, cheeks burning, eyes on her shoes, as I signed her stack of DVDs.

"Here comes Audrey," Lisa had whispered as her sister walked towards us. Lisa was sitting next to me right from the start of that Q & A session. I liked having her by

my side, be it on a jogging path or under the covers. Even our first fight was special, because it was with her. That fight was my fault – I showed up late, drunk, for our three-month anniversary date. I'd been out with Dave Dunn, storing up enough Dutch courage to tell her what she meant to me. Dave should have known better than to suggest that course of action, but there you go.

Our first time making love was like being in a hurricane – warm, wet, scary as hell, and beautiful. Our first real kiss was much the same. I knew the instant before our lips touched that this woman could change my life if I wasn't careful. There was something about how her eyes closed as she leaned toward me. Something about her mouth as she said, "I'm going to kiss you now." We were already miles beyond our previous date, the second one, which ended with a peck on the cheek. That was the date I first saw Audrey, in a photo next to her sister on the beach. "You're not going to believe how little we look alike," Lisa said as she took the picture out of her handbag. I tried not to stare at her as she read her menu. I did better than the maitre d', whose eyes never left her as he showed us to our booth.

The night before that date, it took several drinks to get me to sleep. I couldn't stop thinking of the way she said, "I'd really like to do this again," at the end of our first date. We'd spent that evening learning so much about each other, and it never felt like enough. I knew it would be a great night the moment I saw her walking across the parking lot of the Holiday Inn where I was staying. We'd agreed to meet there the night before, after we talked for two hours at a filmmakers convention. Dave Dunn had introduced her to me as an old friend of his. "Here comes someone I know you're going

to like,” he said as she approached us. He’d been trying to cheer me up all evening. They sold the TV rights to the film, he said; the film’s box office was still strong.

But the only film that mattered to me was the one I was working on. I was fifty pages into it by the time the promo tour for the other one ended. I would isolate myself – in a hotel room, on a plane, in another hotel room – and write. The junkets and autograph sessions were becoming a distraction from my work, an annoyance. Before I reached the end of page twenty, I was starting work with a double bourbon, to clear the distractions away.

I had laughed as I poured that first double bourbon. Dave Dunn’s advice from his phone call the night before just seemed so silly. “Don’t get too lonely,” he cautioned me, after I told him I’d started a new script. That was ironic, because I’d just finished my third interview that day, with *Newsweek*. My second interview was with *Esquire*. My first was with the *New York Times*. They were the first ones to see me in my, shall we say, unattached state. I’d just finished things with Ally the night before. We’d spent two hours on the phone, failing to clear the air about what happened the previous Friday. She’d come onstage during a lecture and slapped my face, right in front of five hundred students. A thousand more students milled around outside, unable to accept the fact that they hadn’t gotten their tickets in time. One student was in the green room, looking forward to seeing me again.

You see – back then, everybody wanted to talk to me.

My Choosing

My car's giving me the usual trouble. I've got the hood up and I've got the air filter off, and I'm wetting the carburetor chambers with a little gasoline.

I love my car. I'm the only one who does. Ten years ago my friend Dalton called it "the wreck of the goddamn Hesperus." I promptly claimed the name for her, and got HESPERUS vanity plates before the year was out. Since then Dalton's gone through two cars and my Hesperus is still going strong. Strong enough for me, anyway.

I get back behind the wheel and turn the key, and the engine fumbles to life. I nod, satisfied, and pat the dashboard. This is going to be a good day.

*

I've got a poster shop I inherited from my cousin Arthur, who got on the wrong side of the law and vanished in Lima. I cleaned it up, expanded the inventory, changed the front window displays once a week, and soon had the clientele I wanted. I'm from the school of thought that sees a lot more value in a Doisneau print than a shot of Jim Morrison. You're free to disagree. But do me the courtesy of opening your mind when

you open my door. Hearing the great unwashed muttering how “there’s never anything good here” on their way out the door has got to be the most aggravating part of the job. It’s all good, believe me.

*

I get to the store around ten-thirty, half an hour after it opens. I let Blair handle the opening procedures. I got lucky when I hired her – she does good work for me and she’s great with the customers. She’s young enough that she still wears black lipstick sometimes, and old enough to read Steinbeck for pleasure. She’s also got a girlfriend named Leslie; that, combined with me being her employer, pretty much eliminates her from my pool of would-be girlfriends.

“Morning, Nate,” she says from her spot by the cash register.

“It certainly is.” I can see three other people in the store, lost in thought as they flip through the display books. “Anything I should know about?” I ask.

“Jam Butty almost got hit by a car.”

Jam Butty’s one of those guys who rides up and down the street on his bike and you say, “There he goes again.” That’s not his real name; Blair just started calling him that because he wears purple shorts and has an enormous ass. You can’t even see the bike seat.

“Is he all right?” I ask, looking out the window at the street.

“Yeah. Honk honk, screech, yell yell, vroom. That was it.”

“That makes what, three times this summer?”

“Four,” she says, giving me a pointed glance.

I shake my head. “That doesn’t count. I knew he’d move in time.”

*

I do most of my work in the back office. Receiving, cataloging, paying the bills – it’s a full time job back there, believe me. I’m confident in Blair minding the store; it’s slow enough most days that she only needs to keep watch. She’s even welcome to read if she wants. (She usually does.) As long as she keeps things professional and doesn’t make personal calls, she’s going to get a great letter of recommendation from me once she finally realizes it’s time to move on.

The highlight of working out back comes around a quarter past eleven, when the UPS guy arrives. Today he brings in a new batch of eighteen by twenty-four Man Ray posters and some movie posters imported from Japan. I wasn’t sure what to expect the first time I ordered them, but they’ve become some of our more reliable sellers.

There’s a weird kind of disconnect that goes on with those posters. You see Al Pacino’s face and it’s so familiar, and all around him there are markings that tens of millions of people understand, but which I never will. It turns Al Pacino into an oasis. It’s kind of fun to think of him that way if you’re not his girlfriend or something.

*

I’m entering an order into the computer when Blair buzzes me from the front desk. “Dalton Dumbo’s on his way back,” she says. She likes to give out the nicknames. She doesn’t like Dalton. He persists in calling Blair’s girlfriend Leslie; she stopped correcting him when she saw he wasn’t being malicious so much as genuinely unable to remember.

“Thanks,” I say, and hang up as Dalton shave-and-a-haircuts and pokes his head in. “Nate the Great,” he says. “Busy tonight?”

“What’s up?”

“A bunch of us are hanging out at my place. We’re going to get Chinese and then we’re going to get Chinese.” This was Dalton’speak for purchasing Asian food and then getting really stoned.

“Bring your own sake?” I ask.

“Or whatever.”

I pretend to give it some thought. I’m disinclined, really. Dalton’s people are not my people, to be generous about it. I’ve been to his parties before, even kindled brief relationships from them. But those relationships were brief for a reason.

“I don’t know, Dalton,” I say. “I might show up, but don’t expect me.”

“Ah hah,” he says. “Think I should ask Blair if she and Leslie might want to go?”

“You can ask. But Dalton – it’s Leslie. Without the B.”

He blinks at me. “Déjà vu,” he says, and ducks out. I have to get up and close the door myself.

*

I’ve been wrong before, and it’s never a pleasant feeling. Whether it’s ordering posters I don’t like just because I think they’ll sell, laying down money on a sporting proposition, or listening to my heart instead of my head, there’s always something in my immediate past to make me wince. Regrets, I’ve had a few hundred.

But lately I’ve been feeling guilty about leaving those regrets behind. Shouldn’t I be embracing them? Aren’t they signs of the kind of person I am? They’ve been turning into time capsules; I go back and open them up to learn what life was really like for

Nathan five years ago (*hello, Sasha!*), or ten (*goodbye, Washington!*), or twenty (*what was so hard about asking her to dance?*). I can't put my choices up for adoption; they're nobody's but mine. I can't orphan them; they're wards of the state of my mind. And I really shouldn't forget them. It almost makes being wrong worthless if I do, right?

*

At six we close up shop, and I wish Blair a good night and cash out the register. It was a slow day, but not fatally so, and it would've been a lot worse if we hadn't sold a framed print of that *Nighthawks* parody, the one with Bogart and Marilyn Monroe. "I like this better than the original," the guy told us, and only a well-aimed kick from Blair kept me from expressing my thoughts out loud.

I'm out the door by six-thirty. I walk over to Hesperus, get in, and proceed to flood it. This gives me three or four minutes to sit there and think and watch the world through my windshield. Jam Butty goes by, aimless and a little forlorn. A woman comes out of Pete's Liquor Store, a brown bundle under her arm; she looks both ways and crosses a one-way street. Two men walk by, deep in conversation. One gestures as he talks, smacks himself in the head. The other guy laughs, pointing at the first guy. It's a warm pointing, one that takes pleasure instead of mocking.

I decide that I'll go to Dalton's after all. Interaction with my contemporaries isn't such a bad thing. Sometimes it makes for a nice change of pace. I could even meet somebody and be glad later on that I'd done so.

Plus, I've had this craving for Chinese food all day.

*

The problem with dwelling on the choices I make is that I tend to ignore the consequences of those choices. Which is the same as ignoring life, really. At some point you've just got to put the photo album back on the shelf and take your camera back out into the world.

My trouble is, I've got the camera, but I hate to use it. I tend to let it all go by and not make any effort to capture a moment or make a statement. Any time I choose to do something, I'm effectively telling the world to stop and say cheese. Shouldn't life be a blur? Shouldn't it flow? Isn't it a sin to try to capture it?

*

Dalton considers himself blessed because he lives two doors down from a bottle redemption center that offers six cents per instead of five. He's got a dozen lawn chairs on his front porch, and by the time I pull into his driveway, they're all occupied, either by people or by little takeout boxes. Dalton's sitting on the front porch steps, talking with a girl, holding a chopstick that skewers a half dozen barbecue chips. I give the door a couple good shoves (it sticks sometimes), get out and walk toward him, a twelve of Rolling Rock in hand.

"Hey, it's beer!" he says, standing up. "And he brought Nate with him!" He turns around to face the multitudes, and I see a few deep green paint chips from the porch steps on the seat of his pants. He rattles off everyone's name for me; I wave and smile and promptly forget them all.

"Why does your license plate say 'Hesperus'?" asks the girl Dalton had been talking to.

“Because ‘Edmund Fitzgerald’ didn’t fit,” I tell her. It’s a well-rehearsed line, and I’m glad it gets a smile out of her. She has nice wavy brown hair and good clean eyes.

“There’s plates inside,” says Dalton, taking the Rolling Rocks from me. “And if you want to be a total loser and use a fork, there’s silverware inside, too.”

*

Once I’ve got my food, I make it a point to sit next to the porch steps girl. I tell her I didn’t catch her name; she calls me Butterfingers and smiles. I wait her out; a good twenty seconds go by before she confesses to being Felice. It’s a good name, one that suits her. I wonder if she had to work to live up to it, or whether she was clearly a Felice from the beginning.

A joint gets passed around. One of the guys in the lawn chairs takes a good long toke and has a giant coughing fit. Someone says that violent coughing enhances the effects; the cougher claims to be aware of that, claims his coughing was deliberate. Nobody believes him. When the joint makes it to me, I take one puff, more to be polite than anything, and pass it to Felice. Our fingertips touch, and I wonder if it gives her a jolt. I grow more aware of the crickets all around us, having noisy parties of their own.

*

A big guy in a grubby white T-shirt trundles toward us. “Felice,” he says. As he hunkers down in front of her, she smiles and introduces me. We shake hands, because we’re supposed to shake hands. Then they fall into a discussion about a TV show I don’t watch, so I tune them out and start checking out the scene around me.

We're all set off in groups of two or three, it seems. Two guys are sitting on the lawn, rolling a volleyball back and forth. Three girls stand by a tree, very close together, smoking cigarettes and laughing every now and then.

One guy's walking toward the far side of the house. There's a girl a step behind him, holding his hand. Her tank top's too small, but I'm certain that doesn't bother either of them. As they walk under one of the porch lights, she turns and sees me. She smiles and widens her eyes, giddy with her circumstances. She's glad to have a witness, someone who can validate this is happening, someone who can tell everybody where she was when he saw her last. Then the porch shadows slice across her, and she and the guy disappear around the corner of the house.

*

My favorite posters tend to be the black and white nature shots. They could have been taken anytime in the past hundred and fifty years; there's nothing manmade to date them, and that includes humans.

When I tell people this, they say, "Oh, you must love Ansel Adams." Well, he's got an awful lot going for him, yes. My problem with Ansel Adams is, he's all about clarity, and everything is too sharply focused. You could cut yourself on his pine trees.

Me, I like a lot more grain. A *lot* more grain. It makes the texture flow around, like things still haven't settled. The picture's always in the process of being taken. The moment may have been caught, but it can never be frozen.

*

"Moon's down to its last quarter," says a guy with long, lank hair.

"The moon and I have a lot in common," says Dalton, and everyone laughs.

“I love the last quarter moon,” says Felice. “I love the C shape. And I love how it’s all about transition. In just a few days it’ll vanish from the sky, and then it’ll be renewed.”

“The new moon, yeah,” another girl says, trying to be helpful.

“Oh yeah,” says a guy with a bad mustache. His head lazies in the girl’s lap, which makes it hard for me to tell if he’s being sarcastic or not.

“You know what this party needs?” Lank Hair asks. “A bonfire.”

Everyone agrees. They all continue to sit there.

*

I bring my silverware back inside (I’m secure enough about myself to know that it takes more than utensil choice to make me a total loser) and place it in the sink. The merry clinking isn’t enough to offset the vomiting sounds down the hall. “Christ!” the vomiter yells. It’s Dalton. I go to check and make sure he’s okay. He’s kneeling at the toilet, one hand holding most of his hair behind his head.

“Hey,” I say.

He spits. “Tasted better the first time,” he says. “Dude, can you hold my hair back for me?”

I get behind him and scoop it back, and he slams down his grip on the toilet seat. “It’s better when you use both hands,” he says.

“Like catching a fly ball,” I say, but he’s vomiting again and my point is lost. I see he’s tacked up a picture of us standing next to one of his old cars, with a pumpkin on the hood that’s exactly the same color.

It takes two flushes before he's done. I help him wobble to his bed, where I take off his boots and put his recycling bin on the floor by his head.

"I regret nothing," he mumbles in woozy defiance.

"Must be nice," I say, turning to go. "You get some rest now."

"Nate?"

I turn back. His face, white as beach sand, is full of concern. "Are you having an okay time?"

I mentally retrace my evening, find that so far it has more positive than negative, and I nod. "I'm fine," I tell him. "I'm glad I came."

He props himself up and inhales for three or four seconds, like he's about to say something I need to know. But it's too much effort, and he sighs and passes out instead.

*

"Okay."

I'm squatting just behind a ring of six or eight people sitting on the lawn. We're all looking at one guy, who's got one finger raised and is savoring our undivided attention. It's the guy who took the girl around the house earlier; that girl is nowhere in sight now. He's got two of my Rolling Rock bottles lying next to him, and a third clenched in his fist. The guy next to him has the volleyball, spins the ball around once, the leather going *ffffff* against his fingertips.

"Before I get started with my real story," he says, "I'm going to ask your patience for a quick little tangent." He looks around, and a couple of us nod for him to go on.

"There's an ant," he says. "And he's trying to haul a chunk of bread back to the anthill. Trouble is, this chunk of bread is too big. The ant's not going any faster than a

millimeter every fifteen minutes, if that. Of course, if he cut the bread into several pieces and made several trips, he could get the job done – but then he runs the risk of losing some of the bread to other ants, and he doesn't want that. So he keeps struggling with his load, and struggling, and he winds up dying of starvation.”

“He *what?*” asks one of the girls.

“He could have eaten some of the bread, true,” the guy says, ignoring her for the moment. “It would've refueled him and lightened the load besides. But he was past the point of even thinking of it as food. It was nothing more than a physical burden, and if he'd just been able to look at it differently, he could've saved his life.”

He tilts the contents of his bottle into his mouth, swishes and swallows. “Now here's the punch line,” he says. “Three hundred years later, another ant does exactly the same thing. Dies exactly the same way. All the changes the world's gone through, and it doesn't make a bit of difference. Ants aren't any stronger or smarter. They haven't evolved into something better. A 21st century ant will blow it just as badly as an 18th century ant. And why? Because he doesn't know that what happened to him happened to another ant three hundred years ago. He can't know that ant's mistakes, so he can't learn from them.”

Everyone mulls this over. One guy with surfer blond hair is tilting his head in different directions, as though he knows the idea might make more sense when considered at a different angle and it's up to him to find the right one. Thirty? Forty-five? Ten the other way?

“An ant wouldn't do that, though,” says an overweight girl in white shorts. Blades of grass are stuck to her big dimpled knees.

“It’s an *allegory*,” says Bad Mustache Guy.

“I just can’t picture ants acting that way,” she says, making an effort to keep the petulance out of her voice.

“Maybe not,” says the guy with the volleyball. “But then again.” He spins the ball around once more. *Fffffff*. “You’d be surprised how stupid an ant can prove himself to be if you keep him in the dark long enough,” he says.

*

“Do you make mistakes?” Felice asks me.

It’s almost midnight, and I would’ve left long ago if she hadn’t kept talking with me, touching my hand, asking about my heritage, my interest in plants. She seems the sort who would ask these questions whether she was sober or not. Tonight, she’s not. But somehow, her eyes are still clean. Immaculate, I’d have to say.

“Of course,” I tell her. “One a day, at least. Like vitamins.”

“How do you handle it?”

“How do I handle it? I guess I do my best not to make them again.”

“You know what I do?” The sentence drips with anticipation. She waits for me to shake my head, then says, “I go out of my way to put myself in situations where I’ll do it again. Then I make a choice whether to do it or not. See, you can sometimes learn more from repeating a mistake than you can from avoiding it. You see how well you’ve learned your lesson. Plus it’s kind of fun being tempted again.”

“You can resist everything but temptation.”

She catches my allusion and smiles. “That’s right, Oscar.”

“Very good,” I say.

“I’m tempted right now,” she whispers, and she kisses me. It’s nice. I can taste the soy sauce. Someone on the porch drops a beer can. The crickets all around us continue celebrating. We break apart, and I say, “Was that you making a mistake again?”

She shakes her head. “No,” she says. “Just setting the stage. Would you take me home?”

*

The day I almost ran into Jam Butty, I had been coming the wrong way up the one-way street. He saw me coming for a good ten seconds, and waited until the very last second to swerve out of my way. It was a little unsettling, and I’ll confess that it was my fault for putting him in that situation, but again, I knew he would move in time. Even Jam Butty wouldn’t want to get in an argument with Hesperus.

Later that morning he came into the store. I was talking with Blair about whether we should sell keychains at the front counter when he opened the door and came up to us. He had on his purple shorts, a denim shirt, and a tiny little smile. We were the only ones in the room. I glanced out at his bike; it was leaning against the window, with no locks or chains holding it to anything.

“You almost ran me down this morning,” Jam Butty said. His tone was pleasant, conversational.

“You’re right,” I said.

“You know the area. You know Sparrow’s a one-way street.”

“That’s true.”

“Apologize.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. Neither of us was speaking with any conviction. Blair looked back and forth at us, trying to figure out our situation. Something flickered in her eyes, like an angry cat’s switching tail.

“Why would you do that?” Jam Butty said. He tugged at the waistband of his shorts. “You know it’s wrong, you do it anyway, you put lives in danger. Lives. Plural.”

“You’re right,” I said. “I have no excuse and I’m sorry.”

“Are you okay?” Blair asked.

“Yes,” Jam Butty and I said together. As I realized that Blair hadn’t been talking to me, Jam Butty laughed and reached up toward my head. I had time to register that his hands were cleaner than I would have thought, that his cheeks had lines on them where I never thought lines might appear, and then he touched his toughened fingers to my temples and bolted his gaze to mine. “Never again,” he said. “Remember this, and remember. Never again.” Then he released me, nodded at Blair, and walked out. In the entire ninety-odd seconds he’d been in the store, he’d never lost his tiny little smile.

“Why did you drive up Sparrow?” Blair asked me.

I shrugged. “I’ve done it before.”

“That’s not a good reason, Nate.”

“But it makes it understandable,” I said. “Doesn’t it?”

She didn’t respond. Together we watched him walk his bike away from the window before he mounted it and pedaled off.

*

“Where’s the handle to roll down the window?” Felice asks, peering at the hole in the door panel.

“In a box somewhere,” I tell her, putting the blinker on way too early. I’m not impaired so much as a little light-headed. We’re driving to her place via the backstreets, which suits my low speeds very well. “Want me to roll mine down?” I ask.

“Just a little.” She cuddles into the far corner and closes her eyes. Hesperus shudders, and I feather the gas a bit. We roll along, maintaining innocent expressions under the scrutiny of the streetlights.

Felice didn’t need to give me directions; I’ve been in this town long enough that I not only know where 220 Wallace is, I know the fastest way to get there. But tonight, I’m not taking the fastest way. I know something’s going to happen when we reach her place and I don’t know what it’ll be. I don’t know how either of us is going to act, or to react. I wish I could ask my father what he would do, or his father before him. I badly need another angle on this.

“Step on it, Skipper,” she says. Her eyes are still closed.

*

I’ve never wanted another man’s life. You can have your riches and your troubles, your joys and your sorrows – they’re yours and only yours, and I wouldn’t have the slightest idea what to do with them, believe me.

If anything, I’d like to have my whole life at once. I’d like one big panorama shot of it, black and white of course, just as coarse and grainy as you can make it. Only then could I dive into my life, let the grains sand me, slice me, smooth me, strip me, skin me, spread me all around. Eight by eleven, four feet by three, whatever it takes; just let me know every corner, every moment, from first cry to final sigh. Not because it would keep

me from taking bad steps and wrong turns, but because it would be such a relief to know the absolute horrors that await me once I do.

*

I pull up to the curb, and Hesperus settles into a high idle. Felice turns to see the house. “Oh, Auntie Em,” she says. “There’s no place like home.”

I try to think of a clever, Oz-related response, but my mind’s a blank.

“You want to come in?” she asks, unbuckling.

“What for?” It’s a genuine question, and I’m hoping she knows the answer.

“That all depends,” she says, “on how well I’ve learned my lesson.” She smiles. She’s making a mistake and she’s happy about it.

I take a deep breath. The time has come, once again, for me to make a mistake of my own. The funny thing is, whether I say yes or no, I won’t know if it’s a mistake or not until after the fact. Maybe years after. It could be hard, waiting that long. I can’t take the uncertainty for that long. I touch my fingers to the sides of my head, where Jam Butty’s had been, and think as hard as I can about what the answer to that question could be.

Felice reaches up to the dome light and flips the switch. Nothing happens. She flips it the other way. The car remains dark. “Hey,” she says, confused.

I know my car. I rap the light a good one with two knuckles, and it pops to life. She’s dazzled. She claps her hands and laughs. I laugh too. Then I reach back up and flick the switch, and together we ascend into the blackness.

The Emissary

I think it was her stride that I first noticed. She had a very purposeful stride, very direct. She always put her feet directly in front of each other, as though she was walking a chalk line. I'm willing to bet her thighs brushed each other with every step she took. She always wore a dress or a skirt, so I can't be certain that's the case, but I liked to think it was true.

I first saw her from the back, striding away from the water fountain, on my third day at the job. She wore a dull gray jacket and a long skirt. Her hair was pulled into a knot, held in place by an unsharpened pencil. Her low heels made no sound on the carpet.

"Hi," I said, very quietly.

"You'd like her, Mills," said John Waits, standing behind me.

"You know her?"

"No, that was irony. She works for Mrs. Grogan."

*

Mrs. Grogan was a mystery. Nobody could tell you what she looked like, but she somehow kept an eye on all of us. We'd regularly get memos telling us the right way to do something, which usually meant someone had been observed doing it the wrong way. THIS IS A REMINDER THAT GUM IS NOT TO BE CHEWED DURING OFFICE HOURS, we'd read one day. The next day, we'd be reminded that IT IS PREFERRED THAT YOU USE NICOTINE PATCHES INSTEAD OF NICOTINE GUM. My favorite was when we were told that IT IS DECEITFUL TO READ ADULT MAGAZINES HIDDEN WITHIN OTHER MAGAZINES. YOU ARE FOOLING NOBODY BUT YOURSELF. What I liked was the idea that it was okay to read smut on the job, as long as you were up front about it. Nobody was willing to put that idea to the test, though. Not even Lou Henson, whom the memo was so obviously aimed at.

*

The first time I saw her from the front, she was striding up to my desk. Her skirt and jacket were the color of rich gingerbread; beneath the jacket, a yellow blouse. Her eyes were blue and flat, like they'd been painted on.

"Mr. Mills?"

"That's my name too." I smiled at her. She did not smile back.

"Mrs. Grogan asks that you stop using the color red in your emails." She said this with no feeling at all. It was as though she'd scooped up the words to bring them to me, keeping them secure in a pouch in her mouth. Her face was just as expressionless as her voice. For some reason that bothered me, so I decided to try to confuse her.

"I don't use the color red in my emails," I said.

It didn't work. No brow twitch, no hitch in her breathing, not even a blink. "Mrs. Grogan asks that you not use that color."

"It's actually magenta," I said. I sounded a lot less smartass and a lot meeker than I would have liked.

"She asks that you not use that color."

"But it stands out," I argued. "It's more noticeable, so you pay more attention to the contents. I would think she'd approve of that."

"She asks that you not use that color."

You can't argue with a recording. "Look," I said, "what do you think?"

She took one perfect step back. "It doesn't matter what I think, Mr. Mills," she said. With that, she turned and strode off.

I leaned out to watch her legs scissoring up the corridor, wondering why it mattered to me what she thought. Then I set about changing the color of my typeface from magenta to teal.

*

IT HAS COME TO MY ATTENTION THAT DESK DRAWERS ARE BEING USED AS FOOD RECEPTACLES. THIS IS BOTH A HEALTH HAZARD AND TOTALLY UNNECESSARY, AS THERE IS A REFRIGERATOR IN THE BREAK ROOM. PLEASE USE YOUR DESK AND THE REFRIGERATOR FOR THEIR DESIGNED PURPOSES.

*

That afternoon.

"Mrs. Grogan asks that you restrict your typeface color to black."

“Yeah, I kinda thought she would.” I swiveled in my chair to face her. “But it would seem to me that if she really felt this way, she’d send all the departments an email to that effect. This one-on-one attention is most unlike her, considering my lowly status.” I paused to admire my little gauntlet before I tossed it down. “Don’t you think?”

Not even a shadow of a feeling crossed her face. She just stood there, quiet and stark. She reminded me of the Venus de Milo with arms and a very dull wardrobe.

“You can’t tell me you don’t have an opinion on this,” I went on. “You have a right to an opinion. I think it says that in the Constitution somewhere.”

“Mr. –” Then she spun away from me, fast. Why? Had I just made her smile? Was I breaking through to her? Gene in Claims walked by and tossed me a funny look just before she turned back to face me, blank as wax paper. “Mr. Mills, I’m here to convey Mrs. Grogan’s thoughts. My thoughts are irrelevant.”

“Please.” I stood up. “Don’t ever say that again. Not even as a joke.”

“Black typeface only, Mr. Mills.” She turned away and took a step. Her next step took several seconds to complete, and then she resumed her normal pace.

My words were definitely getting through. Now I just needed to cut down on the reaction time.

*

IT WOULD BE APPRECIATED IF PAPER CLIPS WOULD BE USED IN PLACE OF STAPLES, AS THEY DO NO DAMAGE TO THE PAPER. THEY WERE DESIGNED FOR THIS PURPOSE, NOT FOR SCULPTURE. KEEP THIS IN MIND.

*

“My name’s Helen.”

I looked up, surprised. She stood by my desk, hands locked behind her, wearing a red plaid ensemble. It looked good in a stiff way.

“Hi, Helen.”

“Mrs. Grogan thought it important for me to introduce myself to maintain clear channels for communication,” she said to my right shoulder. I maneuvered myself a little to make eye contact, but she had already turned to go.

I asked around later. Helen had introduced herself to nobody but me.

*

MRS. GROGAN WOULD LIKE TO HAVE LUNCH WITH YOU TOMORROW, said the note under my windshield wiper. It was a typewritten note.

I'd never known Mrs. Grogan to consort with underlings before, but I could just be pretty ignorant. So I went home, clipped my nails, got a solid night of sleep, shaved, trimmed, wore my good underwear, and got to work in time to throw out the MRS. GROGAN HAS TO CANCEL HER LUNCH APPOINTMENT note before anyone else saw it lying on my keyboard.

*

BE AWARE THAT ALL CORRESPONDENCE REPRESENTS OUR BUSINESS. AS SUCH, IT SHOULD BE KEPT ON A PROFESSIONAL LEVEL. USE OF SLANG AND NICKNAMES IS OBJECTIONABLE; USE OF FOUL LANGUAGE, UNPARDONABLE.

*

Once Helen and I got in an elevator a few seconds apart from each other. The door closed, the floor heaved and the lights went out. In the dark, I turned to face her. I

couldn't hear anything – I'm a quiet breather, and I guess she is too. The lights flickered, just once, and I saw she'd turned to face me. It's funny how the things you see in a flicker can make a stronger imprint than the things you see in direct light. Her head was slightly tilted down, so she was looking up at me. Her mouth was open just a little bit, so I could see her wet front teeth. Her eyes, accustomed to the darkness, were staring through mine. As they were bringing me into focus, her pupils shrinking fast, her face bare and open, her body tense and still, the flicker ended and it was dark again. A few moments later the lights were back on, the elevator was going back down, and she was facing front again, looking at the crack between the doors, muttering, "Mrs. Grogan is going to have to hear about this."

*

I don't know why I didn't think of it earlier. I went to see Ruth, the receptionist. She had the word on everybody, including me – I didn't know I was considered a clueless smartass until she told me. But then, I suppose if I'd known I was clueless I wouldn't have been clueless.

"Ruth, what can you tell me about Helen?"

She released her sheaf of paperwork and leaned close. I could smell the Ben-Gay.

"Mrs. Grogan's personal assistant," she confided. "Five five, one-thirtyish. College grad. No perfume, easy on the makeup. Brings her lunch to work. Drives a basic car, lives in a basic neighborhood. No pets. None with hair, anyway. Demanding but fair. Power walker. And available." She leered a little.

"How'd you learn all this?"

“‘Demanding but fair’ is from her horoscope. The rest is just good detective work.” She tapped the end of my nose with an eraser. “May eighth, in case you’re wondering.”

I backed away. “Thanks, Ruth. That’s a help.”

“Why you asking?” She hunched forward, eyes aglitter. “You trying to hook up with her?”

“Yeah, I thought everyone knew that.”

Her face fell, mushy as a sucked lemon. I walked off, smiling. The best way to squelch gossips is to make them think they’re the last to know.

*

A REMINDER THAT YOUR WORK COLLEAGUES SHOULD BE TREATED WITH THE RESPECT THEY DESERVE. DO NOT PAY ATTENTION TO THEM IN A WAY THAT WOULD MAKE THEM UNCOMFORTABLE, BE IT WITH RANCOR OR OTHERWISE. A CIVIL OFFICE IS AN EFFICIENT OFFICE.

*

Actually, I hadn’t thought of myself as trying to get together with Helen. She just fascinated me, the way a good breath-holding contest is fascinating. Or watching speeded-up footage of a blooming flower. But once Ruth planted the suggestion, I started having dreams about Helen.

In the first one she came up to me and said, “Mrs. Grogan finds you very attractive,” then walked off. That one felt so real that a week later I wasn’t quite sure if it had happened or not.

Another time we were in my bedroom and I took off her olive colored suit and found a dressmaker's dummy underneath, complete with pedestal. She seemed disappointed; whether by my discovery or by my reaction, I couldn't tell.

Then there was the one where we were making out in a movie theatre and the image on the screen turned into Mrs. Grogan, whom I've never even seen a photograph of in real life, but here I just knew it was her. She looked like somebody's mother in a Hitchcock movie. Helen started to stroke me, then turned to the screen and asked, "Like this?" Mrs. Grogan nodded. I did my best to pretend she wasn't there, watching us with foot-high eyes, her nostrils shrinking with her every inward breath, her mouth lined and puckered. But she was too much of a presence, too much for me, and I finally gave up and awoke with great reluctance.

*

Helen was sitting in my chair when I got back from lunch.

"That's my chair," I said. "Or did you already know that?"

She looked up at me. Her eyes were empty, her face white as a cloud. "Mrs. Grogan died this morning," she said.

I squinted. "She did?" I asked. I hated how it came out sounding like I doubted her, but I guess maybe I did a little. It just didn't feel right – Mrs. Grogan couldn't die any more than Mrs. Butterworth could. Or Betty Crocker maybe.

"It was quick." Her whole body was sunken, even her hands. "She didn't suffer." Then she was standing, clutching my shoulder blades. "Hold me," she stated.

I did as I was told. My arms barely touched her; this didn't seem the time for something more intimate. Her forehead butted my chest, and I gave her back a couple of pats.

"She's in a better place," I said. It's hard not to talk in clichés about someone you don't know.

"That's nice of you to say, Mr. Mills," she said as she released me.

I let go. "My name," I told her, "is Henry."

She silently formed my name between her lips and held it there for a moment. Then she said, "To be honest, I prefer Mr. Mills," and walked away, still unmatched in her stride.

*

I went out to my car a half hour before quitting time so I could watch everyone leaving work to go home. I sat in the driver's seat listening to the radio. I kept it on the hard rock station so I wouldn't relax. When Helen left the building I got out of my car and followed her to hers, marveling at her gait, until she turned around to face me.

"Mr. Mills," she said.

"Let me take you to the funeral."

She shook her head. "I don't think that would feel right."

"Let me take you to the funeral," I repeated. I knew from experience that you can't argue with a recording.

"This is something I need to do alone."

"Let me take you to the funeral."

"You don't understand, Mr. Mills."

“Let me take you to the funeral.”

“Mr. Mills,” said Helen, “Mrs. Grogan and I were in love.”

“Let me take you to the funeral.” The fact that I was a recording kept the surprise out of my voice. I think that was why she let me take her to the funeral.

*

The casket was closed, so I never did get a look at Mrs. Grogan. Helen and I sat about halfway down the left hand side, next to a man in a gray suit and a black armband. The only other time I’ve ever seen a guy wear a black armband in mourning was Jimmy Stewart in *It’s a Wonderful Life*. He nodded at us and I nodded back.

I wouldn’t go so far as to call the place full, but forty people’s not a bad turnout. Helen and I were the only ones there from the office, and we were probably the youngest people in the building. Everyone else looked faded and worn. Nobody was crying, or even sniffing. I coughed for the sake of noise.

Helen elbowed me and pointed to the front row, her wrist almost under her chin. “That’s Mr. Grogan,” she said.

Whether he had fantastic hearing or just chose that moment to look around I don’t know, but he spotted us and in a moment was walking toward us. He was handsome in a spongy way. “Helen,” he said, while still a few steps away. “Come and sit up front with me.”

She shook her head and made a fluttering gesture in my direction.

“Please join us,” he said to me. “It would have made her very happy,” he added to Helen. “Us two together. She loved you, you know.”

Helen gasped. *Not that way*, I wanted to assure her. He didn't know, he couldn't know. He was clueless in the way older people sometimes are. His behavior wasn't forced in the slightest. He put his hand out, palm up, to bring her to her feet. She stared at it and began to breathe out of her mouth.

"We need to be alone still, Mr. Grogan," I found myself saying. "But thank you."

He lowered his hand. "Of course," he said. "We all grieve in different ways. I understand." His face never lost its unsettling warmth. "Remember her happy," he said. "That's what she'd want."

I thought how hard that would be for me, remembering a woman I'd never known. Then Helen spoke. "Mr. Grogan," she said, "I'll remember her at her happiest."

He nodded. "Good, Helen," he said. "So will I." He gave me one last nod and went back to his seat, his deep black coat shifting back and forth as he walked.

"He won't," said Helen, her voice soft as crushed velvet. "He can't."

"He can't?"

"You can only be at your happiest once, Mr. Mills."

*

We skipped the burial and I took her home. We drove past the chain-link fences and the *Sorry, CLOSED* signs and all kinds of broken windows, and I kept craning my neck around, hoping for the sun to please come out. Helen stared straight ahead and talked to the dashboard, her words thick and heavy as wool blankets. She said she wished she could have spoken to the man who gave the eulogy to clear up a couple of misconceptions. She said Mrs. Grogan would never have sat still for some of the behavior that had been on display (I saw nothing untoward, myself). She said there was little point

in her going to the workplace anymore and that it wasn't likely I'd ever see her there again. Twenty minutes she went on like this. It was the most I ever heard her say.

When we reached her house, Helen got out of the car, shut the door, and said something that was muffled by the passenger side window. I leaned across and rolled it down. "What?"

"I asked if there was anything you'd like Mrs. Grogan to know."

"If I could talk to her?"

She shook her head. "If I could."

I smiled. "Still passing on her messages?"

"Some people are meant for one thing, Mr. Mills," she said. "I was lucky enough to find out what mine was, and I'm not ready to let it go."

"Never mind Mrs. Grogan for a minute," I said. "Let me tell *you* something."

"You can't, Mr. Mills. All I would do is pass it on." She turned to go to her house and stumbled over a loose brick in the sidewalk. Her hand went down to stop her fall, and then she was running, hard and awkward, all the way up to the house.

*

"Hey, Mills," Ruth cawed at me as I crossed the lobby floor. "Sorry to hear about your girlfriend."

That stopped me. "My what?"

She wobbled her head as her lips disappeared in smugness. "I knew it."

I swooped up to her desk in three long strides. "Ruth, what are you talking about?"

"We used to have a worker here. Helen Kittering? You remember Helen."

I batted Ruth's sarcasm aside. "She's been on bereavement leave for the past two weeks," I said.

"She was on bereavement for one week," Ruth corrected me. "Now she's on medical leave." She pushed off and rolled her chair back to a filing cabinet, a manila folder in her hand.

"Medical? Ruth, what for?"

She gave me a smile the width of a gumdrop. She raised her eyes to the tile ceiling, pointed at her temple and twirled her finger. "Hee-hoo," she said. "Hee-hoo."

I saw now that she didn't roll backward to file that folder, but to get out of my reach. It was a good strategy, but it had one fatal flaw; it left her phone, her lifeline, alone and undefended. I picked it up with both hands, unplugged the jack, and watched her eyes bulge.

"Ruth," I said, holding it high over my head, "I am going to devastate this telephone unless you tell me exactly where she is."

*

"Mr. Mills."

Helen was sitting up in her hospital bed, pale and crisp as the gown and sheets that covered her. Her head moved about like a pigeon's as she tried to find an angle to view me by. She grabbed the handrail to push herself into a sitting position, and her IV tube swung back and forth, lazy and free. I looked over my shoulder, wanting to leave already, hoping I wouldn't find myself needing to.

"Are those for me?" Helen asked, and gestured at the lilies of the valley I was clutching. She had a cast on her right arm.

“I... I thought they were pretty.”

Her face might have fallen, had it held any emotion to begin with. “They’re yours, then.”

“Oh, no – no, I did get them for you.” I hastened to put them on her bedside table. She watched with a faraway curiosity, blinking in the too-bright fluorescent light. I felt like I was seeing her in a mirror that had been broken and mended – she was recognizable, but wrong. She was looking at me, but her attention was somewhere over my head. She was tasting the hum of the air conditioner, or maybe listening to her blanket purr. One thing was certain – something about Helen was asymmetrical now, and I knew that she was never going to recover her stride.

“Oh, Helen,” I said, pulling up a chair. “Look at you. What would Mrs. Grogan say?”

She jerked her head a couple more times to line me up in her sights. “I could answer that for you, Mr. Mills,” she said.

And there it was. I understood that this was why I was here now. This was my way to Helen, my only way. Right or wrong, I had to take it. I found my pen, took an old receipt out of my wallet. I laid my hand on Helen’s, on the plaster that crossed her palm. I looked into her eyes, black and empty as keyholes, and spoke to her cubist soul.

“Tell me, Helen,” I said. “I’m listening.”

*

AN UNFORTUNATE NUMBER OF CUBICLES HAVE DECORATIONS
THAT ARE DETRIMENTAL TO WORKPLACE MORALE. BE AWARE OF ANY

NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS THAT A CARTOON OR STICKER MAY CARRY
FOR YOUR COWORKERS BEFORE YOU POST IT.

ANY QUESTIONS SHOULD BE ADDRESSED TO HENRY MILLS AT
EXTENSION 3643.

Feeling Something

The first time I met Rod Dorsey, at the West Street Tavern, he acted like he recognized me. “Hey,” he said, shaking my hand, touching my elbow. “How you doing, Vincent?”

“F-fine,” I said, leaning back. “Do I know you?”

“Nah.” He sipped his rum and Coke and smacked his lips. “But I’m friends with the Loughtons, and they told me you’d just moved in down the hall from them. They described you to a T.”

I smiled. “What was the final giveaway?” I asked him. “The glasses or the hair?”

I wear what used to be called Buddy Holly glasses, big black clunky ones that didn’t try to blend in with or set off my face. They were glasses, by God; deal with them. As for my hair, it was red. Very red. Turn-it-off red. Kids used to say I looked like Ronald McDonald. Kids can be vicious.

“Actually,” he said, “those just caught my eye. Your build confirmed it. Same as mine, they said.”

“They were right about that,” I said. We were both wiry, just a step or two above gaunt, with narrow little shoulders and Adam’s apples the size of plums. I don’t know how he felt about his, but I never cared for mine. For some reason, I had no problem with his.

“So what’s your name?” I asked.

“Rod Dorsey,” he said, reaching out to shake my hand again. “Good to finally meet you.”

*

I saw Mr. Loughton the following afternoon, coming out of the elevator with a plastic bag of groceries in his hand. “Mr. Loughton,” I said as I locked my door. “I just met Rod Dorsey last night.”

“Oh, did you?” He smiled and set his bag down in front of 4C, two doors down from mine. “How’d he strike you?”

“We talked for three hours.” Actually, it was closer to four. And at the end of the night, I gave him a kiss goodbye on the cheek. He didn’t seem to mind, but he might have been drunk. I know I was.

“Yeah, he likes to talk,” said Mr. Loughton, slapping his pockets to see which one held the keys. “He’s an interesting guy, Rod is. I think you’ll like getting to know him.”

“Yeah. How’d you meet him?”

He had his key out and undid the locks. “He met my wife first. Said he’d seen her from afar a few times and felt like it was time to say hi. He had us both over to his place a little after that.”

“Good guy?”

“Good guy.” He opened the door and smiled inside. “Interesting guy.”

*

I got a phone call from Rod the day after that. “Not too many Vincent Radcliffes in the phone book, are there?” he said by way of greeting.

“Rod?”

“Hey, first try, all right. What are you up to?”

“I just this second got back from my run,” I said, opening my refrigerator.

“Oh, you need to shower? I can call back.”

“No, not right this second.” I rolled a bottle of cold water across my forehead, felt the chilly beads zip from the plastic to the skin, let the refrigerator air roll into me.

“Okay, I’m just calling to see if you were up for meeting again.”

I stepped back and shut the door. “Meeting again?”

“Yeah, catch a basketball game, some squash, beers, whatever. Anyway, something to think about. Why don’t you shower and then call me back and let me know.”

One of my big character flaws is my inability to play my emotional cards close to the vest. If I feel angry, I can’t pretend I don’t. More embarrassingly, if I get excited about something, I simply can’t play it cool. I gush, I babble, my voice goes from tenor to alto, and all I can do is watch and cringe.

I think you can figure out why I bring this up.

“No, no, it’s great, I’d love to get together. Yeah, yeah, we should, yeah.”

“Well, hey, great.” His voice kept its even keel. “But do me a favor and take that shower anyway.”

*

Over the next few weeks we became drinking buddies and jogging partners, learning a little more about each other every time we met. He told me he grew up in North Dakota and hated being good at finance. I told him I was from a family of five and never watched any of the shows I designed costumes for. When we stopped at food carts, he’d get a hot dog with mustard and relish and I’d get a pretzel. Whenever we thought something was funny, he’d let out this giant laugh, solid as a stepladder, and my little giggle would race up one side and down the other. And whenever we got to his apartment building he’d say goodbye, clap me on the shoulder and go inside without a backward glance, leaving me standing there feeling the disappointment crawl down my face. *Relax, I’d have to remind myself. It’ll happen. You know it’s going to happen.*

*

Mrs. Loughton answered my knock. “Well, hello, Vincent,” she said. “Don’t you look handsome.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Loughton,” I said, hitching up my pants. “I have a question for you. I was invited over to Rod Dorsey’s place for dinner tonight -”

“Oh, isn’t that nice.” Mrs. Loughton tended to use a lot of rhetorical questions when we talked.

“Yeah, and I remember you and Mr. Loughton had dinner there once before. Um... what kind of wine does he like?”

“Wine,” she said, taffying out the one syllable for a good four seconds. She licked her dentures, pondering, and finally said, “Why don’t you try a nice cabaret sauvignon.”

“He likes that?”

“I believe he does, yes.”

“That’s great,” I said. “Thanks.”

Mrs. Loughton smiled. “Aren’t you two just going to have the nicest time,” she said.

*

Rod was no cook. He poured a bag of salad mix into a punch bowl and sprinkled it with peanuts and chunks of apple and cucumber. Match that with a never-opened bottle of Roquefort, follow it with a fancy frozen meal in a bag plus my wine, and call it dinner. To be honest, I’ve had a lot worse.

“I just realized like two seconds ago that I’m out of bread,” he said as he poured himself a glass. “Hope that’s not a problem,” he added, setting the bottle down next to my salad plate.

“It’s fine,” I said. I poured a glass for myself, sat back and took everything in.

The apartment was amazing – giant windows, very high ceilings, oak floors, the walls a ghostly blue. It was also clear that Rod didn’t have a very good sense of how to use the space. There was a giant TV, a big black leather couch, a stereo parked on the floor, a coffee table in the living room, and that was it – no chairs, no lamps, no

bookcases, not even a throw rug. The only artwork on the wall was a giant poster of a basketball player for the Celtics. His hair was red, but not as red as mine. He stared at me, eyes and mouth wide open, clamping the ball just under his jersey number.

“That’s Dave Cowens,” said Rod, following my gaze. “Back in the seventies he played center, and he was only six foot nine.” He pointed at him with his fork. “That’s a guy who shouldn’t have been stuck in his position, but he was great at it anyway.”

“I’m not big into basketball,” I confessed, poking at my shrimp, asparagus and penne.

He rubbed his mouth with a paper towel. “What are you big into, Vincent?”

“Well,” I said. “This apartment is great.”

He scoffed.

“No, really. It’s got all kinds of potential.”

“Tell you what,” he said. “Before dessert I’ll show you the rest of it.”

My stomach squeezed my dinner, and my right leg began bouncing up and down under the table. “Great, that’d be great,” I said, and took a good sip of wine, hoping it would tranquilize me.

*

The study was as cluttered as the living room was spare; there were beige and green filing cabinets of various heights, sheets of white paper scattered across the floor like tossed petals, and a desk buried under folders and notebooks. “It’s easy for me to work in here,” he said, not really apologetic.

The bathroom had a slate floor, a gigantic mirror, wall to wall, over a tremendous stone sink, and a deep tub that was watched over by four shower heads. “Wow,” I said.

“Yeah, I love a good bathroom. Okay,” he said, taking my elbow. “Next stop: the sleeping chamber.”

The bedroom had those few extra touches the living room needed, making it that much more of a pleasure to be in. Two halogen lamps lit the room with a soft glow. There was a bookcase in here, a bedside table with two notepads and a book tented open on it, ruffled white sheets and a blue comforter on the bed, a Hopper poster on the closet door, a pair of binoculars hanging off the latch, and a telescope at the far window.

“Oh,” I said, walking over to it. “Are you a stargazer?”

He leaned against the doorway and folded his arms. “Not professionally.”

“Can you see any of the planets from here?”

“I never tried.”

I gave him a curious look. He shrugged. I shrugged back, smiled, working to put two and two together.

“Have a look,” he said. “Don’t move it, though. It’s set up exactly where I want it.” His face was placid, waiting.

I pushed my glasses up to my forehead and bent down to squint into the eyepiece. All I could see was a big picture window. *There’s a building in the way*, I thought, and began to say it. But as my lips pursed and my tongue licked at my front teeth to make the *th* sound, I saw the ceramic tiger inside, half reclined on the mantelpiece, staring off to the left. The Bulova clock hanging over it was a relic from the thirties. Restoring it cost nearly two hundred dollars.

“That’s my apartment,” I said.

“That is your apartment,” Rod confirmed.

I straightened up and adjusted my glasses, bringing him into focus. “You spied on me.”

He nodded. “I watched you getting ready tonight.”

“Did you ever watch me before?”

“Yes,” he said. “For about three weeks before we met. And quite a bit since.”

He said it with no shame, no sense of remorse. He said it like it was the most natural thing in the world. I couldn’t believe it. He betrayed my trust, brought my image of him – of us – crashing down with all the forethought it took to get a glass of water. And now he stood there, watching me burn.

“You’re not happy about this,” he said. “You want to talk?”

I shook my head.

“You want a drink?”

What I wanted was to slug him. But if I said that, chances are I would’ve had to follow through. I just shook my head again.

“You want an explanation? I got one.”

I opened my mouth and said, “I want to go home.”

He raised his eyebrows, closed his eyes, turned away from me. “Hey,” he said.

“No bars on that front door.”

Two minutes later I was on the street, storming home, the clouds above spitting hard filthy rain at me.

*

“Hello, Saint Vincent, it’s Rod. I saw all your blinds go down, so I know you’re home. Not going to pick up, though, are you? Well, not that you asked or anything, but here’s the story. I like watching people live their lives without their being aware. Their guard’s down completely, they’re totally who they are. It’s sweet seeing them like that. I feel something when I watch people crossing the street, or having dinner, or getting ready for bed. I feel something when I watch you that way. Maybe I feel more then than when we’re actually together. I don’t know. Anyway, I’ve enjoyed getting to know you, and I hope you’ll let me know when you want to get back in touch. Thanks again for the wine. Take it easy.”

*

First thing in the morning, I took a walk two doors down.

“Mr. Loughton,” I said, “do you know what Rod Dorsey does?”

Mr. Loughton rubbed his forehead, fiddled with the doorknob. “It’s something to do with money. Municipal funds? Something?”

“No,” I said. “He’s a peeping Tom. He spies.”

His eyes widened. “He told you that?”

“Yeah, he’s got a telescope –”

“Esther!” he called inside. “Rod told Vincent about his hobby!”

Mrs. Loughton’s voice floated back to us. “Sounds like somebody owes me a quarter.”

“Ahhh,” said Mr. Loughton, turning back to me with a rueful snap of his fingers.

“You know, I haven’t won a bet with her in six months.”

“Wait,” I said. “You know this already?”

“Oh yes. He had us over for dinner and told us, just like with you. Only he waited until the third dinner to say anything. That’s why I bet against it happening last night. He must like you.”

“Haven’t you seen them,” Mrs. Loughton said, coming up behind her husband, wiping her hands on her thin white apron. “Of course they like each other. I knew Rod would never be able to wait.”

Mr. Loughton smiled down at her. “And that’s why you’re a quarter richer this morning.”

This was getting ridiculous. “Why,” I asked them, “does he feel the need to tell us?”

He threw up his hands, not a care in the world. “Who knows? Maybe he’s testing. Maybe he likes us enough that he feels the need to be completely honest.”

“And maybe he just wants to share his little hobby with his new friend,” Mrs. Loughton chimed.

“Stop a second,” I said. “This is not some little hobby. He’s invading your privacy. He’s breaking the goddamn law and you’re not doing a thing to stop him?”

“What do we care?” Mr. Loughton asked, raising his hands again. “He wants a look at our boring lives, he’s welcome to it.”

“And doesn’t everybody secretly want an audience,” Mrs. Loughton added.

“All the world’s a stage, Vincent. And if you like, you’re welcome to join us on ours for a cup of tea.” He opened the door and waved at the small glass-topped table by the window. A bowl of cranberry muffins rested in the middle, basking in the morning sunlight. Sunlight that flared off the glass and hurt my eyes.

*

I kept my blinds drawn, my phone unanswered. I spent a lot of time in front of my TV, half an eye on the rerun of choice, half a mind playing out scenarios, past and future.

I'd like to report a crime.

What makes you think he would want to spy on you?

What do you wear when you're alone?

So you're telling me you kissed him the first time you met.

I think you need to consider his point of view.

Do me a favor and take that shower anyway.

Good guy. Interesting guy.

I feel something when I watch you that way.

I'll spare you the suspense. Except for the Loughtons, I never told another soul.

*

After a couple weeks, I started going out again, changing my jogging route, finding places I'd never gone to before, where neither Rod nor memories of Rod was likely to appear. My new watering hole, the Balcony, turned out to be a big improvement over the West Street Tavern – a greater variety of beers on tap, little decks jutting out over the main floor, a much better jukebox. I wished I'd found it sooner.

I took to bringing the paper in with me and working on the crossword at the bar. There's something about a crossword that makes people want to compare their smarts with yours. "Gimme a clue," they say as they drop down on the stool next to mine.

One guy who liked to try his luck was Gary, the bartender. The thing is, he was hopeless at crosswords, absolutely hopeless. At first I asked him for help with the ones I didn't know, but before long I was asking him for the ones everyone knows – everyone but him. But he always took a guess. Once I said, “Gary, thirty-five across, ‘Red blank of Courage,’ five letters, second letter A.” He pressed his knuckles to his lips, thought for a few seconds, and said, “Faces?” It was very endearing.

The Balcony became the place where I felt most comfortable. More comfortable than work, where people could be disagreeable and there was always the undercurrent of a deadline. And certainly more comfortable than my place. In due course I got to where I could let the sunshine in again, but I could never shake the sense that I was being watched, whether the blinds were drawn or not. It was as though Rod had broken in and set up insecurity cameras throughout the apartment, and there was no way for me to shut them off.

*

I brought my laundry downstairs and found Mr. Loughton sitting in a deck chair, reading Robert Parker and working his way through a bag of Fritos. “Vincent,” he said. “Long time no see.”

“Hey, Mr. Loughton,” I said. “I don't think I've ever seen you down here.”

“Well, you know, some stains, it's just wrong for them to sit in the hamper a week, waiting for Esther.”

I didn't care to pursue that. I dumped my basket in front of the washers and began sorting.

“Oh, I saw Rod Dorsey the other day,” said Mr. Loughton, scraping his chair on the cement floor. “I told him you said hi.”

I sighed and took off my glasses. “I wish you hadn’t,” I said, rubbing them with a white shirttail.

“He said he’d like to see you again.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.”

One of the washers kicked into the final spin cycle, and Mr. Loughton had to raise his voice above the thrumming beat. “Would you move on from that, please? It’s stunting your growth.”

I put my glasses back on and kept sorting. He sighed, loud enough to be heard over the machines, and went back to his book.

*

“Two beers,” I said, settling down on the stool and flopping the paper on the counter. “And a bowl of your best honey roasted.”

“Living large tonight,” said Gary, sliding the bowl of peanuts down the bar at me.

“Celebrating,” I said. I opened the paper to their review of *Falling Together*, the play I was working on, and went down to the next to last paragraph. “Listen to this,” I said. ““Radcliffe’s costumes underlined every actor’s performance, revealing their personalities without detracting from their actions.”” It was new enough to me that it still made me blush a little.

“Nice,” said Gary, filling my second glass.

“I know I shouldn’t believe everything I read, but...”

“Hey, if they’re praising you, go ahead and give ’em the benefit of the doubt.”

“All right,” I said, flipping the pages. “Now if I can swing this crossword, it’ll be the perfect day.”

The bar was the best place to do crosswords because it was very well lighted and the writing surface was relatively smooth. I pondered the clues and drank my two beers and ordered a third. Soon the puzzle unlocked itself from the paper and floated around my hand. The clues. The pure white squares. The squares branded with the slashes and curves of my capital letters. The squares with needy numbers huddled in the top left corners.

“F-stop Fitzgerald.”

The puzzle dropped back onto the paper with a silent thud. I looked over at Rod, wearing an overcoat and holding a rum and Coke.

“Twenty-two across,” he said, pointing. “‘Photographed Gatsby, question mark.’ Whenever the clue has a question mark, the answer’s always a pun.” He touched his throat. “Usually a pretty bad one,” he said.

“What do you want,” I said. I was surprised and pleased to hear a snarl in my voice, licking at the consonants.

“I want to see you.”

“Fine. I won’t close the blinds tonight.”

“Not like that.”

I looked down and swatted the paper away; the crossword was worthless now. Rod sat down on the stool next to me and said, “Vincent, I’ve been sitting over there watching you for the last half hour. I wish you could see how happy you look from a distance. But in your case that’s not enough for me.”

I used my eyes to carve my initials into the bar. *VBR. VBR. VBR.*

“It wasn’t until after you left that night that I figured this out, but I actually had more fun with you than I did watching you. It was our talks that I kept coming back to. Not the way you put jam on your toast in the morning.”

I thought of myself licking the knife and cringed.

“So I got Mrs. Loughton to tell me where you go now. Because it was time to tell you...” He reached for the peanut bowl, seemed to start changing his mind, then went ahead and took a handful. “I feel something with you. And it’s because of who you are, not what you do.”

I stood up and put my hands on his chest. “Feel this,” I said, and shoved him as hard as I could. Before the peanuts and ice cubes had finished sliding across the floor, Gary had ordered me to leave the premises.

“Iss a long fall wun yur thrown ahdahdah Balcony,” slurred a bald man in a huge rumpled blazer, sitting at the end of the bar. It was funnier the first time I heard him say it. I think he lived for each new chance he got to say those words.

*

“Mrs. Loughton,” I said, “you had no right to tell him where I was.”

“Oh, my dear.” She rinsed off a bright yellow saucer and placed it in a strainer.

“Of course I did,” she said, running her sudsy hands down the length of her apron.

“That’s the freedom of speech.”

“But...” It was hard to know what to say after that, so I just let the one syllable hang there and counted on her to sweep in and carry it away.

“It’s like this, Vincent.” She picked out a glass she’d just cleaned and opened the refrigerator. “In all the time I’ve known you, you’ve always been a little bit of a Gloomy Gus. We have some white grape juice,” she said, holding up a glass pitcher dotted with hundreds of wet beads.

“No, thank you.”

“But when you knew Rod,” she said, pouring, “you were *alive*. Has anyone in the world ever been happier than you were. And that was why I couldn’t understand why you were so upset about him seeing you.” She put the pitcher away and bumped the door closed with her hip. “Because I think you already let him see you. In all the important ways.”

I looked down at the cat’s water dish. In all the time I’d known them, I’d never once seen that cat. “Not all the ways,” I said.

“Well, maybe you ought to think about all the ways. Because wouldn’t it be nice to find someone who’s ready to give you everything. And then you discover you want to give it all back.” She took a swig of her juice and swished it around a little before her triumphant swallow and smile.

Mr. Loughton poked his head in the kitchen. “Please don’t tell me I owe her another quarter,” he said.

*

When Rod answered, I said, “I promised I wouldn’t close the blinds,” and hung up. Then I went back to the window and waited for him to settle into his sniper’s nest, to draw a bead on my ribcage. I was happy to wait. I had to do it this way. If I was going to give myself, I wanted to know for a fact he’d be able to take me. I breathed, in out, which

whoosh, doing my best to determine whether those clouds of poison filling and departing my lungs were from the atmosphere or were organic to me.

I took off my glasses, turning the world into a blur, and placed them next to my empty Heineken bottles – Dutch courage that was literally Dutch. I removed my shirt; the cotton slid up my back and over my head and fluttered to the floor. I touched my Adam's apple, brushed my collarbone with my fingertips, circled my nipples, squeezed them.

And I felt nothing.

This wasn't fair. I had to feel something.

I bent down, and in ten seconds I was barefoot. Ten seconds more and I was naked. I coiled my coppery pubic hair around my fingers and tugged. I pressed my left hand flat against the window, and the cold glass drew the heat away from me. I caressed myself, closed my eyes – but only for a second; I wanted his eyes on mine. Oh, the touch. Help me. Soft and...

Nothing at all.

Come on, I thought, the bones in my left hand turning to marble, my right hand running scared. I squinted hard into the giant lens of his telescope. *Come on*, I challenged. *Feel something, dammit.*

Empty

The bottle of wine rolled up the passenger seat, and Duncan put his hand out to keep it from dropping to the mat. The label wasn't well glued; it crackled under his palm like a dry leaf. He rubbed the cold bumps of glass at the bottle's base with his thumb, his eyes never leaving the white line at the side of the road. He preferred to steer by that line at night, rather than the yellow one. He saw things he might have missed otherwise – animals preparing to cross, joggers, memorial sites for people who'd been in accidents.

This was not a party he wanted to attend. His friend Mindy had decided he was depressed, what with his newly single status, his dead-end job at the supermarket, and a three-week stretch of fair-to-lousy weather being the contributing factors, and that she would do something to fix that – namely, invite a ton of people over to celebrate him. “More like two tons,” she said. “And you're the guest of honor. Which means you're coming.” She threw him a merry wicked grin. “Get used to it! Friday at seven.” He acquiesced and spent the next few days making an effort to dread it less by not thinking about it at all. It actually worked, more or less.

Duncan wasn't familiar with the wine; he'd bought it for its ranking in the high eighties. He wouldn't have to apologize to Mindy for bringing it, at least. Not that she would say a single negative thing to him tonight. He could have brought a warm can of Orangina and she would have found something about it to praise. Count on Mindy to use excessive happiness as a way to make everything all right. This, as far as Duncan was concerned, was her one fatal flaw. She couldn't understand that some people just liked their coffee black and bitter every now and then, and he'd given up trying to make her understand. Best just to take her cream and two sugars with a smile, then dump the concoction in a flowerpot when no one was looking.

He took the turn onto Van Eegen, keeping one hand on the bottle as he did. Mindy's was at the very end of the road, across from Margo's. She'd be at this little soiree too, he was sure. They would be the only guests he knew. Probably he'd be the only guy. He eased out a groan and pulled up alongside the curb, behind a little blue Plymouth that had some egg cartons pressed against the inside of its back window.

As he got out, Mindy's porch light flicked on and off a few times. A lady with a cigarette stood beneath it, glaring up at the light in annoyance. "The fuck," Duncan heard her mutter, just as his door slammed shut, a perfectly timed punctuation mark. Then the front door opened and Mindy bounced out, taking the three porch steps on one go. "Hello!" she called, the word bright and alive.

"Hey, Mindy," Duncan said, waving as best he could with the hand that held the wine bottle. She trotted up and wrapped her arms around him, fast and hard, her right foot lifting behind her to what Duncan hoped was an exaggerated height. He stood there,

waiting for her to let go, and watched the smoker take a drag. He couldn't see her eyes on account of the shadows cast by the porch light.

"Mmmm," Mindy hummed, contented. Then she pulled back and became grave. "It's good that you came, Duncan," she said. "I hate to think of you just sitting around alone on a Friday."

"Thanks for having me," he said, by rote, his eyes on Mindy but his awareness on the smoker. She wore a long sleeved top with black and white horizontal stripes, boots and burgundy jeans. She rocked on her heels and aimed a stream of smoke at the deck. A sense of assurance came off her in waves; not only did she belong there, she knew she belonged there. Duncan couldn't understand why people weren't surrounding her. The only ones keeping her company were a few moths, and they were obviously more interested in the light bulb over her head.

"I brought this," Duncan said, holding up the bottle. "A little something."

"Oh, thank kew." Mindy took it, not even glancing at the label, then put a hand on his elbow and started back to the house. "Come on in. We're going to enjoy some of this wine, have a little cake, and take a try at karaoke. I rented a machine, and that cost some money, so you can't say no."

"Fine," he said as he mounted the steps. "Hi," he added to the smoking lady.

"Yeah," she replied.

"In, in," said Mindy. "Selma," she called as she came through the door, "here's Duncan." The tone of her voice was such that if she had said, "the guy I've been telling you about," it would have been redundant. "Duncan, this is Selma," she went on, gesturing to the redhead pulling herself out of an ugly tan recliner with no legs that

Mindy had rescued from a curbside last spring. “Selma just started cooking at a vegetarian restaurant.”

“Oh, all right,” he said. Both his words and his smile felt a little vacant to him; he tried to make up for that with a nice firm handshake. She returned it just as firmly, so that was good.

“Yeah, André’s” she said, flipping her hand up in a gesture somewhere between *it’s nothing* and *ta-da*. “It’s so nice not to have to cook meat anymore.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I just split up with my boyfriend, and he was a...” Then her eyes got big and she sucked a big breath through her teeth. “Is it okay to say that?” she asked, her lips barely moving around her huge scared grin.

“Uh,” said Duncan. “Yeah, I guess. I mean, he was *your* boyfriend, say whatever you want.”

“Homagod, I’m so stupid,” Selma went on. “Anyway, he’s gone and I’m here and it’s cool. How do you know Mindy from?”

“From, uh,” Duncan said, searching the room for the vanished hostess. He would have liked to pull the same trick. “She didn’t tell you?” he asked, looking for a good shadow to slip into.

“We didn’t really cover your distant past. She just told me about lately.”

“Lately, right.” There was a stereo set up in the back corner; he could go over there to check out the music selection. Or he could see what was up with this karaoke machine. Or he could go talk to that smoker, if she was still alone outside. “Lately’s been pretty eventful,” he said.

“Right, but how’d you guys meet?” Her voice was more strident than it needed to be, trying too hard to channel the discussion.

Duncan took a step back. “You know,” he said, “I don’t remember. I should go ask her and find out. Hang on.” He turned, holding up a finger to keep her from going anywhere, then went off to the kitchen, where Mindy was sitting on the counter, holding a cutting board full of Granny Smith apple slices on her lap. Sitting on the counter across from her, her heels bubbling against a cupboard door, was Margo. Duncan’s wine bottle sat next to her, still corked.

“Hello, darlings,” Duncan said in a spiffy British accent, helping himself to an apple slice.

“Ask next time,” Mindy said. “Why aren’t you socializing?”

“Hey, Duncan,” said Margo. “Looking good.”

“Considering,” he agreed, and snapped off part of the apple slice into his mouth.

“So Mindy, Selma was just asking how you and I met.”

“Oh, God.” Mindy moved the cutting board to the counter and hopped down.

“What’d you say?”

“Dodged the question.”

“Oh, thank you, Duncan. I need to go play host for a minute. Have some...” She gestured at the fridge just before she turned the corner.

“Well,” said Margo. “However you guys met, she’s still embarrassed about it.”

Margo had a way of asking questions by making statements that led people to volunteer the information themselves. It was a remarkable skill, and Duncan admired her

for it. He considered telling her about that first encounter, decided she knew Mindy well enough that neither would be uncomfortable if he did. “Drunken hookup,” he said.

“You guys? When?”

“No, I walked in on her in the middle of one.”

“Wow.” She flicked her almond bangs away from her eyes. “What’d you say?”

He hadn’t said anything. It was Adriana who’d spoken, as she pulled him out to continue their own search for an empty room. He didn’t want to bring Adriana into this discussion, though – it would lead to apologies and memories, neither of which he was up for receiving. But it was too good not to share. ““Oh, look,”” he said. ““Missionaries.””

Margo smiled, her eyes narrowing. She had a very cute smile. “You didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t,” he admitted, glad to give Margo a little truth. “I wish I had, though.”

“One of those I-should’ve-saids.” She pointed at the apple slices and snapped her fingers twice. As Duncan handed her a slice, a black Doberman came in at a heavy trot, its toenails clicking on the green tile. It passed them and went into the living room without so much as a glance in their direction. A moment later Mindy entered, with a frazzled expression and a bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon.

“That didn’t look like your dog,” Margo said, jerking her thumb at the living room doorway.

“I don’t have a dog,” said Mindy.

Margo smiled again. “Hence.”

Mindy frowned. “Excuse me a minute,” she said, and followed in the dog’s footsteps.

“Uninvited guests,” said Margo. “This has a chance of shaping up to be an actual party.” She snapped her slice in two, and Duncan felt the insides of his mouth prickle. Somewhere in the house the dog let out a giant *woof*, causing one girl to shriek and then giggle aggressively. Duncan recognized the giggle’s subtext in a flash. *I’m not scared*, it insisted. *No, I love dogs. Please believe me.* The giggle was a lie, loud and shifty, and she should’ve held it in. It would have been better if she had.

“An actual party,” he repeated. “Yeah, I should go check it out.”

“No, don’t go,” said Margo.

“I should.” He took one last apple slice between two fingers and held it up to Margo. “One for the road,” he said, and headed into the dining room.

There were seven or eight couples there, more than he expected, eating Chex mix and drinking from bottles and cans. Of these fourteen or sixteen people, only three of them were guys; two of them were eating chocolate cookies and discussing car accidents, and the third was wedged in the far corner letting himself be hit on by someone a good ten inches shorter. He smiled as she reached up and touched his stubble, and one of the cookie eaters said, “In the snow, a brake pedal is not your friend.” His words were clear because all the other conversations had become hushed at just that moment. Maybe everyone had spotted Duncan. He felt a lot of eyes on him. Whether they were on him or not didn’t matter; he felt them there, raking across his skin. He winced at what they were doing to him, what they were taking away. There was damage going on, and it became crucial to him that he get outside.

He put the slice in his mouth and chewed it into a mealy paste as he walked. He passed the cookie eaters, who were agreeing on how disorienting it was to see trees

moving left to right out your windshield when you were skidding. He worked his way through several knots of people, hard to make out in the dim light, discussing karaoke, old boyfriends, the veggie dip. Cutting through the hubbub was work, and a trickle of sweat formed at his hairline. He swallowed the apple as he reached the print of Eurydice following Orpheus that Mindy had hung by the front door. He could see that smoking lady through the door's window, and now it was important to him to get out there and talk to her. Now. Now.

“Excuse me,” he said to two women who were blocking his way.

“Oh,” said one, turning to contemplate him. “You must be Duncan.”

“I must be,” he agreed. “What gave it away?”

She shrugged. “You’ve just got that unattached look to you.”

It wasn't the answer he anticipated. “That what look?” he asked, blinking.

“Detached,” the other woman said, before the first one could repeat herself.

“Kinda remote.”

“Right,” said the first one. “But not aloof, though.”

Duncan wasn't sure how to take that, but before he got a chance to decide, the door opened behind them, hitting one of the women in the shoulder. They both shuffled aside as a thin lady wearing bicycling gear and a ponytail came in. “Knock knock,” she said to no one in particular, and breezed past Duncan in a rush of orange and black Lycra. He caught the door before it closed, and in a moment he was outside, watching the smoker as she lit one cigarette with another. She did this with a determined focus, almost angry at being reduced to needing to feed her addiction like this. She fired a dead look at Duncan and said nothing. He knew there wouldn't be any talk between them if she

stayed like this. He decided he would try to project relaxation, to bring her to a level where they could converse. He looked up past the stars and tipped back against the house, like a rake leaning on a garden shed, and exhaled as he closed his eyes.

They stood there for a couple of minutes, the muffled indoors talk cottoning their ears, the ribbons of her smoke slipping around their faces, seeping into their clothes and their hair. He felt them being drawn together, sharing this space and this half silence, and as he felt this she said, “You don’t smoke, do you?”

He opened his eyes. “Nope.”

“So what are you doing out here?”

“Working on my tan.”

She held her looks stone still, but the flash in her eyes betrayed her; that was a definite glimmer of interest in there, he was sure. Now to maintain his non-disadvantage. “Which car is yours?” he asked, gesturing with his open left hand.

“The blue one,” she said. “The one you parked behind.”

“With the egg cartons?” She nodded. “So that’s what brought you here.”

“Well,” she said, “that and the karaoke.”

The only indication that she may have been being sarcastic was her overall demeanor, which suggested she’d prefer an acid bath to an open mike and an audience. Otherwise, there was nothing – no eye roll, no lip twitch, no stretched vowels – nothing for Duncan to go on at all. He decided to give her a big quiet nod and let her read it as she would.

More new arrivals came up the porch steps, talking amongst themselves, and went in without acknowledging the two of them under the light. He watched her not watching

them. He wanted to see her walk before this night was over. She seemed more like the sort who would stroll, rather than strut, but who could do it with drive, who could slice through a crowd without scattering them, cold brook water running over the stones.

Then she said, “Actually, there’s some asshole who’s supposed to be here tonight whose girlfriend left him and I guess he’s practically suicidal or something. Mindy invited all her girlfriends here to cheer him up. Which is pretty much why I’m going to stay outside as much as I can. That’s shit I can’t really deal with.”

Duncan gave her another big nod. “Not an easy thing.”

“Yeah, if I’m going to go, I’m going to do it the slow way – one cigarette at a time.” She took a drag, and then said with exaggerated politeness, “And what brings you here? Besides a white Volvo.”

“Oh, I’m all about the karaoke,” he said, doing his best to keep his voice as blank as hers was. “It’s sweeping the nation, you know. Just saying the word gives me...” He brought the fingertips of his right hand together, pretended to search the shadows of the night sky for the right word, paused for just the right amount of time. “It gives me the chance to speak Japanese.”

There. She was starting to smile. *Keep going*, his mind whispered. *Don’t back off. Don’t choke. Don’t worry. Just keep going.*

“That’s actually one I do know the literal meaning,” he said. “It means ‘empty orchestra.’ *Kara* is Japanese for *empty*. Like, ‘karate’ means ‘empty hand.’ Or the Jackson Browne song, ‘Running on Kara.’”

“Running on Kara,” she repeated. A hint of laughter bristled in her words.

“Right. I think ‘kara’ is the perfect word to mean ‘empty.’ There’s just something about it that sounds completely vacuous. Completely. We’re talking null and we’re talking void. Kuh ruh,” he said, as thick as he could. “Kuhhhh ruhhhh.”

“Hm,” she said. A corner of her mouth stopped turning up, and he watched it harden at an unattractive angle. She tossed her hair a little and put her hand out. “We haven’t officially met,” she said in a wintergreen voice. “My name’s Kara.”

Duncan felt his self-assurance walk off the cliff. “With a K, of course,” he said, taking her hand in his.

“Of course,” she said, letting go. “I’m guessing you probably want to disappear now.”

He shrugged. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

“Well, before you do, let’s have your name.”

“I’m Duncan.”

It registered with her. He could almost hear the distant click of recognition. He watched her hand steal to her hip and rub his touch away.

“You’re the guy.”

“The guest of honor, yes.”

Her eyebrows puzzled up, and her mouth opened a little, enough for him to see the darkness inside. There were words that wanted to be spoken, but they were blocked by her confusion, and they were blocked, and they were blocked, and then the force behind them was too great and they burst out of her.

“But you’re *funny*,” she said.

He couldn't help smiling. She was so right. He was funny, and he would always be funny, whether it made him happy or not. He could rest assured that the funny would be there when everything and everybody else was gone.

"We laugh," he told her, smiling, "that we may not disappear."

The door opened, and a small guy in a baseball cap and tight yellow golf shirt leaned out. "Hey," he said. "If anyone out here's up for making an ass out of themselves, we're ready to start with the karaoke."

"Thanks," said Duncan. He watched the guy lean back in and shut the door.

"Well," he said to her, "I'll leave you to your one cigarette at a time."

"Right," she said. She was struggling to get her demeanor back. He left her to her struggle and went inside in time for an initial blast of feedback and the howls of protest. He followed the noise to the darkened living room, where Mindy stood under a twinkling mirror ball, holding a microphone and a glass of what must have been Duncan's wine. "We'll begin as soon as Bradley sits down," she said into the former, gesturing at the guy (one of the cookie eaters, Duncan realized) who was bent over, peering at the machinery. "Sit down, Bradley!" the thirty-odd people chanted, applauding when he finally did so. As Mindy explained the workings of the Gig-Star Pro II, Duncan looked at all the people, far more than he ever anticipated, all of them smiling and feeling good. Selma twisted open a bottle of hard iced tea. Margo spotted him and shot him a thumbs up. He stood there in the doorway, not quite in the room and not quite out, and raised his hand to let her know he'd seen her.

“So who’s gonna be our first victim – uh, contestant?” Mindy cried out, spraying a laugh at the crowd. Then she saw Duncan raising his hand to Margo. “Duncan!” she said. “Good for you! Get up here!”

“I wasn’t –” Duncan began, but the applause drowned him out, decided the issue for him. He didn’t want this, but he accepted it as part of the plan, and he picked his way through the encouraging crowd, specks of light from the mirror ball gliding over them. He gave his face a pleasant look, in case anyone was watching closely.

“Okay,” said Mindy, passing over the mike, “pick a good one and let ’em hear you outside.”

“Oh yeah,” he said, not really listening, and leaned down to make his selection. The black Doberman lay behind the machine, its chin on its folded paws, and it gave him a fretful gaze. *Hey hey mama*, Duncan thought as he pushed the buttons. He brought the mike up to his mouth and blew on it, twice. “I hate dusty microphones,” he said. Everyone laughed, and he closed his eyes to shut them out.

“Let’s get this thing rolling,” he went on, as the music swelled behind him. “I’m going to favor you tonight with a little Dobie Gray here.” He opened up and the lyrics rolled out, free and strong, and he let Mindy and Selma and Margo know, he let the cookie eaters and the door blockers and the bicyclist know, he let everyone in the house know, and he did his best to break down the walls and let Kara outside know that he wanted to get lost in the rock and roll and drift away.

The End of Boney and Clive

Monday. Clive staggers into his room in a daze. Boney asks what the trouble is, but Clive can only speak gibberish. In the last panel, Boney smiles and assures us, "Don't worry, folks – by the time tomorrow comes we'll be begging him to shut up!"

*

It was a Sunday strip, one large panel long, not the usual nine or ten small ones. A girl, about twelve years old, is starting down a staircase. She's holding hands with a boy, also about twelve, who's a step behind her and looking at the room they're about to leave. It's an attic, filled with cardboard boxes and photo albums, bottles and jars, clocks and artificial flowers, birdcages and anything else I could think of that might catch the reader's eye. The boy's focused on just one thing – the skeleton of a child, three-quarters faced away from us, hanging from a post in the foreground corner, almost sucked into the shadows, its stark left hand raised as though waving goodbye.

I nodded at it, wrote *Bart Stone* in the corner, turned it over, and began waiting for the others to arrive.

*

Tuesday. Boney gives Clive a glass of water and calms him down enough to speak slowly and calmly. The first words he says: "The Girl kissed me today." Boney's response: "Shut UP!"

*

Fifteen years ago, fifty-three newspapers published the strip where a boy gets a skeleton for his seventh birthday, wonders what the heck he's supposed to do with this, then hears the skeleton say, "Well, if you asked me to dance, I wouldn't say no." The next day they introduced themselves. "What's your name? My name's Clive." "You may call me Jean-Claude Villines Bonaparte the Third." "I'm just gonna call you Boney." "Of course you are."

The strip went on to become huge. There were books and calendars, dolls and coffee mugs, all of them best-sellers. There was an animated special that guaranteed solid ratings whenever Christmas rolled around. And of course, there were the readers and the critics, kids and grandparents, poor and famous, all praising *Boney and Clive* as one of the greatest comic strips of all time.

There was also the intense stress this brought me. It hurts to stay great. I'm convinced that I got my slipped disc thanks to stooping over my desk, and my migraines from a three-week period where I couldn't come up with a single decent idea. It's hard to write a cute punchline when you're vomiting bile and your hair's falling out in clumps. If my staff hadn't bailed me out with their suggestions (and Alex's idea of Boney auditioning to be a horror movie extra was a beauty), I might have been sued for breach of contract.

I kept the pain off the page for the most part, but it wasn't easy, and I'd finally come to the point where it wasn't worth it. I left a phone message for the syndicate to get in touch with me. Then I began work on the final series. I'd had the idea in the back of my mind for years, but this was the first time I'd ever set it down on paper. In just over eighty-five minutes, I had a solid outline for the last three weeks. I spent a few more hours with my fountain pen and some Bristol board, doing a rough drawing of that Sunday strip. I think I would have gotten a lot more pleasure out of how smooth the flow from brain to pen was, if I wasn't already so tired of it all.

*

Wednesday. "The Girl kissed you?" Boney asks. "Yeah," says Clive, "and I kissed her back!" He can't explain why; he just knows it made sense at the time. "Kissing makes no sense to me at all," Boney admits. "Of course not," says Clive. "You don't have any lips!"

*

The studio that *Boney* built was in a converted shirt factory, and it was huge – the ceiling was eighteen feet up, and it took twenty-seven steps to get from my desk at one end to the refrigerator at the other. All of us used the fridge; the freezer was usually crammed with Lean Cuisine dinners and bottles of vodka. There were also a couple of recliners and a very comfortable couch, which had played host to everything from interviews to unarranged trysts. They were all set up as far away from everyone's desks as possible; options, not distractions.

I lay on the couch, rubbing my hairline with my fingertips, my lower palms pressed deep into my eyes. The clock buzzed on the wall, and the refrigerator hummed

back. I held still, patrolling my insides. Trying to find the toxic pools. Trying to push them to the surface, to turn them to heat and sweat and pain and see how much would dissolve and how much would remain to coat my skin, like the oil from a leaf of poison ivy.

There was a life-sized poster of Boney tacked way up on the ceiling over the couch, where I could see it when I was lying down. It showed him on his display rack, feet a few inches off the floor, his jawbone resting on his fist. “Sometimes I dangles and thinks,” read the caption, “and sometimes I just dangles.”

This was a significant poster – it marked the last time I drew Boney or Clive myself for licensed commercial product. Officially, I was happy farming out the work to others while I focused on the strip. In reality, I realized I couldn’t draw it as well as I used to. It took me three hours to get the pensiveness right. Particularly the eyes. Boney’s eyes were the one part of him not made of bone, and their expressiveness became an integral part of his character. He wouldn’t be Boney if he couldn’t put his point across with his eyes, and I couldn’t continue to spend three hours working on just one picture. There wasn’t enough time in the day for me as it was.

I kept the poster on the ceiling as a reminder. *Watch out*, the invisible caption read, *or your talent will shrivel up on you. Now quit lying down on the job.* I’d usually close my eyes or turn my head, and Boney would keep dangling and thinking over me. Or maybe just dangling.

*

Thursday. Clive reveals one more thing – The Girl’s coming over in a half hour. She’s not comfortable with Boney’s presence, and the closet’s too full to hide him in, so Clive intends to bring Boney to the attic. The last two words cause Boney to faint.

*

I hadn’t drawn a *Boney and Clive* strip in more than ten years. I now had a penciller, a letterer, and an inker to do that for me. I wrote the scenarios and supervised the production, so there was no need to feel any guilt about the strip carrying my name and nobody else’s. Besides, this ghost work gave my staff the opportunity to see what went into the making of a strip, and to practice their craft in a successful environment. When they moved on, they had a great item on their résumé and the goods to back it up.

I never had to worry about deadlines after I got my staff. I’m lucky that way – I’ve met other cartoonists who couldn’t talk for three minutes without bringing the discussion around to how much stress they felt from the ever-impending cut-off date hanging over them like the sword of Damocles. Me, I had a good four-month cushion to work with. So no, the demons that were burning me out didn’t come from the outside.

I wonder sometimes if it might have been better to dance a little closer to the edge, to feel the adrenaline rush that comes with fighting to meet the deadline. Maybe that would have kept me from focusing on other difficulties. Then again, maybe it would have just joined those difficulties and made my life twice as bad in half the time.

Well, you have to pick your poison, I guess.

*

Friday. A revived Boney insists he can’t go to the attic, as it’s stuffy and hot and he’s allergic to nostalgia. Clive tries to tell him there’s nowhere else for him to go; an

unlistening Boney claims he can't relate to a dressmaker's dummy from the late fifties. "I promise you'll be fine," says Clive. "They use outdated slang," says Boney.

"Cowabunga, hodads.' It's embarrassing, frankly."

*

Randall, as usual, was the first one in, fifteen minutes before nine. His eyes glittered, impossibly bright, as he walked to his drawing board. Not so much a walk as a strut, really, crying out for a popping, confident soundtrack.

"Bart!" he said. "Hi!" He changed course and approached me. "You're here early, aren't you?"

"Actually," I said, swinging my shoes off the couch and sitting up, "I haven't been to bed yet."

Randall stopped walking. "Geez Louise," he said.

"Big project," I said. "I'll tell you all about it when everyone's here."

He unzipped his bomber jacket. That was the first thing he bought with his *Boney and Clive* money; I could still smell the fresh leather from ten feet away. "Okeefine," he said. "I still have to finish the new Lackey series." That was the one where Lackey vanished and Boney reluctantly offered to use himself as bait to lure Lackey home.

"Good," I said. "Finish it."

"Shouldn't take long." He finished strutting over to his board and snapped on his swing-arm light.

Randall, my penciller, was the newest person on the staff – he only came on board four months ago – and at twenty-six, easily the youngest. Both of these qualities helped inform his personality, which was somewhere between giddy and gaga. There were days

when he'd pound the drawing board with his fists and exult, "I can't *believe* I'm drawing friggin' *Boney and Clive!*" He'd been reading the strip since he was in fifth grade; when I interviewed him for the job, the first things he took out of his portfolio were high school book covers littered with dancing Clives and card-playing Boneys. They had expression and energy, and so did he, so I hired him and tried not to feel old.

*

Saturday. Clive plays his trump card – the attic's tropical and there might be bats up there. Instantly, Boney's wearing a Hawaiian shirt and a camera, ready to go. As they leave Clive's room, Boney says, "You know, I make a mean mai tai." Clive says, "A mean what?"

*

I always valued the feedback I got from my readers. Their letters, their emails, their comments at lectures and conventions told me if the ideas I had were headed in the right direction. It was interesting to see what characters and plotlines brought out what reactions.

Once I had Clive read a pirate book that mentioned the bleached bones of a skeleton, which led him to convince Boney to soak himself in a tub full of Clorox. Horrified mothers nationwide rebuked me for showing something so dangerous that kids might try to emulate. I felt certain that kids were smart enough to know that was a bad idea, and since no bleach-burn stories hit the media, I guess I was right.

In another series, Clive dressed Boney up as a zombie for Halloween (Boney *loved* Halloween), complete with strips of bacon draped on his ribs. The biggest fan of the costume was Lackey, the dog next door who terrified Boney to no end ("Clive, do

you have any idea what dogs DO to bones??”). Several readers sent me pictures of their bacon-covered children; several more blamed me for dog attacks.

I wrote one of my favorite series about five years into the life of the strip. It began with Clive breaking his arm falling out of a tree. Boney couldn’t understand how such a thing was possible, but he did his best to comfort Clive, signing his cast (“205 more to go!”), wearing a sympathy sling, and trying to break his own arm so they could stay alike. Clive had to explain that while his bone could get better, Boney’s wouldn’t. “That’s the great thing about being human,” Clive said. “If something inside you is broken, just care for it and it’ll get better and stronger.” Boney promptly asked Clive to swallow a broken pocket watch for him; Clive demurred, saying, “I don’t think I’d care for that.”

So many parents wrote to me, saying their child had just broken his arm and loved the series, or that they loved the message behind the story. Celine loved the message, too. She’d just gone through a bitter breakup with a creepy tennis instructor (forty-six years old and he still called himself Rusty), and had talked about never knowing how much a broken heart could hurt. I wrote the series for her, and she recognized that without me having to say anything. It led directly to one of those unarranged trysts on the couch.

*

Sunday. Boney and Clive reach the attic, a foreboding yet awe-inspiring room crammed with all sorts of boxes and gadgets. “I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore,” says Boney. Like the following two Sunday strips, this would only be one panel, emphasizing look and feel more than plot.

*

Alex, as usual, arrived at nine o'clock sharp, sipping his very black coffee from his Styrofoam cup. Alex was a traditionalist that way. He would never spend three dollars on something Italian in an environmentally safe container – all he wanted was three spoonfuls of grounds and hot water, and he wanted it in something that squeaked when you crumpled it up.

“Bart,” he said in greeting.

I nodded. “Alex.”

He went to his desk and studied what was on it, then sat down and selected a ruler. If we left him undisturbed, he wouldn't look up for another three hours minimum.

Alex, my letterer, in the fold for three years, was a good steady presence. He wasn't much for talking; he just liked to come in and turn out the solid work. He wrote out the dialogue in a brisk hand, but on occasion he changed fonts, showing the readers the talent he had, talent that I never took for granted. He switched to a blocky lowercase for Sam, the neighbor's toddler, and all the teachers spoke in Courier. His greatest triumph came during a series where Boney got his skull stuck in a knight's helmet, and everything he said came out in Old English. All the lettering ideas were Alex's, every one, and I hope he knew that I appreciated his work. I told him I did, but he didn't say much past “thanks.” I asked him to tell me if he had any concerns, and he didn't say much past “okay.” I even invited him to go drinking with me – several times, in fact – and he didn't say anything past “no.”

*

Monday. Clive ponders where to put Boney, who asks only to be stretched out:

“The last time you threw me in a heap I got the worst Charlie horse.” Clive says he'll be

right back with the display stand and leaves Boney to mumble, “Couldn’t he at least pretend to feel guilty?”

*

Celine, as usual, was late.

Celine was my inker. She had a beautiful line, and she took justifiable pride in knowing which of her two dozen pens was best suited for which task. Watching her work reminded me of a good mechanic reaching into his toolbox and pulling out the right wrench based solely on touch. She was much more graceful, of course, and she had a gentle spirit that really came across in her work. Sometimes Clive would be expressing himself about the world, and Boney would give him a genuinely fond look. And if you think it’s easy to get a skull to express fondness, try it sometime.

She had gray eyes, gray as rain, and hair as black as the ink she used. She kept it cut short so there’d be no danger of it trailing across the panels and smearing her work, turning a chair into a smudge, or a smile into an open-mouthed cry.

Celine had been on staff the longest, hitting lucky number thirteen back in May. I’d known her even longer than that; we were in art school together, where she was both more talented and more popular than I was. I kept tabs on her after graduation, hoping against hope I’d see her again. I didn’t offer her the inker slot until my second year of syndication; I wanted to give her something worthy of her talents, something she’d be excited about.

All right – I wanted to impress her. And it worked, or she never would have accepted. And if she hadn’t, she never would have met her fiancé.

Hal Grover was my penciller before Randall was. He was self-taught, which was an advantage in that he didn't know an effect – an inside-out skull, say – couldn't be drawn, so he went ahead and drew it. He had a coarse feel that schooling hadn't refined out of him, one that nobody else in the comic world was doing. He was very good. The trouble was, he knew it.

He badly wanted his own strip, and I think he resented doing work and not getting the popular recognition. He'd disparage my story lines, then refuse to offer something better – "I'm saving me for me," he'd explain. He'd scowl as he drew, darting some nasty looks my way. *I'll draw your strip*, those looks said, *but I don't have to like it*.

The only reason he stayed for a year and a half was Celine. They used to take smoke breaks together, and over the months those breaks got longer and longer. Alex would go over to the couch and play solitaire or Boggle, while I'd hunch over my desk and work my insides like a speed bag.

I warned them both, separately and together, that we couldn't have any office romance, that those always proved detrimental to our goal of making the best strip possible. So when they came to me and announced their engagement, I had no choice but to let Hal go. He was good, but there are a lot of good pencillers, and nobody could duplicate Celine's line. They understood, and he had his things out of the studio before the day was done. Neither Celine nor I referred to the matter again. We were both too professional for that.

*

Tuesday. Upon Clive's return, Boney says, "What's The Girl got that I haven't got, anyway?" "Skin, for one thing," says Clive. "Yeah," says Boney, "but can she do

this?” His skull whirls around like a tornado. Clive can’t help being impressed. “Whoa,” says Boney, staggering. “I’m not as good at that as I used to be.”

*

Boney and Clive had a good supporting cast. There were Clive’s parents: patient, indulgent, and a little flightier than most. There was the neighbor’s toddler Sam and dog Lackey, both of whom idolized Clive. There was Mr. Binns, the garbageman, who was the only other person in the strip who could hear Boney. There was Ms. Sampson, Clive’s teacher, who had to work at not making Clive the teacher’s pet. There was Bub Herman, the bully, who got the name “Bub” in kindergarten when he had to write his name on the board and he didn’t know how to spell Steven (just like this guy I knew who was an asshole to me in high school – nationwide payback’s a bitch).

And then there was The Girl.

She was a classmate of Clive’s, and while she never cared for Boney, she was sweet on Clive from the very beginning. She was also the most down-to-earth character in the strip, and not exactly full of high spirits. In one Sunday strip her mother pointed out what a beautiful day it was and sent her outside to have fun. She spent the entire strip on the porch swing reading *Little Women*, ignoring the other neighborhood kids playing their games. In the last panel she hopped off the swing, tossing the book aside, and said, “Mom’s right – that *was* fun!”

I chose not to give The Girl a name, thinking that could help her serve as a kind of Everygirl while at the same time making her distant and unknowable. That pretty much defined her character right there; she’d somehow be entirely one thing and entirely another. She had a mole that the kids made fun of until Ms. Sampson called it a beauty

mark. She was the best dodgeball player in gym class, but she hated having to play it. She was an accomplished painter, but only painted still lifes. Once she painted twelve highly detailed fire hydrants, sending Lackey into a state of ecstasy.

“What do you make of a girl like that, Boney?” Clive once asked.

“Never understood ‘em, don’t pretend to,” he replied. “And you can take that to the vault.”

Nobody polarized readers like The Girl did. Half of them desperately wanted her to get together with Clive; the other half thought she’d ruin him and begged me to keep them apart. There was, I’ll admit, pleasure to be taken from seeing how long I could maintain the dance, with a wary Clive keeping The Girl at arm’s length, but never turning away. I’d go so far as to say that the Clive/Girl strips had some of my most inspired work. I was able to play my readers like fiddles and create something meaningful besides.

One of the questions I got asked the most over the years (though not as much as “Where do you get your ideas?”, of course) is “Who’s The Girl based on?” There’s no easy answer. Some parts of her were completely made up. Some were based on people I’d seen but never met. Some were based on girls I’d known, from kindergarten to now. Celine was referred to every June 22nd, her birthday, when The Girl would always appear and always wear a black dress modeled after one of Celine’s favorite outfits. Celine never once said anything to me about it, but she always knew exactly how to ink that dress.

*

Wednesday. “You’ll forget about me up here,” says Boney, as Clive puts him on his stand. “Don’t be stupid,” says Clive. “You’re only going to be here until The Girl leaves.” “She’ll never leave,” says Boney. “You’ll let her in, she won’t leave, and since

three's a crowd you'll kick me out.” “*Are we still talking about the attic?*” Clive asks, as Boney begins singing, “*Do Not Forsake Me Oh My Darling.*”

*

I got off the couch and walked over to the window, where I watched and waited until her black Plymouth – the Plymouth Rock, she called it – pulled into the parking lot. As its engine settled into its chop-chop-chop idling, she got out of the passenger side, turned and bent back down so her head and shoulders were still inside. I couldn't see who was driving, but it had to be Hal. She wouldn't let anybody else drive the Rock. There was a night when she refused to let me take her home in it, and I'd had less to drink than she had. She insisted she was clear-headed enough – maybe not to drive, but to know that giving me control of the situation was a bad idea. I had to sit there and watch her give herself sobriety tests, touch her nose, walk a straight line, count backwards from 100 by sevens, and only she could decide when we were ready to go.

The Rock pulled away, leaving Celine alone in the lot, sucking on a cigarette, not acknowledging my presence at the window. I sighed and wandered over to my desk, where my version of the final strip lay face down, and opened the drawer that held my ideas notebook. It was red, with spiral binding on top, and the last quarter of it was blank. *Probably always will be*, I thought as I flipped it open and reviewed the notes I'd written several hours ago, hunched over the words like a vulture, fighting to ignore the pain in my back and the fuzz in my head.

*

Thursday. Boney insists that he be stored in Clive's room, so Clive won't miss him. Clive insists that he has so many good memories with Boney that it would be

impossible to forget him. Boney agrees, relieved, and they start reminiscing about their years together.

*

I just kept getting sicker and sicker of the constraints of the comic strip format. Tell a story in four panels, keep it under forty pica wide, and do it again tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. On top of that, I was getting sick of the people I was writing about. To the world they were old friends; to me they were the guests who wouldn't leave and it was after midnight and morning was never going to come.

The strange thing was, the sicker I got of the strip, the better it got. I kept introducing new tricks to keep me interested, and they kept working. The characters would break the fourth wall and talk to the reader, or they'd break character and talk to me. "That's not in my copy of the script, Mr. Stone!" The Girl might say after Clive pranked her. Or Clive's mother would complain that she got a culinary degree and how nice it would be to work in a strip where the guy could draw something besides cookies.

Another favorite tactic was freezing the action around Boney and Clive so they could discuss the ramifications of what they were about to do. More often than not, they went ahead and did it anyway, but the longer the pause lasted, the greater the buildup of tension and the more explosive the laugh at the end.

Yet another trick I'd taken to pulling with more and more frequency involved Boney and Clive playing hearts and talking. You could always tell when I didn't feel creative – they'd be at a card table, and for three panels, one of them would hold forth on something – a TV commercial, the father being angry when he came home from work, the misery of those worse off – and in the fourth panel the other would throw in his two

cents. It was a reliable formula, but a formula nonetheless, and every time I came up dry and resorted to another game of hearts, I hated myself more and more.

This hatred compounded with the hatred I was building up for myself in life. I'd gotten so bitter and sarcastic in interviews that I had to stop giving them. I had a series of bad relationships. My house got broken into, and the only thing that got stolen was a model of Boney that hung in the den. A *fucking* Boney doll.

"Is anything of value missing?" the cop asked.

"No," I said.

*

Friday. The Girl arrives. Clive's mother greets her and says Clive's in the attic.

"What's he doing up there?" she wonders. The answer: still reminiscing. "Remember when you soaked your hands in milk to try to make them whiter?" "Me? That was you!"

*

The door opened and Celine walked in.

"Okay, we're all here," I announced. "Let's gather up."

Celine closed the door by backing into it and leaning it into place. After the *k-thud*, she gave a theatrical sigh and walked over to the couch. Randall stopped flaring his nostrils at his compact mirror, which he kept set up on his desk to help him with facial expressions, and slid out of his chair. Alex kept working. "Alex!" I said, with some bite. "Meeting!" He raised a finger, drew one more line, stood up, and didn't take his eyes off his work until he was a few steps away from it. He sat down between Randall and Celine as I walked over, my notebook in one hand and my artwork, facing away from them, in the other.

These Monday meetings were a semi-regular ritual. I'd read them my rough script notes, and we'd talk about them and make suggestions. I'd type everything out that afternoon, and on Tuesday they'd each have a clean copy of the script on their drawing tables to flesh out. I usually welcomed all the suggestions and counter-ideas they could come up with, and they came up with plenty. Today, though, the vision of *Boney and Clive* was going to be all mine.

"All right," I said, putting my artwork down. "This is a three-week series I've got here." I held up two fingers and a thumb. "Three weeks. And it's a big one. I think I've got it the way I want it, so I'll just read this straight through. If you have any questions or comments, hold them until the end."

They gave their okays, and I began.

*

Saturday. The Girl goes upstairs, calling for Clive, who tells Boney to keep still. "You better not be getting ready to do some mean practical joke," she warns, "or I'll brain you!" Boney asks, "Didn't Juliet say that to Romeo? You know, even out of context that's poetry." "Shut up, Boney!" says Clive, agitated.

*

Boney and Clive had once given me life, but now they were taking it away. There's only one healthy thing to do when a relationship goes sour like that – you've got to cut it loose. So that's what I decided to do. I would end it all and isolate the perfect memories from the misery around them. I would stop the rust and the rot; people would never have to see the deterioration that was all too visible to me. Soon it would be all over, and everyone would finally leave me alone.

I started slow, with Clive realizing one day that he was finally taller than Boney, but lying about it and walking around with bad posture, afraid to hurt Boney's feelings. Then Mr. Binns left town. He got a two-week sendoff. Thousands of people begged me not to let him go, but I figured they'd soon see that you can do without someone, no matter how much you think you can't. Sure enough, within a few months there was no mention of Mr. Binns from any of my readers. The speed with which they moved on was breathtaking.

Then there was the series when Bub Herman was bullying The Girl and Clive roared in and beat the living daylights out of him. Exhilarated, he crowed, "I never would have done that when I was a kid!" But then he found himself feeling bad for Bub, which confused him to no end. So much so, in fact, that he never noticed The Girl was looking at him in a whole new way.

Finally, I began dropping clues, little indicators that were designed to make sense only in retrospect. Boney and Clive watched only the endings of movies, seeing a bunch of "The End" title cards, and then compared their typefaces ("You can't beat a good Sans Serif"). Boney, ever the frustrated actor, wanted to learn Shakespeare; he indignantly refused Clive's suggestion of *Hamlet* ("Yorick doesn't say a *word!*") in favor of *All's Well That Ends Well*. In their final hearts game, Boney expounded on the importance of dreams and the imagination in developing the best person possible, and Clive said, "What would I do without you, Boney?"

"Don't go there, Mr. C," said Boney, snapping his fingers together with a dry CLICK.

*

Sunday. In an extreme high-angle shot, The Girl climbs the attic stairs. Boney whispers that there's still time to put up a barricade. "Not happening," Clive whispers back.

*

"I want the last one to look something like this," I said, picking up my artwork and propping it up against my shins, so they could all see it.

None of them was looking at it. They were all staring at me. Randall's mouth was a little bit opened. Alex's eyebrows twisted up toward his widow's peak; he shook his head rapidly, a half dozen times maybe. Celine's eyes darted to her desk, her tall olive jars jammed with fountain pens, and back to me.

"Questions?" I said. "Comments?"

Alex inhaled deeply. "So her name's Angela," he said.

"That is a complete bummer," said Randall, as if in response to Alex.

Celine didn't say a word.

"She never seemed like an Angela to me," said Alex. "Why Angela?"

"She's supposed to be an angel," said Randall. "Duh."

"Satan used to be an angel," Alex said.

Celine started picking at the arm of the couch, twisting one of the buttons back and forth, back and forth. She began to hum, thin and reedy, a children's song about the skull being connected to the skeleton. She had taught it to me one night, as we huddled in a restaurant booth with vinyl seats, drinking red wine from a bottle we'd brought in with us, nearing incoherence. We sang it together, teasing out the S's in *skull* and *skeleton*, hissing at each other in mock ferocity.

“If you’re not married to Angela for a name,” said Alex, “I’ve got a thought.”

I backed up a step, letting the artwork drop to the floor. “I know this must feel pretty sudden,” I said. “You probably need a little time to dwell on this, or talk about it. I’m going to go out for a while.” I went over to the studio door. “If you want to work on your résumés or something,” I said, “you can.”

“Wait,” said Randall. “What?”

The clouds were heavy over the sun, cooling and darkening the day. I stepped out into it.

*

Monday. The Girl reaches the top step to find Boney and Clive standing together.

“Oh,” she says slyly, “I didn’t realize you had company. I’ll come back later.” Clive insists she stay. She acquiesces, adding that she’s probably got more to say than Boney.

“Don’t count on it, sister,” Boney mutters.

*

Grimaldi’s is a tavern located a five-minute walk from the studio, open ten AM to two AM. You can sit on a platform next to the front window and peoplewatch, or you can sit at one of the wobbly oak tables deeper in the shadows. Today I sat at the bar.

“Hey, Joey,” I said to the bartender. “Scotch me.”

“You got it,” he grveled.

There was one other customer, an older man standing in front of a jukebox that Joey kept stocked with nothing but songs that came out before JFK went to Dallas. He studied the buttons, drawing a slow spiral in the sawdust with the tip of his shoe.

“There you go, Bart,” said Joey, setting my drink on a coaster that hadn’t been in front of me a second ago. “Anything else?”

“I’ll probably need another one of these pretty quick.”

He nodded, picked up a glass and began rubbing it with a beige terrycloth towel. The older man returned to his seat, and as he unfolded a newspaper, his choice began playing. “You Are Too Beautiful” by Johnny Hartman. Good song.

I didn’t want to do it, but I turned to my left. Joey had a *Boney and Clive* panel there, framed behind the cash register. It showed Boney pouring a bottle into his mouth, and the liquid splashing off his ribs and spinal column. Clive stood in front of him, hands on his hips, saying, “Boney never could hold his liquor.”

This wasn’t taken from a comic – it was a Bart Stone original, commissioned by Joey Augustine, my self-proclaimed biggest fan. He wanted something adult, “something that wouldn’t get past the bluenoses.” I drew a different one first – Boney pointing at a toilet and yelling, “You won’t get anything out of me!” – but Joey wanted something with a drinking theme. For my payment, drinks were on the house for the rest of my life, and he would never point me out to customers until I was out the door.

“Know something?” Joey asked, refilling a glass I didn’t realize I’d emptied. “Someone came in last weekend and offered me seventy grand for that. Turned him down flat.”

“Sentimental,” I said.

He grinned. “Nah. I’m holding out for more.”

I tipped back a slippery mouthful, felt it take the dangerous journey down my throat. “Tell you what, Joey,” I said. “I can give you a couple of original Bart Stone brushes to go with that. I’ll sign them and everything.”

He jerked forward, like he’d slammed on his brakes. “Oh yeah? Really? You’d do that?”

“Sure, Joey,” I said. “I need to divest myself of a few material possessions, and they might as well go to a good home. Away from home.”

“Well, thanks,” he said. “Thanks, Bart.” He winked at me, then went over to the older man with the newspaper, who was waggling his empty glass over his head, signaling for more.

Home. Away from home. If I hadn’t been drinking, I wouldn’t have included that little pause that messed up the pacing of the line. But then, if I hadn’t been drinking, I might not have come up with the line. I felt fortunate that my field wasn’t standup comedy, where timing is everything, and that I could fix my mistakes before they made it too far outside my circle of friends.

The next song came on – Sinatra, “What’s New.” I turned back to Boney, his eyes as big as those of a child who’s facing two ice cream sundaes. It was back when I could still draw his eyes just the way I wanted them, with little thought and less effort. I wondered how much more it would be worth once the word got out that I had taken my leave. How much more than that it would be worth when I died.

The Scotch eddied through me, seeking out those toxic pools and sliding across their surfaces, covering them the way oil covers water. My cheeks grew warm, and I touched them, touched the bristlings of my day-old beard. The older man opened the

sports section. Chet Baker, “The Night We Called It a Day.” Hey baby, they’re playing our song. More refills, and I never had to ask. No clock in Grimaldi’s, and I wasn’t wearing a watch. The backache was leaving. Sweat, burning as it pushed its way out. Well, no regrets so far. You don’t have any lips – that was a good one. Belafonte now, “Jamaican Farewell.” *Sad to say, I’m on my way...* This guy had good taste. Which reminds me.

“Joey,” I said, standing. “Could you call me a cab?”

“Sure thing, Bart.” He went for the phone.

“I’ll wait outside.”

I took a step. Another. I hated having to focus on walking. Shouldn’t have to think about it. Joey on the phone, next to older guy. Guess I better wave. Older guy reading comics now. Wonder who’ll take over my spot. Door. Breezy.

“Hey.” Joey’s voice, trying to be quiet. “You know who that was?”

*

Tuesday. The Girl: “Clive, why do you make it so hard for people to know you? Whenever I try, you take off. I’m doing everything I can to find out what you’re like inside...” Clive, pointing to Boney: “I’m like him.” The Girl: “Oh, come on!” Clive: “What? Why is that so hard to believe?” The Girl: “Well, for one thing, you’re bigger.” Clive: “Didn’t used to be.” Boney: “Darn right!”

*

“Wait here,” I told the driver, and climbed out of the back seat. Celine’s Plymouth Rock was hunkered at the top of the driveway, and I walked up to it, pushing my right

knee, my left, right, left. The front door was behind it, at the top of three marble steps. Funny that those last three steps were literally the hardest. I wished they had a banister.

“Coming,” yelled a deep voice, as the doorbell tones faded. A moment later, Hal Grover was studying me, his hand on the outside knob, wearing no shirt and a pair of barely pink sailor pants. Celine had a fire engine red skirt; I was willing to bet it had met those pants in the washing machine and refused to let go.

“Bart,” he said.

I hitched my thumb over my shoulder. “Can’t come in. Cab.”

He squinted behind me and sniffled. Then he said, “Celine called. She says you killed Boney.”

“Yeah. Was she upset?”

“Well, she called.”

“Yeah,” I repeated. I was having trouble expelling the words that I’d been turning over in my head since one AM or so, when I drew the first few lines of the final strip. The window, I think I started with.

“Are you drawing?” I asked.

“Uh, yeah. Actually, this morning I sent out some strips to Don at the syndicate, he said he’d take a look. It’s at a supermarket.”

“Lotta character potential there,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking.” He pressed some hair away from his eyes.

“Yeah, I had no idea how hard this was going to be, to sell the idea. My hat’s totally off to you, man.”

“Well, good luck with that. And I also wanted to say I was probably a dick to you a lot of the time and that wasn’t cool. So, you know.”

I put my hand out. It bobbed between us, like seaweed on the ocean’s surface. Hal and I watched it for a moment as it lurched gently, up and down.

“Is this one of those AA steps?” Hal asked me. “Where you go around and say you’re sorry to everybody you wronged?”

I had no desire to get into any kind of pissing contest with Hal Grover today, so I lied. “Yes,” I said. “That’s exactly what it is.”

“You know you’re not supposed to do those steps out of order, right?”

“It’s important for me that I do this, Hal.” My voice was harsh, scraped raw from forcing its way out of my too-small mouth. Hal pulled his head back, surprised. I looked away from him, down at my hand, still floating limp and uneasy between us.

We stood there for a while, him under the doorway arch and me on the marble, and then he took my hand and smacked my arm. “No worries, man,” he said. “Hey, come back some time when you don’t have a cab waiting for you.”

“Right,” I said, and as he closed the door I turned and lost my balance and would have fallen if the Rock wasn’t right there between me and the driveway.

*

Wednesday. The Girl tells Clive what she likes about him – his mischief, his imagination, his kindness, his cuteness. She wraps it up by saying, “And you’ve got more guts than Boney will ever have. Literally.” Clive fidgets, embarrassed but pleased. Boney says, “If I had a stomach, it’d be turning over right now.”

*

You want somebody perfect, Celine told me. And you're never going to find her.

It was one of those early evenings when fifty degrees and a light wind feels good on your face. We were standing about ten feet from the studio door, in the no man's land between fiction and reality. She drew deeply on her cigarette, accentuating her cheekbones. I stood there, fires tearing through my brain, anvils holding down my tongue, and awaited further punishment.

I'm not perfect, she went on, smoke spilling out of her nose and mouth. Much as I hate to admit it. I'm definitely not as perfect as you seem to think I am. And I'm not going to put myself in a position where you feel the need to rub out all my flaws. So don't look for me to turn your life around. If anyone's going to do that, it's got to be you.

I told her that I understood, even thanked her. I said I'd see her tomorrow, and I got in my car and drove home, where I found a big sketch pad and attacked it with a magic marker. Out came a giant Boney, fifteen feet tall, maybe more, hunching down, sending Clive tumbling backward with a screamed curse of "BULLSHIT!!!" It could only have three exclamation points. Four or more would have taken the emphasis off the word itself, and one or two just wasn't enough.

But I couldn't have this drawing in the house now, poisoning the air with its presence. And I had to be careful how I threw it away; there were people who went through my trash, and this drawing was not for them. So I tore it up and put the pieces in three separate wastebaskets, which I would empty weeks apart from each other, and I took the curse and all its exclamation points and I put it in my mouth and chewed the paper into pulpy mush and let the bitter ink run across my tongue and retched a little as the whole mess worked its way down my throat.

*

Thursday. “You know what else you have that Boney doesn’t?” she goes on. “A heart.” She gives him a few examples of his warmest moments, concluding, “And you care about Boney like it was a living, breathing human. But it’s not. I am. And I want to share my heart with you. Will you share yours with me?” she asks, putting her hand on Clive’s, closing her eyes and leaning in. “Boney,” says Clive, turning away, “what should I do?” Boney, touching his face, murmurs, “’Scuse me, I got something in my eye.”

*

“The syndicate called,” said Alex. “Twice.”

“I’ll talk to them tomorrow,” I said, walking toward the sweet comfort of my padded desk chair.

The phone rang.

“Don’t answer that,” I said. “Nobody is to answer the phone for the rest of the day.” I turned on my computer and sat down to transcribe my notes.

“Are you drunk?” asked Randall.

Everything froze. Even the phone stopped ringing. Randall looked mortified; Alex, wary; Celine, watchful. Her hand was poised over her inkwell, the pen it held perfectly steady.

I rotated my chair from twelve o’clock to five to face Randall and lock him into my sight, which took a moment. “Don’t be ridiculous, Randall,” I said. “I’m in no condition to drink.” I tried to smile at my joke, but I knew it had been a lot funnier before it fell apart somewhere in my head.

“Well, neither are we,” said Randall. “Is this really how we’re going to end it?”

“Yessirrebob.”

“This is going to upset a lot of people, you know,” he went on. “It’s already upset a hundred percent of those who’ve seen it. While you were out? I was the only one who didn’t cry.”

I cocked an eyebrow at Alex.

“I only cried because Celine cried,” he claimed, pressing his hands down on his desk’s surface. “Women’s tears are like carbolic acid. They’ll melt anything.”

I started to reach for a pen so I could write that down. Then I stopped. Why bother?

“Maybe I could continue the strip for you,” Randall offered. “Then if you think you made a mistake, we just switch places and you pick right back up again.”

“Randall, no offense intended,” said Alex, “but if Bart’s not writing it, it’s not *Boney and Clive*.”

“Well, it doesn’t have to be. I could give it a different name. We could say Boney’s just visiting another world and have a look-alike take over. Whole different name, whole different personality, but the same look. How about that?”

I rotated back to twelve o’clock and opened a new document on my computer. Celine clinked her pen against the bottle and went back to work. So did Alex. Eventually, so did Randall.

I typed out the notes, ignoring the phone, the returning backache, the velvet bristling in the back of my mind for as long as I could. When I finished the first week, I clicked SAVE and opened my top left desk drawer, where I kept a bag of pretzel nuggets.

There was a letter I kept there, too. One of my earliest fan letters, it was a little worse for wear and tear – I’d crumpled it up at least twice, but I could never bring myself to throw it away, and it always wound up smoothed out and back in the drawer where it belonged. I picked it out and chewed on my pretzel nuggets as I read it one more time.

*dear bart stone, wen im sad i think of bony and clive and im
hapy agen. is that wat you do to. love angela xoxo*

I actually wrote her back. I think I must’ve said yes. She’s probably in her early twenties now. I wonder what she looks like these days. I wonder if she still reads it. If she does, I wonder if she gets anything out of it anymore.

“Slim Shenanigans!” said Randall. “How does that sound?”

*

Friday. As The Girl sits there, frozen in mid-pucker, Boney tells Clive that he should seize this opportunity, that it will take him to some great new worlds and he’ll love exploring them. “You’ll have to explore them without me, of course,” he says. “But I’ll feel good knowing you’ve got someone to share them with.” Clive sniffles; to lighten the mood, Boney says, “So! Do I get to watch you kiss her or what?” A dejected Clive says, “Boney... I’d rather you didn’t.” Boney, resigned: “I know.”

*

Alex, as usual, left at five o’clock sharp. Once he started writing the letter *t* on Friday, and didn’t cross it until the following Tuesday (Monday was a holiday). As he approached my desk, he said, “I’d like to talk to you about your putting us out of work without any warning. Tomorrow, eight-thirty?”

“Sure.”

“Good. See you then.” He never even broke stride.

Randall left a few minutes later. “Get some sleep, Bart,” he said. “You’re going to be doing a lot of press in a few days.” I groaned at the idea, but it didn’t bother him at all. He zipped up his bomber jacket and walked out, mumbling, “Hambone... Jawbone... Bone Appetit...”

That left me and Celine. I turned the chair and watched her working, slow and precise. She was such a pretty girl. I used to love her eyelashes, of all things. She has long thick lashes, and when she closed her eyes, slow and hypnotic as charmed snakes, they came together so perfectly, and you could almost hear the soft *whoosh* as they collided. I used to love to watch her close her eyes.

“Hal picking you up?” I asked.

She raised her head. “Hmmm?”

“Is Hal picking you up tonight?”

“Oh. No, I wasn’t sure when I’d be done, so I told him I’d take a cab.” She put her pen down and offered me a smile. “How’s the view from the other side of the Rubicon?”

“Okay, I guess,” I said, rubbing my forehead. “I’m not used to it.”

She got out of her chair and walked over to me. Wasn’t it nice to watch her walk. “What’s going to become of you, Bart?” she asked, kneeling down next to my desk.

“Oh, I don’t know. Go to comic conventions, learn about acupuncture. Meet someone maybe.” I opened the desk drawer. “Pretzel nugget?” I asked, reaching in.

“Bart,” she said, “I don’t want Boney to die.”

The bag crinkled around my hand as I took out a number of nuggets and dropped them on the desk. Five, it turned out. “Boney’s not going anywhere, Celine,” I said.

She blinked. God, those lashes. “You’re not quitting?”

“Oh, I’m quitting, all right,” I assured her. “And I’m not letting Randall or anybody take over. But no, Boney’s not going anywhere.” I took a nugget; four left, now.

“Is there something you’re not telling me?” She was attempting another smile as she said it, but it couldn’t quite gain enough traction to stay.

“Well,” I said, shifting a little in my chair to get support, “I look at it like this. People are going to be talking about this for a while, but then they’ll go back to talking about their favorite things Boney did, or Clive did. The good times will stay with them a lot longer than the disappointment. No, Boney’s not going anywhere.”

Her hand was flat on my desk, black ink spotting her nails and the backs of her fingers. I patted it, soft pats, as fleeting as I could make them. “So don’t worry. And tell me about your honeymoon. Where are you guys going again?”

She brightened. “Hawaii,” she said. “We’re getting as far away from America as we can without actually leaving it.”

“And what’s the wedding date?”

“March fifteenth. We get married, go to Hawaii for a week, and when we get back, spring’s begun. Isn’t that perfect?”

“And do I get to see this firsthand?”

She hesitated. Reached out for her own pretzel nugget; we were down to three now. “Think that’s such a good idea?” she asked, her voice careful.

“No, everything’s cool. I went and saw Hal over my lunch break. We shook hands.”

Now she was all careful hesitation. “Okay,” she said. “That’s good. That’s good to hear.” She took a bite out of her pretzel nugget. Celine had to be the only person I knew who could make a pretzel nugget last for two or three bites. Someone in *Boney and Clive* did the same thing. Not The Girl, though – I think it might have been Ms. Sampson, way back in the day.

“We haven’t even started making the guest list, Bart,” she said. “But I’ll talk to Hal about it.”

“I’d appreciate that.” I grabbed another nugget and turned back to my computer.

“Oh, wait a minute.” She went over to her desk and came back carrying my guideline draft of the final strip. “You left this on the floor when you went out to lunch,” she said as she laid it on my desk, blanketing the last two nuggets.

I leaned over it, touching my signature in the corner. There was something I liked about this slipshod draft, something rough and energetic about these mournful final moments. The crack in the attic window felt integral to the window. The spilled box of books had really been spilled. Clive’s gaze went past Boney’s waving hand and drilled its way into me.

“I always used to think I was The Girl,” Celine said.

“Sometimes you were,” I admitted. “Every June 22nd you were.”

“That dress.” I could hear the smile in her voice, delighting in the confirmation.

“So is there a real Angela, then?”

I looked down at her, kneeling at my desk, this incredible girl who'd shaken my inner core down to the ground once upon a time. "If there is, Celine," I said, "I'm never going to find her."

For a moment, she looked angry, hurt, sorrowful – I couldn't say surprised. Then she blanked her face, turning it into chilled glass. "Okay," she said. "Okay, Bart." She released me, got up and went to her coat rack, which held her purse, which held a fair number of cigarettes.

*

Saturday. "I'm sorry, Boney," Clive whispers, as he turns Boney, half in shadow and deep in the foreground, to face the reader. He then moves to the background, where The Girl waits. As he kisses her, Boney's eyes shrivel into nothingness, and his brow smoothes out. "Let's go downstairs, Clive," says The Girl. Clive says, "Okay, Angela." And they get up to go, leaving behind an ordinary child's skeleton, skull tilted up a little, with a single tear running down from the empty dark hole where his left eye used to be.

*

Celine was gone, and the natural daylight wasn't far behind, by the time I finished typing the outline. I printed out four copies and distributed them, one on each desk. I walked across the studio to the refrigerator, where I fixed myself a strong vodka and orange juice in a big paper cup. I took it with me to the couch, where I stretched out with a sigh. The poster of Boney on the ceiling was barely visible, but I didn't need to turn on the lights – I knew what he looked like. I just lay there in the gloaming, sipping my drink, deciding whether I should dangles and thinks or whether I should just dangles.

Notes

The Jello Biafra quote from the introduction was taken from his spoken word album *I Blow Minds for a Living*. Flannery O'Connor's quote comes from her book *Mystery and Manners*.

“The Day Denny Hudson Taught Fourth Grade” was inspired by Esmé Codell's book *Educating Esmé*. Ezra Hickey gave me an inside look at what goes on in a grade-school classroom. Thanks, Nephew.

“The Return of Mavis” appeared in different form in the newspaper *The Bookpress*.