

5-22-2006

## Absolute Midget

Mitchell Sommers  
*University of New Orleans*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

---

### Recommended Citation

Sommers, Mitchell, "Absolute Midget" (2006). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 440.  
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/440>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

ABSOLUTE MIDGET

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
In  
Drama and Communications  
Creative Writing

By  
Mitchell A. Sommers

B.A. Franklin and Marshall College, 1980  
J.D. The Dickinson School of Law, 1983

May 2006

## Table of Contents

January, 2001.....	1
April, 2001, Thursday.....	4
January, 2001.....	45
Friday.....	48
January, 2001.....	156
Saturday.....	159
January, 2001, Philadelphia.....	250
Sunday.....	251
January, 2001, Philadelphia.....	291
Monday.....	292
January, 2001, Philadelphia.....	297
Vita.....	327

**January, 2001**

Rudy has said nothing to me for at least ten minutes now. That's not unusual. Some people around here might say he never says anything to me, only at me.

I know better. Rudy has been my cellmate for long enough that I know the difference. What throws people off is that he doesn't actually speak in what are commonly referred to as sentences. He doesn't use paragraphs. He doesn't bother with things like syntax.

Like I said, I know better. Share a prison cell, a prison job, and prison meals with a man; you learn when he's speaking at you and when he's talking to you. And most of the time when he talks, he's definitely talking to me. Granted, the conversations are all in numbers. Actually, numbers and grunts. He'll go, "urrgh." Or "Mmmgh..." Then he'll punctuate that with "16", "49", or a long string of "3's."

At first I began listening for patterns. Then I just started listening.

It's not as if I spend all my time listening to Rudy. I do have other things to do here as an involuntary guest of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Most of them involve maintaining what passes for the prison law library. I didn't expect to be assigned this particular job. I didn't make a big thing out of advertising that I was a lawyer--emphasis on the *was*--when I got here. I figured I'd be deluged with requests from half the people here to help them out with their appeal, or, as

one guy put it, his “labia corpus” petition. I didn’t particularly want to know how their public defender had fucked them over. But word travels, and all of that. So I found myself assigned here, and ended up with a jailhouse practice it’s probably not a smart idea for someone like me to have.

But I’ve done a lot dumber things than this, and lived to tell the tale. Sort of. Besides, this passes the time. It amuses me. And that matters.

Most lawyers, a category I still include myself in emotionally if not in the eyes of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, have long since stopped doing this particular part of my prison job. Once a week or so, I slip the pocket parts, which are basically supplemental mini-books, in the inside covers of various legal publications. The intent is to update law changes in such things as Purdon’s, which are little green books that house all of the Commonwealth’s statutes. They used to be ubiquitous in law offices. Now, most things are online or on CD. Except here. No sense giving inmates computers.

As I work, I occasionally pause and talk to Rudy, talk about the Eagles or the Sixers, or tell him something about my life, the way I would a pet, if a pet was 6’3” and had dreadlocks.

That sounds mean, and maybe even a little bit racist. It’s not meant to. I like Rudy. He’s gentle. Even if he did try to take out two Philly cops when they roused him from an art center closet over in Point Breeze. I understand the desire to gouge a cop’s eye out even if you’re not a violent person, Context. It’s all

context.

“Hey, Rudy,” I say as I stick the 2000 legislative updates in the back of the Vehicle Code. “You gonna be okay when I’m gone?”

Silence. Then, “62. 67, 8.”

I don’t think I’ve heard that particular sequence before.

“Rudy, could you hand me that next set?” Rudy walks over to a box on a metal desk and grabs a handful, then walks them back to me.

“Nice job. You can sit down over there. I’ll let you know when I need some more.”

Unlike most of the people in here, Rudy doesn’t complain about his public defender. Though he should. I’m more likely to be elected president of the State Bar Association than Rudy is of being declared competent to stand trial.

Some days I think I should do something about that.

Mostly, though, I keep my head down, file these pocket parts, or straighten shelves, or generally keep track of things around here, and try not to think about I got here. Except when I do. Which is most of the time.

Some days, like today, I think about what’s likely to happen when I get out.

**April, 2000**  
**Thursday**

I knew Gail was already trying to decide which was the bigger mistake: bringing me along or letting me stay at home. It wasn't the look she gave me that told me that. It was the look she gave the mini-bar.

I knew the calculations she'd made even before we arrived here, because I was accustomed to being on the business end of those calculations. The decision to bring me to Philly wasn't random. Her thought process probably went something like this:

Bring me. I'd be at high risk to embarrass her or just plain piss her off, but she might have a shot at working all the levers of co-dependency to keep my damage from spreading out too far.

Leave me home. Pretend to have fun. Do so with the full knowledge grinding away in her cerebellum that if I did that very something to embarrass her or piss her off, she'd have no means to stop me before I'd thrashed around and done it.

That's the only reason she would have opted for bringing me along. Not for companionship, sex, laughter. Damage control. From her perspective, it was probably the better long-range choice. The short range, however, was what concerned us both now.

One day at a time, to use an expression I have been known to invoke, or have had invoked on me, like a mantra or a threat.

We threw our bags on the bed. One king-sized bed. Not two double beds. Unless she directed me to the sofa--an extreme banishment, one I'd have to work at to be sentenced--that meant I'd get at least get to share the bed with her tonight. That was the first problem I could tell, she spotted, just from her expression, the way she almost imperceptibly squinted her eyes.

The mini-bar. It almost sent us home right there. I watched her whip her head round, in a bed, to mini-bar, then back to bed semi-circle. I saw her eyes roll up. I could almost hear her jaw tense, wondering how she'd forgotten to ask about such a basic thing when traveling with the likes of me. I saw her look at the key in the lock, wonder if she should just grab it, stick it in her pocket, but no, that wouldn't solve a damn thing, since I'd just go downstairs and say I lost it and she knew it. Because I'd done it before. I watched her size up all the lurking catastrophes in the room as she tried to decide if she should stay or just say, fuck it, fuck long-term and turn around. She could head down the Pennsylvania Turnpike as fast as her new SUV would let her go, dump my ass back in Lancaster, be back in Philly in 90 minutes, tops, and maybe cajole her brain into willful ignorance mold. Would there be shit to clean up? Of course. There was always some sort of detritus with me. It might be physical. More likely it would merely be emotional. But clean-up of some sort was something she could count



on. It was a tough call. Worry now. Worry later. But I already knew what she'd do. No turning back. She'd stay.

Gail, unlike me, got hit early in life with the responsibility stick.

We were staying at a chain hotel in the middle of Society Hill in Philadelphia, in the middle of all the standard historical crap. Gail is an officer in and a panelist for several seminars of the National Association of Bankruptcy Lawyers, who are holding their annual convention here this weekend. In other words, she lives for this shit. That's why she's here. I, however, was here to be minded. To be babysat. I don't practice bankruptcy law. Or much of anything else, though I suppose if a client would, by serendipity, have walked into my office--since I couldn't afford a secretary, receptionist, or any sort of gatekeeper whatsoever, they'd have been able to walk right up to my desk--I would have said I practiced criminal defense. That would be consistent with the phone book ad. The ad that I hadn't paid for in four months. In the phone book that propped up my conference room table.

That wasn't entirely true. I still had clients. That's plural. For instance, there was the guy last week who smacked his wife around with a phone book, on the mistaken belief he wouldn't leave marks that way. Perhaps in between smacks, he paused to look at my ad. But I doubt it. It was, after all, a small ad. A little, tiny ad, scarcely bigger than the little teeny tiny bottles in the mini-bar.

More likely he heard of me when I was good. It takes a while for a bad

reputation to completely override a good one, and even when it does, there are always some outliers who didn't get the news.

Like my other client. A kid, barely 18. A security guard caught him turning donuts out by Rohrer's quarry in Sunnyside. A stupid trespassing charge in front of my old friend, Fanny McDyer, who was a District Justice in Southeast Lancaster.

Big crimes. Important stuff. The kind of life or death case that makes me say nobody will particularly care if I show up 45 minutes late and tell Fanny, "Hey, sorry, but it's not exactly *Roe v. Wade* here, right?" and test my friendship with her a few more degrees.

But that was yesterday. And this is now. One day at a time. And I can start that day over any time I want to.

"Jeff," Gail said while sitting on the bed, rummaging through her notes for the first session, "you going to be okay here?"

"Meaning?" I said, as I opened the mini-bar and started taking out bottles, daring her to notice me.

"Meaning you'll be alright while I'm doing stuff all day long?"

"Meaning?" I put back the bottles of Little Jackie Daniels and Baby Jimmie Beam, deciding the bottle of Absolut was more interesting. I hadn't ever seen one that small, not even in the ads.

She sighed. "I don't want this to be uncomfortable for you."

I took the vodka bottle and started to make it dance on the dresser. I imagined it doing a little Russian dance, with a big fur hat on its head.

“Jeff,” she said, “I promise you, we’ll do things together this weekend. “Really.”

“So you’ll take me to the Liberty Bell, and I can run up and down the Art Museum steps like Rocky, and later we’ll get some ice cream?”

“Please, Jeff, please don’t start. Please. I’m going to be on two panels today alone. Look, if you don’t want to be here, just go home.”

“I can’t, remember?”

Not for another three months, two weeks and four days, anyway, when I got my driver’s license back, the loss of that license being among the many ripple effects of running my Miata into a Southern Lancaster County cornfield.

“I need to get ready, Jeff. Please don’t fight with me. Please.” She had already grabbed her makeup and was heading to the bathroom. “Don’t pick a fight with me. Not today; not this weekend. You owe me this. You owe me something.” She kissed me sort of, but not cleanly, on the lips. Then she disappeared into the bathroom. I turned around and walked back to the dresser, making sure that the bottle kept up with the tune in my head, kicking, raising its fist, and dancing to imaginary Russian folk melodies.

In two hours, Gail would be reading excerpts from a paper on the effects of dot.com bankruptcies as they related to issues of consumer privacy. She

needed to get ready. I needed to become, if not quite invisible, at least dismissible.

I wouldn't see her till tonight. I could, of course, have gone to some of the seminars just to pick up some continuing legal education credits I needed. She would have paid for them, since she paid for pretty much everything these days. But since I didn't have any clients to speak of at this point, CLE credits were definitely a back-burner sort of thing. Besides, most of what I knew of bankruptcy law I learned in a more informal, eroticized fashion from Gail herself. The more arcane the topic, the more she'd get into it. She could discuss the particulars of business reorganization while we'd be lying in bed, telling me the most fascinating, fascinating things about unsecured creditors and I'd listen, hanging on every word and she and her half-naked body would gesture, and she'd toss her long auburn hair and shake her head and say, "No, no, that's not going to work, don't you see?" and explain it all to me even more succinctly before I'd start peeling off whatever flimsiness she was still wearing. Sometimes she'd keep talking even thirty or forty seconds after I'd start lightly licking her nipples, though rarely longer.

She wouldn't be telling me any of those things today. She hadn't told me any of those things for a while.

Hotels suck if you're alone. And I was alone. Even if Gail hadn't already left a few minutes ago to hold court in one of the conferences downstairs, even if she had been sitting on that leather chair, revising yet again her notes, or lying

down on the love seat, seminar materials on the floor next to her like a badly-shuffled deck of cards, I would have been alone.

Things to do in Philadelphia when you're alone, your relationship is a bunch of jagged shards, and you can't even drive away from it. Think, think, I told myself.

Actually, I didn't have to tell myself anything. I already knew what I wanted to do, and who I wanted to call. It was Gail's fault, after all. She's the one that left me here all alone. I could hardly be blamed if I wanted something to keep me busy. I was in recovery, after all. Early recovery. This would be the eighth day--no, sixth day, I popped a Xanax last week--no, wait, it was only half a Xanax, eighth day--clean and sober. And that's hard. I knew it was hard. She knew it was hard. She knew I knew it was hard, since I'd managed to get to eight days sober lots of times.

So if I called my ex-girlfriend Aviva, who lived only a few Schuylkill Expressway exits away, it would really, be Gail's fault. Sort of. Even I knew that was one rationalization too many. But Gail was the one who had put the temptation up so close, and that ought to have counted for something.

I thought about my options. We, as in "Gail and I were still going through the motions of being a couple" We, didn't have to be anywhere together until dinner tonight with Marty. That would almost certainly be an experience I could not envision enduring without the loving embrace of chemicals, but I didn't have

the ability to map out my day that far just yet. I was worried mostly about the morning, and the hotel room, and the mini-bar vodka bottle that I had put back into the refrigerator, then taken out again, then put back again.

I took it out again. I walked over to the desk, and held it up, rotating it clockwise, then counter-clockwise. I set it back down on the dresser, in between the room service menu and the Welcome to Philadelphia chain hotel guidebooks. I rolled it from my right hand to my left, and back again, then set it upright. I moved it around in the air, saying to myself. "Dance, monkey boy, dance", referring, I think, to the bottle. Then I put it back in the refrigerator.

There. That wasn't completely awful. Four, maybe five minutes I'd stomped to death. And I was still sober.

I pulled my laptop--okay, Gail's laptop--out of its leather bag. I cleared away the menus and hooked it up. I must have checked my email oh, I don't know, four or five times. Twice, the friendly AOL guy stirred the brief hope that someone other than BARELY LEGAL TEENAGE SEXXXXXXX STARVED JELLO WRESTLING MOTORCYCLE WHIPPED-CREAM SLUTS wanted my attention. Someone like, maybe, a client. No such luck. No such luck when I checked my voice mail five or six times, either. Not even Fanny. Usually my appearance in court prompted a phone call to Gail and me and an invitation to dinner. Apparently this time I'd actually pissed her off. A real piss off, as opposed to the sort of quirky irritation that I liked to think could pass for

endearing.

I made a pot of coffee, then plopped myself down on the love seat to read the Philly Inquirer. I got all over the top worked up wondering why the fuck Bobby Clarke wouldn't either just shut up, make peace with Eric Lindros or trade his ass. I thought about just going back to sleep or, more accurately, going to sleep, period. Sleep, at least sleep on a regular get up in the morning, go to bed at night schedule, is hard to come by in the early stages of being alcohol and chemical-free. Having been in the early stages of that state a fair number of times, I should have, by now, known the drill, even if I'd never get used to the feeling. Sleep when you can. Sleep, and hope the really weird dreams don't penetrate your wakefulness, too.

I was lying diagonally on the bed, sharing space with one of Gail's suitcases and the clothes she'd hurriedly thrown next to it. I noticed the black dress, the God-she-looks-great-in-that black dress with the neckline cut at just the right cleavage point and the fabric that clung to her just enough and that swirled around her just so. I wondered if I'd get to see her wear it. I wondered if I was even meant to.

I checked out the mini-bar again. I opened up the little refrigerator and counted all the bottles. Every single one. Absolut Midget was still there, still smiling at me along with Baby Jimmy Beam and Jackie "The Man" Daniels along with all the sickeningly sweet crap that I normally wouldn't waste my time with

unless that was all there was within arm's reach. I stared, caressed each one, then took the Toblerone candy instead. For breakfast. She'd see something was taken on the checkout statement but I'd save the wrapper, just so I could pull it out and go A-Ha! See, you falsely accused me! See, I too can stay sober an entire weekend, and don't you feel terrible making assumptions like that? It was a wonderfully self-righteous thought, one I could revisit and revise, imagining just the right inflection I'd use to smack her over the head with it.

And all I had to do to use it was stay sober until Sunday evening.

By the time noon rolled around, I had done everything there was to do inside the room, though I hadn't nearly exhausted the possibilities of what there was to do inside my head. Tonight we would be going out to dinner with Marty Munro, Gail's law professor friend along with his significant other. I had never met him, but from Gail's descriptions, I already didn't particularly like the guy. There is a certain kind of law professor, the kind that practices in a big-deal firm for two or three years, just long enough to say he'd done some actual lawyering shit before settling into academic life. I hate those types, and that's exactly what Munro was. But it was more than that, and I was still trying to pin down what it was. Thinking about why made me angry in an ill-fitting, indistinct sort of way that was probably not good for me to brood about for very long.

There were possibilities. I could take a walk. I even started to do that. I



made it out of the hotel and looked around. Penn's Landing and the Delaware Riverfront, two minutes away, practically in back of me. The historic crap that I'd made fun of earlier in the day was just a ten minute walk away, maybe 15 or 20 max, even allowing for my out-of-shape shape. And South Street wasn't that far, either.

This was a great location for a tourist.

I was not a tourist.

I walked as far at the edge of the cobblestone street in front of the hotel, where Gail's Ford Explorer was parked. I positioned myself between its grill and a tree, looked out at Penn's Landing one more time, and just knew I wasn't going to spend a nice spring day doing something harmless.

I went back inside, all the while fingering the key to the Explorer. Gail had never got around to stripping me of that key. I was staying in a room with the keys to both the mini-bar and her car. Maybe Gail was getting sloppy. Maybe I was just wearing her down.

Whenever Gail felt the need for something more urban than Pennsylvania Dutch Country provided, she usually opted for New York City, or Baltimore, or D.C. Not Philly, even though it was closer than any of those. She never said she wanted to steer clear of any place that Aviva lived in. We just never came to Philadelphia together. And yet, here we were. Perhaps she figured that the distance between her and this hotel was hell out of walking range. Either that, or

like with the car and mini-bar keys, she no longer cared what I did as much as even she thought. I could cause anyone to lower their threshold of concern. As long as I didn't get drunk and tell her that I was sure I vomiting blood that was good enough for her. After all, she didn't even get worked up two weeks ago when told her I actually was throwing up blood.

Granted, that was in part because it wasn't blood. It was salsa. She took a look at the vomit, pointed out that blood didn't usually have cilantro in it, and threw a roll of paper towels at my head before walking away.

Still, I thought she'd be concerned a little bit more than that.

Fine. If those were the rules of our relationship, I could descend that far with almost no muscle strain whatsoever.

I flipped open Gail's laptop, which was still on the desk. As I waited for it to reboot, I got up and pulled the curtains shut. I was going to turn on the desk lamp, but decided to let the computer's glow do the illumination. As long as I was doing something furtive, it ought to look like it's furtive. As the AOL sign-in screen came up, I stared at it, head in hands, fleetingly thinking that the modem's screeching was some sort of agonized cry, trying to warn me of the consequences of what I was doing. If it was, too bad. I'd pushed past worse consequences before.

I had taken Aviva off my buddy list a while ago, but it was easy enough for me to check if she was online, assuming she hadn't done the Instant Message

equivalent of a Protection from Abuse Order and blocked me.

I punched in my Instant Message.

**JeffLaw42: Hey, Aviva, its me. How are you?**

I inhaled, then hit send. Then I was forced to wait and stare some more. I thought, if nothing else, at least I didn't type out "are you" as "r u", and that ought to count for something.

15 seconds went by. I forced myself to do nothing.

15 more seconds went by. I forced myself not to immediately send another IM.

15 more seconds went by. I rethought the use of force.

**JeffLaw42: You there? Its Jeff.**

**RabbiViv33: Im here Im here dont go away!**

Be careful what you virtually ask for, I thought as her words came onscreen. I inhaled deeply and started typing

**JeffLaw42: Hey! Its you! How are you? Where are you?**

**RabbiViv33: okay. Im okay**

**JeffLaw42: Anything special? Classes**

**RabbiViv33: no classes for a while Im not in school anymore. I should probably change my screenname.**

I had to follow that one up.

**JeffLaw42: What gives? Not going to be a rabbi anymore?**

**RabbiViv33: Taking a break. Im doing the social work thing, Chester County Children & Youth.**

JeffLaw42: Whoa! Thought you were done playing social worker. What happened? Crisis of faith?

**RabbiViv33: Crisis of money. Got tired of studenthood. Parents got tired of supporting me, I got tired of being supported. Responsibility. You ought to try it.**

**JeffLaw42: Ouch! You wound me!**

**RabbiViv33: Bullsh&t! You never wound. Not even a f#%+ing nick.**  
**What do I owe this virtual visit to?**

**JeffLaw42: Im in Philly all weekend long. You at work now?**

It took a good two minutes for her to respond to that one.

**RabbiViv33: I should lie, but truth is Im home today.**

**JeffLaw42: Why not tell me? What are you doing home anyway?**

RabbiViv33: I had to come into town to interview someone. Relative, lives in Germantown, wants to take two kids of mine in foster care. Figured Id come home and take the rest of the day off. Had some comp time coming.

**JeffLaw42: So why didn't you want to tell me that?**

**RabbiViv33: You're in Philly? Where? Why?**

**JeffLaw42: 2nd and Walnut, Soc Hill, convention, Im bored. Want some company?**

**RabbiViv33: Youre by yourself?**

**JeffLaw42: Just me**

**RabbiViv33: right**

**JeffLaw42: You don't believe me?**

**RabbiViv33: no reason I should ever doubt you. G\_d knows youd  
never lie about anything**

**JeffLaw42: Its just me.**

**RabbiViv33: No Gail?**

**JeffLaw42: Just me**

**RabbiViv33: No Gail**

**JeffLaw42: Just me thinking about you**

Then came another long, almost two-minute pause before she typed something else.

**RabbiViv33: Just you. You are telling me the truth here?**

**JeffLaw42: just me**

**RabbiViv33: Gails out of the picture?**

I thought about this one. I decided a lie that was blurry, rather than sharp and prickly around the edges might be a better bet.

**JeffLaw42: Not gonna lie. Gails still in the picture. Its complicated.  
But Im here alone. Is that honest enough?**

**RabbiViv33: Hmmmmm.**

JeffLaw42: I got an idea. A quick stop at the veggie Kosher Chinese place the one on 10th and Cherry. Takeout. Me and Kosher mock duck. You can't pass that up.

**RabbiViv33: Hmmm**

**JeffLaw42: There were less "mmms" in the "hmmm". Is that significant?**

**RabbiViv33: How soon can u be here?**

**JeffLaw42: I'll call it in now. Gimme 30 minutes. 45 tops.**

**RabbiViv33: Hmm**

**JeffLaw42: Almost no mmms in the Hmm. A good sign**

**RabbiViv33: Hm. Make it 45**

**JeffLaw42: 45 minutes. Ill be there.**

**RabbiViv33: Im a fool to be doing this. Total schmuck. Just so you know.**

**JeffLaw33: Hardly.**

But by the time I typed it out and hit send she was already offline.

Less than two weeks ago I stood in front of a judge I'd been in front of many times, in a courtroom I'd been in many times, in front of Assistant DA's and defense attorneys and a bailiff and a court reporter I'd shared courtrooms with many times, though usually not as the accused. I thought I handled it with

dignity, as much as that situation allows. I put my smart-ass lawyer persona away. I approached my colleagues while we all waited for Stanley Giannopolous to make his usual ten minutes late, silver-haired, this-is-what-you-want-your-judge-to-look-like entrance. I tried to defuse the inherent awkwardness. They responded in kind. The court reporter wished me luck. One of the deputies, who I knew from my previous attempts at thrashing around the margins of sobriety was an AA old timer, gave me his home number and told me to use it if I needed to talk. And when Judge G finally came in, instead of staring at me like I had taken my pants off at the Bench/Bar retreat and told everyone they could lick my sweaty nutsack--something I had actually done last year in Ocean City, so I knew the exact look he was capable of--he gave me a look of compassion. Like I was salvageable. And when I handed my driver's license to the probation officer, who I also knew, he told me not to worry, I'd get through this.

I thought about all those things as I sat in Gail's SUV. I put the key in the ignition, but didn't turn it right way. Instead, I adjusted the rear view mirror, looking at my own truncated reflection. My eyes. I looked at my eyes as much as I could bear to do so. I forced myself to look at them even beyond that point.

Then, only then, did I turn the key.

Mt. Airy is something of a rarity for urban America; one of a handful of racially mixed upper middle class urban neighborhoods that you'll find. Parked between

grittier Germantown and more upscale Chestnut Hill, it has the look and feel of an older, tree-lined, more established suburb. Aviva and I lived here for three years, walking over to the food co-op on Greene Street to pick up vegetarian burritos and samosas, or over to a little corner of Fairmount Park where we'd walk her border collie. It's where I left her, after she decided she wanted to become a Rabbi, after she decided a gentile boyfriend might cause some problems in that area, not to mention one who bounced from law firm to law firm with longer and longer intervals of unemployment in between.

I parked the SUV in her driveway, walked up to her apartment, holding the Scheczuan mock duck and vegetarian spring rolls I'd promised and picked up on the way. Aviva--all of her long, black hair and big brown eyes--opened the door.

"You're here. On time. With food. If I'm meant to be impressed, I am.

Sort of."

"Hi, Aviva."

"You want to come in, or stand nervously, awkwardly outside?"

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to fidget, I just didn't know what you'd say."

"I'd say the food's getting cold; c'mon in."

I walked into the apartment, past the overflowing bookcases where tomes such as Gender Issues in "American Judaism" competed with about three Sunday Editions worth of The New York Times, along with—Yes! Her dirty little secret



is still there--a couple of Cosmos and a Danielle Steel novel she stashed underneath the Arts and Leisure section. I spread out the food on the coffee table in the living room, brushing away various Philadelphia and New York Jewish periodicals that were piled high in order to make room for the vegetarian wonton soup.

We both sat down on the sofa, she at one end, her legs pointed towards me, her torso slouching in the other direction.

“So,” she said as she started pouring the soup out of its container and into a bowl, “you’re here for what? Some seminar?”

“Yeah. Something like that.” I stuffed a spring roll in my mouth and scanned the room, looking for pictures of people that might be possible boyfriends. So far I didn’t see any; just the same shot of her and some friends on a Tel-Aviv beach that had been perched on her bookcase even before I was living with her. I made a mental note to check other rooms later, but so far I was encouraged. With any luck, she hadn’t moved on as much as she thought. And I hate it when they move on.

“Don’t you actually have to be there to get those legal education credits, or do they just let you prop up a stuffed dummy at a desk or something?” She put the soup back on the coffee table, and let her foot graze my thigh. My outer thigh. Hard to know what that meant. Inner thigh would be less ambiguous.

“Fuck the credits. I just wanted to see you.”

She smiled a tight-lipped, crooked, sneaky smile. “Fuck the credits. Now there’s my impulsive little Jeff. Throwing away hard earned money and continuing education credits just to see an ex-girlfriend.” Pause. “So, which elephant in the room should I point out? The one named ‘Gail’, or the one named ‘sobriety’?”

“Tough crowd.”

“Not tough. I just know you. So, really, no bullshit. How are you doing?”

“You really want to know?”

“I asked, Jeff.” Her eyes softened enough that I felt an imperceptible nudge towards telling her something like the truth.

“How honest do you want me to be?”

“How honest can you be? Shit. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I just invited you to open up, and then....shit. I’m not doing this well. Yes, tell me. How are you?”

“Lousy. Really, really lousy. Things suck. I got busted for DUI. The disciplinary board is breathing down my neck, not that it matters, since I have no practice to speak of. Gail and I barely talk. I don't even have a driver’s license anymore. I haven’t had a drink for eight whole fucking days, and I want to rip my flesh off. Anything else you’d like to know?”

“Are you...”

“I’m not drinking. And don’t ask me if I’m going to meetings. I’m just

not drinking. No coke, either. Or pills. Or joints.”

“And how long has that state of affairs been maintained?”

“A while.”

What I said earlier about her eyes softening? Forget that.

“Define a while?”

“Aviva, do we have to go here?”

She sat up straight, then stared down at the last wonton in the bowl. “We’re already here. You’re in Philly, you’re in my apartment, you’re here, we’re here, everyone’s here. Why are you here? Wait. Don’t answer that. Don’t try to sell me. Just stop for a minute, okay? Stop trying.” And with that Schlomo the border collie jumped onto the sofa and into the space between us. There wasn’t really room for him, but that never stopped Shlomo. I motioned him to travel the few inches in the direction of my lap and face, and he happily complied.

“Well, at least Schlomo’s let go of his past resentments,” I said.

“Schlomo, while being a very good boy, has a brain the size of a cherry tomato.”

“That’s not a nice thing to say about you, izzit? Boop boop boop,” I said, reverting to the semi-baby speak I sometimes used around fur bearing quadrupeds that actually enjoyed my company. Not all of them felt that way--my sister Kate’s various dogs and cats, for instance, still clung to some grudges, as did Kate herself—but Schlomo didn’t.

And then I saw Aviva smile a guileless smile. I stopped trying to work for it, just for an instant, and she smiled.

“You look good, Jeff, I have to say.”

“How would you know? I have about 30 pounds of dog on my face,” I said, as my upper body was now lying on the sofa as Schlomo started walking on my stomach, his tongue in slobber mode and engaged in hot pursuit of my nose.

“Maybe I just like you better with a dog on your face. Schlomo, get down.”

Schlomo jumped down, but I stayed in my reclined position, hoping she might decide to kiss me. Or something in that general category of responses.

“Sit up. Eat,” she said.

“Now that was very Jewish motherly of you,” I said, but I did sit up and start spooning more vegetarian fried rice on my plate. 5000 years of guilt administration even works on *goyim*.

“Really. You do look good. Even without a dog on your face.”

“I gained weight.”

“You lost weight.”

“I may have lost weight since you saw me. Then I gained. Then I lost.”

She laughed. “Honestly, I can think of a dozen women who do the weight yo-yo thing less than you do. Me included. And I didn’t think that was possible.”

“Oh, you’ve always been consistently, adorably *zaftig*.”

“Now you’re trying too hard again. You were better with Schlomo on your head. Schlomo? Do you have to go out?” As she walked over to the front door, she paused, just for a moment, at the window.

“Nice wheels,” she said.

“What?”

“That big green Explorer. Looks new. Nice.”

The warmth of her face was starting to dissipate. Smile had whipped around a hairpin curve and turned to smirk. “I thought you just said you didn’t have a driver’s license. And while we’re at it, if things are that bad for you, how you paying for that monster truck, exactly?”

I had nothing to say. Apparently Aviva was better at cross-examination than I was. “Jeff, please do me a favor, ok? Don’t show up on my doorstep, after I’ve just about forgotten about you from the last time you showed up on my doorstep and you fucked me....”

“Stop, please don’t do this.”

“...and you fucked me, and then you went back to Gail anyway, and then try to make me care about you, care about how the hell you’re really doing by showing up again, and again, and again...”

“Aviva, stop this.” I started to feel tightness in my chest.

“...and again, and yet the fuck again, and make me drag little lumps of

truth out of you bit by bit. Please. Just tell me the truth now. Right away. For once.”

“Aviva....”

“LET ME FINISH! The truth. Once. Nothing you can say would really surprise me all that much.”

“Aviva, look, maybe this was naïve, but I just thought we might have a quiet afternoon just catching up.”

“We are catching up. I’m catching up. Oh boy, am I catching up. Is it Gail’s? Is it Gail’s car? Answer the question, counselor. Why would you be going to a seminar if you’ve got no money and no clients and are going to lose your license? Did you come to this little seminar thingy with Gail?”

“How much does that matter? Jesus, give me a break here. Relationships just don’t end with a thud, you know?”

“Do you really think you can just show up, smile, do the sad puppy dog eye thing and expect that you can get anything you want out of any woman you want it from?”

“How much trouble would I be in if I said, ‘yes’ ?”

She shoved the chopsticks back into the mock duck, so they were both sticking upright. “Jeff, go. Just go. Please don’t come back.” I turned to leave. I looked back as I left, watching as she took the chopsticks out of the mock duck and put the plate on the floor for Schlomo to inhale.

I got in the big-assed Ford Explorer and tore out of the parking lot, screeching tires and throwing gravel. I sped down the side street, blew past the stop sign and headed onto Lincoln Drive, the twisty artery that skims along Fairmount Park to the Schuylkill Expressway. It's normally a somewhat serene drive because of it whizzing past the park, but I didn't want serenity at that moment. I needed speed. I needed speed and tire screeching and turns taken too sharply. I needed out of control, cop-attracting speed. It was the last thing that I wanted, but it was exactly what I needed. It was the only thing that would cure the tightness in my chest and the oxygen-deficient feeling I was starting to have in my head. I barreled towards the entrance ramp to the Schuylkill, foot hard on the accelerator, in such a blind funk that I was only subliminally aware of the flashing lights and the staccato bursts of a siren. I must have gone a half a mile like that before I stopped filtering the lights and noises out and pulled over onto the shoulder of the road as the Philadelphia Police cruiser pulled up behind me. I tried to stay calm. I tried to mold my body language to act like this was no big deal. I tried not to think of the part of the vehicle code which, weirdly, like some idiot-savant, I could suddenly recall word for word:

*Any person who drives a motor vehicle on any highway or traffic way of this Commonwealth at a time when their operating privilege is suspended or revoked as a condition of acceptance of Accelerated Rehabilitative Disposition for a violation of section 3731 (relating to driving under influence of alcohol or*

*controlled substance) or because of a violation of section 1547(b)(1) (relating to suspension for refusal) or 3731 shall, upon conviction, be guilty of a summary offense and shall be sentenced to pay a fine of \$1,000 and to undergo imprisonment for a period of not less than 90 days.*

“Sir, may I see your license and registration.”

*Imprisonment for a period of not less than 90 days.*

“Sir. Your license and registration, please.”

*Imprisonment.*

“Sir. Are you alright, sir?”

*For a period.*

”Sir, I need to see your license and registration.”

*Of not less.*

“Sir. You need to answer me.”

*Than 90 days.*

“Look, officer, I have a problem.”

“Yes, sir, I know. I followed you from the stop sign on Lincoln and Cliveden. Why didn’t you stop when I put on my lights?”

“Look, here’s my bar card. I’m an attorney.”

”Well then, counselor, you should definitely know I need to see your license and registration.”

“It’s my girlfriend’s SUV; I don’t have the registration, she has it.”



“Then I’ll have to run the registration, sir. I still need your license.”

“I don’t have it.”

“You don’t have it as in you lost it, or you don’t have it as in it’s suspended?”

“Suspended.

Sir? You said your license is suspended?”

“Yes, suspended. Gone, yanked, sucked away. DUI-related. You’ll find out soon enough when you check with PennDOT, so I may as well tell you.”

“Counselor, do you know what that means....”

“90 days. \$1000 fine. I know. I really, really, really know. I need a break. Please. I don’t know what else to say.”

“Can’t do that, counselor. You should have thought of that before you got behind the wheel. I’ve got to write this one up. Do you have someone who can drive you and this car home?”

“My girlfriend. Her car. But she’s in a meeting now.”

“Then get her. I’m not letting you drive away. Can you reach her?”

The officer went back to his car to run my name and birth date, as well as Gail’s to confirm what I’d told him about her car and my license. I paged her on my cell phone and waited for her to call me back. The officer tapped on my window to present me with the driving under suspension citation just as Gail called me back.

“Gail, I’ve got a problem.”

The officer interrupted me. “Counselor, may I speak to her please?” I wordlessly handed the phone through the crack in the car window.

“Is this Gail Denney?” I heard the officer say. I strained to hear Gail’s response.

“Do you know a Jeffrey Ramsey?” he said. I started thinking I should yank that phone back from the officer, but didn’t know how to do that without just yanking the phone away from the officer.

“So you gave him permission to operate this vehicle?” *Oh God, I need to get that phone away from her right now before...*

“Did you know Mr. Ramsey’s license was under suspension?”

*Too late, too late, she thinks she’s covering for me. Shit, she does that on autopilot.*

“Is the address I have on your registration your correct address, ma’am?”

*I should have seen it coming. One more thing for her to hate me over.*

“Ms. Denney, you allowed Mr. Ramsey to operate your vehicle while you knew he was under suspension. That is a violation of the Pennsylvania Vehicle Code. Permitting someone to operate a vehicle while they are under a DUI-suspension carries with it a mandatory penalty of 90 days in jail and a \$1000 fine. I will be sending you a citation in the mail. Will you be able to come down and transport Mr. Ramsey and your vehicle from this site?”

After the officer heard her answer, not to mention after I heard bits and pieces of her answer, or at least the muffled screams I was able to discern from the cell phone, the policeman told Gail he was handing the phone back to me, then walked back to his cruiser.

“What the hell have you done to me? What the hell have you done to me? Jail? What the hell is he talking about? I’m standing in the middle of the lobby of the Society Hill Marriott, about to start another panel with Judge Berman and Marty and some cop is telling me I’m going to jail. What the hell have you done to me?”

“Gail, Gail, listen, this can be straightened out.”

“Straightened out? There shouldn’t be anything to straighten out.”

“Look, if you hadn’t told the cop you knew I was driving the Explorer, he wouldn’t have cited you.”

“What do I know from cops? I’m a bankruptcy lawyer. I’ve never even been stopped for a speeding ticket. I thought he was going to arrest you for stealing the car. I was trying to protect you.”

“Well, that was your big mistake. I’m sure when I testify, I can straighten it out. I’m the one with the problem here, Gail, I’m the one who’s going to jail.”

“You think THAT was my big mistake? Are you really that much of a fucking narcissist that you think THAT was my big mistake?”

“Look, Gail, I’m sitting by the road on Lincoln Drive. I can’t drive this

away. It's your car. Are you going to come get me or not?"

"What are you doing in that part of town, anyway?"

"Gail, can I please be chastised for only one thing at a time? It would make it all so much easier to keep track of."

Gail pulled up by the side of my car in a gray Acura I didn't recognize, with a balding, goateed guy behind the wheel I had never met before, but who I had a feeling might be Marty Munro. She got out of the car, gave the guy a half-wave, as he drove off, then walked up to me. I was leaning against the driver's side. The cop was still there, minutes before, warning me not to be cute about driving away by myself, and for once I wasn't about to play a round of authority testing. She walked up to me.

"Keys."

"What?" I wasn't sure I heard her right.

"Keys. Car Keys." She held out her right hand, palm out, fingers bunched tight. "Keys." I reached in my pocket and pressed them hard in her hand, wishing I hadn't done that with quite such force.

"Is that Marty?" I said.

She started walking around to the driver's side. I went to the passenger side.

"He seems nice," I said.

She opened the door and got in. I stood in front of the passenger side.

“I said, he seems nice,” as I spoke to glass and metal and pulled on a locked door handle.

She started the car. I tried to open the door again.

“Gail, it’s not open....”

And it wasn’t about to open, either. She drove off. So did the Philly cop. And I had no defense mechanism for coping with what had just happened.

Well, I did, actually. But it was foreclosed to me.

I thought for a moment about my options. And since Gail hadn’t taken the room entrance card from me, even if that was an omission by oversight, going back to the hotel was still an option.

I started to walk. Being somewhat out of shape, I knew, even when I started walking along Lincoln Drive, I wouldn’t get far. Each step I took, as cars drove past me while I walked the narrow passage between the road and the banks of Wissahickon Creek kept my self-pitying , passive-aggressive mojo nicely stoked, at least for a few hundred yards. Which, as I said, I knew was as far as I’d get. It’s hard to be passive-aggressive in a vacuum. It’s even harder when you’re out of breath.

At the entrance to Wissahickon Park, I paused. I stayed paused for at least a minute. When I’d paused enough that I could focus my breath and my anger, I called for a cab and waited.

In the minutes that I waited, I thought about what I would do when I got

back to the hotel. About what I'd find. About who I'd find. About Marty and a gray Acura and Gail with Marty in a gray Acura.

I thought about the dress. The black dress. The last time I saw her in the black dress.

Except she was pissed at me then, too. We were at Gallo Rosa, having a not totally horrible dinner, when I asked if she could cover my malpractice premium, and she suggested that maybe the best malpractice insurance of all might be if I stopped drinking.

Not wanting to relive that moment, I moved further back in time, the time before that when she'd last worn the dress.

Baltimore. Soft shell crab, and a softening of her own shell. A hotel that looked out over the Inner Harbor. I took off her dress and she let me.

That was just last June. Somehow that made the memory worse, not better.

So I moved forward, to dinner tonight. Supposed to be with Marty and his girlfriend. That could still happen.

After 20 minutes of me pacing, twitching and self-pitying, a cab showed up, pulling up to the little mini-pavilion I was sitting under.

"Odd place to be picked up, I know," I said to the cab driver as hopped in the back seat, immediately regretting I'd said anything at all. I didn't want to engage in conversation with Ahmed the cabbie. Who really was named Ahmed. I

may be an asshole--actually, there's very little maybe about that—but I'm not a racist asshole. If I say some dark-skinned, dark-haired guy with a Saddam Hussein look-alike mustache is named Ahmed, that's his name.

“Not that odd. I've picked up people in odder places,” he said, in excellent English. “It's hard to shock a cab driver.”

“I can relate,” I said, starting to converse in spite of myself. “It's hard to shock a criminal defense lawyer.”

“A lawyer?”

“Uh-huh,” I muttered, keeping my lips together as tightly as I could, hoping to make it clear that the small talk part of this transaction was over. I told him where in Society Hill I wanted to be dropped off, then hoped he would read my silence as an indicator I wanted some serious moping time.

He didn't get it. Not right way.

“I know this park. My children come here.”

I said nothing. I didn't want to encourage him into thinking I gave the least little shit. That worked. He drove along the rest of the way in silence. Nice job, Ahmed. He got me back and he shut the fuck up the rest of the way. A silence worthy of a generous tip.

I stood in front of the hotel room door, card key in hand. I heard nobody inside. I tried looking in the outside peephole, fully aware that never worked, that all I'd

see was a swirling nothingness, but doing it anyway because even though that trick had never worked, maybe it would work this time. When it didn't, I took the key, held it in front of the slot for a minute, then inserted it. I waited for the green light, the click, the entrance. No click. Red light. No entrance. Again, this time inserted more slowly. No click. Red light. No entrance. Again. Green. Chest tightening. Rapid breathing. Click. Lever handle down. Open. You think she'd learn to take those keys away from me. Hard to know where anger-induced forgetfulness ends and co-dependency begins.

Then inside, the deep exhaling I'd had the chance to do a moment ago seemed miscast. No Gail. No Gail in the black dress. No Gail out of the black dress. Nothing but the foggy, angry silence of a deserted hotel room.

I walked over to the mini-bar, just to see if the little vodka bottle was still there. He was. I took him out, and was going to force him to dance, sing, and maybe tell a dirty limerick or two when I noticed some empty spaces in the rack. I walked to the trash can.

There they were. Three empty bottles. Little Babies Jackie, Jimmy, another Jackie consumed and discarded. No, make that four. Forgot the tiny little Captain.

I need to explain something here. There are alcoholics in recovery who take the view that they don't want anyone drinking around them ever. I didn't share in that view. If you can drink normally, you not only have a right, but an



absolute duty, to get drunk occasionally for the amusement and vicarious pleasure of people like me who can't. Still, getting drunk for Gail was a relative term. The administration of alcohol to Gail had to be done like administering anesthesia, within a very carefully defined range. Two glasses of wine would usually lead to a blow job in the car. Three would usually lead to her falling asleep in it.

Four was without precedent. I didn't know whether she would collapse, get all giggly, throw up, or carve her initials into someone's flesh.

I decided to find out. Actually, I needed to find out.

I knew where we were meeting; a hot new Cuban restaurant in Old City. I hadn't been there before, but was hoping for the best. Someplace that would cause Philly to recede from view, yielding itself, ever so sophisticatedly, to Old Havana.

That didn't happen. I've never been in Old Havana. I might not know the Buena Vista Social Club from the Yorkville Fire and Hose Club, where my father did some of his best drinking. But I knew theme parks. This was a theme park. Artistically blurred '55 Buicks painted on the walls. A ceiling fan that someone had probably timed to rotate at just the perfect degree of lethargy. Pastel colored walls with paint that had been given a sprinkle of artful cracking and peeling

This place was fucking Hemingway land. And I thought, standing in the doorway, even before some guy wearing a plum colored shirt and matching tie even had the chance to come out from behind his mahogany perch and ask me if I had a reservation, to get out of here just on the strength of the repulsion factor

alone, let alone that I had suddenly thought showing up was a bad idea on the merits.

Then I saw Gail at the bar.

It would not be accurate to say that this was the first time that doing something impulsive and stupid had made my chest tighten, my head feel bereft of all oxygen and my mouth taste like some concoction of zinc and bile. But it was the first time that I thought I could do something about it. I could walk away. I could walk up to her, immediately apologize, and then walk away. Or run away. I didn't have to make things worse.

But she could. Wearing the black dress, and the black high heels that usually accompanied them, she walked over from a wrought iron railing and scarily unsteady looking potted palm trees, pushed--I think literally--past Plum Shirt guy. I noticed that, despite what was almost a swagger, she was a half a notch more unsteady on her feet than the palm trees. Before Mr. Plum could say anything, she said, "He's with me. For now."

I noticed the alcohol had knocked her eyes a little off focus. This was probably a good thing. If the anger I saw there had been any more directed, I would have crapped my pants.

She stood in front of me, wobbling slightly, like there was some hard edge of a breeze only she could feel. She motioned her head in the direction of the bar.

I followed.

“Gail, I just thought....”

“Marty, you remember Jeff, right? He decided to show up tonight. Jeff, what a surprise. What a surprise. Jeff. My, my, my.....Jeff, this is Bella.” Marty, I knew from an earlier description. My height, about 6’1” or so, and sort of similar to me in appearance if I were about five years younger, didn’t think a goatee was an affectation and in more than a bit better shape. With him was a woman about 30, about 5’11”, dark, dark eyes, and long, thick wavy hair that could devour entire rooms.

Okay, he’s got a girlfriend. On the she’s not cheating on me side of the ledger, score one.

“Do you want anything?” I asked her

“Rum,” she said.

“Rum and Coke?”

“Rum and Rum. And why are you asking me if I want anything? Exactly how the hell were you going to pay for it? Or did you take my credit card, too?”

“Gail, please...”

“Jeff, I’m drunk. I’m planning on getting even more drunk. Watch. Learn.” And with that she had a snifter of something that smelled rich and wonderful, followed by two very quick shots of Wild Turkey.

“Maybe you’d like to have some of my old favorite Jack Daniels and be totally passive aggressive about it,” I said.

“Fuck you. And that’s not a bad idea. And fuck you. Excuse me,” she motioned to the bartender, “I’m not done getting hammered yet.”

Almost immediately we got the signal a space was available and we were led past some spaghetti-strap wearing beautiful people to our table, which was next to one more artistically blurry picture of a 1950’s car. Not that it needed to be blurry for Gail at this point. I suspect pretty much everything she was looking at was blurry. Except for her hating me, which was clear. Gail flagged down a waiter wearing a green and gold guayabera shirt--what else did I think he’d be wearing--for a wine list even before getting a menu. When he approached with both list and menu, Gail flopped the menu on the table, flipped open the list, and asked him if he had any recommendations.

“Well,” the waiter said, "what were you thinking of ordering foodwise?”

“I don’t know,” Gail said. “What kind of wine goes best with rage?”

“So,” Marty said as we all started nibbling on the greasiest, worst plantains I’d ever had the misfortune to eat, “how are you doing?”

Me? Was that directed at me? I figured Gail told you all about on the ride over from the hotel to my personal little crime scene.

“I’m alright,” I said. “A little shaken up, but The Man can’t keep me down.” I raised my fist not all the way up, just bending my elbow on the table to display it. “Fight the power.”

“You know, Bella is quite the accomplished criminal defense lawyer. You

might want to talk to her. I mean, I'm sure you know a few attorneys back in Lancaster, but Bella's really quite good. Aren't you, Bella," Marty said as he looked at his girlfriend and suddenly realized it might be a good idea to switch from third person to first. "I mean, maybe I shouldn't be talking about this, but I wanted to help. Gail is so worried, you know. I know her. I can tell."

I looked at Gail when he said that. Leaving aside how Marty could know Gail that well--could he, could he actually know her that well, or was he just smarmily full of shit--the look I saw on Gail's face had more to do with angry intoxication than worry. I had never seen Gail as a mean drunk, but picking out the various degrees of drunken emoting is something I do pretty well.

I decided Bella might be a lot nicer to look at this evening, and since Marty had provided a conversation opening, I took it.

"Where do you practice?"

"Here and West Chester. Shannon, Brenner and Sandusky. Know them?"

My old firm. Jesus Fucking Coincidence Christ.

"Know them? Used to work for them. Mark was my boss, my...." I shouldn't say sponsor, I suppose. Anonymity and all. Don't know what she knows, though most everyone in the Delaware Valley that did anything in the criminal justice system knew about the rise, fall and rise again of Mark Shannon.

I then saw a look on Bella's face. And that look I know as well as the seething drunk look on Gail's. It was disgust.

“Ohhhh...you’re *that* Jeff. Yeah.”

Yeah. Indeed.

“Yup. He’s *that* Jeff. Always, he’s that Jeff,” Gail slurred, pouring more wine into the glass she’d just emptied. “That Jeff. I’m thinking sitcom titles. How about “That’s Jeff.” It’s a good working title. Or ‘That Drunken Asshole Jeff.’ That could be the HBO version.”

Bella started to cringe. Marty was trying to look all wise and understanding.

I wanted to get out of there. Apparently I wasn’t the only one. Bella started to get up, “Maybe I should let you two just talk,” she said with a serrated edge to her voice I hadn’t heard yet, but stupidly thought I might be able to mellow.

“Maybe I should do the same,” I said, just as the food started to show up. I reached into my pocket to throw a few dollars on the table for the meal I was in no mood to eat. “I’ll go. I’ll walk home. You all talk behind my back. Bella, I’ll walk you back to the hotel.”

“I don’t need your back to talk trash to,” Gail said. Piling on top of her words, Bella added, “No, you don’t have to walk me back.”

“Really, I’m happy to do it.”

“Don’t.” And she headed out the door at such a brisk pace that catching up to her would pretty much have involved a running tackle.

It was around midnight when Gail got back to the hotel. By that time I was lying in bed, reading her course materials for lack of anything better to do. She took off her clothes, put on a t-shirt, crawled into bed, and shut the light off. I walked over to the mini-bar, opening it again. The bottles, minus Jimmy, Jackie, and their traveling companions, were still all there. I ran my fingers over them again, closed the door, grabbed a pillow from the bed and opted to sleep on the love seat. As my head slammed against the pillow, I thought to my self, with a feeling amplified by the tiniest light cracking through a windowpane sense of triumph, that I hadn't had a drink so far this weekend.

Of course, it was only Friday. Barely Friday.

## January, 2001

There's a Philadelphia Daily News on a green table in one of the prison TV rooms, and I'm trying to focus on the Eagles-Tampa Bay playoff coverage. Rudy isn't. He's across the table from me, carrying his thick file of legal papers in a manila file that ceased to look particularly manila colored quite some time ago, and is now a nice, crumbled gray. I've never actually seen Rudy look at the file. I'm not completely sure he even knows how to read. But he seems to have some understanding that what he's carting around has something to do with his freedom, or its absence. I've never looked at the file. He's never asked me to. And I think I'd know if he was by the tone of how he enunciated his numerals. You hang with a guy who speaks in numbers and grunts long enough, you start to develop a weird subset of communication skills.

He sits down next to me, and plops the file in front of him. I notice the crumpled blue legal size papers that stick out of the letter size file, curling over so the two horse silhouettes that are on the Pennsylvania Coat of Arms insignia are only partially visible.

Rudy smiles at me, and I pass him the Daily News. We do this. He looks at pictures. He flips through the pages. Sometimes we'll watch television together, and he'll yell out a single digit number if something seems to catch his eye. I know by now that those are special.

While he's looking at a big picture of Donovan McNabb, I start looking at



his file. I knew Rudy was here before I was incarcerated, but I want to find out exactly how long. I already have an idea from other inmates, but I need to know for sure. I memorize some docket numbers, then slide the file back to him.

“Rudy, I’m going to lie down for a while. I gotta calm down, I’m nervous.”

“22?” He’s upset.

“Everything’s cool. Really.”

“22? 22?”

“Really. It’s okay.” I walk over to our cell and write out docket numbers on some of my own legal stuff, then lie down on my bunk.

I really don’t want to talk to anyone until I get out of here. And I’m not sure I want to talk to anyone even then.

I close my eyes and try to empty my head of all thoughts. It doesn’t work. It never works.

The first to poke through is of Dad. Dad in jail, the second DUI. The one time I went to see him, right before he got out. Right before the fall down the stairs. Right before the last, the really last time I saw him.

It’s not quite true I get rid of that thought. More like it gets crowded out, that my demons are such huge, fat-assed monsters that there’s only room for one of them at a time. Because then I see a bottle. *The* bottle. No sound. No arms. No legs. No dancing and soundtrack. Just the bottle. Taped up with duct tape, then

shattering into slivers and shards. There's not even the sound of shattering. Just the unraveling of itself.

I open my eyes. I'm still here

## Friday

Horrible time falling asleep. At the many rehabs I've attended, they talk about the reasons for this; the rebound effect of needing to sleep but finding it hard to do so. There are actual biochemical reasons for this. All I know is it was happening to me. Again. Maybe that was it. Or maybe I just found it hard to sleep next to Gail, afraid to so much as brush up against her. Not that I wanted to do that for any sort of sexual reason. Fear, at least fear of the gnawing, twisting, dull Throbbing variety tends not to put me in the mood for fucking.

I got up and sat in a chair facing Gail's side of the bed. I watched her. She had drunk herself to sleep, availing herself of the very mode of blotting out the universe that was denied me. Which meant, at least, that she'd be out for a while, and my pacing and/or tossing and turning wouldn't disturb her.

Which also meant I could just leave, and she'd never notice I was gone.

It was a little before 1 a.m. The bars of Manayunk were going to be closing soon, but the places along the Delaware might still be hopping.

No, not tonight.

I hurled my body back into bed. I lay awake for that time that always seems like hours, but might be less than that. And amazingly, sleep came. With its usual price.

I mentioned that I can't easily fall asleep when I try to quit drinking and drugging. The other thing that happens is that when I do fall asleep, my dreams

are weird. Really, really weird. I like to discuss them with whatever therapist I'm seeing at the time, because they fascinate and entertain me, and entertainment is the primary reason I generally talk about anything.

The dream started out being one of those dreams where it looks like the real place in which you're sleeping. Boring and disorienting if you wake up for real at the tail end of one of those scenes. I woke up--in the dream, not reality--and couldn't get back to sleep. So I walked over to the mini bar, unlocked it, and out came a conga line of mini-bottles. The mini vodka bottle--I think he had a name, either Midgie or possibly Steve, I think I remembered him being referred to as both--was the lead bottle.

Anyway, Steve, which I'll stick with because it sounds marginally less stupid, was waving his arms in the air going "cha cha cha cha cha *cha*, cha cha cha cha cha *cha*" over and over again. In one hand he held the crumpled Toblerone wrapper. Behind him were all the other bottles, dancing in step, cha cha cha-ing behind. I was still in my hotel room, but it suddenly looked larger and more festive, or at least like a middle school dance committee trying to make a middle school gym look festive in a pseudo Mexican sort of way. And behind the bottles are people. Lots of people. Most I didn't recognize. Others I did. Like Susanna Webber, whose breasts I tried to squeeze at my first dance at Lengel Middle School in Pottsville. I got a whole lot farther with her after I'd plied her with cherry vodka. And Aviva, wearing a *tallis*, a prayer shawl, with nothing else

underneath, except I couldn't distinguish any actual body parts. And I was looking really hard, because she always had great body parts. And Sharon, who I met at an AA meeting in Paoli. I'd stopped by after a hearing before a district justice out on the Main Line. She was only sober two months. I was sober 10 months. They say you should wait a minimum of six months before starting a relationship in recovery. I told her that, between the two of us, that averaged out to six months, so it was okay.

I continued to scan the line, looking for more women I recognize. I didn't see Gail.

I stood a few feet away from the line, when Steve reached out a hand--or what could have been a hand--attached to what would have been an arm, if it hadn't been attached to a bottle. The hand then tried to yank me into the conga line.

"Party, Jeff. Come on, Jeff. Get down."

I fought him. I felt a hand that wasn't a hand attached to an arm that wasn't an arm pulling my hand away from my arm. My arm disconnected from my body.

And then the dancing stopped. The bottles are gone. And I was no longer in the Junior High School gym with Susanna Webber's breasts, but somewhere else. Specifically, I was in my car. My Miata. It was all mangled from the run in with the cornfield, but I was still able to drive it. And I was driving at night down

what looked like an interstate, except it was higher than any actual overpass would be, and I whipped past signs, billboards of beer cans and liquor bottles, even an advertisement for Xanax. And then I saw this building, which I knew was the main administration building of where I last went to rehab, and somehow I knew that the road was heading right at the building's side entrance and I wasn't going to be able to stop my car, and I wondered to myself if I was going to crash or just plow through the entrance, or maybe even the wall.

And then I was inside the building.

The car was gone. I wasn't in the administration building anymore, but the assembly hall across the courtyard. About two dozen chairs were arranged in a semi-circle, but I was the only one there. But not for long. Steve was back. I couldn't see him, or it, but I knew he was there, maybe six chairs to my left. I heard a voice. Steve's voice.

"So, do you know why you're here," Steve asks me.

"No."

"Do you know why you're here?"

"Yes."

"Do you know why you're here?"

"I don't know."

"Are you just going to keep guessing the answers you think I want to hear?"

“Pretty much.”

“Stop guessing,” Steve said. “Just look around. What do you see?”

Nothing. Nothing but a bunch of chairs and a goddamn talking liquor bottle.

“What do you see, Jeff?”

Then he laughed. Then I woke up.

When I met Gail, I was clean and sober. I let her know that. Frequently. At least six times on the first date. Partly because in a relatively small county bar association like ours, reputations cling like shit on shoes, and she would have asked soon enough. Partly because I wanted her to know I was sincere, which I was. I always am. And partly because I figured anyone who would go out with me knowing who I was had to be turned on by who I was or they wouldn't be going out with me in the first place. By definition, she had to get all wet at the thought of me being open and vulnerable and damaged. By the first date--hell, before the first actual date, by the first meet for coffee date--I played out the scene I just knew she'd have at the next Women Lawyer's lunch explaining that “he's really not as bad as you might think.”

Except I was.

I didn't want to look at the digital clock to find out the time. From lots of experience, I knew I'd gotten all the sleep I was going to get that night.

Did I mention that I was sober when I met Gail?

For three months. I had broken up with Aviva...oh, alright, Aviva had thrown me out of everything it was possible to throw me out of...right before went into rehab for the third try. And when I came out of Green Glen, full of grim determination to stay chemical-free, and Aviva didn't come running to me like two troubled parents on an ABC afterschool special and tell me "I know you have a drinking problem, Jeff, but we'll beat it together," well, I found Gail.

But then, I didn't just *find* Gail I scrambled, looking for her, or someone I could or someone I could cast in the part. I went looking for her the way I'd go rummaging under seat cushions hoping to scrounge enough extra quarters and dimes so I could buy a cheap, awful bottle of vodka that night.

Which was one more memory I didn't want to think about, either.

I missed Gail. She was there, but I missed her. She was in bed, she was right here, but I missed her. Tossing fitfully, she stepped up to semi-consciousness, the booze wearing off and her body adjusting accordingly. She turned over, facing the nightstand. I saw her stir, and walked over from the sofa to the bed. I watched her. I watched her pull the blankets back. I watch as she wrestled with the blankets, as her semi-drugged body caused her t-shirt to expose an ass cheek and a swatch of pubic hair. She looked up. She saw me peering over the bed.

"What," she said.



“Nothing, I was just watching you.”

“Do you want to come in?” She looked at me, asking a question that suggests that for a moment, a quick, barely perceptible moment, she forgot why she’d bludgeoned her brain into stupor in the first place. Then I saw her remember. The remembering slashed the softness away. But she had said what she said, and she couldn’t take it back, at least not with words.

That’s what I meant to say when I said that I missed her. In that moment between her forgetting and her remembering, I missed her. And then things shifted to present tense. Again.

Anyway, she had the offer hanging out there that she hadn’t officially retracted, and I was left with accepting or rejecting it and dealing with the consequences either way. I thought of Professor Markley, in Contracts my first year of law school. I could momentarily hear him, as he’d wave his dark, thick glasses with only one hand in the air, pointing to some hapless meat and interrogating him about offer and acceptance.

“Okay,” I said, and climbed into bed. She said nothing, emitted no protest, just turned away from me, her t-shirt now crumpled near her stomach and completely exposing her. She went to sleep almost immediately.

I never did get the answers to offer and acceptance right. Not in Markley’s class, not now.

About 20 minutes after coming into bed, Gail got up to go to the

bathroom, pulling down the t-shirt as far as it would go. When she closed the door of the bathroom, I flipped onto my back, stared at the ceiling maybe a minute, then decided I didn't want to wait for her to come out.

“Gail”, I yelled, already putting on a Phillies T-shirt and sweatpants, “I’m going for a walk.”

“What time is it,” she mumbled.

“The bars are closed.”

“That’s not what I meant, Jeff,” she said, opening the bathroom door.

But I was already leaving the room when she said it.

It was still dark, but daylight would show up within minutes. I decided to start walking, ambling, really, from Society Hill past Liberty Place on Market Street over to Rittenhouse Square, which is sort of near a church I had some interest in visiting. It’s not a terribly long walk; maybe a mile and a half, tops. But I was in no shape to walk it. And not just emotional shape. I was in no physical shape to walk anywhere. I’m about 6’1”’, and when things are going good, I weigh about 180. But, suffice to say, things are not going good. I’ve fattened up to about 210. Or so. “So” being defined as 225.

This, by the way, is not the normal pattern with alcoholics. Lots of drunks could give a shit about eating in the middle of their addiction. When I’m doing coke, as well, I’m like that too. My weight goes down, down, down to the point where people who don’t know me well enough to assume that I’m on the Bolivian

happy dust again and write me the fuck out of their lives *yet another goddamn time* assume I've contracted something hideous and hand me vitamin supplements and AZT on the street. But my last few relapses haven't even involved coke. That was never more than a sideshow with me, anyway. Just alcohol, my lovely liquid mistress. And when I'm romancing that little bitch goddess, I usually do so with lots of food as well. Foods that Gail doesn't like, so I can have them all to myself.

“Oh, that's right; you don't like anchovies on your pizza. Sorry, I can just pick them off...what, it's still too salty? Oh, my, I guess it would be salty. My bad.”

“Damn, I forgot that Kung Pao chicken has peanuts in it and when you eat nuts you turn into the Stay Puffed Marshmallow Man. Here, here, I can pick them out...oh, there's still some residue? Shit, I'm sorry.”

The point is, I didn't want to be walking. I wanted to be driving. Driving far, far away. Not walking in Philly. Not even driving back to Lancaster. I wanted to be somewhere else, somewhere that speed and machines could carry me, and somewhere that was safe and unsullied.

There is, of course, nowhere like the second part of that wish. Not really. But at least I could have gone home, maybe. Home being where I grew up. Pottsville. The coal regions, up north of here. I could revisit things, smells, and sensations. The feel of tagging along with my dad and his friends at the fire and hose company, mixing with them as they sucked back cheap, good Yuengling

beer. The muscle memory of taking some girl who hadn't yet figured out the deadened, mined-out landscape she inhabited wasn't just physical, but emotional, as well, out to some abandoned stripping hole and fuck her there.

Alcohol, women, adolescence. There may have been a leitmotif to all these things, but it eluded me.

But these were unproductive thoughts. Impotent, depressing thoughts, for someone sentenced to Living One Shitty Day At A Fucking Time. So that's what I did. And since as how I was currently Living In The Moment, the best way to do that was by walking up Chestnut Street in full loser battle gear. Starting at my nice little touristy Society Hill perch--the part of Philly where, on a nice spring day, on a weekend afternoon, if you're not totally jaded, you can still sort of catch Ben Franklin in the breeze, I kept walking, as the city changed, imperceptibly, and history yielded to the small storefronts and jewelry stores near 8th and Sansom. Then further along, closer to where I was going, 12th, 13th Streets and up, as the buildings got taller--but not really tall, because this is Philadelphia we're talking about, and the clothing displays in the windows became more fashionable and trendy--but not too trendy, because this is Philadelphia we're talking about. Then further, a few blocks further near 17th Street, Liberty Place, the tallest building in Philly, its ziggurat-like crown punching through the skyline. And, in its shadow, Rittenhouse Square, which is a park, of sorts. More like a little green island, surrounded by money. Subdued money. Quiet, dignified

money. The kind of place, and the kind of money, that looms large in the Philadelphia psyche. Which, as I said earlier, was near a church.

No, this is not about religion. Trust me. No Higher Power nonsense spoke here. But churches are where AA meetings are usually held. And this church had one. Actually, The First mumble mumble church, located on 17th and mumble, mumble street--had lots of 12-step meetings. I don't normally like to give locations of meetings, since I still had respect for the 12-step traditions of anonymity and such. My own personal tradition towards recovery usually consists of honoring it in the breach, particularly the parts involving, like, well, staying clean and sober. But anonymity, I respect that one. Not the anonymity of girlfriends. There are no written traditions for that. But meetings; that's different. And the First mumble mumble Church was, for a powerful and way too brief period of my life, a place that was important to me, so I give it that respect. It's old and historic, with lots of worn over plaques honoring long ago patriots and preachers, to be sure, but, hell, every semi-public in and around Rittenhouse Square could say that; if you're not historic in that part of town, you're not trying very hard.

What was important about this place to me was what went on inside.

When I lived in Philly, before I moved back to Lancaster, before I met Gail, before Aviva left me, really left me for good, this was a place I'd come to all the time. There was a meeting almost every day, sometimes twice a day, of some

12-step group or another. AA, NA, Alanon, SLAA (that's Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, and yes, yes, I picked up women there and shut the fuck up about it), and, most of all, there was my favorite meeting of all, the Delaware Valley Lawyers in Recovery meeting. Thursday evening, between 50 and 75 lawyers from Philly and South Jersey would show up. Some still had licenses to practice law. Some even had clients. I had them, too. Some had all those things and more. Of course, those that had them had fought hard to get them back or keep them, and weren't trying to shovel them away with both hands. And, as an added bonus, that meeting didn't relegate us to Squatter's Row, the place near the boiler room next to where all the leftovers from the bake sale are kept. The meetings were held in a room with artwork, and upholstered chairs, and tables that actually had visible, randomly irregular woodgrains in them and everything. Lawyers insist on that kind of stuff. Even fucked-up lawyers. They may have no more clients, but they still want to be in rooms where it looks like a deposition could theoretically take place.

But the first meeting, if I recalled correctly, would not be till later this morning. And I had a good two plus hours to kill.

And speaking of killing, eventually, Gail was going to wake up. Her head would be thumping, her mouth would feel as if furry woodland creatures had spent the night in it, and she was still going to be pissed at me.

I sat down on a bench in the square. Dawn had arrived. Pigeons pecked

away at whatever pigeons peck at. The city was beginning to take on its workday shapes and noises.

I should have showered before I took this walk. I should have shaved. I should have worn something that didn't look quite so much like the universe and I, in equal measure, had given up on each other.

Mark Shannon, my old sponsor/boss used to tell me that there will eventually come a point in your life when you do something really stupid to somebody else and realize you can't possibly blame it on anyone other than yourself.

He spent about 5 years waiting for me to reach that point. Then he fired me. With love.

Then I fired him as my sponsor. Which clearly demonstrated I had not yet reached the point of enlightenment he was referring to.

I began to hyperventilate. I sat there on the bench, trying to remember how to breathe. I suddenly envied the pigeons at my feet. They didn't seem to have any trouble remembering how to peck at the ground. I looked up at the skyline again.

This was awful. Really, really awful. I can't say it was the worst I've ever felt, since I've been feeling bad for most of my life. But it was bad. Bad enough that I had to do something about it. Bad enough that I honestly didn't think I could wait for that meeting to start.

Bad enough to call Mark.

I walked over to a diner a few blocks from Rittenhouse Square, ordered a cup of coffee, and, as I waited for the waitress to bring it, let my head fully slump into my hands as I called a number in Chestnut Hill I hadn't called in way too many years.

Ring.

Ring.

Ring.

C'mon, Mark, answer the fucking phone. It's not that early.

Ring.

"Hello. Who is it?"

I heard Mark's raspy, itchin'-for-a-fight voice, only slightly softened by the early hours, gasped, and almost hung up in a reflexive act of cowardice.

"Who is it?"

"Me."

Silence.

"It's me, Mark. Jeff..."

"I know who the fuck it is. I'm just trying to figure out what steaming mountain of shit you jumped into that would get you to call me."

"I should have called you a long time ago, Mark."

"What'd you fuckin' do now, Jeff?"



“It's bad.”

“Where are you? You still out in horse and fucking buggy land, representing Amish drug dealers or some shit.”

“I'm in Center City. With my girlfriend.”

“The rabbi?”

“No, she's not a rabbi. She was going to rabbinical school, but not now; she works for Chester County Children and Youth. But not her. I broke up with Aviva.” Stop babbling to him and get to it. “Someone else.”

“So you found yourself another willing victim? She got nice tits, too?”

“Well, she...well, yeah, she does. Look, she's the reason I'm calling. I need you, Mark. I fucked up.”

“Tell me.” He was fully awake, and the guard in his voice was now fully engaged and operational.

“I don't...I don't know where to begin.” And I didn't, either.

“Begin anywhere. I'll piece it together.”

“I did something stupid to myself, and something shitty to my girlfriend.”

“Define ‘shitty.’”

“I got her in trouble.”

“Now, that's a charming euphemism I haven't heard for a while. I would have expected you to say something like ‘knocked her up,’ at least. Even at St. Anthony's in Mahanoy City we were more direct than that...”

“No, no.” I laughed. “No, not that trouble. Legal trouble. I got her cited by the Philly cops for letting me drive under suspension.”

Pause. I could almost hear the gears inside his head shifting into lawyer mode.

“And how did *you* get your driver’s license suspended,” he asked.

“DUI.”

Pause. “Which meant you got cited, too.”

“Yup.”

“Where are you now, Jeff?” His guard ratcheted down a tiny bit, just enough to let through a little bit of something. Not quite hope yet. Not quite light, either. But something.

“16th and Market. I was going to go to a meeting this morning.”

“At the church?”

“Yeah.”

“Then go. Go to that meeting. I’ve got to be in Coatesville this morning for a preliminary hearing. I’ll be in the West Chester office most of the day. Do you have a way to get here?”

“I’ll find a way.”

“A way that doesn't involve driving? Do not fucking piss me off...”

“No. No driving. ‘I’ll get here.”

Pause. “You sure? I can get out there, but it won’t be till later this

afternoon.”

“I’ll get there. I’ll call you first.”

“I’ll be here.”

“Mark, thank you.”

“Don’t thank me for anything yet. You may still be totally fucked.”

“I mean, thank you for...”

“Did I just say don’t piss me off? Just get here.”

I thought, just for a second, about casually mentioning I knew his associate Bella and asking about her dating preferences, but thought better of it. As I ended the phone call, I noticed I was getting a “when the hell are you going to leave” look from the waitress, but I didn’t care. I had passed the point where looks could make me feel bad. Still, I was glad when enough time had elapsed that I could leave for the meeting.

I walked inside the church. Past the bulletin board announcing the sales and Sunday school stuff and some singles thing. Down the hall, past about a dozen kid-drawn pictures of God’s grace in crayon and construction paper. Past a map of “The Holy Land,” circa way long ago, which looked about as loaded with unpleasantness as a map of the same turf in the here-and-now. Down a corridor of articles about Christian stewardship. Into a room. A smallish room. Not the really cool room with stained glass where the lawyers meeting is held. A conference room with stained carpet. A long table with the fiberboard flaking off.

Now that's more like it. Pedestrian AA surroundings. Even in a beautiful old building like this. Gotta love it.

It was a few minutes before the meeting started. About 25 people sat around or stood, milling about. Most had brought in coffee, even though regular and decaf was brewing. Better the safety, not to mention cachet, of the known Starbucks rather than trust the guy in charge of the ancient, smeared coffeepot.

But hey, I like to live dangerously. Bad AA-brewed coffee is part of the tradition, the whole gestalt.

Besides, I was broke.

Anyway, it was drinkable coffee. Sort of. More evidence of God's grace you could not hope to find. At least as persuasive as the crayon and construction paper by Janice and Seth and Brittany.

I sat down at the farthest end of the table from the guy who was chairing the meeting, but not at the head of the table. Chairs and people shuffled. Coffee cups were being stationed just so.

And we're off.

"Welcome to the Friday Morning Rittenhouse Group. My name is Marlene, and I'm a..."

Yeah, yeah, yeah. You're an alcoholic. Or a grateful recovering alcoholic. Or a cross-addicted alcoholic. Or something.

Marlene is early 30's, about 5'7", thin, jet-black hair that probably would

be near shoulder length if not pulled back and up. A face just a touch too angular to be really pretty, but still not bad. Gray Old Navy T-shirt, khaki pants. And those damn black rimmed ridiculously narrow glasses that women have been wearing ever since Lisa Loeb did it and I still have no idea why.

“...and I’m a grateful recovering alcoholic.”

Now, that doesn’t go with the look. Not that phrase, not at all. The ones who say that, that say they are ‘grateful recovering alcoholics,’ as opposed to merely alcoholics, usually have a different look. A look characterized by, say, tattoos. Or less teeth. Or at least a lot more weight.

She’s hiding something. Trying to convince us. Trying too hard. Trying to get us all to look past the fact that she’s *obviously a professional type at an AA meeting in Downtown Philadelphia at what would be the start of the workday and is obviously, dressed like she is, not working.*

Things weren’t going well for Marlene.

First raw, instinctual thought--I might be able to fuck her.

Second thought--I knew her from somewhere. But I didn’t know where.

Third thought--did the second thought somehow utterly preclude the first thought, in a way that my dissheveled id had yet to sort out?

I filed all three thoughts away, and as Marlene is going through the preliminaries, I took the measure of the room. About 25 people in all. Mixed crowd. Many of the women here were, unlike Marlene, dressed like they would

be going to the office at the end of the hours. A few of the guys, too. That was maybe half. The rest...they could be going anywhere. Or nowhere.

Or, like me, running away from somewhere.

Marlene snapped me back to the present.

“Do we have any visitors? Or anyone in their first 30 days of sobriety?”

This was me, arguably, on both counts, since I hadn't been to this meeting for a long while. At first, I wasn't going to say anything. Anything at all. But how could I possibly even hope to sleep with the woman if I didn't at least get her to notice me?

“Hi, my name is Jeff, and I'm here on a convention from Lancaster.”

Everyone now...

“HI JEFF! WELCOME!”

Yes, I know. Way less than 30 days sober. I didn't mention it. Picky, picky, picky.

“I used to come here a lot, before I moved. It's good to be back.”

I sat down.

I didn't plan on saying anything else the rest of the meeting.

I was just going to sit there.

And listen.

Or not.

So, I sipped my coffee, and sat back, and began listening. Dani, late 30's,

black pants and white short-sleeved blouse, stressed out, teenager a mess, job stinks, husband worthless, everything sucks, sucks, sucks and she needs her higher power, which she calls God, or Steve, or....

“Hi, Jeff. Whazzup?”

Steve. Steve has sidled up next to me.

We are not doing this. Whatever sleep deprived part of my brain is doing this, we are not doing this.

“Jeff, care to share?” Steve’s face--if I can call something that looks like a bottle of vodka grown to about 6’2’’as having a face--is looking right at me, smirking.

This is not good. Visual and auditory hallucinations sober is not good. If I concentrate, focus, maybe I can get back to...

“...so, I asked my husband, just take Sandy to the dentist, just this once, you’re home, you’re on layoff, you could do it, but he won’t, he says ‘Dani, don’t order me, don’t order me around, and it’s so hard...’”

Okay, Steve you win. If it’s you or whiny bitch Dani, you win.

“You always put things in terms of winning, Jeff. Why? And what makes you think that I’ve won anything? You think you’re such a prize? It’s not like I’m interested in sleeping with you, you know?”

Why don’t you ask me what is the sound of one bottle clapping? Why don’t you just call me grasshopper or something?

“Jeff, Jeff, Jeff. Why would you choose to listen to me over Dani?  
Thought you didn’t like me?”

Jesus, I can’t win with you. Listen to her. What’s she been going on for,  
now, seven, eight minutes? Don’t they have a fucking gong at this meeting? A  
vaudeville hook? A trap door, maybe?

“You got something better to add?”

That’s not the point. She’s monopolizing things. She’s boring. She’s  
insipid.

“She’s struggling. Same as you.”

She’s not the same as me. She’s not in the least bit funny.

“Well, she hasn’t managed to get her husband busted in Fairmount Park; if  
that’s what you mean by not being funny.”

Cheap shot. And besides, that wasn’t funny.

“Actually, it was pretty funny. It just didn’t amuse you.”

And you’re the expert on what is funny?

“That, and more importantly, what isn’t. But, hey, if this is boring you,  
why don’t you check out who’s speaking. I think Dani’s just about done. There’s  
a kid speaking now, maybe you didn’t notice. About 20. A beanpole. Bad skin.  
That LeClair jersey’s practically hanging off his body. It’s amazing. The quality  
of crack these days is really getting so much better, don’t you agree?”

That wasn’t funny, either.



“Did I say it was?”

I’m not playing this with you. I don’t have to.

“Fine. I’m done.. For now. Go on. You can go back to checking out Marlene. Much more productive use of your time. Gail’s like, so over. And I don’t think Marlene’s wearing a bra.”

And I was back. Back with the kid with the Flyers jersey, and Dani’s kids and worthless husband, and everyone else. And Marlene, who said nothing about her life, but who left me wanting to know more, just by her reticence and the nipples poking from her Old Navy shirt.

I sat there for at least another half hour. I pretended to listen. I tried to manufacture facial expressions that would suggest to the others in the room that I cared. It kept me going, through the end of the meeting, through everyone gathering in a circle and holding their hands at meeting’s end, end, through the moment of silence, through the Serenity and Lord’s Prayer, through all the drunks and addicts letting go of each other’s hands and leaving to face whatever it was they had to face that day. As for me, I had some time before I went to see Mark. Time for a little post-meeting coffee, and the Mystery that was Marlene.

But first, something else. Cell phone. Voice mail.

“Hi, it’s me. I just came from a meeting. I’m going to see Marcus this afternoon. He thinks he can help. I’m going to get this straightened out. I’ll call you. Don’t worry, Gail, I’m okay. Love you. Jeff.”

Let me replay that scene. Before it starts to sound all warm and fuzzy.

I started out by mulling around the room after the meeting ended. I tossed my coffee cup in the waste can while, not too far away from me; Marlene was running a gauntlet of hugs from about five different women. An obstacle course of heartfelt affection. I stood by the glazed donuts, hoping to wait out the hug express, when she walked up to me and introduced herself. I shook her hand and told her to give me a minute. Then I pulled out my phone and told her I had a client to speak to. As I began walking away from her—actually pacing the pace of the self-important—Marlene would have, at most, been able to hear the following:”

“Hi, it’s me. I’m okay. I just came from a meeting. I’m going to see Marmfffff...”

I paced back, phone still in hand, still talking after "Love you. Jeff", but she probably wouldn't have heard that. Hopefully she heard me say, to a silent phone. She probably heard me say “Don’t worry, it’s all taken care of. Call my office if you have any questions.”

I just wanted to be honest. Recovery is about being honest.

I took another look at Marlene. I tried to focus in on that earlier feeling that I knew her from somewhere. It had to potential to make me crazy if I didn't answer it. Maybe she wasn't anyone I knew at all. Or maybe....

“You clean up well, you know,” I said to her.

“What?”

“You. On TV. I’ve been trying to figure out where I knew you. And now I know.”

She threw her head back and laughed. A short, staccato burst of laughter and an open, warm smile. “Oh, god, that! It’s so...so thrilling to be recognized at an AA meeting. Especially as the woman who wouldn’t eat the sheep entrails. I figured that’s why you were looking at me throughout the meeting.”

Marlene Kurtzman---remember, I don’t respect the anonymity of girlfriends, or even potential dates---is a television personality, of the loose, ill-defined, post-modernistic sort. For those that have lives, jobs, and successful relationships, and that who aren’t forced to watch as much TV as I do because I lack all the above, you may be unaware of Marlene’s stint on a television reality show, a show I won’t name because they, unlike girlfriends, or even potential dates, might sue me.

The show drops you in a remote location and leaves you there. The contestants vote each other off, and the last one standing gets money and gets to extend their fifteen minutes to maybe three, even four days. Perhaps I subconsciously knew that over an hour ago. Perhaps I just wanted to get to know her nipples. Perhaps...

“I hope I wasn’t rude,” I told her.

“Websites that rate how hot I am are rude. Especially when they rate me

lower than the bitch who won. You're not rude."

*You can only be thinking that because you don't know me yet.* "What do those geeks possibly know?"

"Well, they unfortunately know that the bitch who won actually was hotter than me. But that's old news. It's hell when your 15 minutes comes up a good 10 minutes short. But enough about my run as a B-list celebrity. So, you're from Lancaster, huh. Out with the Amish?"

"Not many Amish where I live. Just a townhouse in the city."

"Hmmm."

"What's that 'hmmm' about?"

"That 'hmmm' is shorthand for 'do you have any place to go?'

Jeff, right? How exciting is that convention, do you have to get back to it?"

Maybe we could get some coffee. Real coffee. Not this 10-W-40 sludge."

This is too easy, I immediately thought. Nobody could possibly be interested in me unless they were really, really fucked up in the kinds of ways that get you an entry in the DSM-IV Diagnostic Manual of Psychiatric Disorders all by yourself.

Entry all by yourself.

I liked it.

"As long as there are no sheep entrails involved," I said.

“I’m no longer contractually obligated to attempt to eat them anymore. You won’t have to witness any body parts you don’t want to, I promise.”

Marlene and I walked over to a diner a few blocks away, the same one near where I’d made my call to Mark what seemed like a long time ago, when the world seemed pointedly less full of possibilities. It was about 9:30 in the morning. Plenty of worker bees scurrying outside, but not us. Not Marlene and I. Barflies without a bar, hanging out.

“Tell me about the show,” I said.

“No. Not yet. You’ve already seen me bitching about my cramps, getting boozing, festering sores on my legs and fantasizing about being tied up and spanked on coast to coast TV, not to mention dozens of websites posted by the horny and the hopeless. You first.”

“Me first? Well, that’s no fun.”

“Well, if you’re not going to tell me about you first, I’m just going to have to make up my own little story about your life. Shall I do that, or will you tell me?”

“Please. Make up the story. It’s got to be better than my real existence.”

“See,” she said, picking at her eggs, “that’s a clue in itself.” “You want me to make up something. You want me to make your life interesting. I can do that. I can definitely make your life interesting.”

“Start. Anytime.”

“Your life. You are...what do you do exactly? Something professional, you did say you were here on a convention.”

“It doesn’t have to be a professional convention. It might be a Star Trek convention.”

“Please. Geeks aren’t drunks. It just isn’t...isn’t done, that’s all.”

“They might smoke dope.”

“You’re no pothead. I’m figuring you for a coke man, myself. But we’re still trying to figure out what you do; your drugs of choice we’ll get to later. Let’s see...conventions, conventions, what kind of conventions would you go to? What kind of conventions would you flout? Either doctor or lawyer. My money’s on lawyer.”

“Why?”

“Sarcasm level. Cynicism factor. A smart-ass quality you see more in lawyers than doctors. And my father’s a lawyer, and you kind of look like him. Did I guess right? Wait, don’t tell me yet.”

“But I’m dying to tell you....”

“Don’t tell me, don’t tell me. Make me work for it. You’re a lawyer.”

“What kind?”

“Not corporate. Not big firm. You aren’t dressed the part; too grungy, even if you were dressing down for a convention. If you were big firm, you’d be in Friday Dress Casual perfect khakis and ever so tasteful denim style button

down shirt. Not that shit your wearing. Sweatpants are definitely *not* big firm.”

“Tell me more.”

“You want to know more about you? You’re solo. No partners. You’ve pissed them all off. Maybe a long suffering secretary who cleans up after you, literally sometimes. Maybe you used to fuck her. Maybe you still do. Maybe she just wishes she could fix you and nurture you enough so you would.”

“What kind of law do I practice?”

“That’s easy. Three choices. Criminal defense, personal injury, divorce. Got to be one of those.”

“If you had to pick....”

“You’re going to make me pick?”

“Why not? You’re shaping everything else in my life.”

“Not yet. But given enough time...”

“What kind of law do I practice? Pick one.”

“What kind of law do you practice,” she said, nibbling the edges of her English muffin. “Personal injury is so, well, ‘The Verdict.’ Too icky. It’s ok to be a bottom feeding divorce lawyer, but a bottom feeding personal injury lawyer? Yuk. That’s not smart-ass, that’s pathetic.”

“So we’re down to two.”

“Yes, I know. I figured that out. Two choices. I’m betting a divorce lawyer who’s in the middle of a divorce. The right touch of irony, the right

deftness of karma.”

“Karma?”

“The best word I could think of, sorry. Too pompous for you? Hey, it works. Anyway, that’s it. Divorce lawyer in the middle of a divorce.”

“Do I have kids?”

“If you’ve got kids, you haven’t seen them in months, and that would make you a total shitheel. So no, you don’t have kids. Well? How’d I do?”

“I’d rather talk about your cramps in the Outback.”

“No, no, no, you do not get to do that yet,” she said, leaning forward towards me. “You tell me first.” She did this playful slapping thing with her right hand crossing over onto mine, just for a second. Not a caress, not a tap. She took her hand back, but she was still leaning forward.

“You are nauseatingly close. I hate you.”

“Yes!” She leaned back, pumped her fists in the air, then leaned forward again. “What did I miss? Tell me what I missed.” The pumping motion made her breasts jiggle.

“Not sure I want to.”

“Why? Afraid I’ll leave? Stick you with the check, which you probably can’t even pay? Don’t worry,” she said, whipping off the Lisa Loeb glasses and resting them on the table, then leaning towards me again and letting a touch of lilt creep into her voice, “I know who you are. You can’t scare me.”



“That’s right. You’ve fought with all measure of icky, crawly things.”

“You are really, really obsessed with that, aren’t you.”

“Just making small talk.”

“Small talk sucks. Unless it’s subtly pushing things forward. Now,” she paused, putting her glasses back on and straightening in her seat, her eyes narrowing almost as much as the frames on the glasses, “Tell me what I missed.”

I told her what she missed. I even told her I was here with a girlfriend. She didn’t ask me about her. Nor did she tell me about any more wild animals or oozing sores. Animals or oozing sores (“Contractual obligation stuff” she said, “I’m only willing to breach a contract with a major network for someone I’ve fucked more than twice.”) She did, however, as we got in her car and drove to her apartment, tell me why she was still living on the corner of 10th and South Streets, as opposed to:

“Why I’m not in L.A., or New York yet. Why I’m not working as a waitress and running to auditions there, as opposed to working as a waitress on South Street and allowing a perfectly good set of menstrual cramps on national television go to waste.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to put it that bluntly...”

“Of course. That’s my job. And I haven’t been letting it go to waste. I’ve been auditioning for stuff here. And writing. I’ve got a play I’m working on myself, actually.”

We got out of the car, and walked half a block to a three story brick building. She opened the door, grabbed the bills from the metal mail box on the wall, and we walked up the narrow stairway to the second floor. We came to the top, turned left, and I walked into her space.

“You sure you want to come in? That seminar’s still going? Won’t, what’s her name...”

“I didn’t tell you her name. Do you want to guess that, too?”

“No, I don’t need to know that. Won’t she wonder where you are?”

I suddenly realized I had absolutely no idea what the answer to that question was. I couldn’t even guess.

My blankness must have registered somewhere; my face, my body language, my not walking into the apartment even though she’d opened the door.

“Look, I’m sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have asked that. Just come on in, please?”

I came in. She poured soda from a large plastic bottle and handed the glass to me. Maybe I asked for it. I don't remember. I must have.

I thought to myself I should not be here. I stayed. I stayed and I sat down on a sofa covered with a red and yellow geometric designed throw cover, all the while thinking I should not be here. I sipped the soda, and forced myself to think about Gail. Even as Marlene talked, even as I watched her, tried to watch her, tried to keep myself focused on things both carnal and light, I forced myself to

think about Gail, and soon I wasn't forcing it.

Where Gail was I knew, actually. Crumpled in my sweat pants pocket, sandwiched between some used tissues that I hadn't removed from the pockets when I did--when Gail did the laundry--was the itinerary for Bankruptalooza. According to that, she was scheduled to be on a panel roundup of recent appellate decisions. It started in ten minutes. At the hotel. Which is where I wasn't.

As to where I was, Marlene had started to notice that I wasn't what people in recovery would say was "being in the moment," and what people not in recovery would say was "not paying attention." Maybe it was the look on my face--blank but horrified--when I took a look at the plastic soda on the coffee table and thought I saw it wearing a name tag that said "Hi, My name is Steve." In any event, she noticed it. And unfortunately, she noticed it while her arm was draped across the sofa in a way that I could have pretended it was being draped around me if I'd been properly paying attention.

"Jeff? You okay?"

Am I okay? A deceptively complex question in need of a deceptively simple answer.

"Sorry. Yeah. I'm just..."

"We don't have to do this. If you're..."

No, I thought. We definitely have to do this. I have to do this. And I wasn't completely sure why. It wasn't about sex, despite my incessant blathering

about her nipples. It was about something more fundamental than that to my emotional well-being. Entertainment. Her entertaining me. And me, apparently, entertaining her. I had my theories why I entertained her, and they didn't necessarily reflect well on me. But I didn't care. It had been a long while since I entertained anybody. And since I knew she entertained me, we had a two-way street of entertainment. And for feeling alive, there are days in which entertainment can kick sex's ass.

I started coming back. I started putting together the strands and strings of her conversation until finally I was paying attention to whole sentences. She was writing a play. A one woman play. She was reading it tonight, for some friends. Maybe it would be produced, maybe it wouldn't. She wanted me to come. I thought about it, hard, even as I could see the soda bottle start to spin around violently, just for a second. Less than a second.

"I'd love to see you tonight, but somehow I think I'd be mucking things up. When is this happening, anyway?"

"Tonight. Around 7. Maybe I'll be done around 9 or so."

"Well, then, I'd like to see you at about 9:01."

"I said 'or so.'"

"9:02. 9:07. I'm flexible."

"What about the nameless one?"

"I'd like to see you at 9:07 tonight. Approximately. Thereabouts."

“And how do we do this? With you not driving, and staying with your nameless....”

“Gail. Her name’s Gail.” I needed to give her a name. She deserved at least that much, if I was going to cheat on her.” And I’ll find a way. Cab, SEPTA bus, whatever. I still have some money, you know.” Actually, I didn’t know for sure until I tried to subtly stick my hands in my pockets to determine that.

I stood up suddenly, maybe a little too suddenly, since I started to feel dizzy.

“Marlene, I think I need to go. And I think I need to see you after you’ve done that reading. I want to know how it went. Will you tell me?”

“Gail, right? We’ve named her, we’ve brought her into the room. Jeff, do you think you should be seeing me at all tonight? Not that I mind all the drama, mind you, but you suddenly seem to.”

“Marlene, it’s just...”

“I thought I had you pegged as someone who wanted a whole smorgasbord of drama. Did I read you wrong?”

“No. I can usually be found at the dessert tray in the drama buffet.” She stood up, asked me if I needed a ride back-I said I didn’t-and she kissed me. On the lips. Lightly. Sweetly, even. “Here’s my cell phone number. If you figure things out, call me. Even if you don’t figure things out, call me.

And I left, but not before I thought I saw the soda bottle hold its little

bottle arms up and make the internationally recognized “loser” sign on its little bottle forehead. I, of course, did need a ride back to the hotel. But I wasn’t about to ask. I can be a stubborn little fuck that way.

Standing on the steps outside Marlene’s apartment, I did a quick geographic assessment. I was maybe a mile away from the hotel. Even as out of shape as I was, and quite depressingly, in some actual pain at having walked as much as I had, I could walk it. Just walk back to the hotel, clean up a bit, and try to figure out whether I should still care about Gail, and if Gail should still care about me. It had the feel of conventional logic to it. And, for once, I didn’t immediately diss conventional logic merely because it was conventional and logical.

And that didn’t even cover the question of how I was going to get to West Chester, where Mark was. Which was, presumably, still part of the whole quest thing that I seemed to be on.

Which is why the real thoughts racing around in my head weren’t about where I was geographically, and sweet fucking hell even I knew that.

I had to make some decisions. Like, who do I call now? Do I call anyone? And what, exactly, did I want to say to them? Did I even want to say anything to anybody?

Mark used to tell me that recovery was about being able to make choices, as opposed to merely cutting losses. Probably he told me that before he cut me as

one of his losses.

But I wanted to talk to him. And not just about him helping Gail. I knew that much, and so did he. I had to assume, just by the fact that he hadn't already blown me off, that he'd decided he'd spent enough of his life talking to me, and that there was nothing more to say except to smile, speak some AA program speak, and kick me to the curb.

Somewhere in the hopeful part of my bowels I didn't think he'd do that. And it was a well-founded belief, because he never had.

I stood outside Marlene's apartment, thinking about Gail, staring at a neighborhood bar across the street that I'd never been in and didn't particularly want to go, but thought about what its interior looked like anyway, just for a second. Then I thought about Aviva.

And yes, it was a stupid thought. But I thought it. And it was my thought, and I wasn't prepared to let go of it. Gail would take me to West Chester. If it didn't work out, I would be only a few miles from Aviva. And then...

I'd think about then, then.

I walked over to a newsstand and picked up a Philadelphia Daily News. Then I went to a little coffeehouse about two blocks from Marlene's apartment, sat down, ordered a dish of hazelnut gelato, which I was suddenly, quirkily, in a powerful mood for, sat down, spread out the sports page in front of me, and felt immensely proud of myself for having fused two rational thoughts into one.

It was suddenly a good day. I felt soothed by the gelato and box scores. It no longer felt like I was humbling myself, but had become a necessary part of drawing her into my whole amends gestalt. Besides, unlike certain precincts in Mt. Airy and Wissahickon, me being on South Street wouldn't automatically set off any ex-girlfriend alarms.

“Gail, hi,” I said to her on the cell phone, noting the battery was starting to get kind of low.

“Where are you now,” she said, with a voice that wasn't quite flat enough to drain all the frustration out of it.

“South Street. 18th and South. A little place called...um, what the hell is this place called...?”

“Why are you there?” Now the voice wasn't flat at all. Little pointy spikes were coming out of the phone. Maybe my being anywhere at all set off alarms now.

“I'm just there. It's just a place to go. I...we need to talk. Can you pick me up?”

“How'd you get there?”

“Walked. I walked.”

“You walked to South Street? I thought you were going to the meeting near Rittenhouse Square?”

“I did go. I just kind of ended up here.”



Gail paused. I could imagine her imagining a big map of the Delaware Valley in her head, plotting how long it would take me to walk from those two locations, then trying to figure out why I'd do that in the first place. I felt like a teenager taking Dad's car out to drive, with Gail checking a mental odometer to see if my stated itinerary matched up.

"Look, I know you're busy...."

"I've got a break in the schedule. Marty Munro wanted to meet me for lunch, but I...I guess I can skip that." She sighed, paused, then continued. "Hell, after last night I'm surprised he'd want to be seen with me anyway. Jeff..."

OK, here it comes. The question that you ask every drunk when they disappear or act weird. C'mon, ask it. Just ask it.

"...are you sober?"

"Yes." C'mon, there's at least two more questions. Ask 'em. Chrissake, ask 'em.

"You aren't high, are you? You didn't go somewhere to score, did you?"

"No." One more question. Just get it out of the way.

"Did you fuck anyone?"

"Jesus, Gail, who the hell do I even know down here? No, I didn't fuck anyone."

There is a term lawyers use when questioning a witness. If an area under cross examination would not normally be allowed to be touched on, but the

witness blurts something out that touches on it anyway, you can question on that otherwise permissible area. “Opening the door” is the term for it.

Gail had just asked a question which called for a yes or no answer, and to which I could have answered “no” truthfully. And I, by my answer, just opened the door to further inquiry. I didn’t actually hold my breath, but I did feel the blood scooting out of everywhere above my neck.

“How do I know who the hell you know anywhere? I’ve lost track. I don’t even want to keep track. Look, why are you there? Just tell me.”

“I’m just here. I just want to go to South Street. I hadn’t been there for a while. I was bored. I was depressed. I missed you.”

“Horseshit. At least to the last part of that.”

“Not horseshit. Definitely not horseshit. I’m just sitting here, eating some gelato, thinking about everything.”

“Did you actually go to the meeting?”

“I did.” Pause. “I called Mark.”

She laughed. “Holy shit. Jeff calls Mark. I’ll be goddamned.”

“I think I already am.”

“Did you talk to Mark about the thing yesterday?”

“Yes. He wants to see us both. He’s at the West Chester office today. I know you’d have to blow off stuff this afternoon...”

“Nothing I can’t get out of. I can’t think clearly, anyway. Does he really

think he can help?”

“He does.”

“How’d it go with him. How’s he doing? How much did you tell him?”

“We just talked basics.”

“It must have been hard for you to call him.”

“It was.”

“You must have really hated that.”

“I did.”

“Good. I like that.”

“Gail, please...”

“I’ll get you, I’ll get you. 8th and South; be there in a bit.”

And with that she hung up. And I stared at the sticky remnants of the gelato, which suddenly wasn't nearly as good as it had been just moments ago.

The point of life--at least the point of my life--has always been preserving the maximum number of options for myself. There are lots of rotten things I’ve done, and lots of rotten choices I’ve made. But as long as I’m not irrevocably stuck with those choices, I could always say to myself, “Jeff, you’re still okay.”

I was standing outside the gelato place waiting for Gail's forest green Ford Explorer to appear. Standing and thinking, and assessing my choices.

Well, that and really wishing I’d showered and shaved about 7 1/2 hours ago. But mostly, I was thinking about my options.

Having options is everything for me. Absolutely everything. There is nothing quite so horrible as the knowledge that I'm stuck. Stuck with something I've done. Stuck with something I haven't done. Stuck with some choice life has presented me, or that I've presented myself with, and knowing that my options are down to one. Or, worse, none.

I managed to feel not totally terrible thinking that I had choices left. That I could call Gail. That I could maybe see Aviva. That there was still Marlene, maybe even tonight.

Now, some might think, "Gee, Jeff, doesn't this make you sort of a scumbag?" And I can't really argue with that. But you have to understand. It's never been purely about wanting to have women lined up for me. For starters, they weren't lined up for me. As could be accurately pointed out, I wasn't having sex with any of these women. One of them threw me out of her house yesterday. And not for the first time. Gail can barely stand me. And who knows what Marlene will think of me tonight when she actually gets to know a tiny little piece me? And just why did she think anything of me in the first place?

No, the point is, that as long as I have the feel, the appearance, the aura of options, I can manage to get through the day. Call it scummy. Call it delusional. But it's still something like hope. And where I've got that something like hope feeling that I can summon up, I can get through a day. And when I can't--well, that's when I hyperventilate with pigeons pecking near my feet on a park bench.

When I left my little hometown in coal country, it was because it felt like I had no options. I saw my father stay, long after his chance at playing pro football ended thanks to an ACL injury before fixing anterior cruciate ligaments was as common as taking out appendixes. Even when coming home to set up a practice would have been an option, a real option--everybody knew "Stiff" Ramsey, and everybody knew Stiff Ramsey's kid--it didn't have the feel, the flavor, the scent of an option.

If it doesn't feel like it's my choice, it's just not a choice I can make.

A few years ago I represented this guy, an attorney. He got caught ridiculously overbilling the school district he was solicitor for over in Bucks County and got banged for 38 months Federal time. I visited him after he was sentenced to one of those Federal prisons that idiot talk radio types like to refer to as "Club Fed," as if it's not an actual goddamn prison, but some sort of tax supported spa. He was doing his time at this place in West Virginia which had this absolutely breathtaking view of the Appalachian Mountains. My client told me he loved to look out at them in the morning, but he had to look at them a certain way. He had to tilt his head just so, in order not to let the guard towers and the fence with the razor wire on top spoils the view. "That way," he said to me, "it feels like I'm choosing to be at this beautiful place in the mountains. Just for a minute, it feels like I've got a choice."

There's a reason I've always, always relapsed. Whenever it feels like

drinking or using drugs is not an option, I can't stand it. I have to drink. I have to use. As long as I can tell myself the big One Day At A Time lie, as long as I can keep the clouds of blue smoke surrounding recovery and pretend I'm just making a choice, that I'm acting on this silly little whim not to drink today because I just don't feel like it, I can do it. But at some point--and I always get to that point--it ceases to feel like a choice. When that happens, the knowledge that I'm trapped, that I can't ever drink, ever, that every time I drink or snort or smoke or swallow a pill I'm totally fucked takes over. The thought crawls in my head, grabs a hold of the most lizard like, reptilian part of my brain and chokes it in an eye-popping, cartoon-like way. When that happens I'm done. Tell me I have no options and I'm done.

Fortunately, right now, I have options. And one of them is pulling up to the curb in a green Ford Explorer.

It took us a good 50 minutes or so to get to West Chester, which is a long time to travel in a car with someone who you've really pissed off. We didn't actually say a word until we got onto the Schuylkill, and into a midday traffic jam. Finally, I felt the need to say something to Gail. It wasn't the first thing that came to my mind, but it seemed like a good idea at the time.

"I'm sorry."

She said nothing.

"Gail, did you hear me? I said...."

“I heard you.”

“And?”

“And what? I heard you. You’re sorry. That’s what you said.”

This time I paused. “Gail, don’t you have anything to say to that?”

She said nothing for a few seconds, as we inched up to the Route 202 exit, where the mall sprawl of King of Prussia went one way and the Pennsylvania Turnpike went the other. “No. No. I don’t know what to say. So, no.”

“No.” I echoed her.

“No.” She echoed me echoing her.

And that was all she said until we got into West Chester.

The law office of Shannon, Brenner & Sandusky--actually, just Mark Shannon, Al Brenner and the ghost of Morty Sandusky, who died last year when the plane he was piloting went down off the coast of Cape May--was what you’d call a typical county practitioner’s office. Mark had a suite in Center City, but his main base of operations was here. It was located directly across the street from the Chester County Courthouse, on the intersection of one of the main roads through West Chester and a little alleyway. A painted red brick building with blue shutters. A heavy wooden door in front, and a brass plaque with the firm name bolted to the brick. Gail and I--still not having said anything to each other for most of the trip--walked in the front door, down a very short corridor, and entered the second door on the right where the receptionist asked if we had an

appointment.

“No, not really,” I said, then realized that Gail had just shot me what I’d characterize as a “you really are a lying piece of shit, you never even talked to Mark in the first place, did you” look, so I quickly blurted out, “but he is expecting us.”

“I’ll let him know, then,” the receptionist said, and before we could even sit down, Mark came bounding out of his office.

“My God, you actually made it. You didn’t punk out on me.” I took a good look at the guy who fired me and said I’d never get sober. Except for the beard finally having grayed enough to match the hair, nothing much had changed. Still wearing those \$800 suits without ever seemingly getting them dry cleaned. And still not convinced I’d ever stop fucking up.

“And this must be the latest woman you’ve taken hostage in a relationship. “Hello,” he extended his hand to Gail, who gave him the thinnest-lipped smile I’d ever seen, “Mark Shannon. How are you?”

Gail still wasn’t speaking. And I noticed that her hands were shaking when she reached out to grab Mark’s hand.

We started walking back to the conference room/library. “So sorry to hear about Morty,” I said.

“Hell, Morty always said he didn’t want to still be dealing with this shit by the time he was 60. Sonofabitch got his wish. I should be so lucky.”



Mark took us back into the conference room. Mark sat down at one end of the huge oak table, me at the other. Gail sat down on the side, in the middle, her back facing the green Purdon's Consolidated Statutes that probably were kept updated mostly for the benefit of Larry Brenner, Mark's surviving partner, who, if he was anything like he was when I left, would remain computer illiterate till the day he retired.

"I hate to ask, but this being an official visit and all, who the fuck exactly is my client here?" Mark said.

This was a damn good question, the kind I would have thought of myself if I hadn't abandoned thinking like a lawyer and started thinking like a scared, weasly little client.

"How critical is it that we figure this out right now...," I said.

"It's critical for me," Gail said. "Who is going to be representing me?" Her voice was trembling, just a little bit.

"Mark, you represent Gail," I said, trying to sound more gallant than I actually felt. "You get her out of this first. Figure me out later."

"You all sure of that? I don't want anyone changing their minds later."

"I'm sure. Gail's your client. If you can help me later, fine. If not, we'll get somebody else. I want her to have the best."

"Don't know if she has the best. But she has me."

"Is that bit of mock self-depreciation supposed to make me feel better?"

Gail muttered. Her jaw then tensed and flattened, making me think that what she had just said was actually meant to be thought, rather than heard. Mark responded graciously, as Mark usually did for anyone but me. “Gail, I think I can help you. I really do. I know this is horrible for you. But dealing with these kind of things is what I do, day in and day out. Okay?”

Gail’s jawline returned to normal. “Okay.”

“So, let’s see,” Mark said, staring squarely at me. “Where do we begin?”

That was typical Mark. He always led with the royal we when he wanted to tell someone how they’d fucked something up.

“I think I told you on the phone, Mark.”

“Maybe we should hear it again. Start from the beginning, Jeff.”

The very beginning? You mean when I was 12 years old and I broke into my dad's liquor cabinet and guzzled his Old Granddad till I puked, then passed it around to three other kids until they puked too?

“It wasn’t very smart of me. I was driving over in Mt. Airy under suspension.”

“What were you doing there, Jeff. Didn’t that rabbi girlfriend of yours live there?” I noticed for the first time that Mark’s chair was leather and that he could lean back in it, which he was, almost to the point where I thought he was going to be plumb with the desk. “Sorry, Gail. If I’m going to help, I gotta ask those questions. You’re a lawyer, I’m sure you understand.”

“You’re starting to sound like Gail now.” Or Gail’s starting to sound like Mark. It’s so damned hard to tell the difference these days.

“How did it happen that one of Philadelphia’s finest came to stop you?”

“I think he had probable cause...”

“Jeff.” He said my name with an upward inflection, much as he might talking to an unruly teenager, which is how he always viewed me, even when I was his associate. Good to know nothing much changes here. “Why don’t we play along with the whole attorney client charade for a minute, with you being the client and me being the lawyer. Just for a little while. Now, tell me, where were you coming from.”

“I was pulling out from an intersection onto Lincoln Drive. I sort of went through the stop sign. I was sort of speeding.”

“Sort of?”

“Sort of. I think my tires were flinging gravel.”

“That is, indeed, sort of. Continue.”

“Well, I was stopped. The cop pulled me over. I told him I had my license suspended. He wanted to talk to Gail. Gail told him she gave me permission to drive. She didn’t of course.”

“Of course. She’d be out of her fucking mind to do that even if you had a license.” Gail shifted her gaze downward towards the table.

“Right, of course....what do you mean by that?”

“Just continue, Jeff. What happened next?”

“Well, I tried to tell the cop...”

“Jesus,” Gail interrupted. “Am I going to go to jail? Is anyone going to answer that question? I’m just sitting here, and you say you’re representing me, but I feel like this is some goddamn private conversation with it’s own little code words and hand signals that I’m intruding on. I need to know. Am I going to go to jail? Because if I’m going to go to jail anyway, I may as well cut this little cheating, lying, drunken unemployed fuckup’s balls off with the dullest letter opener I can find. That, at least, would be worth going to jail for.”

“Gail,” Mark tried going into Soothing Lawyer mode. “I’m just getting as much information as I can. Don’t worry. Not yet. Not until I tell you to worry.”

“I can’t do this. I can’t do this. I need my own lawyer. I don’t trust anyone in this room. Do you all just think I’m a fucking idiot for having let things get this far?” She got up, slammed the chair against the table, then started walking for the door.

“Gail, please,” I said, trying to return her to some kind of pliancy. “Don’t do this.” Now you decide to bail on me? Now, when I’m actually trying to fix things and be responsible for once? What kind of incentive is that to be an adult?

“Gail, listen to me,” Mark said. “I know our mutual acquaintance is a royal fuckup. That’s a given. *Res Ipsa Loquitur*, you might say. The asshole speaks for itself. But I think I can help you. This is explainable to a cop.

Please....”

“You *know* he’s an asshole,” Gail said. “Of course he’s an asshole. Maybe you can tell me why you put up with it all those years he was practicing under your goddamn wing and never did a single thing about it. What could you have seen in him? Why did you protect him? It’s not like you were fucking him, right?”

“Gail,” Mark said. “I could write a book on why I stuck with him. But that doesn’t matter now. What matters is....”

“Of course it matters. I loved him. What the hell was your excuse? I’m sorry, I can’t do this. I’m gone. I’ll call you if I need you. And I don’t think I’ll be needing you. And I assume I’m not being billed for this shit.” And with that, she and her reddened eyes ran out of the conference room and to her car. Without me.

There was silence for maybe 15 seconds. Then Mark spoke.

“You still know how to charm the pants off the women, don’t you?”

“Mark, I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“It was nothing I haven’t seen or lived before. You alright?”

“No, not particularly. I really don’t know what I’m going to do this time.”

Well, actually, I did. I had an extremely good excuse to call Aviva, since I needed a ride back to Philadelphia. And not just an excuse. Damn near a justification.

“You know, solving Gail’s problem is probably going to require you, shall

we say, taking a dive for your ladyfriend,” Mark said. Somehow the use of the word ladyfriend seemed awfully formal, given what we’d all just been witness to.

“I’ve sort of been avoiding that thought.”

“No avoiding it, Jeff. You know what that means, don’t you?”

Uh, yes. 90 days. \$1000.00 fine. And more grim amusement for the Disciplinary Board. “I do. I know.”

“You could just let her fend for herself, you know. I’m not suggesting you should, only suggesting that you could.”

“Right now that thought is crossing my mind, big time. So what would Mark-my-sponsor tell me to do,” “Mark-your-sponsor was fired, remember. And Mark-your-lawyer hasn’t actually been retained as such. In any even, since I don’t really know who my client is, maybe I should just drop this for a while.”

“Let’s drop it, Mark. I’d rather avoid talking about reality anyway.”

“Listen, Jeff, it’s about two thirty right now. I’ve got some things to attend to. Take a minute, stay and collect your thoughts, use the phone if you need to. You know where my office is. Rap on the door when you’re ready to talk again. And don’t fucking sneak off without telling me.”

“I think I can do that.”

“It remains to be seen just what you can do. But try to stay put for awhile.”

And Mark left, leaving me alone with a room full of oak and law books and unpleasantness.

I stayed at the table for a few minutes. Just sat. Tried to stay still. To just Be. It seemed a simple, Zen for Dummies kind of concept that I thought I could handle. Just Be. Just Be with me. Just me.

“Just you, huh? You look like you couldn’t use any company.”

Steve. Steve. Shrunk down to the size of a mini bar bottle again, and on my shoulder. Smaller, but still packing an irritating punch.

“Go away,” I said.

“Are we cranky today? In need of some sleep? Say, do you know you are really, really starting to need a shower bad? I can smell you and I don’t even have a proper nose.”

“Fuck you. Go away.”

“Fuck me? Go away. Why, and just when I was getting used to this whole Jiminy Cricket sitting on your shoulder thing, you send me packing. What kind of friend are you? Where is our sense of adventure? Did we leave it at Marlene’s apartment?”

“I’m not your friend. You don’t exist. And I’m having too much adventure these days.”

“Say that again.”

“I’m not your friend....”

“No, no. The too much adventure part. This I gotta see to believe. Surely you can’t mean that? You? Tired of insanity? Quick, somebody fetch me an MRI

of this boy.”

“You’re. Not. Here. You’re a hallucination, brought on by too little sleep and too much stress.”

“Oh, I’m here. In fact, I’m just going to jump from your right to your left shoulder, just to prove I can. Look. Hop. Hop. I can fly, I can fly!”

“Fine. You’re here. You’re a fucking bottle on my shoulder and you’re here. Then tell me what I should do. Tell me what’s going to happen. Tell me how to get out of this.”

“How to get out of this? Let’s see now. Eat more fiber. Floss daily. Accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions. No, forget that last one. And...pheww! Have you smelled your breath lately? Let’s just concentrate on the flossing.”

“Just help me. Just tell me what my next move is.” Dear God, I’m actually asking my hallucinations for help. That may be an actual definition of hitting bottom.

“Fine. Call Aviva. You’re obviously not done yet sinking into warm, comfy shit. Have fun. I know I will.”

And with that, my head jerked upward and I realized that I had fallen asleep at the conference table.

I thought about walking over to Mark and talking. About us both growing up in coal country, about having fathers who we saw getting drunk on Yuengling



beer at the bars on seemingly ever corner in every neighborhood, about waiting for the time when we could do that too. About trying to get and stay clean and sober in a profession where the stereotype of the hard-driving litigator who could always down a few with friend and colleagues died hard. About trying to take a life and career in shambles and build them back up, one day, one brick, one client at a time, because I knew Mark had done that when he got caught hiding a client's gun and cocaine stash in his office safe in 1977.

I had grown to hate those speeches. And now I was terrified to admit I wanted to hear them again and again, like a drunk's lullaby.

My cell phone was dead. Nothing to do but use the phone in the conference room to call someone. And it might as well be Aviva.

So I did. I called Children and Youth, and they put me through to her. And she answered. And I begged her to pick me up in front of the Courthouse. And she tried to hang up, but I begged her not too. So she said she'd come. Then she hung up.

And indeed true to all expected form, I snuck out the door without telling Mark. But not without running into Bella. Somewhere between conference room and copier, I'm a little hazy on exactly where. I was already hazy as I tried to slither out of the building, and the sight of her layered fog on top of the haze. A misty parfait of confusion.

"Hi," I said, or maybe I thought I said.

“Hi,” she said, or maybe I thought she said.

I noticed her hair crowding the room, and sucking up all its oxygen, and decided that there might be limits, after all, to my choices, even my imaginary ones that had virtually no basis in reality. Better to just keep slithering out the door.

There’s a reason I’m here, Jeff. I’m sure of it. I’m just not sure what it is,” Aviva said, pulling up to the curb just outside of the Chester County Courthouse Annex in her battered 1980 something Saab.

“I asked?” I said, leaning inside the passenger window.

“No, that wasn’t enough.”

“I still amuse you?” I asked, hopefully.

“Fuck you and your beautiful hazel eyes.”

“You felt sorry for me. That must be it. Yes, that must be it....”

“Get in the car, before I change my mind.”

“I’m usually pretty good at figuring out when I’m about ready to push Aviva over the edge, so I opened the door and got in, pushing aside four casefiles, three days worth of Philadelphia Inquirers and a book that, I swear, had the title “Inner Child, Inner Peace.” Really. Honest. I picked it up as she headed out of West Chester towards Route 202.

“You do know, Aviva, that if I were going to do a parody of you, I’d start with this book.”

“If I were going to do a parody of you, Jeff, I’d find it impossible to parody a caricature.”

“C’mon, lighten up, I was only kidding.”

“I got pulled out of a case management meeting that was kind of important. I’ve probably missed it all by now.”

“Then let’s go home. Get an early jump on rush hour.”

“Let’s go home? As in us? You, me, my house. Didn’t I just throw you out yesterday?”

“You’ve thrown me out lots of times.”

Careful, boy, you’re getting awfully close to that no options thingy here.

“Look, I’m sorry,” I said.

“For what it’s worth, that book is bullshit. Somebody at work gave it to me, and I haven’t told them it’s utter crap yet. Honestly, there are things too twee even for me. That’s one way you were good for me. You raised my cynicism level enormously. Well that, and working with children who’ve been burned alive, left for dead and anally raped.”

“Good lord, how can you stand this job. Why not go back to school?”

“I was sick of school. I was sick of studying and not doing. Being a rabbi lost its appeal. And my parents were getting tired of supporting me, and I was getting tired of being supported by them.”

“That’s way too grown up for me.” Pause. Desperate, desolate pause

“That was a joke. Honest. A joke. Look, look, I’m parodying myself now.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“It was.”

“If you say so, it must be so.”

We drove in silence for about ten minutes, then she surprised me. “So, talk to me. Tell me what’s really going on.”

Yes! I knew I could get that co-dependent mojo working. Now if you can just pull the car over so I can look at those deep brown eyes again? Damn, you just get hotter and hotter every year. “Well, it’s like I said before. Things suck. Really and truly suck. Not going well at all.”

“Tell me about Gail. Seriously. Are you still with her? What the hell put you out in West Chester anyway?”

“I was seeing Mark.”

“You’re kidding. Really? You actually broke down and saw Mark.”

“Yup. I did the full grovel and everything.”

“Good.”

“Don’t be a smart ass.”

“I’m not. I mean it. That’s good. I always liked Mark. I’m glad you’re talking again. What all did you talk about, if I may be nosy enough to ask?” as her Saab got back onto the Schuylkill for her reverse commute back to Mt. Airy.

“Things. Recovery. Trying to get back on track.” And getting busted. And Gail getting busted. And being too much of a pussy to face Mark. Just another day in the life.

“How did you get to West Chester in the first place? Gail again?”

“She dropped me off. Then left.” A not completely untrue statement, if you kind of squint real hard.

“Where is she now?”

“I don’t know.” And that’s more than technically true.

“And where are you with her right now?”

“I don’t know.” Even truer yet. This truth thing isn’t as bad as I thought. Maybe it’ll help me get laid. What was that Groucho Marx line about being able to fake sincerity, anyway?

“Look, Jeff, I probably shouldn’t tell you this, because you might get the wrong idea, but I still have some of your old clothes at my place. I, uh, don’t know if they still fit, you look like you’ve gained a few pounds.”

“That depends, if I was in one of my fat, drinking, piglike periods when I bought it.”

“There were more than a few of those. I don’t remember.”

“What does the shirt look like? I may be able to tell you,” I said as the car hit the logjam around the Conshohocken curve.

“Button down collar. Green and black check pattern. I think you got it at

the airport mall in Pittsburgh, when we were flying to Colorado for that seminar on Midrash writing.”

“I remember now. It should fit. I needed something because I was already putting on weight. I’d relapsed just before that, but you didn’t know.”

“I knew. I always knew. Were you really here to see Mark?”

“Yes. Absolutely, I swear.”

“OK.” And with that she softened her tone, while her eyes, even reflected through the rear view mirror, showed enough sadness mixed with hope that I thought I could work with it.

Before heading over to her apartment back in Mt. Airy, she drove over to the co-op. She parked the Saab in a lot caddy-corner from the co-op next to a dance studio/massage therapist/yoga and spiritual enlightenment center. Just like old times, I thought. We’d grab some fruits and vegetables with odd colors and twisted shapes. At least one of them would be imported from somewhere with the suffix “stan”. We’d go home and she’d prepare these odd, gnarled, bright orange or dull, pale green whatever they were from things, and they would actually not totally suck. Either that, or shed break down and get some fish-salmon, wild salmon usually, which she justified by saying that under Kosher laws fish could be eaten with either meat or milk and therefore, by definition, it was just like a vegetable. This always sounded like serious rationalization to me, but I will never, ever slam anyone for rationalizing stuff.

“I’ll just be a few minutes. You can wait here,” she said.

“I can come in.”

“Really, I’ll just be a few minutes.”

“Hey, I want to come in.” Which I did. I hadn’t been to this old bursting at the seams but they won’t leave this neighborhood for someplace bigger and more logical place for a while. This place represented better times. That, and I could make fun of aging hippies whose hairlines ended where their ponytails began.

“Why don’t you wait here, ok?”

Sometimes I’m clueless and dense. But not often. I usually can pick on certain clues and body language. Like, say, when someone doesn’t want to be seen with someone in a place where they’re likely to be seen, because they’d then have to deal with the inevitable “oh, um, are you back with, um, what’s his name, Jeff, right? Is he, uh, um, you know....”

But until she actually says that, I have every right to play dumb.

“Listen, it’ll be fun. Like old times. We can pick up some organically grown, fairly traded produce and I won’t even make fun of it, I promise.”

She leaned her head back, rubbed her eyes and sighed.

“OK. Come on in.”

Trapped her. Again. Just like old times.

As long as we’re talking about parodying things, the Human Touch food

co-op is the kind of place that it would be easy to parody. Free range chicken in the meat counter, Free Mumia posters on the bulletin board. But that's a cheap shot, and I don't like taking those kind of cheap shots. Not as to places, anyway. People, maybe, places, rarely. And this is a place I like. I like the oddly shaped things in bins, the brands of foods I've never heard of from places I can't even conjure an image of in my head. I like the fact that everyone is expected to put in so many hours a year working for the place as the price of getting their organic veggies. Hell, I like that I call them veggies when I think about buying things here.

I actually unloaded cartons of plantains one afternoon. Really. And avocados, and mangos, too. Four hours of plantains and avocados and mangos. And half a carton of star fruit.

I'm not exactly what you'd call a liberal Democrat. More like an angry, snotty libertarian. This despite the fact that I grew up in a union household. More than a union household. A household where my dad ran Local 657 of the Ironworkers Union and made sure his boys got every damn cent they were entitled, and a few to which they weren't. Then there was my stint as president of the Central Pennsylvania ACLU branch. I took that pretty seriously, even though other attorneys suggested that my fighting Pennsylvania's shitty, harsh drug laws may have less to do with philosophical reasons and more to do with the fear that someone might find my own stash of goodies.



I could make all kinds of fun of this place if I wanted to. Lots of people back in good, conservative, God fearing Lancaster County would. But making fun of real earnestness isn't all that much fun. Or at least, not as much fun as it used to be.

Just don't call that growth. In fact, don't tell anyone at all. I don't want to lose my street cred for being an asshole.

Aviva and I walked in together. She grabbed a basket, not a cart--this isn't going to be long"--and we walked past the bins.

"What are we getting, anyway?"

"We? What's with 'we'?"

"I just thought..."

"Jeff, I know perfectly well what you thought."

"No, you don't."

"You're utterly transparent. Saran wrap surrounds your soul. Dinner, and hopes of getting laid. That's what you're thinking about. Go ahead, I dare you, tell me I'm wrong."

"See, you weren't even close to what I was thinking," I said, as she grabbed some eggplant and we headed past the cookies. "This...this is what I was thinking. Something without the least bit of a pretension to either good health or a healthy planet. See? See these Double Chocolate Milano cookies. This is what I was thinking about."

“I’m trying to lose weight.”

“You don’t need to lose a pound. I like the curves, dammit. How many times do I have to tell you that I don’t like women who are sticks. Here, have a cookie. Have several.”

“Well, then *you* need to lose weight, Jeff. Really, you do. This isn’t good.”

“I know. I know. Tomorrow. Until then, get the cookies. It’s the only remaining drug left to me. I haven’t been busted yet for driving while fat.” I threw the Milanos in the basket. “If they ever make me blow into a tube to check my cholesterol, I’m screwed, but until then....”

She partially picked up the Milanos, then let them drop back down. “Okay, okay, it’s like shopping with a six-year-old. The cookies. Okay, the cookies. I’m glad I didn’t get a shopping cart, you’d probably ask to ride in it.”

“I’d ask to drive it. You don’t need a license from Penn DOT for that,” I said, throwing a prepaid phone card into the shopping basket.

She gave me a wavy, swiggly little smile I just knew she fought like a bitch to suppress as we walked over to the deli counter, and I felt the old tank of possibilities start to fill up just a little bit.

I am the kind of guy that women are always having to explain away to their friends. I know this. I’ve occasionally seen this happen right in my face. I inspire that. It’s a skill, one of those utterly useless skills like being able to turn your eyelids inside out or speaking in prime numbers.

Still, I can frequently find ways to survive that. For instance, with Aviva, I figured if we can get through this basic little shopping excursion, I've got at least a better than even shot at, as she put it, "dinner and getting laid."

The important part of the equation, the setting of the whole gestalt, is the dinner. Preparing dinner, more specifically. Working in her tiny but methodically well organized kitchen, reestablishing rhythms we'd done for years, and could reestablish with just a little bit of chopping of eggplant and dicing of onions. I cut this, she slices that. A symbiotic division of labor that becomes its own language. Food as foreplay. And I knew how it had gone before, and how it might go.

And all I had to do to get my shot at that was to get past the checkout line, and hope she didn't have to explain me away to anyone.

So it was inevitable that she'd run into Sol Wasserman today. Or someone like him. Someone who likes her, and can't stand me.

"Aviva, how are you," Sol, all 6'4" of him, tapped her on the shoulder, then gave her one of his characteristic bear hugs.

"Hi, Sol, how are you?" she said, as much out of real concern as social necessity, since Sol's booming voice and big frame had both been roughed up by throat cancer surgery a few years back. "You, uh, you remember..."

Sol then looked at me, and I saw his eyes narrow.

In addition to his day job as a state senatorial aide, Sol was active at the

somewhat avant garde synagogue Aviva went to in Mt. Airy. It was and, I suspect, is the kind of place in which tolerance was seemingly the 11th commandment; yet, when I went to Sol's Talmudic classes in an attempt to impress Aviva about my commitment to learning Judaism, I found out that tolerance, even in a place like Beth Shalom, was honored in the breach wherever and whenever I was concerned. I'd like to think that was because she was a hypocrite and not because I started having a coke-induced nosebleed during one class.

"Hi, Sol," I said, as I held out my hand for ritual shaking purposes. "How are you?" Not exactly scintillating conversation, but a step or two above pre-verbal grunting.

Sol shook my hand, but didn't look at me. "Jeff," he said. Not "Jeff, how are you," or "Jeff, what brings you to town," or even "Jeff, are you still the same old putz I remember like it was yesterday?" Just "Jeff."

"Jeff's here in town for the day," Aviva stepped in, trying to throw fruits, vegetables and Pepperidge Farm cookies on the checkout counter while trying to keep the conversation from slipping further into the void of silence.

Sol had since stopped shaking my hand, and just repeated himself. "Jeff." I think I would have preferred had he just said "Putz." It would actually have been less awkward. Significantly less awkward, in fact, than what Aviva said next.

“You know, Jeff’s doing really well, now. Really, really well. He’s doing...”

“Really well,” Sol said. “OK.”

“Really well,” I said. “Really, really well,” as I threw the plantains on the conveyor belt and one broke off from the bunch like it, too, wanted to get as far away from this conversation as possible.

Sol then said “Glad you’re doing...”

“Really well,” I said. “Amazingly well.”

“Really.” Aviva chimed in, taking on this odd upward lilt in her voice.

“Well, good for you, Jeff,” Sol said, as Aviva pulled out her check card and began punching in her PIN number. “I’m glad you’re doing so well. Good for you.”

“Good for me.”

Aviva finished bagging the groceries--no baggers at this place, more egalitarian and all--and we began walking away. “Good to see you, Sol. See you at shul tomorrow?” The upward voice lilt was back, reaching even higher than before.

“Yeah, I’ll be there.”

We started walking out of the store, as I yelled out, “Doing really well, Sol. Doing so well you could plotz.”

Nothing like an alcoholic gentile coal cracker tossing out some Yiddish to

give a bad moment one last little cringe inducing twist in the *kishkes*.

Aviva didn't say anything until we walked to her car; as we loaded the groceries, she looked up from the trunk and said, "doing so well you could plotz? What in the hell was that all about?"

"I think it was the Jewish equivalent of trying to be a home boy."

"A home boy? More like a home goy."

"Every home should have one. Speaking of which, we going home now?"

"We, homey?"

"We. Us."

"Guess so," she said, as she slammed the trunk down and got in the Saab. "Somebody please tell me why I'm doing this." With that she stuck her key in the ignition switch on the floor before I was in the car myself, in a way that suggested she wanted, momentarily at least, to drive off without me.

But she didn't. And, for the moment, it was still We. And Us.

I thought about asking her how she felt about what just happened back in the store. That maybe I should detonate the unexploded bomb here, right now, sitting in the car. Get all the blood and gore out of the way now, speak honestly and truthfully and openly about it now, so it didn't get in the way of sex later. Then I thought I should just shut up for once. Then, in the short distance between the store and her driveway, she made the choice for me.

"So, are you going to talk about what happened back there, or should I?"

she said.

“I think we need to talk about it. We need to clear the air. To be open and honest.”

“Really? You really want to talk about it? You’d usually run from open and honest about as much as you’d run away from rehabs.”

“I never actually ran away from a rehab. I snuck out for some beers once or twice, but I always came back. But yeah, let’s talk.”

“All right then,” she said, pulling up into the driveway and shutting the engine off. “How do you feel?”

“Truthfully,” I said, taking a long, fifteen second pause between words, because I want to at least try to be semi-truthful, bad. Bad. Bad as in guilty. As in I have this...this record that I’m never going to be able to expunge with anyone I’ve ever known. Not just with you, but with everyone in the universe.”

My heart began racing. I was starting to feel like I did earlier this morning, sitting with the pigeons in Rittenhouse Square. Now I really did feel bad. Bad as in going to pass out.

“Jeff, are you ok? You look sick. Your eyes look all glassy and shit.”

“I hate Sol. I hate him. I hate all the fucking Sols all over Pennsylvania who think they can wipe their feet of me, or on me, or whatever. I hate him. I just hate them.”

“Forget Sol, we need to get you inside.”

“I want to forget Sol. Sol won’t let me forget Sol. I...” pant, puff, huff, pant, “hate him...” gasp, gasp, pant.

“C’mon. Come inside. Please.” And she gave me her hand, and I leaned on her arm, and we walked up the stairs into her apartment. I was still ranting between breaths and squeaks about Sol, and judges who didn’t listen to me anymore, and maybe even Gail, and quite possible Steve, I don’t know, the oxygen wasn’t exactly getting to my head in an orderly fashion, but she just kept walking with me, and letting me lean on her, and helping me into the brown leather sofa that I always used to bust her balls about why she had a leather sofa if she was such a goddamn strict vegetarian but I wasn’t about to do that today. And she went into the bedroom and put a pillow, the buckwheat pillow that I always used to make fun of and do the Eddie Murphy doing Buckwheat impression whenever I’d see it, but not today, because it felt good and the sofa felt good and her hand felt good on my arm and my forehead.

I fell asleep. And I didn’t see Steve once.

It was almost 6 pm when I woke up. Aviva had already laid out the green and black checked Pittsburgh airport shirt on the coffee table in front of the sofa, on top of all the newspapers. As I walked, shirt in hand, to her bathroom in order to take a long-delayed shower, her border collie Shlomo began sniffing me, no doubt trying to figure out if he should bother getting used to my scent again.

I walked into her shower. I turned on the water and just let it pour over



me, not even grabbing one of her many soapy lotions just yet. Finally, I grabbed something greenish, squeezed several dollops of it out of the container and started rubbing it all over my hair and body. I looked at the container for a second, noticed it had soy and ginger in it, and thought for a second that maybe I was washing with sushi. But only for a second. It felt good. Anything cleansing would have felt good. I shaved the bristle off my face. I wanted to just stay there for a while, until every last bit of hot water was used up and I couldn't stay there one second longer. In fact, that's pretty much what I did, turning down the cold water and turning up the hot, adjusting it again and again until there was no more adjusting and it was too cold to stand. I stayed in that shower as long as I possibly could, until I'd wrung every bit of joy that I could from it and then some. I stayed even past that point; until it was lukewarm, then tepid chilly, to downright freezing, staying past the point of rationality, like I was trying to catch a last buzz.

Finally I stepped out. I looked at the mirror, waiting for Steve's miserable reflection to show up in the corner. It didn't. I could get used to not seeing him. I put on the shirt. It fit. Sort of. There was some minimal but noticeable bulging around the buttons. Obviously, I'd bought it in mid-relapse and weight gain mode. There was also some jeans which were just tight enough for them to be cutting into my gut.

Put on shirt. Put on pants. Face Aviva.

"How do I look," I said to her when I came out of the bathroom. "Do I

still clean up well?”

Aviva was standing there wearing a green, oversize T-shirt with some unfamiliar Hebrew lettering on it and jeans. Not to mention wearing this expression that appeared to suggest frustration, leavened with a why-should-I-give-a-shit-anymore undertone.

“When were you planning on telling me?” she said.

“Telling you what?”

“I noticed that phone card you bought. Couldn’t figure out what you needed it for.”

“I’ll pay you for that, no biggie...”

“Especially since you had a cell phone.”

“The cell phone wasn’t working, that’s why I needed the card. I wasn’t trying to rip you off, honest. Really.”

“So I took the cell phone, and I noticed, ‘Hey, it’s the same kind I have,’ but the battery was used up, so I plugged it in for you, and recharged it, just because I thought you might need it...”

“You didn’t have to do that, really.”

“And then you got some calls while you were lying there like a lox on my couch. Do you want to hear the calls I got?”

“Aviva, baby....”

“Do you want to hear the calls?” Her usually throaty, buttery voice was

now taking on the serrated edge when she was ready to expel anger and choke down disgust.

“Aviva, I’m here to be with you. I don’t care about any calls.”

“Do you want to hear the fucking calls,” she said, walking to the bookshelf where the phone was resting and plugged in. She removed the plug, grabbed the phone, and appeared ready to toss it at me sideways like a Frisbee. “Do you want to hear the fucking calls. Because I do. Let’s listen to them. Together.”

“Look, you know I haven’t broken up with Gail. I told you that,” I said, taking a gamble in the absence of more reliable information because I really had no choice.

“You don’t even know, do you? You can’t even keep up with your own bullshit. You used to be better at that, don’t you know. Keeping up with your own bullshit. Catching you at lies was like a puzzle, a mental gymnastic, like doing the New York Times crossword puzzle. In ink.”

“Aviva, please stop this...”

“Take a guess.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Take a guess. Take a guess at who called. Amuse me. You owe it to me. Take a guess.”

“I don’t want to do this.”

“No, you love doing this, just to other people. You don’t want it done to yourself. Take a guess. Who called?”

I had to guess. I didn’t have a choice. The least dangerous guess was “look, like I said, things are over with me and Gail, I know she’s upset.”

“No, Jeff, you didn’t say that. But you may actually be right, since she’s not the one who called. Apparently she doesn’t give a shit where you are. Smart girl. Try again.”

Bad choices now. Either Marlene or Mark. If I say Mark, and it’s Marlene, then I’m screwed. If I say Mark, and it’s just Mark, I may still be screwed, but I have at least a puncher’s chance of pulling this out. If I say Marlene, and it’s Mark, I’m screwed. And if it’s both of them, well, it doesn’t much matter what I say. No, no, wait, she wouldn’t know it’s Marlene, unless she retrieved the message. And she wouldn’t have my password, she couldn’t retrieve it. She’d only be able to look up Mark’s number in a phone book. So the choice here has got to be:

“I can explain what happened with Mark.”

She paused. Her eyes narrowed. “Fine. Let’s hear it.”

“There’s nothing to tell. Not really. I’m going to call Mark back, I just had a hard time facing him. It was harder than I thought.”

I waited for a reaction. Instead, she just stood there, arms folded under those wonderful breasts that I still managed to subliminally notice even though I

was terrified I was losing my grip on this conversation.

“You know my relationship with Mark is, well, complex,” I said. She still stood there. Another 20 seconds elapsed. I suddenly realized that all those times she kept asking me about how do lawyers cross examine witnesses, she was listening.

“Look, I ran out of the office, okay? I was scared...:”

“You’re always scared.”

“This was different.”

It’s always different.”

“No, please, let me finish. I didn’t want to admit defeat, you know how hard that is for me. It’s the hardest thing for me. It’s Recovery 101, admitting you’re powerless. I will, I was, I was gonna call him back. I’ll do it now. Right now.”

“Right now, I’d call a cab first.”

“Aviva, please.”

“No, let’s listen to the calls first. I already know who called, but I want to listen to the calls. Let’s listen.” With that she threw the phone at me, leaving me with nothing but the barest of reflexes to catch it before it hit my nose. I looked at the numbers of the people who called. Two calls from Mark. Aviva interrupted me as I was clicking on the phone.

“I thought that one looked familiar, so I checked it. But keep clicking.”

The next one was from Marlene.

“Didn’t know who that one was. So I just called it. You should listen to it sometime, interesting message that girls got on her answering machine. Have you gotten into her pants yet, or are you just trying real hard?”

“Aviva, I can explain.”

“The messages, Jeffrey, the messages. And hold it up close enough to me so I can listen.”

“Shouldn’t this be private?”

“Probably. Hold it up close so I can listen.”

So I did. First message:

“Jeff, Mark. I would scream at you and say why the fuck did you run off you little chickenshit pussy, but I’ll do that when I see you face to face. Let me know you’re not dead first. Apparently you still know the number after all these years, so use it.”

“Aviva, I really can explain that.”

“You have two more messages,” she said in a nearly atonal voice.

Click to second message:

“Jeff, uh, this is Marlene. Listen, I’ve been thinking. I think I’d like you to see the reading of the play tonight. I don’t know, maybe it might be nice to, um, get an outside opinion on whether it only semi-sucks or is completely foul and wretched. So, um, give me a call, ok?”

Ordinarily, a message like that would be the high point of my day. Clearly, under these circumstances, it was something other than that.

“One more message. Let’s hear it.”

So we heard it. Mark again. “Jeff, if you don’t call me today, please don’t bother calling ever. I mean that. I hate that I mean that, but I mean that.”

“Aviva, can we talk? Or do you still want me to call that cab. Because I will, if that’s what you want.”

She tilted her head, bit her lip in a way that should have been sexy but instead was inching up to violent, and just stared at me.

“What are you trying to do to me? What do you want with me? It isn’t just sex, I know that. Do you want me to get all sucked into all the chaos again? Do you like taking me along for the ride? Do you just hate to travel into the pits of hell alone?”

“I thought Jews didn’t buy the concept of hell.”

“I’m reconsidering that.” Pause. “Goddamn it, see what you just did. You had to crack a joke right then and there. Do you have to look at every thing sideways and off kilter? Do you have to just deflect every ugly thing? And don’t answer that. Don’t say yes, of course you do. Just stay there. Shut up and listen.”

“Aviva....”

“Don’t. Don’t say a fucking word. I mean it. Just stand there.”

I did. I just stood there. She shut me up. Then she kept going.

“Just let me yell at you. Let me just yell and scream at you and ask you why you want me in your life anymore and don’t answer me. Just let me rant.” Her eyes started tearing up, and started to reach over and...well, maybe comfort her is the wrong word, but at least acknowledge the tears.

“NO! Don’t touch me. Don’t come near me. If I’m crying, just let me cry.”

“Aviva....” She put her hand out, almost on my mouth.

“Goddammit, didn’t you hear me? Say nothing. Look, I almost don’t care what you were doing with this Marlana person, or what happened with Mark. It’s about me now, not you. I’m going to go into my room. You’re still here when I leave...no, don’t be here when I leave. Just go.”

And she walked into her bedroom and closed the door. And though I at least had enough sense not to interrupt her and say it was Marlene and not Marlana, it was extremely hard to let her have the last word.

It was nearly 6:30. I didn’t know what to do next. Mark lived nearby, in Chestnut Hill. I could call him. I could meet him somewhere. He could pick me up in a matter of minutes. I could take Marlene up on her offer, an offer that candidly, surprised me, but I wasn’t sure if I wouldn’t screw up somehow.

Or, I could stay. I could try to make things right with Aviva. Maybe there was hope. She hadn’t told me to leave right that instant. The door was still open. Perhaps it was open and she was pointing at it and telling me to walk on through, but it was still open.



Or, I could somehow get back to the hotel and find out if Gail really had written me off.

I sat down on the leather sofa. I stared at the coffee table. I scratched Shlomo's ears as he sniffed me again.

I listened, trying to hear if Aviva was crying inside her bedroom. I walked over to the bay window that overlooked the driveway. I looked out at the street below, watching people and cars passing by, wondering if they'd used up all their options and were only left with damage control in every direction.

Mark. Mark is it. Mark can help me. And Mark has a car.

"Hi, Mark," I called his house from Aviva's phone, leaving a message on his machine. "I'm here in Mt. Airy, I was wondering..."

"With the rabbi again?" Mark cut in on his own machine. "Is that where you are?"

"Mark, I need you. I need to make things right with Gail. And you. Can you pick me up here?"

"Gonna run out on her, too?"

"No. I think she wants me to run me out."

"You're wearing out your welcome in a matter of minutes now, these days. Tell me where. I'll be there."

And I waited, having no choice but to wait. But I did two things while I was waiting.

The first was the writing of a note. An actual note, on a yellow legal pad sitting on top of one of her many bulging bookcases. I grabbed the pad, placed it on top of the many newspapers on the coffee table and began scrawling out, “I’m sorry. I know, you’ve heard it before. Probably more articulately expressed. But I can’t say it any better than that. I will call. Hopefully, you’ll take the call.” I agonized for about 30 seconds over writing “love,” then decided what the hell, I had nothing to lose by putting it in there.

Then I called Marlene, from Aviva’s phone, taking care to hit \*67 and block the caller ID. On came the message. Or, more accurately, out came the introduction to the message.

First, some indistinct mumblings, with a vaguely Australian accent. Then the mumblings sounded more and more like voices, with the famous “that’s not a knife. *This* is a knife” line from Crocodile Dundee. Then the damn didgeridoo sounding all spooky and shit. Then her.

“Hi, this is Marlene. If you’ve called expecting me to milk my pathetic celebrityhood for all it’s worth, I hope I didn’t disappoint. If you’re my agent, glad to see you’re checking in to make sure I still have a pulse. Anyone else, leave a message.”

Beep. I let it beep and then hung up after letting it roll along in post-beep silence for about five seconds. I decided to leave a message later. Or not. In any event, Mark’s car was pulling up and I suddenly wanted get the hell out of

Aviva's personal space. I ran down the steps, not daring to look back at Shlomo or anything else.

I ran down the steps into Mark's lawyer car, a new, gunmetal gray Lexus with Pennsylvania license plates NT GLTY. I practically threw myself into the leather seat and said, "Mark, get me the hell outta here."

"Another fine day for the gangster of love?"

At a different point in my life, I would have been unable to resist telling Mark to fuck off. This was not that point. This was the point where I had to just shut up and be grateful for the loving kindness of Mark Shannon, who was, for the moment, my Higher Power. *Lexus ex Machina*. And I am aware the Latin doesn't quite match up. That's okay. Lawyers haven't really known the meaning of Latin phrases for a long time.

"So where am I taking you," Mark said, as he headed out the driveway and then onto Lincoln Drive, down the same street that I had gotten busted on--Jesus Christ, was that just yesterday? It feels like several bad, twisted lifetimes ago.

"What time is it?" I asked him.

"Why? You got a hot date?"

Maybe. Maybe not. When the hell was Marlene finishing up that performance art crap? And what was Gail doing tonight? Wasn't there some banquet or something? Or was that tomorrow night?

"It's 6:30, Jeff. Jeff?"

I heard him. I just wanted to look like I was out of it. I needed to collect what few thoughts I had left and assemble them in a basket. A handbasket. A nice little handbasket, like the one I was going to hell inside of.

“Jeffrey. You’re not sleeping. Cut that shit out and focus.”

“I’m not trying to sleep. I’m trying to hide. I’m doing that I’m closing my eyes and the world can’t see me thing.”

“The world, to the extent it cares, is actively averting its gaze at you these days. Except to the extent the world enjoys watching car wrecks. Where to, Jeffrey? To my house? Dinner and a meeting?”

“Tempting as that is, I think I should deal with Gail.”

“What do we mean by ‘deal with?’ Is that a euphemism for ‘damage control’?”

“Damage control and being honest aren’t necessarily mutually exclusive, Mark. Actually, they kind of go hand in hand.”

“Good answer.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s bullshit coming out of your mouth, but it’s a good answer.”

“Even if it is, I still need to see her.”

“All kidding aside, and assuming that one-tenth of what you’ve said is sincere, is that really the wisest idea right now? Leaving aside the fact that she may not even want to talk to you, do you even know what it is you want? I mean,

let me state the obvious. I just picked you up at your ex-girlfriend's house. The same ex-girlfriend, I might add, whose house you left yesterday in Gail's car and promptly got busted in."

"I have to talk to her sometime. If for no other reason than she's my ride home. And my home is her home. At least for the moment." Mark, I am not avoiding you. I'm just wondering if I should stop avoiding her. Really, it would be easier to just duck this as long as I could."

"I don't think your heart's in this. I think you're telling me what you think I want to hear. Or what you think *you* want to hear."

"Maybe. Actually, yes. But I still want to do it. She's at the Society Hill Marriott. Tomorrow. Tomorrow we do that meeting. I promise." I meant it, too. Even though Mark's house was close, and his wife Shari was always warm and funny, I meant it. Even though Mark--Mark, of all people, was offering me an escape hatch from reality, just a short drive down Germantown Avenue, I meant it. "I need to make things right. For once. Whatever it takes. However it goes."

"Hope you know what you're doing, buddy boy."

"I don't. But I'm doing it anyway."

"That," he said, as he hit the accelerator, "is the story of your life." And as he hit that accelerator, I found myself almost wishing a cop would suddenly stop him, just to show him that his sobriety didn't make him indestructible.

On route to the Marriott, I remembered two things.

The first was that Marlene's read-through of her play was starting now, around 7. The second is that at that same time Gail, Professor Marty, and the rest of the National Association of Bankruptcy Lawyers would be having their dinner, then a keynote speaker, followed by something called Bankruptcy Jeopardy. Or maybe it was Wheel of Debtors. I'm not sure. Whatever it was, it sounded like something which could and should be mocked, starting with the very acronym for the National Association of Bankruptcy Lawyers-NaBLA. I mean, any organization of lawyers whose nickname sounds suspiciously like a bunch of pedophiles really needs to be made fun of, for their own good.

I should be there to mock it. Though a crucial part of mocking requires that there be someone to conspiratorially mock that something with. Like, say, a girlfriend. Otherwise you're not really a clever master of the high art of Mock, but more like a feces-flinging monkey.

"Moment of truth time. Here we are." Mark pulled the Lexus up to the lobby door. "Let me know when you fuck up."

"I might not. Fuck up, I mean."

"Fine. I'll play along. Good luck. By the way, does she even know you're showing up?" And with that, he pulled away, and I walked into the lobby, realizing that, as usual, Mark had posed a damn good question to which I had absolutely no answer.

Not to worry. I walked past the front desk and got my answer before even

heading to the elevator. The elevator door opened and there was Gail, wearing a red dress that had the vaguest outlines of a sparkle to it. And Marty Munro, *sans* Bella. I watched them come out of the elevator. They were laughing. No, she was laughing. Giggling, almost.

I still don't believe what I did next. I hid behind a plant--this ugly, plastic unnaturally colored green thing that looked like it had gotten hold of a tainted batch of chlorophyll. I peeked out through a broad, polymerized leaf. No, they weren't holding hands. Not yet, anyway. But she was still laughing. And she was tossing, or trying to toss, her short, no nonsense auburn hair in a "I'm so cute please fuck me" sort of way. I watched them turn left and head down the hall to, I presume, where the dinner/speaker/Bankruptcy version of "Name that Tune" was supposed to be. Then they passed out of my sight. Not out of my brain, mind you. Just my vision.

Lawyers swarmed in the lobby. Hotel guests checked in, and walked out into the cool Philadelphia night. And I stayed, for maybe two or three minutes, staring between the leaves of a plastic plant waiting for Gail to come back and tell me this was all a fucking joke.

Strike that. I think she had just told me, in the most direct way imaginable, that this was all a fucking joke.

I started getting dizzy. I suddenly couldn't breathe. I leaned against the plastic plant. I then discovered something really important about plastic plants.

They don't have roots. When you lean on them, they crash to the floor. And occasionally, if you're having an exceptionally bad run, you crash along with them. Which I did. Me on top of the plant. The plant on top of a Japanese tourist wearing a Sixers jersey.

I struggled to my feet, then helped up the Japanese guy, whose wife and two small sons started crowding around me. I started babbling, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, are you alright," without any clue as to whether his phrasebook English could help him figure out what I was saying. For a minute I thought I should just bow or something, but decided against it, figuring that it was either culturally offensive or just plain stupid, but either way it seemed not a good idea. So I made the motions I'd make to dust myself off even although there was no dust, then tried to do the same to him, though he had the good sense to start backing away from me. I tried to right the plant, which had become lopsided as it shifted and settled on the ground, so it didn't want to stay upright. It swayed right, then left, then I centered it by shoving its fake trunk rightwards against the fake mulch in its container. By this time the Japanese family had gone on their way, and a woman left the front desk--finally, hello, you've got plants and people collapsing on other people, good of you to notice--and told me that they'd take care of the plant, and was I okay, and are you actually a guest here or some crazy person whose lost all control of his gross motor skills and can we just throw you out now?

Well, they didn't exactly say that last part. Not in any way that would



show up on a court transcript or anything. But yes, Miss Hospitality person from the Society Hill Marriott, I got the idea.

“I’ll just be going up to my room now. Thanks.” For nothing. Bye. Hopefully, the magnetic card key still works and Gail hasn’t had it demagnetized or whatever the hell they do to magnetic card keys when the people who pay for the room don’t want them to function for freeloaders anymore.

I got into the elevator, up to the floor we were on. I walked to the room, swiped the card in the door--yes, it still works, one thing Gail hadn’t thought of doing to banish me, and flopped on the bed.

Then I got up. Bolted upright, actually. I started looking around. Looking for--things. Clues. I wasn’t sure exactly what I was supposed to be looking for. It wasn’t as if I expected to find anything as tacky as a used condom or anything. But I figured I needed to look. I was supposed to look. I had a duty to look. I needed something to even things up, something tangible, more than the glimpse of affection I had seen down in the lobby.

I did this for about three minutes. Looking under clothes, under cushions, in drawers. All I found were clothes and make up kits and floppy discs. The clothes in particular were all over the place. Strewn around. Not neat at all. Things not hung up. The black dress from last night, still lying on the loveseat, not folded away, not typical of Gail at all.

And bottles. Two of them. Empty bottles from the mini bar. Little Jackie

Daniels was sitting by the nightstand, all empty. Little Jimmy Beam, equally drained of life, was in the trashcan.

I opened the mini-bar. He was still there. The Absolut bottle was still there. She couldn't have drunk all the blood from Steve's veins. No. She had to leave him there. She had to leave him just sitting there.

I took him out of the bar, grabbing by his little neck as if to choke him. I put him up to my ear, hoping at least to hear him laugh and snicker at me. Nothing. He just stood there. The little cocksucker just lay there in my hand, not saying a goddamned word, but still fucking with me over and over again.

I wanted to do something with the smug, silent little bastard. And no, it wasn't drink him dry. I don't know what it was I wanted to do, but I knew without thinking it wasn't that.

I was going to stick Steve back in the minibar. But I didn't. I figured if I had to put up with my life, then so did he. Into my pocket he went.

It was almost 8 pm. Unless I wanted to work up a good, messy pile of rage, or unless I could get calm and serene in a hurry, there didn't seem to be any point in staying here.

I left the hotel room, and walked down to the lobby again. I was going to call Marlene on my cell phone, but decided to save the battery and hit the payphone in the lobby instead.

I could have fessed up. I could have told Marlene I had no place else to go

that night. That it would have been just too difficult to go back to Gail. That I was terrified even to be in the lobby of a goddamn chain hotel in Society Hill, that every second I stood in that lobby facing a payphone, I was hoping and praying to the higher power I never, ever want to acknowledge that the metal shielding on each side, in conjunction with my face practically being buried up against the number pad would make me invisible just in case Gail walked by.

Not that I needed any such artificially created construct with Gail now. At least, it seemed that way.

If she and Marty Munro wanted to spend the night playing Bankruptcy Jeopardy, fuck 'em. Let them.

They say that lawyers are a bunch of humorless weasels. Things like this show that they are wrong. They are terribly funny. Just not intentionally.

“Hey, Alex, I’ll take mortgage foreclosures for \$500.”

That’s what Gail will be doing tonight. Laughing with her colleagues over this kind of insipid shit. Without me. Having a great time. Being the the Official Skank of the Creditors.

True, there will be nobody around to lick her nipples while she’s answering her Final Jeopardy question on the dischargability of second mortgages. But hell, this is Gail we’re talking about. Maybe they’ll get hard on their own.

So I won’t be missed. And I won’t miss it.

Fuck me, I'm lying.

Though not about Bankruptcy Jeopardy being insipid.

So I called Marlene on her home phone. I knew she'd still be at the theater, but I figured I had to leave a message somewhere. I told her I'd meet her there.

I was not walking. Too late, too far away, and nobody to give me a lift. I felt I'd earned a cab this time. I met it outside the hotel and headed over to the Corinne Theater.

The cab let me off in front of the theater, on 20th and Sansom Streets. The door was open--good thing I called first, since this wasn't exactly open to the public. I walked past a dark box office and into a semi-lit auditorium. I debated where I should sit--in the back, inconspicuously, or up front. Not that it was all that easy to be ignored in a 150 seat venue like this, and you're one of about six people there, and they've all been there for about an hour and a half. So, since I couldn't be invisible anywhere, I decided for the third row back from the stage. Up front, but able to put my feet up on the row in front of me and have my body take on a semi-slacker V shape.

As it turned out, I didn't get to see much of it. She was just about done as I was burrowing myself into my seat, at around 8:30 or so. Her two hour run time may have been a bit off.

Everyone applauded, even me, though I'd seen about 45 seconds of it. She

jumped off the stage, and the other friends started to cluster around her and hug her. I always seemed to be catching Marlene in the middle of hugs and accolades. I wasn't sure whether that was a coincidence or she just sought out hugs and accolades more than most. Though given that just a few months ago she was flashing her pixilated breasts on a major network, the fact that she'd seek out accolades shouldn't have been surprising to me. Though what did surprise me was how much I wanted all those people to go the hell away.

I started hoisting my body out of its slumped shape to get out of the chair, which was proving to be a more difficult feat than it should have been. At the same time as I was doing that, my cell phone started ringing. I tried fishing it out of my pants pocket, at the same time still trying to get out of the chair and was ending up not doing either function correctly. The good news was my thrashing got Marlene to notice me. The bad news was it got Marlene to notice me. She waved. She smiled. The phone kept ringing. Finally it stopped. Still in my chair, though at least seated in the traditional feet on the floor fashion favored by most, I managed to hit the button that would have muted the phone, even though the phone didn't need muting anymore, just to prove to myself that I could do it.

I gave Marlene a "Hi, I'm here and I'm a clumsy dickhead" wave, then finally got out the chair and walked about 20 feet away from the stage to retrieve the voice mail, which had a 215 area code and a number I didn't recognize. The same couldn't be said of the voice. That voice I recognized. But the stammering,

uncertain tone in her voice--that I definitely didn't recognize.

"Jeff, Gail. Look, I suppose I shouldn't have run off, I know you were trying to help, but I didn't want--I couldn't--fuck it. I--I--we need to talk about things. I guess that's pretty obvious. Not tonight, not the rest of this weekend, but we need to talk. Soon. Maybe now. I don't know. I'm glad you're not picking this up, sort of. Assuming you're okay. Are you okay? Just let me know that. Were you back earlier, back at the hotel earlier? Were you in the room? No, I guess not. Silly to think that. Just call."

Just call. Just call and what? No, Gail, I will not just call. I felt bad for a second, but only for a second. No, Gail, I will not just call. You can try to figure out whether it's safe to suck Marty Munro's tenured dick in our hotel room, the room that I helped pay for, all by yourself. I'm not going to help you.

Wait. I didn't pay for it. No matter. That's not the point. I'm still not going to call you. On principle. Or something.

I walked back to the stage. I noticed one guy; a guy I couldn't decide was either gay or just a pretty boy community theater type, lean over to Marlene and whisper something. I thought this might be a very good chance to walk up to them and do my best to make things awkward, in case he was not only straighter than I'd thought, but someone she'd been having or was planning on having sex with.

"Jeff!" she said, turning away from him, and that was enough. For a moment. But the pretty boy whisperer still seemed a little bit too intimate with

Marlene, inching too close to her and the just tight enough fitting pink t-shirt and just tight enough fitting denim miniskirt she was wearing, and I realized I basically knew nothing about her and the interior of her life, or if this guy was in any way part of that interior. But I needed to chart that interior, fast.

“Derrick,” she said, turning to Pretty Boy. This is Jeff Ramsey. Jeff, Derrick Moss.”

Now. Jump in. Now. Just in case you need to. Freeze Pretty Boy out..

“I’m in town visiting Marlene this weekend.”

“Really? The whole weekend,” Derrick said. “Marlene, you didn’t say you had a visitor this weekend.”

“Yeah, well,” I spoke up. “It was sort of spur of the moment.”

“Yes,” Marlene said. “Very, very spur indeed.” Her mouth took on this little crooked incarnation of slyness.

“So,” Derrick said, his eyes narrowing just slightly, “are you an actor of some sort? In, you said, Lancaster? Do you act in Amish plays or something?”

“Funny you should ask,” I said, “I was Harrison Ford’s stunt double in ‘Witness’ and I had a role in Weird Al Yankovic’s video parody ‘Amish Paradise.’ I played one of the butter churners.”

“Really,” said Derrick, with a tone that suggested he was instinctual enough to know he was being mocked but not quite smart enough to be certain.

“You don’t look...quite old enough to be a stunt double for Harrison Ford.”

“He doesn’t look thin enough, either. Really, Derrick, he’s full of shit,” Marlene said. He’s a lawyer.” She then cocked her head and smiled this sneaky smile. “Jeff, are we done being silly tonight?”

“Probably not,” I said.

“Probably not,” she said. “I’ll be with you in a bit. Give me a minute or two with Derrick.

And with that Marlene walked away from me and I walked away from her wondering what the hell had just happened, whether I should feel good or not, waiting for a sign that I was still in the game, or that I even knew what the game actually was.

“I’m sorry I missed the play,” I said, as she grabbed a coat and I put my arm around her shoulder to pseudo-escort her outside the theater.

“Where to now?” she said, letting the arm stay on the shoulder.

“Really, I am. I wish I’d gotten here in time to see it.”

“You missed nothing. It needs a lot of work. It’s self-indulgent bullshit. Even more self-indulgent than I usually am. Derrick will be doing major surgery on it next week, whether I like it or not.”

“So, what’s the deal with Derrick?”

“He’s going to be directing this thing, and maybe helping me raise money to put it on.”

“That’s not what I mean.”



“I know.”

“And you’re not going to tell me.”

“Let’s head to the Art Museum.”

“They’re closed, aren’t they?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I don’t know. Let’s head there. I’ll drive, I guess.”

“You’ll have to, I guess.”

We got in her car--a yellow Corvette convertible with the top up. “You’re probably thinking ‘where’d she get the money for this set of wheels?’”

“Actually, I’m still thinking about Derrick, but now that you mention it, yeah, where did you?”

“Finishing in seventh place on a reality show doesn’t make you rich,” she said, pushing away papers, scripts and several pairs of high heel shoes off the passenger seat. “It’s just enough money to blow. So I blew it. On this. The perfect car to give handjobs in. Like it?”

“I don’t even know what to say to that,” sitting down, but picking up one of the shoes, trying to gauge the height of the heel and wondering how she’d look in it.”

“How about, ‘did I ever give Derrick a handjob in my Vette?’ I mean, you do want to ask, don’t you?”

In a roundabout way, I though I’d been asking that all night.

“Couldn’t you even tell he was gay?” she said.

“I thought he might be just a sensitive, New Age straight guy who wanted to fuck you. He was kind of on the border.”

“Were you jealous?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s sweet. Unwarranted, but sweet.”

“You’re sweet.”

“No, I’m not. Don’t think that. It ruins everything. To the Art Museum?”

The Philadelphia Museum of Art was not, truth be told, a bad place to be on a Friday night. It wouldn’t have been my first choice, but it played well enough into a whole host of mental images. It is emblematic of an image of Philadelphia that Philly doesn’t think it has or even deserves. Locals almost always miss it. They never see it through any but the cloudiest, dustiest prism imaginable. The city that Isn’t New York. That Isn’t Washington. “Corrupt and contented,” to use a famous phrase from someone whose name escapes me. Think W.C. Fields’ epitaph. Think booing Santa Claus at Vet Stadium. I could go on and on.

Except I didn’t see it that way. I grew up in a place where the nicest homes were the big mansions of the old coal barons that had been sliced into apartments, and the not as nice homes seemed covered with a kind of grime that I knew couldn’t literally be coal anymore, but ought to be. And when you live in a place like that, you orient yourself to a big city. It becomes your big city. It’s

whose teams you root for. It's--if culture and such matters to you, and it matters to me--whose cultural attractions you see. Maybe it's a negative affiliation—it's the city you fear going to, the big bad Gomorrah just a few scary hours away. Maybe it's both things at once. But, in any event, it's The city to you. And it probably always will be, wherever life takes you.

To me, Philadelphia was--is--that city. When I drive east along the Schuylkill Expressway at night, and I race past the rowing clubs on the river banks, the outlines of their windows and roofs and doors and chimneys all lit up, throwing their light down like stalactites in the Schuylkill River, I still feel something. Like I'm escaping my little hometown in coal country again, one more time. I feel I can say to myself, "I'm going somewhere. I'm going somewhere."

And I wanted to feel that. Right now. Tonight, on a cool, breezy evening with Marlene. I had no idea what was going to happen the next day, and the day after that, except that it likely wouldn't end up being anything good, or even tolerable. But I didn't have to think about that. This could be my version of One Day at a Time, just for tonight. For the past two days I'd been getting whacked and smacked around the Delaware Valley, but for tonight I was going to Philadelphia. And going with someone who wanted me along for the trip.

Marlene parked her car next to a metered spot not far from the Art Museum, and I asked her again why we were going here. And she didn't answer. She just said let's walk up the steps, the famous "Rocky" steps, just trust me.

And we walked up the steps. And I'm not really sure it happened like this, but it could have, and should have. It was an almost perfect moment. So perfect, I wanted to step outside myself, outside the scene, away from her and me and the people that were still there, still walking past, walking down the steps and out of the museum and view it all in the twilight. And I want to improve it. To photoshop all the imperfections out of the scene, and out of my life. Or, even better yet, to view it cinematically, to have this giant crane shot going up, up, up and looking down on Marlene and in this perfectly lit setting in this perfect place. Not that it was perfect. Not that it should even be perfect. But it should be that sort of perfect within the realm of human ability because anything more would make it less than real, and flawed, and I've had enough of flaws for one life.

So, imagine it. Twilight is ending. Street lights are twinkling on, all over Philadelphia. And I know that lights don't really twinkle on anywhere, least of all in Philadelphia, but work with me. And I'm standing aside, just outside the door of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. And I'm with Marlene. And we are together, our bodies close to each other silhouetted by the museum's Greek or Roman or whatever the hell it is, I'm not up on my architecture, temple-like outline. And the camera on that crane pulls back, back, back as we are kissing, as she kisses me, as she leans me against a doorway, or something, I don't even remember what, and kisses me, and the camera is high atop that crane, pulling back, back, way back over the Parkway until we are just barely, barely visible, two silhouetted figures

starting a romance backdropped by the Philadelphia Museum of Art amidst twinkling lights in the City of Brotherly Love.

It's a moment. A moment with a capital MOME. I can actually see the letters MOME in big red letters, with the "O" tilted to one side, morphing into the LOVE sculpture sitting at the other end of the Parkway, the O in MOME reclining just like the O in the real sculpture. It's the moment I wanted, with Gail, or Aviva, or anyone, and yes, I had those moments with them and I pissed them away, pissed them away as recently as this afternoon, but I have it with Marlene, and it's okay, because its A Moment. A glowing kind of thing. Soft and passionate and strong and edgy, but yet not too edgy, not too unfamiliar but not too familiar either, because even though it is the Philadelphia Museum of Art and it's familiar and everybody knows it from "Rocky" it's never been used like this, for this, and I'm the first one to do this, I know I am, and even if I'm not, I'm the first one to film it, at least in my head, high above the Parkway, so even if other lesser mortals, fuck it, even if greater mortals have done this or end up doing this, it's the first time its ever been done this way, written down this way, lights twinkling along the Parkway.

For a moment, the moment almost doesn't even need Marlene. She disappears into it, even though she's the reason for it, at least for a fleeting, twinkling sensation of a second.

Then she comes back into the scene. And that's good.

And then it stops being a scene, and becomes real.

And I leaned against her, and she leaned against a column, or a wall, or something. And pretty much most of my torso and pelvis were pressing against her, not too insistently, but enough. One hand was against the wall. The other was on her thigh, where the end of the denim miniskirt met her leg.

That hand had to go somewhere else, soon. I had my own ideas about that. A slow slide, up thigh, under the denim. But not all at once. Not while neglecting the rest of her, either.

She had other, quicker ideas. She guided my hand up further, further than I would have gone in five, in ten minutes, at least. I thought she'd stop, or I'd stop, at her panties, slowly move my finger around the elastic leg band.

She wanted no part of that. "Fuck foreplay," she said, in a breathy, angry whisper, then guided--forced, really, one, then another finger inside of her.

And I realized that there were people around. Or, more accurately, I had always known there were people around, but suddenly not only their presence, but their judgment of me mattered. Night was less of a cover than she thought.

No, that wasn't accurate. She didn't want cover. She didn't care about cover. I found that out when I was still being tentative, even as she was trying to push my two of my fingers inside her, and I was still trying to dance them along the edge of her wet self.

"Now. Inside me."

I looked around. At least I must have. I'm not sure, but she whispered, "No. Look. Look at me."

I'd done this before. I'd fucked and eaten and fingered and flicked and been sucked and jerked in public and semi-public places before.

But I'd never done it sober.

I couldn't. I pulled my fingers out of her, then out from under her underwear and skirt. And I thought--and by now I was looking at her again, looking at nothing else in the universe--that she might do me actual violence. And I wasn't entirely sure I didn't deserve it. But I kept my hand where it was. At my side. Away from her. Laden with the feel of the evidence that I had just had my hands inside the pussy of a woman who I thought I wanted in the most urgent way, and now I wasn't sure.

"Let's go somewhere else," I said. She stopped leaning against the wall, but didn't answer right away.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what to say." That wasn't true. I did know what to say. I wanted to say that this was way too much for someone trying to keep sober, and that she of all people should understand that. But I didn't have the balls to say it without a drink.

Sobriety was turning me into a wuss.

We walked down all the steps. There were, by the way, a lot of steps. I

started to pant a little bit, hoping that this was merely another vestige of me being out of shape, and not me having a round of whatever the hell hit me this morning in the park and again at Aviva's house. It was noticeable enough that Marlene asked me if I was doing alright. She'd asked me the same questions on the way up the steps before, and then I thought I was. Now, I didn't know. I no longer trusted my own body's reactions to anything.

"Could the somewhere else be your apartment?" I suggested.

"It can be. Is that what you want?"

"I wonder...."

"You wonder too much."

I wasn't entirely sure I agreed with that. No matter. Marlene caught something in me before I did.

"What *do* you want, anyway, Jeff?"

"What do you find about me that's remotely attractive? Seriously."

"I tried to show you at the top of those steps. You pulled away. I thought you were fucked up enough for this."

"Is that what you find attractive in me?" And now I was pissed. And I knew she caught it, since I wasn't hiding any of my emotions well.

She and I both got in her car. She leaned back in her seat. She sighed. Twice. She started on a third sigh but stopped herself.

"This, weirdly enough, Jeff, is what I find attractive."



“Mixed signals are attractive?”

“Some are. Yours are. They’re frustrating me, especially when I was dripping wet a few minutes ago, but yes, it’s attractive. Or intriguing.”

“So, it’s a chance to fix me?”

“Jesus, no. It’s more...it’s more watching you try to fix yourself. It’s interesting. It’s unusual. It suggests something a little different.”

“What if I said I don’t particularly want to be figured out right now, but I want to go home now?”

“I’d say--reluctantly, because I’m still a little bit horny—that’s probably not a bad idea. But what do you mean by home? The hotel? Back to your, um....um....”

“Gail. Her name is Gail.”

“Is Gail your home?”

“Gail’s where my suitcase is, for the moment. You really do like watching me squirm, don’t you?”

“It’s an interesting thing to observe.” She paused. “I think I’ll take you back to your suitcase. You can figure the rest out later. But not too much later.”

“Will you lose interest?”

“I might. I might not. Don’t push it.”

I sat in the car without saying a word for maybe 15 seconds. Then I told her to take me back to the suitcase, the Marriott, and everything that was there

with it, because I was really beginning to get angry with Marlene, though I wasn't wholly sure why. I decided I'd rather face Gail that night, where I would at least have a much clearer, more linear idea why I was angry.

It got even clearer why I was nice and conventionally mad at Gail when Marlene deposited me back to the hotel lobby, and I made my way up to what was an empty room. I thought briefly--well, not that briefly--of finding out where Professor Marty was staying, and knocking on the door in order to rustle up some ugliness and low farce. I gave up on the idea, only because of exhaustion. I could summon up the whole stupid idea again after a good night's sleep.

I took off my clothes, stuck the cell phone back in the charger, and was going to put on some sweatpants. Then I remembered that the pair I'd packed were still sitting in Aviva's apartment. That is, unless she'd ceremonially burned them and danced around the flames with great joy. I took out the bottle I'd stuck in my pants pocket, and stared at it. At him. I rolled the bottle around in my hands.

WWSD? What Would Steve Do?

Who knew what that little toad would do? What I wanted to do, to be blunt about it, was to find a mental image to fixate on for a little while, employ that image for the purposes of some harmless little masturbatory diversion, and then fall asleep.

I tried, too. Tried and tried.

It wasn't the first time this weekend I felt I was just sitting there with my dick in my hand, but it was the first time that feeling was so damn literal. Indistinct images passed through my brain. No single face or body I could wrap my head, or hand around. Not even the ones with Marlene less than a half hour before. In fact, thinking about that just made me more lifeless and limp than before, when there was at least a little stirring, if not outright stiffening.

Great. I couldn't even summon up eroticism on demand anymore. I had passed into new and unpleasant territory; I had become officially Too Confused Even to Jerk Off.

Fine. Plain old sleep. I stopped looking at my pathetic, unresponsive dick and decided to opt for sleep.

Sleep.

Lots and lots of sleep.

Please. Please. Nice and normal, conventional REM inducing, no fucked up overly vivid dreaming sleep.

Sleep. It's happening. I can feel it. That, and the steps of the Art Museum again, under my feet.

And the sound of other steps. Thump, thump, thump on each step. No feet, but the pounding up and down those long steps.

And the music. I know that music.

Da da DA, da da DA.

Gonna fly now. Gonna fly now.

And that voice. That voice singing, “It’s the thrill of the fight, Rising up to the challenge of our rival.”

“Yo! Asshole. Eye of the Tiger!”

Steve. Steve in Everlast boxing trunks, gloves on hands that aren’t hands.

“Jeff, baby. C’mon, start running. Keep up with me.” He was punching, left, right, left, right. “C’mon, fat boy, get into shape. You think you can take Apollo Creed like that?” he said, running up the Art Museum steps as a full horn section blared in the background. “Fat boy, you look like Rocky Balboa *before* he started training. Stallone’s mama’s in better shape than you. Lose that gut, lawyer-boy.” Steve slammed me in the stomach. I collapsed and fell down about a hundred steps, clinging to my midsection the whole time.

“See, it’s like this. You keep hitting this piece of meat over and over again.” And suddenly, Steve was slamming a side of beef suspended in the air.

“Hit it. Put some leather on it. Hit it.”

I start to hit the beef, tentatively at first.”

“Yo, harder. Harder. Tell me who it looks like?”

“It’s just a slab of meat.”

“They all are, right? Tell me who it looks like.”

“It’s all so indistinct. I can” tell.”

“Bullshit, Jeff. It’s gotta look like someone. Gail, does it look like Gail?”

Would you like it to look like Gail? Or the douche bag she's spreading her legs for? Want it to look like him? Professor Mar-tee?" he said, drawing out and placing the accent on the last syllable.

I kept hitting the beef. I didn't want to answer him.

"Aviva? Mark? Marlene? Your dad, maybe. Yeah, your dad. Tell me who it looks like. Then hit it."

My arms started getting too heavy to box anymore. I found myself at the top of the museum steps again, with the slab of beef having followed me.

"Yo, hit it. You've got to keep hitting it. Or I'm just gonna keep hitting you like this..." and then Steve pounded my gut again, and I fell again. And when I caught my breath, the horn section filled out every available molecule of space, and I couldn't hear a word Steve was saying. Just a mouth and a bottle.

Then silence. Then Steve's voice.

"Yo, Jeff. Think you can go the distance?"

Then I woke up, sweating like I'd actually done some exercise for a change.

I looked at the alarm clock. 12:03 in the morning.

Saturday. Day two of NaBLAFest. Things still sucked.

But, as we say in AA, "at least I didn't drink today. I'm a winner."



## January, 2001

The first time I knew my father was going to die, and die soon—really intuit that fact in a way that no doctor neither could nor needed to explain—was when he was in a hospital bed in Reading. It wasn't so much the injuries that led me to that knowledge. He had only broken his right arm and left leg when he drunkenly fell down the basement staircase. I hadn't even been told yet that his liver enzymes were fucked beyond imagining. None of that was necessary for me to know. I only had to be a party to this exchange.

“Hi, Dad.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Dad, are you okay?”

“I'm alright. It's not so bad.”

“Dad, I'm really worried about you.”

“You don't worry. It's not your job.” His stare sucked whatever affection there might have been in the room out of every door and window.

“I just...I know you were drinking.”

“Of course I was.” His eyes, including the one that had turned black and green and purple around the edges when his head hit a toolbox next to the bottom step became as narrow and flat as the tone in his voice.

And I knew. I knew he just didn't give a shit anymore, and wasn't even going to pretend that he did. Kate and I were adults. Mom was dead. He had his

Ironworker pension. The gap between wanting to care and needing to care, always more tenuous than I knew when I was growing up, had finally slammed shut.

I stayed for a few more minutes, made small talk to Kate when she walked in the room, then left. In my car, I snorted some coke, then headed back to court. It was a good day. I got rape charges against a client tossed at a preliminary hearing because the victim froze up and couldn't identify my client. That almost never happens; you almost always lose prelims. I was happy. I took a few more coke hits back at Mark's office. I took Aviva out to dinner that night, practically parking a bottle of Jack Daniels at the table. Even Aviva got buzzed. She told me not to worry about my dad. She didn't need to. I had already decided that. And until I saw him horizontal in a box three years later, I kept that promise.

I find myself thinking about my father more now than I ever did back then. Now that I need thought to fill up time, my father expands to fill up more of that space than I wish he would.

And yet there are advantages to that. If I try hard enough, think about it enough, maybe I can fix my past. It's easier than dealing with the wreckage of my future. Which I'm going to have to start doing soon enough, when I get out of here.

When I get out. It's what everyone in jail thinks about. But you think of other things as well. You can try to focus just on the hallelujah I'm getting out moment, but other thoughts will creep in, whether you want them to or not.



I'm in my cell, with Rudy. Work is done, and 3 pm count is about to start. We wait in place, wait for a guard to verify we are where we're supposed to be.

Where I'm supposed to be. Don't get me started on that.

I look over at Rudy, who is looking at his file again. Don't get me started on where Rudy is supposed to be, either. At least I know why I earned my spot as a guest of the City of Philadelphia. That's more than Rudy does.

"9. 9. 9."

"Yeah, Rudy, Count'll be over soon."

And maybe I'll get the word I'm waiting to hear, that I'm getting out.

## Saturday

I woke up at four in the morning, still all alone in a hotel bed, the covers where Gail had slept the night before still wrapped around me, the scent of her having faded and never really having had a chance to take hold.

Here's a test. Something to think about, to try to figure out if you're really alone in the world. Imagine you're in a big city you don't live in, and you're having really bad 4 a.m angst. Who would you call?

If the answer is that there's nobody left in the universe who thinks your deep dark fears are even remotely worth humoring, then you're stabbing, burning angst was probably thoroughly justified in the first place. In fact, I'd suggest ramping that fresh angsty feeling up to a full fledged panic attack.

This, by the way, is me beating around the bush. This is me trying not to say something that I really, really don't want to say, because it's so utterly lame-ass predictable.

This is me saying I need a drink.

No. This is me saying I need a full on drunk. I need to drink and drink and drink until I've taken myself so far down that every drink I'm piling on is no longer working, and I need to yank my insides up with some coke, push it as far as I can up until that's not working and those little cocaine bugs are creeping through my epidermis at that same spot on my forearms and in back of my calves, always on the same spot, the same goddamn spot, and I can't stand it, can't bear it

anymore so I have to go down, down and slam down that Jack Daniels, so harsh and wonderful, like a lover that I fight with all the time, but I stay with because I don't have to explain any of this to and she can still fuck like a demon again and again until it all stops working again and nothing brings me up or takes me down and I'm just spinning.

I know that this feeling will pass. If I let it.

Right at this moment, I have to decide if I'll let it.

Some people would pray to get through a moment like this. They'd literally get down on their knees and beg God for the strength to ride that moment out just one more day.

But I'd rather confront someone else than myself today. Like, for instance, Professor Mar-TEE. I'd rather pound on the door of his hotel room, grab a naked Gail, drag the bitch back here, throw her ass on the bed and then....and...and then what?

Probably walk out on her. That would serve her right. Let her know I'm hurt. Scarred. Wounded. That I may be a troglodyte, but I'm a sensitive troglodyte.

Shit. The door opened. I threw the covers over my head and curled up like a sleeping lump.

I could be calm. And still. And never let her know I'm even awake. She'll tiptoe in, not trying to wake me up. Just see what she did. I didn't even have to

say a word, I didn't have to have my whole body shoot straight up, like I was sleeping, and say anything like, for instance:

“Gail you fucking cunt, what the fuck were you doing with Munro?”

“What? What? You what? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I saw you. In the lobby. With that fucking prick scumbag professor. You were giggling and laughing and...”

“Jesus Christ, Jeff. Were you spying on me?”

“Damn right I was. With good reason.” I was feeling great. Wonderfully wronged. Like a victim, but an empowered one. The best kind of victim. And the urge to drink had totally subsided. Rage is good. Rage is your friend. Rage kicks ass.

“Stop this. Now. Let me explain.”

“Let you explain? Let you explain? There is nothing to explain...”

“Stop yelling. It's late.”

“Damn fucking right it's late. It's after four. And you're coming in here, smelling of newly tenured professorial sex.”

“Jeff, you need to stop. Now.”

“No, I will not stop.”

Oh, yeah, baby. I'm on a roll. By now I was out of bed, pacing in my underwear, walking back and forth in front of an imaginary jury box, delivering an impassioned closing argument the likes of which had never been seen before,

except perhaps on a particularly mediocre “Law and Order” episode.

“Jeff, I’m serious. Please stop. Catch your breath. Let me catch mine.”

“You cannot have an innocent explanation for your behavior. There is none possible.”

“And how the hell can you say that?”

“Because”, I said as I dramatically paused for effect in front of Imaginary Juror number 3, the cute one with the straight blonde hair, listening intently, hanging on to every word (and how come I couldn’t imagine *her* earlier this evening, when I was trying to jerk off), “I never had an innocent explanation when I did it.”

This phrase struck me as brilliant only for as long as it took me to spit it out. It amazed me how quickly it lost its allure.

A few years back, I represented this kid who was charged with breaking into the old abandoned steel mill in Phoenixville. Some security guard, who may have been about 100 or so, was brought in by the Commonwealth as their eyewitness. Except he couldn’t make any sort of positive ID at all. He kept saying that “I don’t see so good anymore,” which is generally considered to be a bad thing to say if you’re an eyewitness and a security guard. I watched the cop who had brought the case as he slumped his head down on the desk, trying hard to make this case, if not himself, disappear.

And then it happened. Salvation for the prosecution.

The assistant DA asked what the kid was wearing on his head at the time. Security guard paused, and said “I think it was a bandanna.”

At which point my client jumped up and said, “No it wasn’t, dumbass, I was wearing a hat.”

I bet that kid thought he was brilliant, too. For at least about a second or so.

“I think you should go now,” Gail said.

“What?” I said, as if I hadn’t known I had really overplayed my hand.

“Go. Leave. Now.”

“Gail, look....”

“Go project your bullshit on someone else. Just go.”

“Gail, I don’t have a car. I don’t have money. It’s four in the morning.”

“None of those things have ever stopped you before from cheating on me and getting drunk. But fine. You need money. Here. Take some. What’s some more money from me? This time it’s an investment.” She started crumpling up twenty dollar bills and throwing them at me. “Just. Go. Go.” She punctuated each word with another green spitball aimed at the bed, or my head.

“Gail...”

“Take it. Take the money and go. Go. I’m done. We’re done.”

“Are you breaking up with me?”

She started to shake her head, close her eyes and laugh. “I don’t even

know what to say. Just go. Now. Now. Go.”

“Gail, I need to gather my stuff.”

“Gather it? I’ll gather it.” She started rummaging through the entire span of the bedroom, then the bathroom, grabbing clothes, suitcases, all manner of things, then opened the hotel door and threw them outside. “They’re gathered. Go.”

I followed them. I sat outside the door, on the heap of stuff, for about a minute. I started uncrumpling the money, to figure out how much I had to play with. I had counted up about \$200, when I realized my phone and charger were still inside her room. I was about to knock on the door, when her hand--just her hand--appeared, took both phone and charger, dumped them on the floor, then retreated.

I reached over and grabbed the phone. Now all I had to do was figure out who to call. And why.

It’s odd what you think about, sitting on a bunch of your clothing in the hallway of a hotel at 4:15 in the morning.

I thought about my father. It’s my earliest memory of him, really. I was maybe four or five, and we were at the Jersey Shore, at a hotel in Wildwood. We always stayed there, always went back to this same place, a suite of rooms, which makes the place sound more luxurious than it was. Even then I remember the

odd, faded green color of the walls. Or maybe they just faded over time, and I blurred all my visits. Together.

But I'm not blurring this. Not this image.

My father--he would have been not quite 30 then, a long way from the days when he was a high school and college football star and he got the barest whiff and tickle of an NFL career, but still strong, still big, still not bent over with that fucked up shoulder and carved up back of his--was at the hotel pool. So was my mother, and my younger sister Kate, who was just a baby then. At least, I assume they were. I don't remember them being at the pool, or in the picture. Just my dad. My dad, having this perfect physique, muscular, powerful. I thought that if monsters rose up out of the swimming pool he could just defeat them, send them back into the water, one by one. And I remember the swimming trunks. The black swimming trunks he was wearing.

He was drinking a beer. It wouldn't have been his usual brand--not much Yuengling was served outside of Pennsylvania, it would be years till it started creeping out of coal country and became trendy and hot--but it was a beer. It had to have been a beer, anyway. And he put it down, and walked up the diving board, and dove in. And I remember it being this perfect dive. Minimum of splash, just straight down, a clean slice through the water. And he got out of the water, and went right back to his beer.

I thought of him as I reached through the pile of clothes Gail had tossed



out and put on my pants. I thought of him as I buttoned my shirt, and looped my belt in, and put on socks and shoes. I thought of him, and that perfect dive, and that beer in his hand before and after. Power, and grace. Class. He had this blue collar Cheever-like thing going on, and I carried that image in my head for a long, long time. I don't have many images of my father exuding power and grace that I tote around. But I have that one. I have that one to damn me all of my days.

There isn't much you can say about wheeling luggage out of a hotel room and into the world before the sun's even up. If you're lucky, the reason you're doing it at that ungodly hour is that you've got an early plane to catch.

As should be clear by now, I'm not lucky.

I am, however, used to being thrown out of places. Though they are usually apartments, or residences, or rehabs. (Yes, I lied when I suggested to Aviva I'd never been thrown out of a rehab. But it was before I met her, and before I met Gail. And it's not a story I feel like telling right now. I'll stick with the one I'm relaying right now. You're missing nothing.) And there's usually some notice. Or at least a vibe that it's coming, which can pass for actual notice in a pinch. And some place to go. And somebody to take me to that place.

Right now the only somebody was a cab. I opted not to call Mark. Not right now. I couldn't face him. I needed to put some kind of a winning streak together before I called him back. Cab drivers require much less in the way of explanations.

I walked through the lobby, past the plastic shrub I had knocked over last evening, its trunk still askew in the fake mulch, past the front desk, through the glass doors, out into the first slivery light of dawn, and into a cab. He asked me if I wanted to put the suitcase in the trunk, but I told him I'd hang onto it. Which I did. I shoved the slightly recalcitrant handle back into its little recessed place and put it on my lap, encircling it with my arms and slightly leaning forward in the back seat.

“Take me to Wissahickon Park”, I said.

“Not an address? The park?” the cab driver said.

“The park. The park's fine.”

“I know that park well. I don't think it's open yet.”

“I don't think I particularly care. Take me.”

“Isn't that kind of stupid?”

“Isn't it kind of stupid for cab drivers to be offering opinions on where their passengers go?”

He didn't have much of a response except maybe three-quarters of a shoulder shrug and about one and a half times the normal length of a sigh.

“And don't take the expressway,” I said. “I'll show you the route,” I said, leaning even further towards the front seat and clutching my suitcase even tighter.

“Your money, your ride,” said Ahmed the cabbie. Really. Ahmed.

Ahmed. The same Ahmed who had picked me up before. Allah fucking

Akbar, am I going to have to tell this guy to shut up twice?

“Take it Callowhill to Juniper. Or Market to Juniper, either way. Then to City all, past Logan Circle, up to the Art Museum. Then to Wissahickon Park. No expressway. Got it?”

“Got it. Whatever you want.”

And with that I put my trust in Ahmed. Or perhaps I didn't put my trust in him so much as I loosened my cynicism just a bit and relaxed. No, I didn't relax so much as I just simply sat back in the seat like a regular person and stopped clutching the suitcase like it was something nuclear.

I'd like to say I enjoyed it. I didn't do that, either. I wished I could enjoy it. Or at least let it wash over me. But I wasn't capable of doing that. The drive past the art museum was so yesterday. Literally. Everything that looked beautiful hours earlier lost--well, something. I can't quite say what it lost. Or maybe it had lost nothing, and I was the one who was lost.

At the time I had that less than brilliant epiphany, I began to realize that being dropped off at Wissahickon Park was, to use the relatively accent-free statement of Ahmed, kind of stupid. Minutes before, it seemed profound, with a dollop of nostalgic longing, as I thought about walking along Forbidden Drive's gravel trail with Aviva, alongside Wissahickon Creek.

Except it wasn't walking. It was usually biking.

And I didn't have a bike. I had me. Me and all my body fat. Me and my

paunch and a suitcase. Me and my paunch and my suitcase, each of us going clunk clunk along a gravel trail at six in the morning alongside a creek with a good three or four miles before getting over to Mt. Airy, and a few more on top of that before hitting Chestnut Hill.

Perhaps Ahmed had a better handle on my best interests than I did. But then, most people did.

“Forget the park.”

“We’re almost there.”

“Forget the park. Take me somewhere else.”

“The park is pretty.”

“The park is stupid. You said so yourself.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it wasn’t as stupid as I thought. It wasn’t my place to give an opinion.”

“It was. It was very stupid. You are a wise man, Ahmed. Take me far away from this park. And I’m sorry I blew you off the other day when you were trying to talk to me.”

“It’s not a problem. You tipped me well, I forgave you.” He smiled. So did I. So where to then, if not the park?”

Damn. I had to make a choice here. For all that I like having options, this one, being as it was forced upon me, was suddenly becoming a major pain in the ass.

Where's the closest place to get something to eat here that's open," I said.

"It's been a while since I lived here."

"There's a diner on Germantown Avenue. Not far. You want that?"

"As good as anything. Take me there."

We headed onto Lincoln Drive, past the park.

"Really, I shouldn't have said it was stupid, going to the park," Ahmed spoke, jarring me out of my half-formed thoughts.

"No, really, it was," I said, smiling. "It was a silly thought."

"Silly isn't stupid. I come here a lot, with my wife and two daughters. We live over in Germantown. My girls like to ride their bikes past the creek. I like that they don't allow cars there. It's safe for them."

"That's how Forbidden Drive got its name, you know. The cars are forbidden. Hence the name. Forbidden Drive." Good lord, that sounded obvious coming out of my mouth.

"It's nice to have it safe for them. They've even, um, what's the word when you do something and they don't pay you."

That would have been my law practice, Ahmed, but I don't think that's the answer you wanted. "Volunteer."

"That's it. They volunteer. They help to keep it clean sometimes."

"That's nice that they do that."

"We got out of Afghanistan three years ago, right after the Taliban took

over. Not a good place for girls.”

“No, it isn’t. It must have been horrible.”

“It was. It is. There are minefields all over the countryside, unexploded shit from everywhere. The Russians, the mujahadeen, everyone left their little bombs buried. Not a place to just be a girl on a bike.”

“It’s good to be somewhere where there are no minefields in your life.”

“It’s a gift from Allah to be somewhere like that.”

We pulled up to the diner parking lot. No sign of life yet. Ahmed pulled up to the door. “They don’t open till 7,” he said. “Do you want me to take you somewhere else?”

I paused. I had some choices again. But I didn’t particularly like any of them. Except one that wasn’t even on the menu. It was time to get out of town.

“How much would it cost to take me about 95 miles from here? North. Coal country.”

After Ahmed told me it would suck up most of my remaining crumpled up dollars on a cab ride, I decided to let him drop me off in front of the unopened diner, then called my sister Kate instead. I knew I’d be waking her up--it was about ten after six Saturday morning, after all--but, as I said, she hadn’t heard from me in almost a year. She’s probably stay on the phone long enough to find out what I’d destroyed, wrecked or abused this time and if she could still look at her own life

and judge it superior to mine. Some days doing that was the best thing she had going.

That last conversation I'd had with Kate, by the way, wasn't a particularly long one. And the one a year before that, though a bit longer, wasn't particularly pleasant. But she hadn't actually told me to get out of her life. She hadn't told me to stay in it, mind you. But in the absence of explicit negation, she still remained an option. More importantly, she was a cheaper option.

"Kate. It's me."

"Umm...what? Jeff? What happened? What did you.... are you okay?"

"What did I do? You were going to ask what did I do, right?"

"Jeff, it's...what time is it?"

"You were going to ask me what I did now. Go on and ask."

"It's.... it's too early for this. Why are you calling me this early? Did you get arrested again?"

"No, of course not."

That's true, by the way. Being cited for driving while under suspension is not being arrested. It's being issued a citation. It's good to know the law.

"What, then?" she said. "Did that attorney you were with finally have an attack of common sense and toss you out?"

"It's a bit more ambiguous than that."

"Oh, God, Jeff. What happened?" Pause. "You don't sound drunk or high."

Are you? Are you drunk or high?" she said, in a tone of voice that suggested she was shaking her head in disbelief that I could be calling her this early in the morning and not be drunk or high. That I had violated some law of nature in not being drunk or high and calling her up this early on a Saturday morning.

"No, Kate, I'm not. But I'm going to need a place to stay for a while..."

"Oh, God, Jeff. We can't do this again."

"Short term. Short. Very short."

I don't know about your definition of short, Jeff. The last time, after Aviva dumped you..."

"It won't be that long."

"It was almost four months, Jeff. And...look I don't want to rehash this, I really appreciate you're trying to stay sober, really, it means a lot, but the last time....:"

"Like I said, I'm sober. It won't happen again."

"You weren't drinking or using drugs the first two weeks then, either. But you started, Jeff. And I can't..." she said, adding a digging in her heels quality to her voice, "I just can't subject Slinky, Lisa Marie, Camembert, Barton Fink and Irving to that again."

Slinky is her black cat. Lisa Marie is her other black cat. Camembert is a Bichon Frise. Barton Fink is a Pomeranian. I don't remember what Irving is. Maybe it's the obese Beagle. Unless it's her ex-husband who still hangs around. I



get the two mixed up. They both have droopy expressions, big ears, and neither one is what you'd call a working breed.

“That’s not going to happen again. I’m sober. You said so yourself.”

“I said you *sound* sober. I’ve been wrong about that before.”

“Besides, it can’t happen again. You’re back in Pottsville. You’re not in California anymore. You don’t even have a backyard with orange trees.”

“Jeff. I’ve got to think about this. Really, I’ve really, really got to think about this. I’m still remembering that.”

“It won’t happen again. I promise.”

“Do you know that Camembert still runs and hides under the coffee table when I so much as go near the gas grill? Still? It’s been almost four years, Jeff, and I get too close to that grill she just makes this awful sound, sort of like ‘Heemp, heemp, heemp’....I can’t quite get it, maybe it’s like ‘hee-eemp, hee-eemp.’” She emphasized the last syllable as he was making this sound. “It’s horrible. It’s like she’s trying to cry and like when the cat’s trying to get rid of a hairball at the same time.”

“Kate, I’m sorry to do this to you. I really wouldn’t impose. But I need you.”

“I don’t remember how to get to where you’re at in Lancaster. You’re going to have to give me directions. But I’ve got to think about this. Do you have to leave right now.”

“Well, I’m not at her house. I’m in Philadelphia.”

“Philly? When did you move back there?”

“I didn’t. I’ll explain later, when you get here.”

“Oh, God, Jeff. What is going on with you? Philly? What are you doing there? I thought you were never going back there. Did you try to get back together with the rabbi? Is that what happened?”

“She’s not a rabbi. And no, I didn’t. Just come down. I’ll explain later.”

“Jeff, I have to think about this. I do. It’s just, I want to be there for you, and I want you to be clean and sober, I want to be there for you, and I don’t think I’m even considering this because I’m codependent or anything, I really want to believe you, but it’s just that I remember all those oranges and lemons burning up, smoke everywhere, that big flaming branch falling on Irving’s tail.”

Well, at least that confirmed that Irving was not the ex-husband.

“Jeff,” she said, in the tone of voice again that she’s obviously practiced, hands on hips, at countless Al-Anon meetings, “All those orange and lemon trees set on fire, because you thought you’ve gobble up some of my Xanax, wash it down with a bottle of vodka, then start a barbeque to make those ribs like dad use to make.”

“I just wanted to surprise you.”

“Half the fire trucks in Orange County were in my backyard. Do you know what it’s like to have to travel cross-country in a Dodge Dart with two cats

and three dogs who've been burned and traumatized? It was awful, Jeff. My animals and I were dispossessed because of you and your citrus flambe."

Thank God she didn't know that I'd also spent that afternoon smoking a joint.

"Look, Jeff, I'll think about this. I'll call you later. Where can I reach you?"

I gave her my cell phone number. She promised she'd call in a few hours. It was the best I could do right now. At least the diner was opening. I carted the suitcase inside, wheeled it and me past all manner of 50's decor, and let myself be steered to a booth. Though lonely and depressed lends itself more to a serve-at-the-counter kind of mentality, there was still the matter of the ungainly suitcase that I was dragging around with me. I hate it when my baggage is so literal and visible. I hoisted the suitcase on the seats across from me, and dumped myself in the other. I flipped open the menu, trying to decide whether I should order something or just surrender to the buffet table and omelet station, when in walked Aviva. And Sol. No. That's not quite right. It was more like Aviva and Sol. Or maybe Solaviva. Or Aviva del Sol. But in they walked. Together. Smiling. Laughing. Laughing at 7:05 a.m. A couple. A couple of people laughing at my expense. And they didn't even know I was here. But they would. Because I'd damn well make sure of it. As long as were going to have awkward, we're going to have full out, go for it, 110% awkwardness. The Olympics of social unease.

I got up. I walked over to their booth. I opened my mouth. Nothing came out. Sounds never had the chance to form.

“Jeff,” Aviva said. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Aviva,” I said. “What the hell are you doing with someone old enough to be your father?”

“Being with you was like being with a child. Maybe I thought I’d try something different.” She paused, then had a look that suggested something more than just annoyance. “Oh , God, Jeff, are you stalking me?”

“I’m calling the police,” Sol said.

“Pussy,” I muttered under my breath. Or maybe a little bit louder than that, at the point where breath and mutter meet.

“Jeff, for God’s sake, are you stalking me? Is that what you’ve come down to?”

“I thought you said he was on probation,” Sol said. “I’m calling the cops.”

“Aviva, I had no idea you were here. Really.”

“Liar. Good God, Jeff, this is a low even for you. I’m supposed to believe you just ended up here. That you weren’t waiting outside my apartment. What did you do, Jeff, peek in on me? You sick bastard.”

“I’m calling the police,” Sol said again. And suddenly I became the pussy.

“I’m going. I’m going. I didn’t know you were here, but I’m going.”

I ran back to my booth just as the waitress was coming up to take my order. I grabbed the suitcase, yanking it so hard that it wasn't completely balanced on its two wheels, causing it to careen into Sol and Aviva's table, knocking water onto her lap.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I said, reaching across their table to grab napkins.

"Fuck you, Jeff. Go. Sol, call the cops."

"I'm going. I'm going." I shouted, this time to everyone in the restaurant.

"I'm going. See?" I was walking backwards, out the door, wobbling suitcase by my side. "Going, going, gone. See. I'm going."

I started walking backwards out of the diner, my suitcase trailing behind me, shaky and wobbly as everything else in my life as it banged into tables and waitresses. I backed out the door, steering the suitcase and myself out of the parking lot. At the lot's edge, at what I hoped was off the property line, I pulled my cell phone out and called Mark. He was close by. I needed close by right now.

Answer, Mark. Answer.

I fucked up and I didn't even fuck up. Answer.

A Philadelphia police car pulled up to the light on the corner. I watched to see if it was going to turn into the lot when the light changed.

Answer. Answer. There is no way anyone will believe anything I have to say....

"Hello?" Mark's voice.

“It’s me. I need you to come get me. I’m at a diner on Germantown Avenue, near, um, Emlen, Emlen Avenue, I think.”

“Why? What did you do now.”

“Nothing. But it doesn’t look that way. Mark, I think Aviva thinks I tried to stalk her at this diner I’m at now.

“You weren’t?”

“No,” I said, continuing to watch as the light changed and the police car continued down Germantown Avenue, as I breathed a sigh of relief, but only a very short, shallow sigh. “I think she called the cops on me. She was starting to as I left.”

“You saw her do that?”

“I didn’t. I got the hell out of there when she said....Mark, I’m standing in a parking lot with my suitcase. Gail threw me out of her hotel room; Aviva may or may not be calling the cops. I just talked to my sister Kate. I need to go back up to Pottsville. Can you take me there? Please.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to get away from here.”

“No, why should I be the one to do it?”

“I don’t know.” I paused. I really didn’t. “I’m not running away.”

“Actually you are. And that may or may not be a smart move. But my question is why should I give a shit at this point?”

Another police car this time a Chevy Blazer or something like it--drove past.

“None. I’m a fuckup and you should wash your hands of me. I’m just begging, that’s all. Please. I’m begging. I don’t know what else to do. I’m begging. Babbling and begging.”

Mark sighed. “I could be there in less than ten minutes.”

“Thanks.”

“I could. But I won’t. Solve this yourself. Call me if you do.”

“Don’t hang up on me, Mark. You’re all I’ve got.”

That wasn’t totally true. But it was getting real close.

“I don’t know if that’s true. But on the off chance it is, I’m letting you figure this out yourself. Bye.”

I then realized that any description of me to the cops would probably say that I was dragging a suitcase down the street.

Fuck the suitcase. Who needs clothes, anyway? I walked back into the parking lot, long enough to toss it into a dumpster. Then I started running--flailing and panting, really--down Germantown Avenue till I came to a Wawa and ducked inside. I tried to look as inconspicuous as I could, which mostly consisted of trying to will myself to blend into the Tastykake displays. When my heart stopped racing enough that blood wasn’t pounding in my head, and that I wasn’t going to look like a Butterscotch Krimpet, no matter how hard I tried, I called for a cab,

wondering how far Gail's \$180.00 or so that I had left in my pocket would get me.

It almost got me there. I managed to make it all the way out of town and up Route 61 to a lumber yard at Schuylkill Haven. Another cab driver who could have been named Ahmed but wasn't took me to Danny Janowski's Big Crazy Lumber Place, right under the sign of Big Crazy Danny Janowski, who really was big, and probably was crazy, at least that's what my dad told me when he and Danny were in their high school football playing prime, and left me while I waited for Kate to arrive. Ahmed Lite didn't talk, which was fine, since I didn't want to hear whatever he had to say. I just let him drive as I watched Philadelphia recede into the distance and the Pennsylvania that nobody cares about--not even me, until about three hours ago--enter my life again.

It's called "The T", if you're a political or socio-economic type. Picture a map of Pennsylvania, take out Philly and its suburbs, Pittsburgh and its suburbs, and you're left with the rest of the place. That's the part that's sort of shaped like a "T".

Except it's not all the same, save for the fact that it isn't Philly, and it isn't Pittsburgh. Some of it's rural. Some of it is small town. And some of it is, well, its places like my hometown, places where the scenery ranges from unremarkable to man-made ugly. Places where people don't seem to leave, but can't really



articulate why they stay.

Places like my hometown.

It took about an hour and 40 minutes to get here. 14 years to get away. An hour and 40 minutes to get back.

I paid Ahmed the Lesser, tipped him, jingled the dollar in change I had left in my pocket from all the money Gail had thrown at me this morning, and waited for Kate to show up. Or, more accurately, I forced her hand, calling her somewhere north of Reading, when I knew I was about a half hour away from the meter hitting the limits of my money. It worked. Once a co-dependent, always a co-dependent. Absence may not necessarily make the heart grow fonder, but it doesn't necessarily make it any less exploitable.

So I knew I didn't have to wait long. She might even be there when I arrived at Danny Janowski's outsized face on a sign by the side of Route 61.

Except she wasn't. She wasn't there when I got there. She wasn't there after 10 minutes.

She wasn't there after 20 minutes and a phone call.

She wasn't there after 35 minutes, two more phone calls, and several walks around the lumber yard.

She wasn't there after 57 minutes, two more phone calls, and about ten minutes of truly disjointed panic that I was standing by the side of a road running past, around and through disfigured hills with no possessions, no car, no money

and maybe no sister.

And then, finally, there was no phone. It died. A slow death, sort of like what I was experiencing.

Come to coal country, experience slow death. It worked for my father. It could work for me, too.

For a second, I thought maybe Steve would show up. He'd drive up to Crazy Danny Janowski's enlarged, Neanderthal-brow dominant face, probably in a '65 Mustang, and say, "hey, stranger, need a lift somewhere?" as something from ZZ Top blared from the radio. Maybe some bikini wearing mini-bottles of rum would be in the passenger seat and in the back.

Great. I was now hoping for my hallucinations to save me. Or at least shield me. What good was having visual and auditory flights of insanity if it wouldn't protect from all the suckass parts of reality? How bad is it when you're having separation anxiety from your hallucinations?

I was starting to think I had just flat out panicked for no good reason. I left the restaurant; I had no real reason to think that Aviva would have actually called the police. And besides, I really didn't do anything wrong. Nothing that even danced along the edge of legal, for once.

I walked into the lumber yard, which was just opening up. I hoped I might find Danny Janowski actually on site, tell him who I was, and see if that got me anywhere, like, maybe, to a phone. Marlene, maybe. I could call Marlene. I didn't

think I'd completely, irredeemably pissed her off yet. On the other hand, Friday night already seemed like it had happened in some other alternate universe where options abounded.

I walked in, past the customer service desk, and asked a skinny girl with straight, long, dullish blonde hair if Danny was in.

"Is there something I can help you with?" she cocked her head and asked me.

No, I just wanted to see Danny. My father was a friend of his, I used to live here, I'm...."

"Did you need something?"

"I'm sorry, I'm not making myself clear, I wanted to know if Mr. Janowski was in."

I truly had no idea what the hell I was doing.

"Mr. Janowski isn't in. Can I help you with something?" She cocked her head in the other direction.

I took a look at her. She was maybe 19 or 20. She had on this gray, t-shirt like blouse and black pants. Her one front tooth was crossing into another front tooth at a 45 degree angle, and the tooth that was on the receiving end of the cross was significantly browner than the tooth that was angled. She had on a wedding ring, one that sported a diamond the size of an electron.

I knew her. Or, more accurately, I know her. Or, more accurately, I know

her, and her, and her, and girls like her all over here. I knew she either had a kid already, or soon would. I knew that she was making six bucks an hour, maybe six fifty. Maybe. Her husband made the same, or not much more. Maybe they were hoping to get a house in Minersville someday, some row home that cost maybe 20 grand or so on a steep hill at the edge of town. Maybe even that was out of reach.

She'd never leave this place. And in any other context, looking at her would fill me with a sense of relief. I'd left, and I'd never come back.

Except here I was. With no money, a suitcase full of stuff sitting in a parking lot in Mt. Airy, no place to live and no one who wanted me.

She might never leave this county. But at least she'd never try to leave and come crawling back. And that put Ms. Funny Angled Tooth one up on me.

"No, thank you. There's nothing I want. Thank you." And I left, as she cocked her head and shifted her dullish hair one more time.

Outside, in the parking lot, leaning against her car, stood Kate. If she'd have just shown up a few minutes earlier, she could have saved me from feeling awful. Now, she was just a ride.

My sister Kate--Katherine Ramsey Silverstein Stancavage--as she insisted of tacking on the names of both of her ex-husbands--had on what, for her, would have been her customary outfit. An old flannel shirt that may well have been one of my father's shirts. Also, an old, baggy pair of my father's jeans. She usually

had on some of my father's castoffs. Since she'd say, not without some justification, that she was her father's castoff, her position was sort of defensible. She was also wearing the same style of Annie Hall type glasses she'd worn since, well, the first time she saw Annie Hall. It fit into the entire shiska girlfriend of some overly neurotic Jewish guy world view she envisioned herself as fitting into. Which she did, for a time, with the guy who gave her the Silverstein part of her name.

"So, where's your suitcase?" Kate said, walking towards me.

I resisted the temptation to say something like my baggage follows me no matter where I go--it was too easy a punch line. "No luggage. Just me." I turned to the '74 Dodge Dart that Kate had never seen fit to get rid of, even driving it out to, and then back from, California. "Do you plan on ever getting rid of that thing?"

"That's what I keep saying about you. And you're both still here. Now, why don't you get in, before I start to think this is all a very bad idea."

"You're already thinking that." I slid in the bench-style passenger seat and turned around to look for animals.

"No dogs along for the ride?"

"I thought about bringing them, and using the time to prepare them. But they were all sleeping. I just didn't want to disturb them," she said, pulling out of the parking lot and heading north on 61.

“They can’t still hate me. Besides, the Pomeranian always liked me. He’d jump up and try to lick the snot out of my nose.”

“That’s true, Barton Fink will probably be happy to see you. I don’t know about Camembert, though. And Irving’s health isn’t what it used to be.”

“The beagle, right?”

“You never could keep them all straight. Yes, the beagle. He’s got heart problems now.”

I was tempted--seriously tempted--to say that the only internal organ of Irving I had any reason to think about was his colon, given his propensity for fursinging farts. But making fun of Kate’s animals was never a wise move in the best of situations. And this was not, at least for me, the best of situations.

What’s the matter with his heart?”

“Jeff, why are you here? What did you do now?”

“Kate, do you really want to hear all of this?”

“I think I need to hear it all.”

“I really am sober. I wasn’t kidding about that.” Though at exactly the moment I said that, I reached into my pocket to make sure Little Stevie Wonder was still there. It was. Apparently I’d packed my luggage after all.

“You must really be desperate if you’re back here.”

“It’s a long story.”

“It’s a long day. Talk to me.” And, for the first time in--well, at least since

the start of this weekend--someone asked me something without any suspiciousness, anger, or agenda in their voice. So I told her. We drove past all the familiar coal mounds and breakers, their corrugated structures and tentacle-like chutes rusting from disuse, and I told her about Gail, and Aviva, and Marlene, and Mark, and if I didn't tell her everything, and I didn't, I gave her enough to understand. Not that she couldn't have understood on much less. I just wanted her, for once, to not force her to fill in every blank for herself. I never thought Kate would come back to Schuylkill County, but after her first marriage fell apart (and I did not cause that to happen just because the orange tree incident gave the Bichon Frise asthma), she came back, bought a standard issue, red brick two and a half story sitting on a corner on an incline on a narrow street in Minersville coal region house. She married again and divorced again, this time finding a loser a little closer to home. And this time, when Freddy Stancavage left her to pursue his dream of starting a Journey cover band, she stayed put. I had the nauseating feeling she'd be staying put for a long time. I had an even worse feeling I might be joining her.

We parked the car on the narrow street in front of the standard issue coal country house, and walked inside. I threw my jacket--a/k/a my luggage--onto her sofa, then threw myself on it as well, and asked if I could use her phone.

“Sure, no problem. You may as well start the moochfest early.”

I crunched my face up into one big, painful squint, and she backed off. “I

was kidding, I was kidding, go ahead. Please. I'm sorry. There's a cordless phone in the kitchen if you want to use that."

I did. I grabbed that phone and went outside, into the standard issue rusty fenced in backyard. I first called my voice mail. First message:

"Hi. It's Gail. Um....look, I'm not saying I'm sorry, because I'm not sorry, but I want to know if you're, if you're, well, where you are. We have some things I guess we need to talk about. I...we....look, this isn't working, but I don't want to end it quite like this, so....Marty, it's okay, don't worry....sorry, Jeff, we do need to talk about the thing with the car, I think I've got someone who can take care of it, but I need to talk to you. So, call me. Okay? Okay."

Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.

Second message.

"Hey. It's Marlene. I've been thinking about you. Call me."

Good. Nice breathy quality to the voice. I can work with that.

Third message.

"Jeff, Mark. Call me a co-dependent asshole, or a criminal defense attorney who doesn't know when to quit. But call me."

Thank you, Mark. I mean that.

Fourth message.

"Mr. Ramsey, this is Officer Phillip DiSantis of the Philadelphia Police Department. Please call me immediately at (215)...."



I did not need to hear any more of that message. So I didn't. If it's deleted, it doesn't exist.

In fact, the message that didn't exist so scared me, that it took me a good thirty or forty seconds to realize that Gail had just dumped me--officially, if a bit obliquely--while Marty was within earshot. Anger from Gail I could deal with. Hell, being tossed out of a hotel room in the middle of the night I could deal with. Those were all variations on a theme I knew how to play. But this was different, in that sort of tone that's moved past anger, past sadness, past resignation even, into something that might be close to grim determination. Except it wasn't exactly grim. Closer to relief.

Gail and I were over. Really, really over.

Oh, yeah, and a Philly cop wants to talk to me.

Gail and I were over, a Philly cop wants to talk to me, and she's probably fucking Marty Munro. Or she will. And maybe she should.

I walked towards the end of Kate's backyard, and leaned against the fence in a space between two garbage cans. I looked out over the dirt alley. A girl, maybe 10 or 11, rode past in a neon yellow colored bike. Someone across the alley was firing up a grill, and tossing what smelled like kielbasa on it. The fresh stuff. Homemade, I suspected, not the glowing red stuff you get in supermarkets.

My parents used to make it. Actually, my dad did. He'd insist, it was part of one of his many food related rituals. Grind it himself, stuff it himself, cook it

himself. The halupkies were my mother's territory. She stuffed the cabbage. But dad was the kielbasa maker.

I don't know whether I missed my parents, or the concept of my parents. But I damn sure missed something. Maybe it was just the kielbasa.

I looked out into the alley again. This time, I thought, for just a second, I saw the same neon colored bike roll past, with Steve standing upside down on the handle bars. I closed my eyes, and either he was gone or he rode past. As I turned around and began walking back towards the house, Barton Fink and Camembert came running out the back door. Barton, the Pomeranian, came bounding towards me. Camembert, the Bichon Frise, did not. He saw me, and started making the noise that I'd heard Kate try to describe. She didn't do it justice. It started out like this:

hee—eemp

hee—eemp

as if it were almost two syllables, but not quite, with the emphasis on the first *hee*. Then it got louder, and the two parts became even more distinct, with a throat clearing sound in the middle, like this:

hee-ccchh-eemp

hee-ccchh-eemp

with the *hee* and the *eemp* being now equally emphasized, and the guttural *ccchh* the only relief in between.

Then he ran back towards the door. No, actually he started flinging himself at the door. Not just scratching to be let back inside, in the normal doglike fashion, but hurling himself at the bottom panel, so there was this slamming noise punctuating the *hee-ccchh-eemp* every few seconds, which Kate finally did.

“Camembert? Are you alright?” she said, as she opened the door and Camembert zoomed inside. By this time, however, I had dropped to the ground to meet Barton at eye level. He had, apparently and unlike Camembert, long gotten over the trauma of the orange trees, and even if he hadn’t, he obviously was willing to treat my willingness to have all of my snot directly licked out of my nose as an appropriate peace offering. He did this for about 10 minutes, until my nose had been officially rendered a booger-free zone, then ran to the back door and scratched to be let inside. I continued to lay on the ground, staring up at the clouds for a few more seconds, before deciding I’d better start returning some calls. And, perhaps, not returning others.

After standing up and thus terminating the lickfest, I decided the order of returning calls was as follows: a) Marlene, b) Mark, and c) Gail, but only after I’d obsessed about it a lot more. The Philly cop could wait until after I’d talked to Mark, and, possibly, after hell froze over, then thawed out again, then let me out of it so I could visit the rest of the universe for a while.

But I changed my mind on the calling order in a sudden attack of responsibility.

“Mark, it’s Jeff. I’m alright, I’m at my sister’s in Minersville, and I do need to talk to you. Call me.”

I was about to call Marlene when Kate called out to me first.

“Jeff. Come on in. We’ve got company.”

And not just any company. Kate’s ex-husband. And I was wrong in my comparing Freddy--I just remembered his name, I can’t believe I blocked it out of my head--to Irving the beagle. The beagle was better looking. Certainly better groomed. Probably better educated.

“For Chrissake, Kate,” I said in a hushed voice on the back porch that, frankly, wasn’t all that hushed. “Send him the fuck away. I don’t need to deal with your idiot ex-husband right now.”

“Jeff. Be nice.”

“No. I do not want to be nice. Not to him. He’s a creep. Not just a general, all-purpose creep, but he’s been a creep to you. Why do you keep letting him come around here like he owns the place.”

“Well, Jeff, if we’re being technical about such thing, he does own the place.” “What? You were divorced, what, 3 years ago?”

“Well, Jeff, here’s the thing. We kind of, well, we never actually got divorced. We were going to sign everything, and we just kind of put it on hold. And then, since we didn’t do anything, the court kind of, you know, what’s the word....”

“Dismissed the case. They dismissed the case because you didn’t press it for two years. Jesus creeping bullshit.” I smacked my head with the palm of my right hand. I wanted to smack hers, instead. “What in holy fucking hell is wrong with you?”

“Look. He’s doing okay. He’s been clean for a while now. And he’s studying for his GED. And with his learning disability, that’s been hard for him.”

“With his lazy ass sitting on the couch and staring at ESPN all day, doing anything’s hard.”

“Jeff, you’re in no position to judge.”

“Wrong. I’m in a perfect position to judge. What’s the point of being a loser myself if I can’t judge other losers.”

“I’m going to ask you to be nice....”

“Alright, alright already. Of course I’ll be nice to Fred. By the way,” I said, as we walked inside the house, “did you ever get the bail money back that you posted to get him out of Schuylkill County Jail when he drove your car up on the lawn and pissed on the bushes. Just wondering. Since I’m the one who gave it to you to post and all.” “Jeff....”

“Okay. I’m happy for him. I think it’s a great thing. He used to be hooked on crack, now he’s hooked on phonics. I can’t wait to say... Hi, Freddy, how are you?” Freddy Stancavage was, indeed, already parked on Kate’s green, velvety cat-shredded sofa watching the Phillies listlessly shuffle through a game against

the Dodgers, a bottle of Yuengling Black and Tan on the coffee table. He started to rise up from the sofa, but I met him halfway into his standing up, causing him to quickly decide that standing up wasn't necessary, after all. "Jeff," he said. "Long time, no see. How the hell are you doing?"

"What's the score?" I plopped down on the sofa.

"Losing. Getting their asses kicked. Third inning and they're down 8-0."

"Who's up for the Phils?"

"Brogna's at bat. At least he's good."

I could not let that pass. "Excuse me? He sucks."

"He does not suck. He's tough. He's a clubhouse leader."

"Fred," I said, whipping around to face him as quickly as I could given that my ass had pretty much sunk into the sofa's cushions in no time at all, "I hate to be the one to break this to you, but he sucks, Fred. Rico Brogna is a mediocre, overpaid hitter, getting over three million a year to be a mediocre hitter." I sounded sure of myself, and it wasn't just my usual pose. I may not be a total stathead, but I know my baseball, and I know the Phillies, and I knew Rico Brogna was a loser of a first baseman.

"He brings chemistry to this team."

"He brings a .250 bat to this team. Whoop-de damn fuckin' doo."

"Oh yeah? What about his defense? What about his work with the glove?"

"He's a decent fielder. Only decent. Not great." Kate inched closer to us

both, sensing, not without some justification, that I was baiting Freddy into turning into, for lack of a better word, Freddy.

“He’s a great fielder.”

I was on a roll, and not about to be dissuaded from rushing headlong into authoritative mode.

“Fred, listen to me.” He took what seemed an overly aggressive gulp from the Yuengling bottle as his eyes narrowed as far as they could, which wasn’t very far considering that they remained outsized, bulging globes no matter how pissed off he got. Rico Brogna is not a great fielder. That is a myth. He is average, maybe slightly better than average. He hasn’t won a single Gold Glove or even come close to winning one. And besides, being a first basemen is probably the least challenging position, fielding wise. Tell me you’ve got a good glove at short, I’ll listen. Tell me you’ve got a good glove at third, I’ll care. Tell me you got a slightly better than average glove at first, and I’m going to ask you how much does this guy actually hit? And if he’s hitting around 250 or so, and he’s pretty much of a bottom dweller among hitting first basemen, then I’ll tell you that he adds less to the team than does the Phillie Phanatic’s fuzzy green head.” “That’s bullshit. Kate, anymore beer back there? Oh hell, I’ll get it.”

An alcoholic and addict who fetches his own beer, rather than trying to get his not quite ex-wife do it. Like we say in recovery, progress, not perfection.

“Rico Brogna,” Freddy continued, pontificating all the way to the

refrigerator and all the way back again, right back to the dent in the sofa that was still nice and receptive to his ass, “is a clubhouse leader. He comes to play.”

“Well, I sure hope he comes to play. He’s being paid \$3.2 million dollars this year. I’d hate to think he misses a check.”

“Hey. He’s got a disease. He’s got...” I let the conversation pause. I wanted to see if he could pronounce Rico Brogna’s disease. “He’s got some kind of fucking disease. It’s, uh...”

Come on, Fred. Please, *please* try to pronounce it. I need the diversion.

Kate, however, did not. She was having visions--flashbacks, really—of angry drunks in her house fighting about nothing. “Jeff, Freddy’s playing tonight.”

I was going to force the issue and try to make Freddy say “ankylosing spondylitis” but the thought of Freddy belting out really bad cover versions of Journey was even more fertile ground. And, unlike discussions about the Phillies, he’d never even know I was fucking with him.

“Really,” I said. “Where at?”

Freddy couldn’t wait to share the location with me. “A bar in Orwigsburg. We’re going down in about an hour to set up. You coming?”

“I don’t know. I just got here. It’s been a long day.”

“Hey, you gotta come. First time I’ve played this place. We’ve been wanting to get in here for a while. I’ve almost got the hair long enough.”



Long enough, but I think Steve Perry may have had an actual hairline to go with it.

“Jeff, come on,” Kate said. “It’ll be fun.” And just as I was about to tell her that a Journey retrospective was about as much fun as the first time that shit was on the radio, the phone rang.

“Hello? Oh. Oh, my. Just a minute.” She handed the phone over to me. “It’s Gail.”

“Gail. How the fuck did Gail...did you tell her I was here?”

“No. I didn’t tell her anything. Really. Here, take it.”

I grabbed the phone, which now weighed about 400 pounds and was covered with plutonium.

“How did you find me here?”

“I guessed. I was getting worried. Jeff, we need to talk.”

“Later. Not now.”

“Now. There’s not going to be a good time for this.”

“I’m not ready to be dumped. Not now.”

“You need to pay attention to me now.”

“Gail, can’t we do this face-to-face? Can’t we talk later, when we can be in the same room, at least?”

“We were in a room together this morning. It didn’t seem to do us any good. This has got to end.”

“No. I’m going”-- I didn’t believe I was saying this, but it seemed to be as good a place as any—“over to this place in a little while to see my sister’s ex’s band play. You want to talk, we can talk there.”

“No, I need to do this now....your sister’s ex? Is that the one who wanted to do Loverboy cover tunes? The one with the bad mullet?”

“It’s Journey, not Loverboy. And there are no good mullets. Gail, I’m sorry I overreacted. I’m sorry I accused you of things that weren’t true.”

Silence. The faint whispers of a teenage girl’s conversation bled in almost imperceptibly on the cordless phone. It was a sound more felt than heard.

“Jeff, you weren’t wrong. You were more right than you thought. I’ve been seeing Marty for two months now. It’s why I’ve been going to Philly so much lately. I’m sorry. I’m the one that’s sorry. I didn’t know how to say it. I didn’t know how to disentangle us.”

I wanted to say, “Well, this certainly works nicely, bitch.” But I really couldn’t say anything at all. Of all the possible scenarios I could have envisioned for this weekend, Gail fessing up to an affair was the absolute lowest on the list. Lower than getting cited for driving under suspension. Lower than dumping my luggage in Mt. Airy and running from the cops. Lower than listening to Freddy Stancavage belt out “Separate Ways” at a bar in Orwigsburg.

I couldn’t believe I didn’t see it coming. Especially since she had every reason, and red flags were all over the place. And I didn’t see it coming, anyway.

Not because I was in love anymore, because it was pretty obvious that I wasn't. But because I was arrogant enough to think that even if she wasn't in love, it didn't matter.

"Jeff? Are you there?"

"I have to go."

"Look, where will you be? Where's he playing?"

"I don't know. Some place in Orwigsburg. Grillo's, or something like that. But don't come. I'll get my things later."

I shut the phone off without saying goodbye. What would have been the point? I started to feel sick. I went over to the sofa again. Freddy had abandoned it, and Barton Fink and one of the cats were on it. I melted into the middle panel of the couch. I couldn't breathe, and couldn't think, and couldn't focus. Kate came over, but I couldn't tell what she was saying. I only knew that Barton Fink was jumping up and down, trying to get more snot out of my nose. I don't think he succeeded.

I apparently succeeded in worrying Kate, however. She started shaking me. "Jeff. Jeff. Jeff? What's going on?"

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine. What's the matter? Do we need to call an ambulance?"

About that time Freddy started jostling me. "Jeff. Jeff. Jeff?" And when Freddy jostled me, he really jostled me. So it was sort of like:

“Jeff.” Thwack, thwack, as he shook my shoulders and my head kind of bobbed. “Jeff.” Thwack, thwack, as he smacked my cheek and my neck kind of shook. “Jeff?” This wasn’t either a thwack or a smack, but more like a grabbing around my midsection, causing pretty much everything from my torso on upward to move like a bobblehead doll. I suddenly had an image of me, as a Rico Brogna bobblehead doll being handed out on Fan Appreciation Day at Vet Stadium. That, and an image of me needing physical therapy real damn soon if Freddy didn’t stop this shit fast.

“I’m fine. I’m fine. Freddy, stop. I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine, Jeff,” Freddy said.

I was sure I didn’t, either. I wasn’t driving further into the grayness, but I wasn’t exactly feeling good, either.

“Hey,” Freddy added, “thought we were losing you for a minute there. You looked all pale and sick.”

“I’m alright. I just get these...these....”

“It looked like a panic attack,” Kate said. “I didn’t know you got those.”

“I didn’t get them until this week. Like Thursday.”

“What happened?” she asked. Then things seemed to jell with her. “Did she end it? Did Gail break up with you?”

I thought about this for a while. I debated how much I should tell her. I decided that, in true deposition-like fashion, Kate had answered a question that

could be answered by a simple yes or no, and further explanation wasn't need or called for. "Yes."

"Shit," Kate said. "Look, Freddy, you go, I'll stay home with..."

"No. No. I'll stay home; you go to see Freddy play. It'll be okay. You two go. I'll stay here. Maybe if I spend some quality time with Camembert he won't pee every time he sees me. It's a goal."

Kate gently squeezed my hand. "Actually, that's Irving who pees. Camembert just runs. You sure? Look, I'll leave the keys to my car if you change your mind."

"You sure you want to do that?" I said. I did tell her my license was suspended, didn't I?

"Just be careful. Don't speed or anything."

I'd be terrified even to think about speeding in a 25 year old rusting Dodge Dart. I preferred to save that kind of stunt for brand new, 2000 Ford Explorers.

"I'm going to rest. I don't think I'll need it. But thanks. Freddy, you're gonna knock 'em dead."

Kate leaned over to me, trying to say what she was going to say out of Freddy's earshot, not that it actually was. "Do you need a few bucks? I've got a little money, in case you need to get some things. And you can borrow Freddy's clothes if you need them."

"Thanks. I do. I will."

The tenseness in my chest began to ease, just a bit. The narrowing of my peripheral vision began to fade. I lay down on the sofa. I had car keys on the table. I had Steve, tumbling around in my pocket. I knew how to pronounce ankylosing spondylitis. And I had Marlene's number.

"We're leaving now. Sure you don't want to come? Last chance," Kate asked me, shouting as she came down the stairway while Freddy and Irving, in full farting mode, (Irving, not Freddy--just wanted to be clear and fair to Fred)--trailed behind her.

"I'll pass. Have a good show."

And they left, Kate and Freddy, laughing together. Go figure.

I leaned over one of the sofa's arms to grab the cordless phone, as Slinky jumped on my shoulders--thank you, sister of mine, for not believing in the barbaric custom of declawing cats, Jesus Fucking Christ, I think Slinky just scored a direct hit on my brain stem--and decided that, just because I wasn't going to watch Freddy play was no reason to stick around the house.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Marlene. It's Jeff."

"I was wondering if I was going to hear from you. Where are you?"

"Listen, have you even been in Schuylkill County after dark? It's surprisingly awful."

“What? Where the hell are you?”

“Let me give you some directions, and I can show you myself. You like hot dogs? The best in the world. Trust me. Onions chopped so fine, you could hardly believe it.”

“Now there’s a hot date for you. Hot dogs and abandoned coal mines.”

“Hey, I saw that episode of you on TV where you were willing to flash your tits for a hamburger.”

“Actually, I just wanted to show my tits, period.”

“So what would you do for a hot dog?”

“I don’t know. It depends. Are you going to digitalize them out?”

“Just get up here. You will not be disappointed. Grab your pen. Let me give you those directions.”

“Maybe I have plans.”

“If you had plans, you would have told me. Now listen. Grab that pen. I’ll tell you how to get to me.”

I didn’t really mean to drift off to sleep almost immediately after that call. But when you’ve been up since four in the morning, and it’s after six p.m., sleep happens. Quickly, I might add. Quick enough that it took me by surprise when I heard a voice, an odd, strangely familiar voice. I know that voice. And it’s not Steve Perry. Or, more accurately, it’s Steve, but not Perry. I look, but only hear a voice.

“I want to change the station,” I said. “Journey sucks.” Silence. Damn, that was way too easy. “You got a problem with the ‘80’s?” Steve’s voice, but still no face.

“I got a problem if you're wearing a mullet on that bottle.”

“Your brother-in-law’s got the mullet. I’m more into the long wavy rock star hair thing. Think David Coverdale in Whitesnake.”

“If I ever want to think about Whitesnake--which is pretty much fucking never—I’ll think about Tawny what’s her name writhing around on the hood of a car. Not you.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me if I take requests?”

“I keep requesting you go away, but you don’t listen.”

“Not always. Aren’t you going to ask me if it was me on the bicycle outside in the alley. You thought you saw me.”

“I was tired. I was hungry. I was thinking about kielbasa.”

“Say that if you want. Me, I’m thinking about Haircut 100. Whatever happened to them, anyway?”

This is a dream. You can wake up anytime.

“Jeff. Aren’t your parents buried just down the road, over at St. Patrick’s Cemetery? You could go visit them. It’s a nice short walk, past the borough line, down the hill, across from the Lou-Anne Party House.”

This is a dream. Repeat. This is a dream.



“Say, I was wondering. You think Dad’s sober now?”

Dream. It’s a dream.

“I’ll bet he is. Bet that alcohol has finally leached into all that good, coal cracker earth. Go on. Say hi.”

Fuck. Off. Fuck. Off.

“Forget Haircut 100. I’m thinking A Flock of Seagulls now. “And I ran, I ran so far away. I just ran, I ran all night and day, couldn’t get away.”

Pause. Silence.

“You can wake up now, Jeff.” Pause again, then a whisper in my ear, and a bottle with a guitar across its shoulder sidled up to me. “And when you wake up, Frank Ramsey’s still gonna be a dead loser drunk.”

I woke up. I could feel my jaw ache from the clenching my teeth had been doing whenever I dreamed bad dreams. I reached into my pocket. Steve had fallen out. I was on the sharp edge between worry and panic when I fished my hand between the sofa cushions. I held the bottle up to the light, looking through its clear liquid soul. Then, and only then, did I feel safe enough to shove it back in my pocket.

I checked the clock. I had been sleeping for maybe 45 minutes, and Marlene was a good half hour away, at least. I decided I’d better check my voice mail again. Only one message. Mark. “Me. Call.”

That’s my Mark. The master of minimalism. I called him, but got his

answering machine. “Mark, it’s me. I’m alright. I’m up with my sister, I’m...” I thought of the message from the Philly cop. “I do need to talk to you about something, but it can wait. Call me later.” I gave her my sister’s number and hung up.

I went over to the kitchen. There was a big jar of hot bologna and some actual, honest-to-God city chicken wrapped up in aluminum foil. Which isn’t even chicken, but pork and veal, mixed together, with some bread crumbs and an egg thrown in, put on skewers, and baked. Glad to see someone was paying attention to the family recipes. I took it out of the foil and nuked it, giving some pieces to the animals that started to cluster around me. Even Camembert. There may be hope for us yet. With dogs, food is the great leveler.

I settled in. I still had the keys to Kate’s car--I kept looking at them almost unbelievably, still unconvinced she’d trust me with anything with an internal combustion engine--but decided I’d let Marlene do the driving when she showed up. Which was something else I thought about almost unbelievably. So unbelievably, I found myself wondering why. What exactly did she want with me?

I thought about this as I walked up the stairs into the bathroom. I didn’t have any clean clothes to change into, unless I wanted to go back to a dumpster in Mt. Airy, but I could at least shower and try to reach some sort of presentable state. So I did, suddenly grateful that Freddy, for someone that was supposedly

divorcing my sister, seemed to spend a lot of time there, leaving razors and deodorant to mark his presence. And, if I was lucky, maybe even a shirt, since with all my weight gain, they might fit me now. Maybe it might even be semi-tasteful. Something not from the customary Freddy Stancavage wife-beater collection, but something with sleeves and such. Something that would not remind me too badly that I was having to cadge a fucking wardrobe from Freddy Stancavage in the first place.

I showered, shaved, and, rummaging through Kate's room, found such a shirt. Dark blue, actual oxford cloth. Kate's influence, definitely. This must be the one he wears to his parole officer. I put it on, buttoning it up just as the doorbell rang.

"Do you know this place is in the middle of nowhere?" she said.

"Technically, that's not true. It's the exurbs of nowhere."

"Exurbs? That's not a word I hear in conversation much."

"You need to get out more. Come on in."

"I need to get out more? Look where we are," she said, as she walked inside and started sizing up things.

"So, are you planning to stay a while?" she asked. I didn't answer right away, as I wanted to focus just a little bit more than I should on the black, stretchy tank top she was wearing. It was worth the linger. It reaffirmed my general belief that small and braless, with nipples that could cut through glass, could usually

work out better than bigger, more obvious tits. It's a rule I tended to honor in girlfriend criteria pretty regularly. Except for Aviva. Small breasts wouldn't have worked on her body well. But then she never did anything small.

"I'll stay." She ambled over to a picture on Kate's TV. "You?"

"Me. Thinner me." Indeed it was. It was a picture of both the Ramsey children, flush with life's possibilities. Maybe even probabilities back then. "Your dad? The one in the middle?"

"Actually, I think the fire engine is in the middle, technically."

I remember the day it was taken, too. Yorkville Fire and Hose. 1976. I was 16. Kate was 14. He was president of the fire company that year, and had sold the guys on the concept that lime-yellow fire engines were the thing of the future and red on its way out. He was so goddamn proud of that engine. My dad. Man with a vision.

"What does your dad do?"

"You can ask him. He's lying under dirt and a headstone, about a quarter mile down the hill."

"Ouch. I'm sorry."

"Sorry isn't even close to the right sentiment, but thanks."

"When did he die?"

"Four years ago. Can we change the subject?"

"We can change the subject to anything you want."

“Good. I have two suggestions in mind. First, what do you want to do tonight, and second, what made you decide you wanted to see me again?”

“When does your sister’s husband start belting out Journey tunes?”

“You don’t want to see that.”

“Oh, yes I do.” She turned to me from the pictures on the television and gave me this look, this partially squinted eye look thingy, that made me realize I was going to have to, absolutely have to, check out Freddy tonight.

By now the animal troupe had come to check out the new visitor. Camembert was barking. Barton was sniffing. Lisa Marie, the white and gray shorthair who I hadn’t seen since I got here, and whose sightings were, by frequency’s sake, on a par with large asteroids falling through roofs, actually came out of hiding and rubbed Marlene’s leg. Irving could be neither seen nor smelled. I assumed Slinky would show up and shred some flesh in a matter of time, but right now all he was doing was checking things out from the stairway.

“You didn’t tell me about the creatures,” she said, bending down to acknowledge Lisa Marie’s rubbing and Barton Fink’s sniffing. “Is this everyone?”

“There’s an extremely flatulent beagle around her somewhere. The green eyes over on the stairwell belong to the black cat. So do the fishhooks on his paws. Otherwise, that’s it.

“They’re cute.”

“Their cuteness fades over time. Have a seat. I’ll brush off the fur. Those black pants aren’t exactly animal conducive.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s fine.” She sat down on the sofa. I sat down on the sofa. Irving ran out of the living room and jumped on the sofa, right between us.

“I had a beagle like him,” she said. “He’s cute. He was 18 when he died; right before I went off to my little South Pacific island adventure.”

“I’ve been wanting to ask you about that. The TV show and all....”

“No, no, no,” she said, wagging her finger in a way that was both languorous with just a hint of menace. “No talking about that. We’re here to walk down your memory lane, not mine.”

“Aren’t you ever going to tell me if you slept with the Wyoming cowboy? I was positive by the seventh episode you were going to, but then you got kicked off?”

“I thought there were these really incredible hot dogs that you described. The weiners of the gods. Are you going to take me there? Before your brother-in-law channels Steve Perry, I mean.”

I thought about the car keys. An attack of good sense hit me. “Well, you’ll have to take me there, but yeah, we can head over. If you want.”

“That’s right. You can’t drive. Forgot. No problem.” I don’t know why, but somehow I didn’t believe she forgot. “I’ll drive, and maybe, maybe, if you’re

nice, I'll tell you all the secrets of reality television you could possibly imagine. Some of them might even be true."

She went up to the bathroom for a minute. I stared at the menagerie. I wondered if I shouldn't just stay home. Maybe I could even get Camembert to like me. For a second, it seemed a goal worth pursuing. I wanted choices, but maybe the boring option was the better choice. I began to think about everything that had happened since Thursday morning, and that maybe part of the fun in having choices is leaving some of them unpicked.

"Listen, Marlene," I said, as I saw her coming down the stairs again.

"What?"

I paused. "What?" she said again. I suddenly thought of Marlene on TV, topless, with her breasts partially digitalized and blurred.

"Fuck the hot dogs. Let's go see Freddy play. I'll drive."

"No, you won't. And who says we can't do both."

"Okay, I can live with that."

"You'll have to."

I could. For now. But I put the car keys in my pocket anyway.

When Kate got married--the first time she got married--some of my friends and I introduced Seth Silverstein, my new brother-in-law to a sick, twisted little custom we have up here in coal country, which came as an outcropping of another custom. When there's a wedding, everyone is supposed to cluster around

the bride for what's called the "Dollar Dance." You pay a dollar to the newlyweds, you get a dance with the bride, as well as a shot of whiskey. That's the basic custom.

Here's the variation on the theme, which gives the whole affair a nice, little misogynistic spin. At some point, usually around the time the dance starts, someone takes the groom--it helps if the groom is a Jewish guy from Pikesville, Maryland, who doesn't know any of this shit--and lures him out to the lobby on some idiotic pretext. Then, he's kidnapped, driven around town for a few minutes, and unceremoniously dumped back at the wedding. He then fights his way through the crowd of half-looped revelers to get to his bride, claims the estrogen-based life form that is now his birthright, and everybody cheers and gets even more drunk. Dragging the bride away by her hair is generally frowned on, but I've heard that up in Shamokin it's been known to happen.

This is how it's all supposed to work if things are going well. Things did not go well. I was in charge of the kidnap. I still feel bad for Seth, who assumed, foolishly, that just because we were both lawyers that we were brothers under the skin or some such shit and that I wouldn't absolutely fuck him over like this. My buddy Snoggin and I—don't ask me how he got his nickname, that's a story in itself, and I'd probably have to relapse before I'd be willing to share with anyone--frog-marched Seth into Snoggin's Jeep. We tossed Seth in the back. We pulled out of the parking lot of the fire hall where we were holding the reception.



Snoggin turned left. Then, out past the old train station, turned left again. Or maybe it was right. Then he turned right. Or maybe it was left.

Which is sort of how Snoggin and I, despite having lived in this place our whole lives, managed to get lost in our hometown at my sister's wedding. It was kind of a disappointment to me on a personal level. We'd both been driving around this place dead solid drunk most our lives, and we really should have been able to navigate like that when it actually mattered. Instead, we choked. We drove past a stripping hole, nearly into another stripping hole while Snoggin decided to show off the four-wheel prowess of his Jeep, and through several ditches in Heckshersville. Somehow, we ended up back on 901 and at the fire hall in Primrose. 45 minutes later. Nobody was clustering around Kate. Kate herself was standing next to Stash Orloski, lead singer of the Polkamandos, smoking a cigarette and looking one part bored and three parts pissed. My father started screaming at me, "You fucking moron." Actually, that's not quite correct. Saying he started implies that, at some point, he stopped. He didn't stop. I'm not sure he ever stopped. And, though I managed to miss this part, I have it on the authority of three family members that my grandfather began telling anyone who'd listen, and more than a few drunken relatives that wouldn't, "I knew that Jew would run off."

That was the last time I spent any amount of time driving aimlessly around Schuylkill County. And at least then, I had the cover of drunkenness. And now I was

about to do the same thing with Marlene, and do it sober.

I cannot begin to describe the feeling of dread it gave me.

There is a saying in AA. “My worst day sober was better than my best day drunk.” I had the feeling, as I petted Barton goodbye, locked the door, and walked into Marlene’s car, that even more than the rest of this Godforsaken weekend, I was about to put that lameassed theory to the test.

“Where to?” she said, in a voice straddling a line between invitation and challenge. “Do you really want to see my brother in law?”

“Yeah, but not right now. In a bit. How about we play a little bit of ‘this is your life’ and you show me around this place.” “We should grab some road food for the journey. And for Journey.”

“The hot dogs?”

“The hot dogs.”

We pulled up to the drive-in window of the place that really does have the best chili dogs I’ve ever had, Coney Island in Pottsville and loaded up the hot dogs as well some hamburgers. The onions on the hot dogs are raw and cut unbelievably finely. The onions on the hamburgers are sautéed in a Delaware-sized vat of butter. Plenty of chili sauce on both. Not only was I glad to have them again, but I was glad Marlene was a cheap date. I realize I’d eaten not too long before, but if the only pleasure of being back here was the food of my youth, I was damn sure going to avail myself of it. And I did. I stuffed my face gloriously.

I think Kate's dogs may show more restraint and dignity chasing after food than I did.

"It's good. Your choice in grease is excellent. Now, how about showing me where you grew up."

"You're not far from it. Just a few blocks down the street."

"Show me."

"It's just a house."

"It's your house."

"Was. My house. Mom died when I was 21. Dad died four years ago."

"What happened?"

"Mom? Ovarian cancer. Sudden. Ugly. Unexpected. Dad, liver failure. Not sudden. Just as ugly. Completely, totally expected. Predictable. Boringly, mind numbingly predictable. Dare I say 'deserved?'"

"I think you just said it. Don't worry; I'm the last person to judge anyone being pissed off about their parents."

"Let's not drive past their house, Marlene."

"Fuck it. We don't have to."

"Definitely. We don't have to." I was working on my second hot dog, and I was starting to feel uncharacteristically sick from the grease and meat.

"Anything else worth showing me, then?"

Anything else? Nothing that isn't depressingly maudlin. Just a bunch of

jagged, amputated hills of coal dust, standing useless guard over the flooded stripping hole where my friends and I got drunk and smoked dope. Anyone up for seeing that? Didn't think so. Neither was I.

“Take me out of here.”

“I drove all the way up here. Not so fast.”

“I'm sorry. It's just...”

“No 'it's just.' You have to show me something. I may do things on a whim, but I intend to fully execute that whim till the bitter end. Something, Jeff. Something.”

“Fine, then. How about we check out my brother-in-law.”

“Thought you'd never ask. You want that hamburger?”

I didn't. Amazingly. “Take it.”

“Not bad. You know, I would have given someone a blowjob on that damn TV show for a hamburger half this good. Still might. You never know.”

She drove past my old house as she headed out of town. I never told her.

Grillo's is not really and truly representative of a Coal Country bar. For one thing, the place was built after World War II. It didn't have a cramped interior. There was an actual parking lot. In fact, a good case could be made that its being a bar at all disqualified it. My dad would say that good, hardcore Coal Region drinking was best done at his hose and ladder company. His dad would have probably put

in a vote for the VFW or Catholic War Vets. Still, it had the basics. Yuengling beer, its nod to the native brew. Miller and Bud Light, its nod to American tastes generally. Decent hot wings. And the worst of the '80's.

“Where’s your brother-in-law. And am I overdressed?”

“You’re underdressed. No tattoos?”

“How do you know?”

“I guess I don’t. They did digitalize body parts. And it doesn’t look like Freddy’s on yet.”

But someone else was here. And I got barely further than the faux aged wooden door before seeing it.

Gail. Gail and Kate.

Gail being drunk, for the second time this weekend. I was trying to remember the last time I’d seen that, and my answer would be same as it was then--pretty much never. “Let’s go.” I grabbed Marlene and ran, hoping to use the fact that this wasn’t a cheek by drunken, flushed jowl kind of place, into a quick, maybe-she didn’t-really-see-me-or-I’ll-at-least-pretend-she-didn’t getaway.

“What the fuck are you doing?” she said, as I was pulling her back toward her car. “It’s Gail?”

“Who? Oh, the nameless one.” Pause. “Jeff, what’s going on? Did you tell her to meet you here? Either you are even needier than I thought, or way kinkier than I thought. Neither of those things is always bad, mind you, but....”

“Neither. Neither applies. Really, I didn’t know...I don’t know how she got here.” “She just showed up?”

“I...I may have mentioned I was going to see Freddy play in Orwigsburg. Gail’s obsessive that way. She’d have called every bar in town if she wanted to know.”

“So you invited her?”

“No. I mean yes, but that was before she said she didn’t want to see me anymore because she was seeing someone else, some geek law professor, and...wait. What if he’s here? What if that fucking tenured toad is here? I have to find him. Let me check the parking lot.”

“Jeff,” she reached over to grab my arm, “I didn’t come up to watch you in a dick-sizing contest.”

“Well, then,” I paused, coming up for air, as we strolled further away from the door, around the corner and towards a dumpster, “What did you come up for?”

I saw Marlene launch into the beginning of a pause and inhale to answer that question. Her reaction confirmed what I knew the minute I asked. This question was an exceedingly stupid question to ask. She’d answer it, and I’d regret it. She’d not answer it, and I’d regret it.

There was a third possibility. The earth would swallow us both up, and answering it would be moot. And amazingly, that’s what happened. Or, at least, its relationship equivalent. Gail poked her head around the corner. Kate then

poked her head around Gail and the corner.

I wanted to poke my head in the dumpster and leave it there for a few hours.

“Gail? Hi, um...hi.” I looked pleadingly at Kate, wondering if she could save me. Save me, Kate. Do something. It’s your job, it’s on your resume.

“I thought that was you,” Gail said.

“I thought you weren’t coming.”

“You were right. We did need to....who’s she?”

“Marlene. Marlene Kurtzman.” She offered her hand, first to Gail, then Kate. “Marlene, Gail. Gail, Marlene. Marlene, my sister Kate.”

No, that’s not what I said. It’s what I thought. What I said was akin to “Um...um...marlenegailgailmarlee..um...marleeumummysisterkate”. With my voice going up and down in pitch and timber. With my wildly gesturing hands trying to find the time to wipe sweat off my face, but ineptly smearing it around my forehead instead.

“This wasn’t a good idea,” Gail said, and started walking away.

“Gail,” I said, in a please-come-back tone of voice, which I wasn’t altogether sure I meant.

“No, I’m going. Really, I’m going. Kate, it’s good to see you. I gotta go.”

“Come on back.” It was Marlene. If I didn’t have the answer to my query of why did Marlene come up in the first place, the answer’s broad outlines were

starting to take shape.

Gail stopped. Then half-turned around. “Are you....are you?”

“I’m just a friend. Just a buddy in recovery. Come on back. You’ve got some unfinished business, you should finish it. I’ll give you space. I’ll just wait here. Or in there. I’ll wait there now. In the bar. Umm...” She gestured over to my sister.

“Kate.”

“Kate, come on in. Tell me about your ex’s band. Just Journey, or does he do any Duran Duran, too.”

“Well...”

“I’ve always loved ‘Hungry Like the Wolf.’ Actually, it’s not so much that I loved it, but I lost my virginity to it. The video, actually.” And they both stepped into the bar. Leaving me alone. And I hated them both for it.

“I feel like I should say something profound, or at least clever,” Gail said. I caught the smell of alcohol on her breath immediately, and the sense that she was feeling its effects from her slightly swaying head and body. And I felt even more anxious and twitchy than I did the other night at the Cuban restaurant, even though she wasn’t nearly as smashed now as she was then. Probably because now the stakes were higher.

“You didn’t have to come up for this,” I said, walking away from the grease, bottles and produce of the overflowing dumpster, and towards the parking



lot, since it hadn't yet been established that Professor Marty wasn't waiting in the car. And I had a desire to establish precisely that. Actually, it was a desire morphing rapidly into a compulsion.

"I did. I owed you a better resolution of our relationship than this."

"Gail, you don't owe me shit. Nothing. We both made our mistakes." I thought this sounded generous and more or less nonconfrontational, as I continued my brisk pace towards the parking lot.

"What mistakes?" she asked as she not only walked back toward the dumpster, but seemingly leaned her whole body in that direction, as if trying to will me to follow her.

Oops, pissed her off at the wrong moment. Quick verbal scrambling required. "We don't have to go there. Just forget. And can we please get away from that dumpster?"

"Exactly what mistakes did I make? I don't recall being drunk, out of work, cheating on you, sponging off you and generally being a loser on a non-stop basis?"

"Thanks for coming up such a long way to set things right. Glad you could make it. Don't you have some keynote address to attend too? You're overdressed for a trip down '80's lane, aren't you?"

"Look, I didn't come down all this way...:"

"Up. Technically, you came up all this way. We're north of Philly. North

is up. Get the fucking directions right.”

She shook her head. “Look, I’m going to try to keep this simple. I’m sorry I wasn’t more straightforward with you about how unhappy I was.”

“And what would have been more straightforward? Hi, Jeff, I just came back from Philadelphia and several hours of Marty Munro pounding away at me, Jesus you’re a fucking loser, is there anything in the fridge?”

“Why are you making this so hard?”

“Why should I make this easy? And why do you keep pulling me away from the parking lot. Is he here?”

“What?”

“Is he here? Is that asshole here?”

“Marty?”

“Marty. Who the hell else? What does he teach, anyway? Moral bankruptcy?

Which chapter of the Bankruptcy Code is that?”

“I don’t want a scene. I didn’t come up for that.”

“He’s here. I want his ass.”

“He’s not here. I came up myself. He wanted to come.”

“Then where’s your Explorer? I don’t see it.”

“I brought his car.” And then I saw the gray Acura I’d last seen pull up on Friday along Lincoln Drive.

“Why would you bring his car unless he was along for the ride?”

“Jeff, alright, he’s in the car.”

“Fuck you.”

“He was worried you’d flip out.”

“He was right. That tenure committee obviously knew he was one smart guy.”

“Jeff, stop. I’m not going to stay.”

“Why not? Stick around. Get drunk at my expense again. Bring the guy who you’ve been screwing along for the ride.”

“For God’s sake, Jeff. You don’t even like me anymore, let alone love me. You just don’t want to give up your enabler, that’s all.”

“Oh, that’s good. Enabler. Did you and Marty practice that one up on the way up here. It is up, you know. Not down.”

“Here. Proper use of directions. I went up to Pottsville. I went down on Marty.”

“You were right. I shouldn’t have come up here. I’m going.”

“Not so fast.” I started following her as she speed-walked to Marty’s car.

“Don’t turn into a goddamn stalker along with everything else you’ve done to me.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I figure there’s always some new bottom waiting for me to hit.” She walked over to Marty’s car, with Marty slumped down in the driver’s seat. I walked over to the driver’s window, and tapped on it.

“Get out, Marty.”

“Stop this.”

“Out. Now.”

“I’m calling the police if you don’t stop this.”

Maybe I was just growing used to that phrase. It kept getting less and less terrifying each time today that I heard it.

I heard the click of a locked door, and saw Marty slump even further down into his seat. Pussy.

“Gail, either you get him out of that car, or I’m going to smash the fucking window and drag him out.”

“No, you won’t.”

“What?”

“You won’t. I know you won’t. You’ve never done a violent think in your life. As bad as things got between us, you never raised a hand to me. You won’t. I know it. It’s not you.”

I paused. Her tone was not a pleading one. It was confident. She knew me. And she knew that however many character flaws I had going on in my underdeveloped soul, a propensity to kick people’s asses wasn’t one of them.

Maybe I needed to fix that.

“Marty’s going to open that door. I’m going to get in. And we’re going to drive away. And we’ll finish this later. You’re not violet. I know you won’t do anything to stop me.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. We’ll talk later.”

And with that, she motioned to Marty. She mouthed the words, “It’s okay” to him. He opened the passenger side. She started to get in.

That’s when I shoved my hand in, shoved her aside, and tried to grab Marty’s jacket to pull him out through the passenger side, the more effectively to kick his ass.

“Jeff,” Gail screamed. “What the hell are you doing?” She kept trying to force herself inside the car, and push me away. I didn’t actually see Marty’s face. Just his eyes, wide and scared, reflected in the rear view mirror. Then, I didn’t even see those, as he slumped down even further, trying to melt into the gray leather seat.

“I’m going to kick his ass.”

“You’re not going to kick anyone’s ass. Stop it.”

At this point Gail’s head and one arm was in the passenger side. I had a head, an arm, and part of my torso in there. Then there was Marty, who summoned up deep personal courage to sit up straight, get his key in the ignition, and...

“Marty. What the hell are you doing?”

Driving away. Driving away with his passenger door open, with me half inside, with Gail maybe a third of the way inside. He started backing up. Then he took his hands, and shoved Gail--Gail?--out the door. I jumped out after her. He pulled the car forward, his car missing the actual exit and instead going up and over a curb, the accompanying scraping sound suggesting that some semi-important part of that Acura would remain behind in Schuylkill County while he hightailed it back to Philly.

I got up. Gail was still on the ground. She wasn't moving.

“Gail? You okay.”

“My head hurts. I think my bracelet flew off. And that fucker drove off with my purse. Give me your hand. I hope I can still stand up.” I helped her to her feet. “Oh, Jesus, my head hurts.”

“You should get to the hospital.”

“No. No. The perfect end to a horrible weekend, in an emergency room in this shitty place. No. Thank you. I'll pass. I can't believe he just drove off. With my purse.”

“Told you he was a pussy.”

“Ow. My ankle. I think I twisted it.”

“Here. Let's go inside. You need to sit down.” She leaned on me as we walked towards the bar.

“You’re not off the hook, Jeff. This is still your fault. Ow. Shit. That hurts.”

“Easy. Take off those heels, it might help.”

“Don’t think that being nice to me is getting you out of this.”

“Take the heels off.”

“I’ll rip the stockings.”

“Heels. Off.” She took the shoes off, holding one in one hand, while I held one in my free hand.

“Gail, I have to tell you something.”

“What now?” She said, with a near total whine in her voice.

“I drank and used drugs for a whole lot of years, you know that.”

“No shit.”

“You know, this is the first time ever, in all those years, I got into a fight at a bar. And I did it sober. I think that’s some kind of accomplishment, don’t you think?”

“Oh, Jesus. This is not something to brag about.” But she did laugh as she said it. Then she grimaced as the ankle hit the ground funny.

“I don’t know. I think it is. 25 years of being a drunk, and I get into my first bar fight sober. Slowly. Don’t force the ankle to do too much.”

“It’s not like it’s a marketable skill or anything.”

“But it’s unique. Like being double jointed, or when identical twins speak to each other in prime numbers.”

“Like when my best friend in Junior High School could sing all the words to ‘Stairway to Heaven’ in Pig Latin.”

“That’s it. Precisely.”

“You’re not off the hook,” she said, as we walked into the bar. Laughing. Well, at least smiling, with laugh-like undertones.

Then the smile came off Gail’s face. There was Kate. And, oh, by the way, Marlene.

And to think that I wanted to have choices in my life.

I waived to Kate and Marlene, who were sitting at the bar while clouds of self-generated cigarette smoke swirled around them both (since when did Kate start smoking again, by the way?) with the hand that still had Gail’s shoe in it, then quickly gave her back the shoe. Then I shoved both hands in my pockets.

Steve. Where’s Steve?

“Jeff, shall we take a table? Is Gail staying?” Kate asked me.

Steve, Where is Steve?

“Jeff,” Kate asked me. “You okay?”

“What’s the matter,” Gail asked.



Steve? Where was Steve? I did a quick inventory of my pockets. I had some change. I had a cell phone with a dead battery. I had a wad of tissue. I had keys to a car I had no business driving. But where was Steve?

“I have to go. I’ll be right back.”

“Jeff?” That was Marlene asking me this time if I’m okay. “Where are you going?”

I ran outside to the parking lot again, over to where I thought Marty had parked the car. Except there was no longer an empty space where I thought his Acura was, so I didn’t even know where I was supposed to look. I tried to guess. I half-ran over to the edge of the lot where I thought the altercation had taken place, and got on my hands and knees feeling under cars. It was now dark, and the parking lot lighting was only so-so. I looked under a Chevy Lumina with a coat hanger for an antenna. I looked under the Dodge Ram right next to it. And under the Isuzu Trooper with the NRA sticker on it. I was about to poke my head under some mid-80’s Olds when I saw Marlene looming over me.

“Um, exactly what are you doing?”

This was a difficult question to answer. Actually, that’s not quite correct. It was an easy question to answer. It was just that the ramifications were awkward.

Hi, I realize that I’m a recovering alcoholic, and so are you, and I’ve

entertaining thoughts of sex with you, and I don't want to actively discourage you from having the same thoughts, especially since I was there when you had them just last night, but, since you asked, I'm on the ground of a parking lot of a bar rolling around looking for a mini-bottle of vodka that fell out of my pocket, which I need because it occasionally speaks to me, and what's worse, I'm starting to listen, but don't worry, I don't actually want to drink anything out of it. I just want to hang onto it and fondle it for a while. By the way, is my current girlfriend still in the bar?

"Don't mind me, Marlene, I'm just looking for something," I said, as I peered up at her from the vicinity of a green Cutlass.

"Um..." I stood up. "This is going to sound weird."

"Jeff, I only met you on Friday, and I'm on a sort of date with you in a bar about to listen to your brother law sing badly while your current live in girlfriend just hobbled in the bar. I think you need to define weird."

"You're going to think I'm crazy. Or I've relapsed."

"Relapsed how? By siphoning gasoline out of cars in the parking lot and huffing the fumes?" She laughed. I forced a smile, then, resting my hands on the Cutlass's back bumper, rose to my feet.

"Promise me you won't immediately run away."

"Given the qualifier 'immediately run away, I'll commit to that.'"

“I’m looking for a liquor bottle. It was in my pocket.”

“Like a flask?”

“Like an airplane mini-bottle. A mini-bottle of Absolut Vodka. I’ve been carting it around for a while.”

“Why?”

“I’m not really sure. But I need it. I really need it.” And I started feeling a tightness in my chest.

She looked at me, eyes widening, then narrowing, trying to figure out what it was I was all about.

“I really, really need it, Marlene.” The tightness was getting worse, and my breathing was getting more rapid.

“You okay?”

“No,” I wasn’t. This was bad. The worst one I’d felt all weekend. I got down on all fours again. “I need to find it. You should go. I’m really fucked up.”

“What did you take? Seriously? I won’t judge you. Just tell me.” She stooped down to meet me eye level.

“Nothing. Honest. Nothing. I’m just really fucked up, and I don’t think any woman should be around me. Go. I’m sorry. I’m nothing but trouble. I’m a loser.”

“You’re not a loser. Fucked up, but not a loser.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“You don’t even know me. And I do know you, and you do know me.”

I wanted to scream. And hit something. And drink something. And cry. Mostly, I wanted to cry. Instead, I grabbed her hand. “Marlene, I’m a mess. I’m sober, I’m clean, and I’m a mess. I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. I really like you, and I don’t want you to run away forever, so if you want to do me a favor, maybe you should just take me back to Kate’s and get out of this crappy place, and when I’ve got my shit together, I’ll look you up and if you haven’t hooked up with someone from your play yet, maybe we can do this.”

“You’re sweet.”

“I am not sweet. I’m having a panic attack. I’m an asshole. I’m not sweet.”

“Stand up.”

I did. And she kissed me. She pressed me against the driver’s side of a minivan and kissed me. Hard at first, then softer, more delicately. And I kept waiting for the tightness in my chest to fade. It didn’t. I felt detached from the kiss, like my mouth was there, doing the work, but disengaged from everything else, working off of rote and protocol.

“You are sweet. You are also an asshole. Consistency is bullshit. Let’s go

inside.”

And we did. And I started to feel my head clear just a little bit. But not so much that the weirdness of Gail and Marlene and Kate all being in the same place was completely registering. Though that may have been because Freddy was already on stage---or platform, to be more precise---in mid-screch as we walked in .

By this time Gail and Kate were at a table not far from where Freddy and his band, The Open Arms, were performing. It had been a while since I heard Freddy sing. The last time, I’m pretty sure, was at their wedding, when Freddy, in a display of surreal romanticism, decided he was going to write, then sing, lyrics for Pachelbel’s Canon in D Major, restructuring it as a power ballad. Time, drugs and the memory removing powers of a merciful God have sucked most of the lyrics from my head, so I couldn’t exactly tell you at what point he added the driving bass line, but I do remember how it started:

*Space*

*Time*

*You’re*

*Mine.*

*Love.*

*Songs*

*Di-*

*Vine.*

That got repeated a few times. Then it went to:

*Happiness and joy*

*For this girl and boy*

and then somewhere else:

*I'm so-o-lucky, man oh-I'm such-a-lucky-man*

*Being here, here with you oh-it's-such-a-lovely-plan*

That's all I recall. After that, I was desperate enough for the pain to stop that I'd just started hoping I'd mix enough gin with Valium that I'd end up in one of those persistent vegetative states that I'd heard so much about, and which suddenly seemed underrated.

“He only knew four chords then, Jeff. Cut him a break. He's better now.”

“So he learned to read music *and* vowels?”

“Cut it out.”

“Okay, okay, Kate. I'll chill out. By the way, whose idea was the fog machine?”

I didn't pay attention to the answer. I kept jamming my hands in my pockets, hoping that, for the thirtieth time, Steve would turn up in that wad of tissue I kept combing through.

I was sitting across from Marlene. Gail was next to me. Kate across from her. Me alone, without Steve. I wanted to go back into the parking lot again, crawl around on all fours and hunt for that damn bottle, but I couldn't possibly think of

a reason that would get me out there inconspicuously.

Gail. She was still here. I thought about asking why, but I didn't want that to be perceived as "please go the hell away." Granted, that would have made things a lot less strange, but that really wasn't what I meant.

"How are you feeling? How's the ankle?" I said to her.

"Hurts. The head still hurts too. I should probably call a cab. I've got to get back. I can't believe he drove off like that."

"Hey, like I said..."

"Don't call him a pussy again. I mean, he is, but I don't want to hear it from you."

"How about weenie? Is weenie allowed?"

"Is the Vicodin starting to help?" Kate said.

"Vicodin? What manner of drugs are you carrying around with you," I asked. "What do you need Vicodin for?"

"Headaches. Cramps."

"Cramps? What happened to Midol?"

"You're lecturing me on drug usage?"

"Well, at least I never pretended any shit I ever took was the least bit medicinal."

“Well, the drugs were helping a little, but listening to you bicker, Jeff, is not helping.” Gail took another sip out of her margarita glass.

“Do you need to go somewhere?” It was Marlene. “I can take you somewhere.”

What? Did I just hear that? Marlene and Gail in a car together?

“I can call a cab, thanks.”

“You’ll need some money, don’t you think? There’s that matter of the purse.”

“I can loan it. Here,” Kate said, digging under her pills.

“Oh, Jesus, I don’t even know where to go. I just want to go home, but my stuff’s still back in Philly....” She stood up, but the bad ankle and some wobbliness from the Vicodin and margarita mixture-knowing Kate, she’d probably told her two pills would be even better than one-sent her nearly crashing to the floor, her outstretched hand on the chair narrowly breaking her fall.

“I think I’ve been drunk more times this weekend than I have the rest of my entire life. Jeff, tell me. How the hell do you do this and stay coherent?”

“It’s like the old joke about Carnegie Hall. Practice, practice, practice.”

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Gail said, and wobbled around and through the crowd. Marlene got up and followed her. “Be right back.” I suddenly



had the urge to grab Kate by the arm and beg her to do something. I followed that urge. “Jesus Fucking Christ, Kate, now what do I do. This is the nightmare scenario. They’re both in the bathroom together. This is awful. And I still don’t have Steve.”

“Freddy’s back,” Kate said, apparently oblivious to me as she spoke in an almost squealing-with-delight voice that was just a hair below disgusting, or would have been if I cared. Apparently Freddy’s band was on break, and I hadn’t even noticed that. Maybe that was because the choice of recorded music and the live stuff Freddy was doing weren’t all that distinct. It took Kate a second to realize that I’d said something which didn’t make a whole lot of sense. “Who’s Steve.”

“Never mind.”

“I asked him to play a song for your new girlfriend. She’s cute, by the way. I like her.”

“I don’t think she’s actually my girlfriend yet. By the way, what are they doing in the bathroom together? What would you be talking about, if you were them.”

“You, of course.”

“I was hoping you’d say, ‘don’t be silly, they’re not talking about you.’ ”

“You’re the elephant in the bar. Of course they’re talking about you.

Who's Steve? Freddy, Freddy, Jeff's here." She started waving her hands, as Freddy's drummer, Donny Piacini, playfully waved a stick at her. Donny was still as skinny and dwarfed by his drumset as he was when he was in high school with Kate and used to hang around our house going, "Hey, wanna hear my latest drum solo. It sounds just like Keith Moon. Before he died." It got him about as much attention with Kate then as now. I always thought that line was at least modestly funny, though I was never sure if it was intentionally so.

More clouds of ersatz smoke from wherever they had stashed the fog machine. Then lights. Blue. Red, White. It looked like someone was trying to put together a laser show that lacked only lasers.

And then Freddy, front and center. The crowd looked up---I mean they collectively looked up from their drinks and conversations---and started cheering. Actually, honest-to-God cheering. For Freddy Stancavage. Freddy Stancavage, who got fired from a Dunkin' Donuts once for squeezing a jelly donut with both his hands in front of a mother and her small child and saying, "Look. This one's infected." And that happened when he was 33.

"We're back. Open Arms is back. And ready to rock! And I couldn't rock without these guys. On bass, Steven P. Schroeder! Donny Piacini pounding the drums! Eagle Rock Johnson on the keyboards!"

I kept waiting for the Irony Police to come charging in, but apparently this place was out of their jurisdiction. Or maybe I was the only one who was in on

the joke. Or maybe the crowd just wanted to hear the music. Or—and this was the really hard to believe part—they wanted to hear Freddy play.

People who were in no way related to Freddy were waiting for him to do stuff. I was having a very hard time wrapping my brain around this.

That and the fact that Marlene and Gail were emerging from the bathroom, laughing.

They cannot--absolutely cannot--start to dance together. Whatever girl-on-girl fantasies that might otherwise appeal to would be dwarfed by heaping gobs of terror.

“And out there, in the audience,” Freddy belted out from the ever so slightly over-cranked up and distorted sound system, “is my girl Kate. And she’s got a request.

“Oh, Lord. Sister Christian. Night Ranger. The ultimate ‘80’s chick song. Girl bonding at my expense.

“Who asked for this,” I wondered.

“It’s one of my guilty pleasures,” Marlene answered. “That, and trying out for reality shows.”

“That and watching reality shows,” Gail added.

“How about just smoking crack and masturbating to internet porn. Doesn’t anyone do that anymore? Or am I the only one....” I was babbling to myself. Nobody was listening to me.

“I need some air.” I said, hoping someone would hear me.

“Jeff, come on,” Gail said, with a smile too broad and a slur in her voice.

“What are you afraid of?”

“That we’re all going to talk about your dick size?”

“Not hardly. You all know what a dick I am. Not even news. Go on, listen to your Sister Christian. I need some air.”

I walked out into the parking lot again, making sure that the stamp on my hand was still nice and visible. Lord knows, I’d hate to have to pay a cover charge twice to watch these three getting all nostalgic over this shit.

And I needed to find Steve.

I noticed none of them had followed me out. Which was what I wanted, to be left alone so I could crawl on the ground in peace. Though it would have been nice if someone had tried to follow me.

I walked over, again, to the place I thought the Acura had been parked, near the parking lot’s entrance. As I was walking there, an SUV pulled out.

And I heard what sounded terrifyingly like a crunch. A faint crunch. But a crunch all the same.

There it was. Steve’s battered, beaten, savaged corpse.

I bent down. I grabbed all the pieces. I started collecting glass and dripping vodka and a flattened metal screw top. I put my vodka covered hands all over my shirt and hands and hair. I found a piece with part of the label on, and

tried to find another piece to connect it with. There wasn't much to connect. It was just a mini-bottle. But it was Steve.

Maybe they had duct tape in the bar.

I walked back in. Freddy was still on stage, his fists suddenly pumping in the air, head and hair tilted back, guitar dangling in front. Kate had left the table, and was up front, watching and cheering. And Marlene and Gail were—where, exactly?

I walked over to the bar and asked the bartender, “Do you have any duct tape.” “What?”

“Duct tape. Do you have any....”

“I know what you said. What the hell do you need duct tape for?”

“I broke a bottle.”

“Here? In the bar? We'll clean it up. Don't worry.”

“No. I need to fix it.”

“Look, don't worry. Just tell me where it is.”

“It's in my pocket. Here.” I pulled out Steve's leg and torso, and put them on the counter, only at that point realizing that I was also putting my blood on the counter, as well.

“What the hell did you do to your hand? What is all this shit?”

“I just need you to put him back together.”

“Get that shit the fuck off of my counter.” I grabbed the pieces of Steve

before he brushed them away, and hurriedly put them in my pocket. I was going to wipe my blood off the counter, but the bartender said, “No, I’ll take care of it. Just go away.” Another first. I just pissed off a bartender while sober.

I walked around the perimeter of the room. Freddy was just finishing up a set. I walked up to Kate.

“Jeff. Where were you?”

“Is he taking requests?”

“Were you drinking? You smell like booze.”

“Freddy, got a request.” I started waving my blood-stained right hand “Let me hear the Journey line from Live Aid.”

“What?” Freddy asked. I wasn’t sure if that was a “what did you say,” or “what are you asking me to do, you asshole?” I was hoping it was the latter.

“The line. You know. That one line. Do it, Freddy. Do it with feeling. With heart.”

“You mean...” Freddy took a deep breath and sang it *a cappella*-“Oh, there’s a choice we’re making. We’re saving our own lives.” He sang it softly, though, with his eyes and face all crunched up, like Steve Perry would.

“Yeah. That. Do it again. With the band.

“You’re kiddin’ me, Jeff.”

“Do it. C’mon. With passion. Like you’re trying to stop famine, and only your voice can do it.”

“Jeff, stop.” Kate gave me one of those dirty looks that I usually only got from her when I inadvertently sat on an animal.

“Do it. Do it.”

And he did. Backed up by the band, he belted out that one line. They must have screwed around once or twice in practice and done it before. Or maybe they were just good at fielding requests by drunken jerks. But they did it. “Oh there’s a *choooooice* we’re making. We’re *saaaving* our own *liiiivvees*.” Some people in the crowd laughed. They probably thought they were laughing with him.

“Do it again,” I yelled.

“Shut the fuck up,” someone in the crowd yelled.

“Okay, we’re taking a break. Back in a bit,” Freddy yelled, and climbed off the platform.

“Why did you have to do that, Jeff?” Kate asked, as Marlene and Gail were walking over from wherever they were. “Do you always have to make fun of him.”

“I’m going to keep making fun of him until he realizes I’m doing it.”

“Of course he realizes it. Do you think he’s retarded? And don’t answer that. I mean it. Don’t.”

And speaking of retarded, or things close to it, Gail and Marlene were giggling like idiots. Particularly Gail, whose eyes seemed totally out of focus with the rest of her face.

“I was just having a little fun with him.”

“Do you know why I didn’t want to have you come back here?”

“Of course I know that, Kate. You can’t stand me.”

“That’s not true. Well, it’s true a little, but mostly I just can’t stand that you never want to grow up.”

“This is grown up?”

“He’s doing what he wants. What the hell are you doing with your life?”

“Oh, please. What he wants is to play rock star and for you to play along.”

“And that’s so fucking bad?”

“Actually, yes.” Actually, no. But I didn’t want to concede anything. “But fine. I’ll drop it.” Which I did mostly because I was trying to figure out what was going on with Gail. Which wasn’t particularly hard the second I started paying attention.

Jesus. She’s high. They’ve been smoking a joint. And I doubt Gail had it with her, so that left only one suspect.

“Marlene, can I talk to you for a bit.”

We walked to a hallway between the payphones and the bathrooms.

“So, interesting evening you’ve shown me so far. What next? Do I get to meet your old prom date from high school?”

“Marlene....”

“I’m kidding. I’m kidding. Really.” She leaned into me, ever so slightly



pushing me against a wall, so my ear was resting against the side of a payphone. “It’s been fun. And your taste in girlfriends gives me some encouragement. Gail’s nice. Not what I would have picked for you, but fun when she loosens up.”

“I want to talk about that loosening up.”

“We *are* going to have to get her back to Philly somehow. Much as I like her, I did want you to myself. I’m trying to figure out the logistics of this.”

“Why are you smoking dope?”

She laughed. “Jeff, please don’t tell me you’re one of those alcoholics who’s bothered by that sort of thing. And besides, how come you smell like cheap vodka?”

“It wasn’t cheap. But I wasn’t drinking. And don’t change the subject.”

“Look, Jeff, I like to smoke pot once in a while. It’s not something I want to give up. I’m not expecting you to do it, but don’t judge me. And I thought Gail needed to relax.”

“How much relaxing does she need to do? She’s drunk. Kate gave her a Vicodin.”

“Two. She was in a lot of pain. You do know she still likes you, don’t you?”

“I don’t know anything of the sort, and I don’t care.”

“You’re a very bad liar.”

Actually I thought I was an above average one, but I decided not to argue

that point.

“Jeff, in the first place, the poor girl had a really bad evening. In the second place, I’m eventually going to have to transport her back to her hotel room in Philly. It’s the decent thing to do. And in the third place, if she’s drunk and high and buzzed from pain killers, she won’t be in much shape to say anything when I drop her off at her hotel room and don’t drop you off with her. Because I’m not planning on leaving her with you. I have other plans for you. Unless, of course, you’re one of those alcoholics who has a problem with people in recovery who smoke pot, even when you’re smelling like vodka, in which case we may have to discuss that, even though I don’t feel like working that hard at discussions right now.”

I stared at those button mushroom like nipples for what may well have been the last time.

“Marlene, I got a problem with that. I’m trying to stay clean and sober. From everything. I probably shouldn’t have even gone to a bar tonight. I can’t handle someone smoking pot.” Pause. “But I still want to see you. Is that a problem?”

“Jeff. I don’t want to work this hard. Later. Maybe later.” She loosened her body off mine, leaving me free to move my head or do whatever I might want to do, so long as it didn’t involve sex with Marlene now or, probably ever. She walked over to our table; Kate and Gail were back there, and Gail looked like she

was dangerously close to falling in a plate of nachos.

“Come on, Gail, time to get you home.”

“Home? Where home?”

“Back to Philly. Back to your hotel. Jeff, help me get her in the car. I don’t think I can carry her.”

“I saw you carry someone across a pit on the TV show.”

“That wasn’t dead weight. This is very close to dead weight. Help me get her up.”

I did. In a manner of speaking, anyway. Between the mixture of buzz-creating substances, her damaged ankle, and the fact that she had apparently put the high heels on again, she more or less folded into the floor. Twice. By the third time, I was starting to think I might have to just carry her over my shoulder, but she managed, between grunting and giggling, to stand up enough that, with Marlene at one arm and me at the other, we could get her into the parking lot.

“Are we going somewherrre?” Gail asked, except the way she said it didn’t have a lilting inflection upward, but more like a slurred downward matter of factness.

“We’re getting you back,” I said. “Marlene’s taking you back to Philly.”

“That’s nice,” Gail said. “You wanna go out and do something. I’m ready to party like it’s 1999. Wait. It’s past 1999. Holy shit. That’s funny.”

I whispered to Marlene as we eased Gail horizontally into the back seat of

Marlene's car, "You didn't slip some Ecstasy in there too, did you?"

"That would have been semi-amusing, but no. I'll get her home. You staying here?"

"I'll call later."

Marlene didn't respond. She just shut the door, gave me a thin, tight smile, started the engine, backed up over Steve's grave and headed out of the lot.

I stood out in the parking lot for a few minutes after they left, trying to figure out what I had just done. It seemed, on paper, the right thing to do. But I had never been one to live my life on paper, and I wasn't sure I was ready to deal with the consequences of it now. Especially not being this alone.

I started to walk back inside, when I remembered (actually, I never quite forgot) I had Kate's keys. I didn't know if any of the keys on the chain would fit Freddy's van. But I decided to find out. I tried them all. The second to last one, a big bulky key with a red plastic cover on the top, opened up the door. The last one, with a black plastic cover on top, started the ignition.

It was 12:42 am. I was only going to drive for a little while.

**January, 2001  
Philadelphia**

There's something-- don't know, I'd call it Zen-like about Rudy, except I never really studied Buddhism enough to know what Zen-like actually is, so I'll just say he's serene. Accepting. He takes things day by day. If I could figure out a way to do that without suffering the corresponding brain damage, I might actually have a shot at a decent life when I get out.

I guess you could say Rudy is my spiritual advisor. Which is why I feel like dragging him with me when a guard unexpectedly tells me that my attorney is waiting for me in the legal meeting room.

I didn't expect this, actually. I didn't expect anyone, least of all my lawyer. Not today. Today could only mean bad news.

Something is wrong. Something is very, very wrong.

A slight metallic taste seeps in my mouth, a counterpoint to the slightly metallic reverberations hovering around the guard's and my footfalls. The guard and I come up to a grayish-green door. There's a buzz, and the door unlocks. I go inside. Contact is allowed here, so I walk past three other prisoners at tables with lawyers, their briefcases and papers spread out before their clients. And then I see what's waiting for me.

Gail. It's Gail.

## Sunday

My father placed a lot of pride on having a well-stocked bar. Not just the beer that he kept in an actual tap and everything, but all sorts of liquor imaginable. Even the stuff for, as he'd put it, "your mother's sissy drinks." But besides having the liquor itself, he'd took almost as much pride in getting it out of state, and avoiding Pennsylvania's taxes and bizarro liquor laws. He liked to brag to his friends, "Go on, see if you can find a Pennsylvania revenue stamp on any of these bottles. I dare you." So every few months, we'd all load up in the family station wagon and take a two hour run across the state line into Maryland. We wouldn't exactly go far. We didn't need to. Hell, I think I was 18 before I made it as far south as Baltimore. What we needed was maybe 500 yards below Mason and Dixon's long ago marker; the neon world of Garfield's Discount Liquors. Open late. Open early. Bottles and bottles of all kinds of exotica that Pennsylvania's fucked-up state run liquor stores would never carry. I'd walk among the aisles, just reading the labels, letting myself be transported in my mind to places far across the globe, different lands where different nations spoke the common language of booze. Australian wine. Polish Vodka. Malaysian—well, I didn't know what they drank in Malaysia, and I still don't, but if I wanted to know, it probably was in the racks at Garfield's.

And they would have minibottles. And I was going to get one. I was going to drive down. If they were still open, I'd get one. If they weren't open, I'd wait

till they did.

I was going to call Kate. I figured I'd just call, and tell her what I did, and they could get a ride home from one of the other band members. Then I thought I'd drive back to Kate's place first, switch to her car, which she said I could drive anyway, and continue on to Maryland. Then I looked around at the van I'd expropriated--which basically had seats in the front, and nothing else, so as to store the band's equipment--and realized they needed this van to get their stuff back. Then I realized that, having taken the only method they had to get their stuff back, they were already pissed, perhaps irredeemably so.

So I kept driving into Maryland. When you're already fucked, just keep driving.

I drove down through Reading, then into Lancaster County. I was not that far from home, assuming I could still call the house I shared with Gail home, and I thought for a second about just stopping there. But only for a second. Instead, I kept heading down 222, through Lancaster, and south.

I didn't do anything crazy. I didn't speed. I kept my seatbelts on. I even stopped the van about halfway into the trip, got out, and made sure front and rear lights were working. I didn't do anything to attract attention to myself. I had no desire to disturb some graveyard shift state trooper's routine. I knew they didn't go looking for trouble at that time of night. All I did was drive. All I needed to do was drive.

Which is what I did.

Until I stopped.

The last time I was driving in southern Lancaster County, I was drunk. My blood alcohol was .19, that day, almost twice the legal limit. I still don't quite know what happened, only that my Miata and I—the last remnants of a law practice that could enable me to buy stuff--parted company in a cornfield not too far from this place, and that a mailbox ended up where my stick shift should have been.

But at least then I was drunk. I had an excuse to run off the road and not remember how it happened. It made sense to run away from four state troopers as they chased me down. I had a reason to squirm and fight as they tried to cuff me while my head slammed face down on this rock that was jutting out and scratched my cornea. It even seemed right to yell, “You can't do this! I'm a lawyer! I'll make your lives a living hell,” as they each grabbed a limb and threw me in the back of the car, while I screamed out, “I'll prove it. Let me get my bar card, I'll prove it.”

I was a drunk. I was supposed to be hitting a bottom. I was required to do that sort of stupid shit. I was supposed to acquire all sorts of stories like that to tell people when I got sober and could pass along my wisdom to clueless newbies coming out of rehab all twitchy and jangly who were too fucked themselves to realize that I didn't have anything they could possibly want.



But to fall asleep behind the wheel because you've been up almost 22 hours, except for a short nap in the afternoon, isn't a story you can tell anywhere in AA. It doesn't lead anywhere noble or inspiring. It's just something stupid I did. While sober.

So, for the second time in my life, for the second time in the same general location, I blacked out, lost consciousness, ran off the road and wrecked something I was driving.

I'm not quite sure how it happened, but the van flipped over on the passenger side. It happened suddenly and in slow motion all at once.

And since it had been stripped of pretty much everything in the way of upholstery or amenities, and was basically a cube of unadorned steel on four wheels and a drive train, I probably would have gone crashing into something headfirst and hard if I wasn't wearing the seatbelt. Score one for blind obedience to the law.

As it was, the force of the flip threw my neck and torso hard against the seatbelt. I had to kick my door about four times, but I got it open, and kind of vaulted myself out. I paused long enough to crane my neck up and try to see my reflection in the driver's side mirror, to figure out what my face looked like, but it was too dark to see much of anything.

I walked to the side of the road. I could see a small blinking red light off in the distance. I knew that light. It was attached to a tower, on the property of a

natural gas company, right on the Pennsylvania-Maryland line. It wasn't far.

I could walk to Maryland.

It wasn't far, I sort of knew that. Maybe a mile, maybe two. It didn't matter. I just wanted to get to the liquor store and wait. The light was my beacon. Follow it. Go towards the light.

It was like having one of those near-death experiences. Except I wasn't as near to death as I felt I deserved to be.

The reality of the accident was starting to sink in, and I suddenly became really scared. Then I started thinking I'd have another panic attack, and became scared of that.

Eventually, I lost all moorings to the specifics of why I was scared, and just settled into being one big ball of fright.

But I kept walking. Close to the road at first. I didn't want to get hit. I didn't want to get lost. I just wanted to stick to the road's shoulder.

Then I realized I wasn't wearing anything particularly bright, or reflective, and I was walking along the side of the road sometime in the middle of the night. So I left the road entirely, and just started walking in the yards and fields alongside the road, all the while keeping my sights on the orangish light that I knew straddled the state line.

That was the plan.

I can't actually say I abandoned that plan. Some part of my brain kept

sight of the light on the tower. But it became unconscious. Autonomous, really. Like breathing, or blinking. Or drinking.

That's probably why I tripped on a rock in a field. And hit another rock in the same field.

I just went down. Straight down. My ankle gave way, and I went flying. The grasses and weeds would have cushioned the fall pretty good, except for my head hitting a rock.

I don't know how long I was on the ground, face down, bleeding into the earth. I don't even know how much of the blood came from the accident and how much came from that damn rock. But I was suddenly aware that my body hurt in all kinds of places. My left eye. My neck. My right wrist. Parts of my rib cage.

I reached into my pocket. I felt the little jagged piece of Steve slice into my index finger. There was something almost reassuring about that. But only for a moment. Then I felt worse than ever.

I started to sit up. I looked around. I was in some sort of field. It was too dark for me to make out what exactly was being grown in this field. But whatever it was, I wanted to stay there. I wanted to stay there, and I wanted it to be night forever. I wanted to curl up in the weeds, stay in the fetal position, and not be found for a while. A nice, long while. I wanted the world to stop on me while I figured out my next move.

I wanted to think about the two guys who surveyed that state line. I knew

it was Jeremiah Dixon; don't ask me how I remembered that. I couldn't remember Mason's first name for anything. But I wanted to be them. I wanted it to be 1760 something. Because if it was then, it wouldn't be now. And I'd be walking around this place for a reason, a real reason, not the lame, stupid reason I had.

I wanted to think about Jeremiah Dixon and what's his name Mason. But ultimately I couldn't. I couldn't take myself, not even mentally take myself anywhere else but where I was, curled up into a ball in a field near the Maryland state line because I had nobody else to hold on to.

I don't know how long I stayed on the ground. I just stayed until it seemed apparent that life went on, and I had to stand eventually. I tried brushing off dirt. I tried to rid myself of the blood on my face. Some of it had caked; some of it hadn't, though it was a bit viscous. There were the first shards of light cracking the sky, but it was still plenty dark enough that I could have located the light of the tower if I'd have had a second.

But I didn't have a second. There was another light. Behind me, then pulled up alongside me.

A Pennsylvania State Trooper, driving an unmarked car, a red flashing light perched on the dashboard and glowering out at me.

Then, in a matter of seconds, another trooper, this one in a marked car, all the reds and blues stuttering staccato rhythms on the roof, pulled up behind the

first.

I didn't know what to do. Usually, that doesn't stop me. I had a matter of seconds to figure out if that principle would apply or whether I'd just meekly accept whatever was going to happen next.

The guy from the unmarked car got out first, fastening his chin strap to the smokey bear style hat that the Pennsylvania State Police still anachronistically cling to. He started walking towards me. The other cop, his hat on, remained in the car.

"Sir? Are you all right, sir?"

"I'm fine."

"Do you have any identification?"

"Do I need to?"

"Sir, there was a van that crashed about a mile and a half up the road.

Were you operating it?"

I glanced over at the other trooper, who was just starting to get out of his car.

"I'm fine. Am I free to go?"

"How did you get those scrapes and bruises on your face?"

I started summoning up every bit of lawyerly dignity and intensity I had left. As long as I didn't lie, admit anything or get into a screaming match, I had a puncher's chance of getting out of this.

“Am I free to go about my business. Because if I am, I’m leaving.”

“Sir. Are you refusing to tell us who you are?”

“Apparently the answer to my question is yes, or you would have tried to stop me. Goodbye.” I started to walk away.

The other officer started walking towards me, as the first officer cut in front of me.

“Sir, is your name Jeffrey Ramsey?”

“I’m not committing a crime. It isn’t illegal to walk in a field in the middle of the night.” I thought to myself, for just a moment, Damn, that sounded pretty good. Kind of authoritative and everything. And if this cop actually busts me anyway, I’m laying out my lack of probable cause arguments pretty cleanly. If I showed up as a client in my office, I’d think, “That guy’s got a lot on the ball.”

I also would have thought, “That guy’s a career criminal.”

Since cop number one was in front of me, the police cars were both to the side, and nobody had actually told me I was in custody, I started walking deeper into the field. I noticed, for the first time, that the tower light looked very close to me, maybe a quarter-mile away, maybe a little less.

“Sir, come back here.” Cop number one put his hand on my left shoulder. It wasn’t a heavy grab, but there was authority in it.

“Either get your hands off me and let me go or arrest me,” I said. I was daring him and I knew it. But I also knew that state cops are generally not idiots.

They may or may not be assholes, but they teach them a few things in the Academy about grounds to stop, and they have actual bureaucracies and chains of command to report to if they fuck up. Right now these guys knew I had cuts and bruises and I was walking a mile down from a one car accident. That's all they knew.

Which is why my strategy actually worked. Cop number one quickly pulled his hands away. I was hoping to keep him mentally off balance, and I seemed to be succeeding. I wasn't resisting, I wasn't cooperating, and I wasn't admitting to anything.

To detain and question me, they'd have to have something more. Something like....

"Sir, there was a van that was reported as stolen in Schuylkill County matching the tags and description of the van that was overturned a mile up the road. I'd like to ask you about it. Are you Jeffrey Ramsey? Were you operating the vehicle?"

Now that, to my highly trained legal mind, was starting to sound more like probable cause.

I thought about my options. I couldn't lie. That would be giving false reports to a police officer. But I didn't want to admit I was operating it, either. That would be incriminatory. Not to mention stupid.

I could try to talk my way out of this. But even I knew that never works.

I decided on a middle course of action.

I started running.

There was just enough distance between the two troopers and me, even with one in front of me and one in the back, that I could dart past both of them and head deeper into the field, without either one of them being immediately able to grab a hold of any body parts.

I ran out straight, then cut to my left, heading towards that tower light. I could hear the two troopers' footfalls as they crunched through weeds and grass. I could hear the jangling of hardware, the handcuffs that would be ending up on my wrists soon enough.

I started thinking about hot pursuit. Jurisdictional issues. When can a policeman from one state pursue a fleeing suspect into another state? What constitutes "hot pursuit"? What do various interstate compacts allow for? Has Pennsylvania adopted them? Has Maryland? What if the crime is a felony? What if it's only a misdemeanor? I began crafting the briefs that I'd be writing from my jail cell as I pursued these various arguments, and as two state troopers pursued me. It might be my last chance to play lawyer, and I wanted it to be good.

And in between those thoughts, I ran towards that tower light, as hard as my overweight, twitching, sweating, toxin-exuding body would let me. My legs got heavier. My breath got more labored. Off in the far fields of peripheral vision



I saw another series of flashing lights. Another cop. More thudding of boots. Sunrise. The tower, less bright as the sun started crowding its glow out of the sky. A different shape. Like, like...

“Like a bottle, maybe?”

Steve. Tall, glowing Steve.

“You know, you should at least do this in a Ford Bronco or something. Less taxing on that fat ass. Wait. I forgot. You got into this mess because you were in a Ford SUV. Whoops. Sorry.”

I just panted and ran as he spoke.

“Nothing to say? Are we too busy for me?”

“It’s all your fault.”

“My fault? My fault? You wound me, Jeff. Literally. Look at my face. See? It’s all jagged and busted. We had a deal. You were supposed to take care of me.”

“You were supposed to take care of me!” I said, as I noticed a big mass of duct tape diagonally running down Steve’s head.

“When did I ever say that?”

“It was implied. The whole time, it was implied.”

“You’re reading things into the contract that were never there.”

“Then what the fuck were you supposed to be doing the whole time you were in my pocket?”

“Maybe I’ll tell you later. Right now, I think this discussion is about to be overtaken by fast moving events. By the way, brace yourself. That’s gonna hurt.”

I wanted to wave goodbye, or at least give the finger, to Steve as I ran past him, but one trooper tackled me at the knees as the other two piled on my back before I had the chance.

By the way, there’s a common misperception that people outside the criminal justice system have. Most people think that cops are required to read you your Miranda rights. They aren’t. Or, more accurately, they are only required to read them if they are planning on questioning you while you're in custody.

If they aren’t the least bit interested in what you have to say, for instance, they may not choose to read you those rights. Just to cite a random example, let’s say someone who is being arrested—a lawyer, hypothetically—starts screaming about lack of jurisdiction, the utter failure of probable cause, and possible civil rights violations. It’s entirely possible—likely even—that not only will the cops in that situation not read you your rights, as they handcuff you in the back, then grab you by those handcuffed wrists, pull you up off the ground and dump you horizontally in the back of a Pennsylvania State Police vehicle. Rather, they may actually insist that you exercise your right to remain silent. Or, more properly and more accurately, they may tell you to “shut the fuck up, nobody fuckin’ cares what you think.”

“Can you help me sit up?” I asked the trooper behind the wheel of the

police car.

I didn't really want to sit up. I wanted to sink into the seat and never surface from the upholstery again. But the uncomfortableness of my position, coupled with the fact that my face was probably resting on the exact location of some miscreant's vomit, caused me to press the issue.

"Be quiet," the trooper said.

"Look. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to give you a hard time..."

"Shut the fuck up. I'm not going to say it again."

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

"Jesus Fucking Christ. It's too late for 'I'm sorry.' Shut up. You did what you did. Deal. In silence."

I shut up. I tried to tell myself I was exercising restraint and accepting personal responsibility for the consequences of my actions.

We stayed parked on the shoulder of the road for a good ten minutes. The trooper kept radioing the State Police's computer network, trying to find out if there were any outstanding charges or warrants. I was in enough trouble for what I'd just done, but depending on what may or may not have been filed in Schuylkill County for the van, things could get a whole lot worse.

Kate. Kate wouldn't actually press charges against me. She couldn't. She wouldn't.

Except it wasn't her van. It was Freddy's.

Okay. I'm fucked.

"Ramsey." The trooper's raspy voice startled me.

"What?"

"You have charges outstanding."

"It was my brother-in-law's van. He said I could drive it." I started babbling like every cretinous loser who'd ever paid me a retainer, and several that hadn't.

"What the hell are you talking about? There's a stalking charge. Filed today. In Philadelphia."

Aviva. Good God. She actually did it. She went and had me arrested.

It's Sol's fault. If I could get my hands on him and his cancerous little windpipe, I'd do something worthy of being busted.

"You're on probation. I'm contacting your PO."

I sighed. "I know you have to."

"No I don't. I just want to."

The trooper, his attention bouncing between the radio, his laptop, and me, was charting his, and by extension, my next move. After a few minutes of this, he started the engine.

"We're going to have you arraigned. On call DJ is in Lancaster. Gonna take a while." And he pulled off the shoulder of the road and headed back up Route 222.

There wasn't much I did for the half-hour or so I waited as he drove into Lancaster in search of the on-duty judge. If this were a client in this predicament, and I had been called from the scene of the arrest (which did happen sometimes--not everyone who is arrested behaves like a moron, and policemen will sometimes cut people breaks who don't), I'd drive from my office or home to the DJ--a district justice, the lowest rung of the judicial ladder in Pennsylvania—and call the DJ before I got there. Since they were the ones who initially set bail, getting to them before the cop did was crucial. It was killing me not to know who I was being driven to and not safely being able to ask, but there wasn't much I could do about it. I tried not to focus on the too-tight handcuffs, or my total helplessness, or the fact that I was going to be helpless for what would be, at a minimum, hours.

Screw a day at a time. I was going to have to take things a minute at a time. I had no choice but to let each second wash over me, without dwelling on the one that came before or the one that would follow.

The last time this happened, I was so smashed I barely knew what was happening. No such good fortune now.

I was riding in the back of a police car. Sober.

Goddamn it. If I had just stuck with Marlene none of this shit would have happened.

I don't know how I managed not to have the ultimate, supreme panic attack in the

cruiser. All I knew is that somehow I got through the sheer awfulness of the drive until we made it into Lancaster. I somehow didn't even notice it had turned fully light outside. I didn't notice much of anything, in fact, until we pulled into the parking lot of a gray-green, one story trapezoid building that I knew, even before I saw the blue keystone-shaped sign, was Fanny McDyre's office. My friend Fanny. My friend Fanny that I'd spent the beginning of this shitty, awful, bitch-slapped weekend pissing off.

And yet, I felt just a bit of hope. Even though I'd been a jerk to Fanny this weekend, and lots of other times in the recent past, I had some credit built up with her. In Even though I was in handcuffs, and wouldn't be carrying a briefcase and walking in the front of the building, I felt like I had just a little bit of juice left. However many shit lists I'd earned my way onto--many of which began and ended with my name the sole entry on it--I still hadn't completely made Fanny's. Maybe it was because of how Gail and I worked our asses off when she ran for State Senate and came within 900 votes of becoming the first African American in the Lancaster County delegation. Maybe she just liked me. Maybe she thought I was an okay human being. Which meant something, given the kind of person Fanny was and is. Which was something she demonstrated when her pregnant daughter was shot to death in a bank robbery four months after she lost, even her political enemies sorta, kinda felt sorry for her and threw her the bone of being a District Justice in the most crime-ridden part of Lancaster. Fanny didn't treat it as

being the shittiest consolation prize in the world. She gave the job dignity.

I was going to need all the dignity and compassion the Honorable Fantasia Leonora McDyre could muster. I can't begin to describe how much I hated that.

The trooper told me to slide over to the open door, and helped me out of the car. The other trooper, the one in the unmarked car, pulled up alongside, parked, and then grabbed onto my elbow as they both escorted me inside. We walked around the front door, to a side metal door of an entrance with a buzzer. Unmarked trooper rang the buzzer, and Fanny herself opened it up.

"Good God. You look like shit rolled over. What the hell happened to him," she said, turning to Uniformed trooper.

"He was in an accident. Then he decided to run."

"You? Decided to run from cops? Ramsey, what were you thinking? Don't answer that. Get him in. And take off those cuffs."

"Judge, he tried to run from us. I really don't feel comfortable with that."

"Well, at least cuff him in front. Good God. Put him in the holding area. Jeff, I'll get to you in a minute. Good God."

They walked me over to a small room adjacent to a conference area.

"Sit down," Uniformed cop barked out. I sat on a metal bench. "Turn around so we can take off your cuffs. When we do, put your hands on your head. Immediately."

I did what they asked.

Unmarked cop then took my wrists and cuffed them in front, making sure that, even though they were in front, my hands were facing away from each other rather than towards each other.

“Don’t even think about going anywhere.” They both walked out of the small room.

There wasn’t much to think about. All the fight was out of me. There was nothing left to do but to sit there, on the holding cell bench, staring at walls that lacked even the ephemeral defiance of interesting graffiti.

I did that until I lost track of time, and until Fanny leaned against the steel, windowless door that, thankfully, hadn’t been closed shut.

“You want to tell me what is going on here, Ramsey? What have I got to do to get your ass clean and sober?”

“I *am* clean and sober. Really. That’s what sucks.”

“You’re not drinking?”

“Nope.”

“No Peruvian happy dust?”

“Nope.”

“You haven’t started up with some new chemical shit, have you?”

“I think I’m officially too old for Ecstasy. Nope.”

“Then what did happen?”

I paused. I knew Fanny was not asking me this question just to be polite.



I hadn't been around her enough as of late for her to have completely washed her hands of me. I wanted to give her the most truthful answer I could.

"I think...I think...I think I've just lost control of everything, and I don't know how to get it all back. Or even if I can anymore. Actually, it's worse than that. I'm almost certain I can't."

There, that was easy. Now find me a razor blade so I slash my fucking wrists.

Fanny walked over to me, and sat down on the bench.

"Ramsey, are you really sober? Do not lie to me."

"Fanny, I don't think I've ever bullshitted you, except where a client was involved. Not that I'll ever be having any more of them, mind you."

"Look. I want you to listen to me carefully. I've got two incredibly angry state troopers outside typing up an arrest warrant for aggravated assault, resisting arrest, and driving under suspension..."

"Ag assault? That's bullshit."

"Come on, Ramsey, you know the deal. You as much as brush up against a cop in Pennsylvania, its felony ag assault. Anyway, I can't set bail unsecured. I can't just let you walk out of here without posting some money. And even if I did, your probation officer is coming down here to violate you, and there's a Philly cop that is saying something about charges there. And some cops up in Schuylkill County want to ask you some questions. So here's the thing. First, I'm going to

have to hold you here a while. And second, and I don't know any other way to say this, you're going to jail."

"Oh, God. Oh, God." I knew everything she was saying was true. But hearing her lay it out there so plain and direct was too much. I felt like I was having this sudden surge of shit implanting itself directly into my aorta.

"Listen to me. Listen to me. You've still got some friends."

"See, that's the thing. No, I don't. I don't even know why you're still my friend."

"You came by when my daughter died and I thought my heart couldn't bear the sadness."

"I didn't do anything."

"You came by. That's what you did. Again and again. That time you and Gail brought that big batch of fried chicken and you said, 'I want to show you what us white boys can cook.' You made me smile, Ramsey. I didn't think I could smile, but you made me smile."

"I was going to bring some grape soda, but Gail thought that might be pushing it."

"Gail, for once, had better comic timing than you. Listen, do you want to call her?"

"Um, there's not much point in that now." I didn't want to think what kind of anger Gail might be nursing, waking up for the second morning in a row with a

hangover and visions of what an asshole I was racing through her head.

“Think about who you want to call, then, Ramsey. I got to get back to the troopers. I’ll bring you into chambers in a few minutes.”

I could, as Fanny left, imagine what she’d do next. She’d walk just outside the side entrance of the office, the one they brought me through. She’d pull out a cigarette. If someone was with her, they’d make a comment about how her latest attempt to quit smoking had obviously not worked, and she’d laugh.

I wished that someone was me. I could use some banal normality right now.

I decided sitting handcuffed on the bench that I needed someone. A legal someone. It was time to suck it up and call Mark.

At that moment Unmarked Cop came into the room with a stack of white and orange paperwork.

“Mr. Ramsey. You’re being served with warrants for the charges of aggravated assault, resisting arrest, driving under suspension and unauthorized use of a motor vehicle. I’ve also been directed to hold you until your probation officer arrives, when he will be issuing a parole violation. There are also charges of harassment and stalking by the Philadelphia Police Department. They will be coming to get you in the next few days from Lancaster County Prison.”

“Did you talk to my brother-in-law?” I knew the only way they could have done the unauthorized use charge is if they had.

“Read the warrant. Do you want to call anyone.”

“My lawyer.”

Uniformed Cop walked into the room. “I’ll take him to the phone,” he said to Unmarked Cop. Before doing that, he began reading the arrest warrant.

*Defendant did operate a motor vehicle, to wit, a 1981 Ford Econoline van, without the permission or consent of the owner, Bruno Francis Stancavage of Minersville, PA...*

Excuse me? Bruno Francis? That’s his actual name? Where the hell did “Freddy” come from?

*Defendant did operate said vehicle despite the suspension of his Pennsylvania operator’s license...*

Fine, oracle of the obvious, tell me something I don’t know.

*Defendant, while in custody of two Pennsylvania State Troopers...*

Was I in custody? I don’t think so.

*did resist arrest by running from said troopers through a field...*

And I stopped. I just stopped dissecting the warrant. There wasn’t any point.

Everything was over now.

All my logic and cleverness had brought me right here, and there was nothing I could do about it.

No more career. No more law license. No more anything. At best, I’d be

one of those losers at AA meetings, the ones with off-kilter eyes and marginally groomed facial hair, that talk about they've lost everything, but are trying to live one day at a time, and as long as they can do that, they'll be fine.

At worst, I'd just be a drunk and a drug addict, never getting it together, getting busted, getting my probation violated, going in and out of jail, not even trying to get into treatment facilities because they won't take me and County won't pay for it anymore.

Unless I actively tried to kill myself, I had at least another ten or 15 years of this shit to look forward to before organs started throwing down signs of protest.

I buried my head in my manacled hands. Not to cry, but to hide.

But I couldn't bury my ears. They heard Uniformed Cop ask me if I wanted to make a phone call or not.

And then I heard Aviva. She must have been in the lobby at that point, asking the empty chairs and desks in the front, "Where's Jeff? Where's Jeff?"

"What? How did she.... what did....?" I started sputtering.

"Do you want to make the phone call or not," Uniformed cop asked as he stood over me. I noticed he had strapped the Smokey Bear hat back on for full effect.

"I don't know," I said, not really meaning that but just too confused to think of anything else.

“Fne. Don’t call.” Both cops started walking out of the holding area.

“No. Wait. I need to call.”

“Make up your mind,” Uniformed cop said.

“I need to call someone.”

“Stand up,” Unmarked cop said.

“How did she get here....” I asked nobody in particular. I still hadn’t seen her, except in my mind, which was quite enough.

“Stand up,” both troopers said almost, but not quite, in unison.

“I can’t look at her. How did she get here?”

“Do you want to call someone or not. Last chance.” That was Plainclothes Cop growling at me.

I didn’t have a choice, not a rational one, anyway. I stood up and let them lead me out of the holding cell, around a field of empty cubicles, and past Aviva, who was sitting on a chair in one of the cubicles.

She said nothing to me. She just looked. The two troopers hustled me past her, but I tried-forced myself-to read something in her face.

The last time I saw that expression in her eyes, it was right around the time she decided she didn’t want to continue studying to be a rabbi. It was a look that melded sadness to disgust. I still remember what she said: “There’s just nothing in this for me anymore.” And then she quit her studies, and she didn’t look back.

“How did she get here,” I asked Unmarked cop.

“We may have tracked her down and not mentioned it”, he said, as his lips formed a thin, vengeful little smile. “We’re good at that sort of stuff when we want to be.”

Couldn’t these two guys just beat the shit out of me instead of playing mind fuck games? Whatever happened to simple, good old American police brutality?

They led me to a room adjacent to Fanny’s chambers. It was piled high with boxes stuffed with old files, with a mid 1800’s map of Lancaster on the wall. The desk had the nameplate of a probation officer, who met clients there sometimes. Uniformed trooper walked in with me, while the other trooper stayed right outside the door.

“Can you unlock one of my wrists so I can call?”

“No.”

“How am I supposed to make a call with these things?”

“Figure it out.”

“Can you at least close the door?”

“No.”

Fanny yelled out from next door. “You can close the door. It’s okay.”

He closed it.

I picked up the receiver, and cradled it under my chin. I hit an outside line, then dialed the number.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

“He’s not going to answer you.”

Steve. Steven in an orange prison suit.

“Hello,” Steve went on in a singsongy, voicemail voice. “You’ve reached the Shannon residence. If you’re anyone else but Jeff Ramsey, press one. If you are Jeff Ramsey, you’ve pressed your luck once too often. Bye.”

Then the real answering machine came on.

“This is the residence of Mark and Louise Shannon. Leave a message.”

“Mark, Mark, it’s Jeff. I’ve been arrested, I’m at a district justice’s office in Lancaster...”

“Hello? What’s going on?” Mark picked up the phone.

“I need you. I’ve been arrested. For all kinds of stuff.”

“Where are you?”

“Lancaster. And Aviva’s here.”

“Aviva? The rabbi?”

“I need you, Mark. I need a lawyer. There’s charges here, and charges in Philly. I’m going to jail. My PO is violating me.”

“Are you being arraigned? Where are you going to jail?”

“Here. In Lancaster. Unless the Philly cop comes to get me. But I think I’ll be at County here first.”

“What the DJ’s name.”



“Fanny McDyre. She’s a friend. But there’s not much she can do for me.”

“Put her on. I’ll talk to her. And Jeff?”

“What.”

“Don’t try to think your way out of this.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m an idiot for helping you. I should tell you to get a public defender.  
Put the DJ on.”

I let the phone drop into my hands, then set the receiver down on the metal desk. I pressed hold, then knocked on the door. Unmarked Cop opened the door, but didn’t come the room.

“My lawyer wants to talk to the judge. Please let her know.”

He wordlessly closed the door. In a second, the blinking light of the phone line stopped blinking.

“You’re screwed, Jeff.”

“You’re a hallucination, Steve. You’re the product of sleep deprivation.”

“You can’t get out of this one. It’s over, Jeff. You fucked up big time. Did you really think that you could outrun me? Get me out of your life?”

I could feel myself starting to hyperventilate.

“Poor baby. Mark can’t help you. Fanny can’t help you. Aviva came all the way from Philadelphia just to twist your balls in a knot. Nobody loves you but me, Jeff. And you left me bleeding in a parking lot.”

“You’re not real.”

“Not real? You love me, Jeff. I’m the only one you’ve ever loved.”

“Not true. Not true.”

“Well, I’m the only one you’ve ever been faithful too.”

He had me there.

“I’m all yours, Jeff. All you have to do is give up everything else.”

Before I had to decide whether that was a rhetorical or real question, Fanny walked into the room.

“Your friend Mark wants to talk to you again. You can pick up the phone. Here, I’ll do it.” And Fanny pressed the line Mark was on and gave me the receiver.

“Jeff, tell me something. How is it you get all these people that still like you? Your Justice McDyer thinks the world of you.”

“I know.”

“She also told me that I maybe I ought to let you crash and burn.”

“Maybe you should.”

“That what you want?”

I looked over to the boxes, where Steve had been, and now was gone.

“No.”

“Okay, listen up. There’s not much point in me coming out right this second. She’s going to set bail, and you’ve got the parole detainer, and those

charges in Philly which sound like they might actually be bullshit. Don't worry about Aviva being there."

"Easy for you to say."

"It's all easy for me to say. That's why I love my job. By the way, did you really do all this shit sober?"

"Afraid so."

"If there was a dry drunk hall of fame, you'd be in it right now. I was saying, I'll work on the Philly stuff from here. I'll come out to see you tomorrow at the prison."

"Tomorrow?" I started hyperventilating again.

"Listen to me. There's nothing I can do today. I'm not coming out today just to hold your hand. This isn't right around the fucking corner. I'll be filing stuff tomorrow, and I'll stop by before I do. And today I've got plans. Tomorrow. You'll live."

"I'll live," I said half to myself, not convinced at all.

"Tomorrow. Don't say a word to Aviva. Bye."

"Mark, before you go, can you call..."

Bye. I thought I ought to call Gail, or Kate. But no. It was just me. Alone. I looked again where Steve had stood, but there was still no sign of him.

"I'm ready for the arraignment," I pushed the door open and shouted out to nobody in particular. I was still hyperventilating, and getting a little dizzy, but I

wasn't going to get any more ready for this over time. And nobody was going to wait much longer anyway.

The two troopers came for me and escorted me into the courtroom. Two tables. The first had interchangeable nameplates, either "Plaintiff" or "Prosecution," depending on whether it was a civil or a criminal case. The other table, the one by the door, had a nameplate "Defendant." Civil or criminal, that one never changed.

I was dizzy and rapidly getting nauseous. I was trying to stop my rapid breathing on my own, and not doing a good job at it.

Aviva walked in. I didn't dare let my eyes follow her to the back. I just watched as she walked past the desk, her long brown hair pulled back in a scrunchie, wearing jeans and a white on blue "Villanova University School of Law" sweatshirt.

My sweatshirt. How nice. At least I know where it ended up.

Fanny came in through the door adjacent to the judicial bench the County provided her with, a dark brown wooden thing with a blue, monochromatic version of Pennsylvania's seal on the front. Everyone started standing, but Fanny motioned them down. "Sit. Stay seated."

I sat back down. So did the troopers. Uniformed Cop finally took off his penis shaped hat.

“Mr. Ramsey, this is a preliminary arraignment. We are here to read the charges against you, unless you wish to waive the formal reading. Have you reviewed the charges.”

“Yes, Your Honor, I have. I’ll waive.”

“Okay. Now, in order to set bail, I’ll need you to answer a few questions. First, what is your date of birth? April something, right?”

“25<sup>th</sup>. 1961.”

“And what is your address. Is it still on Old Trinity Place?”

“Well, um...that’s a good question.” Somehow I doubt I’ll be sharing an address with Gail anymore.

“I’ll put down Old Trinity Place. For now. Occupation, lawyer?”

“Funny you should ask that in the form of a question.” There was an easy familiarity between Fanny and me, even in these circumstances, that managed to be both comforting and still break my heart.

She smiled grimly. “I’ll put down lawyer. Office on North Duke Street, right?”

Yup. They haven’t evicted me yet. “I still got that.” If it was possible for not just my stomach, but my entire nervous system to be nauseous, that was about to happen.

“Prior arrests.”

“Yes. DUI.”

“And still on parole for that?”

“Yes.”

“Are you on any medication, or controlled substance, or have you been drinking or taking anything that might impair your judgment so you can’t understand what I’m saying.”

“No,” I mumbled barely audibly, convinced I was going to throw up on the Defendant nameplate.

“What did you say?”

“He said no, I believe,” Uniformed Cop said.

“No.” I repeated.

“Does the Commonwealth have any position on bail?”

“I do.” It was Aviva, standing up. Now, at least, I felt I had a reason to turn around and look at her.

Except when I turned around, I lost my balance. My knees buckled. The uniformed trooper, whether acting out of rote or actual concern, reached over to break my fall.

He was too late.

I hit the floor. I couldn’t break my fall very well because I was still in handcuffs. I collapsed into the stackable green chairs behind me. The chairs started bouncing into other chairs, like an awkwardly designed physics experiment. Aviva bolted upright and ran backwards to avoid caroming chairs or,

perhaps, caroming ex-boyfriends. Both troopers grabbed me, but not until after I had fallen between two of the chairs. “Oh dear God, he’s bleeding.” That was Fanny. She was right. Blood ran down the left side of my head, where I had already injured it in the car accident. I could taste it as it ran into my mouth and dripped down my already scraped and abused shirt.

“Get him to the hospital. We can do this later,” Fanny yelled out to the troopers, who didn’t seem to disagree. They helped me up. My knees buckled as they did so. I was still dizzy, and no longer sure from what. As they took me out of the courtroom, I heard Aviva say to Uniformed Cop, “Where are you taking him.”

“Lancaster General. The closest.”

“He’ll be okay?”

“I think so.”

“Good.”

That was the last time I ever heard Aviva say a word to me or anyone else.

They walked me outside. The uniformed trooper began putting me in the back seat. When he went to push my head down so I didn’t bang it against the car door, he pressed where I had just hit it. I screamed, “Fuck.”

Then I threw up. Over him. Over the back seat. A splash or two on me.

Then he yelled, “Fuck.”

Then they started driving. And I bounced in and out of coherence all the

way to the hospital like those chairs in Fanny's courtroom, too sick and hurting even to get some small pleasure out of making these cops ride around with vomit and blood all over their back seat.

I heard one of the troopers--no idea which one, they had started blurring together radio something that sounded like "man...custody...semiconscious...vomit...vomiting...Jeff...asshole...loser...fuckup.. .dad would be proud of you...."

"Hi, Steve. How was it I knew you'd be here?"

"Why are you fighting it so hard?"

"What, consciousness?"

"Me, Jeff. Why do you think you can fight me?"

"Why do you even care?"

"I care, man. I loooooovve you, man. You're the man. Da man. How many ways you want me to say it?"

"I'm nobody's man."

"Sure you are. You're mine."

I kept hearing Steve speak, but the words kept fading into strings of nonsense syllables, held together by the sneer of an inanimate, imaginary object. It began blurring out on me around the time several hospital types pulled up to the trooper's car as the car was pulling up to the emergency entrance. "He's in custody," one of them--I think it was Uniformed Cop, but I wasn't paying



attention anymore--shouted, but, despite that, the hospital people put me on a gurney without handcuffing me.

The hospital people whooshed me right through the big sliding doors and into the emergency room. I passed a cubicle where the privacy curtain hadn't been shut, whizzing past an Amish couple dressed in traditional purple and black as they leaned over a child lying in the bed, then started fading out again just as I was wheeled into to the next cubicle over and one of the troopers handcuffed my left wrist to the bed.

“Remember, ask for lots of drugs. Good drugs.” Steve’s voice started cutting through my brain’s fog again. “Demerol is good. Actually, you know what I’ve always wanted to try?”

“Fuck off.”

“That Oxycontin stuff. I’ve been hearing really good things about it. Apparently you take the pills, crush them and snort them. Sounds fun. Make sure they give you a doggie bag to take them home.”

“I know all about Oxycontin. I’ve had clients.”

“You’ve had clients? When did you last have a client? Was that before or after you first became a client?”

“Leave me alone. Please.”

“You don’t really mean that.”

“I do. I really mean it.”

“No you don’t. I wouldn’t still be dancing around your soul if you meant it. By the way, are you wondering what layers of disgust that Amish couple has to work through just looking at you? I know I am. I bet Ruths speaking to Jakey right now while looking at your bloody face and doughy body. ‘Jakey,’ look. Look at the English with the bloody face and the handcuffs. What kind of bad man is he? You did a good thing, today, Jeff. You helped an Amish couple feel smug.”

“Mr. Ramsey? Can you hear me? Mr. Ramsey?” That wasn’t Steve. I wasn’t sure yet if it was a real person or not, but it wasn’t Steve.

I tried to respond, but nothing came out of my mouth but a whispered, grimaced groan.

“Mr. Ramsey, you’ve had a concussion. You may have some internal bleeding. Can you understand me?”

White coat. Stethoscope. Female. Doctor or hallucination, I wasn’t sure.

Cute doctor, actually. Short auburn hair, cut like Gail’s, though a bit darker. With a face that grazed the border of ethnicity.

I tried to focus on her face.

“You think you can charm her, too?” Steve again.

And yes. Smashed to the ground, bleeding, chained to a hospital bed, I did think it. But then I stopped thinking it again, as I lost the face and started seeing other things. Like visual disturbance things.

I saw my car. What was my car, anyway. My Miata, before I turned it into

a pile of scrap metal and carcinogenic particulate. It was traveling down 222, just like I was the day I wrecked it, just like I was last night in Freddy's van. And then, just like that, I was in the driver's seat, speeding along, whipping around all manner of hairpin turns. Hurling over speed bumps that made the car fly before coming back to earth. And through it all, I kept driving, faster even in my shadowy mental state I knew wasn't a speed that anyone could drive a car.

I wanted to stop. I wanted to make the car stop. But I knew the only way I could stop it was to crash it. To plow it into a cornfield again. So I tried doing that. I tried to steer it off the road. And I couldn't. I tried to run it into a ditch. It stubbornly clung to the highway. And then I saw a bridge. There's no bridge on that road in the real world, but I saw one anyway. A long, narrow bridge over a wide stretch of water.

"This isn't Route 222," I said, to nobody in particular.

"This isn't reality," Steve said back to me, sitting in the passenger seat.

"Make it stop. Please make it stop."

"Hit it."

"What?"

"Hit it. The bridge abutment. Hit it. It'll stop."

"That's not what I want."

"It's what you need. Hit it."

"No."

“You sure about that?”

“Don’t send me anywhere near that thing. Ever.”

And with that, pieces of my imaginary Miata flew off in all kinds of directions. The convertible roof, the doors, the bumpers all started flying off, though I was still somehow traveling along the highway. The steering wheel flew out of my hand. CD’s started flying out of the glove compartment. I tried grabbing for them, but the only one I was able to save was one labeled, “Steve Perry Live at the Amish Homestead.”

And suddenly there was no car, no bridge, no road. Just me, face down in the ground, like I had been a few hours before. I flipped over onto my back. I began reaching for my banged up head, but something sharp and cruel pulled it back. It was the handcuff.

“Mr. Ramsey?” It was the doctor again.

“Uhbbb.” It was as articulate as anything else I’d said today.

“Can you speak? Do you know where you are?”

“Uhbbb. Aaa.”

“He has to be arraigned.” I recognized that as the voice of one of the troopers, though I couldn’t actually see a face or body to match the voice.

“I don’t think he’s well enough even to know where he is,” the doctor said. “I’m in the hospital. I know where I am,” I started to say, but I heard myself say, “Uhbbb” again. And again. The third time the doctor put her hand to

her mouth, either telling me it was okay to stay quiet or I should just shut up.

I wanted to speak. I wanted to tell her something. I started out wanting to flirt with her, to try to charm my way out of this, but after all the repeating “Uhbbbs” I didn’t even care about that. Really. I did not care. I just wanted to be able to talk to her. I just wanted to be able to talk. To communicate. To convey some deeper thought, even slightly deeper, than “uhbbb.”

But I didn’t. And I faded out again. And if Steve wasn’t there to torment me in the dark, neither was anyone there to help out.

**January, 2001**  
**Philadelphia**

I thought I was getting out today. That was the deal. I thought that was the deal. I remembered being in court--in more than one court, actually-- cleaned up, looking like the lawyer that I wasn't, hearing the terms of the plea bargain rattled off to me.

Now I don't know what to think. I don't even know where to start tying strands of consciousness together in order to form a thought. How do I bundle them together, how do I tie them into a sentence, then a paragraph?

Gail stands. It's the first time I've seen her in nine months.

I can't run. And I can't speak.

And she's beautiful. Why, why, why the fuck hadn't I even noticed that before?

## Monday

My right leg was chained to a railing on a hospital bed. The door was closed. I wasn't sure what day it was, but a quick look outside at the dawn at least made me realize that it wasn't Sunday any more, and I had spent the rest of it unconscious. Whether I had spent any more days unconscious was something I wanted to find out.

I looked around the room. The door was closed, but I figured someone had to be guarding it. I hunted for some sort of device to signal for a nurse, found one hanging from the pillow, and buzzed. In a few seconds, a nurse came in, followed by a man in a two tone brown uniform that I recognized as belonging to the Lancaster County Sheriff's department.

"Tell me what's going on," I said to the nurse.

"You had a rough night," she said. You seem to be doing better. When you're well enough to leave, which could be today, you'll be sent over to County Prison."

"No hurry on that," I said. I looked up at the Deputy Sheriff, who was now standing directly behind the nurse. I couldn't remember his name at first. He didn't have any such confusion.

"Mr. Ramsey, hello." I remembered him now. Paul Sensenig. He usually worked out of Judge Giannopolous's chambers.

"Paul, how are you?" I forced myself to say that.

“You too know each other?” said the nurse.

“Judge G’s having another round of chemo today. That’s how I got you.”

Lucky guy, I thought. “How long I’ve been out of it?”

“Well,” the nurse said, “It’s about eight in the morning now. I just came on. He just got here. You’ve...” She flipped through a chart, “been here since about 11 yesterday morning.”

“Can I have visitors?”

“I’m not allowed to do that, Mr. Ramsey,” the deputy interrupted. “Not normally, anyway. Not unless you’re a lot sicker, and there’s all kinds of protocols for that. Sorry. There was someone who came by for you earlier. We had to turn her away?”

Her?

“I don’t know her name--I wasn’t here when she came by, but the other deputy said she was about five feet tall, short red hair.”

Gail.

“Can I call her?” I reached over to where the phone would have been, and started thrashing around for the receiver. “I need to call her.” I started getting frustrated, wondering if I was stupidly not able to find it or still not quite conscious yet.

“Sorry,” the nurse said. “Can’t have phones here when you’re in custody. But you do get the TV. And food. I think you’ll be here long enough for lunch.”



I sighed, out of frustration and fatigue. Even the short conversation I'd just had was a lot of work; just trying to focus on two different people was more than I was capable of. "That's fine. Let me pick my lunch." I checked the turkey sandwich and the butter pecan ice cream, not totally sure I'd be able to keep any of them down or have any kind of an appetite since every move, breath and eyelid blink still hurt, then told both the nurse and the deputy they could leave the room.

I'm pretty sure I slept through lunch anyway. And I know I got to the Lancaster County Prison too late for dinner. The deputies who came to get me told me that when they picked me up, I didn't know either of them; they both looked fairly new. Just as well. I was more awake by this time, and sick of running into people I knew in what was pretty obviously my former life.

The first time I went to jail--my weekend stint for the DUI and the mangled Miata--I reported on a Friday afternoon. It wasn't a lot of fun, but it wasn't utterly horrible. I walked in through the front door, they patted me down, took me to a room where the rules and regulations of the place were explained by a helpful cassette tape that could be listened to in English, Spanish, or Vietnamese, then taken to administrative segregation. That was fine. Two days in a cell, by myself, with a beginning, middle and end.

But now there was no end. No, that's not true. There was an end. It just wouldn't be in this jail, on this day.

The deputies pulled into the side entrance off Marshall Street. They pulled

down the ramp. They got me out of the car. The door was buzzed open, and they took me in.

Doors without handles. Buzzers and locks. I passed through them, again and again. I listen to the helpful tape again. They might as well have flipped on the Vietnamese track for all I listened.

“You’ll have to be arraigned. They never finished it.”

They didn’t, apparently. Fanny was never able finish it up because of my flop and crash.

“Where? Where do I go?” I said to guard, already thinking like a prisoner, just waiting to be told where to shuffle my feet and move along to.

It was the room where I used to meet clients. I’d walk in through the front door, and be buzzed through the same handleless doors. I’d wait at a table for a man or woman in green scrub-like clothes to show up. That would be my client. They’d buzz him in. Then I’d hit the intercom when I was done, and a guard would come get me. The prisoner would stay behind.

That was the room where everyone was waiting for me. Actually, there was no everybody. Just Fanny. Even the two troopers weren’t there. It wasn’t like they needed to know what was going to happen to me. All that was needed was for me to sign stuff.

“Hey, there,” Fanny said as I walked in the room. She stood up from the table to shake my hand.

“Hey,” I said, in a voice that narrowly missed being a whisper.

“How’s the head?”

“The head’s okay. The brain underneath not so good.”

We finished up in three minutes the arraignment from the day before. She set bail I couldn’t post. She gave me papers I didn’t need to read. She told me Mark would be coming to see me today, but I no longer believed it. She wished me good luck and God be with you when I left the room, but I wasn’t looking for Him or anyone else.

I just wanted to be put in my cell. And I got my wish.

I knew I’d be in Administrative Segregation again for at least the better part of a week, until they put me in a general population pod, or sent me to one of the other counties that wanted a piece of me.

The door clicked a hard prison click. And there I was.

I sat on the bed. I sat on the chair. I took a shit on the toilet. I got up. I paced. Then I rested on the bed and waited.

Waited for time to pass. Waited for someone to come. But nobody, not even my demons, showed their face.

**January , 2001**  
**Philadelphia**

I thought I was getting out today. This afternoon, supposedly, if Mark was correct. The counselor in charge of the prison library told me I didn't have to work this morning, but I was too nervous to just hang out in my pod. So, I opted for filing instead. Besides, Rudy without me would be, well, Rudy, and I wasn't completely sure that his filing system would have any but the most tangential relationship with the alphabet.

It was Mark who I thought I'd be seeing today. It's Mark who is my attorney, and my employer, with me being a glorified law clerk for his firm while my situation is worked out. "Situation" being a not altogether smoothing the corners euphemism for having my law license suspended for three years.

It was Mark who worked out the plea bargain, too, the one that I thought would have me getting sprung from the Philadelphia House of Correction today. I had the terms all memorized, like a convict should:

Three months for the driving under suspension in Philly.

Three more months for the driving under suspension and resisting arrest in Lancaster County, served concurrently here in Philly.

The Philadelphia stalking charge dropped. Thank you, Aviva.

Two months for unauthorized use of a motor vehicle in Schuylkill County, also concurrently. Fuck you, Freddy.

A damn good plea bargain. If I'd negotiated that one, I'd be justly proud. Three counties, four sets of charges, only one stretch of time. It's like three crimes for the price of one. And with good time, today was my last day. Five days a month. Seventy-five days inside. I could have done the math even without Mark's assurance. I did the math at least three times in my head in the long walk to this meeting room. Three and a half, until seeing Gail, her hair, her face made me lose count, took away my ability to add and subtract.

She stands up. I start to sit down. She sits down, and I do one of those half-stand, half-sit things. Then I sit again, and so does she.

"Hey," I say to her.

"Hey," she says back, as she forms a thin, cautious smile.

Her hair is longer, shoulder-length, and the reddish hue is a bit more intense than it was the last time I saw her, right after my wild weekend.

"My lawyer?" I asked her, trying to act bemused.

"It was the easiest way to get in here without having to go through the visiting hours hassle."

"Did you know I was getting out today?"

"Fanny said." Except when Mark needed to for the legal stuff to help Gail's attorney get the charges against her dropped, Fanny had been our main go-between to help us disentangle our respective lives. She had arranged for a crew from a local drug rehab to move my paltry possessions out of Gail's house and put

them in storage, something that might have been worth commenting on at one point, but my irony meter is not what it used to be.

“So.” I pause, wondering how best to avoid saying something stupid. “I like the hair.” I think that’s banal enough. I feel my chest tightening as I say it.

“I was in town, in Bankruptcy Court,” she says, flipping the hair I just commented on.

“This is slightly out of the way, even for being in Philly, in Bankruptcy Court.”

“Really? You like it? The hair, I mean.”

“It’s great. The outfit, the suit, what you’re wearing. It’s nice. Nice. Sort of Hillary Clintonesque. Hillary inspired.”

“You hate it.”

“No. I don’t hate it. I mean....I mean that’s not what I meant.”

“You mean you do hate it.”

“No, I mean...I don’t know what the hell I mean. Gail, I don’t mean to be, like, ungrateful for the company, but why are you here?” I consciously stop my shallow breathing and force myself to inhale and exhale nice and deeply. I fight the urge to tell her to go the hell away, that I’ve been embarrassed enough and don’t need her to see me in jail.

“I don’t know. I’m...I thought I should see how you were.”

“I’m in jail and I can’t practice law till 2003 at the earliest. I have no

money, no friends, and no family. But I didn't drink today. That fucking rocks, right?"

"Stop it. You have friends. Fanny. Mark."

"You left yourself off that list."

"I didn't think you wanted me on it."

"I didn't." Dumbass. Dumbass thing to say.

Gail starts to stand. "This was a bad idea. I'll go...."

"Don't." I reach out to grab her arm, mindful of where I am and not wanting something like that to be misconstrued as a threat. She sits again." Gail, I just wanted to say 'I'm sorry for every thing I ever did to you,' but it seemed pitifully inadequate. So I didn't. It wasn't even that I was embarrassed to do so. I wasn't. I wanted to tell you. I just didn't think it would matter."

Her eyes start to just barely water, just enough for me to see if I look right at her, which I do. "Of course it matters."

"How are you doing, Gail? I've wanted to know."

"You mean, did I go back to Marty?"

"I already know the answer to that. He's too much of a dickhead for you."

She smiles another thin smile. "No, I'm not seeing Marty. He did have my purse FedEx'd to me, however. Second day delivery. He couldn't even overnight it."

"Gail, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything." Words just start pouring out of

me, unfiltered, not cleaned up and burnished for humor or effect. “I’m sorry. I’m not going to bother you again. I won’t come around, I won’t bother you. I’m even sorry I’ve stayed connected to Fanny. I thought I was making her have to pick between two friends, and thought I should just drift away from her, too. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Jeff, I know.”

“No. You don’t know. You can’t possibly know how awful I feel, even if you feel worse. You can’t. You’re just the one I did it do. You can get over it. You can just leave me and not look back. I can’t do that. I’m stuck.”

Gail starts to stand up, positions her hands on the table for just a second, then sat back down. “Jeff, I didn’t come her to make you feel bad. Really. You have to believe that.”

“You came down here to make me feel something.”

She pauses. “You’re right. Of course you’re right. Something like...”

“Don’t say closure. Please don’t say that. I hate that term. I may start a hunger strike if you say it.” She laughs. “A short hunger strike, I grant you, but a hunger strike.”

“Okay. No clos....”

“Don’t say it.” I held up my hand as I smiled.

“I won’t say it. Are you really going back to work for Mark?”

“For now. Seems like the least worst move.”



Gail again starts to stand up, again positions her hands on the table for just a second, but this time finishes standing. “I should leave. You’re going to be okay, you know.”

“Do you really believe that?”

She laughs. “Oddly, I do. Don’t ask me why. Maybe because I’m finally signing off this project.”

She walks right up to me, and there’s this point where I think she’s going to hug me, but I decide to kill that off and twitch away from her, just to make sure either it doesn’t happen or I’m not embarrassingly misreading things. It seems to work. I’m relieved, sort of.

“Take care.” She walks towards the door and gives me a half wave where only the fingers move and the palm stays perfectly in place. She walks up to the buzzer to be let out of the room. As frequently happens, nobody comes to let her out for about four minutes. She stands there. I stand there. This is bad. We’ve ended the conversation and the relationship, and we still have to stand there waiting until a guard finally lets her out. I just look at her. At the long hair that used to be shorter, and the earrings that I remember from when she got them at the Crafts Festival in Long’s Park, and the back of the gold necklace, with the clasp I’d undo for her, sometimes before she’d even ask. And she doesn’t look back at me, but still can see me in the semi reflection in the glass window, and I think I see her looking at that, but maybe I’m misreading that along with the hug

thing.

And then a guard finally buzzes her out, and she leaves. And the door clicks shut and I sit down, waiting to be escorted back to the pod.

And there's my closure.

I'm back in the pod, still waiting to be cut loose. I don't know what to do. I'm angry and helpless and pissed and scared and angry all over again, and I don't know what to do. It's almost seven in the evening; I'm still here, with no way to find out why. I was going to call Mark collect, but seeing Gail so totally threw me off balance that it took me the better part of an hour to collect my thoughts and realize that I still wasn't out of jail on the day I was supposed to be released. I walk over to the payphones. A Russian guy, at least I think he's Russian, is on one phone, and a Puerto Rican guy is on the other. I keep passing by, not having the patience even to wait in line or to listen to their two different languages twisting and folding around each other in a cacophony of foreignness.

I go back to the TV area. Rudy's there, sitting, staring but not necessarily watching. Out of sequence pages of the morning newspaper are still scattered about.

I don't know what to do. I wait for panic to set in and make me its bitch all over again. It doesn't. I'm not sure if that's good or bad. But just in case, just to keep myself from doing something stupid, I decide to embrace my powerlessness in all its glory and head off to the 7 pm prison AA meeting.

I'm not really listening, though. Not to the guy to my right, who is talking again about how the last visit from his girlfriend Niesha pissed him off. Not to the short Puerto Rican kid with thick rimmed prison issued glasses who got bumped off work release for three days because he called his kids from work. And definitely not listening to the guy who is chairing this meeting, a big Polish biker type guy from Port Richmond who was probably a lot more fun as a badass, but lately seems to have absorbed way too much Ned Flanders on "The Simpsons" for his own good. At least, for my own good.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not usually this hostile lately. This is a good meeting. Even if there's no coffee, or even water. Even if the 12-step posters on the wall are starting to peel and curl around the edges. Even if there's a guy from the prison who isn't technically a guard but still stands there, hovering around to remind us that we don't all get to leave the meeting and have a smoke outside at will. Even if the Philadelphia Department of Corrections is too cheap to cough up a few bucks for actual AA literature and the guy from the outside who helps set this up has to scrounge up a few Big Books and AA Grapevine magazines from what he finds at yard sales.

"Jeff," says Port Richmond, whose real name is Carl, "thought you were going home today?"

"So did I. Don't know what happened. I need to talk about it."

"So, talk."

I try to talk. But I have nothing to say. I have a problem speaking when I can't think of something clever.

"You know what? I think I'll pass. I'm just going to listen."

"No problem," Carl says. "Talk when you're ready. Anyone else have something they want to say?"

"Hi, I'm Steve, and I'm an alcoholic."

I feel every ounce of blood I have in my face drain down to my esophagus. I whip my head around. It's just a guy. Just a short, pudgy Asian guy I've never seen here before. The blood starts coming back to my face, a corpuscle at a time.

"Hi, Steve," everyone shouts in unison, and I silently say to myself, "Hi, Steve. Glad you're not Steve."

"Hi, everyone." Steve pauses. "I'm doing 90 days for a third offense DUI, and this is the first time I'm been here. Here as in this meeting, not here as in jail. Last time was 30 days in Delaware County Prison, thought I'd never come back. I was wrong." Steve pauses some more, runs his fingers through his hair three or four times, then continues. "I was sober for almost three years after that. I got a good job in my field, as an engineer. Yeah, an Asian guy as an engineer. Big shock, right? Except nobody ever told me that Koreans not only become engineers, but alcoholics. That's not part of the stereotype." He pauses again, this time for a few seconds more, almost to the point of being awkward, before speaking again. "Maybe there's not a stereotype. Maybe there's just a bunch of

drunks and addicts, trying to stay sober. I don't know. I just never thought I'd end up here. The first time I ended up in jail I thought, 'I wonder how many other people with engineering degrees at Lehigh ended up in jail.' Then, last year at my reunion, I found out someone else got popped for DUI, too. And you know what? I was pissed. Here I thought, 'Well, at least I'm unique', and I'm not even the only drunken engineer from Lehigh." He pauses again. "I'm not special. I'm just a drunk. That's all there is. No better, no worse. That's all I've got. Thanks for listening." His eyes started to tear up, and the short Puerto Rican guy hands Steve a roll of toilet paper, our substitute for the tissues they don't let us have in here, either.

"Thanks for sharing," everyone says in unison, everyone except me. I keep looking at Steve for a moment, half hoping, half dreading he'd morph into a bottle. But no. He was just Steve, flesh and blood Steve, crying and wiping his eyes with something a free man would use to wipe his ass.

In my head, I think what I want to say. Hi, I'm Jeff, and I'm a cross-addicted alcoholic. I hear a room of 30 inmates going "Hi, Jeff," and I continue. I give the speech in my head that I'd like to tell everyone here. That I thought I was getting out today. That I know I will. That I know it's some sort of screw-up, and I have to accept that, and I actually can accept it. But that me still sitting here isn't what's really scaring me. What's really scaring me is the fact that I will be getting out. And I'm coming out stripped of everything I had before, except being sober,

and I don't know if that will be enough. I don't want to be here, but I don't know if I can make it out there. So what does that make me?

That's what I want to say. But I never say another word. I stay silent, even at the end, even when everyone gathers in a circle, holds hands and says the Serenity Prayer and the Lord's Prayer, when I move my lips without letting any sounds actually exit my throat.

After the meeting, Carl comes up to me and asks me how I'm doing. I tell him I thought I was leaving today, but hopefully it's tomorrow. He gives me a great big bear hug. I accept it. It's the outer limit of my capacity for acceptance today. I think about walking up to Steve and telling him that my dad always wanted to be an engineer before marriage and parenthood sent him to the more coal country traditional path of becoming an ironworker instead. I think better of it and head back to the pod.

Lights out. Me in one bed, Rudy in the other. I look at him, sleeping. I explore for the rage in his face, the rage that got him here. I can't see it now. But I know it's there. I know that cop Rudy fought with, the one whose eye gouging landing him here will never see clearly out of that eye again. And I know that Rudy was nothing more than a frightened creature when he nearly popped it out. It is that thought that sits hard on me when the door of my cell opens.

“Ramsey, you're going home.”

“Glad you finally figured it out. What happened? Why so long?”

The guard shook his head. “Screw up. You should have been cut loose earlier today. Long story. We need to get you out of here right away.”

I look over at Rudy, who is still sleeping through all this, who can sleep through the noisy, clangy jangle of a prison night like nobody else. I wonder if I should disturb him, and I tell myself I’m not being cowardly in refusing to do so. I grab what little stuff I have and start to follow the guard, but to my surprise, Rudy awakens.

“60. 66. 60. 66,” Rudy says, in a voice that is jagged with anguish.

“Give me a minute,” I ask the guard, and walk back in the cell. “Rudy, I’m going. You’re gonna be okay. Okay?”

“60. 60. Luck. 62.”

“Hey, did you just say an actual word?” I smile. Before I can do anything else but smile, the guard blurts out, “You want to leave or not?”

I stand up. “Let’s go,” I tell him, and he leads me out into a cold January night in Philadelphia, with nothing else but the rest of my life stuttering and twitching in front of me.

Mark--whether out of generosity, laziness, or quite possibly disdain--has called for a cab to take me to his house for the evening. Whatever the motivation, I’ll take the gift. Especially since he’s paying for it, and getting out of jail at ten minutes to midnight without any actual cash leaves me few other options.

It’s cold. I put my ungloved hands in my pockets and pace. I walk away

from the front of the jail, far enough away that I can look back and try to figure out where my cell was, where Rudy is. I can't tell from here. I don't need to, really. He's swallowed up inside, like everyone else is, like I was until a few minutes ago, like I could be again if I fuck up.

I think, oddly enough, about Lancaster County Prison. Not far from the jail, about two blocks away, there's a bar, the kind of place where beer flows in the morning, and not just for people getting off an 11 to 7 shift. The owner has a tradition going, according to some of my old clients. If you've just got out of jail, the first one's on him.

I don't think I'd avail myself of that privilege if I had the option. But it's probably good that I don't.

The cab pulls up. I get inside and tell the cabbie to take me over to Chestnut Hill. I give him the address. I say, "Yeah, I know, awfully nice neighborhood to be going to when I just got out of the slammer, huh," then I realize he doesn't care, that incongruities probably come at him on a daily basis, most of them far stranger than this, and my voice trails off into an awkward stream of hesitation.

He drives. I sit. He gets on to I-95 and I let myself go numb. I keep waiting for something to hit me, I'm free, I'm out of jail, I can start reclaiming my life again, but that last thought seems like a thought too far, coloring all the other thoughts.



Then I remember.

“Ahmed, right?”

“Yes,” the cab driver says with the hint, the slightly cautious hint, of an upturn in his voice.

“You have daughters. They help clean up Wissahickon Park.”

“Yes?” The uptick in his voice is more pronounced, as is the undertone of caution, almost fear. I wish I hadn’t said anything at all for a moment, but I’m in this far, I may as well keep talking.

“You gave me a ride. About eight months ago. I asked you to take me to the park. You told me...you told me...forget it.”

“No, no. I remember now. I remember.” I could see his smile reflected in the rear view mirror. You wanted to go to the park and changed your mind.”

“It must have been odd.”

“So,” he said. “You are, um....”

“Getting out of jail. Yeah. Long, long story. Stupid story. You don’t want to hear it. Hell, I don’t want to hear it. Let’s talk about your daughters. Two of them, right?”

“I can’t believe you remember that.”

“It’s amazing what I remember of that weekend. Why do you think I don’t want to talk about it? Are they doing well?”

“They’re doing so well. Both of them. Thank you for asking. I still can’t

believe you'd remember something like that. It's so funny, running into you again. What are, what are the...the odds, right? The odds."

I was going to tell him I remembered how he told me about Afghanistan and landmines everywhere. I was going to compare, tell him about how I felt my life had even more landmines now back in the middle of that weekend. But his landmines were real. I kept the metaphor to myself, and was glad for it.

"So, I hope you are doing well? You must be happy today."

"Yes. I am." No point sharing my anxieties either.

"My brother was in jail, at home. I...he does not talk about it. I hope things weren't as bad for you. He did not deserve to be in a prison."

"I'm quite sure I did," I said to myself, not realizing my admission of culpability had been entirely audible. The caution I'd heard in his voice slashed across his face and reflected back at me, if only for an ungracious moment or two. I wonder how many people had been giving me that expression for years now. I wonder how many times I'd been oblivious to it.

Ahmed drives me to Mark's house. I tell him to wait. I knock on the door, and Mark comes out in black sweats.

"Made it, I see." he says.

"Made it."

"Here," he puts a twenty and a five in my hand. "Make sure I tip him well."

I did. Mark, tired, tired from all manner of things, then points me to the guest room. And I close the door, fall on the bed, and allow myself to revel in silence I'd done nothing to earn, at least not yet.

For a week, I've been coming to Mark's office. The West Chester one. I thought it might be a quieter place to be. Don't go back to the city. Get a small apartment--hardly more than a room, really--a few blocks from the office and the courthouse. Walk to work, walk home, walk to AA meetings at the clubhouse.

Keep it simple, in true recovery fashion.

But that is too simple.

Three nights ago, I downloaded a picture and put it up as my wallpaper on this slow, old desktop.

The bottle. The Bottle.

I stare at it. Sometimes I get out of bed just to look at it. I walk from the bed to the computer, I click the mouse, and its dark monitor comes to glowing life. And there's the bottle. I don't have to click on anything else to make my way to it. It's just there.

This is an old computer. It doesn't have a speaker or a sound card. But I suspect that won't really be a logistical problem if that bottle has something to say.

"I need you for a second." It's not Mark whose voice reaches out through

the intercom, but Bella.

“Sure. Come on down to my cubbyhole, I’m here.”

“Come over here. Bring the Ortiz file.”

I grab the two bulging accordion files and walk down the hall. I come into Bella’s office. She’s on the phone. She looks at me, then looks away, then motions me to come in and sit. Actually, it’s done in two distinct motions.

Come in.

Sit.

I come in. I sit. She’s my boss.

My boss is still as stunning as she was the day I met her at the bad Cuban restaurant. Her hair is still as all-encompassing. Her eyes are just as dark and deep. And she still barely tolerates me.

Those dark eyes still don’t look at me. She has yet to say anything since I’ve been sitting here, puppy-dog like, in response to her hand commands. She’s still on the phone. Now she speaks.

“That’s bullshit,” she says.

“Bullshit,” she continues. But she’s smiling when she says that.

I know this banter. I’ve done it so, so many times in my career. It’s the intricate verbal dance of defense lawyer and assistant DA. A little bit of posturing, usually followed up by a dollop or two of groveling.

“Still more bullshit.” She looks at me, around me, then away from me.

“Now that,” she continues, laughing a non-malicious laugh, “is a case of the large, creeping attack of the bullshit commandos.”

Attack of the bullshit commandos. Not bad. Not a bad line to steal.

“I’ll think about it. I’ll convey it to my client,” she says. “I mean, I have to, I have to convey it.” She pauses. “Yes, yes, it’s not a totally terrible offer, I agree. Maybe it’s only partial, three-quarters bullshit. Okay. Later. Say hi to Stephanie for me.” She laughs and smiles. I know that part of it, too. The collegiality, the maintaining of the grease you need to get thing done when you’re a defense lawyer, and you almost always have the worse hand to play. It’s what good lawyers need to do. And it’s clear that Bella is a good lawyer. “Tell her she should be glad, getting off the fast track, Stay at Home Mom thing.”

Small laugh. Big smile. Then she disconnects the phone and pivots to face me.

“What do you have for me?” An all-business, neutral voice. Neutral in that in which neutral really means hostile.

“Um, I’m still working on it, but I think there might be an issue on the CI that’s worth a damn.”

Confesor Ortiz--which is a really terrible first name for someone charged with a crime to have--was currently sitting in Montgomery County Prison as a result of a confidential informant’s tip that our client was dealing out of a King of Prussia hotel room. The task at hand is to prove that the CI’s information was stale, incomplete and shouldn’t have been relied on even though the information

let them right to the hotel room and drugs.

“What's the issue? Do you have the memo done yet?”

“Still working on the memo.” She sighs. A really deep sigh. She brushes that hair out of her face that manages to be utterly devoid of seduction.

“Okay. Then just give me what you've got. Memo it later.”

“The CI is a buddy of his. They haven't revealed it, but our guy is about 90 percent sure he knows. And if it's him, he would only have had the info second hand. The guy hadn't talked to our client for at least a week before the bust.”

“And we know this how? Besides our client's telling us that?”

No smile. No laugh. Only her grilling me about the facts of a drug case, the kind of case I spent much of my career winging my way through.

“He has some folks who can confirm. I'm tracking it down. I've got some case law. I can give you the cites”

“The pre-trial stuff's due in two weeks.”

“I got it.”

“Later, then.” She stands up, and I expect, just for a moment, for her to give me more hand motions telling me to leave, but I figure it out by myself. As I start to leave, I turn around, smile and say, “Don't worry. You'll have it. I've done this stuff a million times. Chill.”

“Jeff, I didn't hire you. This was Mark's call, not mine. Just get me the memo and the phone contacts. Don't call them yourself, we'll get the private

investigator to do it.”

“I don’t mind calling,” I say, thinking I’d take one last shot at ingratiation.

“I do. Just get me the numbers.” She stands up. I stand up. With her heels she’s not far off my height. And, for the first time, she looks at me, and I really, really wish she hadn’t. I walk out, heading back to my office. I pass Mark’s office. The door is closed, and I know he’s in there. I haven’t actually seen him today, but his car is in the lot. I pause by the door. I think about knocking. And I try to figure out what I can say that wouldn’t make me seem like a total asshole.

There is nothing I can say that wouldn’t make me seem like a total asshole. I walk past Mark’s office and into my own.

For all intents and purposes, I’m not a lawyer for the next three years. I can’t make even the most minor, miniscule representation to the public that I’m in any way licensed to practice law. Doing so is itself a disciplinary violation, a big one. I know this, know it all too well. But I want at least be able to represent myself as a lawyer to Bella. She’ll have none of it. Not even the tiniest whiff of it. I can’t have Bella’s career anymore. And I know--oh boy, do I know--I can’t have Bella. But I can have this fucking Ortiz memo in her email next morning. I slap the file on my desk and log online to more research.

I’m at home. I’ve just walked back from a meeting at the sobriety clubhouse to my tiny apartment overlooking --well, overlooking nothing but a street in West

Chester. A few blocks away is the nondescript downtown. Then me and my excessively beige apartment.

Actually, although it doesn't overlook anything but a street, I can hear the party several doors away. I'm not far from West Chester University, and a gaggle of students are getting an early jump on the weekend. I can hear the echoes of a hip-hop beat, and I can, in my mind's eye, if I can mix a metaphor freely, smell the beer. I can feel the cold keg, and the foam as it overflows my plastic cup. Somewhere, a few doors down, sophomores are getting a serious start on their drinking careers. It is as appropriate a place to start one as any. It's not where I started mine, since that career started well before that. But I picked up refinement of technique in frat houses and bad apartments just like them. I think back. I force myself to think about other things, to conjure up other senses. I make myself think not of the beer coming out of the tap, but its staleness as it puddles up on a grainy, grimy hardwood floor. Just to be safe.

I don't know if I miss that drinking career so much as I mourn its loss.

I stop by Bella's office mid-morning. "Did you check your email?"

"Saw it. Got it."

"Any questions?"

"I haven't read it yet," she says, in a dull tone that dovetails with the flatness in her face.



I walk back to my office. I pull out a notepad that has the docket number of Rudy's case on it. I stare at it. I've been out of jail almost two weeks. I think for a moment about calling the House of Correction to see if Rudy's still inside. I don't. I tell myself that I don't need to, that I already know he is. It's a good reason for inaction. I tell myself that, too.

Saturday morning. Kate picks me up. I'm happy to get out of the apartment, but not happy at the circumstances. Well, I'm happy with one of the circumstances. No Freddy. Apparently he's still pissed at me.

"Can you blame him?" Kate says, pulling away from the curb as she and I head back up to Pottsville. "Did you really think he didn't know how much you were making fun of him?"

"*That's* what he's still upset about? I figured it was the whole stealing the van thingy."

"That he got over. It's the idea that you'd steal the van right after making fun of him. You dissed him."

"Were those his words? Dissed? Is that his nod to the urban experience now? Is he leaving the 80's for good, or will he be incorporating hip-hop into his Journey retrospective?"

She pulls her battered old Dodge Dart--hurled it, really--into a McDonald's parking lot, throwing a real scare into a family walking in the lot as

she parked without seeming to slow down, the line between the spaces almost exactly bisecting the car. “Fuck this. Are you just going to keep doing this? Even now? Even after everything?”

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I’ll stop.” I’m not sorry. But I do stop.

“This is important,” she says, slowly pulling out of the lot.

“No dogs today? Not even Irving?”

“He doesn’t travel well. Projective vomiting. Besides this is just us.”

Us and a God Box.

Kate had an idea. And while, over the years, and particularly over the last few months, when I hadn’t made things easy for her, I’ve come to appreciate her better qualities, like the fact that she still speaks to me, I still live in fear of the concept of Kate having an idea. It was bound to combine the most vapid qualities of 12-steppism, therapy and New Age horseshit.

Like a God Box

Today is the anniversary of our father’s death, or, as I refer to it, the day his liver caught up with his soul. Right after I got out of jail Kate suggested that I take all my bad ideas, thoughts and fears, write them on little slips of paper, stick them in the God Box, then at some appropriate time we open the box, light a candle, and burn the little slips of paper.

She suggested I make the box pretty, or ornamental, or spiritually significant. I hadn’t even made it at all. I hadn’t written anything out on little

slips of paper. So last night, I polished off a box of cheese crackers, made sure most of the crumbs were out, except for those little tiny ones that were more salt than crumb, then started writing out things on slips of paper.

Actually, no. I wrote out one thing, on a bunch of slips of paper. And I'm not going to say what it is. Not now, not ever. But I was proud of my box.

"Kate, before you say anything about the box, remember, that this is only a vessel. A mere container for earthly ideas."

"You're making fun of this."

"Only a little."

"How little."

"A very little."

"What percent?"

"What?"

"What percent?"

"Kate...."

"I need to know if you're mostly taking this seriously. I'm not going to do it with you if it's mostly a big joke. I mean, I brought my container."

She did, too. In the backseat of the car. It was brown.

"Look, I'm going along with this."

"You're just going along to get out of the house. Screw this, I'm turning around."

“No, listen,” I said, as I almost, but had the medium good sense not to grab the wheel, “I’m not just here to get out of the house.” I did have to concede that any sort of excursion in a moving vehicle had value. It was sort of like being hauled out of jail to a hearing. The cuffs, transport belt and orange jumpsuit I could do without, but at least it got me out of there for awhile. But I wanted to see Kate. And if this bit of silliness made her want to see me, I could shut up. For the second time in about three minutes.

My parents are buried in a cemetery up a steep hill just outside Pottsville. You drive up, then turn in on a dirt road, and then pass through what might be called cemetery row: four different burial ground, each next to the other, each of a different parish, with the Poles next to the Slavs next to the Irish next to the Italians. It’s where the melting pot comes to die. We drive to the gates of St. Patrick’s Cemetery. She parks the Dart next to the closed, but not locked iron gates and got out of the car. I open the gates. I want them to creak a little bit, but they don’t, not even a spooky little bit. I hold my empty box of cheese crackers as she clutches her wooden box. I take a look at the box as we walk. It looks like it’s made of cedar, and has a little brass plate on the lid.

“What’s on top of the box?”

“Nothing.” She holds it closer to her, tucking it directly under her breasts.

“Let me see that,” I say, stopping in front of Danny Cullen, who was nobody I knew, but was probably a drunk, too, based purely on percentages. I tug

at the box, getting enough of a view to see the name “Herschel”.

“Who’s Herschel?”

“Nobody.”

“Wasn’t that one of your dogs? The brother of Irving?”

“Shut up.”

“Yeah, that’s Herschel. He farted even worse than Irving. Awful, gag-inducing farts. I always used to think I stepped in shit whenever he was around. Did you use Herschel’s cremation box?”

“Shut up. I didn’t have anything nice enough.”

“So let’s see if I’ve got this straight”, I tell her as I lean against the tombstone of Danny Cullen and his long suffering wife Patty, who I also didn’t know but, based again on percentages, had to have been miserable married to a worthless prick like Danny. “You brought the cremation box--the coffin of a dead dog--to a human cemetery. Is that right?”

“Don’t give me any grief on this. I didn’t have a nice box. I only started on this today.”

“I thought you were stuffing your deepest thought in the God Box for weeks now.”

“Well, it’s not like you were taking it seriously, Jeff.”

“Yeah, but I thought you were. If you’re not, what’s the point of this?”

“Look, I thought it was a good idea.”

“Really? Did you really think it was a good idea?”

“My Al-Anon sponsor thought it was a good idea.”

“Is this the Al-Anon sponsor that wears the little angel pins on her blouse?”

“Look, do you have to be cynical about everything?”

“I’ll make you a deal,” I say, walking away from the Cullens final resting place. “I’ll do it. I’ll walk over to the grave, we’ll take out our little slips of paper and burn them, or release them to the four directions, or the Three Stooges, or whatever, if you admit that your sponsor’s little angel pins are sappy, sentimental crap.”

She pauses, saying nothing, still clutching Herschel’s earthly container.

“I’m waiting. By the way, what’s in the Herschel Box.”

“I’m not telling.”

“By the way, what happened to Herschel? Where’s his ashes, anyway?”

She pauses again. “You promise you won’t say anything smartass?”

“No.” I smile.

“Okay.” She looks down at the ground, but she smiles, too. “I put them in a Ziploc bag. They’re on my desk.”

I start laughing. Then she starts laughing.

“Was this a stupid idea?” she says.

I think to myself, that a Ziploc bag full of a powdery substance, if seen by

Freddy, might likely induce him to try to snort Herschel. I almost say that. I don't.

“Do you want to get something to eat?” I suggest.

“Hot dogs? Coney Island?” I nod in agreement at her suggestion.

“Stop at the gravesite first?” I nod at that suggestion, as well. We do that.

Saturday night at my apartment. Me, takeout Chinese, and the West Chester students down the street. Their presence is more felt than heard. I stare, again, at my downloaded mini-bottle. Then I get online. I minimize the screen to look at the bottle again, just for a second. I then start trying to instant message Steve. I start typing in anything I can think of that might be a screen name for an imaginary liquor bottle. I type in Stevethemidget, DancingStevetheBottle, MiniBottleSteve. I go through about 20 different names, trying to IM the bottle. I type in each name, then try to find if the bottle' online. It never is.

I feel the tightness in my chest. I feel dizzy and nauseous. I can't even look at the computer monitor without getting sick. I think, for a second, about calling Mark. Then I look at the phone, decide it weighs about 800 pounds and is coated with Ebola. I leave it in the cradle and try to gut it out. I tell myself ow to breathe, then try to get my body to respond. It does, sort of. My breathing bcomes a little slower. The nausea doesn't go away, but it at least takes on the character of intestinal white noise.

I look at my bottle screensaver again. I try to picture it with arms, legs and

a voice. I think about trying to IM it again.

That's stupid. It's a bottle. It's not even that. They're just pixels forming an image of a bottle that's just a bottle. That's all.

I pick up the phone. It weighs less, maybe only 50 or 100 pounds now, and the Ebola is gone. I call Mark. I get his voice mail.

“Mark, it's Jeff. I...I just wanted to say hi. I wasn't doing okay before, but I am now. Really, that's the truth. But call me anyway, okay? Okay.”

I have no life, no friends, nowhere to go. I'm a middle aged loser starting at the bottom again.

I am all that. It's okay.

It's Monday. Monday morning at my office cubicle. And I'm thinking about Rudy, yet again. It's not quite true that I can't stop thinking about him. I probably could. I just don't want to. I have other things to do, and I can do them. This doesn't obsess me. I know obsession. I've lived obsession. I wish this was obsession, because I know what that feels like. This is more like being slapped silly by obligation. Or maybe that's just me, making this all more epic and grand than it is. All I know is that the number on my notepad is still there, and every time I keep wanting to scratch it out, I just end up doodling around it.

I need to do something. Something stupid. Something that will make me feel like myself, just for today.



I pick up the phone. It rings to voice mail.

“This is the office of the Philadelphia Defender Association.” The Philly Public Defender. I punch in numbers, trying to get myself to a human. I do.

“Yes, can I help you?”

I stop. I pause. But it’s not much of a pause. I don’t need much of a pause.

“Hi, my name is Jeff, and I’m a lawyer...”

## **Vita**

Mitchell Sommers grew up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He received his B.A. from Franklin and Marshall College in 1980 and his J. D. from Dickinson School of Law in 1983. He is an attorney and principal in the law firm of Mitchell A. Sommers, Esq., P.C. in Ephrata, Pennsylvania. He has been a frequent op-ed and essay contributor to a number of Pennsylvania newspapers, including the Philadelphia Inquirer. He resides in Ephrata, Pennsylvania.