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The Projectionist

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The Projectionist

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
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

By

David Parker Jr.

B.A. Hampden-Sydney College, 1994

May, 2008

For the Angel in the fountain.

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I can calculate the motion of heavenly bodies, but not the madness of people.

- Sir Isaac Newton

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i.

In an expanding universe, time is on the side of the outcast. Those who once inhabited the suburbs of human contempt find that without changing their address they eventually live in the metropolis.

- Quentin Crisp

The Projectionist

The sky was made of crushed violets, and Franky Whitman sailed down Tenth Street, gliding on a perfumed breeze toward the Metropolis Theater with its crumbling art deco façade and its lighted marquis announcing the classic film of the week: *Desire*, with Marlene Dietrich and Gary Cooper. This was one of those days that Franky was happy to be dying.

His heart contracted and expanded smoothly, pumping blood and morphine through his body, making the world seem magical to him, bizarre, as if he were walking through a surrealist vision. He imagined his pink heart floating down the street ahead of him as the buildings veered overhead at beautiful angles. Tenth Street lay like a worn ribbon between rows of small unhealthy sugar maples that grew from planters set into the sidewalks on either side of the road. Franky wondered if the girls were nearby, his strange angels. He saw them here quite often these days, lurking among the storefronts, peering at him when they thought he wasn't looking.

Franky walked toward the front doors of the Metropolitan Theater where he was the projectionist, a position he had occupied for more than thirty years now, since he was a boy in high school. At the doorway he paused and glanced around. Sure enough, there they were – the strange angels, slipping into a doorway down the block. He only got a glimpse of them, but he recognized the tangle of dark hair, the clunky dark sunglasses, the way the angels were drawn in sharper contrast to the rest of the scene, as if they were filmed on 16 millimeter film instead of Super 8. Franky thought perhaps they were waiting, ready to take him. Someplace.

In the dim light of the projection booth, he often had fantasies about the angels, wondering what it would be like to touch them, to feel their caresses on his face when they finally came for him, to feel their pale arms wrap around him as they drew him into their shadow world. In the theater lobby, Franky would watch pretty girls walk across the carpet with their tickets in their hand, and his body reacted to the warm life that radiated from them. They passed beneath the old crystal chandelier, and Franky would sometimes forget what year it was, what decade it was, as he watched the curves of their bodies move away from him. Time became fluid as he stood at the edge of this lobby, but he always heard the Siren song of the angels somewhere in the distance, filling him with desire.

“You’re late,” Mimi said, standing in the theater lobby as Franky came through the doors. She checked his eyes to see how glassy they were. The glassier the eyes, the slipperier the Franky, and she liked to know what she was dealing with.

“Hello, good-lookin,” Franky said, and his eyes looked only moderately glazed, which meant the pain wasn’t too bad today.

“Don’t sweet talk me,” Mimi said. “There are thirteen people waiting for *Desire* to begin, and I don’t have my projectionist.”

“Thirteen people?” Franky said, winking at her. “That would be quite a riot,” and he wandered off toward the projection booth, leaving Mimi to scowl after him.

He’s getting worse, she thought. She knew he wandered around the city, hallucinating angels and flowers and god knows what. He often forgot what year it was.

And something about his cocktail of cancers and “pain management” medications put him in bizarre states of sexual arousal; last week, after the late show, he had cornered her behind the concession stand again and placed his hand on her hip romantically. “Hello, Kitten,” he said. “How would you like a special tour of the projection booth?”

“Unhand me,” Mimi had replied, “you villain.”

Mimi knew she could find a new projectionist or even learn to run the booth herself if it came to it. She had a hard enough time keeping this theater open without making her few customers wait around, but she also knew that she could never actually fire Franky Whitman. He had become an institution like the old pipe organ under the stage. He was a Phantom of the Opera, skulking about in the shadows of the theater, forever tinkering with his inventions, his projectors, his optical illusions and toys. He had been here when she moved home from Hollywood and bought the place, and besides, what else did he have in this world? A handful of strange patents? A photo album of ex-girlfriends from his youth? Even now, slightly crazy, almost fifty years old, his brooding eyes and lean jaw line still made Mimi think of Cary Grant in *To Catch a Thief*. Mimi wondered if she should try to find him someone to date. *Last Tango in Paris*, she thought with a wry grin.

Anna Papania sat in the front window of the deli across the street from the Metropolitan Theater, eating a grilled cheese sandwich and wondering for the hundredth time what on earth she was doing here. She had never intended to follow this Franky Whitman around for so long – it was Josie’s idea to see what he was like. Josie, who was Anna’s college

roommate, eventually tired of following Franky, but there was something about him that fascinated Anna. She admired his meticulous nature, the way he sat down on a bench to carefully retie his shoelace when it came undone during his travels. She puzzled at the strange devices he carried about with him – cameras and toys and lenses and lights – never noticing the strange looks people gave him as he paused to take pictures or play with a string in the breeze. She sympathized with his seclusion, the way he spent nearly all his time alone.

In short, he reminded Anna of herself. She felt drawn to him in a way she hadn't expected.

She adjusted her dark sunglasses and peered at her reflection in the deli window. The sunglasses were a hand-me-down from Josie after one of her shopping excursions. Anna wondered if she looked as stylish as her roommate, who was from the north side of the city. Josie and her mother were both very pretty. "My stepfather is an architect," Josie had told her on the first day of school as they moved into the dorms. "He's sweet. What do your parents do?"

"My mother's a dancer," Anna said. "I've never met my father."

"A dancer? Really?"

"Yes," Anna said. "She does strip tease."

Josie's face lit up with laughter. "Oh my god, that's great."

Anna's face looked small and pale though as she looked at it in the reflection from the deli window now. I can't possibly go in there, she thought to herself as she refocused her gaze out the window at the lit-up marquis of the Metropolitan Theater.

She did like Marlene Deitrich movies though.

* * *

A few days later, splashes of light from the projector moved mechanically across the wall of the projection booth, and Franky leaned back in his chair, listening to Marlene Deitrich. He imagined that the spots of light were angels, shooting him smoldering looks over their bare shoulders as they flew across the walls with stolen diamonds. “So beautiful,” Franky said as he held his hand up to watch the lights pass over his palm, and then cast off over the walls and shelves while the projector clicked and whirred smoothly.

When the first reel finished, Franky switched to the second projector with the precision of a surgeon, and then he dozed in his chair until he heard a soft knocking on the door. He opened one eye. Who was knocking? Mimi always barged in unannounced, and everyone else steered clear of Franky’s booth. “Who’s there?” he said at the door’s edge. “Who is it?”

Another soft knock.

He opened the door a crack and peered out into the dimly lit hall. Then he clutched the door til his knuckles went white. “You,” he said.

One of the dark-haired angels stood at his door. She looked impossibly strange, wearing a black pea coat and sunglasses. Her hair was all edges and angles, standing out from her head in several directions. She didn’t say a word, just stood with her hands in her pockets.

“What are you?” Franky said.

“I’m Anna,” the girl said.

“Anna?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you here?”

“Well,” the girl said, and then she hesitated. “I’m your daughter, sir.”

“Excuse me?” Franky said.

“You once dated Mindy Monaco.”

“Yes,” Franky said, relaxing his grip on the door. “I remember Mindy Monaco.”

“Well. Mindy is my mother.”

“And that makes me . . .”

“My father.”

“Wait,” said Franky. “That’s why you’re here?”

“Yes sir.”

It dawned on Franky then why he had been followed for these past weeks, why he had seen these visions lurking about in the doorways, peering through the windows, and ducking around corners. She had been watching. Deciding if she was going to meet him, building up her resolve to approach him. “Your father?” he said. “Are you sure?”

“Quite certain,” Anna said, hands in pockets.

Franky looked up and down the dim hallway. “I thought I saw two of you before.”

“It’s just me.”

“Jesus,” Franky said, settling his gaze on the girl. He felt completely disoriented, unsure of what to do or say.

The girl stood quietly, waiting.

“Let me ask you something,” Franky finally said.

“All right.”

“How can you see in here with those glasses on?”

“You have a *what?*” Mimi said, standing behind the concession stand with the popcorn scoop in her hand.

“A daughter.”

“And how long have you known about this?”

“Two days now.”

“Goddamn Franky. How old is she?”

“Eighteen.”

“And she wants to be a projectionist?”

“She wants me to teach her.”

“She didn’t say anything about money?”

“It’s too late now for child support,” Franky said.

“Does this seem a little weird to you?” Mimi asked.

“No weirder than watching Mimi Leroy scoop popcorn.”

She shot him a dirty look. Mimi Leroy had been a popular B movie actress when she was young, starring in such classic films as *Bikini Massacre*, *Dance For the Devil*, and *Hacksaw: The Story of Molly Rae Higgins*. She had a centerfold spread in *Swank Magazine for Men*, and *Hollywood Insider* once called her the “Princess of Scream.” Then during a nasty drug-fueled fight with her director/boyfriend, he had dragged her from his velvet-curtained bed and tossed her naked out of a car onto Ventura Boulevard. He went to jail overnight. She went to the hospital, and by the time she recovered from a

broken collar bone, a skin graft, and a cocaine addiction, the tabloids had quit publishing the nude pictures of her. She had nothing left in Hollywood.

“I like scooping popcorn,” Mimi said, cocking her head dramatically. “It’s therapeutic, like karate.”

“So do you mind if I train Anna in the booth?”

“You and Anna can start your own circus of freaks for all I care.”

“That’s kind of you.”

“This is a great scene,” Franky said.

“What movie is this?” Anna asked. They were hunched together in the projection booth, pulling sections of film off the reels to clean and repair it while Franky explained the arts of illusion and the mechanics of film projectors.

“This is from *Bikini Massacre*. We play all Mimi’s old movies around Halloween as part of the “Screamfest.”

“Wow,” Anna said. “She was hot.”

“Yes she was,” Franky said, gazing into the translucent frozen images of Mimi Leroy running naked down the beach with a crazed killer behind her. “Persistence of vision,” he said absently.

“What?” Anna said.

“It’s how a film works,” Franky said. “Film doesn’t just roll continuously through a projector; it stops at every single frame, for a fraction of a second, and the image is cast onto the screen, then the next frame is loaded.”

“And no one notices this?”

“When humans see something, the image stays in their minds for a second, even after the image is gone, kind of like seeing sunspots. So in between frames, when the screen goes dark, people still see whatever image came just before.”

“Humans are bizarre.”

“The memory of the image lingers.” Franky took a round token from one of his shelves. “This is a thaumatrope.”

The token was painted on both sides and suspended between two strings. He held the token up, showing her one side. “What do you see?”

“A bird.”

He flipped the token around.

“A cage,” Anna said.

Franky took hold of the strings and let the token hang in between his fingertips. He spun the strings, and the token rolled over and over quickly. “What do you see now?”

“A bird in a cage.”

“Persistence of vision.”

Two weeks later, Anna walked up Tenth Street with an enormous bag of popcorn, heading home with her jacket buttoned tightly and her sunglasses fixed to her face. She kept close to the buildings, trying to avoid sunshine and the cool autumn breeze that blew out of the west, turning the sky a beautiful fierce blue. Buttered popcorn melted on her

tongue as she walked toward the bus stop, and she scowled at people who passed too close to her on the sidewalk. She felt happier than she'd ever felt in her life.

Anna loved working with Franky in the projection booth. She adored the way he fussed over her, showed her how to run and care for all the machinery and reels of film. He was a mad genius with his instruments, bringing in zoetropes, gyroscopes, stroboscopes, telescopes – he knew a thousand different kinds of “scopes.”

No one had ever offered her such undivided attention, and she quietly devoured it. She devoured the faded lobby and the feel of film in her hands and the click and whir of the projectors. She wanted to learn everything, be a part of this world.

Anna's mother had been hit or miss through the years. Sometimes she would be kind and generous towards Anna, and then she would get a new boyfriend, or fall in love with a new drug, and Anna would fade to background, blend in with the gray flowered wallpaper around the apartment. Her mother's boyfriends weren't any better. Sometimes they were nice. But mostly they were just there. Anna would hear sex sounds coming from her mother's bedroom, and she would clench her thighs tightly around her own hand, imagining that one of her mother's boyfriends had forced open her door in the middle of the night and ripped the covers off her bed. She lay awake at night imagining the horrible things her mother's boyfriends might do to her – one part of her terrified at the thoughts, another part of her aroused.

But it never happened. No one disturbed or molested her. No one punished or yelled at her. She was simply ignored.

Anna ducked away from the sunlight and glanced over her shoulder, back at the theater, and sure enough, Franky was standing there in the glass doors watching her. She

didn't wave or even smile, just turned back around, popped another piece of popcorn in her mouth and let it melt delicious on her tongue.

"That's one odd duck," Mimi said, coming up behind Franky to see what he was looking at.

"Yes," Franky said. "She wonderful."

"A chip off the old block?"

"Something like that."

Mimi put her hand on Franky's shoulder. "I hate to admit it," she said, "but I'm glad you two freaks are getting along."

"I haven't told her though."

"Told her what?"

"That I'm almost dead."

Mimi had never heard Franky say it out loud in that way, and it sent a shock through her arms. She stared straight ahead, out the windows and down Tenth Street, and for the first time she realized how difficult this was all going to become. Franky wasn't going to show up late, or fall asleep in the booth, or proposition her at the popcorn stand with those dark hungry eyes and his hands on her hips – he was going to be dead.

Mimi turned away to hide her glassy eyes. "Well," she said. "I've got some paperwork."

* * *

A few days later, Anna was in the booth at night, helping run the late show. Franky sat in his chair, hardly able to move from all the morphine he had taken while he was in the bathroom. The pain was bad today.

He watched, fascinated, as Anna straightened his back shelf, organizing canisters of film and changing right in front of his eyes. One moment she was Anna. The next moment, she blurred in color and texture and looked like a young Mimi Leroy standing there poring over old canisters of film. The next time he opened his heavy eyes he saw Marlene Deitrich steal a glance at him over her shoulder. “What are you looking at?” she asked, doing her seductive angel routine on him.

Franky shook his head, blinked, and brought Anna, his daughter, back into focus. He looked closely at her face. “There’s something you should know,” he said.

Anna pursed her lips at him. “Are you going to tell me a dark secret?”

Franky smiled. She had gotten even weirder lately, he thought, as she began to relax and become comfortable with him, the booth, and the equipment. He loved it. She wore perfume now, something she stole from her mother, although the smell didn’t remind Franky of Mindy Monaco at all. It was too sweet. He paused. He was afraid to tell Anna he was dying, afraid she might go away if she knew. “Well?” she said. “What’s the big secret?”

“You’re a beautiful girl,” he said finally.

It seemed to catch her off guard. Franky had never seen her face register surprise before. Her face typically ran a short gamut of expressions, from sneering on one end to dismissive on the other, but she bit her lip now and appeared at a loss for words.

Standing there in the flickering light, pale as a snake, with that tangle of dark hair, she really did look beautiful. She leaned against the table in her black jeans and her black t-shirt, with her skinny hip cocked out, and her hands planted on her waist, as if she was about to challenge him to a dance-off.

Franky closed his eyes, and the smell of her perfume rolled over him in warm waves. He saw angels again, slipping up on him through the shadows, draping their smooth arms over his shoulders and whispering in his ears, letting their lips graze across his cheek. He felt hands on his chest, and he groaned softly with pleasure. He felt one angel take his hand, lift it to her mouth, breathe gently on his palm, and plant a hot lingering kiss on the soft pink skin there. Franky glided out to sea, held by angels, beneath a starry sky. He opened his eyes to look at the stars more closely, and Anna was standing over him, holding his hand. “Anna,” he said. “What are you doing?”

She held his hand to her face, and took his first two fingers into her mouth, letting them slide between her lips and over the smooth wet muscle of her tongue. Billy’s heart contracted and released, pumping morphine through his veins and into his fibers. “Anna,” he said again, but his eyes were half-closed, and he was on a warm wave. “My girl.”

Anna took his hand and placed it on her small breast. She wasn’t wearing any bra, and Billy felt the soft flesh, and his fingers began to move, to knead and squeeze. He pinched softly, and she inhaled deeply. She clutched his hand, held it tight against her. She looked at him with desperate eyes that shone like dark purple gems.

“My beautiful girl,” Billy said, and Anna dropped his hand so she could pull her shirt off over her head. She glowed pale blue in the flickering light as she crawled over him, breathing hot into his ear.

Anna returned to her dorm room late that night. Josie was sleeping already. Josie had left a lamp on for Anna, and Anna slowly undressed for bed, feeling the echoes of sensation roll through her body as her clothes landed on the floor. It reminded Anna vaguely of *Bikini Massacre*, when the amputee in the cage howls about the ghost pains in his missing limbs. Only these weren't pains that Anna felt as she gazed along her own naked limbs. Gentle waves of heat and pleasure rolled through her.

The small dormitory apartment had one living space, and Anna looked closely at her sleeping roommate as she lay in her bed on the opposite side of the room in the dim light with the sheet falling off her shoulder.

Josie was pretty in so many ways that Anna was not. Pretty hair, pretty smile, pretty breasts and hips. Josie groomed herself beautifully, painted her fingernails and toenails in matching colors. Anna crept closer. She looked closely at Josie's eyebrows. Looked at the line of her jaw and neck. Followed the contours of Josie's body beneath the sheets and blankets. Anna breathed deeply the scent of Josie's hair and skin. Anna gently pulled at the sheet until it slid off Josie's shoulder, revealing the straps of her nightshirt.

This, Anna thought as she hovered just inches over her sleeping roommate, could have been me. This *should* have been me.

* * *

Franky woke with a start the next morning, his eyes flying open as if he'd heard some kind of moaning or crying. He lay in his bed and looked around the room. The zoetropes and praxinoscopes sat still on the bookshelf. City sounds came through the walls and the windows, muffled and far away. Other than that, the house was still and quiet. Wow, Franky thought. What kind of dream was that? Angels carrying him to sea?

Franky sat up in bed and tried to remember the night before, but it stretched out like blurred frames. What movie did they show? *The Maltese Falcon*. Who worked last night? He couldn't remember. He often spent mornings like this – all his short term memories scattered like leaves. He had to meticulously gather them up, one at a time, so that he remembered events of the night before. Most often this was a dull chore, putting back together a slow night of work. But ever since Anna had begun working in the booth, Franky had taken great pleasure in piecing the moments back together, like filling in frames of a favorite film.

But last night. The dream. Who was there? Anna. Oh god, Franky thought, stitching together images into memories. Oh god, what did I do?

Heart racing, he fumbled toward the bedside table, reaching for his medicine, trying to fend off the streak of heat that was burning a line down the center of his mind.

“Oh, thank god,” Mimi said when she saw Anna walk through the front doors of the Metro that same night. “Can you run the booth by yourself?”

“Yes,” Anna said. “Where's Franky?”

“He’s sick. He can’t come in. I didn’t know how to reach you – no one has your telephone number.”

“I know.”

“Do you know what we’re playing tonight?”

“Of course,” Anna said, squinting at Mimi before she angled off toward the projection booth.

Mimi shook her head and returned to the ticket window. As much as Franky seemed to love having her around, Mimi couldn’t help having a strange feeling about that girl. However she learned faster than anyone Mimi had ever seen, and she could run the booth by herself. Mimi would be having a terrible night otherwise – Franky was sick, and she had already caught her usher doing lines of cocaine in the bathroom. “You could at least go into a stall to do that,” she had said.

“What are you doing in the men’s room?” the usher had asked indignantly, holding a rolled up dollar bill in the air.

“This is my goddamn theater; I’ll go where I want!”

She thought about calling Franky again to check on him. He sounded awful when she talked to him earlier. It was a rare occasion that Franky Whitman missed work in his booth. This is bad, she thought.

A couple of days later, Anna went to Franky’s house, a red brick townhouse near Scott Circle, covered with ivy. Lush vines grew up the walls in long winding tendrils and crowded around the dark windows. The house sat back from the road, and the narrow

sliver of front yard was surrounded by a black wrought iron fence with an ornate gate that squeaked terribly whenever it moved. Anna stood by the fence in her dark coat and sunglasses. She swung the heavy gate open, listening to the sound of metal squealing on metal. She closed the gate again. Open. Closed. Back and forth on its loud metal hinges until she finally saw the front curtain move. Franky peered out from his living room, and Anna tilted her head. He stared at her a moment, then let the curtain fall back in place. Anna walked down the flagstones to the door, and it opened just as she arrived. “Anna,” Franky said, his face pale and stoned and lined with fear.

“This is a nice house,” Anna said, peering past him into the hallway. “Can I come in?”

Franky hesitated but stepped aside, and Anna walked in, gazing around in her sunglasses. She moved gingerly down the short hall, feeling like a black cat, peering into the living room, the kitchen, and the study. “What’s this?” she asked.

Franky walked to the study where she stood pointing at a wooden shelf against the far wall. The shelf was covered in neatly arranged lenses and pieces of small machinery. “Those are my inventions,” Franky said. “I have patents.”

“What do they do?”

“Well,” Franky said, moving toward the shelf, “lots of things. This is a lens made specifically for capturing certain lighting effects. And this is a timer for standard projectors.”

“You really are a mad scientist.”

“Once,” Franky said. “A long time ago. Now, I’m just the projectionist.”

Anna walked up to where he stood by the shelf and took off her sunglasses and looked up into his face. She saw the tears form in the corners of his eyes and the muscle in his jaw working. She came closer, wrapped her arms around him, and put her head against his chest.

“Anna,” he whispered. “Did I . . . ?”

“It’s all right,” she said. “Really.”

“I don’t know what happened.”

“Things happen,” she said, holding him tightly.

“I’m so sorry.”

She looked up at him, the line of his jaw, his dark swimming eyes. She loved his eyes, the way they went on forever and saw things from other places. “There’s nothing to be sorry for,” she said. “Really.”

“But, you’re my . . .”

“No,” she said. “Not any more.”

They hung there like that for a long moment, looking at each other, and Anna felt her stomach tighten, full of nerves. She realized she was terribly afraid of losing what she had found here, afraid of what would happen if she revealed too much. But then she saw a softening in Franky’s eyes, an understanding that passed between them, and as if something had melted, Franky’s eyes filled with tears. He put his arms around her, and they listened to the clock on the mantle go *tick tick* until Franky laid his head on top of Anna’s head.

* * *

Tick, tick, and only then did he realize he was crying again, the tears slipping like quicksilver through the girl's dark tangles, sweet and strange as raspberry vines. He looked down at her; she was drawn so clearly, so vividly, in such odd angles. The rest of the house seemed to fade out around her until there was nothing but Anna standing in a disappearing study. Her hands on his face now, touching the tears. She gently brought his head down until his cheek was on her cheek. "Shh," she said, wiping the tears from his face. "Don't cry."

He tried to pull away, pull himself together, but her hands were on his face, and her voice so close in his ear. "Shh, Daddy, it's all right. I'll make it go away."

He felt like warm water, like he might collapse and soak into the ground, vanish into the earth. He turned his head to her. "Make what go away?"

"The pain," she said.

"I'm dying, Anna," he said. "I'm disappearing."

"I know," she said.

"You know?"

"Of course I know," she said. "But you're alive right now."

"But we can't," he said. "Not like this."

"Shh," she said, and then her bottom lip was between his lips, and they both hung there like that, barely breathing, and she tasted like crushed violets. Franky slowly bit her lip, rolled it gently between his teeth, feeling the firmness of the flesh, the life coursing through the girl's slender frame. He put two arms around her and pulled her close as they

fell against the shelf. She clutched at his head with her skinny hands, pulled him tighter and tighter to her face and her throat and her body.

“Josie thinks I’m having an affair,” Anna said, two weeks later, as they sat in the projection booth repairing old films.

“You *are* having an affair,” Franky said without looking up. He wore an optivisor and peered closely through the magnifying lenses at the frames as he ran them through his hands. He was good today, hardly shaking at all.

“I know,” Anna said. “But I can’t tell anyone about it. It’s like the affair that doesn’t exist.”

“You could make something up,” Franky said. “Tell her you’re interning with a coven of vampires.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Franky flipped the optivisor up on top of his head and sat back in his chair. “I need a break,” he said. “You want to take over?”

“Yes,” Anna said.

“You want some popcorn?” Franky asked.

“Ju Ju Bees,” Anna said, arranging the optivisor onto her own head. “I feel sweet today.”

Franky pinched her bottom. “You do feel sweet.”

* * *

“That’s coming out of your paycheck!” Mimi yelled across the lobby as she swished over the carpet toward her office and watched Franky rummaging behind the counter for boxes of candy. It’s all very sweet, she thought, that he likes to give his girl sweets, but Ju Ju Bees don’t grow on trees, goddammit, not even these plastic ficus trees in the lobby.

Franky waved at her and went back to rummaging, and quite honestly he seemed better than he had in a long time. As strange as that girl Anna was, fatherhood seemed to suit Franky well. He was lucid, punctual, clean shaven. He had even quit trapping Mimi in hallways and corners with his inappropriate advances, which she kind of regretted, truth be told. It’s amazing, she thought, what little surprises life springs on us, right to the very end.

Of course it was unlikely that Mimi might have a daughter out there that she didn’t know about. But she had two projectionists for the price of one, right in time for Screampfest, and if that wasn’t a happy surprise, she didn’t know what was.

It was that very night that Franky’s kidneys failed while he slept, and he slipped into a coma. Anna woke in his bed to find him barely breathing and completely unresponsive. “Franky?” she said, shaking him. “Franky?”

She dialed 911.

“It’s lucky you were there,” Mimi said, a couple hours later, as they sat in the hospital waiting room, shifting in the vinyl seats and eating Ju Ju Bees.

“I know,” Anna said, feeling increasingly uncomfortable under Mimi’s gaze. “I stay over sometimes.”

“It’s amazing how close you two have become in such a short time.”

“Yeah,” Anna said. “It’s pretty intense.”

After another hour, a doctor came to speak with them. “We’ve brought him out of the coma, and it looks like he’s going to be all right for now.”

“For now?” Mimi asked.

“We want to keep him for a couple of days,” the doctor said, “to make sure he’s not going to relapse.”

“It’s ScreamFest,” Mimi said sadly.

“Excuse me?”

“Franky’s never missed a ScreamFest.”

“You’ve still got me,” Anna said.

Mimi shot her a strange look.

“I brought you something,” Anna said to Franky the next day when she came for visiting hours. The walls breathed gently behind her, and her voice sounded far away. She stood at the foot of Franky’s bed with her sunglasses on and her hands stuffed in the pockets of her coat. The curtain was drawn around his bed, and Franky could hear his hospital roommate talking with his own family too.

“You look like an assassin,” Franky said. “You’re all dressed up.”

“It’s just a skirt,” Anna said.

“I’ve never seen you in a skirt. Are you here on a secret mission?”

“Not exactly,” Anna said, and she whipped her hands out of her pockets to reveal two puppets, both fuzzy bunnies. One was white. One was black. She looked impossibly strange, standing at the foot of a hospital bed like this, with her deadly serious expression, and Franky started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” she said.

“You kill me,” he said.

“Just wait til I get started,” Anna said. “Tonight’s a double feature: *Summer Camp Slasher*, followed by – of course – *Bikini Massacre*.”

Franky watched delighted as Anna crouched out of sight at the end of the bed, and then proceeded to reenact two entire ScreamFest horror films at the foot of his hospital bed with fuzzy bunnies. The white bunny would eviscerate the black bunny, and then the black bunny would mutilate the white bunny, all done in chilling voices and bizarre accents. The puppets mesmerized as they floated against the white wall, glided over the sheets, moved in and out of focus as they committed horrific acts of sex and violence on one another.

When Anna was through, Franky offered applause, and Anna came along beside the bed and put the white bunny on his hand. “Now you can play too,” she said.

Franky held up white bunny and said in a falsetto, “White bunny can’t wait to get home.”

“I can’t wait to get you home,” black bunny said.

“It’s a little lonely around here,” white bunny said, moving closer to the black.

“You’re not lonely now,” black bunny said.

“No,” said white bunny. “I’m not.”

Black bunny traveled over the sheets, rubbing Franky’s stomach. White bunny traveled over the edge of the bed, and rubbed against Anna’s leg. “I’ve missed you,” said white bunny.

“I’ve missed you too,” black bunny whispered.

White bunny moved between Anna’s thighs, and she bit her bottom lip. Black bunny traveled lower over the sheets and rubbed between Franky’s legs where he was growing hard.

Mimi, dressed as a sexy witch for Halloween, walked toward Franky’s room with a small bouquet of red roses. She smiled and nodded hellos as she walked through the hospital, and she ducked through doorways to keep her pointed witch hat from getting knocked askew.

When she got to the room, she knocked softly and entered. Franky’s roommate was sitting up in bed talking with his wife and family who were gathered there. Mimi waved hello and put her finger to her lips, shh. She wanted to surprise Franky.

She tip-toed over and peeked around the edge of the curtain. Anna was there already.

It took Mimi a moment to realize what she was seeing. Anna had a fuzzy puppet on her hand, and she was stroking Franky feverishly between his legs. Franky had a puppet on his hand too, using it to clutch at the sheets. Anna leaned over and whispered

in his ear, and then Franky let loose a soft groan, and he erupted all over the fuzzy puppet.

In the horrified silence of Mimi's mind came a single thought. "What the fuck."

Franky and Anna both looked up startled when they heard her voice.

Franky lay in the dark, listening to the electric hum and beep of hospital instruments. In his hand he held the handle that allowed him to self-administer small doses of morphine. He closed his eyes, and he could see the lobby of the Metropolitan Theater, the wide expanse of carpet and the crystal chandelier. The lobby was quiet, clean, empty, and Franky could almost feel the soft crush of carpet beneath his shoes as he walked the imaginary floor. Persistence of vision, Franky thought.

Eyes open, Franky gazed up at the hospital ceiling, lit by the dim glow of night lights and instrument panels. He knew that he wasn't ever going home again, despite what Mimi wished for, what the doctors talked about. Only Anna seemed to accept this knowledge with him. She sneaked in during off hours and leaned back against the window with her skinny hip cocked out and stared at him with a chiseled expression while nurses swirled about the room in a blur of sounds and motion.

Franky felt as alive and human as he had ever felt right now as he edged closer to death. Full of suffering, full of love, his life ebbed away, eroded from beneath him with each wave of pain that rolled through the night. It made him happy to think of Anna – that she would be a continuum of his story, in a strange kind of way.

Alone now, Franky closed his eyes as another wave of pain washed over him. Hit the morphine button and wait for that wave to come wash over him too. Eroding. Vanishing into the earth. Walking across the Metropolitan lobby. Heading for the cool darkness of the projection booth.

“Where have you been?” Josie asked, walking into the dorm room after a football game. Josie’s cheeks were flushed with cold weather and mixed drinks and too much laughing. “You missed the game.”

“I was at a funeral,” Anna said. She sat at her desk, spinning the thaumatrope on its strings, looking at the bird in its cage.

“I’m sorry,” Josie said. “Who died?”

“Your father,” Anna said.

“What?”

“Your father died.”

Josie bristled, a disturbed look on her face. “What are you talking about?”

“He had cancer.”

Josie paused in mid-motion, as she was taking off her coat. “Are you being serious?”

“Yes.”

“Why were you at my father’s funeral?”

“He was nice to me.”

Josie let her arms fall back down to her sides, and her coat slipped back on. “We agreed not to meet him,” she said.

“You know I like the movies,” Anna said.

Josie watched Anna for a moment, giving her a dark look. She opened her mouth, then closed it. Finally she said, “Did you tell him about me?”

“I told him lots of things,” Anna said.

Josie gathered up her bag again and left the room without looking back at Anna.

Anna spun the thaumatrope. She held it by the strings and spun the token, slowly at first, watching the bird and the cage spin one over the other. Then faster and faster, twisting the strings between her fingers. She squeezed her eyes closed, and she could see Franky hunched over his desk in the projection booth. So vivid, he turned to look at her with his optivisor flipped up on top of his head, as if he were surprised to see her, but happy. She tilted her head, and felt the faintest trace of a smile working at the corners of her mouth.

Anna opened her eyes, and she saw the bird in its cage.

Trouble With Girls Who Bite

At ten minutes to eight in the morning, I'm lost in a horribly boring daydream about work while I'm sitting in the driver's seat. I turn through a busy eight-lane intersection thinking It's a ridiculous idea, but knowing that my boss will love it anyway, a tea party, and then the tires slip on the wet pavement and I lose control of the car.

"Oh shit," and I'm back in the present moment as the back end of the car spins out and around. My pink painted fingernails bite into my palms as I grapple with the sudden physics of inertia, lost surface contact, and anti-lock brakes, and my head fills with the odd lucidity of adrenaline as I pin the brake pedal to the floor and we careen through rush hour traffic.

I glance for a split second in the rearview mirror at Gloria, my four year old daughter, sitting in the back, strapped into her car seat. Gazing out the passenger side window, her hair, pale gold and curly, shines in the sunlight. The tiny blue cornflowers embroidered on her socks match the blue of her dress. *Oh God*, I think as the world spins around outside the car windows. I'm going to kill my baby.

We spin in a large arc, and I'm waiting for the first deadly jolt, the first sound of crunching metal, the first spider webs of broken glass across the windshield, but there is only a dull *thump*, a sliding sensation, and then there is nothing. We have slid to a stop.

A long moment of silence hangs suspended all around me, and for a moment I'm convinced we have landed, like Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, in some grassy field, far away, in time for a tea party beneath this oak tree. It seems so shady and peaceful here, but then there's a stoplight hanging in the air.

The light turns green with a tiny *click*, and all the world rushes back to focus: commotion, noise, traffic, and people running toward the car where I sit calmly, holding the steering wheel. I realize we have flown over the curb and into the grass in front of a chiropractor's office. A woman arrives at the window and says, "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"It's a miracle," she says, catching her breath, "that you didn't hit anything."

I gaze into her face, smooth brown skin and features, brown eyes. Her hair is pulled back, and silver earrings shine from her dark lobes. "It's a miracle," I say.

She sets a hand on my shoulder. "Let go of the steering wheel, honey."

My hands tremble when I turn them over to look at them. My fingernails have cut small crescent moons into my palms. "I'm going to be late for work," I say, watching beads of blood form in each of the crescents.

After work, I'm snared in traffic, driving back down the same road to pick up Gloria from daycare. Work dragged on forever today, but the executive team loved the invitation that I produced for their annual fundraiser, The Tea Party – a trippy illustration, reminiscent of an old Bob Dylan concert poster, but with a table set for tea beneath a big oak tree. "Gorgeous work," said the President as she passed the printout around the table. "I don't usually like this hippie art, but this is so . . . creative. That's thinking outside the box, Angelica."

Outside the box, I think, sitting in gridlocked traffic now. *I'd rather be outside the beltway.*

A man in the car next to me talks into his cell phone, reminding me of my husband Ed. Ed has recently refused to take calls from his mother's nursing home, and so they have been calling me instead. Today I learned that last night they caught Ed's mother, Caitlin, in bed with a 74-year old man named Mr. Holmes. "What were they doing in bed together?" I asked, not realizing.

"They were, um, in *bed* together, Mrs. Reiser."

"Oh, my god."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes, I'm sorry. This kind of thing is not uncommon in nursing homes, and we try to use great discretion, but your mother has been acting out lately."

"She's actually my husband's mother, you know."

"Yes, of course. I tried calling your husband earlier today."

"Right," I said, shaking my head, squeezing my fingers against my closed eyes.

"Well, she's not going to get pregnant or anything, right?"

"True. But there are other risk factors – sexually transmitted diseases, medical conditions, social concerns and so on."

"What do you mean by 'social concerns'?"

"Well, just for an example, the man your mother slept with last night happens to be married."

"It's my husband's mother, you know."

"Oh, yes. Sorry about that."

* * *

“I’m sorry I’m late,” I say to Ms. Warren when I reach the Home Away From Home daycare center. “I got stuck at work.”

Ms. Warren has been waiting for me while Gloria plays in the yard out back with some of the other stragglers. Ms. Warren wears dark pants and a short sleeved blouse, a necklace with beads. She flickers in the fluorescent light in the hallway, which makes her look otherworldly. Her blue eyes catch the tubed light. “I’d like to talk to you about Gloria,” she says

“Gloria?” My heart sinks.

“She bit a boy this afternoon.”

“She what?”

“Gloria bit a boy in her class today,” Ms. Warren says. “She was playing in the yard, having a tea party.”

“You serve them tea?”

“They’re make-believe tea parties. Which is wonderful, but today, a boy from her class tried to sit down with her, and she bit him.”

“Oh no,” I say.

“Yes,” Ms. Warren says. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Gloria has been acting out lately. In the past few weeks, she has been a little moody. A little aggressive. I was just wondering if there’s anything going on at home, or elsewhere, she might be upset about.”

“Gloria’s very creative.”

“I know.”

“Is that so odd?”

“Well, it is if she bites.”

“Oh. Right. I suppose we can’t have that.”

“No.”

On the way home, I say to Gloria, “Ms. Warren told me that you bit someone today in school.”

Gloria, tucked into her seat, looks absently out the passenger side window. “I didn’t bite Ms. Warren,” she says.

“She said you bit a boy.”

“He came into my garden,” Gloria says.

“Why did you bite him?”

“He made me so mad.”

“What did he do?”

Gloria looks at me in the rearview mirror, as if I’m silly for asking. “He interrupted my *tea party*, Mama.”

“*Ohhh*, I see. Well, maybe next time, instead of biting him, you could offer him tea.”

“One lump or two,” Gloria says.

“Exactly,” I say.

Gloria looks like she’s giving it some thought. Then she shakes her head. “*Men*,” she says with great earnestness.

I know I shouldn't, but I laugh.

At home, I prepare dinner. I set water to boil, lay out the cutting board and chop broccoli with a sharp *thunk, thunk, thunk* as the blade splits the green stalks. Over the counter, I look out into the living room. Gloria watches television, lying on her stomach with the remote control in her hand. Her hair shines in the fading sunlight that angles through the glass patio doors.

Trixie, my older daughter, talks to the telephone. She drifts through the living room with the cordless held casually to her ear. She twirls her hair around the index finger of her free hand, smiling and laughing, "He did *not!*" she says as she floats into her bedroom and closes the door behind her.

Trixie is fourteen, ten years older than Gloria – a fact that raises a lot of eyebrows when I mention it. I say the same thing over and over: "We had a little trouble conceiving after Trixie was born; it took a while."

The truth is, of course, I had *no* trouble conceiving. Gloria was completely accidental.

Ed said something supportive at the time like, "Aw shit, Angel."

I said something loving like, "I told you to get that thing clipped."

Now I gaze out at the golden-haired minx lying in the sunshine with her chin propped up on her hands to watch television and I can't help smiling.

I hear Trixie's voice muffled through the door, and I try not to pay attention, allow her some privacy. Then I worry about what she's talking about, and I try to

eavesdrop. Trixie goes into high school this year, and I'm terrified of what she's going to get into. She fills out her bathing suit in a whole new way, and she has already begun talking about boys on the varsity swim team, proms, raves in the armory, and nights out in the city. She closes her door now when she's on the phone.

Ed walks in the front door with a blast of hot summer air, and Gloria yells, "Hello, Daddy," without looking away from the TV.

Ed calls back, "Hello, baby," and he drags his briefcase to the hall table where he drops his suit jacket and keys too. Ed works for the government, in the Department of Labor, which has made his shoulders stoop, as if he goes to work and carries heavy loads of paper all day. He still moves nicely though, with some of his old grace, sweeping into the kitchen, loosening his tie, looking for a beer. He drinks a lot of beer recently, ever since he started hanging out with his new musician friends. It's all part of his mid-life crisis. He announced one Wednesday a couple of months ago that he plays in a band. Then, last month, he announced that he was going parachuting. I don't know what to expect next, with this unpredictable behavior, but I'm sure something's coming. "What's for dinner?" he says with his head in the refrigerator.

"Pasta," I say. "And by the way, your mother's a slut."

"Sounds good," he says, standing up and drifting out of the kitchen. I'm not sure if he heard me or not.

I watch him cross the living room and plop down in the easy chair to watch television with Gloria. She climbs up into his lap and leans back into him as if he were a recliner. They watch *Power Puff Girls*, drink beer.

I run water over the vegetables, wonder what would happen to these people if I ran away to Las Vegas to work in a casino. I would slip away with no announcements. *They wouldn't even notice, I think. Not til all the leftovers were finished.*

Looking out into the living room, I pause a moment. *I'll take Gloria with me, I think. She'll be good for tips.*

On Friday, I drop off Gloria at the daycare center, just a couple of minutes late. She wears jean overalls and a short sleeved shirt. The dark blue ribbons in her hair match the trim on her shirt. I unbuckle her seat, and she climbs out of the car and gathers up her lunchbox, puts on her pink backpack.

“Don't bite anyone today,” I say

Gloria rolls her eyes. “Don't *you* bite anyone.”

“All right,” I say. “It's a deal.”

“*Deal,*” she says. Then she flits off across the yard like a breeze, toward Ms. Warren who stands in the front doors. Gloria's blue ribbons trail out behind her like the tail of a kite.

At the office, I'm importing donor lists into the new database when the telephone rings. I grab the receiver: “Angelica Reiser speaking.”

“This is Tony Whorel, from the Calypso Park nursing home. I'm calling regarding your husband's mother.”

“You already called,” I say. “We spoke earlier this week, remember?”

“Well, actually, there has been another incident.”

“What? Who’s she sleeping with now?”

“No, no, she’s not sleeping with anyone.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“She bit someone.”

“What?”

“Yes.”

“Who did she bite?”

“One of the staff,” Tony says. “I’d like to talk to you about her behavior. It’s been more erratic than usual over the last couple of weeks, and there are some options we would like to consider.”

I lay my fingers gently on my closed eyelids. “Can it wait till tomorrow, Tony? My husband and I come visit on Saturday’s, and we would be happy to talk with you.”

“That’s fine,” Tony says. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Gloria barrels down the hallway of the house, vanishes around the corner toward her room. I’m exhausted, and I resent the little extortionist, but I promised her that I would take her to the swimming pool around the corner. It was the only way to get her out from behind the bushes in the yard at the daycare center. Gloria had been holed up back there for almost an hour before I got there; they couldn’t get her out of the thick patch of greenery.

I call for Trixie, but there is no answer. A note on the dining room table says that she’s out at the coffee shop with April, a girlfriend of hers from school. I drop my keys

on the table, set down my briefcase, and drape my suit jacket over the back of the chair. Gloria comes running out into the living room again. She's naked now, except for a pair of flip flops. "Mama, come *on!*" she says.

She makes emphatic gestures with her arms. "All right, all right, let Mama get her swimsuit. You should get yours too; you can't go out like that or people will mistake you for your granny."

Gloria races off.

When we return from the pool, Gloria wears her towel on her head, wrapped like a turban. The lifeguard showed her how to wear it like that. Gloria makes flapping noises as she parades through the house in her flip flops. "Hi, Daddy," she yells at Ed, who is sitting in his easy chair, watching television.

"Hi baby," Ed says.

"*Hi Daddy,*" I say in a playful voice.

"Hi baby," Ed says. "Can you grab me another beer while you're over there?"

I flinch. But I get the beer for him, enjoy the feel of the cold can on my skin. The moon-shaped wounds on my palms are almost gone. I cross the living room and sit on the arm of his chair. "Whatcha watching?" I say

"Cartoons."

"Reality break?" I say.

"I suppose," Ed says, popping open the can. "It's nice to get away."

I look down at him and wonder what he meant by that. I concentrate on his face, but I can't read his expression. I'm just about to say something when the front door opens, and Trixie bustles in with her friend April. Highly caffeinated, they speak in excited voices. Trixie calls out, "Hi Mom, hi Dad, I'm home. Can April stay for dinner?"

"Yes."

"Hi, Mrs. Reiser," April says.

April looks like she was drawn for a storybook, with dark curly hair and smooth skin. She paints her eyes with dark glittery makeup. "Hi, April," I say.

"I like that swimsuit," she says. "It looks nice on you."

"Thank you," I say.

Ed turns around for the first time. He looks at me in my swimsuit, glances up and down, but I can't tell what he thinks any more.

"I heard you're playing a show at the Vegas Lounge on Sunday," April says.

Ed smiles. "You heard about that?"

"What?" I say.

"Yeah," April says. "Trixie told me. That's pretty cool."

"What?" I say again. I had no idea that Ed was playing a show.

"Yeah," Ed says. "It's my first gig with this new band. I'm stoked."

I raise my voice now: "You're *what*?"

* * *

Later that night, Ed and I lie in bed with the lights on. “Why didn’t you tell me you were playing a show this weekend?”

Ed flips through the pages of *Guitar* magazine. “Angel, how many times do I have to say it. I thought I told you already.”

“You didn’t tell me. You don’t tell me anything, Ed. You walk in and out of this house like a zombie.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want you to be sorry. I want you to start telling me things. I want you to pay attention to what’s happening around here.”

Ed lays *Guitar* down. “All right,” he says.

I look away, at the ceiling. There’s a water stain where the roof leaks into the attic. “Calypso Park called again this afternoon,” I say, remembering the conversation. “Your mother bit someone at the nursing home.”

“Of course she did,” Ed says, looking at the same stain. “They need to increase her medication.”

“And what? Stone her out of her mind?”

“Well, she can’t go around biting people.”

“You don’t even know why she did it,” I say. “Maybe she had a perfectly good reason to bite someone.”

“Tell me,” Ed says. “What exactly constitutes a good reason to bite someone?”

“Good point,” I say. “Still, we’ll ask her tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes,” I say. “Remember? We visit your mother on Saturdays?”

“Shit,” Ed says. “I can’t do it tomorrow.”

“Why not?”

“I have band practice. It’s our last rehearsal before the gig on Sunday.”

“Well, practice in the evening.”

“We can’t. Juan has to work.”

“Juan?” I say. “Who the hell is Juan?”

“Juan plays drums.”

“And you have a meeting with your mother’s supervisor.”

“I’m sorry,” Ed says. “Could you talk to Tony for me and see what’s going on?”

I consider him for a moment. He lies there in the lamplight, looking at me with those dark eyes that used to make my head swim. Then I lean over and bite him. I bite him on top of the shoulder in the soft spot. My teeth clamp down hard, and Ed lets out a howl.

That night, I dream of the car accident. I dream that the car spins off the wet road, whirling round and round, as if we were caught in a tornado. Ed’s mother, Caitlin, is strapped into the passenger seat beside me. Gloria, tucked into her car seat, looks at me in the rearview mirror. “It’s all right, Mama,” she says. “We won’t hit anything.”

Gloria and I sit down in sculpted plastic chairs for our appointment with Tony Whorel. He reminds me of our auto mechanic, with a bearded face and the edge of a tattoo peeking out from beneath his shirt sleeve. He has good eyes though – bright and kind. He smiles and says, “We would like to change Mrs. Reiser’s medication.”

“What for?”

“We would like to introduce some tranquilizers to stabilize her moods.”

“No, thank you.”

“Excuse me?”

“She doesn’t need tranquilizers,” I say. “She’s just looking for a good time.”

“It’s not just the sex,” Tony says, shooting an uncomfortable look at Gloria, who is paying close attention. “It’s also the dementia and the more violent outbursts. We feel it would be in everyone’s best interest to settle her down, just a little.”

“She’s an old lady,” I say. “She only has a little time left here, and I don’t imagine she would like to spend her last years in a tranquilized daze.”

“It’s not as bad as that,” Tony says. “And really, we can’t have her sneaking around and wandering off the grounds and biting people. I’m thinking of her own good.”

“Oh, hell,” I say. “I bit someone this week too.”

“I bit someone, too,” Gloria says.

“Well,” Tony says. “Perhaps all three of you should be medicated.”

After the meeting, Gloria and I go out into the yard to find Caitlin. It’s a gorgeous yard, half the reason we chose the Calypso Park home. Sunshine glances through the trees,

falling over the wide lawns and the flower beds. A tall wooden fence surrounds the yard, lined with great boxwoods, azaleas and beds of lilies.

Caitlin sits on a bench, reading a magazine. “Hello, Mother,” I say as Gloria and I walk up.

“Hello, Angel,” Caitlin says, wearing a green housecoat, looking at me with Ed’s dark eyes. “And who is this young lady?”

“It’s me,” Gloria says. “Gloria!”

“Oh, my,” Caitlin says with mock surprise. “So it is. I hardly recognized you, you’ve grown so big.”

Gloria wiggles with delight, and then climbs onto the bench next to Caitlin, who sets down the magazine and turns to me. “So what’s the verdict?” she says.

“They want to put you on tranquilizers.”

“Well, it’s about time,” she says. “You’d think living in a place like this you could get any meds you wanted to, but they treat us like thieves or junkies. It’s all locked up.”

“You want to be on tranquilizers?”

“Jesus,” she says. “Anything to make the soap operas more interesting.”

Then she turns to Gloria. “Well,” she says. “Shall we go find something sweet to eat?”

“A tea party,” Gloria says. “Let’s have a tea party.”

“I know just the place.”

* * *

As we skulk through the kitchen and out the service entrance, I whisper to Caitlin,

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just sign you out for the afternoon?”

“No,” Caitlin says, peering around a dumpster. “I can’t stand those people keeping tabs on me.”

Gloria picks at a metal hinge on the dumpster, and I take her hand in mine.

“Won’t we get in trouble?”

“We’ll be back before they miss me,” Caitlin says.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Jesus, Angela,” Caitlin says. “Go get the car. Are you going to leave an old lady waiting around by the garbage all day?”

Gloria, Caitlin and I sit at a round table at the Piccadilly Buffet, eating bowls of ice cream, sipping cups of tea and milk. Only a few other tables are occupied at this hour, and the three of us talk and laugh. “One lump or two?” Gloria says after Caitlin returns with another cup of tea.

“Three,” Caitlin says.

Gloria deposits the sugar cubes in Caitlin’s cup, and Caitlin stirs with a metal spoon. “You’re a charming girl,” she says.

“I’m bad,” Gloria says.

“I’ve always admired that in girls.”

Caitlin slips into song, something about the low-down ways of dirty women, and Gloria and I roll our eyes and laugh. I look from Gloria to Caitlin, put my hands on my own face. I cannot remember the last time my cheeks hurt from smiling. And it occurs to me – I’m not late for anything. Not for Gloria’s daycare, not for Trixie’s swim practice, not for work. For this brief moment, this slice of time on a summer afternoon, everything is all right. The whole world is spinning by outside, and for once I’m not caught up in it.

I look past Gloria at the mural painted on the wall on the other side of the buffet – a painting of a sprawling oak tree with a table set beneath its branches. “It’s perfect,” I say.

“What’s perfect?” Gloria says.

“The tea party.”

Just then a voice says, “Mrs. Reiser?”

Caitlin and I both turn. “Yes?”

Two police officers walk toward us. One of them speaks into the hand mic on his shoulder: “We found the Reiser woman.”

“Oh, shit,” Caitlin says.

A squawking reply comes through the walkie talkie, and the officer says, “Yes, she was at the Piccadilly again.”

Gloria squeals with delight.

Jonesy O'Neil is Dead

On Saturday, Randall wore his best suit to the church. The autumn air felt cool and clean after the storms last night, and sunlight played in the stained glass windows. The lives of saints shimmered in landscapes of blue and red and green, with bright gold stars and haloes. "It is with great sadness," the priest said, "that we gather today to say goodbye to Jones O'Neil."

Randall bounced his knee as he sat, looking around at the congregation. He couldn't stop wondering what he was doing sitting here in the second row of this service, what he was doing back in this town after all these years. None of this felt real. "Jonesy said you would be here," Wyatt said, just before the service. "But I didn't believe him."

"I didn't either," Randall had said, straightening his tie again. "But here I am."

Still, it was hard to believe that any of this was actually happening, that Jonesy was dead, that Randall was standing among these people again. It had been more than ten years since he had been back to Glendale, West Virginia.

Randall wished that his girlfriend Josie had come with him – he wanted something from his real life to squeeze right now – but she was attending a wedding, back in DC. He could picture it now: the ceremony at St. Catherine's followed by the reception on the rooftop of the Hotel Washington. Josie would be in her brown silk dress and matching high heels, wearing her pearls and Audrey Hepburn sunglasses. She was probably laughing and flitting around the reception at this very moment, saying hello to all their friends and co-workers who were attending. That's where Randall was supposed to be right now. That was his life.

This. This was his past. This was like sitting in a church full of ghosts, and the only real thing in this room was the dead body of his best friend from childhood. When time came to take Jonesy to the hearse, Randall took his place alongside the coffin and lifted. Being taller than the rest of the pall bearers, Randall stooped uncomfortably to carry the load. Looking around, he knew two of the other pall bearers: Wyatt Laine and Billy Adams.

Wyatt Laine stood opposite Randall, holding the rear of the coffin. Blond-haired and red-cheeked, they used to call Wyatt the Doughboy. Now Wyatt was married to Pauline, and they had a baby girl named Bix. Wyatt owned a record store and played in a band called Tractor Gravy. He looked more like a pale-haired Elvis than the Doughboy, right down to the big gold sunglasses hanging from the breast pocket of his suit jacket.

Billy Adams walked in front of Wyatt. Slump-shouldered, with a lopsided grin and a good nature, Billy worked for an insurance company now, and he got to carry a handgun, which was the first thing he told Randall upon seeing him. “Really,” Randall had said. “A gun.”

“Fuck yeah, dude,” Billy had said, tucking the revolver back into the shoulder holster beneath his wrinkled suit jacket.

They all walked Jonesy down the aisle of the church and out into the sunshine.

On Sunday afternoon, Randall went down to Mr. P’s with Billy Adams and Wyatt and the rest of the old gang. The bar had a low, dark ceiling and small, diamond-shaped windows that let dusty shafts of afternoon sunlight lean across the room like rafters. An

oak bar stood against the front wall, a small stage stood against the back, and a dirty juke box stood in the middle of the room, leaning against a brick pillar. The juke box played country music and blues and old rock n roll. Wyatt punched in some Lightning Hopkins and came back to the table in the far corner to make a toast to Jonesy O'Neil: "May we all be in heaven one half hour before the devil knows we're dead."

Everyone raised their glasses.

Then Wyatt's wife, Pauline, said, "It was good of you to come back, Randall. It's been a long time."

"It feels like ages," Randall said.

"It feels like yesterday," Wyatt said.

Billy Adams raised his glass of whiskey and made another toast. "To the return of the Chicken Man."

Wyatt looked skeptical, but he raised his glass and toasted with the rest of the table. "To the Chicken Man."

Randall, looking around the table from face to face, felt something stir in his chest then, something he had forgotten.

On Monday, Randall was supposed to be back at work already, but he wasn't. He had called Josie last night at three o'clock in the morning to tell her he wasn't coming home yet. "Are you all right?" Josie had asked.

"What do you mean?" he had replied, teetering past Wyatt's kitchen counter with a glass of whiskey in his hand.

“I can practically smell your breath from here,” Josie had replied, and Randall couldn’t quite tell if that was amusement or concern in her voice.

“I’m fine,” he said.

“I guess you’re having fun after all.”

“Kind of,” Randall replied. “It’s stranger than fun.”

Now, Randall laid both his palms on the cool marble of Wyatt’s kitchen counter and tried to remember the last time he had been this hung over on a Monday. Jonesy’s other friends and family members had returned to their far flung jobs and cities – Charlotte, Nashville, Denver. They seemed to have moved in every direction, like a bomb had gone off and scattered them across the country. “Hell,” Wyatt said, standing in his boxer shorts at the kitchen counter and eating a sausage link, “hardly anybody actually *lives* here anymore.”

“Tell me one thing,” Randall said.

“What?” Wyatt asked.

“Is there coffee?”

“In the pot, beside the Advil.”

It’s funny, Randall thought, pouring himself a mug of the thick black coffee. He hadn’t wanted to come here in the first place. It was a tragic occasion, and he had had no idea where he was going to stay, or who he was going to see here, or what he would say to anyone he happened to recognize. What would they think of him, disappeared for all these years? His head crowned with anxious thoughts and self doubts, Randall drove over the mountains in that ripping thunderstorm, but he knew, deep down, that he had to be there, that he wouldn’t be comfortable in his own skin if he denied this, Jonesy’s last

request that had arrived in the mail two months earlier when Jonesy knew that his condition was terminal and deteriorating. Jonesy had tracked down Randall's work address at the newspaper, and the plain white envelope had shown up in Randall's inbox on his desk. Randall thought he'd be in and out of Glendale in less than twenty-four hours.

Now Randall left Wyatt eating sausage in his underwear to walk out onto the back deck of the house and gaze across the rolling green mountains, showing the first hints of fall colors. He recognized the smell of the hardwoods and the dried leaves, the feel of the light cool air. Like slipping his hand into a soft leather work glove, Randall had a sensation of being home, and he realized that he hadn't felt that feeling in a long time.

He was also hung over. Hanging onto his cup of coffee and a palm full of Advils, which he ate one by one, sucking the sugar coating off until they turned bitter on his tongue, Randall spoke to the mountains in the distance: "I feel strange today."

The mountains replied with a low guttural growl, which startled Randall until he realized it was the sound of Billy's car clawing its way up the steep gravel drive to the house. Pauline came out onto the deck when she heard the sound. "What's Billy doing here?" Randall asked.

"He's picking you up."

"What for?"

"A stakeout."

"Did I agree to this?"

"Last night."

"Shit."

Later that morning, Randall sat in Billy's car, parked on a residential street near the center of town. "How on earth did you get this job?" Randall asked.

"Night school," Billy Adams said. "They even have journalism. I could be just like you."

"This is more exciting than what I do," Randall said. "Writers don't get to carry guns."

They wore sunglasses and watched a house across the street. They had fresh coffees and a bag of donuts. "It's in the glove box," Billy Adams said. "Don't wave it around though. Incognito, if you know what I mean."

Billy Adams made some notes on a notebook – keeping track of times and locations. There was a tape recorder on the dashboard and a hand-held video camera in the back seat. Randall turned the pistol over in his hand, looking at the dull shine of the metal. "So are you just like Magnum PI?"

"Fuck yeah," Billy Adams said. "Only imagine that Magnum PI works for an insurance company and drives a rusty Pontiac."

Just then someone came out of a house across the street. A young woman, pushing a baby stroller carefully down the front stairs. "Is that your perp?" Randall asked.

"Naw, my perp lives two doors down. That's your ex-girlfriend."

"What?"

"That's Betty Ann Hanson," Billy said. "Only she's called Betty Ann Bailey now. Still looks good though. Total MILF."

Betty Ann Hanson. Randall felt a rush of blood in his groin that spread down through his thighs. He slid down lower in the car seat. "Holy shit," he said. "Did you know she lived right there?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"Surprise," Billy said.

Randall watched her brush a loose strand of hair back from her face. "She has a baby."

"Yeah," Billy Adams said. "Her old man ran off, though. He got shipped overseas with the Army Reserves and never came back. He took a job with Blackwater, and now he makes a fortune running convoys through Baghdad and shooting at children."

"Jesus."

"I know," Billy said. "People lose their minds when they leave here."

They watched Betty Ann walk through the sunshine. Randall put his hand over his stomach. He was watching his past glide down the sidewalk, her Puma sneakers landing on the pavement as she went, pushing a baby stroller. It was strangely erotic. He and Betty Ann had been scandalous in high school; they both had been dating other people when they first hooked up in Jonesy's basement during a party. She had taken her shoes off to play on the slip and slide, and Randall had offered to wash her feet off.

"Sure," she'd said with a half-drunk glint in her eye.

He had run a warm cloth over her foot, moving gently between the toes, rubbing sinuously along the arch until he heard her breath catch in her throat. It was a finished

basement, but the indoor/outdoor carpeting left telltale signs of their passion – rug burns on their backs and knees and elbows.

Afterwards, Randall got beat up outside the gymnasium, and Betty Ann got called a whore, but eventually everyone settled into their low-smoldering grudges, and Randall was free to ride around in cars with Betty Ann, get a matching tattoo, compare rug burns and foot rubs.

Now, beside Randall in the front seat, Billy Adams sighed dramatically and said, “Let me offer you one small piece of advice, my friend.”

Randall knew what Billy was going to say. Billy was going to say we’re all in different places now. There’s no turning back time. That’s not your life any more.

Billy Adams said, “Don’t lift a fishing boat if you’ve sued for workman’s compensation – there’s probably someone like me watching you.”

“What?” Randall asked. He looked over at the house two doors down, and sure enough, a man in the driveway hoisted his boat trailer onto the hitch of his pickup truck. “Looks pretty healthy, don’t you think?” Billy asked.

“Is he supposed to be sick?”

“He’s *supposed* to have a slipped disc and damage to the spine.” Billy Adams was getting everything on video.

On Tuesday, Randall called Josie, back in DC. “I’m not coming home yet,” he said.

“Let me guess,” Josie said. “You’ve met some old girlfriend of yours and you’re having a hot affair.”

“Ha, ha,” Randall said. He imagined Josie in one of her business suits at her desk downtown, working on client proposals. She looked good in her suits. He wondered what shoes she was wearing. “I just need to sort some things out,” he said.

“Things?”

Randall could hear the tension creeping into her voice. Randall had met Josie during happy hour. His office and hers were both at the same patio bar, and Randall was drunk. “I like your shoes,” Randall had said, waiting beside her at the bar for another cocktail.

“Thank you,” Josie had said with a cool politeness, turning away from him.

“I like your shoulder too,” Randall had said. “But it’s pretty cold, you know?”

Josie had turned to give him a sharp look, but Randall was already falling over backwards at the moment, tripping over a barstool. She reached out and grabbed him by his tie, second-hand silk with purple stripes, to keep him from falling.

Now, standing in a kitchen in West Virginia, Randall had no idea what he was even saying to Josie. “I just have these *things* coming up, you know. People I haven’t seen. Places I haven’t been.”

“Hey,” she said. “It’s all right. I just miss you.”

That night, Randall and Billy went back to Mr. P’s to hear Tractor Gravy play. Wyatt growled into the microphone, “I’d like to dedicate this next song to the Chicken Man.”

The band played “All my Rowdy Friends Have Settled Down.”

Randall leaned against the bar, drinking a beer. He felt young and mean. Looking around, nothing was the quite the same – the bar was changed, the friends were

changed – but everything felt familiar. Everything felt good. He caught himself turning to say something to Jonesy, but it was a stranger standing there. Something in the man’s profile had reminded Randall of his dead friend, but he found himself looking into unfamiliar eyes. “Sorry,” Randall said. “I thought you were someone else,” and a flash of sadness and regret went through Randall then, as if a smiling magician had just run a sword through him.

Randall walked down to Billy Adams, sitting on a stool at the end of the bar. Billy was talking to a dark-haired girl, saying, “So there I was hiding in a deer stand, and along comes this dude, carrying a four point buck over his shoulders, and I’m getting the whole thing on video. I mean this guy’s telling us he’s laid up with a damaged rotator cuff!”

“Was that Rudy Westmorland?” the girl asked.

“Huh?”

“The man in the woods – was it Rudy Westmorland?”

“I’m not really at liberty to say,” Billy Adams replied.

“It was, wasn’t it?”

“Well, I won’t deny that it might have been Rudy Westmorland.”

“Well, I’m Trisha Westmorland, his cousin.”

“Trisha,” Billy Adams said, extending his skinny hand. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

She left the bar.

Randall leaned over and said, “Let me offer you one small piece of advice, my friend.”

“I know, I know,” Billy Adams said.

On Wednesday, Randall stood on Betty Ann Bailey’s porch, trying to work up the nerve to knock on her door. He felt seventeen again, like he was coming to meet her parents. He held his hand suspended in midair. “This is ridiculous,” he muttered.

Then the door opened.

Betty Ann screamed, startled, and jumped back. She took a deep breath, recovering quickly from the shock of seeing a man standing in her doorway with his fist raised. “Jesus, Randall,” she said. “You could have just rung the doorbell.”

“Sorry.”

“You scared the hell out of me.”

“Surprise,” Randall said.

“Yeah, yeah,” Betty Ann said with a smile. “I heard you were in town – I was starting to wonder if you were going to ignore me altogether.”

After a cup of coffee, they went for a walk, and Betty Ann pushed the stroller with her son, Jack, who had a fleece blanket tucked around his chin. “Tell me about your girlfriend,” she said.

“She wears excellent shoes,” Randall said.

“Are you happy in DC?”

“Yes,” Randall said. “Well, mostly. Kind of. It’s not exactly the life I imagined.”

“What kind of life is it?”

“A thirty five-minute commute. An apartment in the suburbs.”

“Well, what were you imagining?” Betty Ann asked.

“I don’t know,” Randall said. “Something more exciting. Do you remember the night we made the fire by the rock quarry?”

“Yes.”

“And we didn’t get home till after dawn, and your dad was waiting up with a baseball bat?”

“Yes.”

“That was pretty exciting.”

“Yes,” Betty Ann said. “I remember.”

They walked down the leafy street until they met a larger road that Randall recognized. A little way further, they walked up on Glendale High School. Randall gazed across the yard at the red brick building with the long pitched roof. “The scene of the crime,” he said.

Betty Ann patted him on the shoulder. “Welcome home, Chicken Man.”

It was a good prank. Late one night, Randall and the boys had been driving home from a party, and they stopped at the truck stop for eggs and pancakes. In the parking lot, a flatbed truck idled, unattended, loaded with chickens from the Purdue farm up the road. The driver was inside the store, sweet-talking with the girl behind the cash register. He leaned over the counter, telling her jokes while she pretended to rearrange the magazine racks. They didn’t even look up when the boys pulled up.

“No,” Jonesy said, spotting the gleam in Randall’s eyes. “It’s too much. We could get in trouble.”

“It’ll be all right,” Randall said. “We’re making history.”

The next morning, two hundred twenty nine chickens ran loose in the high school, clucking and squawking, darting back and forth over the polished tile floors. Feathers floated in the air, and birds ran out the front door and across the lawn where the students were gathered. It took two days to open the school back up for students. It took two weeks to get the stink of chicken out of the building. It took less than five minutes for the police to find Randall’s jacket hung neatly from a metal peg on the bed of the chicken truck where he’d forgotten it.

“We should have listened to Jonesy,” Wyatt said, thirteen years later, back at the bar with Randall, staring at the dull shine of the mirror behind the liquor bottles and listening to Merle Haggard on the jukebox.

“I was caught up in the moment, you know?”

“Yeah, that was your moment all right,” Wyatt said. “Do you know that to this day, seniors sneak chickens into the high school? It’s called the Chicken Run or something, and everyone chases it around.”

“Delinquents,” Randall said.

He and Wyatt both took sips of their beers. Then, after a pause, Wyatt said, “Sorry you took that fall all by yourself.”

Randall stared straight ahead, taken aback. Like *deja vous*, he felt he had dreamt these words before. “Nothing to be sorry for,” he said.

“None of us wanted to let you take the fall all by yourself. But fuck, we didn’t want to go to jail either.”

“Really,” Randall said. “It’s cool.”

“If it was cool,” Wyatt said. “Where the fuck have you been for ten years?”

Randall paused. “Other side of the mountains,” he said.

“And you never thought of coming back to see us?”

“Man,” Randall said, not really sure how to answer his friend. “I finished high school in juvenile detention. I went to college in Virginia. My parents moved to Carolina. Everything just kept moving away until it got too hard to come back, you know?”

“Sure,” Wyatt said. “But you know it’s not actually that far from here to your house.”

“No,” Randall said. “It’s not nearly as far as I had imagined.”

Just then Billy Adams came through the door with a smashed face. He bled from the nose and the mouth, his cheek was scraped badly, and one eye was swollen shut. “I need two High Life’s,” he said to the bartender. “Stat.”

“Holy shit,” Wyatt said, coming off his barstool. “What happened to you?”

Billy slumped onto the bar while people moved quickly away from him, and he grabbed one High Life. He held the bottle to his swollen eye, and then he lifted the other bottle to drink from.

“Billy, what happened to your face?” Randall asked.

“Well,” Billy Adams said. “Remember I was talking to Trisha Westmorland the other night? And I may have mentioned that I caught her cousin on video doing some things he wasn’t supposed to be doing?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, believe it or not, word got back to Rudy Westmorland that it was me in the woods with the video camera, and he wasn’t too thrilled about it.”

“Jesus, Billy,” Wyatt said. “Why didn’t you shoot him or something?”

“A firearm is really meant to be more of a deterrent, Wyatt.”

On Thursday, Randall went for a walk with Betty Ann and Jack. Jack was out of the stroller, walking off beside them, wearing a little hunting jacket and blaze orange hat that Betty Ann’s father had got for him. “Fall is a good season,” Betty Ann said. “It’s kind of like that cool wind that blows in before a thunderstorm.”

“Did you ever miss me?” Randall asked, watching his feet land on the smooth pavement as he walked.

Betty Ann laughed. “In the fall?”

“Or the spring. Any time, really.”

Betty Ann walked along, brushed the loose hair away from her face, then said, “Of course I missed you, asshole. I was going to marry you, remember? But you disappeared. They sent you off to that school, and you never came back.”

“I got a little sidetracked,” Randall said.

“Yeah, a little.”

Randall chewed his lip, remembering it all. “Do you still have your tattoo?”

“That nasty thing?” Betty Ann said. “I had that removed years ago.”

“Are you serious?”

“No,” she said. “It costs too much to have them removed.”

“Let me see it,” Randall said.

“Absolutely not,” Betty Ann said.

“It’s just a tattoo. I’ve seen it before.”

“There are lots of things you’ve seen before, Randall McGregor, that you’re not going to see again.”

They walked along for a while. Then Randall said, “What about now?”

“I’m still not showing you my tattoo.”

“No – would you marry me now?”

“What?” Betty Ann asked.

“Seriously,” Randall said.

It was a ridiculous question, and he knew it. But at this particular moment, in this particular light, Randall meant it. He looked at her standing there in her ankle high brown leather boots and wondered why he had never come back to this place, this girl, this life. It felt more real to him now than his life back in the city. Standing here, he longed for something more, something of the old magic. He had been happy once – really happy – and it had been here. It had been with this person, Betty Ann. Randall looked at little Jack, and he thought, that could be my son. This could be my family. He looked around at the hills and the blue sky, looked back again to Betty Ann’s clear blue eyes.

She reached out and touched his face with the palm of her hand. “No,” she said.

On Friday, the sky grew cloudy, and Randall went to the graveyard. He wandered among the smooth grey headstones until he came to Jonsey’s. A bright green blanket of artificial grass clung to the mound of earth, red clay showing around the edges. Arrangements of flowers leaned against the marker, withered and dried already. “Hello Jonsey,” Randall said, standing at the foot of the grave.

Jonesy had picked his own gravestone, about the same time he sent Randall the letter, and he had chosen his own epitaph as well: “May we get what we want, may we get what we need, but may we never get what we deserve.”

“Cheers,” Randall said as he walked up and set a mason jar of whiskey at the headstone. Golden brown, it glowed in the dull light. Then Randall sat in the grass beside the stone, looked off the hillside at the long stretch of Appalachian Mountains across the valley with the pale gray clouds moving low across the sky. A group of swallows darted through the wind, wheeling after each other and calling.

On Saturday, Randall sat in the car with Billy Adams in front of Betty Ann’s house. They both wore sunglasses, even though it was gray weather, and they stared in the same direction, sucking the sugar coating off of Advils one at a time and sipping on coffees. Randall said, “Aren’t you supposed to be watching that house over there?”

“Nah, I finished that job yesterday. Got plenty of footage.”

“Well what are we doing out here?”

Billy Adams shrugged his shoulders.

Randall watched Betty Ann’s house some more. “It’s just weird, you know? I look at that house and I can’t help thinking if I had made one different decision somewhere along the way, that might be my place, and little Jack might have my blue eyes instead of those brown ones.”

“Yeah,” Billy said. “It’s a real kick in the nuts, isn’t it?”

“Well,” Randall said. “I’m not sure I would have phrased it quite like that.”

Billy Adams put a hand on Randall’s shoulder. “It’s been good seeing you, man.”

“It’s been good seeing you too, Billy.”

On Sunday, Randall packed up the rental car and said goodbye to Wyatt and Billy and Bix and Pauline. Hugs and kisses. “It’s been a long, strange week,” Randall said.

“Y’all come back,” Wyatt said.

Bix squealed, and Randall climbed into the rental car. He waved goodbye as he descended the long gravel drive and slipped around a bend in the hillside.

On the way to the highway, Randall drove past the graveyard. It was late morning, the sky just beginning to clear, and clean shafts of sunshine broke through the clouds. Randall looked up the hill and imagined Jonesy sitting there, sipping on a jar of whiskey that shone like a cat’s eye in the morning light. Randall imagined Betty Ann, on the other side of the hill, walking with Jack in the autumn breeze. Then he imagined Josie, and he knew he would have to make this up to her. By last night, on the telephone,

she sounded angry with him and his constant delays, his constant excuses to stay one more night. “Look Randall,” she had said, “just stop telling me you’re coming home if you’re not coming home.”

“I’m coming home.”

The road through the mountains was crooked and winding, and Randall merged onto the wide highway and glided into the first long bend. He had no idea what lay ahead – he could only see as far as the next curve. He imagined the sensation of melting back into Josie’s arms though, back into her body. She was somewhere down this road. So many things were on this road, in front of him and behind him. He squinted through the windshield into dappled sunlight.

The Johnny Damn Show

Johnny Damn sits on the hood of his new car, a silver Honda, and looks up at the faint stars strewn across an inky purple city sky. “It’s hard to imagine,” he says fingering the length of eight-gauge chain that lies across his lap, “how fast we’re flying right now.”

Johnny Damn paid for the Honda with cash he’d been saving up from his prize-winning videos, and during shop class at high school he and Theo had tricked the car out, with tinted windows, nice rims, and an Alpine sound system.

“What do you mean?” Theo asks. Theo lies reclined on the hood of the car, staring up at the same wispy stars, with his hands crossed behind his head. Theo is still saving up his shares of the prize money, and he just shrugs his shoulders whenever Johnny asks what he’s waiting for. .

“I mean we’re hurtling through space at like a million miles per hour right now,” Johnny says. “The earth is moving. The galaxy is moving. The universe is moving. We’re like hood ornaments, stuck on the front end of a planet.”

The silver Honda sits on the wooded edge of a large construction site for a new shopping mall being built in Fairfax County, just outside the 495 beltway. The rolling landscape has been clear cut, and the dark foundations, dug into the hillside, stretch out below the boys like an empty canyon. City lights glow across the horizon.

“I don’t know,” Theo says. “Seems pretty peaceful to me.”

“Peaceful?” Johnny says, stretching his arms out to encompass the entire sky and the earth. “What keeps any of this shit glued together?”

“I think it’s physics,” Theo says.

Johnny marvels at Theo. They're opposites in so many ways, these two boys – where Johnny is dark and lean, Theo has a preppy mop of blond hair and wears wrinkled kakis. Where Johnny is more of a showman, Theo likes to hang back behind the camera, behind the scenes.

Theo turns to look at the car parked on the other side of the construction site. This isolated parking area has become a favorite for local teenagers. “Speaking of physics, it looks like they're gettin busy.”

Johnny looks over at the car on the other side, and watches it rock gently. He can the buzz of anticipation grow stronger in his stomach. “You ready?” he says.

“Sure,” Theo says.

The boys slide off the hood and open the trunk of the car and put on translucent plastic masks, rubber gloves, and ball caps on backwards. Theo checks the batteries on a video camera. Johnny tucks a small caliber revolver into the back of his pants and then steps back and spins the doubled-up length of chain around, martial arts-style, side to side, like spinning propellers.

Theo starts filming, and Johnny comes up close to the camera. “Hello, boys and girls,” he says, his plastic clown face glowing in the camera's spotlight. “Welcome to the Johnny Damn Show. Tonight's program is called ‘Lover's Lane.’”

Johnny Damn looks up at the sky and continues: “This is the story of *star-crossed* lovers desperate to escape the mind-numbing boredom of suburbia. They find themselves in a secluded parking lot – here – where at last they fall into each other's warm embrace. What could be more natural?”

Johnny Damn looks over his shoulder at the car, rocking more vigorously now. He turns back to the camera. “But this is a show about Man *versus* Nature. Let’s see how this goes for them.”

At the lovers’ car, the spotlight from the camera shows two bodies in the front passenger seat, the girl on top, straddling her reclined boyfriend. They both freeze when the light hits them, and the girl clutches at her shirt on the back seat to cover herself from the glare. Without a word of warning, Johnny swings the heavy chain and smashes out the passenger side window. The lovers throw their arms up to protect their faces from spotlight and flying glass, and the girl screams and shrieks as Johnny reaches through the window, unlocks the door and drags it open. He grabs the girl by the hair and pulls her out, pushes her down onto the gravel. She clings to her shirt with one hand, uses the other hand to clutch at Johnny Damn’s sneaker which he has placed firmly on her sternum. Her pale, naked body twists on the ground, legs kicking.

“What the fuck?” shouts the boy in the car as he pulls his pants up from around his ankles, trying to move his feet. He starts to come out of the car, squinting into the light, but the doubled-up eight-gauge chain strikes, and he falls back into the seat with a smashed nose and a torn ear. “Oh,” Johnny Damn says to the camera with his frozen plastic grin. “This is going to be so fun.”

Two weeks later, Arlo Sparks, the producer, sits at his computer consol watching the video on the large monitor. “Goddamn,” he says in a voice edged with delight. “This dude is so sick. Look at this.”

Arlo's business partner, Steve, slides over in a rolling desk chair to look at the screen. Steve has tattoos on his arms, black hair that hangs across his eyes. "Johnny Damn," Steve says with a smile.

On screen, Johnny Damn has beaten the teenaged lovers and robbed them. They lie naked on the hood of their own car while Johnny Damn takes all the bullets out of the revolver, except one. "Who wants to play a little game?" he says to the camera, his plastic face glowing.

Johnny Damn spins the chamber, cocks the hammer back, and gently inserts the barrel of the gun into the girl's vagina. "Wider," he says. "Spread your legs wider."

She makes a sound like she's choking, and Johnny pulls the trigger. Click.

"It's your lucky day," he says to the girl.

"Godamn," Steve says, gazing into the blue light of the monitor. "Look how he plays to the camera."

"I know," Arlo says. "Look how he controls the entire scene."

"This kid belongs in Hollywood."

"This smells like another winner," Arlo says.

Arlo and Steve run a contest. Every month they offer large cash awards for the top-rated videos that they receive on their website, called Shooting Starz. Johnny Damn is the top rated "star" right now, with over 170,000 total votes. The website started off as a macabre kind of YouTube, mostly amateur porn and backyard fistfights. Then a few enterprising bastards took their violence out into the streets, turned it into a kind of performance art.

And then came Johnny Damn.

A natural showman, his rise to fame was bloody and swift. In one of the most amazing shows Arlo and Steve had ever seen, Johnny Damn actually tracked down his top competitor, who was operating out of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and beat him half to death in the basement of his own home while the kid's parents watched television upstairs. With that, Johnny Damn sealed his position at the top of the chart, the website developed a huge cult following, and the money from subscriptions started coming in hand over fist.

Abigail Parker, in a short skirt and tight top, waits on the corner of 19th and V Streets in downtown D.C., leaning against a newspaper box and looking up at the purple glow of the sky over the city. Wispy traces of stars shine through the haze, and Abigail thinks of what one of her other clients, a professor from the University of Maryland, once told her about stars and planets. "It's the same matter that has been around for billions of years, the same recycled atoms and particles, passed along through the ages." He ran his hand over her bare breast, down her stomach, to the soft trimmed hair between her legs. "You and I are made of stardust," he said.

Abigail squints at the hazy sky, trying to bring the stars into sharper focus. They shimmer in their orbits. She thinks of the sky back home, in West Virginia – a sky so dark and rich and full of big bright stars. She couldn't wait to get out from under that sky.

A black BMW with California license plates pulls up to the curb and the passenger side window glides open. The interior glows softly from the dashboard lights,

and Abigail abandons the stars and walks slowly, knowing exactly what Arlo is looking at – blond hair, candy lip gloss, long legs, and swinging hips. She leans into the window.

“There you are,” she says. “I was starting to worry you were a no-show.”

Arlo unlocks the door with a button on his consol. “Hurry up,” he says. “I have to pick up smoked salmon and get back home soon.”

“Smoked salmon?” Abigail asks.

“Don’t ask.”

“Alright,” she says. “Will that be cash, check or credit tonight?”

“Very funny,” Arlo says, handing over two bills.

“No tip tonight?”

“You’ll be home in bed in less than a half hour,” he says.

Abigail tucks the bills into her small purse and climbs into the passenger side of the car, legs sleek against the leather seats, stiletto heels shining as brightly as the waxed finish of the BMW. “Well,” she says. “Let’s get a move on then.”

Dan Tolliver, a detective with the Bethesda Police Department, enters his password to the Shooting Starz website and scrolls through the newest video links. “Johnny Damn,” he says. “You prick.”

Tolliver leans toward the computer screen, peering at the link titled “Lover’s Lane.” The blue light shimmers in the lenses of his glasses as the video begins: Johnny Damn in the gravel lot swinging his chain around. When Johnny closes in on the lovers, Tolliver leans back in his chair and says, “Godamn, I knew it.”

Tolliver has been scanning through police reports from five states, looking for incidents involving two young men in plastic masks, a heavy chain, and a video camera. He sends the information to the FBI, but he's not sure what exactly they're doing to stop this freak, Johnny Damn. Tolliver has had the Shooting Starz website shut down three times now, but a mirror site resurfaces each time, with service providers in far flung countries: Netherlands, Philippines, Malaysia. The producers, a couple of shitbags called Arlo Sparks and Steve Myers, fled after they were served papers in California. They used to work for Paramount, producing reality television shows. Now they're charged with accessory to felony offenses, solicitation of minors, and interstate flight. There's no telling where they are. Living it up on the fucking Riviera or something like that while Dan makes hospital visits to get statements from young girls who have been beaten, robbed, and raped with a gun barrel.

Tolliver transferred to this cyber crime unit after ten years as an undercover detective, and he thought it was going to be easy – sit at the desk and lure pedophiles to his MySpace account where he appeared to be a thirteen-year old girl. Like fishing for bottom dwellers, slimy and suck-mouthed. Then he stumbled onto this Shooting Starz bullshit . . . and Johnny Damn.

“Lover’s Lane” is the top rated video for this month. The scene is exactly as the kids described it in the police report. Tolliver leans back in his chair. Congratulations, mother fucker.

* * *

Arlo and his girlfriend Cynthia sit at a restaurant on 18th street in the Adams Morgan neighborhood. The waiters wear black shirts, black ties, move through the dimly lit dining room with the sinuous motion of eels. They deliver wine to the table. “You can have half a glass now, half a glass with dinner,” Arlo says.

Cynthia frowns, tucks a loose strand of her dark hair behind her ear, revealing a diamond earring, part of a set that Arlo bought her for her twenty-fifth birthday last month. Arlo becomes acutely aware of his own graying hair when he looks at her in candlelight, and wonders if the light is as flattering to him as it is to her. In her third trimester of pregnancy, Cynthia shifts in her seat to make herself more comfortable. “I know how much wine I can drink,” she says.

“Just making sure.”

Cynthia smiles, the smooth surfaces of her face glowing softly. “I thought you liked to live dangerously.”

“Not with you,” Arlo says. “Not with the baby.”

“Everything by the book?” Cynthia asks.

“By the book.”

“So when are we getting married?”

Arlo winces. He walked right into that one. “You know we can’t get married yet,” he says. “That stupid warrant.”

Cynthia owned a small hair and makeup business in Los Angeles before she met Arlo during a production at Paramount studios. They started dating, and she had just missed her first period when the warrants arrived for Arlo’s and Steve’s arrest, so he

convinced her to move to Washington DC where he had some connections and let him use her business as a front to process all the money he made with his website.

“I want to go back to California,” Cynthia says. “You and Steve do nothing but play on your computers all the time.”

Arlo looks at the candle, flickering inside a frosted glass globe on the table. “I told you, baby,” he says running his fingers over the hot glass, “my lawyers in California are working things out. We just have to be patient.”

“I hate it here.”

“We’re making a lot of money here,” Arlo says.

“I don’t care about the money,” Cynthia says. “I want my life back.”

“Soon,” Arlo says. “I promise.” He leans forward and gives her a smile, and relaxes considerably when he sees Cynthia lean back with her wine and peer at him over the rim of her glass. Ever since she became pregnant, Steve has learned to read her looks like a meteorologist would read a cloudy sky, and he sees the weather clearing, but just then a wooden chair falls over two tables away, and the loud crack of wood on wood makes Cynthia jump. Arlo looks over startled, and the eel-like waiters sweep by and right the chair. “God,” Cynthia says. “That sounded like a gunshot.”

Arlo smiles, gazes around the room, wondering how many of these people have ever shot a gun, how many people have shot a person, how many of these people have ever beaten or robbed someone, how many of these people might be planning something violent right now. It never ceases to amaze him, some of the unlikely people that send him footage of themselves acting out their dark fantasies. The way Arlo figures it,

everyone is two parts evil and one part good, and every room full of people is a power struggle, an orgy of sex and violence barely contained by veneer of civility.

Looking around the room, from face to face, imagining the chaos that would ensue if that had been a real gunshot instead of a chair falling over, Arlo feels a thrill, electric, move through his stomach. He thinks of Johnny Damn. He looks across the table at his young, attractive, pregnant girlfriend and decides to give Abigail a call again very soon. “What are you having?” he says.

“I think I’ll have the salmon.”

“You and the salmon.”

“You know I can’t help it,” Cynthia says. “It’s a craving.”

“I know.”

In his office, Dan Tolliver pores over old footage of Johnny Damn, looking for anything that might help. Tolliver’s pale face glows by the computer light. A pile of police reports from three states sits on his desk. “Christ,” Tolliver says to the computer. “With this many eye witnesses, this much video, something has got to hit.”

Behind him, on the wall, a map of the DC region is stuck full of red pins. One pin for each of Johnny Damn’s attacks. Virginia. Maryland. West Virginia. Pennsylvania. Delaware. The states all converge in this one small geographic region, and the red pins orbit the District of Columbia like planets around a sun. He’s close, Tolliver thinks. This kid’s like a comet, so cold that he burns what he touches.

* * *

Without warning, Johnny Damn swings the eight gauge chain at the attendant's face, knocking him backwards into the cigarette case. In a flash Johnny is over the counter, dragging the attendant out into the open linoleum of the convenience store. There are two other patrons in the store, standing shocked by the beer cooler as Johnny Damn beats the attendant brutally, quickly, to the sounds of swinging chain links, until the attendant is sobbing on the floor, covering his head with slashed and broken hands. The two young men run for the door, but Johnny swings his chain at their knees. One man falls loudly and the other backs up against the cooler with Johnny's revolver pointed at his face. "Where the fuck are you going?" Johnny says with his plastic smile.

"Nowhere," replies the man.

"Fucking right," Johnny says. "We're just getting started here."

Two states away, Abigail, in the front seat of the black BMW, slides her panties down her legs, lets them slip off over her lucky high heels. Stripper heels. She always makes good money when she dances in these shoes. Arlo tipped a hundred dollars tonight at the club and slipped a note in with the bills: "meet me after close."

Abigail hands her panties to Arlo who holds them in a ball, clutching the sheer fabric in one hand as he steers around Dupont Circle with the other hand. The stereo plays lounge techno, a song by Thievery Corporation, and Abigail reaches across and undoes the front of Arlo's pants. She strokes him gently as they glide along Connecticut Avenue, heading toward Rock Creek Parkway. Abigail likes the shady Parkway – it

reminds her of the winding roads back home. When she left West Virginia after high school she thought she would become an actress. She chokes on the thought of it now – so utterly unoriginal. How many thousands of girls wander off from home every day to become “actresses?” Perhaps, she thinks, it was meant to be the stand-in dream, just until Abigail discovers her real dream.

Arlo is hard in her hand, and Abigail leans over and lowers her head into his lap. Lights and shadows pass through the car as they drive beneath city street lights. She listens to the music, listens to Arlo groan as she slides down him with her lips and her tongue, her fingers massaging gently around the base of his shaft.

The three men all bleed badly, kneeling on the linoleum floor of the convenience store. The attendant is beaten the worst; his face disfigured, he can hardly hold himself up. Johnny Damn pulls the name tag off of the attendant’s shirt, wipes the blood off it with a dramatic gesture toward the camera. “Timothy,” says Johnny Damn, reading the tag. “I don’t want you to worry about a thing, Timothy. This will all be over soon.”

Johnny Damn takes a bottle of lighter fluid from aisle two and yanks the lid off. He pours the lighter fluid over Timothy’s head, soaking him from the waist up while Timothy shivers and spits. Then he hands a book of matches to the man next to Timothy. “Light him on fire,” Johnny says.

“What?” the man asks.

“Light him on fire,” Johnny says. “And hurry the fuck up. I’m on a timetable here.”

The man does nothing. Johnny Damn cocks the hammer on the revolver and puts it to the man's head. The man, with shaking hands, pulls one of the matches free from the book. "Come on!" Johnny says.

The man tries to strike the match, but his hands are shaking too badly. He tries again, then once more. He hangs his head. "I can't."

"That was fucking pathetic," Johnny says, stepping back and emptying the revolver of all its bullets except one. He checks to make sure it is his lucky bullet, the one that he modified so that it cannot actually fire. Johnny Damn is a showman, not a murderer. He spins the chamber and holds the gun to the shaking man's face. "You ready?" he says.

The man drops the matches and nods his head. Johnny pulls the trigger. Click. "It's your lucky day," Johnny says.

Dan Tolliver, still sitting at his computer, picks up the telephone and dials. The sleepy voice of a woman answers, "Hello?"

"It's me," Tolliver says.

"Hi baby," the voice says.

"Is it too late to call?"

"You haven't called in ages."

"Can I come over?" Tolliver says. "I could use some company."

"Now?"

"Yeah."

“Yeah,” the sleepy voice says. “You can come over.”

Flames engulf the convenience store. Theo, outside in the parking lot, films as the front windows fill with smoke and fire. The two young men from the beer cooler carry the attendant out the front door and they all scramble across the parking lot away from the building. A moment later, Johnny Damn emerges. The chain in one hand, the revolver in the other, the flames behind him, smoke rising off his shoulders. He walks to the camera, leans in close with his plastic clown smile, and whispers, “Boys and girls. Follow me to hell on earth.”

Dan Tolliver gets dressed while Abigail watches him from bed. “You should come around more often,” she says. “I miss you, Danny.”

“I’ll bet you do.”

Tolliver has known Abigail for five years now, since she was seventeen, dancing illegally at a downtown strip club. Tolliver was undercover at the time, and a couple of drug dealers who worked out of the back room kept buying him lap dances. He knew Abigail was young, but goddamn. She could dance.

Months later, after the bust, Tolliver tried to help her out, get her a straight job with a temp company downtown, but she said she didn’t have the right clothes to work in daylight. “Look at these shoes,” she said. “Do these look like secretary shoes?”

Tolliver tried to think of her with more of a fatherly interest after that, but every once in a while he still finds himself in this very situation, getting dressed while Abigail watches him from the bed.

She never lets him pay her, but he always leaves a folded fifty-dollar bill hidden under the pillow or tucked in the bathroom mirror. It's not much, but he knows that she's keeping a tab for the rest, that one day he will owe her something big in return for these special attentions.

A few weeks later, Arlo pulls up to the newspaper box and looks for Abigail, but she's not there yet. He checks his watch; he's a couple minutes late already. A man walking down the street peers a little too closely at Arlo, so he pulls out and drives around a couple of blocks to give her a few minutes and then rolls up to paper box again. No Abigail. "Fuck," Arlo says. It's been a hard couple of weeks. His attorneys in California have warned him to get out of the country, but Cynthia can't travel until after she has the baby. Once they get overseas, Arlo can marry her and transfer all his assets into her accounts. "At least I have Johnny Damn," Arlo says, pulling away again.

Johnny Damn sent an email a few days ago saying he was planning something special. Arlo doesn't have any idea, but after that last film, he can't wait to see what Johnny has up his sleeve. Arlo spins past the paper box one last time, and then he drives home alone. He refuses to wait any longer for a hooker, even if it is Abigail.

* * *

Three days later, Arlo and Steve are screening the new contest submissions, and Steve says, “Bingo!”

Arlo slides his chair across the floor to Steve’s monitor. “Who is it?”

“Guess,” Steve says.

“Johnny Damn,” Arlo says, feeling a jolt of excitement run through him.

“Yeah,” Steve says. “And guess who has a guest appearance on this one.”

“How should I know,” Arlo says. “Move over.”

Steve slides away from the monitor and Arlo stares into the blue light. The look of concentration freezes on his face as he recognizes what he’s watching. The video shows a black BMW with California license plates pulling up to a newspaper box. A close up on the driver reveals an aggravated-looking Arlo checking his watch, and then pulling away. “That’s me,” Arlo says.

“Um, yeah,” Steve says.

In the next scene, Johnny Damn wears his plastic mask and stands near an exposed light bulb in a basement somewhere. “Hello boys and girls,” he says. “And welcome to the Johnny Damn Show.”

He dances up to the camera. “Tonight’s episode is titled ‘Where in the World is My Whore.’”

There is a muffled scream from behind him, and the camera pans over to show Abigail tied to a chair and gagged. “Oh look,” Johnny says. “*There* she is.”

Dan Tolliver stares at the computer screen in disbelief. “No,” he says out loud.

First Tolliver saw himself on the film, walking from Abigail’s apartment, and now this – Johnny Damn smiles the relentless plastic smile that he wears on his translucent mask. “First,” he says to the camera. “Let’s get all the *business* out of the way so we can all relax and enjoy ourselves.”

He pulls a bound stack of cash from his back pocket and he flips it in Abigail’s face. “How much for the whole night?” he says. “I want to take our time, do this right.”

Her eyes plead with him, and he smacks her with the cash. “Yeah,” he says. “I think this ought to cover it.”

He puts the money in her small purse and tosses it aside. Then he pulls the gag off her mouth. “Please,” Abigail says quickly. “Let me go. There doesn’t need to be any trouble. I can do whatever you want.”

Johnny Damn laughs. “Of course you’ll do what we want. We just paid you.”

“Let her go,” Dan Tolliver says, staring at the video stream. “Let her go.” But he knows they won’t; they don’t let anybody go.

Arlo watches transfixed as Johnny Damn cuts Abigail’s clothes off with a barber’s razor, leaving her sitting in her red lacey underwear – underwear she put on especially for Arlo – and her lucky high heels. Then Johnny uses the razor to cut Abigail’s hair off in large clumps. Then he nonchalantly cuts her earlobes off, sawing easily through the soft flesh, leaving bloody smears on her neck and face. Abigail goes quiet and dark, a numb

expression on her face. Johnny Damn reappears onscreen with the chain in his hands. She screams and rocks against her bindings when Johnny swings the metal links at her.

Dan Tolliver can't stand to watch, but he can't look away. He has to know what happens. He has to know what they do to her, all of it. Each blow is an ember that makes him hotter inside, makes him pray for the day he has these laughing shitbags alone, handcuffed, in the back of his car in one of the deserted parking lots they love so well. "I'll show you how to use a fucking razor," Tolliver says.

Johnny Damn has a large rubber dildo in his hand now, and he holds it in front of Abigail. "Show us," he says. "Show us how to give the perfect blow job."

Abigail's mouth is split open, bleeding down her chin. Her left eye swells shut. She doesn't move. "You want more of the chain?" Johnny says.

Abigail shakes her head, looking at the camera with one eye.

"Show us. Show us how you suck off your hot shot California producer clients."

Abigail hesitates, then she slowly bends her head forward and takes the dildo into her mouth. "Oh yeah," Johnny Damn says. "Don't stop."

Abigail moves back and forth on the dildo, and Johnny Damn pretends to face fuck her until he gets overly excited and grabs the back of her head as he thrusts the dildo into her throat, gagging her. Abigail tries to squirm away, but Johnny Damn forces the dildo into her throat until she spews vomit.

"Yeah!" Johnny Damn yells. "Fuck yeah!"

* * *

Arlo feels his excitement near a crest as he watches Johnny Damn take all the bullets out of the revolver except one. “You feeling lucky?” he says to Abigail.

Abigail says nothing, stares at her shoes.

“Those are her favorite shoes,” Arlo says, and Steve gives him a sidelong look.

Johnny Damn spins the chamber, cocks the hammer, holds the gun to her head and lets the moment hang. He turns to the camera, wags his head, and pulls the trigger.

BOOM.

The sound is huge, distorted, and the boys are clearly startled. The camera veers all over the room, and Johnny Damn yells, “Fuck! Holy shit!”

When the camera steadies, Johnny Damn strides off screen, and Abigail slumps against her ropes, blood dripping from her head. Johnny’s voice is shaky, saying, “Turn it off. Turn it off, man.”

The monitor goes dark, and Steve leans back into his chair, dumbstruck. “Holy shit,” he says. “That’s a real snuff.”

Arlo is speechless. The shock fades slowly, and he experiences a moment of sublime thrill, realizing how dangerously close this violence has passed by him, like having a white hot comet miss you by a few feet, streak off into the darkness, leave you stunned and half blind, blinking in the burn of the vapor trail.

“Jesus,” Steve says. “They seemed scared shitless.”

“This is a masterpiece,” Arlo says.

“We can’t put this up,” Steve says. “That’s a real snuff film. It’s too much, even for us.”

“Are you kidding,” Arlo asks. “This is our Opus.”

Dan Tolliver walks outside to breathe some cool air and looks up at the faint shimmer of stars over the city. He thinks of something Abigail told him once, about how everything is made of the same ancient matter, the same stardust. He realizes how closely he must have passed by Arlo Sparks and Johnny Damn to get caught on their video. Tolliver imagines them all swirling around Abigail as if she were a sun, and then all swerving off through the night in different directions. Where were they right fucking now?

Johnny Damn and Theo wander the aisles of the grocery store, eating out of a large bag of Doritos, picking up junk food – microwave popcorn, candy, ice cream and two liter Cokes. They rented *Three Kings* and *Reservoir Dogs*. “What are you looking for now?” Johnny asks.

“Pickles, man. I want one of those big jars.”

“Pickles and ice cream,” Johnny says. “You’re worse than a pregnant woman.”

“Dude, I’d kill for a pickle right now.”

It hangs there in the air for a moment, that word. Kill. It rolls off the tongue so easily. The boys shift uncomfortably, watch the shining rows of jars of jellies, jams, olives. They look at each other again, and Theo cracks a nervous smile. Johnny crunches on a Dorito, and they both laugh as they reach the middle of the aisle. “There,” Johnny says. “Get your fucking pickles.”

ii.

But the universe, as a collection of finite things, presents itself as a kind of island situated in a pure vacuity to which time ... is nothing and does nothing.

- Muhammed Iqbal

Scavenger's Waltz

Dolls. Doll heads and doll eyes with long curling eyelashes. Little doll hands emerging from hand-sewn sleeves of silk and cotton and lace and chiffon. Hundreds of dolls with little feet propped out in front of them, arranged from floor to ceiling on shelves all around the room. This is what the young woman saw when she awoke in the bed in the room with white curtains that blew in a cool salty breeze coming through the picture windows. This is what she saw while she ran her hands over the clean white sheets and looked at the glass globe of the oil lamp beside the bed and tried to remember who she was, and where she was. The young woman peered around the room into the hundreds of glass eyes that watched her as she lay in bed. In the gray afternoon light the dolls looked like impish young girls, and she imagined that they all knew her name but would not tell her, and that if she looked away from the dolls they would shiver and shift with barely contained laughter. Where am I? thought the young woman, and who do I know who would make such mean dolls?

She could not remember.

When she woke again, the first watery light of dawn filled the blown glass windows, now closed against the chill. Who closed the windows? She looked at the rows of dolls, their faces still veiled in shadows, eyes shimmering in the half light. The young woman tingled as a sense of unease swelled from the pit of her stomach and rolled wave-like, up through her chest and into her throat. Where *was* she? She tried to remember going to

sleep in this room, tried to remember putting on this flannel night gown, but her head felt heavy and dull. Her body ached all over, barely able to move, and she was terribly thirsty. She looked around the room for a pitcher of water, but there was none.

She heard a child's voice then, and she glanced at the heavy oak door. A little girl sang a nursery rhyme in the hallway, coming closer. The sounds of hard leather soles on the floorboards, pausing on the floor outside the door, and then the smooth metallic grind of the big iron door handle.

The girl was not nearly as little as she sounded at first. Probably closer to ten or eleven, she entered the room, moving awkwardly on long spindly legs. She wore a dark blue dress with white piping around the edges, tall white socks, and black shiny shoes. Her blue eyes glittered, dark hair tied neatly with a bow. She moved with strange bird-like gestures, and paid close attention to a doll in her arms while she continued singing a nursery rhyme:

The wind and the sea will send them to me,

Send me the little babies.

Put shells of white over their eyes,

And plant them with the daisies.

“Hello,” the young woman said, and the girl looked up, startled. “Do you know where there's a glass of water?” the young woman asked.

The girl screamed. She tilted her head like a sharp-beaked gull, let the doll fall to the floor and let loose a terrible high-pitched scream, hands held stiffly at her sides. “It's

awake!” the girl screamed after drawing a breath. “It’s awake!” and she dashed out of the room, a blur of pale piping and ribbons and socks.

Out across the yard, over sandy soil and clumps of thick green grass, the young woman and the girl walked hand-in-hand. Dark clouds sailed across the sky on a strong breeze, and sea grass blew in waves on top of the dunes toward the ocean. “Mama says your face will return if you keep the salve on,” said the girl, whose name was Betsy.

“Your mother is kind.”

The young woman had a burn on the left side of her face and neck, and the skin was purple and pulled tight, and her dark hair singed and burned off in places. She had watched in the mirror this morning as Betsy’s mother, Ellen, carefully applied the salve to the burned flesh, and now the young woman could sense how different the wind felt on the left side of her face compared to the right.

“I think we should call you Mirabella,” Betsy said.

“Sounds very French to me,” said the young woman as she gazed at the lighthouse which towered over the entire scene like a quiet sentinel, guarding this isolated outpost at the edge of America. Earlier, they had all agreed that the young woman was very English, judging by her accent.

“I think the French are marvelous,” Betsy said. “Don’t you?”

“*Je ne sais pas,*” the young woman said.

“What’s that?”

“That’s French.”

Besty tugged at the young woman's hand and squealed with delight. "Oh, I think *you're* marvelous too. I don't care what Papa says about your face!"

"Mirabella?" Ellen asked.

"Yes," Besty said. "It's only temporary, of course, until she can remember her real name."

The three of them hung clean laundry from lines in the back yard. Baskets and baskets of laundry – dresses and petticoats and slacks and jackets and sheets and towels and table cloths. Extra laundry lines had been strung up behind the house, criss-crossing the yard from heavy wooden poles, and the clothes and linens waved and flapped in the breeze like so many flags of black and white and navy blue. "And you don't mind?"

Ellen asked the young woman.

"Where did all these clothes come from?" the young woman asked.

"They came from the shipwreck, of course. We gather them at low tide."

"Are all these people dead?"

"I suppose they are," Ellen said. "There were very few survivors."

"What will you do with them all?"

"Sell them."

"High tide," Besty said with delight in her strange blue eyes. "High tide is marvelous."

"Besty, hush," her mother said.

Mirabella reached into a wicker basket and lifted out a linen table cloth, heavy and wet and twisted. She noticed the monogram around the border of the cloth: QM, for the Queen Mary, the name of the ocean liner that was sunk. Queen Mary . . . Mirabella tried desperately to remember such a ship, reaching blindly through the shadowy recesses of her mind for something familiar. She snapped the linen open with a flip of her wrists and flung it over the clothesline in a practiced, fluid motion, pinned it to the line, ran her hands over the smooth cool fabric as it billowed toward her, full of wind. The cool wet linen felt sweet as it kissed her burned cheek.

At dinner that night, Seamus, who was Besty's father and the lighthouse keeper on the island here, looked closely at Mirabella who sat across the table from him. He studied her face, her hair, her clothes. "You look stronger," he said.

"I feel better," Mirabella said.

"Still nothing?" he asked, referring to her memory. He pointed at his own head, covered in dark curly hair, dark curly beard, streaked with gray. His blue eyes peered out of the dark features like headlamps, aimed at Mirabella.

She shook her head.

"If she never remembers," Besty said, clapping her hands together, "she can stay with us forever!"

"I radioed the Coast Guard," Seamus said, ignoring his daughter. "They'll be here tomorrow. Maybe the day after. They'll take you to the mainland, make sure you're looked after."

“Thank you,” Mirabella said.

“Don’t thank me,” Seamus said. “Thank God. It’s rare that someone washes up alive.”

Ellen, at the other end of the table, bowed her head and crossed herself, and Besty reached over and took Mirabella’s hand. With big blue earnest eyes full of tears, Besty said, “You. You’re the lucky one.”

“The lucky one,” Mirabella repeated softly.

“Yes,” Besty said, and then she turned to her mother and her posture straightened and the tears vanished from her eyes. “May I be excused now? I’d like to play with dolls.”

“Yes, darling.”

Doll heads and doll arms and little doll feet all over the floor – Besty, it seemed, didn’t like to play with dolls so much as she liked to play with doll parts. The radio crackled with its fuzzy reception in the corner, beneath the electric lamp, delivering the news. Bombs raining on London. The resistance in France. Germans marching on the Netherlands. Italians marching on Egypt. Japanese marching on the Philippines.

“Will America join the war?” Mirabella asked.

“No,” Seamus said.

“What about the U-Boats,” Mirabella said. “They’re right here.”

“The rest of the world is going to hell,” Seamus said. “But we’ll be all right.”

“And you can steal from the dead.”

Seamus stared at her with those piercing, blue eyes, and Ellen dropped her sewing onto her lap, while her eyes darted toward her sewing basket before she looked up as well. Mirabella looked down at her hands, watched her fingers wrap around each other in her lap.

Just then Besty laughed, a sharp gull-like sound. “Isn’t she marvelous,” she said to her parents. “She’ll say absolutely *anything*.”

That night as Mirabella lay in bed, she could hear the radio, still playing downstairs, echoing softly through the long wooden hallways of the lighthouse keeper’s home. The radio played music now, a classic waltz, broadcasting through the static and fuzzy reception, as if the music were coming from some faraway place, some faraway time when armies didn’t roam the earth and ships weren’t ripped apart by bombs. Where was that place? Where was this music from? The familiar music somehow inspired both a sense of peace and of dread, and Mirabella drifted off to sleep, dreaming of the waltz.

Dolls, Mirabella thought, gazing around the dance floor of the Queen Mary, which thrummed with elegant sound and motion. They look like such lovely dolls.

Women sweeping past in dresses of silk and lace and chiffon. Straight-backed men in black jackets, and waiters clad in white moving smoothly past the edges of the dance floor through the labyrinth of tables. The orchestra played a waltz, and Mirabella let herself melt into Mr. Douglas’s arms as he swept her across the gleaming parquet. He

was an excellent dancer, and their bodies moved smoothly together, and as Mirabella spun past the smiling faces she could hardly imagine that somewhere outside this beautiful ship a war was raging, that London was burning beneath the endless drone of dark gray bombers in the sky, that these people were all fleeing to the United States and Canada and South America to live in exile. Europeans with connections, setting sail from Liverpool, drinking champagne and glasses of Scotch and twirling round the dance floor, and Mirabella held tightly to this man who was not her husband.

Terror flooded her whenever she thought how her husband's transport ship was sunk by Germans in the English Channel. He never even made it to the front lines, never saw a single day of combat. Mirabella smiled and danced and tried to ignore the echoes of the explosion, the fire and the freezing Channel waters rushing in. Men falling over each other and into the water. How long had her husband lived before he sank beneath that icy surface, slick with oil and gas and blood?

Mirabella smiled through the echoes and danced, and Mr. Douglas held her tightly, squeezed her hand and spun her around beautifully. She did not look in his face though; she knew she would see love there. When the dance ended, she thanked him and he escorted her back to the dinner table. When they drew near, Mirabella saw that Mr. Douglas's wife had been watching them. Mrs. Douglas's pale face was unusually relaxed, which meant her venom was near the surface. "Ma'am," Mirabella said with a slight curtsy.

"You dance beautifully, Caitlin. My husband could hardly take his eyes off you."

"He's a good dancer, Ma'am."

"Is he?" Mrs. Douglas said. "He'll hardly move from his chair for me."

“Oh stop,” Mr. Douglas said good-naturedly.

“Perhaps I should go check on the children,” Caitlin said.

“Nonsense,” Mr. Douglas said. “The children are fine.”

“Don’t leave now,” Mrs. Douglas said with a relaxed smile. “The evening is just starting to get interesting.”

Mirabella woke with a start. She sat up in bed, looked at the gauzy white curtains in the window. The powerful beam of the lighthouse swept past, illuminating the room for one moment, and hundreds of doll eyes glittered on shelves and tables before retreating back to darkness.

She remembered. She remembered everything, even her name. Caitlin.

In the morning, a stranger greeted her in the kitchen. “Hello.”

“Oh!” she said. “You startled me.”

The stranger wore a black wool fisherman’s coat and a cap on his head. He looked out from a weather-red face with a blonde mustache, and he held a cup of hot coffee. “Who are you?” he said.

“I’m Mirabella.”

“You’re the one they fished out alive?”

“Yes.”

“Did they let you keep your rings then?”

A muffled bark of a laugh came from behind her, and Mirabella spun around to find a tall boy sitting at the table behind them. Clad also in the black wool coat and cap, he looked away when she met his eyes. “That’s my son,” said the man. “Edward.”

“What’s your name?” Mirabella asked, turning back to the man.

“I’m Edward, too.”

Out across the yard, over the sandy soil and clumps of thick green grass, Mirabella and Betsy walked hand-in-hand. Mirabella noticed now that her wedding band was missing from her hand, the smooth unadorned fingers laced through the long bony fingers of the girl.

Heavy gray clouds sailed across the sky on a strong breeze, and Mirabella wore a black wool jacket that she took from the house. She gazed up at the towering lighthouse as they walked, painted black and white with stripes. The wrought iron platform around the top of the tower and the huge windows gazing out to sea. Such a strange quiet sentinel.

“Eight hundred forty-two stairs to get to the top,” Betsy said. “Papa will take us up if you want, but you’ll get dizzy.”

They walked over the dunes and onto the beach. The large waves tumbled in towards shore in long choppy lines before barreling onto the beach with a boom and shudder that made the air tremble. “High tide,” Betsy said, delighted.

North they walked, to the edge of the sandy island where the Hatteras Inlet let water from the ocean push past the barrier island and into the calmer waters of the sound

when the tide was up. Here is where Betsy's father and the two Edwards stood in the water, up to their thighs, wielding long poles with hooks on the ends.

Mirabella paused when she realized what the men were doing. They were pulling dead bodies out of the water. She looked at the neat row they had already pulled onto the beach. Eight people. Betsy tugged at Mirabella to get her moving again, and they walked slowly past the corpses, gazing into the pale, distorted faces. Three women and five men. "The women are nice," Betsy explained, "because they sometimes wear jewelry."

Betsy lifted a dead female hand to show Mirabella the small ruby ring on the pinky finger. "The men are nice," Betsy continued, "because they sometimes have wallets."

Mirabella paused by the body of a man in a seaman's uniform. Dread rolled over her as she examined his insignia. She peered into the face – pale, bloated. The tongue had swollen out over the blue lips and the open eyes were milky and dull. Still, she knew this man. He was the ship's doctor onboard the Queen Mary, the man who had helped her when she was still called Caitlin. It was almost impossible to imagine that this waterlogged corpse was once the Scotsman with the silver mustache who had winked at her with such gentle eyes. "I need to sit down," Mirabella said.

"We can sit over here," Betsy said, and they sat on a dune where they could look down on the men dressed in black, wading in the cold water.

Wind in her ears and the heaving of the ocean, and Mirabella felt dizzy and sick to her stomach. She watched the men with their long, hooked poles as if they were dark

angels, moving beneath a stormy sky, watching carefully for the dead so they could snag them and pull them onto this purgatory.

That night after dinner they listened to the radio again, beneath the electric light. The two Edwards sat quietly on the bench by the window, smoking pipes. After the news came the radio shows. *Amos n Andy, The Green Hornet, The Jack Benny Program*. Ellen rocked in her chair and sewed clothes for dolls while she listened. Seamus seemed to drift off to sleep in his chair. Betsy sat on the floor and played with something on the other side of the room, giggling with delight. “What are you playing with?” Mirabella asked.

“Dolls,” Betsy said without looking up, cradling the small thing in her hands.

“What kind of doll is that small?” Mirabella asked from the chair where she sat reading a book about American cities.

“Do you want to see?”

“Yes.”

Betsy scooted across the floor on her bottom, her eyes wide and crazy, her mouth suspended in a kind of smile. When she drew near she flipped her hands open and a human finger lay in her palm. Mirabella pushed back in her chair and let out a startled cry.

Ellen looked up from her sewing, and Seamus bolted awake at the sound. Betsy rolled backwards, overcome by peels of laughter, clutching the dead finger to her bony chest.

“Betsy!” the girl’s mother yelled. “Put that down!”

Seamus leapt out of his chair and grabbed the girl off the floor by her arm. She dropped the finger onto the rug and then burst into tears. “I was only trying to help,” she sobbed. “I tried to pull the ring off, but the whole finger came instead.”

“Time for bed,” Seamus said, and Betsy dissolved at his feet, falling to the floor and screaming wildly. He picked her up roughly, put her over his shoulder, and went to the stairs.

As the echoes of Betsy’s screaming moved upstairs and down the long hallway, Mirabella and Ellen sat in the living room staring at the finger on the floor. A woman’s finger with a large diamond ring stuck on the knuckle. The skin had been peeled back, and the soft white meat hung loose from the bone. The fingernail looked to have been beautifully manicured. “Seamus must be losing his eyesight,” Ellen said, “to have missed a ring like that.”

That night, Mirabella lay in bed listening to the sounds of music floating up from downstairs, listening to the sounds of Betsy sniffing and wailing down the hall. She rubbed her ring finger absently where her wedding band used to be. The great light in the lighthouse swept past at perfect forty-second intervals, lighting up her room, and she remembered vividly the night the ship’s doctor saved her on the third deck of the Queen Mary.

She had been walking briskly on deck late at night after Mr. Douglas had crept into her chambers and tried to press himself against her in the tiny bed, and his breath smelling like sweet brandy as he whispered, “But I love you. It’s all right.”

Wrapped in a long wool coat, Caitlin walked the deck, and the cold night wind blew through her hair and over her face. She didn’t even have stockings on, and she began to tremble.

Just then, from above her she heard, “Hi ho!” and when she looked up to see who was calling from the next deck, she realized that something was spilling on her. It took a moment, with the wind whipping around, for her to recognize the smell – lamp oil. She recoiled, stepped away from the rail, slipping in oil that was on the deck, but not before the shadowy figure on top chuckled and said, “Missus Douglas sends her greetings.”

Then he dropped a lighted lamp over the edge of the railing, and Caitlin jumped, startled as the glass globe smashed on the ship deck, and the small flame hit the fuel and erupted like a bomb, a miniature version of the incendiary bombs she’d seen fall on St. Martin’s Cathedral in north London. It was a split second too late that she realized what danger she was in, watching the flames leap across the deck, following the pools of spilled lamp oil, until she turned and ran, but the flames had moved as quick as the wind, and her coat was on fire, and the lamp oil in her hair was on fire, and she turned and screamed and clawed free of the coat, and burned her own hands trying to tamp the fire around her face, and suddenly she heard loud shouting, and something was thrown over her, and she was tackled to the ground roughly.

* * *

The next day, on the cold, sandy island, Betsy stayed in her room all morning, so Mirabella applied her salve carefully, and then walked alone across the yard, beneath the lighthouse, with the collar of her wool seaman's coat turned up against the wind. Seamus stood on the wrought iron platform, high above the earth, with a bucket and rags, cleaning the thick glass of the tower windows. Ellen carried a basket of laundry to the outbuilding for washing. Mirabella felt the eyes of the younger Edward following her as she walked. The Edwards waited on the front porch of the house for the tide to change again so they could go back to work with their long poles.

Mirabella walked behind the house, toward the dock on the sound side of the island. The rows of bodies lay waiting there for the coast guard boats to come load and take them to the mainland for identification and burials. Rows and rows of bodies, and she wandered over the corpses, looking from torso to torso until she finally came across the one she was looking for – the ship's doctor. She looked at his feet, white and crooked, lying on the sandy soil. Seamus and Ellen had taken his boots. Mirabella shivered, imagining that even corpses must get cold in a wind like this without their boots and jackets. She looked around for a blanket or cloth of some kind to cover the doctor with, remembering how kind he had been to her on the ship. He had been the one to treat her burns – applying a salve gently and keeping her safe in the hospital quarters.

News had spread quickly of the attack, and everyone eyed Mrs. Douglas with suspicion, but there was no way to prove anything, and as the doctor was quick to mention, "The wealthy are good at two things: protecting their fortunes, and one another."

“Am I safe?” Caitlin asked.

“None of us is particularly safe,” the doctor replied with a sad smile. “Not on this ocean. But I assure you no one on this ship will hurt you again.”

“Can I stay here with you?” Caitlin asked.

“Of course you can.”

“Where are the boots?” Mirabella asked, standing in the doorway to the outbuilding.

“What boots?” Ellen asked, looking up from the steaming wash tubs full of dead men’s clothes.

“The boots you take from the bodies.”

“Are you shoe shopping?” Ellen asked.

“No.”

A moment passed where Ellen waited for some explanation, but none came.

“They’re in the shed next door.”

Mirabella opened the door to the shed, and she was overcome by the smell of wet leather and rotten flesh. The small floor was piled high with shoes of every imaginable shape and size. She dug through the shoes at the top until she found a tall, leather boot. The right foot. She needed the left. She dug further until she found it, and in a hand-sewn pocket inside the lip of the boot, she found the knife. It was a five-inch folding blade, set in a scrimshawed handle of ivory. A beautiful weapon. The doctor had showed it to her the night before the torpedoes. “This,” he said, “is exactly what you need.”

He opened the blade and rolled the knife over in his palm. “This blade has been through three wars, that I know of, and countless voyages.”

“It’s beautiful,” Caitlin said.

“Take it,” the doctor said. “I’m old; my journey is almost ended. It belongs with someone young.”

“I can’t take it,” Caitlin said. “You’ve done too much already.”

Mirabella stepped out of the shoe shed into the cool salty wind and inhaled deeply, trying to cast off the pall. She looked at the dark windows of the lighthouse keeper’s home, and she thought of all the boot-less, ring-less, jacket-less ghosts that must be wandering the island, trapped by the water all around them, circling the big white house, looking for their lost possessions.

When the Coast Guard men finished loading the dead bodies onto the boats, they spoke with Seamus in low tones that Mirabella could overhear from where she sat on the dock.

“The girl doesn’t remember anything?”

“Not even her own name,” Seamus replied.

Mirabella stroked the hair of a doll that she held in her hands. The doll was a gift from Betsy. “You’ll come back and see us, won’t you?” she asked.

“Of course I will,” Mirabella lied.

“Did you find more survivors?” Seamus asked the Coast Guard men now, as they stood in a small group on the dock.

“Not many,” one Coast Guard man replied. “Three torpedoes. The ship went down so quickly that the life boats were still tied to their moorings.”

“What will you do with the girl?” Seamus asked, and they all looked at Mirabella, who appeared to have nothing in this world besides a doll.

“Jesus,” one Coast Guard man said. “She could be anybody.”

Mirabella sat at the back of the Coast Guard boat and watched the island slowly fade beneath a windy sky of battleship gray. Seamus, Ellen, Betsy, and the Edwards grew tiny, standing there on the dock, and even the quiet tower of the lighthouse began to shrink away. Mirabella held her hands in the pockets of her skirt. In one hand, she held her knife. In the other, she held a gift from the younger Edward. “Safe travels,” he said as he pressed the small gift into the palm of her hand.

Mirabella was afraid to look at the gift in front of anyone else, but she knew from feeling it that it was the large diamond ring from the dead finger on the floor. She wondered how Edward got it away from Ellen. But then everyone knew that Ellen kept her jewels hidden in her sewing basket.

Mirabella held her small treasures and glided away with the dead toward the mainland. She could be anybody now.

Pale Hand, Rock Steady

I stand on a rock in the middle of the Lost River, in the half-light before dawn, and look around for my three friends. I don't see them anywhere, and I begin to wonder if they left me here in the middle of the river. It really is called the Lost River, in a wide valley, somewhere in West Virginia, and cold clear water flows past me, off into the dark spinning pools and eddies. Booty says that the river disappears under a mountain, and no one, including all the geological masterminds of the world, can figure out where the river actually goes. It's a small river to have created such a big mystery.

My hands are freezing cold. I look at them in the gloomy light: pale and blue-veined, wet and steady. My hands are average-sized, but remarkable in that they never shake. Rock steady. I put them in my pockets and peer around through the mist. The river winds through the long, wide valley, lined at the edges with dark woods that march up the mountainsides. The trees look silver and black in the half-light. Then Eddie throws a rock at me, and it occurs to me that of course my friends wouldn't leave me here in the middle of nowhere.

It's small for a rock, but sharp. Flint-colored, angular, spinning end over end as it sails through the air toward me. It misses, whizzing off and – *plunk* – into the cold dark current. Eddie says, "Fuck, Sticks. Let's go back to the car."

I expect Eddie's hands are cold, too. The four of us came straight from the parties and the nightclubs in the city. It was a warm night back on the blacktop, but here in the country the air is cold, and none of us is dressed to be outdoors. We belong far away

from here on the D.C. city streets, gliding along in taxicabs, gazing out at the traffic and streetlights and tall glass buildings on our way home to warm beds.

But we are in West Virginia, watching the first light of day slowly fill this valley. Eddie crosses his arms, tucks his hands into the warm pockets of his armpits. “This was a stupid idea,” he says. “Do you realize we are like *two hours* away from home?”

This was Booty's idea, of course. “We’re going on a vision quest,” he said, his brown eyes and brown skin lit by neon lights as the four of us stood outside the Asylum nightclub on 18th Street. Maya had made us leave the club; the crush of bodies in the darkness was too much, and she squeezed my arm three times, the signal to leave. Maya’s so much better these days, but still. Fragile. “I just needed some air,” she said. “It was a little tight in there.”

Booty however – lean and strong as a 177mm howitzer. He ships out next week, to go fight in Iraq, so tonight we were supposed to be living it up, but there we stood outside the Asylum, drinking in the cool air, wondering what came next. Up and down the street, music spilled out of bars and late night shops and diners. We walked along slowly, and I caught our reflection in a large window: a close-knit crew in blacks and silvers and Booty wearing Brazil yellow. Our image rippled, distorted, like walking past a funhouse mirror, made magic by liquor and pills and music from the nightclubs, and then we disappeared past the edge of the glass.

“So what is this vision quest?” Eddie asked Booty. “Peyote in the desert? Some kind of Lizard King bullshit?”

“Not exactly,” Booty said.

“A strip club?”

“Meteors.”

Eddie looked intrigued. “Meteors?”

“Tonight is the last night of the meteor shower,” Booty said.

“Wait,” Eddie said. “You mean *real* meteors?”

“Oh yeah,” Maya said, smiling at last. “It was in the news.”

We all looked up at the red, hazy glow of a sky over the city. “I don’t see anything,” I said.

“Exactly,” Booty said. “That’s why it’s called a *quest*.”

Maya linked her arm through Booty’s and continued down the hill. “Who’s driving?”

“I’ll drive,” Booty said. “I know a good place.”

“Is it far?” Eddie asked.

“Nah.”

Now I’m standing in the Lost River, and I’m not ready to leave yet, even if Eddie is starting to sober up. The stars were fantastic. “Ten thousand angels,” Maya said when we stepped onto the path beneath the sky. She stood between Booty and me, with her hands on his waist. She leaned her head back against my shoulder. Her hair smelled like wind and smoke.

“Ten thousand minus one,” I said, watching a streak of white light flash across the sky.

“Somebody make a wish,” Booty said.

“I wish we could all stay here forever,” Maya said.

“I wish there was a pizza stand,” Eddie said.

I kept my wish to myself.

So did Booty.

Now Eddie crawls among the rocks, looking for ammunition. “I’ll get you off that rock one way or another, man,” he says

I like it here though, the cold water swirling deep around me. Standing on this rock, I am the funhouse magician, watching carefully for dreams and wishes in the cold dark water. They linger there on the downside of the rocks, hang in the deep swirling pools, holding steady with a flash of dark silver fins. I reach into the water, watch my pale hands move slowly, the long fingers reaching for the creatures. There is the rush of something smooth and muscled, the blink of an eye, and then the dream is gone.

I reach deeper, pick a smooth flat rock from the river bottom.

Eddie says, “Look, man, there aren’t even any stars left. It’s almost daylight.”

“Oh, fuck off,” I say. “Go sleep in the car.”

Eddie hunts absent-mindedly for another rock. His head is bent low, blond hair standing up every which way. He wears a black sweater that clings to his lean frame, making him look sleek and muscled, like a vein of coal in the bed of rocks. He says, “Man, I’m almost sober,” and he looks like a madman now, picking through the rocks on the shore. “What are we *doing* out here?”

I aim carefully, send my rock skipping up the river, out across the wide smooth section of the bend, count the number of times it pops off the water before it sinks

beneath the dark surface for good. Six. “We are skipping rocks,” I say victoriously, and then I flip my slick hand in his direction, as if to make him slip and fall.

Eddie slips and falls. He lands on his ass in between two larger rocks. “Goddamn it,” he says, splayed out on the ground, and I blink in amazement.

Did I do that?

I pause for a moment, watch Eddie struggle back onto his feet. Then I look at my hands. So steady. I imagine what I would do next if I were really a magician, if I could do anything I wanted. I peer around through the mist and the shrinking gloom. I look toward the high grass at the river’s edge, and I beckon with my wet hand, as if I were conjuring Maya, inviting her to join me on my rock.

Just then Maya appears in the tall grass. She adjusts the waist of her panties through the fabric of her shining dress, using the tips of her fingers. She climbs back down the bank into the river bed. “Nothing like peeing in the woods,” she says. “I feel like a bear.”

She’s beautiful, with her silver dress and tan skin, coming through the tall grass and over the riverbed rocks with tall black boots on her legs. “Where’s Booty?” she asks when she gets to the water’s edge.

“Who knows,” Eddie says, picking through the rocks, not looking up.

I stand amazed, watching Maya move as if I conjured her out of thin air. So sinuous, and I can’t help wondering what Maya would look like if she walked through that field in this pale blue light without that silver dress on. I know I shouldn’t, but I imagine her in nothing but tall boots and black underwear, moving with that cat-like grace, that way she floats when she’s stoned, coming right toward me, scars exposed,

through the grass, walking to my outstretched hands, and my palm would slide against that long pink scar on her belly. Should I conjure it? Should I make it happen?

Then – *wham* – the rock hits me in the shoulder. It's small for a rock, but it gets me right in the soft spot up front where the tendons and the joint and the muscles all come together, and my whole left arm tingles, right to my fingertips. "Gotcha," Eddie says, blue eyes glittering.

I smile serenely, focus on Eddie, and make a crushing motion with my right hand as Eddie turns away to pick through the rocks again. "God," he says. "My head is killing me. How do you get a hangover before you've even made it home?"

"I don't see Booty," Maya says.

We all look up the river, checking for Booty's yellow jersey among the river rocks and the tall grass on the banks. There's a moment where I think maybe Booty has left. I think maybe he faded away with the stars, and perhaps we'll all vanish with the sunrise. Eddie cups his hands around his mouth and calls out, "*Booooty!*"

His voice, so real and loud, rings through the whole silver valley, echoes away into the dark woods. "*Booooty!*"

I hiss at him from my magic rock where I hallucinate slightly in the first light of day: "*Shut up, you fuckwad.*"

Maya looks up at me, a startled expression on her face. Eddie stops and looks at me. I see some wicked thought form behind his eyes, and he smiles at me sarcastically. "Eat me," he says.

"Whatever," I say.

Then Maya says, "What is *that*?"

She points into the air, over my head, and I turn quickly to follow her gaze. I hear it before I see it – a stirring of the air, a whooshing sound. Then I see the huge angular bird lift itself up higher, coming right toward me. The long legs trail behind it, and the long pointed beak points straight ahead like an arrow. The neck is curled and poised; it bounces slightly with each giant sweep of the wings. I can hear every move the bird makes, the wings through the air. I hear its bones creaking with the effort. A blue heron, startled by Eddie’s yelling. It soars past me, keeping a distance from Eddie’s side of the river. It stretches its wings wide and glides away upriver, following the bend of the valley.

No one says anything as the bird vanishes toward the darkness. We all stand on smooth rocks, watching the dark bend of the river until Maya turns to Eddie and says, “You scared it.”

“Whatever,” Eddie says.

“Those feathers,” Maya says, looking back downriver after the bird. “They’d be perfect in my dream catcher.”

“What,” Eddie says. “You think that bird was going to walk over here and hand you a fistful of feathers?”

Maya is a Capricorn, an air sign, born beneath a gentle breeze, and she believes like Hamlet: “There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophies.” She’s been making a dream catcher back at home, ever since she got sick. She’s formed it a dozen times or so now: re-stretched it, re-shaped it, re-woven it with pieces of nature, pieces of the city. Maya gathers feathers, beads, glass, metal, wires. It’s a strange and beautiful thing, this dream catcher, and it hangs over her bed, spins there at

night. It snares her bad dreams in its web, lets them burn away like mist in the first sunlight so she can heal. She still needs to heal.

Maya got the cancer when we were in college. They said she was too young, but there it was – the tumor on her ovary. Imagine Maya as a drawing, and then erase part of her midsection, and then paint the rest of her white and bruise yellow with chemical treatments and radiation. Erase the hair from the drawing. Erase the sun that hangs over her head. Paint the darkness. Paint the heavy curtains over the windows. Paint the days and days where she is unable to move. Paint the long pink scars on her belly and her chest from surgeries and intravenous ports that had to be surgically implanted.

Now paint the dream catcher.

We stayed with Maya all the time, preparing meals in her kitchen and bringing over piles of movies and playing endless games of Monopoly which Eddie almost always won because he never lets anyone off easy. “You’re not doing anyone a favor,” he would say, “by letting them win.”

Finally, Maya was strong enough to stand in the tiny living room of her apartment with her hands on her hips and announce, “It smells like a goddamn boys’ locker room in here. You all have to leave.”

“How do you know what a boys’ locker room smells like?” Eddie asked.

“You,” Maya said. “Out.”

That was months ago, in the spring. Now, in the autumn river valley at dawn, her skin is berry brown and smooth again, her face shows almost no trace of the chemicals or illness, but I know she should have a heron feather anyway, so I spin around and hold my

hands in the air in the direction that the bird flew, and I imagine plucking a feather from the heron's wing, and suddenly there is a singsong voice from behind us. "*Hey ho!*"

It's Booty, coming back around the bend, and his smile is sunlight coming through the cold mist. Dressed in yellow with black pants and dark running shoes, Booty leaps easily over the riverbed rocks. He played soccer when we were all at George Washington University, but he came on ROTC scholarship from a small town in West Virginia, not far from where we stand now, so now when I watch him move nimbly over the rocks, I realize I'm looking at First Lieutenant Jonathan Booty of the Army 1st Armored Division. He'll be leaping nimbly over tanks soon, driving through city streets, blowing insurgents out of apartment buildings with 13mm high velocity shells, and there will be thousands of people trying to kill him every day. A pain shoots through my chest when I think of all that hatred.

But then I see what he's holding in his hand. A blue feather. My blood runs cold. How is that in Booty's hand? My spell must have gone astray.

"There you are," Maya says, smiling.

"Thank god," Eddie says. "We have *got* to get out of here."

"Look what I found," Booty says, holding up the feather.

But that feather is from *me*. I look from the feather to Maya's lit-up face and back to Booty. I'm suddenly filled with a dark impulse, and I hold my hands flat to my side.

"No," I whisper to myself. "Not like this."

* * *

I remember the dream catcher the way it was before. Before the blue feather. Before Booty left for the war. When Maya was still sick, when she still needed me. The dream catcher spun slowly in the dark in the room, just above the bed where Maya was asleep. Moving in a breath of cool air, the feathers and beads and glass and wire were just visible in the dark room, the dark night that gathered close around the bed. Maya turned over beneath her deep covers, safe from the chill in the air, drifting off through sleep. With her bald head and fine features, she looked like a nymph from the clouds or the wind, until the darkness came over her. The first twitches of fear struck in her body, and the shadows came creeping over her features, came crawling through the valleys of her dreams. I sat on the edge of her bed while Eddie and Booty were in the other room, sleeping in front of the television. “Maya?” I asked softly.

Maya cried in her sleep. Something somewhere reached for her, and she started awake with a shriek, sat up in her bed, eyes wide open, looking around the room, past the room, past me sitting on the edge of the bed, looking for something that had already slipped away into the shadows.

The dream catcher spun slowly in the dark and quiet just above her bed.

“Maya?” I asked. “Are you all right?”

“Sticks,” she said, and she wrapped her paper-thin arms around my neck.

* * *

Maya kisses Booty. She reaches out for the feather, and she keeps on reaching, and their hands touch, and their bodies move together in this perfect fluid motion, and then her face is turned up and Booty shines down on her, and then they are kissing.

The bottom drops out of my stomach.

I turn away, plunge my hands back into the cold water, and reach for another rock to skip. I pull one up from the bottom, and it's covered in green moss. Hunched around my knees on the magician's rock in the middle of the river, I stare at the mossy rock. Slick and cold, and so dark against my pale palm. I hear Eddie, back on the riverbank, calling out to Maya and Booty, "We had to drive to the middle of fucking nowhere for you two to make out? You couldn't do that at home?"

I drop the moss rock back into the water with a deep plunk, and I peer over the hard curve of my shoulder. Booty smiles sheepishly, and Maya holds his hand. In her other hand is the feather. Almost without thinking, almost as if it were a casual gesture, almost as if I could take it back later, I reach out with my magic hand and make a quick slashing gesture across Booty's throat.

There. It's done. I have killed him.

Booty leads us away from the water at last. "Come on, Sticks."

"All right," I say, keeping my eyes down, leaping back across the rocks. I turn away from the water, scramble up the riverbank, back up onto the earth and the tall grass of the field. It is a short walk back to the road.

“Look,” Booty says, and we all turn to watch the sky as it begins to glow like fire, lighting the top edge of the mountain. “The sun’s almost up,” he says.

Impossibly beautiful: the elements have converged on this valley in this strange moment – fire, earth, air, water. The far side of the valley is scorched in fall colors, coming alive as the air grows brighter. The river gurgles and sighs with my rock in the middle of it. My head tingles with guilt and love and the beginnings of a hangover and cold, fresh air, and I want to forget this morning, forget this vision. I want to forget everything.

The sun breaks over the edge of the mountain, and we are struck by bright red light. We squint, step backwards, hold our hands up to shield our eyes. “Wow,” Maya says.

“I’m melting,” Eddie says. “Get me out of the light.”

Booty says, "Sticks, you coming?"

"I'm coming."

I turn to catch up, fall in line with the others on the small path, the sunlight chasing shadows and club kids out of the valley. Booty leads the way, with Eddie stumbling along behind him, moving over the trail, through the tall grass. Maya walks like a cat, stepping gingerly over the path, holding onto her long blue feather. I close my eyes as I fall into line behind her, imagine myself soaking into the ground, but even in my mind, I can still see the way the light plays on her silver dress.

iii.

The Sun, with all the planets revolving around it, and depending on it, can still ripen a bunch of grapes as though it had nothing else in the Universe to do.

- Galileo Galilei.

Tribe of the Mole

Delilah woke with a start, as she often did, and lay in bed listening to the house at night, wondering what had wakened her. Ben snored gently beside her. Faint sounds from the highway traffic came through the windows. Then she heard it, Lance's voice from down the hall, shouting, "Go!"

Oh, God, she thought, as her stomach tightened. What now?

"Go!" Lance shouted, in his dinosaur-themed bedroom, a remnant from one of last year's obsessions. He kneeled in the floor, pressing his face to the midnight-cool glass of his bedroom window and listened carefully, as if he might possibly be able to hear the moles digging their tunnels beneath the carpet of moonlit grass down in the front yard. His breath made clouds of fog on the windowpane, but he could barely see without his thick glasses that sat on the bedside table where his mother had set them. He closed his eyes and listened.

He listened for the small pads of the mole feet scratching at the soil, burrowing through the roots. He imagined the tiny hard claws digging furiously, chewing their way through eighteen feet of earth per hour, across the yard, through his mother's garden, around the roots of the big elm tree, beneath his father's hammock that they bought at Ocean City last summer. "Go!" Lance shouted as the moles crisscrossed paths beneath a bed of pansies.

"Lance!" cried his mother, Delilah, turning on the lights in his bedroom. "What are you doing?"

Even the moles paused at the sound. Lance opened his eyes, squinted in the light. He couldn't see from here, but he knew his mother was in her t-shirt and underwear, hair disheveled, her glasses hung on the end of her nose. She was pretty like this, when she was startled, standing in his doorway in the middle of the night. "Moles operate twenty four hours a day," Lance said.

"Yes," Delilah said. "But we do not. We sleep at night."

"Yes, mother."

She tucked him back into bed, sat on the edge of the down comforter and sang him a song while she stroked the blond hair back from his head, looked into his enormous blue eyes until they grew heavy with sleep, like the bellies of clouds growing fat with rain and thunder. She wondered what it was he dreamt of when he slept, what it was that jolted him out of bed in the middle of the night, clawing his way half-blind to the windows to listen for moles or bats or ghosts, or whatever arrested his attention.

"What now?" Ben said, with his head under a pillow, shielding his eyes from the lamplight. She could see the tattoo on Ben's bicep, an eagle clutching hockey sticks, a reminder of his glory days.

"Moles," Delilah said.

"How does he even know what a mole is?"

"He's not stupid, Ben."

The next morning, Ben walked out the front door and saw the yard. "What the hell?"

"Moles," Lance said.

Small earthen mounds crisscrossed the lawn. Lance was bundled into a winter jacket even though the spring days reached seventy degrees by the time he and the rest of the sixth graders came pouring out of school. “Well,” Ben said. “What are they doing in our yard?”

“Eating,” Lance said. “A mole eats its own bodyweight in food every day in order to maintain its metabolism which it needs to live underground.”

Ben stared at his son who looked back up at him with blue eyes, magnified behind thick glasses. Ben had never understood his son, could not imagine how this was, in fact, his own offspring. Ben had been thrilled to have a boy; he had even chosen the name Lance when the boy was born, thinking it would help him grow up strong, and might even look good on a hockey trading card one day.

But Lance. Good God, he barely tested into the public schools. He was small, thin, nearly blind. The doctors assured them Lance wasn't autistic, but Ben wasn't sure he trusted the doctors. He was considering getting a third opinion. “Get in the car, buddy,” he said.

“Yes, father.”

At Silver Spring Middle School, Ben dropped Lance off with April, an eighth grader who tutored Lance during first period. April, in her cheerleader outfit, got up from the benches in front of school where she sat with her boyfriend, Ricky Johnson, the basketball player. She greeted Lance warmly while Ben leaned across the front seat, smiling. “Big game tonight, eh?”

“Yeah,” April said.

“Maybe me and Lance will come and watch you. You know, cheering.”

“Sure,” April said.

As they walked away toward the front doors, April leaned toward Lance. “Your dad’s a little weird.”

“He was a popular athlete,” Lance said.

“He likes cheerleaders?”

“Yes,” Lance said. “He also has a metal plate in his head; he injured himself playing hockey, and now he sets off metal detectors.”

April laughed. “I’m sorry,” she said hooking her arm through Lance’s. “I know that’s not funny, but the way you say it.”

She pulled him through the front doors of school.

During third period, Lance sat with Bruce Lee, his only friend at school, as Mrs. Applebottom taught Reading to the sixth grade Special Ed class. Only slightly larger than Lance, Bruce Lee wore his brown hair long and stringy so he could hide behind it, and he had a nervous habit of snapping his fingers excitedly. Once his mother had tried to have his hair cut short, and Bruce wept silently in the barber’s chair, snapping his fingers, until the old man said, “Jesus Christ, I can’t cut this girl’s hair.”

Now, in reading class, Mrs. Applebottom turned and said, “Bruce, why do you think Turtle sat on his little brother in the story?”

“Perhaps,” Bruce Lee said, “Turtle discovered his little brother touching himself inappropriately.”

“Bruce,” Mrs. Applebottom said curtly, while Lance and the other students giggled with their heads down.

“It happens,” said Bruce Lee, who had actually been caught several times at school touching himself inappropriately. Once in the boys room, once in the gym locker room, and once in the janitor’s closet.

“It’s not a problem,” Bruce Lee had explained to Lance after the third incident. “It’s my blooming manhood.”

“Moles meet once a year to mate,” Lance had replied. “Otherwise, they spend most of their time alone.”

“Man,” Bruce Lee replied. “Would you do it with a mole? I mean if you were both the same size?”

“I don’t know,” Lance said. “They do have very soft fur.”

“There you go,” Bruce Lee said, snapping his fingers.

On Sunday, Lance watched out the living room window as his father taped one end of the garden hose to the exhaust pipe of his Chevy Blazer, and then inserted the other end of the garden hose into one of the raised mole tunnels. He turned the truck on, and revved the engine, sending fumes through the hose, injecting them into the ground. Soon, clouds of exhaust rose from the lawn, drifted across the lush grass. Ben laughed, delighted. He came back inside the house, into the kitchen. “It’s like a House of Horrors for those little bastards.”

Lance didn't worry; he knew that this was completely ineffective strategy against moles. He pulled on his bright yellow backpack, tightened the straps. "Can I go out and play?" he asked his mother.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To the woods."

The "woods" was a square acre of trees in between two housing developments that backed up to the edge of the Interstate. Developers had already bought the land, and planned on turning it into a third middle-income development called Cozy Acre. "What do you do back there?" she asked Lance.

"I play."

"Play what?"

"I play mole."

"Oh god," Ben said. "Let him go. Go have fun, Mole Man."

"I don't know," Delilah said, watching Lance trudge off toward the trees. The whole reason they lived in this small house in this neighborhood they could barely afford was so that Lance could go to Fairfax schools and play outside without the worry of him being run over by a delivery truck, or mugged. But still, Delilah grew uneasy at the sight of her tiny, strange son walking alone, no matter where it was. "I don't like him going back there by himself," she said. "Something could happen."

"Aw, let him go," Ben said. "A little fresh air is good for him."

Lance trudged through the woods, thumbs hooked through the yellow straps of his pack, until he came to the steep embankment that led up to interstate 95. A tall cement wall stood at the top of the embankment, running for miles in both directions,

guarding the highway from the neighborhoods on either side. It hummed and echoed with sounds of traffic, like some wall around a magic kingdom. Lance stared up the hill at the pale concrete. He had promised his mother a thousand times that he never went near the highway, and he didn't. He went beneath it.

Dragging some large branches out of the way, Lance took the flashlight from his pack, and he entered the opening of a large corrugated metal drainage pipe that ran straight into the embankment. A remnant from some older construction, the pipe only ran about twenty yards now before it ended in a wall of earth. Lance had spent all summer digging a chamber out of the packed dirt, using a small army surplus shovel that Bruce Lee had lent him. Now, with the chamber nearly finished, Lance had brought some things to make it more comfortable: a scrap of blue tarp; a tin of sardines; a tape recorder with a tape of his new favorite band, Night Ranger, that he had borrowed from one of his father's old boxes. He shone the light as he walked down the tunnel, listening to the low hum of traffic that vibrated somewhere over his head like a conveyor belt. And then, almost to the living chamber, his light showed something lying on the floor, and he stopped short, his throat going tight and cold as he sucked in his breath. There was a body in there, face down in the dirt. A man. Ragged clothes, pale lifeless hands. It smelled horrible.

Lance stood frozen, staring at the body. Then, blinking back to action, he turned and ran. Slipping on the grooved metal, backpack flapping against his back, light beam wobbling all over the walls, Lance ran for the bright opening of the tunnel. He heard a roaring sound, and he realized with some shock that it was his own voice, bouncing off

the tunnel walls and coming back at him, propelling him faster and faster into the open air.

“There’s a dead man in my mole hole,” Lance said.

“What?” April asked.

“I don’t know how he got there,” Lance said.

“Sometimes,” Bruce Lee said, “people accidentally kill themselves while masturbating.”

“Bruce!” April said.

The three of them were sitting at a table in first period study hall. April was helping Lance with his math homework, and since Bruce Lee found himself temporarily in between tutors, again, he sat with them. “Did you tell your parents?” April asked.

“I think it would startle my mother,” Lance said.

“Well you have to tell someone,” April said.

“I’ve told you.”

“You have to tell the police or something,” April said.

“Maybe we could move him first, so the police don’t find my hole.”

“Good idea,” Bruce Lee said, snapping his fingers. “Good idea!”

“I’m not going anywhere near your mole hole,” April said.

“I’m in,” Bruce Lee said, looking intently from April to Lance, back to April.

“I’m in like Flynn, baby.”

* * *

Ben stood shirtless in the front yard with a long funnel and a gas can when he looked up and saw Lance and Bruce Lee walking up the drive from the bus stop. Lance looked ridiculous in his heavy winter jacket, like a potato with skinny legs, walking through sixty nine-degree sunshine. Ben wondered if he could hide the jacket overnight, and put Lance in something a little more temperature-appropriate tomorrow, but he knew to be careful about messing with Lance's routines. "Hey boys," he said as he funneled gasoline into a mole hole. "How was school?"

"Fine," Lance said.

Bruce Lee looked at his feet, kicked at a raised piece of turf.

Jesus, Ben thought as he struck a match. Couldn't Lance find someone else to play with besides the Lee kid? He was even weirder than Lance. Ben couldn't imagine what the two of them talked about when they were alone. He dropped the match onto the mole hole, and it burst into flames.

"We're gonna play in the woods," Lance said.

"Fine," Ben said, stepping away from the fire. "Be back before dinner."

Lance and Bruce Lee disappeared across the yard and into the trees, and Ben suddenly wondered what the hell they were up to back there. Oh god, he thought watching them walk off. Please don't let him be gay too.

At the mole hole, Lance peered into the tunnel with his flashlight, and Bruce Lee said, "Go on, let's see him."

They inched down the tunnel until they came near the chamber, peering around with the beam of light. The tunnel vibrated slightly with the thrum of highway traffic overhead. “Where is he?” Bruce Lee said.

“I don’t know. He was right there.”

“Well, I’m over here now,” said a gravelly voice, and the boys both screamed, falling over each other as they scrambled backwards through the metal tube. The beam of light shot sideways up the wall as the flashlight fell from Lance’s hand, and heavy footsteps sounded in the tunnel, coming slowly toward the tangled boys, squirming on their backs.

“What do you mean he’s not dead?” April asked the next morning, wearing her Fairfax Cheerleading sweat suit for practice at lunchtime.

“It’s all right,” Lance said.

“Yeah,” Bruce Lee said. “He’s one of us.”

“One of who?” April asked.

As a response, Bruce Lee hung his tongue out, wagged his head and made cuckoo bird noises. “You are such a freak,” April said.

Bruce Lee snapped his fingers, excited. “That’s it!” he said. “You got it. You really got it that time.”

“Wait,” April said. “So who is this guy?”

“He’s a hobo,” Lance said. “A remnant of a bygone era.”

“A remnant of what?” April asked.

“A bygone era,” Lance repeated. “That’s what he told us. His name is Edmund.”

“A prince among hobos,” Bruce Lee said.

“He’s quite old,” Lance said. “He lived in the drainpipe once before, a long time ago, before my house was even built. There was a truck stop called Miss Mae’s that used to be there, and Edmund says he still considers the tunnel is his country home.”

“You should *not* be hanging around with homeless men,” April said. “You don’t know what he might do.”

“He scared us at first,” Lance said. “But then he gave us a sip of his wine.”

“A real prince,” Bruce Lee said. “Prince of the Mole People.”

At lunch, Bruce Lee eyed the door to the gym. “You know what’s happening in there right now?” he said.

“Cheerleader practice,” Lance said, eating a pear half from his lunch tray.

Bruce Lee sucked on his bottom lip, stared at the door. “You know female pubic hair is softer than mole hair.”

“How do you know?”

“Everyone knows that. It’s a proven fact.”

Now they both stared at the door to the gym, imagining April with no pants on, waving pom poms. Lance swallowed a pear half. “You better stay out of there,” he said.

“Don’t worry,” Bruce Lee said, getting up from the table. “I’m just going to the bathroom.”

Not five minutes later, Ricky Johnson, April's boyfriend, shoved Bruce Lee back into the cafeteria. "What have I told you about spying on the girls?"

Bruce stared at his feet, face hidden behind his stringy hair.

Some of the other basketball players egged Ricky on. "Is the masturbator at it again?"

"Come on, Bruce Lee," said Ricky, swatting him with an open palm across the side of his head. "Show me some of your moves."

Bruce didn't move.

"Come on Bruce Lee," said someone from the group. "Show us some of that fancy handiwork."

They ringed him in, up against the wall. Lance blinked behind his thick glasses, and then stared at his lunch tray. These were the moments that startled and terrified Lance, when he felt the glare of others' attention suddenly turned on Bruce Lee, or on himself, and he felt exposed and vulnerable. He listened to the bigger boys harassing Bruce Lee, and he longed to retreat underground, to a subterranean place of quiet and safety. Lance adjusted his glasses with his thumb and slowly finished the last of his pears.

Three days later, Lance stood at the counter of the Quickie Mart, trying to purchase four bottles of lemon lime flavored Mad Dog 20/20 malt liquor. "You're kidding me, right?" said the kid behind the counter. "Are you even twelve?"

"It's for my father," Lance said. "He's disabled, and he can't get out of the car."

“Where is he?” the kid asked.

“Right there.” Lance pointed to a car in the parking lot with someone sitting in the driver’s seat tapping his hands on the steering wheel. The kid looked at the car, looked back at Lance, then chewed on his lip. “All right,” he said. “But don’t tell anyone I did this. It’s for a good cause, right?”

“Right.”

He rang up the liquor. “What was your dad in the Army or something?”

“My father was a hockey player before he injured himself,” said Lance, handing over two weeks’ allowance to the attendant. “He sometimes blows things up with gasoline now.”

“Take it easy,” the kid said. “I gave you the liquor.”

“Thank you,” Lance said.

“Have a nice day.”

Lance walked out the door and around the corner. Bruce Lee hopped out of driver’s seat of the parked car and ran over. “It worked,” he said, making kung fu motions with his arms. “Masters of disguise. I wonder if we could rob a bank like that.”

“Whose car is that anyway?” Lance said.

“I don’t know,” Bruce Lee said. “Let’s get out of here.”

“What’s this?” Edmund asked.

“Malt liquor.”

“Is it now?” said Edmund, smacking his lips, taking a bottle of the lemon lime.
“You’re good boys,” he said, unscrewing the bottle.

Lance and Bruce Lee sat on the scrap of blue tarp, drinking Cokes, sharing a tin of sardines by the light of a flashlight.

Edmund carefully wiped off the top of the bottle with the sleeve of his ragged coat, then gulped down half the bottle. He leveled his bloodshot eyes on the boys. “Did I ever tell you about the time in Texarkana when I saw a nigger beaten half to death by a Mexican wedding party?”

The boys shook their heads no.

“Well it was something awful to see, lemme tell you.”

The boys sat transfixed as Edmund told the story. They had never heard anyone talk like Edmund did; everything out of his mouth was bizarre, outrageous, and offensive. “I’ll tell you one thing though,” Edmund said, leaning in close as he finished his story. “That nigger walked away on his own two feet. They mighta beat him good, but the man had some spirit. Spirit!”

“My mother says to never use the N-word,” Lance said.

“Your mother sounds like a good woman,” Edmund said.

“She’s good-looking,” Bruce Lee said.

“She’s good at Chinese checkers,” Lance said.

“Well hell,” Edmund said. “Let’s make her our queen.”

“All right,” Lance said, chewing thoughtfully on a sardine.

* * *

That night, in the yard – a tiny click, and the quick swish of metal on metal as a harpoon trap was sprung, the needle sharp points thrust downwards through the earth, through the tunnel, through the soft body of the mole, impaled it through the mid section, nearly cut it in half. A terrible shrill squeak, barely audible, from beneath the surface of the yard, as the mole thrashed against the metal barbs, flails with its small front legs.

Lance bolted from his sleep, screaming. “Ahhh! Ahhh!”

He kicked off the covers, fell into the floor, scrambled toward the window.

Moments later, lights on, Delilah fell to her knees beside him, wrapped her arms around him. “Baby, baby,” she crooned. “Shh, it’s just a bad dream.”

“He killed it,” Lance cried. “He killed the mole.”

Lance felt the animal dying in its tunnel, trapped, alone, gutted. Delilah felt her son thrashing, wracked with sobs. “It’s all right,” she said. “Mama’s here.”

“The mole didn’t do anything,” Lance said, lips shining with spittle. “It didn’t do anything.”

Later that night, Ben crawled around the front yard in sweatpants and a winter coat, removing the rest of the harpoon traps he had purchased yesterday at the hardware store. He had realized he was going to have to do something more serious if he was actually going to get rid of the moles, so he had purchased five of the small deadly traps.

He buried the one dead mole in a shallow hole, felt terrible as he palmed cold dirt over the small animal. How, he wondered. How the *hell* did Lance hear that?

* * *

“Did you get all traps out?” Delilah said a little while later, sitting in the kitchen with a cup of hot tea. She was shaken, wide awake, watching Ben wash his hands at the sink.

“Yeah,” Ben said scrubbing at the dirt under his nails.

“I’ve never seen him like that,” she said, and she sipped her tea, added mole traps to her mental list of things to protect her son from. She wondered what would happen when she wasn’t there, how Lance would ever protect himself from the harpoon traps of the world. Her stomach tightened at the thought of it, and she wrapped her hands around the hot ceramic mug.

“I’m sorry,” Ben said, pulling up in the chair next her. “I didn’t know that would happen.”

“I know.”

A day later, on a sunny Saturday afternoon, the boys gathered with Edmund in the dark recesses of the mole hole. By the light of candles, half drunk on Wild Irish Rose, Edmund lowered the army surplus shovel gently onto Lance’s left shoulder, then his right. “I dub thee Sir Lancelot,” Edmund said in a low grave voice. “Knight to the Queen, and Protector of the ancient Tribe of Moles.”

Lance nodded solemnly.

“Yeah bitches,” Bruce Lee said, clapping his hands and snapping his fingers.

“That’s what I’m talking about!”

* * *

At school Monday, Lance and Bruce Lee walked through the halls together toward third period classes. “So how does it feel to be a knight?” Bruce Lee asked.

“I don’t know,” Lance said. “Kind of the same as it felt to be a regular boy.”

“Give it time,” Lance said. “You’ll bloom into your manhood too.”

“You know moles are actually divided into three subfamilies and seven different tribes.”

“Which tribe are we?”

“Condylurini, I think.”

“Is that mole-speak for bad ass?”

“The star-nosed mole can detect, catch and eat food faster than the human eye can follow.”

“Damn right he can,” Bruce Lee said.

Just then Ricky Johnson came walking toward them in his bright white sneakers, his blue and white letter jacket. Bruce Lee hissed loudly as he passed. “Condylurini, baby.”

Ricky Johnson shook his head and kept walking. “Why do you do that?” Lance asked. “He’s gonna kill you.”

“It’s only when he’s with all those other guys you have to watch out,” Bruce Lee said. “When he’s by himself he’s normal.”

“Edmund would call that mob mentality,” Lance said.

“Do you think Edmund has sex with hobo women?”

Lance considered it for a moment. “He *is* a knight.”

“He’s *the* knight.”

“He’s quite smart too.”

“Quite.”

“I think girls would like him,” Lance said. “If he took a shower.”

“We should take him to a basketball game,” Bruce Lee said. “See if he can score us some cheerleaders.”

Delilah had hoped the police would be gone before Lance got home from school, but here she stood squeezing him tight in his puffy jacket, and holding him back as he tried to claw his way into the back seat of a police cruiser where a homeless man called Edmund was handcuffed. Edmund made crazy rodent faces at them, pretending to gnaw through the glass. “Edmund!” Lance Shouted, as the police climbed into the front seat of the cruiser and the neighbors all stood gathered around on their front lawns watching the display. “Edmund, where are you going?”

Delilah had been horrified to see the man emerge from the woods in the officer’s custody. He was so ragged and dirty, hunched over and squinting in the light with bloodshot eyes. To think Lance had been playing in the woods with this man – it made Delilah want to throw up with worry. “What did you play with that man?”

“Tribe of the Mole,” Lance replied.

“I knew I shouldn’t have let you go in the woods by yourself.”

“But mother,” Lance replied as he stared mournfully at the police car. “I wasn’t by myself.”

Delilah watched the cruiser pull away, and the knots in her stomach pulled tighter and smaller, making room for new knots.

“I’m sorry,” April said the next day at school. “But I had to tell your parents about Edmund.”

Lance stared at the math homework laid out in front of him – long division and fractions. The numbers fanned out in mysterious patterns, dividing and subdividing into equations, multiplying on the page.

“I told you to tell someone,” April said softly. “He might have hurt you.”

Lance gazed at the numbers, could almost feel them humming with meaning, as if they were cars on the other side of the concrete wall, zooming along through their secret lives so full of purpose. Lance wondered what happened there, beneath the surface of the page. What did the numbers do? What did they mean? They moved with such determination, arrived at such concrete destinations like 132 or $12 \frac{5}{8}$. Lance gazed into the page of numbers felt himself pulled along by their energy until he was lost in the rows of equations, slipping along through the labyrinth of long division, watching quietly as the numbers drove past him.

“Lance?” April said. “Lance?”

At lunch the next day, Lance and Bruce Lee sat quietly at their end of the table in the crowded lunch room. Lance chewed on his sloppy Joe while Bruce Lee used his spoon to

flip boiled peas at the poster of the boys' basketball team that hung on the wall next to the gym doors. "I'm just saying," Bruce Lee said as he let a pea fly to the wall. "We could break him out of jail, no problem."

"My mother says he's probably out of jail already."

"Well, where is he then?"

"Gone," Lance said.

"Do you think he's having sex?" Bruce Lee said, holding a whole spoonful of peas in the air.

"No," Lance said. "You shouldn't shoot that many peas at once; you'll get in trouble."

"Dude," Bruce Lee said, leaning forward, looking deadly serious. "Trouble is my middle name."

The group of peas made a loud smack against the poster and left a long smear of pea innards across Ricky Johnson's face. "Shazam!" Bruce Lee said, dropping the spoon to snap his fingers. "Did you see that shot?"

But then Ricky Johnson said, "What the fuck are you doing?"

The basketball players, in their blue and white jackets, all looked at the smeared and splattered poster, then looked at Lance and Bruce Lee. Bruce tucked his hands by his side and ducked behind his hair. Lance held a half eaten sloppy Joe in front of him.

The players puffed up with mock outrage. Ricky walked up to Bruce Lee. "Come over here and clean this up," he said.

Bruce sat motionless, stared at his plate from behind his thin curtain of hair.

"Did you hear me?" Ricky said.

“April has more posters,” Lance said.

Ricky shot a dirty look at Lance. “Shut up, genius.” Then he grabbed Bruce Lee by the back of his shirt and pulled him off the bench. “Come clean this up.”

Bruce fell to the floor like a wet towel, and the other players gathered around as Ricky tried to haul him up by his shirt.

Lance looked down into his tray of food, his stomach tied in knots. Bruce Lee kicked at the basketball players, and they kicked him back. Bruce made a squeaking sound as Ricky pulled at him, and Lance thought of the mole in the hole, trapped, dying slowly. Lance thought of Edmund disappearing in the back of the police car, gone forever. Then he calmly stood up, walked around the edge of the table, waited for an opening, and then flung his entire lunch tray at the back of Ricky’s blue and white letter jacket.

Ricky swung around, startled, and caught Lance with a fist in the side of the head. Lance’s glasses flew off, clattering against the table somewhere, and Lance fell straight to the floor.

Shouting erupted all over the cafeteria. Bruce Lee yelled and thrashed, the basketball players closed in. Lance could barely make out what was happening, staring up at the crowd with half-blind eyes, feeling people jostle him as they rushed around and on top of him. He crouched and reached around for his glasses, but his hand closed over something metal. A fork, with thin sharp teeth. He closed his eyes, planted his feet on the linoleum, listened carefully to the sounds of the scuffle, and then he sprang like a tight coil from the polished floor, eyes closed, swinging through the air until he sank the fork into bare flesh. “What the fuck?” someone said.

And then there was screaming. “Oh my god!”

The sound of the basketball coach and the principal arriving. Lance crawled on the floor, trying to find his glasses. “Here,” Bruce Lee said, and suddenly Lance could see again. They were both crawling under the table. “You got him good,” Bruce Lee said. “You stuck him clean through his hand.”

At school the following week, Bruce Lee was impossibly energized, bouncing in his seat as he watched Lance do math homework, sitting in the small drab in-school suspension room. Ricky Johnson had convinced his parents not to press any charges, especially after April threatened to break up with him and Delilah had called the Johnson’s house and offered to cover all the medical costs, so the school put all the students involved on probation and in-school suspension.

“Bruce!” April said, as she tried to help Lance with his homework. “Stop fidgeting.”

“You talkin to me?” Bruce Lee said. “You talkin to *me*? You watch out lady, or I’ll sick *The Fork* on you.”

April rolled her eyes. Bruce Lee made hissing sounds and stabbed at the air with four fingers splayed out like a fork. Lance plodded quietly through a long division equation.

A few more weeks passed, uneventful, and Delilah sat in the kitchen, drinking a cup of tea, listening to the silence in the house, enjoying the calm. Ben and Lance came bustling in later, home from watching the basketball game, and she sent Lance upstairs to get ready for bed. “How’d they do?” she asked.

“They got creamed,” Ben said, settling into the chair next to her. “Ricky Johnson gets his stitches out next week.”

“I still can’t believe Lance did that.”

“I know,” Ben said, shaking his head. “You should see the looks he gets at the games.” But deep down, even though he knew it was wrong, Ben felt proud of his son in a way that he didn’t think he was ever going to be. Lance’s first fight, and it was a full-on cafeteria brawl, with paramedics and everything. “Tribe of the Mole,” Ben said.

“Tribe of the Mole,” said Queen Delilah, gazing out the kitchen window. She too felt strangely comforted, though for slightly different reasons. It was a small achievement, tiny in fact when compared to the mountain of anxiety she felt when she considered Lance’s future, but she had finally crossed one thing off the mental list of things to protect Lance from. Basketball players, of all things. She supposed it was as good a start as any.

The Velocity of Ed

To Do List Item 3: Travel to Thailand

In the end, the thing that surprised Ed the most was how easy it actually was to approach the ticket counter in Heathrow Airport, exchange his frequent flier miles for a ticket to Thailand, and find himself standing in the International Departures line, heading toward Southeast Asia. In his mind, for all these weeks, the task had seemed enormous. Travel to Thailand? Forget it. Forget The List. Forget everything. How on earth was he ever going to do something like “Travel to Thailand” when he had a wife and kids at home?

But here he stood, in his dark gray business suit, with his laptop computer and small overnight bag. Ed and Marvin had come straight to the airport after their meetings this morning, and they said goodbye to each other now as Ed prepared to leave for Bangkok and Marvin prepared to fly home to Washington, DC. “It’s an odd coincidence, don’t you think?” Ed asked.

“You are insane,” Marvin replied. “What will you tell Angelica?”

“What are the chances that there would be a flight to Thailand right when we get to the airport?”

“This is the busiest international airport in the world,” Marvin replied. “Your chances were actually quite good.”

Ed and Marvin, Workforce Injury Specialists for the U.S. Department of Labor, were in London attending a conference. Four times in three days they had delivered a 90-minute presentation entitled “The Ergonomic Workplace of the Future” about specially designed equipment, cubicles and office environments. They were both exhausted from

obsessive nights of watching British television in their hotel rooms. Ed favored the gritty crime dramas, while Marvin steered toward BBC News and had developed a crush on an anchorwoman named Jamila Jameson who pronounced Africa *Ah-freeka*. “Just listen,” Marvin would say when he called Ed from the adjoining room. “When Jamila Jameson and I have babies together, this is how they will pronounce their homeland.”

“You think your wife will like Jamilla Jameson?” Ed asked.

“I feel sure she will.”

Marvin, an engineer from the Democratic Republic of Congo, had emigrated to the U.S. after years of legal limbo in France, where he had been received as a political refugee. “It was not really so political,” Marvin explained years later, at happy hour with Ed, “as it was practical. The economy was ruined. My family was starving. These are the things you do for your family, no?”

Now, years later, as a Workforce Injury Specialist, Marvin specialized in repetitive strain injuries and ergonomics, and he loved to sing. He fought to keep American workers safe from carpal tunnel syndrome and the like, and he accompanied the FM radio, belting out American Top 40 and R&B songs.

“What about your easy chair?” Marvin asked, as they prepared to part ways in the airport. “You know you miss your chair.”

“You make me sound like an old man,” Ed replied.

“You are an old man.”

“I’m younger than you.”

“But I have youth in my heart,” Marvin said. “Your heart is dark and bitter.”

“I am the White Hunter,” Ed replied, and Marvin’s face split into a grin.

“You know that List is going to get you in trouble,” Marvin said.

“Have a safe flight,” Ed replied, and as he watched Marvin walk away shaking his head, Ed felt a sharp twinge of nervousness, and he thought, once more, of The List.

It was a handwritten agenda written on the back of a bar napkin that Ed had scrawled when he was a senior in college, 27 years ago. It was titled, “*10 Things to do Before You Die.*” Ed had forgotten about The List entirely until three weeks ago, when it fell out from between the pages of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. It had been stored away on a basement bookshelf, like a time capsule, for more than twenty years, until the moment Ed’s wife Angelica declared, “We’re getting rid of those old books in the basement.”

“Those are my books,” Ed had replied.

“You haven’t touched those books since we moved into this house,” Angelica said. “They’re getting bugs.”

“Bugs?” Ed asked. “Bugs don’t like books.” But when he wandered downstairs to the shelf, he drifted past the stiff spines and dusty titles of the books that smelled of mildew, and he was startled and slightly disgusted to find spider webs and mites and quick-darting silverfish scurrying over the weathered pages, as if his bookshelf had become some kind of subterranean ecosystem of its own, like a barrier reef or something.

Then his gaze landed on the hardbound heft of *Ulysses*, with the gold gilt print. I always meant to read that, Ed thought, placing a fingertip tentatively on edge of the dirty book.

* * *

Ed climbed out of the taxi and walked toward the water at Tit Bhong beach. Crystalline shades of blue and green stretched out before him, disappearing against the horizon of impossibly blue sky. White sand bars stretched out beneath the tranquil surface of the water, shimmering in the brilliant midday light. The sand on the beach gave easily, soft as powder under Ed's dark dress shoes, stretching out into a wide expanse. Palm trees swayed in the hot breeze. Locals and tourists gathered on the beach, sunbathing, swimming, playing games, and relaxing with food and drinks. Ed walked toward the water. He knew he must look like a bizarre figure, wearing a dark suit and fedora that he had picked up in the Camden Market in London. He wore large dark sunglasses, purchased from the Duty Free shop in the Bangkok airport, and carried a laptop computer and a small overnight bag as he strode over the hot white sand. A young boy with a canvas bag slung over his shoulder walked up to him and said in English, "You like pina colada? Cold beer? Very fresh."

"Do you take American dollars?"

The boy grinned.

"Give me something in a coconut."

To Do List Item 6: Read Ulysses

"Jesus Christ, Ed," Angelica said when he finally arrived home in a taxi. "Thailand? *Thailand?*"

“I got you a present,” Ed said, handing her a batik printed cloth. “They’re quite popular at the beach.”

Angelica stared at him, and her blue eyes looked almost as if they were examining a madman from the opposite side of a thick glass barrier through which neither party could communicate. She held a wet plate in her hand, poised over the open dishwasher, and her hair was pinned back with glittery butterfly barrettes. Ed couldn’t hear the girls and figured they must be in bed already. “Look,” she said as she dropped the plate into the rack, “it’s one thing if you decide to go for a ride in the country, or decide to go to the bar for happy hour, or even go bungee jumping – whatever. But Thailand?”

“It was only for one day,” Ed said. “I just needed to see it.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“I did call you.”

“You called me from *Bangkok*.”

Ed shrugged his shoulders, made a confused face. “It happened so fast: one minute I’m sitting there talking to Marvin, and the next thing I know I’m drinking out of a coconut on the beach. There wasn’t any other time.”

Angelica said, “I can’t believe we’re even having this conversation. It’s too weird. I cannot imagine what you were thinking.”

Ed was thinking about The List. He thought of telling her the truth – that a 27-year old bar napkin had inspired this momentary flight of madness. But he imagined that the truth would only make things worse right now. “Where did you get those barrettes?” he asked.

“The what?”

“The butterflies in your hair.”

“They’re Trixie’s.”

“You look cute.”

She gave him a sideways look and said, “Thank you.” Then she wiped off her hands and left the kitchen.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to bed,” Angelica said. “It’s been a long week.”

“It’s only Tuesday,” Ed said.

“I know.”

Angelica crossed the room and climbed the stairs, and Ed leaned on the counter and watched her. She still had her grace and her style, after all these years, and Ed flushed with a physical desire for her as he watched the soft sinewy lines of her back and hips and legs. He had been away for almost a week now, and he had hoped his homecoming would be a little more affectionate. He had hoped to be behind that closed bedroom door undressing his wife, laughing and kissing and moaning softly in her ear while she said, “Shhh, the girls will hear.”

Instead, he stood in the living room, listening for sounds of her dropping her barrettes and earrings onto the polished surface of her dresser in the bedroom at the top of the stairs.

Ed sighed and looked around at the dark television sitting opposite the easy chair. He didn’t want to watch TV though – the same old American shows and accents that he was accustomed to. They seemed dull all of a sudden, two-dimensional. Ed had been

living in three dimensions for the last week, and he wasn't ready to return to that flat existence.

Ed gazed across the room at the telltale clues of his family's secret inner lives – the pink heart with someone's initials drawn in the corner of Trixie's algebra homework, Gloria's matching Alice in Wonderland books and sippy cups. Then Ed spotted *Ulysses*. Sitting on the edge of the desk where he had left it. Ed crossed the room, and took the book in his hands. He flipped the pages until the book opened in the middle, where the napkin was still tucked away with the Young Ed's handwriting on it.

Looking over the items, Ed felt fascinated. Who was the young man who wrote these things? Ed felt like a complete stranger to this younger self that wanted something so exotic as a trip to Thailand. Ed didn't even recognize the handwriting on the napkin as his own, although he remembered vividly now the night he and his friends had sat around the bar, just weeks before graduation, each formulating their own lists over rounds of beer and whiskey.

He took a pen from the desktop, and he carefully drew a black line through item 3: "Travel to Thailand."

Then Ed walked over and sank into his easy chair with the book and the napkin. And finally, after all these years, he opened the book to page one, and began reading *Ulysses*.

To Do List Item 7: Birthday Party on Roller Skates

"No, seriously," Angelica said. "What do you want to do for your birthday?"

“Seriously,” Ed said. “Let’s go to the roller rink. We can invite everybody. Maybe we’ll do a seventies night.”

Two months had flown past since the “Thailand Incident,” which had, almost overnight, become legendary, both at the office and within his and Angelica’s circles of friends. People found the whole thing bizarre, hysterical, and strangely charming. Angelica had finally thawed, and even laughed about it once or twice that Ed knew of.

Only now she was looking at him like he was crazy again. “Are you trying to kill all your friends? When’s the last time you put on roller skates?”

Ed couldn’t remember. “Maybe fifth grade?”

“You do realize you’re in your fifth *decade* now, right?”

“It’ll be fun – we’ll have all the kids around to cushion our fall.”

At the Seven Corners Roller Rink, Ed careened on uncertain feet around the smooth polished floor of the rink. In the center of the floor, the DJ booth stood behind a waist-high wall, elevated on low risers. An enormous disco ball cast rainbow reflections across the floor and around the room. The DJ wore big dark sunglasses, a wide-collared shirt and gold chains on his neck, shining against his brown skin. “This one goes out to the birthday boy,” he said in a low smooth voice. “And to everyone else – whether you’re young, or young at heart – let’s get it *on*.” Marvin Gaye came blasting out through the speakers.

Kids whirled around the rink, weaving through the older, more unsteady crowd of skaters. Teenagers gathered by the concession stand, and Ed's daughter Trixie spoke in excited whispers and shrieks with Marvin's daughter, Tonya, and a couple of boys.

Gloria whirled like a dervish of dark curls and white lacey dress, threatening everyone in sight with slimy hands covered in birthday cake icing. Angelica and friends sat at strategically placed tables, where they could keep an eye on kids and look out over the skaters at the same time.

Ed started to get a feel for the roller skates, and moved with a little more confidence. He had already fallen twice, and each time knocked down Marvin as he tried to help Ed back up. Angelica had put her hands over her face as if she were embarrassed to be associated with Ed, but she smiled, and she blew him a kiss when he came around again.

Ed watched as couple all around him coupled up, holding hands and making trains. The more ambitious, and talented, couples looked like they were gliding across dance floors face to face. Ed wondered what it would take to get Angelica on a pair of skates, and then he heard a sound that made his mind go blank – young women laughing. The administrative assistants from Media Relations had skated out onto the floor, and they were coming up behind him. "Hey Ed," they called.

"Hey," he said.

"Let's be partners," they said. They surrounded him with their smiles and laughing. Ed had been surprised that the young women had come to his party, but ever since the Thailand Incident people had been hanging around the door of his office to chat more often, and besides, the women knew a lot of the other people here from the

Department. Now, they linked their arms through his arms and moved over the floor in a group. “You have to move your hips more,” one girl said. “Like this.”

Ed moved his hips, trying to mimic the girl’s moves. They all laughed. “No,” said a different girl. “Like *this*.”

Ed glided along through the disco lights, in a perfumed haze of seventies soul and lithe young office girls, trying to avoid running over other skaters – it was like navigating a sea of moving rocks.

In the car, on the way home, Angelica said, “Well you were Mr. Charming tonight.”

To Do List Item 9: Ride a Camel

Three weeks later, Ed walked with Marvin out of the office after work. They carried their laptop computers in overstuffed carrying bags and walked toward the Metro station. “Those young girls in Media Relations – they love you.”

“You’re the one who sings for them.”

“I’m afraid I have lost their hearts,” Marvin said. “They love the great White Hunter now.”

Just then, near the Metro station, Ed spotted a poster for a circus that was coming to town. Brightly colored, animated, with big yellow letters, the poster practically leapt off the wall. And there was a camel. Ed had been wondering recently where exactly one goes to find a camel, aside from Egypt. “Of course,” he said. “The circus.”

Marvin stopped beside Ed to admire the poster. “What are you up to now?” he asked.

“I need to ride a camel.”

“Of course you do.”

Ed had told Marvin about The List, but Ed never mentioned what specifically was included on there. As the men gazed over the garish poster it occurred to Ed that he could propose practically anything in the world, and Marvin would nod his head in approval and say, “Do it.”

Further, people who had no idea about The List, like Angelica, were becoming strangely supportive of his odd behavior. It was fun after all – who doesn’t like roller skate parties? Or circuses?

Gloria was unimpressed with the camel.

“It’ll be fun,” Ed said. “I’ll ride with you.”

Gloria squeezed the tip of her nose, indicating the smell of the animals which she apparently didn’t approve of.

“A real live camel,” Ed said excitedly, positioning them in the Camel Ride line.

The entire circus set up inside the downtown arena: trapeze artists and tightrope performers, contortionists and clowns on motorcycles. Elephants danced and tigers roared in the big cage. Gloria was particularly moved by the glow-in-the-dark wand that Ed bought for her at the gift stand. She waved it in the air, and then touched him on the head. “I changed you,” she said.

“What did you change me into?”

“I’m not telling.” Then she changed him again. And again.

When it was their turn to ride the camel which walked in a large straw-strewn circle, Ed Put Gloria into the large handle-barred saddle, and then he started to climb up too. The man holding the camel said, “It’s for the kids.”

Ed stopped with his foot in the air. “I’d like to ride too.”

“It’s for the kids.”

“Yes, but I’d like to ride too.”

“Sorry, man.”

“You don’t understand,” Ed said. “I need to ride this camel.”

The man was unmoved, even when Ed produced his government ID and pretended to be a top-ranking political appointee. “How about this?” Ed asked, holding out a twenty dollar bill. “The saddle’s gonna be a little small for you,” the man said

“I’ll be fine,” Ed said, climbing up behind Gloria.

Around the straw-strewn pen, they could see all across the circus from the back of the camel, crowds of people moving through the strange scenery. Ed felt giddy, like he must be glowing, like his warmth could fill a big top with light and laughter. Gloria held her nose and looked highly annoyed, rocking back and forth on the back of the smelly creature.

To Do Item 6: Read Ulysses

Angelica came into the quiet and dim light of the living room where Ed sat in his easy chair. She smelled good, like shampoo and bathwater, perched on the edge of the chair. Gloria had demanded to be bathed and put to bed when she got home from the circus. All Ed wanted was a beer and to relax in the afterglow of another strange night. “Are you still reading that book?” Angelica asked.

“Yeah.”

“Is it good?”

“It’s bizarre.”

She tousled Ed’s hair and moved off toward the bedroom. “You coming to bed?”

“Yes, in a bit.”

“Goodnight,” she said.

“Goodnight.”

Alone in the semi-dark with his book and his list, Ed imagined himself in a palace. He imagined a mountaintop, remote, with a fortress of stone, full of shadows. The shadows rose from the stones, moved through the echoing halls, stood quiet in the swirling wind. The shadows were all Ed’s former selves that he had nearly forgotten. The wind blew in the long billowing curtains. Ed imagined that the shadows gathered around him, whispering reminders of past lives, past girlfriends, past dreams and youthful ambitions, as he sat in his chair, reading into the night.

Item 1: Parachute

“I’m going parachuting,” Ed said.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Angelica said. “We’re going to visit your mother today.”

“Aw shit,” Ed said. “I forgot.”

“I’m sure you can parachute some other time,” Angelica said.

“But I have reservations. And Marvin’s on his way over.”

“Marvin’s going to jump out of a plane?”

“He just wants to watch.”

“What about your mother? I made her cookies.”

“Can you go see her?”

Angelica put a hand on her hip. “You want me to drive to Front Royal to visit your mother while you go parachuting?”

“Please?”

Falling through the air, Ed peed on himself, just a little. The instructor, who was strapped tightly to Ed’s back, yelled loudly to be heard over the sound of the air rushing past: “Do you want to try a flip?”

“Okay,” Ed yelled as he stared down at the earth, wondering where, on that wide swath of planet, Marvin was standing with his binoculars.

“Bend at the waist,” the instructor yelled. Ed bent, and the world spun away, and Ed thought he was going to throw up. He had a sudden vision of his life, as if this were his dying moment. He saw Angelica and the girls. He saw his mother. He saw Marvin

and the jump instructor. Everyone was frowning and shaking their heads. From behind Ed, as if Death himself were strapped to his back, the instructor yelled, “Pretty wild, huh?”

“Yeah,” Ed yelled. “Pretty wild.”

To Do List Item 2: Play in a Band

“Hey Marvin,” Ed said as he walked into Marvin’s office, which always felt like a place of tidy efficiency, with photos arranged neatly on the desk and bookshelf, and a well-tended plant in the windowsill beside the radio. Ed’s office always seemed more of a work in progress, with several ongoing projects and rearrangements halfway finished.

Marvin spun around in his swivel desk chair. “Yes?” he asked.

“Isn’t your cousin in a band?”

“No.”

“I thought you said he was in some kind of a band.”

“He plays in a drum circle,” Marvin said. “It’s not really a band.”

Ed absorbed this for a moment. “Do you think they would let me play with them?”

“It is an African drum circle.”

“That’s fine.”

“Do you even own a drum?”

“No.”

“Of course you don’t,” Marvin said. “I’ll ask my cousin.”

* * *

Sound filled the room, from the very first beat, and Ed was surprised at the volume, ringing off the walls, thumping in his chest. At first it was a big steady beat with everyone playing the same rhythm. Ed played tentatively, keeping 1-2 time on his brand new jimbay. Then, one by one, other drummers began to peel away from the bass beat and improvise new rhythms that wove seamlessly with the original. Staccato melodies rang out, and fast paced rhythms turned circles inside the deeper longer rhythms. Ed was impressed.

The other players smiled, looked around, called to each other over the music. Then, slowly, they began to sway more deeply, close their eyes, get lost in the sound that was swelling up through the house, filling every nook and cranny. Ed watched the black hands on the skins of the drums. Like watching hummingbirds' wings.

Later, while they were taking a break, the drummers passed around a large joint. Ed hadn't smoked pot in a long time, not since before he was married. The drummers laughed at him as he coughed up a swirling blue cloud of smoke. "Like the drum," one of them said to him. "It gets better with practice."

Ed took another drag off the joint, and after a while, as his body started coming unattached from his mind, and the drumming resumed, Ed felt a warm connection with the universe. He was no longer in this small house, decorated with African masks and paintings, in the Maryland suburbs. With his eyes closed, he was gliding along on a current in the Milky Way, somewhere over Africa.

Item 4: Teach a Class of Children

Three weeks later, Ed sat with Angelica at a parent-teacher conference at Fairfax Junior High School. Angelica wasn't speaking to Ed. He had failed to come home again last night after drum circle, and even though he offered a perfectly reasonable explanation, which was a lie, she had ignored him completely, and continued to do so, which made him feel a little more justified about his being dishonest in the first place. He had claimed he drank too much and couldn't drive the car home last night. In reality, some girls had come over, and they had all stayed up very late smoking pot and listening to music, and Ed had flirted shamelessly with a girl who was little more than half his age, and at some point he had passed out on the sofa, where he woke this morning, already late for work.

Strangely, Ed wasn't bothered that Angelica had stopped talking to him. It somehow made things easier. She didn't understand his journey. She didn't understand his newfound connection with the Milky Way and the African drum and his imaginary palace full of younger selves, and it was easier for Ed to say nothing at all than to try and explain these things.

Further, Ed found it amusing – in a dark way, admittedly – that even though they were not talking to each other, he and Angelica sat here together talking through Mr. Richardson, Trixie's science and math teacher. "Trixie's father has been sort of absent lately," Angelica said, "which might help explain her slipping grades."

Ed wondered if Mr. Richardson ever smoked pot. Ed marveled at the way the man sat straight as a post in his wooden seat behind the desk.

"There's always after-school tutoring," Mr. Richardson said.

“You have excellent posture,” Ed commented.

“Excuse me?”

“Your posture – it’s very good.”

Angelica shot Ed an incredulous look, and Mr. Richardson looked at Angelica, apparently hoping to find some explanation in her expression. “I study ergonomics,” Ed explained. “For the Department of Labor. You are a textbook example of the way to hold a body in a seated position.”

“I’m ex-Marine Corps,” Mr. Richardson said, seemingly flattered.

“Yes, I’ve heard,” Ed said. Then Ed leaned forward with a smile and an idea. “You know, I give presentations on ergonomics and Repetitive Stress Injuries.”

“To junior high school students?” Mr. Richardson asked.

“Absolutely.”

Angelica stared at Ed like he had three heads, but Ed persisted. Ever since he began crossing items off his list he had been feeling sort of euphoric. He had discovered a new shinier Ed just beneath the surface of the old dull Ed, and he loved it. He clawed his way out of the old body like some kind of giant, slightly overweight butterfly. Every time Ed crossed an item off of The List, or thought of crossing an item off, he experienced a rush of adrenaline and confidence. He leaned toward Mr. Richardson’s desk and said, “It could be good for these kids to learn some practical, science-based self-discipline.”

Mr. Richardson considered Ed for a moment, looking at him with those blue eyes set in a well-positioned head. “We *have* finished up our astronomy section ahead of schedule.”

“There you go,” Ed said, and he noticed, out of his periphery, Angelica holding her fingertips against her eyelids and shaking her head.

Ed waved when Trixie came into the room, and she went directly to her desk and put her head down on her stack of books. After a brief introduction, Ed began his presentation:

“The Ergonomic Classroom of the Future.”

Everything went well until Mr. Richardson switched off the lights for the PowerPoint slides. Then all of a sudden, every boy in the room seemed to develop a nasty cough. Girls all got a case of the giggles. A bent paperclip, fired from a rubber band, struck Ed in the back of the head.

Ed looked out through the teen-infested shadows and saw Mr. Richardson prowling the aisles as Ed spoke about carpal tunnel syndrome. Ed was startled by shouts of “Ha!” as Mr. Richardson came up behind some student who was whispering or pencil fighting or tossing spitballs. “Ha!” from across the darkened room, and Ed looked around skittishly. What the hell was this? A classroom, or some bizarre scene from *Apocalypse Now*?

As Mr. Richardson drifted off to the right side of the classroom, Ed heard a low buzz of conversation coming from the left. He looked left, and peering from the shadows were the faces of six boys, lit up by the dim white light of the projector, looking at him with smiles. They looked like they were up to something. To the left: “Ha!” and Ed jumped noticeably.

Finally the presentation ended, and Ed walked with Trixie down the crowded hall of the junior high school. “I thought that went pretty well,” Ed said.

“You’re covered in spitballs.”

“What?” Ed looked down at his suit.

“They’re on your back. Those jerks from the wrestling team got you every time you turned around.”

Trixie helped him wipe them off, then wiped her hand on his suit pants. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I’m going to get them back.”

“No, don’t get them back.”

“I’ve got ways,” Trixie said, deadly earnest.

Ed looked at her, suddenly wondering what, exactly, his raspberry-scented daughter was like when he wasn’t around. Or even when he was.

To Do List Item 8: Punch Philip Glass

“I’m not sure about this,” Marvin said, standing in the busy hallway outside the men’s room of Stella’s, a fancy downtown restaurant where politicians and businessmen and women went for power lunches and off-the-record happy hours.

“Nothing to worry about,” Ed said, even as he realized how he was shifting his weight from one foot to the other nervously while waiters and busboys hurried past.

“You just act surprised to see me.”

“You have done some crazy things,” Marvin said. “But this is *crazy*. You will punch this man?”

“More like a love tap,” Ed said. “An *accidental* love tap.”

“He must have made you very angry.”

Ed shrugged his shoulders. “It was a long time ago.”

They had followed Philip Glass into the restaurant and waited for this exact moment, when he went to the restroom, to take up their positions here outside the door, lost amid the lunchtime bustle of the wait staff. Philip had been easy to track down with a couple of quick internet searches – he had become a high end political pollster, still working in Washington, DC. He had put on weight, Ed noticed, and he wore an eye patch over his right eye for some reason.

“It is bad luck to strike a one-eyed man,” Marvin said.

“I’ll be careful,” Ed replied.

“Do not hit him in the eye,” Marvin said.

“The good eye, or the bad one?” Ed asked.

“We should leave,” Marvin said.

“We can’t leave.”

“I’m leaving,” Marvin said. “You have gone too far.”

“What? We haven’t done anything yet.”

“We should not be hitting strangers,” Marvin whispered emphatically, using hand gestures to exaggerate his point, and drawing curious looks from passing waiters.

“I’m barely going to touch him,” Ed whispered. “Just one tap.”

“This man could sue you!”

“Now!” Ed whispered as he noticed the bathroom door opening.

Marvin threw his arms in the air and shouted excitedly, “Ed? Is that you?”

Ed, pretending to have just noticed his long lost friend Marvin for the first time since they fought together in the Foreign Legion, years ago, shouted back. “My god! Marvin!” and he threw his arms in the air too, and flung himself at Marvin for a hug, and out of the corner of his eye he aimed his right hand at Philip Glass, who peered at them both as he emerged from the men’s room. Ed had intended to land a very soft, glancing blow, but in his zeal, he badly miscalculated his own velocity. He knocked Marvin backwards, and, tumbling through the air, he flung his fist directly, and firmly, into Philip Glass’s face, and then all three men, tumbling on tangled feet, barreled over onto the smooth tiled floor. “Ahh!” Philip yelled. “My eye!” and he reached out spasmodically and grabbed a waiter by the ankle, sending a shower of dirty plates crashing onto the floor.

Ed lay among the twisting bodies and shattered remains of porcelain dinnerware, listening to the frantic voices of restaurant staff and the indignant bellowing of Philip Glass. This was so utterly absurd; Ed fought to contain his laughter.

To Do List Item 6: Read Ulysses

“Are you still reading that Book?” Angelica asked, coming into the living room where Ed sat in his chair. It was late, and she was getting ready for bed. The house was finally quiet after all the fighting tonight. Angelica and Trixie fought about tutoring over the summer, and then Ed and Angelica got in a fight about the new band that Ed was playing with. Trixie had stormed out of the house. Angelica had taken over the kitchen. Ed had retreated to the living room. Gloria had cried herself to sleep.

“Yes,” Ed said. “I’m still reading this book.”

“It’s been months now,” she said.

“It’s a big book.”

“Hmm,” she said, lingering for a moment before she went off toward the bedroom.

Alone with his thoughts, Ed pulled out The List from between the pages of the book. He gazed over all the crossed out items – eight of them now. He felt a tremendous sense of satisfaction. As if he were knocking down walls, Ed felt his life becoming bigger and more expansive – after all if he could punch a man in the face in public and get away with it Scott free, what *couldn't* he do?

He gazed over the last two items on the list, the last two walls to knock down: one was the easiest task on the agenda, and the other was the hardest. He never imagined he would actually have to decide between them. He never thought he would get this far. But here he sat in the darkened living room, casting a single large shadow over the beige carpet. His stomach tensed. He stared at the hardest task on the The List. “Can I really do this?” he asked the long shadow.

The sound of Angelica dropping an earring on the polished top of her dresser bolstered his confidence. She was going to bed without him, again. He could do this, no big deal. He could.

To Do List Item 5: Sleep With a Hooker

Ed shuffled nervously over the turquoise carpet as he followed Sung Lu down the hallway of the Little Korea massage parlor, toward the wooden door marked number 5. Sung Lu was young, no older than twenty he guessed, and she wore the traditional kimono, like all the women he had seen who worked here. Her skin was pale, very soft-looking at the nape of her neck where her hair was pulled back into a long dark pony tail, tied up with a scrunchy. Trixie had a scrunchy just like that.

A ceiling lamp lit room 5, it's bright glare reflecting off the worn tiled floors. Towels and massage oils and lotions filled a shelf against the wall. Sung Lu waited outside the door as Ed removed his clothes and lay on the massage table in the center of the room, wearing just a towel.

Sung Lu came back into the room. "Ready?" she asked.

"Ready as ever," Ed said.

"Full body?"

"Full body," Ed said.

"O-K."

Sung Lu went to work on Ed's back, rubbing oil into his skin. Her small strong hands worked the muscles in Ed's neck and shoulders. It felt wonderful. "You so tight," she said.

"You can't imagine," Ed said.

Sung Lu massaged Ed's back, his legs, his arms. Ed floated off in the sensation of it. The soft hands working into his body sent him reeling until he almost forgot why

he was here. Then, after what seemed like a nice long dream, Sung Lu came to a finish. “You all set?” she asked.

Ed opened his eyes, struck by a jolt of conscious thought. What should he do now? He wasn’t all set, not yet. He rolled over onto his back, the towel still loosely in place. Sung Lu was close, and he took her hand. She looked at him and he hesitated. “Yes?” she said.

Ed swallowed. He couldn’t look her in the eyes. “Yes?” she repeated, and he finally pulled her hand toward him and moved it beneath his towel. Sung Lu yanked her hand back, out of his grip. Oh shit, Ed thought. He had just made a terrible mistake. And then Sung Lu squinted her eyes, looked at him intensely, and said in a hushed tone, “You swear to god you no police?”

“No,” Ed said. “I’m not the police.”

“You swear to god?”

“I swear to god.”

“O-K,” Sung Lu said, and she went to the door and locked the handle. She came back and moved her hand under his towel. She touched Ed lightly, and his body responded tentatively. Then she touched him with both hands, massaging, and his body responded more vigorously, going firm and erect. Sung Lu poured lotion into her palm, and she pulled the towel away from him, and she slowly stroked Ed until he moaned out loud. “Shh,” she said, her soft hands moving slowly up and down over his glistening skin.

Then she stopped. “You want the hand?” she asked. “Or you want to go all the way?”

Ed hesitated. “All the way,” he finally said.

“One hundred dollars extra.”

“All right.”

“Now,” she said.

“Oh. All right.” Ed got up slowly, and went to his pants. He wished he had wrapped the towel around himself as he came back across the room, naked and erect, with a hundred dollar bill in his hand.

Sung Lu tucked the bill away into a pocket in her kimono, and then she untied the sash and let the dress fall away. She laid it over the chair. She removed her shoes and her bra and her panties. Then she walked back to Ed who was lying on the table. She rubbed him with lotion until he groaned again, and then she slipped a condom onto him. She climbed up onto the table and straddled him.

Ed looked down the length of her body; she was gorgeous. Young face, young breasts, slim young stomach and hips. Her pony tail of shining hair snaked over her shoulder, and Ed looked down at the dark hair between her legs. He felt bewitched, like he couldn't possibly be lying here beneath this nymph. She reached down and held him as she descended slowly. He felt the hair, the skin, felt himself begin to slip inside of her. He closed his eyes, tilted his head back – and then he grabbed her by the hips. “Wait,” he said. He held her still, poised over top of him.

“What?” she said.

“Stop,” he said.

“What wrong?”

In the split second where he closed his eyes and felt the girl sliding down onto him, Ed had a sudden reflexive vision of his wife, the only other woman who had slid down onto him during the last two decades, and it sent a cold jolt through his body. He imagined Angelica's face over him, until he opened his eyes, and then she faded to mist, leaving this young, confused stranger looking down at him. Ed's chest was like a fist uncoiling. "I can't," he said to Sung Lu. "I can't do this."

He felt himself falling, shrinking, sliding away from between the girl's legs.

"No refunds," she said, climbing off the table.

"Alright," he said.

To Do List Item 10: Write a Love Letter, and Give it to a Stranger

Ed sat at Kramer's café in Dupont circle and tapped a pen against the palm of his hand. It had taken more than two months for Ed to arrive here, and to tackle this last item on his To Do List. After the Little Korea incident, Ed's euphoria had crashed down around him. What had he been doing? What was he thinking? What was it all about? He had retreated to his easy chair and turned it back around toward the television. After all he had been through – to fall short at the very end. His former self had built an impossible situation for his older self, or perhaps it was the other way around. Damned if you do, damned if you don't, Ed thought.

Finally, however, Ed had retrieved *Ulysses* from under the chair, and he thumbed his way to the final chapters where he had left off. He began reading again. When he

read the last page, he closed the book, and gazing out the dark windows, he realized he had one final leg of this particular odd journey of his.

“Jesus,” Ed said now, sitting at the cafe window and trying to think like a lover. “This is harder than I thought.”

Ed could write an entire handbook on ergonomically correct keyboards, but he couldn't seem to write a single page of poetry or emotion. I'm stunted, he thought.

He knew whatever stranger he handed this letter to was not going to know anything about him, but still, he wanted it to be a good love letter. He crumpled the sheet of paper he was working on, and started over at the beginning:

Hello, beautiful . . . No. Be assured I am not following you right now . . . No. Memorandum Concerning Love . . . Ed crumpled another piece of paper and stared through the window of the coffee shop, watching strangers walk by on the sidewalk. A river of strangers flowing endlessly down the street, and Ed was supposed to choose one and offer her – or him – his affections of love. It reminded Ed of the carnival games at the State Fair where Trixie used to pluck a random plastic duck out of the water, and the number on the bottom of the duck corresponded to a certain prize on the wall. The anticipation was nearly always better than the prize, and Ed always wound up walking with an armful of trinkets and cheap stuffed animals. Ed gazed out the window, thinking of Angelica and the girls.

Then he thought of all the time he had been spending at the office. He thought about band practice. He thought about Sung Lu. He thought of sitting up at night listening to his wife get ready for bed without him. “My god,” Ed said to the window.

“Talk about strangers – I can’t remember the last time I had a real conversation with my own wife.”

Ed wondered where she was, what she was doing right now. He wondered if she might drift past the café window, part of the river of strangers – would he even spot her? Would she look at him through the window and keep walking? He imagined Angelica gliding away down the sidewalk without giving him a second glance.

It occurred to Ed for the first time, in this very moment, that he had been so concerned with kicking out all the walls of his life that he forgot to wonder what was left to support the roof. Ed pulled a fresh sheet of paper out and began the love letter:

Dear Angelica . . .

He felt his stomach rise when he finally turned onto his own street, but when Ed pulled up in front of the house, the windows appeared dark. Oh, Ed thought, disappointed. No one’s home yet.

He went up the front walk to his small house in the Fairfax suburbs, and turned his key in the lock. It made a hollow sound, and Ed felt strangely anxious. When he pushed the door open, however, he realized there was a light on in the back of the house. “Anyone there?” he said. “I’m home.”

He smelled a trace of Angelica’s perfume in the hall, and he paused to inhale.

Tripwire

Jerry's new leg was made of titanium, polished steel, and sculpted plastic, with a microchip in the knee that read fifty impulses per second. It looked sleek, with a size-twelve Adidas tennis shoe on the robotic foot to match the one on Jerry's remaining flesh and bone foot. "I'm the bionic man," Jerry said, sitting in his hospital bed, letting his legs dangle side by side.

In a white t-shirt and blue gym shorts, Jerry was still built like thick rope, muscled and tight. Dark hair freshly cut. Constellations of large pale scars covered his arms and leg, reminders of the white hot shrapnel.

"Half man, half machine," Tobias said, standing in the sunlight that was streaming through the windows in steep angles. "You're like Darth Vader."

"Fuckin right," Jerry said. "The doctors say I'll be able to play football, drive a car, wrestle women in baby oil."

Tobias smiled as a reply, but it felt strange, like wearing a mask. He had no doubt that Jerry would play football again, drive his new truck, take girls home from bars, and have sex with his cowboy boots on, just like the old days when they were growing up together. Tobias ran a hand over his own close-cropped hair. "Don't get *too* good on that thing," he said. "Or they'll send you back to Baghdad."

"Shit," said Jerry. "I'd like to find the fuckers that put me in this bed." There was a pause while both men looked at the polished titanium. Tobias had a vivid memory of Jerry's real leg, burned flesh and broken bone, lying in the road. Explosions ripping in the narrow city street, bullets pinging off cinderblock house fronts, his mouth full of

cement dust and sand. Jerry had been torn to pieces, riddled with shrapnel wounds, screaming. “Give me my leg! Give me my gun! Give me my goddamn leg!” Tobias remembered how slippery Jerry was, writhing in the road, covered in blood. Tobias finally locked his fingers through an ammo belt and dragged Jerry through a doorway, leaving a smear across the road.

In the hospital though, in the April sunshine, in a room with bright white sheets, Jerry dangled his new leg of metal and sculpted plastic from the bed. “It’s good to see you, man,” he said. “Thanks for coming all the way out here.”

“You look good,” Tobias said.

“I’ve been working out,” Jerry said. “How’s everyone at home?”

“My mama said to tell you hello, and Mrs. Anderson said they’re putting another care package together for you.”

“Tell Mrs. Anderson to send me her hot-ass cheerleader daughter. *That* would be a care package.”

“I’ll mention that.”

“I saw her on TV.”

“Mrs. Anderson?”

“Her daughter. On ESPN, during the basketball game. You wanna talk about some March Madness? That girl looks good.”

Just then a female nurse walked into the room in a clean blue uniform with her hair pulled back into a pony tail. She brought a faint scent of raspberry shampoo with her. Jerry inhaled deeply and winked at Tobias. “Speaking of looking good, have you met Nurse Annie yet?” he asked.

“Good morning,” Nurse Annie said as she pulled the sheets from the bed next to his. Jerry’s roommate had just been discharged to home care.

Jerry leaned back into his bed. “Toby and I are need of some feminine attentions, Nurse Annie. What can you prescribe?”

“A cold sponge bath,” Nurse Annie replied without looking up, traces of a smile at the corners of her mouth.

“Who’s administering today?” Jerry asked.

“I believe Carl is on duty this morning.”

“Well,” Jerry said. “Carl does have a nice technique. It’s all in the wrist, you know.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Nurse Annie said.

Later that day, at the edge of the tidal basin, Tobias walked beneath the cherry blossoms. It was like walking through a snow globe on a child’s bedside table – legions of white and pale pink petals in every direction, waving on the old gnarled branches of Japanese cherry trees that lined the water’s edge, making a ring around the Jefferson Memorial in downtown Washington DC. The petals fell loose in the breeze, drifted in waves across the air and fell to the ground or gathered on the still dark water. Grass grew lush at the water’s edge, the shade was deep and serene, and the sounds of the city were muffled, distant, as Tobias glided over the walkway. He absent-mindedly scanned the ground as he walked, looking for traps and tripwires, anything out of the ordinary – until he realized

what he was doing. You're not in Oz anymore, he thought with a wry grin. The bad guys are far away from here.

In his unit, the Army 1st Armored Division, they called Tobias the Lucky Charm. He was very good at spotting traps and IED's – Improvised Explosive Devices – in time to stop or veer out of harm's way. He could spot a tripwire or a remote control antenna from the front seat of a carrier moving fifty miles an hour. Even now, in the heart of Washington D.C., he kept glancing over the ground out of nerves and reflex, looking for empty cans, wires, disturbed ground, fresh pavement, any signs of danger. He hated to miss anything.

Like the bomb that blew off Jerry's leg while they were riding in an armored troop carrier. Tobias never saw that one coming, a big tank killer buried right in the middle of the road. No one can see them all, he told himself, walking through the cherry blossoms.

He passed a family having a picnic in the grass beneath one of the blooming trees. Tobias watched the children as they ran and laughed. They were dark-skinned Latino, chasing each other around the old gnarled trunks of the cherry trees. They looked up when they saw Tobias, smiled at him. Tobias thought of the crowds of children that came out to greet the military patrols, or to jeer at them. The children gave thumbs-up signs. Tobias learned, however, that there was a careful distinction between a friendly thumbs-up and a fuck you thumbs-up in the local culture. Tobias never trusted the kids after he learned that. He made aggressive gestures with his machine gun when they came too close.

Jerry loved the kids though. He gave them candies and small treats. He would stand in the road, his tall, muscled frame covered in body armor and weaponry, telling jokes and blowing giant bubbles with his chewing gum for crowds of chattering children, like some kind of post-apocalypse warrior-clown.

Tobias, beneath the cherry blossoms, looked over at the mother of the dark-skinned children. Long hair, and large dark eyes, she leaned back on her elbow on a blanket in the grass, speaking with her husband. Tobias stared at her, transfixed, and remembered a dark-eyed girl, younger than this woman but similar in features, from the Baghdad streets. He remembered vividly the girl's eyes staring back at him, her breath on his face as he touched her cheek. His stomach tightened.

Just then the mother looked over and saw Tobias staring at her. The smile vanished from her face, and Tobias looked away quickly, gazed over the dark water.

At the hospital the next day, Jerry collapsed into his bed after physical therapy. Tobias watched dark sweat stains spread out slowly from Jerry's body on the white sheets while he twisted his body, trying to get comfortable as waves of pain passed through him.

"How did it go?" Tobias asked from his perch by the windowsill.

"I walked halfway across a fucking gym," Jerry said.

"Sweet," Tobias said. "You'll be line dancing with Mrs. Anderson's hot-ass cheerleader daughter in no time."

"Toby, do you know how pathetic it is to be excited about walking one hundred feet?"

“You’ll walk two hundred tomorrow.”

“Two hundred might kill me.”

Nurse Annie walked into the room with a cup of pills. “How’s everyone today?” she asked.

“I need a sponge bath and a cold beer,” Jerry said.

“I’ll arrange a bath,” Nurse Annie said.

“And the beer?” Jerry asked.

“I’m afraid this is as good as it gets,” she said, pouring a glass of water and handing him the cup of pills.

Jerry turned to Tobias. “You see how it is here?” Jerry said. “You ask for a beer, and you get a cup full of antibiotics and blood coagulants.”

Nurse Annie headed for the door. “There’s a pain pill in there,” she said over her shoulder. “I’ll send someone to help with your bath.”

Jerry and Tobias watched her go, inhaled the faint scent of raspberries, gazed at the empty doorway where she had been standing. “I need a fucking beer,” Jerry said.

Tobias took a taxi back downtown. The cab glided down Massachusetts Avenue beneath a canopy of sunshine and hardwood trees, past rows of neat brick houses with white columns and lawns and front porches. He was absent-mindedly scanning the road for IED’s until he realized, once again, what he was doing, and he looked away from the roadside. Out the windshield, he watched as the cab snaked around Wilson Circle and made its way down along Embassy Row. A woman walking on the sidewalk caught

Tobias's eye. She wore a business suit and carried a shoulder bag, but there was something familiar in the way she held herself, in the sight of her long dark hair. She turned up the walkway to one of the large stone buildings as the cab passed, and Tobias resisted the urge to turn and stare at her out the back window. He knew that if he looked closely she was not the young woman from Baghdad, but that didn't seem to stop the young woman from appearing everywhere he looked. He preferred to imagine that there was some possibility that it was really her, that she had somehow projected herself onto that street, into that suit, just to appear in the periphery of Tobias's vision, just to remind him that she was there. He imagined the girl's dark eyes, her wine red lips, the sun-soaked stretch of houses crowded along the lane that ran past her front door.

Just then, out the side windows of the cab, Tobias sensed something wrong. Glancing quickly left and right, he saw two dark-clad figures – one on each side of the vehicle – closing in fast, moving swiftly on bicycles, with large bags strapped on their bodies. Tobias reached instinctively for his weapon, but there was no M-4 assault rifle on the seat next to him now.

The riders were only yards away, wearing mirrored wrap around sunglasses – Tobias imagined he could see his own reflection in them, his face twisted with fear as the two riders detonated their charges, and the ball of fire and smoke and metal enveloped them all. Tobias remembered instantly the explosion that erupted from the armored carrier when their patrol ran over the tank killer. Fire and smoke and mangled bodies clawing their way across the dirt. Then the fighting had begun – machine gun fire and rocket launchers. The whole patrol had been pinned down in a cross fire right in the middle of a residential neighborhood. Tobias leapt out of the truck to lay down cover fire

while the soldiers scrambled into a fighting position. Then the rocket hit the corner of the truck, and Tobias went flying. He woke up moments later, face down in the road. “Fall back!” yelled the Sergeant. “Get into those houses!”

Tobias spat cement dust and sand. He looked up and saw the charred leg lying just in front of him. Holy fuck, he thought. Whose leg is that?

Tobias, in the back of the taxi cab now, snapped into action, smacking the back of the drivers seat with the heel of his palm and screaming at the driver: “Evade! Evade! Evade!”

The startled driver nearly crashed into oncoming traffic as Tobias screamed commands from the back seat. The driver skidded to a stop at the side of the road. “What the fuck you doing?” he yelled over his shoulder, staring wide-eyed at Tobias who lay across the black vinyl seat with his fists clenched.

Tobias swallowed hot shallow breaths of recycled cab air as he sat up and looked out the back window, watching the two bicycle messengers pass each other on their way to destinations along Embassy Row. They were carrying bags of mail and packages. Nothing more.

“What the fuck?” repeated the cab driver. “You trying to kill somebody?”

“Sorry,” said Tobias, recovering his breath, remembering where he was, feeling the tension seep out of his coiled body.

“Sorry?” the driver said. “That’s all you’ve got to say?”

“How about ‘drive the fucking car?’”

“How about ‘take a fucking walk?’ You like that one?”

* * *

Tobias hid two Budweisers in a lunch bag when he went back to the hospital. He and Jerry poured the beer into hospital cups and toasted the titanium appendage that was sitting on the desk against the far wall. “To my new leg,” Jerry said.

“To your new leg.”

They took long sips of the beer and Jerry laid his head back and closed his eyes. “You remember that time we wrecked my dad’s pickup out by the reservoir and had to walk back into town?”

“Through the locusts,” Tobias said.

“The fucking locusts.”

“The seventeen-year swarm,” Tobias replied. “We could hardly hear each other talk.”

“And we finally got to Mr. P’s,” Jerry said

“That was a good beer.” Tobias replied.

“This beer is even better,” Jerry said.

Tobias smiled, and remembered, and looked at Jerry’s leg on the desk, and instead of homesickness, he had a strange feeling of jealousy, almost as though he wanted a titanium limb of his own. He admired the polished shafts and intricate joints, the smooth, cold look of it. He knew Jerry was thinking of mountains, moonshine, and girlfriends. Tobias, however, could almost feel the leg, feel himself walking on electronic joints with microprocessors reading fifty impulses per second. After a moment Jerry said, “So what the fuck’s wrong with you anyway?”

“What are you talking about?” Tobias asked

“You’re not right,” Jerry said, sitting up and taking another sip. “I think you’re spending too much time in this hospital.”

“I’m fine,” Tobias said. “A little stressed out, you know?”

“Stressed out?” Jerry said. “You’re on two-week leave, man. You should be doing nothing but fucking and sleeping.”

“I haven’t met any nice girls,” Tobias said, forcing a smile again. “And I can’t sleep; I miss the heat.”

He didn’t mention the nightmares that haunted him ever since he got back to the states. He didn’t mention the dark-eyed girl that had been creeping up on him everywhere he went.

“Here,” Jerry said, speaking in a low voice. “I want you to take this.”

He handed Tobias a piece of paper with a phone number on it. “What’s this?” Tobias asked.

“It’s a friend of mine,” Jerry said. “I want you to call her.”

“What kind of friend?”

“A very talented friend,” Jerry said. “Who will set you back about two hundred dollars for an hour. At least that’s what she charges for house calls.”

“House calls?” Tobias asked, looking at his one-legged friend lying prone in a hospital bed.

“She’s a very friendly girl. She even brings care packages.”

“You’re kidding me,” Tobias said. “You call hookers into the hospital?”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Jerry said. “It’s a more limited selection than if you were at the restaurant itself, but a starving man is not going to complain about eating from the appetizer section of the menu, now is he?”

A genuine smile spread across Tobias’s face, and he shook his head.

Jerry said, “But you’ve got to keep this quiet, man. If the staff here finds out about the girl behind the curtain . . .” Jerry reached over and closed the thin divider curtain that separated his bed from the next, concealing himself and Tobias. “There are going to be some disappointed soldiers.”

Tobias looked at the phone number in his hand.

“She can help you,” Jerry said.

“She specializes in the maimed?” Tobias asked, and suddenly wished he hadn’t.

Jerry smiled and took a long sip of beer. “It’s only one part of the male anatomy she’s concerned with; she can do without all the rest.”

Tobias sat at a sidewalk table at a busy café on 18th Street, sipping a cup of coffee, watching the foot traffic through the Adams Morgan neighborhood. Businessmen and bike couriers, shopkeepers and young hipsters having late lunches or early happy hours, lingering at the bars and cafés. Tobias stared into the dark surface of his coffee and listened to the sounds around him – cars and buses in the street, people walking on the sidewalk talking, the low buzz of conversation from the tables around him. When he closed his eyes, it sounded like any street in any city. When he closed his eyes and let his mind wander through the sounds and the smells and the feeling of warm sunshine on his

face, he saw the sunny stretch of Baghdad houses. He could see the Iraqis, hear the sharp punctuations of the spoken Arabic, smell the sun-baked buildings and roads. He could see the dark-eyed girl. As if she were sitting at the table with him.

Tobias opened his eyes. Washington DC. Adams Morgan neighborhood. He sat alone at the table.

Tobias closed his eyes, and he was far away, sitting in a very different city, with the dark-eyed girl. She wore an Arab dress of layered silk in shades of orange, red and brown. She looked at Tobias with those beautiful eyes, so deep and dream-like, welling over with fear. With pain. Tobias wanted desperately to reach across the table and touch her, to feel her, to make her speak. What's your name? Tobias thought.

He opened his eyes, back on the DC streets, and watched the number 12 bus rumble down the street and turn onto Columbia Avenue. Sparrows dashed back and forth on the sidewalk, scooping up crumbs. He felt startled and edgy and aroused.

Tobias knocked on the door to the hotel room, and a blonde woman answered the door. Slim and petite and fair, she looked exactly like Tobias expected, the way Jerry had described her. For some reason, though, he felt disappointment as he glanced over her. "I'm Candi," she said.

"I'm Toby."

"Come on in." He followed her into the room. It was nondescript, with a bed, television, desk. There was a stuffed chair in the corner. Candi had lit a scented candle on the bedside table. She sat on the bed. "So you're here on leave?" she asked. She

wore a negligee and small silver hoop earrings. Her hair was long, and it shone in the lamplight.

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to sit down?”

“Yeah.” He sat next to her. He smelled her perfume. They talked for a few minutes, and he paid her, and she touched his arm. He reclined on the bed, and she caressed his arms and chest, put her hands under his dark t-shirt and touched his skin. She slid onto her knees, in between his legs, and she planted kisses on his belly and his crotch as she undid the front of his pants.

It had been a long time since Tobias had been with a girl, and he felt nervous, unsettled. He leaned back on his elbows and watched Candi’s blonde head as she took his pants down and took him into her mouth. He felt an overwhelming sense of nothingness. He could feel her, the warm wet softness of her mouth, but the sensation was dull, muted, as if it were dispersed into mist almost immediately. He watched her head moving, felt her hands on his thighs, and tried to feel something, some kind of arousal. But he felt dull, as if he were stuffed with wet cotton. He closed his eyes and filled his head with the scents and sounds of the room, but nothing came to him. He was alone in the dark.

Candi looked up, holding his flaccid cock in her hands. “Is everything all right?” she asked. “What do you want me to do?”

Tobias opened his eyes, looked at her fingernails, painted pale pink. “I don’t think this is going to work for me,” he said.

* * *

When the patrol came under attack, Tobias dragged Jerry out of the road, through a door, into a house while bullets rang off stones and concrete and RPG shells exploded overhead, sending down showers of debris. The sergeant was already in the room, firing out through the window, back into the street. Lieutenant Booty was dead in the middle of the floor. Tobias propped Jerry in the corner with a gun in his hand and went to work on his leg, tying it off crudely, but tightly, with a nylon belt from his own waist.

Then Tobias swept through the other rooms, quickly, efficiently, meanly. He discovered the family who lived there hiding in the small kitchen at the back of the house. “Down!” Tobias yelled. “Stay down.”

Bullets came through the windows and sunk into the walls with that sharp metallic pinging. The family – mother, father, and two older children – were in a corner behind an old refrigerator. They were terrified, staring at Tobias as if he were some kind of mechanized monster, and Tobias could only imagine how he looked now, half-charred, covered in blood, in his armor, helmet, mirrored sunglasses, wielding an M-4 assault rifle.

“What’s back there?” the sergeant yelled from the front windows.

“Civilian family,” Tobias replied.

“Nobody moves, Toby” the sergeant said. “Keep everyone in the corner, and nothing comes through that back door.”

Just then, an explosion from above caused part of the ceiling to collapse, filling the kitchen with thick dust, at the same time the panicked family fled for the back door.

In slow motion, clear as cut glass, Tobias raised his rifle. No one through that back door, he thought.

Back in Washington DC, at the hospital, Tobias leaned in his perch against the wall near the windowsill and watched the hospital room doorway until Jerry awoke. “Goddamn,” Jerry said, bolting up and clutching at the place in the bed where his leg would be if it were still there.

“Bad dream?” Tobias asked, and Jerry swiveled, startled.

“What the fuck,” Jerry said. “Where did you come from?”

“You were out cold when I got here,” Tobias said.

“I had a crazy dream,” Jerry said.

“I heard you,” Tobias said. “You were back in the road.”

“Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“I wanted to hear it.”

Tobias knocked on the door to the hotel room, and Candi answered, wearing a short black dress. “Hello again,” she said.

“Hello.”

“I didn’t think I would see you again,” she said.

“I didn’t think I’d be back,” Tobias said.

“What changed your mind?” she asked.

“I decided I couldn’t go back overseas without taking another shot.”

Candi smiled. She had a pretty smile. Then she turned and gave Tobias a coy look over her shoulder as she led him into the room. Her stockings went swish as she walked, and Tobias could feel all of the pressure inside him building. He wanted to feel it build. He wanted to feel it crescendo and burst out of him. He wanted it out of him, all of it. He wanted to feel normal. He wanted to be able to take this woman, feel their bodies coupling and smell her on his skin later. In the semi-dark of the room with drawn curtains, he imagined her in an Arabian dress, looking up at him with big, dark eyes.

He followed Candi, watched her figure as she walked. He liked watching her from behind, watching her move away from him. He had the urge to take her by surprise, to grab her from behind. He felt himself getting hard, felt the knot of anticipation forming in his stomach.

Then Candi turned around. Blonde hair, blue eyes, painted lips curled back into a smile. She fell back onto the bed and propped herself up on pale thin arms. “Come here,” she said.

She was striking, but there was something about the moment that made Tobias go cold. *No*, he thought, but he felt the heat slowly trickle away. He felt the anticipation fade to mist. But why? Where was it going?

He looked at Candi and felt himself go soft. “Come here,” she said again.

“No,” he whispered.

Tobias lay on the bed, on top of the covers. Candi lay beside him. They were fully dressed, except for their shoes which they had kicked off. The shoes were haphazard on

the floor, intermingled. “I should have seen it,” Tobias said. “They buried it right in the middle of the road – it was so fucking obvious, and then . . .”

“Then what?” Candi asked.

“*Boom,*” Tobias replied. “The truck is upside down, and Jerry’s lying in the middle of the road with one leg.”

“Oh my god,” Candi said.

“It could have been either one of us, but Jerry was the lucky one that day.”

“Lucky?”

“I mean unlucky.”

After a quiet moment, Candi checked her watch. “Toby?” she said.

“Yeah.”

“You have to go now.”

Tobias went to the Asylum. It was early, and he was the only person sitting at the bar.

“Another,” he said, and the bartender poured another glass of whiskey. Tobias sipped it slowly, letting the burn settle down his throat into his stomach.

With his fifth glass of whiskey, the bar had begun to fill up. There was a row of customers on the barstools, and the music had been turned up louder. It was getting dark outside. The world began to tilt unevenly – music and dim light and a crush of bodies coming down the stairs into the bar. Tobias closed his eyes, and there she was – the dark-eyed girl, sitting on the bar stool next to him. He reached out to wipe the blood from her lips, but he felt someone grab his arm. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Tobias opened his eyes and found he had been reaching for a young woman standing with her back to him and talking with her friends, a group of black-clad bike couriers. One of the couriers had him by the arm. “Sorry,” Tobias said, but the courier held onto his arm.

“Might be time for you to head home,” the courier said.

“I’m on leave,” Tobias said.

The courier let go of his arm, and in one smooth motion Tobias stood and planted the heel of his palm squarely in the courier’s face. A sharp pop rang out as the courier’s nose broke sideways. Tobias heard the yelling, saw the shower of fists come at him then, and he rolled toward the door, feeling the blows rain down on him, landing on his head and shoulders and back. He felt the boots to the flesh above his kidneys. But it all felt faraway, like it was happening to a body that wasn’t his. The only thing he could still feel was his trigger finger, as if it were still curled around that that smooth metal.

Tobias dialed the number. The phone rang four times. Candi answered. “Hello?”

Tobias paused, sucked the blood off his lip. “Can I come back over?”

“Toby?”

“Yes.”

“Look,” Candi said. “I’m not sure if it’s a good idea. I hate to take any more of your money.”

Tobias closed his eyes, peered into the darkness there. “Just see me.”

“It doesn’t seem like it’s working out between you and me, Toby.”

“Once more,” Tobias said. “Please.”

“Oh my god,” Candi said, answering the hotel door. “What happened to you?”

Tobias pushed her back inside and spun her around. He kicked the door shut behind him and grabbed her from behind, lifted her roughly to the bed. He was surprised by how light she felt, like he could fling her. He was hard already, just thinking of it. “What the fuck are you doing?” Candi asked.

“Nobody moves,” Tobias said. He pushed her face down on the bed. “Nobody fucking moves.” He covered her head with a pillow.

He held her down, felt her body tremble beneath him while he fumbled with the front of his pants. He ran his eyes over the length of her body, scanning her. He lingered on the curve of her hips, the way her short black skirt tightened there.

With his pants around his knees, Tobias grabbed at the skirt, pushed it up over her hips. He pulled her underwear down to her knees. He felt like a steel shaft as he hovered over top of her prone body, like he was made of polished titanium. He gazed down on her stretch of barred flesh until he felt the heat surge in him. The heat swelled inside him until it threatened to consume him like a tank killer buried in the road. Candi tried to move, and he held her down firmly. He grabbed a condom from the bedside table and put it on. He pushed her legs apart with his knees, as far as the panties would allow, moved himself into position, and then he pushed into her from behind. He pushed all the way in, and she clutched at the sheets with her pale pink fingernails.

Tobias felt the sensation run through his body like an electric current, like he had taken hold of a live wire. He closed his eyes tightly and he shot to a place far away, to a Baghdad street fight. He was standing in the kitchen again, looking at the dark-eyed girl, watching the whole family race for the back door. Coolly, smoothly, he wrapped his finger around the trigger.

Tobias opened his eyes. He squeezed Candi's waist as he held her down, plunging into her from behind, watching her pale flesh rise to meet his. Tobias closed his eyes, and he stood in the kitchen, looking at the dark-eyed girl. She looked back over her shoulder at him, and he responded like a machine. Easy pressure to the trigger, and an explosion of rounds through the kitchen. Pull the trigger again. Again. Short bursts, and close clusters, he cleaved through the family, torso by torso, until they lay scattered through the doorway.

Toby opened his eyes, and he was in a nondescript hotel room with all the lights on, plunging from behind into a prostitute, building closer and closer to climax. He closed his eyes, and he saw the girl. She lay face down, breathing heavily. "Toby!" the sergeant shouted from the other room. "What the fuck's going on back there?"

"Toby!" Candi shouted. "Stop!"

Tobias rolled the girl over onto her back, and she looked around the room with those beautiful dark eyes. She was dazed, until she latched onto Tobias's face. Her eyes locked onto his, and she swallowed a mouthful of blood back down and started coughing. Tobias aimed his rifle at the girl's heart, and she gave him with a pleading look. "There's nothing else," Tobias said, and he pulled the trigger, filled the girl's heart with hot metal as she arched her back and cried out.

Tobias cried out as he came, great waves of release rolling over him, shooting and shooting and shooting, and he finally collapsed onto Candi's back.

She propped herself up and pushed him away from her then. Standing over him, pulling her panties back up, she said, "You pay extra for that bullshit rough stuff."

"I know," Tobias said, breathing heavily.

"Goddamn," Jerry said, standing on his own, getting ready to go to physical therapy.

"You almost look like a soldier."

Tobias wore his fatigues. He was on his way to Langley Airfield to return overseas. He felt relaxed and moved easily through the space around him, as if something inside him had finally cooled, becoming smooth and metallic. He slept soundly last night for the first time since he returned from Iraq. "You don't look half bad yourself," he said, "for a civilian."

"You get yourself back home in one piece," Jerry said. "And I'll have Mrs. Anderson's other daughter waiting for you."

"The ugly one?"

"She's not much to look at, but she's got great technique."

Tobias smiled and thought of home, but the images left him strangely empty inside. But when his thoughts went back overseas, to the killing streets of Baghdad, he felt his heart surge with an electric current, fifty pulses per second. He looked at his best friend, but already Tobias's eyes were focusing on dusty ghetto streets, ready to roll fifty-mile-an-hour convoys through downtown, and sweep to road for tripwires.

Jerry stepped forward and grabbed Tobias in a strong hug. “Take care of yourself,” he said.

“I’ll give the bad guys your regards,” Tobias said.

Boogie Music

My son, Alexander, wears spurs on his boots, pistols on each hip. He prefers to be called “X” these days. “Alex” wasn’t shortened enough. He gives me a sharp look from beneath the rim of his black hat. Blue eyes hard with impatience. “Can we go?”

“Not yet,” I say.

“What’s taking her so long?”

“She’s coming,” I say, and X stomps off toward the stairs, shouting, “Katie!”

X is six years old, full of piss and vinegar. We’ve been watching cowboy movies all afternoon, and it’s time for ice cream. Now.

Katie, four years old, comes down the stairs in a purple fairy princess dress. Dark hair, dark eyes, she draws from her mother’s looks, but still sometimes when I look at her I’m convinced we stole her from Persian gypsies. A train of gauzy lavender fabric follows her down the carpeted steps. X is incredulous: “You’re supposed to be an Indian.”

“I don’t want to be an Indian,” she says.

“Why not?”

“What if I get shot?”

“I’m not gonna shoot my own sister,” he says.

“No one shoots a princess,” she says.

X turns and gives me a dirty look. “You knew.”

I shrug my shoulders. Of course I knew. Someone had to help her get dressed.

“What the hell?” I say. “Let’s go.”

* * *

At the diner, we are two cowboys and a fairy princess occupying the center booth in front of the long front windows. The jukebox, full of old country and rock and roll, is playing “A Tear in My Beer.” The cowboys are on one side of the booth, wearing black hats and working on pineapple sundaes. The princess sits on the other side, on a throne of red vinyl, using a ten inch-long straw to pick apart the ball of ice cream in a root beer float. “Careful honey,” I say. “Don’t make a mess.”

She smiles sweetly, like I’ve said something funny. “Cowboys are ridiculous,” she says.

I take off my hat and put it on the table. The seventeen year-old waitress, Amanda, comes by to see if we need anything. She chews gum, has a blackbird tattooed on her wrist, and wears dark eye makeup. She laughs out loud when Katie asks for an enema. “A what?” Amanda asks.

“A what?” I say, turning to Katie.

“An enema,” she says.

“Honey,” I say. “What’s an enema?”

She points at the bowl in front of me. We all look at it for a moment.

“Pineapple?” I ask hopefully.

Katie nods her head.

I push the bowl across to her. “Here, have some of daddy’s.”

Amanda lingers a moment, glances at my wedding ring, smiles, and walks off. I glance at my wedding ring, and then look at Amanda’s back as she walks away. I turn to X and Katie. “Did you see that?” I ask. “I think she just checked me out.”

“Girls like cowboys,” X says, and I put my hat back on.

If Molly were here, she would say something kind right now like, “She was probably just wondering who would actually join their genetic code with yours to produce these mutant children.”

I would reply with something witty like, “Um, you?”

Molly would deny procreating with me until the children were in giggling fits, and then we would go home, wait til the kids were asleep, and have sex downstairs on a kitchen chair.

Molly is a medical writer, working for the National Institutes of Health. She’s attending a conference this week in Atlanta, so I have taken a Saturday off from the job site to look after the kids. It’s sweet, like playing hooky, and I’m imagining the look that would be in Molly’s eye as she pushed me down onto the kitchen chair, but then X says, “What the hell?”

“Hey,” I say absently. “Watch your mouth.”

“He has a gun too,” X says.

“Who has a gun?”

“That man.”

“What?” I ask. “Where?”

Just then, loudly: “That’s right, mother fuckers!”

I snap up in the red vinyl seat and look over, and three people have stood up from a booth beside the front door. All three are displaying their guns. They have panty hose pulled over their faces. Two men, and one woman. “Oh hell,” I say.

One man, wearing a Redskins jacket, stands by the door. “Nobody fuckin move!” he shouts. He shouts some more, but I can’t understand what he’s saying. My ears tingle with rushing blood as I try to understand what, exactly, he wants from me and my children.

The woman moves from table to table with what looks like a leather bowling ball bag in one hand and her dull black gun in the other. She makes jerky motions with her hands, speaks in a shrill voice. “C’mon! C’mon! Gimme the fucking money. Gimme your fucking watch.”

She swings the gun around haphazardly. The music from the jukebox seems strangely loud.

The last man, the quiet one, wearing black steel-toed boots and desert camouflage pants, strides over the linoleum tiles to Amanda, who is standing still with her pad in her hand. He grabs her by the hair and places the gun against her cheek. “Where’s the safe?” he says. “Bitch.”

He spits the last word. I can see it shining on the side of the girl’s face, and my stomach feels as tight and heavy and fragile as a bag of nails. I want to take the metal napkin dispenser from my table and smash this man in the mouth, bludgeon him until he’s unconscious, until his head splits open and spills its dark contents of spit and invectives, bullets and larceny, all while Hank Williams croons from the jukebox.

Amanda points toward the doorway behind the counter. The man holds tight to her hair and pushes her by the back of her head as they go toward the doorway.

The owner of the diner, an old man named Vincent, stands behind the counter with the palms of his hands raised. “Please,” he says. “We don’t want any trouble.”

“Open the fucking safe.”

“I’ll open the safe. Let the girl go.”

“You open the safe or I’ll blow her pretty little head off.”

Go, I think. Just go, and make this end. All three of them disappear through the doorway.

I look at my children. They sit still, with looks of shock and wonder on their faces. They watch everything, absorb everything: the shrill woman making her way from table to table, moving slowly towards us; the gunman keeping watch at the door; the frightened sounds of customers at their tables; the swivel and click of the juke box as it switches records for the next song. I wonder if it’s one of our songs. We loaded the jukebox up with “boogie music.” X and Katie look at me, and I put my finger on my lips. Shhh.

My finger trembles badly.

“And what do we have here?” says the woman, finally arriving at our table.

“Happy fucking Halloween.”

Her features are pressed, twisted behind the panty hose. Her eyes look like dark voids, with just a glimmer of something living there. She seems unaware, at the moment, of the gun in her hand that is pointed at my daughter.

“It’s not Halloween,” X says.

“What?” snaps the woman. She seems coldly aware of the gun in her hand *now* as it swings around on X and me. My throat tightens as I place my wallet and watch into the bowling bag, and I am horrified by my complete inability to stop this woman from

threatening, or harming, my children. I lay my palms on the table in front of me, and my skin burns from inside, all over my body.

“It’s not Halloween,” X repeats.

The woman does not smile. She does not glance at my wedding ring. She turns to Katie and says, “What are you?”

“I’m a princess,” Katie says.

The woman snorts. “I was a princess once.”

“Nobody shoots a princess,” Katie says.

The woman comes in close, points the gun at Katie’s chest. “Don’t count on it.”

And there it is. This moment. Suspended in the air in front of me. A robber in panty hose leaning over the table to point a gun at my daughter, a four year-old princess, in the middle of a diner while the Big Bopper starts belting out “Chantilly Lace” on the juke box. It’s one of our songs, our boogie music, and I’m burning and tight, seized with terror. I struggle with the urge to grab the gun. I can take it from her easily. This woman is shaky and shrill. I am angry and quick. It stretches out like a thread in front of me, this action, this taking of the gun. I can see the thread unfolding, see me knock the woman to the ground, see me turn around with the gun in my hand, aim at the man by the door. I can see the man fall back as I shoot, see the chaos that ensues with people flying and scurrying in every direction. I can see the muzzle flashes as the two men return fire on me, see blood streaked across the linoleum floor under the feet of diners. I can see the pale terrified faces of my children fade away as darkness engulfs me.

Then I see Molly. I see Molly answering a call on the telephone in her hotel room. Dark hair, dark eyes, and I see the smile fade on her face as she listens to the receiver. I see her drop the phone, fall to the floor. The thread ends there.

“Be careful,” I say.

“What?” snaps the woman, turning the gun and her nearly lifeless eyes on me.

“The windows,” I say, motioning with my head toward the large windows we sit by. “People can see you.”

“You wish, cowboy,” she says, and she moves abruptly on to the next table.

It is only a minute more, and then Amanda comes out from the back room, still at the end of a gun barrel. Vincent too. The steel-toed gunman holds a bag of money. It is a thin plastic bag from the grocery store, and I can see the cash through the semi-transparent material. I wonder why he doesn't use a nicer bag, more like the vintage bowling bag, but then he shoves Vincent roughly to the ground and points his gun at Amanda. “You too, baby,” he says. “I like my women face down.”

Amanda sinks to the floor, lies down next to Vincent. I can see her eyes from here, dark and shining. Leave, I think, looking back at the robbers. Leave us alone.

Then they are gone. No announcements, nothing. Out the door, they slip around the edge of the building, vanish past the windows, run away through the labyrinth of narrow parking lots behind the strip mall and the office buildings.

I practically melt into the vinyl seat with the release of tension, and the diner explodes into commotion. The patrons all burst into excited and angry conversation, drowning out the music. Amanda stands up, wiping tears off her face. Vincent grabs the

telephone and dials 911. Several people have run outside to try and see where the robbers ran to.

Katie climbs around the edge of the table, onto my lap. X attaches himself to my arm. I turn back to the kids, let my head rest on the back of the vinyl booth and put my arms around them. "Somebody could have got shot," X says, standing on the seat and looking around at the activity.

"No," I say. "They just wanted to scare us. They didn't want to hurt anyone."

"I think," Katie says, playing with the collar of my t-shirt, "that princesses do get shot sometimes."

"No baby," I say. "Not princesses. Cowboys keep a princess safe."

"But you're not a real cowboy," Katie says.

A chill runs through me, settles in my stomach. I feel the importance of this moment, the importance of reassuring my children, of restoring a sense of protection and warmth to my family. But what do you say to a four-year old who just had a revolver aimed at her chest? I suddenly feel ridiculous in this outfit

X and Katie and me hang onto each other in the red vinyl booth and gaze out, wide-eyed and quiet, at the commotion all through the diner while we all wait for the police to arrive.

iv.

The two principle kinds of muscular tissue found in the body are voluntary and involuntary.

- Dr. Henry Gray, *Gray's Anatomy*

As the Crow Flies

It begins with a nylon cord, yellow and black, slightly frayed, slipping slowly out of the knot it's tied in. The nylon cord is stretched tight, holding a load of color televisions inside the long trailer as it pulls onto the highway. Josie McGregor has no idea about the slipping knot. Just behind the 18-wheeler, she accelerates up the ramp in her Volkswagen Passat and speaks into the headset of her cell phone to her husband, Randall. "You feeling lucky?" she asks.

"I'm already in bed."

"I'm at 99 degrees, and my estrogen levels are off the scale. Doctor Marshall said everything looks good."

"We're going to be baby-making machines."

The knot should have been triple tied. Inch by inch the cord slips through itself, unable to support the weight it bears. The load shifts, the final length of nylon cord slips through the strained curve of the knot, and the whole thing whips loose with a loud *zzzzzing*. The load breaks free and hurtles toward the rear of the closed trailer. Nylon screams through metal eyelets as the frayed cord plays out its whole length. The load rumbles like thunder, flies toward the rear doors of the tractor trailer, toward the sunshine, toward the traffic, toward the steep 495 onramp.

Josie checks her rear view mirror, prepares to merge onto the beltway. "You know I have to be back at work by three."

"You'd better start undressing now," Randall says.

Josie smiles, checks her rear view mirror once more. Then the metal doors on the trailer truck right in front of her blow off their hinges and the load of tightly wrapped pallets crashes out onto the highway. Josie screams and squeezes the steering wheel, swinging it around sharply. The Volkswagen slides up onto two wheels and smashes sideways at sixty miles per hour into the load from the truck. Then the car behind Josie smashes into her from the other side.

“Josie?!” Randall yells through the telephone. “Josie, what was that?!”

Josie dreams of crows. They appear day after day in this dreamscape, like vultures circling far above in a pale white sky, while Josie lies in the grass beside a sea as smooth as polished glass. She listens closely to the sounds that the crows make: whispers and mutterings, electronic sounds and bleeping. Some of the crows sing songs that sound familiar.

The crows spin lower with each day that passes, look down on Josie with black eyes glittering, and beaks as sharp as scalpels. Josie clutches at the earth, moving her fingernails in the fleshy soil until they begin to feel like roots, like she is becoming part of the grass, part of the sea, growing and blooming into this landscape.

Another day the crows spin slowly, slowly, until they finally land on the brown grass all around Josie. She tries to plunge her roots into the earth, but it has hardened, and her fingernails shatter at the half moon cuticles.

Finally one day the crows walk nearer, until one has come right to Josie’s face. They look at each other, Josie and this crow, each of their eyes glittering darkly, and the

crow, in a swift motion, plunges his beak toward Josie's eye. She lurches up off the ground, hands clutched around her face, screaming.

When she lets her hands fall away from her face, Josie sees that she is lying in a hospital bed. Nighttime, and the room is dark and quiet, except for the echoes of screaming that ring in her ears. Another patient lies in the next bed, sleeping. The patient is hooked to machines. Josie looks down; she is hooked to machines too. She feels strange. Her body feels weak, in a way she cannot define. Not just injured. Her mind is a fog. What happened? Where is she? Where is Randall?

Josie breathes deeply, stares into the shadows on the ceiling, begins to follow the threads of her memory, like following trails of bread crumbs, searching for her way back to where she belongs. Where is her mother? Where is her brother, Jonathan? They must be here, somewhere. How long has she been asleep, Josie wonders.

“Five and a half years,” Jonathan says, sitting at her bedside in the hospital. Jonathan wears a sweater vest over his open-collared shirt and rubs his round belly. He is more bald now than Josie remembers him being.

“How is it possible?” Josie asks.

“It's a miracle,” Jonathan says. “You're on every news channel, and the media are all over the hospital. You're quite the celebrity again.”

“Again?” Josie asks.

Jonathan pauses, and a look of concern clouds over his face. “There are some people you need to meet, Josie.”

“What kind of people?”

“Family,” he says, and he slowly gets up from his chair. He goes to the door, and signals for someone to enter. Josie watches as three little girls in identical white dresses enter the room. They can’t be more than four years old, all with dark hair in little page boy haircuts and big dark eyes. “Triplets?” Josie asks, smiling at the girls.

“Yes,” Jonathan says.

“They’re lovely,” Josie says. “Are they yours?”

“No,” Jonathan says. “They’re yours.”

Two weeks later, Jonathan rolls Josie up the front walk to the small house that used to belong to their mother, before she died two years ago. It’s a pretty one-story house on a half acre of land looking over Rock Creek Park from the Virginia side of the Potomac. “Mama lived here?” Josie says.

“Yes.”

“How on earth did she afford it?”

“Well,” Jonathan says. “I told you how we did quite well in the settlement.”

“So, did I pay for my own hysterectomy too, or did you spring for that yourself?”

“I’ve told you,” Jonathan says. “We thought it was the best decision at the time.”

“I want my uterus back.”

“I’m afraid that’s quite impossible,” Jonathan says, rolling Josie up the add-on ramp to the front door of the house. “The whole house is handicapped accessible.”

“I’m not handicapped,” Josie says.

“Of course you’re not. We did it for Mother, but I think you’ll find many of the features quite handy.”

“You don’t have to sell me on the house, Jon Jon. I already own it.”

“Actually,” Jonathan says, “the *estate* owns it, and I’m still the executor. So be nice to me.”

Inside, the house looks almost like a museum. All their mother’s belongings are perfectly preserved in their original places. “Jesus, Johnny. This is kind of creepy in here.”

“It’s not creepy,” Jonathan says. “You just need to settle in, that’s all.”

“Is that the chair where Mama died?” A tall-backed stuffed chair in green floral-patterned plush material, it looks like something from a storybook.

“Yes, that’s it,” Jonathan says.

“Where do the girls stay?”

“They’ve been living with me since they were born, but I’m sure we can move them in here with you when you get settled in and acquainted with everyone.”

Three days later, Randall calls from Baghdad. “Josie.”

“Randall.”

“Jesus,” he says. “I just found out. Is it really you?”

Josie sits in the green stuffed chair where her mother died and twists the long telephone cord around her fingers. “The newspapers say it’s me,” she says.

“The papers?” Randall asks. “Don’t believe a word they print.”

Josie smiles and imagines what Randall might possibly look like right now, calling from some hotel lobby in Baghdad, with his press credentials strung around his neck. She imagines him unshaven, dusty, handsome, just back from some combat zone.

“I can’t believe I’m talking to you,” Randall says.

“I can’t believe you’re remarried,” Josie says.

Half the distance around the world, and a long pause hang between them then.

“Yeah,” Randall finally says. “This is a little strange.”

“It’s what I get,” Josie says, twisting the cord around and around her finger.

“Coming back from the dead like this.”

“I’m catching the first transport I can get on. It will take a while to get all the way back to the States though. Can I come see you?”

“Of course you can,” Josie says. But Randall . . .”

“Yes?”

Come alone, she wants to say, but she can’t bring herself to do it. “Safe trip,” she says.

Once Josie settles in the house, the commotion finally begins to die down. Jonathan goes back to work at his law firm downtown, and the girls go back to their private preschool during the day. The stream of friends and media and well wishers finally begins to taper

off. The welcome home flowers begin to wither and die in their vases, and Josie picks absently at the brown petals, pulling them loose and crumbling them over the end table that stands beside the chair where her mother died.

She finds a strange comfort sitting in the Chair of Death, as she has begun calling it. It seems appropriately detached from any reality that she can possibly relate to, as if she and the Chair belong to some parallel universe and are stranded here in this bizarre island of a house. Josie wonders where her mother is right now. She wonders how much Randall will have changed in five years.

Jonathan organizes a small army of caregivers. A nurse stops by the house three times a week to check Josie's blood pressure, reflexes and prescriptions. Xanax. Estrogen. Amthronycene. A housekeeper in the afternoon does laundry, cooks, cleans. A nanny brings the girls over after preschool. A physical therapist stops by each morning to help Josie regain muscle and mobility. "Practice," the therapist says. "The more you walk, the stronger you'll get."

Josie walks in the garden. Hobbling along on shaky legs, she uses a cane, and moves through the overgrown beds of azaleas and rows of boxwoods. Josie enjoys the smells of summer, and watches the breeze toy with the hem of her nightgown. The flagstones are smooth beneath her slippered feet, and sunshine falls in shifting patterns through the elm leaves. Josie inhales deeply, lets the sounds and sensations of the garden fill her. With her eyes closed though, she has the feeling that something is watching her.

She opens her eyes slowly, looks around. Then she sees them, up in the branches of the elm tree. Crows. They make rustling noises with the breeze in the tree, then they cry with raucous voices, and soar off as a group, their black wings beating the air, their dark forms disappearing through the trees toward the river.

“What are you thinking about?” Jonathan says, drinking iced tea and sitting beside Josie on the front porch of the little house.

“My uterus.”

“Hmm,” Jonathan says.

When Josie feels scooped-out and overly medicated, which is often, she finds herself pondering the warm pink flesh of her missing uterus. “Where exactly do they take extra uteruses?” she asks.

“That whole affair was pretty disturbing, you know,” Jonathan says. “Imagine finding out your sister, who’s been in a coma for three months, is suddenly pregnant.”

“It must have been quite trying for you.”

“It was trying for all of us. Mother nearly died. Can you imagine the ordeal of taking DNA evidence from the entire hospital staff?”

“But you never caught the culprit.”

“Never caught the *rapist*,” Jonathan says, correcting her.

The complexity and the pain of her situation are so overwhelming that Josie often retreats to this place of numbness where she finds a strange and depressing dark humor in these events that feel so removed to her, as if she’s playing a poorly-written part in some

B-movie. “Were you dogged in your pursuit, Jon Jon?” she asks, playing to the imaginary camera.

“I was indeed,” Jonathan replies, sipping from his tea. “We decided in the end that if some good could come from it, we would try and bring the babies to term. The hysterectomy was to head off any future female complications.”

“That way I could be as slutty as I wanted,” Josie says, but even she winces when she hears herself.

The next morning, in the garden shed, Josie digs through the shelves, looking for some kind of clippers to trim back the boxwoods. They have begun to claw at her nightgown when she walks, and she considers using gasoline, burning the bushes into the dirt. She likes the idea of the fire, the scorched earth.

From a box on the shelf, Josie pulls out a neatly tied length of nylon rope. She stops rummaging, stares at the rope. She turns it over and over in her hands, plucking at the frayed ends where the nylon has come unraveled. Her mother used lengths of this weatherproof cord to tie back the rose bushes in winter.

Then a voice at the door of the garden shed: “Knock, knock.”

Josie turns to find Randall standing in the doorway. And he looks exactly like Randall, nearly unchanged. His tan is deeper, and his hair shows streaks of gray, but the blue eyes and the smile are just the same. “Hey Kiddo,” he says softly.

Josie sets the rope gently onto the shelf and smooths the front of her nightgown. “I didn’t know you were here already.”

“I tried calling the house.”

“I’ve been in the garden.”

“I see that.”

“Did you come alone?”

“Yes.”

They look at each other for a long moment, then Josie lurches forward and stumbles into Randall’s arms as violent sobs shake her thin body. It is the first time Josie has cried since she awoke.

“Jesus,” Randall says, “look how . . . *big* they are now.”

Randall and Josie sit on the sofa, and the girls sit quietly and awkwardly on the floor, staring up with their big dark eyes. The girls wear baby blue sailor’s dresses.

“Yes,” Josie says, trying to sound perky. “Rose, Audrey and Susan.”

“Which one’s which?” Randall asks.

Josie pauses. “I don’t know,” she finally admits. “Jonathan dresses them all alike.”

Randall looks at her, and Josie fears for a moment that she’s going to burst into tears again, despite what she promised herself. Randall recognizes her distress, she can tell, because he saves her by squeezing her hand and saying, “You should get them different haircuts or something, like in *The Sound of Music*.”

“Jonathan would have a fit,” Josie says, holding back a wave of relief that feels like it will erupt in laughter. “He’s very particular about the way they look.”

“It worked for the Von Trapps,” Randall says, “And if Jonathan hates it, that’s even more reason to do it.”

Randall smiles, but Josie senses the thinly-veiled waves of hatred radiating off him when Jonathan’s name is mentioned. Apparently when Randall was offered the opportunity to go overseas, he signed over power-of-attorney rights to Jonathan, just in case some decision had to be made in his absence. It was supposed to be temporary, just until Randall returned from the one-month gig, but Jonathan seized the situation. He made himself media spokesman during the pregnancy scandal, and shut Randall, and the rest of the family, out of all subsequent financial and medical decision-making. Eventually, the pain and expense of the whole legal battle – Randall vs. Jonathan and his entire law firm – drove Randall to volunteer to go back into the Middle East as a full-time reporter, embedded with the Army 1st Armored Division.

Randall turns to Josie now, as they sit on the sofa, and he seems to be unaware that her hand is still lying in his. “I never thought I would talk to you again,” he says.

“What’s your wife’s name?” Josie asks, gazing at the gold band on his ring finger. It’s wider than the ring he wore when he was with Josie.

Randall suddenly focuses on the ring too. “Sunali,” he says.

“Where did you meet her?”

“Iraq. She’s a British aid worker.”

“Do you have children?” Josie asks.

“There’s a boy on the way,” he says.

* * *

Each morning, for ten days, after light physical therapy, Josie wears track pants and running shoes, and she holds onto Randall's arm as they navigate slowly down the front walk to the driveway, and onto the walking trail that runs downhill to the river. Each day they get a tiny bit farther, choosing landmarks such as empty beer cans, cracked places in the blacktop that resemble the Virgin Mary, and dried piles of dog crap to measure their progress. "Do you suppose," Josie asks, on her final walk with Randall, "that I'll get my ass back?"

"I'm confident," Randall says, "that one day soon you will have more ass than you know what to do with."

"I don't know why I let you walk with me," Josie replies.

"You need someone to pull you back up the hill."

"An escalator would be less trouble."

"How about a ski lift, or a motorcycle?" Randall asks. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I think it's in the landfill with my uterus."

They make more than halfway to the river before Josie feels her legs begin to give. They shake and buckle on the angled path, and her muscles burn. Josie stops and gazes down on the river, admires the tall stone bridge that stretches across to Wilson Island, the dark current of water that glides beneath it. "One day," she says, "I'll make it to the bridge."

"But not today?"

"No," Josie says. "Not today."

* * *

“I have to go now,” Randall says.

“I know.”

They rock in chairs on the little front porch. Randall checked out of his hotel this morning, and the rental car is packed in the driveway, ready to return to the airport. Ten days of walking and talking, of juggling caregiver schedules and taking girls for ice creams, of shared meals and long drives on the parkway seem to have passed in the blink of an eye, and now Randall is about to be gone as quickly as he arrived. “I’ll be back soon,” he says. “And I can check email in Baghdad; I’ll write. I’ll call when I can.”

“Careful,” Josie says. “You’ll make your wife jealous.”

Randall turns to her. “Josie, listen.”

Josie looks into his blue eyes. She can see the love and the pain and the guilt and the silent desperation. She recognizes it all, knows that she is projecting it back at him with her own dark eyes. “I know,” she says, and then she watches Randall plant a lingering kiss on her cheek, and feels the soft touch of his hands on her neck, just beneath her ear. Then he gets up. He walks slowly to his rental car and gives her a last look.

“See ya.”

“See ya,” Josie says. She smiles and waves from her chair on the front porch, and chokes down the bile that has risen in her throat.

Josie steps off the bus downtown, using a cane to help keep her balance. She feels so old, so frail. “Give yourself time,” her physical therapist keeps saying, but Josie looks at

herself in the reflections from shop windows, and she doesn't even know who she's looking at. Who is that woman? The frizzy hair turning grey already, the hunched posture, the pale skin and skinny legs sticking out from beneath her loose dress.

Josie slips on a pair of large black sunglasses and moves down the street, stopping to listen to music coming from shops, and look at the items for sale in the windows. It's all familiar, even the hair salon she used to visit, but for some reason, it all seems so foreign to her. Afraid she might be recognized, she turns away from the salon and keeps walking, slowly. She's supposed to be visiting her psychiatrist, but Josie plays hooky today. She's seen enough of that man, after just four visits, sitting at his mahogany desk. It all seems so sturdy – the man, the furniture, the theory, the prescriptions – like stone arches holding a bridge up.

Josie, on the other hand, feels flighty, unmoored. She chooses directions at random, wanders slowly through the city streets. No one talks to her as she walks. No one seems to notice her at all. Josie feels like she is a ghost, like she is half dead, walking through the city, a pale shadow moving over the sidewalk, passing beneath the tall buildings, startled by her own reflection every time she looks over and finds it staring back at her.

Standing on the edge of 18th Street, waiting for the streetlight, Josie watches the crush of traffic race by her – taxi cabs, cars, buses. She has a strong urge to step into the oncoming lane, just to see if the cars would go right through her.

* * *

Sitting on the front porch, Josie rocks in the chair next to Jonathan, sipping on iced tea, and watching the girls play in the front yard. Jonathan rap taps the edge of his glass with his big gold class ring from Georgetown Law. “Dr. Glide said you skipped your appointment with him again this week.”

“When did the girls do that to their hair?”

“Yesterday,” Jonathan says. “They’re quite a little force to be reckoned with, wouldn’t you say?”

Josie hired a hair dresser to come out to the house and give her and the girls haircuts, in all different styles, but in the night the girls chopped at each others’ hair with paper scissors so that they all had identical ragged heads. With such short hair their dark eyes look even more enormous. “They’re not exactly the Von Trapps, are they?” Josie asks.

“Excuse me?” Jonathan asks.

“I don’t like being alone with them,” Josie says.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jonathan says. “They’re your daughters. They love you.”

“They tolerate me,” Josie says. “It’s you they love.”

“You can talk with Dr. Glide about it tomorrow. I pulled some strings to reschedule your appointment.”

“I don’t want to see anyone.”

“We’ll have lunch in the city, like old times.”

“Why did you run Randall off?”

“What?” Jonathan asks. “What are you talking about?”

“Randall said you sued him until he left the country.”

“I *counter*-sued Randall after he put his career ahead of your well-being.”

“Sounds complicated,” Josie says, staring out over the yard and off toward Rock Creek Park. “Is there anyone you *didn't* sue?”

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow at noon,” Jonathan replies.

At night, when Jonathan has left and taken the girls with him, Josie changes out of her nightgown, into her sweatpants and running shoes. One foot over the other, she makes her way down the dark walking path toward the river. She knows that she will make it tonight, all the way down the path. Slowly down and down, and she walks round a bend in the trail, and she can see the sparkle of moonlight and city reflecting off the wide dark water. It’s beautiful, she thinks. Absolutely beautiful.

It ends with a nylon cord, slightly frayed, slipping over Josie’s head, going snug around her throat. She has made it all the way down the hill, and she stands, exhausted, on the ledge of the tall stone bridge that leads to Wilson Island. She wraps the other end of the cord to the thick concrete railing and triple ties the knot. She peers down into the darkness where the river gurgles and hisses below her, glimmers in the reflected light from the city. Josie tingles, sitting on the railing of the bridge. Her legs burn from the exertion of walking here, and her whole body aches and sings to the swirling darkness below her. This, she thinks. This is where she belongs.

Finally, Josie leans forward and takes a deep breath, relaxing her grip on the edge of the railing. Let go, she tells herself, and slowly she lets the tension ease in her hands and fingers, until she feels the rough concrete slipping away, and her own weight pulls her forward, slowly at first, away from the sturdy bridge. Falling forward, she gains momentum, until she's tumbling tumbling down through the dark. In the rush of wind, there is no pain, no withered body and weight to bear. Only the itch of nylon rope around her neck.

She stretches her arms out wide, and imagines dark wings.

Jar of Teeth

The thing Philip Glass hated most about going to the beach was the way it upended his entire method of social ordering. For example, when he took his shirt off and leaned back in a folding chair beside his wife and their daughter on a beach in Florida, nothing indicated that he was, in fact, one of the most sought after pollsters in all of Washington DC. Entire political destinies rose and fell by the numbers he provided, yet here he was – another middle aged man with a large pale belly and mirrored sunglasses, trying to relax while his real life went on without him twelve hundred miles away. On the beach here, surfers and lifeguards ruled at the top of the social strata with their lithe bodies and tanned skin, their casual disdain for the pale visitors on their beaches. Even Philip’s ten-year old daughter, Elsie, recognized the primitive order. “There’s the king,” she had said, pointing at a lifeguard sitting in his raised stand while the Glass family trudged over hot sand with beach bags, floppy hats, umbrellas, coolers and folding chairs.

Now Philip sighed and rubbed his own chest, covered in a thin layer of dark wispy hair, still slick with SPF 50 sun block. He shifted his weight in the chair, and it groaned uncomfortably beneath his wide bottom, clad in canary yellow swim trunks. “You want something to read?” his wife, Claire, asked without looking up from her book, *Don Quixote*.

“No,” Phillip said, rubbing his chest. Claire read these impossible books each summer – *Don Quixote*, *Moby Dick*, *Finnegan’s Wake*. She called them her “summer projects,” and she often wore a small headlamp so she could read at night, either in the rental car or in bed while Philip flopped over and drifted off to sleep. Meanwhile, Philip

was forbidden to bring either his BlackBerry or his folio of political trend analyses onto the beach with them. “What about *my* summer projects?” he had asked in the hotel room.

“I wouldn’t call your BlackBerry a project exactly,” Claire had replied as she squeezed her large thighs through the elastic openings of her bikini bottom.

“There could be an emergency,” Phillip said, feeling slightly uncomfortable at being this close to his wife’s semi-nude body. He hadn’t actually seen her in this state of undress for quite some time, and he looked away from her figure. “The office might need to reach me,” he said angrily.

“Of course they’ll need to reach you,” Claire replied. “There’s always an emergency. I’m just asking you to leave that thing behind for a couple of hours. You’re on vacation with your daughter for Christ’s sake.”

“And my wife,” Philip added.

“Yes,” Claire said, “and your wife.”

Elsie walked up now, on the beach, and stood in front of him, peering at him strangely from behind her pink sunglasses while he peered back at her from behind his own mirrored lenses. “Why are you doing that?” she asked.

“Doing what?”

“Rubbing your own boobs like that?”

“First of all,” Philip said, “this is Daddy’s *chest*, not his *boobs*. And secondly, Daddy’s just rubbing in the sun screen.”

Philip wasn’t sure when exactly he had begun to refer to himself in third person around his daughter, or, for that matter, when exactly his boobs had gotten this big. He realized he was cupping them as if they were women’s breasts. He thought perhaps it all

happened at about the same time that his daughter had turned into this space alien who was standing in front of him now. Thin and blonde and tan, Elsie wore a pink two piece bathing suit and a gauzy sarong. Earphones on thin white cables connected her brain to her iPod. Pink sunglasses perched on top of a button nose, and jelly bracelets adorned her wrists. She looked like some miniature movie star taking holiday in the south of France, not the pouting thin-lipped little girl that Philip remembered feeding and dressing for school. When on earth did ten-year olds become this sophisticated?

“I think your boobs are bigger than mom’s,” Elsie said as she absent-mindedly adjusted the volume on her iPod.

Philip let go of his chest. “Trust me when I assure you that Daddy’s chest is *not* as big as Mommy’s.”

At this, Claire looked up from her book. She glanced at Elsie and then Philip. She looked at his chest for a moment, then looked down at her own. The look on her face never changed from that of vague curiosity. Then she returned to the adventure in *Don Quixote*, removing her index finger from the spot she was saving and picking up exactly where she left off.

It occurred to Philip in that exact moment, as he stared at this woman sitting next to him, this woman who was the only person on the beach he could identify as having an ass as big as his own, that he was trapped on a Florida key, twelve hundred miles from home, with two complete strangers. What’s more, this large-assed woman and this small space alien who seemed to respect and admire each other’s personalities quite a lot were the only creatures on the whole island who actually knew that he, Philip Glass, was one

of the most sought after political pollsters in all of Washington, DC, and they didn't give two shits. How in God's name, he thought, am I going to survive six more days of this?

Philip ran a hand through his wispy chest hair and found some small comfort in the feel of his own lotion-slick skin, the weight of his own flesh.

The next day, on the beach, Philip woke with a start from a dream where he had lost an important mid term election for one of his clients by misreading the polling data, and as a result he was stripped naked by his co-workers, marinated, and put to roast in an oven that was the exact size and shape of an office cubicle. "But think about the return on investment!" Philip cried as they slammed the oven door closed on him. "*The return on investment!*"

Philip sat up startled on his beach blanket, reaching instinctually for his missing BlackBerry, as if it were some protective talisman. He discovered that the sun had shifted while he was sleeping, and now he lay well outside the small circle of shade his umbrella provided. His chest and belly were hot and pink and sweaty. "You want something to read?" Claire asked.

"No," Philip said, and he lumbered up off the blanket. "I'm going to go for a swim. Where's Elsie?"

"She's looking for seashells."

Over the hot sand and into the clear blue water. Philip walked slowly, letting the water inch up his body bit by bit until he left his feet and was rolling around like a lazy sea lion, admiring the way his belly protruded from the water when he floated on his

back. He resembled a white whale, or some magical island that drifted on the tide. Philip imagined sea gulls using him as a place to rest on their way across the ocean. After a short while, however, Philip became unsettled by his own weightlessness in the ocean, as if he might actually be pulled out to sea, and he returned to land, dragging his mass up out of the small breakers and climbing back onto the beach. He looked down at the tide lines of sea debris as he walked, wondering what on earth possessed people, like Elsie, to spend hours looking through this mess for seashells or beach glass or some other ocean discard. He paused for a moment though when he saw the water retreat over something black and shiny, leaving it exposed to the sun. Despite himself, Philip drew closer and saw that it was a shark's tooth. The gulf beaches were famous for these petrified teeth, thousands of years old, that rolled up onto the white sand with tide changes. Philip had examined a placemat just last night at the seafood restaurant that showed which types of teeth belonged to which ancient varieties of shark.

Philip looked around to make sure no one was watching him. Then he picked the tooth up out of the sand and flipped it over in his hand. Roughly the size and weight of a fifty-cent piece, and he examined closely the sharp edges of the tooth. He wondered which type of shark this would have belonged to, how big the creature would have been, how many more teeth would have been planted in that jawbone.

When he got back to his folding chair, Elsie had returned and was presenting her discoveries to her mother. "This one," she said emphatically, handing Claire a small well-formed seashell, "I'm going to give to Alexis Adams when I get back home."

"Who's Alexis Adams?" Philip asked, pausing at the edge of his blanket to drip saltwater on the sand.

“Alexis Adams is my BFF,” Elsie said.

“Your what?”

Elsie rolled her eyes. “My Best Friend Forever, Dad.”

“Oh,” Philip said. “Well, give her this too. Daddy found it by the water.” He handed Elsie the large black tooth, and he was surprised to see the girl’s eyes light up when she examined the treasure in her palm. “This is a *huge* one,” she said. “Where did you find it?”

“Down by the water, over there.”

Elsie skipped off in the direction that Philip pointed, and Claire smiled at him.

“That was sweet of you,” she said.

Philip couldn’t help noticing there was something green stuck in between Claire’s front teeth, as if she hadn’t smiled at him in so long, that moss or mildew had begun to claim her mouth.

It’s disgusting, he thought, looking at her mouth. But still, there was something about the smile that was nice to see.

It began the next morning, this hunting of the shark’s teeth. Philip discovered, much to his own surprise, that he had a certain knack for finding the teeth. His eye could spot the small dark shapes from among the other bits of shell and reeds and small pieces of wood. Philip wandered down the beach, staring at the sand just off the bow of his feet, stopping now and again to pluck one of the dark slender teeth from the ground. Philip admired his newfound ability and gazed contentedly at the deep footprints he left in the pale sand.

Returning to Base Camp, as he called it now, he stood among the beach chairs and presented the handful of shark's teeth to his wife and daughter. Elsie squealed with delight, a sound Philip hadn't heard in months. "Oh my god," she said. "We're going to have, like, a *hundred* of these."

Claire set *Don Quixote* down in her lap, and she helped her daughter examine the teeth, oohing and ahing over each well-formed artifact. Philip found it hard to believe that something so small and relatively worthless could bring such pleasure, but here were his wife and daughter, looking up at him affectionately. "Operation Shark Tooth," he said with a smile.

Philip Glass, one of the most sought after tooth hunters on the entire island.

That night for dinner, they went back to the restaurant with the shark tooth placemats, and Philip made an elaborate gesture. He presented Elsie with an empty pickle jar and announced that by the end of the week they would have that jar filled with shark's teeth. "Awesome," Elsie replied. "Where did you get the jar?"

"At the grocery store."

"Where are the pickles?" Claire asked.

"I dumped them in the toilet."

Over shrimp scampi and seafood penne and Caesar salads, the Glass family pored over their shark tooth placemats, pronouncing the names of beasts that prowled the clear blue Florida waters for thousands and thousands of years, before people existed, before

nations or highways or political polling existed, before seafood restaurants and strip malls and time share condominiums. *Mako. Snaggletooth. Carcharodon.*

Philip pretended to be a shark, and he leaned over and gnawed on his daughter's shoulder, making loud gnawing noises. "Um, that's enough Dad," Elsie said. "I think you're getting a little too into this." Still, she smiled when she said it, and later, after a couple glasses of wine, Claire reached over and pinched the fat on Philip's neck, just beneath his ear. He turned to her, unsure what could have prompted the sharp pinch, and she was smiling again, giving him a look he hadn't seen in a long long while.

Philip made love to his wife that night, the first time they had joined in coital bliss in over a year. Claire was surprisingly aggressive in bed, wielding her large hips and ass like a battering ram, pummeling Philip down onto the sheets and then rolling over onto her back so he could mount her. Philip went slowly at first, moving over her large body with the weight of his own, exploring her as if it were their first time, not their thousand and first. "Fuck me," she said.

"Pardon me?"

"Fuck me," she repeated, and a flash of fear shot through Philip, mingled with the tangy pheromone scent of arousal. He had never heard his wife talk like this, but the almost desperate way she grabbed the back of his hair and held it tight in her fist made him want to do unspeakable things to her, and he dropped his hungry mouth onto a roll of belly fat and made loud gnawing noises while Claire pressed his face into her body, as if she were trying to smother him.

When Philip climbed on top of her and began thrusting, his man-breasts swung frantically, smacking Claire's breasts with an occasional loud popping sound, and she pawed and clutched at him as they both made low guttural animal sounds that almost drowned out the squeaking noise of the badly strained bed frame as it rocked back and forth and sideways, hammering small dents into the plaster walls of the time share condominium. "Oh god," Claire said, grabbing at Philip's chest and squeezing his flesh. "Oh god," and she rubbed his bosoms against hers, their pink puffy nipples smacking against each others, the combined weight of their two bodies merging into a single fleshy heat and ecstasy, throbbing and pulsing in unison. Philip cried out as he felt himself reaching his climax, a long sustained, "Ahhhhh!!" that grew in volume and pitch until Claire slapped a hand over his mouth roughly, squeezed his cheeks and the flesh of his lips, and he bit her finger as he thrashed into a wild ejaculation.

"I couldn't help noticing," Claire said, just a few minutes later as she dropped back into the bed beside Philip, "that there are pickles in the toilet."

"Yes," Philip said. "They get all jammed together and won't flush."

"When you said 'toilet,' I didn't think you meant *our* toilet."

"I should have tried flushing them one by one," Philip said.

"You could have thrown them in the trash."

"I left a note for the housekeeper," Philip said. "She'll take care of it tomorrow."

They lay side by side on the bed now, a cotton sheet draped over their bodies.

Their breathing and demeanors had returned to normal, and Claire strapped on her small

headlamp so she could read a little before she fell asleep. “You could just leave the lamp on,” Philip said, referring to the bedside lamp in the shape of a lighthouse. The jar of teeth rested on the table, just beside the miniature lighthouse keeper’s cottage. Nearly a quarter full already, the jar contained a tight mosaic of black shiny prehistoric flesh rippers. His BlackBerry sat next to the teeth.

“I don’t want to bother you with the light,” Claire said.

“Don’t worry,” Philip replied. “I should sleep well tonight.”

Philip dreamt of sharks. There must have been thousands of them, swimming in lazy interlocking patterns beneath the surface of the clear blue water. Philip stood on the sea floor, anchored firmly to the soft sand by the weight of his body. He left deep impressive tracks wherever he walked, and the light came in beautiful angled shafts through the crystal waters as he strolled along watching the sharks. Such great light, and the sharks were quite beautiful, elegant in their motion, the sleek heads and flanks of a hundred different types, dorsal fins slicing through the push and pull of the tides, mouths full of black teeth. Philip knew that the teeth only turned black when they petrified, and he puzzled at this as he walked – why would these living sharks have mouths full of stone teeth?

A large shark, a mako, came from behind him, passed close by, startling Philip, and at that exact moment, his foot sank into a soft spot in the sand. He couldn’t remove the foot. His other foot sank into the soft sand too, and the large shark circled back by again, passing very close. Philip tried to pull his feet loose, but he was sunk up to his

knees now, and more sharks were coming low to circle around him. A shaft of sunlight seemed trained on him like a spotlight, and all the sharks suddenly became aware of him. “Goddammit,” Philip said, pulling at his leg with his hands. He looked up, standing in the beautiful light, and the large mako was coming right at him, his jaws working violently, mouth full of black teeth. Phillip screamed.

“Ahh!” and Philip bolted upright in bed, waking Claire who slept beside him with Don Quixote still open in her lap.

“I’m sorry,” Claire said. “I fell asleep with the light on.”

“It’s all right,” Philip said, panting.

“Would you like a glass of water?”

“No,” Philip said. “Hand me my BlackBerry; I’m just going to check email.”

“At three in the morning?”

“Yes.”

Claire handed him the device, and she rubbed his belly as she snuggled down into the sheets. “You get ‘em, tiger.”

Philip looked at her, puzzled. “Get what?” he asked.

“Whatever it is you get,” Claire replied, and a moment later she started snoring.

The next day on the beach, Philip resumed his treasure hunt. Elsie joined him at first, and they walked together along the seashore in the morning sunshine, lunging excitedly

toward any small black artifacts on the beach, hoping for the small pleasure of lifting a prehistoric shark tooth from the wet sand so they could carry it back to the beach umbrellas with the rest of the catch and place the teeth in the pickle jar. Handful after handful, the jar filled slowly, and Philip got more and more excited about the challenge with each half hour-long excursion down the beach.

He couldn't help noticing though that Elsie got less and less excited with each excursion. Finally, as they regrouped over cucumber sandwiches and bottled water, she said, "I'm going to rest, Daddy," and she rearranged her hair into a pink scrunchy and plopped down in his beach chair. She pulled her iPod back out of her bag, and plugged the earphones into her head. Claire, meanwhile, adjusted the straps of her bright red bikini to even out her tan lines and charged ahead with her own week-long challenge of the novel.

Philip gazed lovingly at his daughter who reminded him now of a sand crab, moving in small jerky rhythms to sounds he couldn't hear, and at his wife, sitting in her chair, whose ass and hips now reminded him of a giant overripe tomato. He wanted to squeeze and bite the ass in the bright red bikini bottom, spank it and knead it. Claire looked up at him. "Why are you doing that?"

"Doing what?" he said.

"Rubbing your chest like that."

Philip looked down, and he was cupping his man-breasts. "I was just thinking," he said.

Claire gave him the look, that smoldering look. "Thinking about what?" she said.

"You two are so gross," Elsie said.

* * *

That evening, Philip and Claire peered together into the toilet full of pickles. “I thought housekeeping was going to take care of them,” Claire said.

“Incompetent morons,” Philip said. “They claim that anything obstructing flow of water is a matter for the plumber.”

A dozen or so large green phalluses floated there with a thin veil of tattered wet toilet paper over them. Philip tried flushing again, and the pickles all spun in the porcelain bowl, whirling round and round and then wedged all together at the opening, forcing the water to rise dangerously close to the toilet’s edge and then recede back to the low tide line. “Shit,” Philip said.

“That’s exactly what I have to do,” Claire said, looking over his shoulder at the pickle jam at the bottom of the bowl.

“I’ll call management and have the entire housekeeping staff fired.”

“We could just use salad tongs and do it ourselves,” Claire said.

“Nobody touches the toilets, you hear me?” Philip said. “The last thing on earth *my* family is going to do on vacation is clean the goddamn toilets.”

“What about . . .”

“We’ll use Elsie’s bathroom for now.”

After dinner that night, and after ice cream and eighteen holes of Friday night mini golf and not one but two pinches from Claire on his neck fat, Philip heaved himself naked into bed and gazed at the jar of teeth that glimmered meanly in the lamplight. The sharp

points and angles all joined together to form something strange and beautiful. The jar was only two thirds full though, and tomorrow was their last day on the beach before they returned home. He and Elsie would have to work hard tomorrow if they were going to top off the jar.

Philip's gaze landed on his BlackBerry sitting beside the pickle jar. He hadn't checked emails or messages all day, and it had been wonderful, just him and his family. He looked at the closed door of the bathroom where he could hear the shower running. Claire was rinsing off before bed. "Why bother?" Philip had said, using his sexy voice as she peeled her panties off and let them fall to the bathroom floor. "I'm just going to get you all sweaty and dirty again."

"I like to be clean before I get dirty," Claire had said. "You be ready for me when I come out of here."

Philip listened to the water running and looked back at the bedside table where his BlackBerry rested idle and dark beside the teeth and the lighthouse keeper's cottage. I'll check email now, he thought, so I can relax the rest of the night.

Moments later, he found himself in a panic, sitting upright on the edge of the bed. "What?!" he yelled into the phone. Philip came off the bed and stormed across the room, naked and flailing, talking with Wally from his office. "Why in hell didn't you call me?"

"We tried calling all afternoon," Wally said, "but your BlackBerry was turned off."

A mislabeled file had been sent to the Senate Armed Forces Committee, and the Congressmen had been given another client's internal polling data.

"Well, who in God's name mislabeled the file?" Philip yelled.

“Well,” Wally replied, hesitating. “You did.”

A moment’s silence, then Philip groaned. “How bad is it?”

“We lost the contract for Senator Blake’s reelection campaign.”

“Jesus Christ,” Philip said. “Get me Senator Blake on the phone.”

“It’s nearly midnight on a Friday,” Wally said. “There’s nothing we can do til Monday.”

Philip hung up and dropped the BlackBerry onto the bed. He stood in the center of the room, boiling with rage. Senator Blake? Chairman of the Armed Forces Committee? How could they possibly have just lost Senator Blake over an incorrect label?

Just then, the bathroom door swung open, revealing his wife, damp and plump and pink, with a devilish grin on her face. She leaned into the doorframe seductively. “What’s all this yelling I hear?” she asked. “You getting ready for me big boy?”

“Why?” Philip yelled. “Why? Why wouldn’t you let me take my goddamn BlackBerry on the beach?”

The pink glow drained from Claire’s face, and she stood, stunned for a moment. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the Chairman of the Armed Forces Committee!”

Claire turned slowly and went back into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

* * *

The next day on the beach, Philip clipped the BlackBerry to the waist band of his swim trunks and trudged up the beach, dragging Elsie along behind him. “We’re going to fill that jar today,” he said.

“It’s okay, Daddy,” Elsie said. “I don’t care if we don’t fill it all the way.”

Philip was undeterred though. He worked diligently all day, plodding up and down the beach until his back hurt from hunching and bending over. He returned each hour and deposited his small load in the pickle jar, and each time Claire looked up and asked him if he wouldn’t like a cold drink or a bite of sandwich. “Sit here,” she said, patting his chair in the sand beside hers.

“Work to do, my dear. Work to do,” he replied each time in a voice so chipper that even he recognized it sounded slightly insane.

He realized too that Claire was making an extremely generous gesture. He had, after all, yelled at her last night for several minutes through the bathroom door about how Senator Blake could possibly be the next wartime President of the United States before she calmly walked out in her bathrobe, with her hair combed, and climbed into bed with *Don Quixote*. Claire had always been remarkably patient, but Philip couldn’t escape the idea that her affection was tinged with pity, and it was exactly moments like this, as she sat there offering him neatly sliced triangles of cucumber sandwich, that reminded Philip how much he resented her abilities at kindness.

Work, by god. That’s what Philip would do now. Work was what he did best. He provided for his family by working. He made his name by working. And *this* work, this filling of the jar, had restored some balance within the family unit. No longer was

Claire the only one who could provide this familial sustenance. Operation Shark Tooth changed everything, but his mission wasn't complete yet. Philip had set a challenge for himself, and it had provided an excellent return on investment, and he was going to finish this job. "Be back soon," he said in a ringing falsetto, and he waved over his shoulder at Claire and Elsie as they sat in matching turquoise bikinis with their matching blonde hair and identical disturbed looks on their faces.

After dinner that night, Philip gazed dejectedly into the toilet of pickles. He was tempted to finally just plunge his hands in and pull them all out once and for all, but he and Claire had both been peeing over them, and they were covered in thin veils of toilet paper. Management had politely declined Philip's strongly-worded recommendation that they fire the entire housekeeping staff, but promised that the plumber would be by tomorrow. "But I'm *leaving* tomorrow," Philip had said, pounding his fist on the kitchen counter.

"Is that right," the manager said. "I hope you enjoyed your stay."

Philip closed the toilet lid and walked to Elsie's room. "Daddy has to use your toilet."

"Oh my god," Elsie moaned. "The smell takes like an hour to go away after you're done."

"Life's tough, kiddo."

Elsie stormed out of the room, and Philip lowered his large ass onto the cool porcelain, dropped his chin into his hands, propped up on his knees, and relaxed his

bowels with the accompanying thunder of escaping gas. This, he thought, is not how I imagined my vacation.

He had indigestion, a toilet full of pickles, a lost account at work, and he had not been able to find enough shark teeth to fill the jar today. Despite his best efforts, the entire week was poised to be an epic failure. He couldn't even muster the energy to imagine burning the entire condominium complex to the ground as he had been doing all afternoon.

Instead, he thought of Claire, alone in bed, working her way through her book, and he wondered how far along she had gotten, if she had managed to achieve her goal. Then he lifted his chin up out of his hand. He sat erect and alert on the toilet, imagining Claire hunkering down in bed with her headlamp on. Hands free headlamp, Philip thought. Hands free, and it ought to be low tide any minute now.

“Baby, this is crazy,” Claire said. “Stay here with me; it’s our last night at the beach together.”

Philip adjusted the head strap and planted the small lamp in the centre of his forehead. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll be back soon.”

“It’ll be impossible to find those teeth at night. They’re hard enough to spot in the daylight.”

“I only need a few more,” Philip said, eyeing the three quarters-full pickle jar on the bedside table.

Philip reached over and pinched Clair's cheek, brushing his fingers past her lips. He saw the kindness in her eyes, the warmth. She smiled sadly, and he turned and plunged out the door into the darkness, heading toward the white sand shoreline.

Singularity

Sliding across the pavement on my ass at fifty miles per hour, I feel the friction, 14th Street turning white hot under my jeans and boots and leather jacket. My motorcycle, a 500CC Yamaha roadster, slides beside me – the cry of metal versus blacktop, the smell of burnt rubber. Bodies in motion tend to stay in motion, I think as the white stripes of the traffic lanes go *swoosh, swoosh*, beneath me, and traffic swerves in every direction. My head floods with shock and adrenaline, so strange and lucid: each moment, each car, each flash of chrome in sunlight passes by with crisp precision as I gaze out the visor of my helmet.

The motorcycle drifts left, out of reach. I stretch my arms and legs wide open, boots scraping the dry pavement. I watch the shining black and chrome hull of the bike and wonder how something so strange can happen so fast. Seconds ago I flew upright. Minutes ago, I was lying in bed.

At the Asylum, I pour drinks. Drinks. More drinks. Thursday night, and a local hardcore band called Implosion plays at the back of the club. I weave back and forth behind the bar, reaching for shimmering bottles of clear and gold and brown liquors, pouring hard drinks, semi-cold cups of beer, moving with the momentum of the music as it pulses and throbs through the crawl space between the low black ceiling and the heads of partygoers.

Trixie squeezes up to the bar with some of her friends. They have just arrived, their eyesight and postures still acclimating to the dim light and the crush of the atmosphere. Trixie smiles and tilts her head, her brown hair falling over her shoulders. Pink bra straps peek out from the edges of a tight white tank top. “Hi, Jamie,” she says in a singsong voice.

“Hi, Trixie,” I say in a singsong voice.

“Can I have a cosmopolitan?”

“Hell, no. Are you sure you have the right bar?”

“Yes,” Trixie says. “I can tell by the asshole bartenders.”

She blows a kiss, and I pretend to catch it in mid air and drop it in the tip jar on my way to Trixie’s favorite vodka which I pull off the shelf. She’s the only person I know who drinks cosmopolitans in this club, but she’s also the only girl I know who carries a vintage sailor’s knife in her pocket. She sways around with her pretty hair and her designer jeans, moving through black-clad throngs of couriers, bikers, and punks. She gets respect though. If someone throws an elbow at her, she’ll fling her long-stemmed glass in their face. I’ve seen her pulled out of two fist fights, and she covers a scar on her bottom lip with pink lipstick.

Later that night, just before close, I slide one last drink to Trixie, and she asks, “Is that a new tattoo?”

“Yes,” I say, showing her my forearm – a black sun with the Leo constellation in the center and a tight ring of swirling rays around it.

“Are you an astrologist?” she asks.

“I admire the artwork.”

“Leo,” she says, touching my arm lightly. “You’re having a one-star day.”

“Is that good?”

“No,” she says, looking at me over the edge of her glass, her dark eyes shining in the backlight of the bar. “But there are always bright spots.”

Her lips curl at the edges when she lowers her drink, and for some reason I think of that kiss I dropped in the tip jar. The slender stem of her glass held with pink-tipped fingers, and the room moves slightly, some discernable shift in the momentum, as I watch her draw me in with that look.

Jeans disintegrate on the surface of the road. Skin burns, peels back layer upon layer until there is no skin, thousands upon thousands of nerve endings being burned alive on pavement. I could collapse my body and start rolling, but it’s too fast still – I’d thrash myself to pieces, break every bone in my body. Keep loose, keep sliding, *swoosh*, *swoosh*, and the road ahead of me begins to look like a tunnel, like I’m traveling through the long blur of a carnival ride.

In the hallway of my apartment, I unbutton Trixie’s jeans while she puts her hands under my shirt and touches my chest. She pushes my shirt up and kisses my nipples, soft lingering kisses. I touch her hair, and she traces circles on my skin with her tongue.

She pushes my shirt off over my head, and I ease her jeans down over her hips. I hear the sound of her knife in her pants pocket hitting the floor. A five-inch steel blade

folded into a scrimshawed ivory handle that her grandmother gave her. Trixie kicks the pants away and leans into me again with her mouth to my mouth, and my hands travel down the length of her back, and I hook my fingers into the waist of her panties. I pull her close, and she rises up onto her tiptoes, as if her hips were floating to meet my hips, and her breasts press soft and tight against my chest.

My motorcycle connects with a moving car in the oncoming lane – the terrible grind of metal on metal, and the chrome exhaust pipe bursts into the air as the bike flips up and spins – a broken glittering comet of black metal and chrome and rubber, leaving a trail of gasoline and oil and debris in its wake.

“It’s called inertia,” Trixie says. “Bodies in motion tend to stay in motion until acted upon by some other force.”

From bed, we watch the first gray light of dawn fill the windowpanes. From this angle, we see sky – no hard edges or brick walls of the apartment buildings that surround mine. Inside the window, an empty wine bottle and a stack of books lie on the ledge like a still life. Trixie traces long lazy lines on my chest with her fingertips. “Bodies at rest,” she says, her leg lying on top of my leg, “tend to stay at rest.”

“Everyone knows that,” I say, looking at her hand on my skin. I’m amazed that these are the same pink-tipped fingers I’ve seen in fistfights; they move so gently now. “Tell me one I don’t know,” I say.

“Okay,” she says, touching the black sun on my arm. “Do you know singularity?”

“What’s that?”

“When a sun collapses, it makes a black hole. Singularity is the very middle, where everything gets crushed into infinity.”

“Remind me not to go into one of those.”

“You wouldn’t know if you did,” Trixie says. “There’s an event horizon – that’s the surface of a black hole – and you could walk right through it without realizing anything was wrong.”

“Then what happens?” I ask.

“To me, it would look like you vanished without a trace. For you – you’d be on some kind of wild ride.”

She explains the physics of outer space, the forces that suck entire universes into black holes, and her voice glows in my head. Her fingers, hypnotic, trace circles on my skin. My sense of time comes unhinged, and I want this morning to keep going, to stretch out indefinitely like some theory of relativity. The four walls of my bedroom fall away, and the ceiling drifts off to join the mist, and a horizon stretches out as far as I can sense, like being adrift on a calm gray sea. I want to be marooned on an island with this girl, this strange girl with the scar on her lip, this girl that I’ve made a thousand pink cocktails for. A stack of books for an anchor and a bottle to send messages across the water. “Who are you?” I ask. “And what planet do you come from?”

“I’m Trixie,” she says. “From the Virgo constellation.”

* * *

I drift into the oncoming traffic lane – cars veer out of the way, tires screech. Leather and jeans are ruined, and I hear the sound of my elbow on the surface of the road – the sound of bone grinding on pavement. My body tears away piece by piece, but the pain feels removed now, distant, like this is all happening to a body that I am only visiting. The event horizon, I think. I have stepped through.

I wake first, some time in the morning, and find that she has pulled the shades down to block out light and sound. Trixie lies on top of the sheets with her back to me. She is slender curves and soft breathing and beautiful unmarked skin, as lovely as a blank canvas. Her long hair snakes over the pillow like contours in a moonscape. I wrap my arm around her, touch her stomach with my hand, and she makes soft half-waking noises. She puts her hand on my hand, and I press closer. I'm hard, and I rub against her gently from behind. My hand drifts down from her stomach, slowly over smooth pale skin, until my fingers slide between her legs. She shifts slightly, thighs apart, so I can touch her.

My body trembles now, spasms, and I feel like I'm being squeezed, shot down this tunnel of a road. Above me, dizzy glimpses of blue sky, high rises, maple trees. A swallow hangs motionless on a breeze. The taste of bile rises in my throat, hot and bitter, as a new pain surfaces from someplace deep, someplace I don't know of yet.

“Have you ever had those honey buns,” Trixie asks, “that they make at Lulu’s Bakery?”

Early afternoon, and we lie in bed still. The stereo plays an old David Bowie album while we drink tall glasses of soda water with crushed limes, and I watch Trixie’s painted toenails as she rubs her foot against mine.

“Yes,” I say. “They have good coffee too.”

“I would kill for a honey bun right now.”

“What if I said I could have a hot Lulu’s honey bun in this bed in less than twenty minutes?”

“I’d say you were crazy,” Trixie says. “Lulu’s is all the way down by the Arena.”

“I have a motorcycle.”

“Does it fly?”

“It’s pretty fast.”

Trixie sinks back on the pillow and looks over at me with those eyes and that mouth and those breasts. “If you can get a honey bun into this bed,” she says, “in less than twenty minutes, I’ll do things for you that you’ve only dreamt of.”

“You’ll be my girl Friday?”

“I’ll be your girl all right.”

Flying over the road, all blood and blacktop and a roar like fire in my ears, I think for a split second of that cool dim island where Trixie waits in bed for me to return. My flesh

tears away, and I think of my body merging into Trixie's. I was supple, strong, filling her, watching her twist beneath me, feeling her wrap her legs tightly around me.

Now things snap inside me, tendons and muscles and joints giving out, severing, recoiling. I'm controlled by the pull and burn of inertia. I gaze down the long tunnel of 14th Street at the car that is coming right at me – a wine-colored sedan, with a low fiberglass fender – and it cannot possibly swerve in time. The driver sees me too late, spins the steering wheel frantically. One last traffic line goes past, *swoosh*.

Here I come, I think, looking at the crush of darkness behind that low fender. The darkness pulls me in, deep and fast.

Vita

David Parker Jr. grew up in the Ohio River valley and the West Virginia Appalachians. Upon graduation from Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, Parker moved to the Outer Banks of North Carolina where he began surfing and free diving to shipwrecks. He now lives in New Orleans, Louisiana, where he explores dive bars, swamp pop, and second lines, and he still chases hurricanes across the Gulf Coast in search of rideable waves and other small adventures.