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It Must be Karma: The Story of Vicki Joy and Johnnymoon

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It Must be Karma: The Story of Vicki Joy and Johnnymoon

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts

in

Film, Theatre and Communication Arts

Creative Writing

by

Rick Bolner

B.S. University of New Orleans, 1982

May, 2010

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Prologue

Then: The Incident

New Orleans, July 11, 1979, 7:00pm

Desi and I drive to a Time Saver convenience store. We need some coffee to fight off the sleeps. There's one person in the place, the cashier. Desi gets the coffee. I head to the bathroom and exit from the nun getup. Getting out of the habit is a small job in itself. The disguise works great for passing phony prescriptions.

We need to kill some time before we return the K&B pharmacy and pick up the phony prescription. Phonies are serious business as in a tall, dark, and ugly felony known as Fraud and Deceit. Jail time. We truck down to the end of Huey P. Long Avenue to the Mississippi River where there's an abandoned ferry dock. Desi drives up the concrete roadway to the top of the levee. From across the river, I hear a grieving trumpet drop blue notes into the departing day. A breeze passes over the TR-4's open roof. It soothes me like a kiss to the cheek.

Desi pulls underneath this big iron ramp that's part of the old ferry dock. We hide there. I try to calm down. Instead, I get the chills and my calves start to ache, which means I've entered *absolute* cold turkey. Cold turkey is all about withdrawal pain. It feels so humiliating. I've got diarrhea and want to shit on myself, but I hold it back. I am no longer human but post-human.

I feel my anger with Desi creep down the skin of my back. It pinpricks its way to my skull and enters my chest. It's like I suddenly have a bomb strapped to my heart. To diffuse it I bring up the issue of his former girlfriend.

"What are you talking about?" Desi says. He suddenly turns stupid.

“Looks like you can’t let go of her,” I say.

“Vicki, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He gets dumber.

“I think you do. And it’s time you make a decision. Me or her?”

“Look, I’m not in the mind to talk about that now.”

“*That*. It’s a girl, a woman, another human being.”

“Vicki, knock it the fuck off. You just need a dose.”

“You’ve betrayed me,” I say.

“You’re pregnant with another man’s child. Johnnymoon’s of all people. Johnny-fucking-Moon. Be sure to invite me to the baby shower, would you.”

“You betrayed me.”

Desi takes a big sigh. His cold turkey has made him listless. He leans his head back on the car seat. He falls asleep like he’s just been turned off or something. All the stuff described as cold turkey (withdrawal symptoms) in the PDR (Physician’s Desk Reference) happen, and *you* get to feel them. You get listless. That means really, I mean really, tired.

To make things even spookier, during cold turkey your brain starts to have a brain of its own. Both brains play tricks on you, and you never know these things are really happening to you. It makes you do things you don’t ordinarily do. In short, you become drug crazed. Suddenly your mind is a terrible place to be. A payphone sits underneath the iron ramp. Time to get even.

I put a nickel in and the dial tone blasts my eardrum. I call Detective Billy Trenton, the narc who everyone luv’s to hate. He’s a one-man police force. He is the one who busted me three years earlier for Fraud and Deceit. An act my parents got me out of. All charges

disappeared, like magic, as though Samantha on *Bewitched* showed up and twitched her nose.

The operator patches me through to Detective Trenton.

“Trenton,” he says.

I’ve got my hand over the phone. “K&B pharmacy, one-ninety-seven Westbank Expressway, nine o’clock tonight. Fraud and deceit. A phony script. Tussionex.”

“What,” he says.

I take my hand off the phone and throat-whisper over the receiver. I sound part May West, part psycho. I repeat the information. “Figure it out.” I hang up and return to the TR-4, which actually belongs to Johnnymoon.

Desi sleeps. The smell of the Mississippi and its cool breeze feels like a gift. I turn on the radio, and *Skylab* is expected to crash within the next twenty-four hours. I can’t stay awake any longer much less have a sane thought. I lie back as far as I can on the car’s passenger seat.

About eight-thirty p.m. my aching bones wake me. We sleep longer than planned. Nobody has disturbed us. The sky is about to squeeze the last drop of sunlight out of the day. We will not be able to ride away into the sunset, because the sky will soon be as black as my soul.

My stomach feels like a cesspool. I’m sweating at the same time I have a round of the chills. I get out of the car and puke. My vomit has gobs of clear phlegm gilded with gold specks of what, I don’t know. I haven’t eaten a full meal in days.

We head back to the K&B drugstore. The bus stop that runs along the Westbank Expressway is not crowded like it was hours ago. The K&B parking lot still has cars in it. Desi parks the TR-4 in a way that gives me easy and distant view of the entrance. Next door to the K&B, Jules’s Pet Store, and Weiner Cort Used Furniture have already closed. Some of the lights

in K&B are already off. A few leftover customers leave through the drugstore's front doors. An employee lets them out one at a time. I see some store higher-ups in their purple-and-white vests moving around like stage characters.

Desi says, "Okay, let's switch places. You drive. You know how, right?"

"I can wing it," I say. I don't reveal the fact that I don't even have a driver's license.

Desi brought a white dress shirt to make him look halfway legit, but he doesn't. He looks like a drug addict who's found a white shirt. "Okay, time to get right," he says.

"Please."

He splits. I sit, hot and cold all at once. The long drip of humidity covers my body like it's got a personal problem with me. Diarrhea is ready to leak out of my body. I've got to leave this parking spot in case the pigs actually show up. But I am so fucking tired I nod out. Then nod back on.

About five minutes later, through the store's big windows, I see Desi at the front counter. He moves around like he's jolted up with some supernatural energy or something. A guy who must be a manager walks up to him. They point at each other. They move like puppets. Desi freaks. He pushes the guy to the side and picks up a shopping cart. He tosses it at the big front window. What the fuck! "Nooooo," I yelp into the hot night. The drugstore's big window doesn't crash. The cart bounces off it. The glass must be that bulletproof stuff some places use now. Desi mixes it up with some guys inside. He swings at one of the managers.

As though some director just yelled action, a black Ford appears. It screeches to a stop away from the front door. Desi comes out. He holds a white paper bag that has the potion in it. Two pigs dressed in plain clothes leap out of their black car and kneel behind their doors. I slam

open the glove compartment to check for the guns. One is missing. I see a gun in Desi's hand. The narcs drop to their shooting positions, and they shout something I can't understand.

I hear two life-taking pops. The blasts sound loud but fake, like from a big cap gun. The shots send a jolt of fear through me. The blasts are so definite, like a command. They're so fast, like a slap to the face. Speed kills. Desi grabs his left leg and goes down. With his other hand, he raises up the white bag as though it's a surrender flag.

I stay quiet, quiet, quiet and start the car. I pull back and head to the far side of the parking lot near Schwegmann's Supermarket, which is still open and bustling with customers. I look back. Two narcs gaze over the parking lot like sharp shooters. They point, but too late. I move onto the service road of the Westbank Expressway.

Before I get on the highway, I stop at a nearby Gulf gas station. I can't help it, but I vomit again, and I hate to say it, but I shit on myself. I hold most of it back. I think of Desi, and I start to cry. I didn't want him to get shot. I just wanted revenge. I drive. A thick gob of hopelessness rises in my tummy. I think of rehab in Minnesota. I cry a monsoon of tears.

My absolute cold turkey depresses me. I think about my unborn child and of all people, Johnnymoon, and even my parents. My dead baby brother. I think of the past three months: Degas's New Orleans house, Satchmo's birthplace, Lee Oswald's high school, Tennessee Williams' kindness, and *Skylab's* doom. Of all things, I want to be at home watching that Doris Day movie *With Six You Get Eggroll*. I don't know how I've gotten from a Doris Day movie to committing felony Fraud and Deceit in a nun's habit. Maybe because that Doris Day movie is about a big, happy family. Get a hold of yourself I tell myself. I don't know if I can.

I cross the Mississippi River Bridge. Lights freckle the city. The night feels sneaky and dangerous, like there's a dagger hidden in the darkness. I take a break from sobbing and turn on the radio.

"*Skylab* is dead," the radio announcer says. "Just hours ago it disintegrated from the heat of friction caused by its reentry. NASA guided it to the Indian Ocean, but a portion of debris fell into isolated areas of Australia. There were no injuries. In spite of its crash, NASA considers the *Skylab* program successful."

I head down the Camp Street exit. I look behind me and a car with a flashing red light on its dashboard pulls up close. What timing. For all practical purposes I'm crashing with *Skylab*. It has not been a good day for *Skylab* or me. For that matter it has not been a good life for either one of us. What is life about? Doris Day movies? Sex, sin, and somebody to luv? Honey and home? Family? Crimes and the crime ridden? Ex-boyfriends like Johnnymoon, whom I think I still luv in spite. . . I don't know. I just don't want to be sick anymore.

It just dawns on me, NASA called the *Skylab* program successful, There's hope in catastrophe after all.

I reach in the glove compartment for Desi's second gun.

Chapter One

DESI AND JOHNNYMOON

New Orleans, August 19, 2005, 8:30am

Louise DeAmas strolled the aisles at *Robéerts* Supermarket. The air conditioning dried the morning sweat off her back. A round of the chills came and went. The fragrance of fresh bread filled the store. She picked up chocolate soymilk for her twins, along with French bread, and filet mignon for that evening's special event: her ten-year wedding anniversary. She even stopped in the wine section—always a challenge for her—and bought her husband a bottle of 1999 Cabernet Sauvignon Alexander Valley.

Her anniversary loomed, yes loomed. It seemed her husband had completely forgotten about it. She refused to remind him. She wanted to tremble, but she controlled herself. She wanted to scream, but she clung to silence. She wanted to divorce him, but she wanted love.

She stared at the clover honey containers. The collective effort of the tiny bees amazed her. The thick dreamy gold calmed her. An article on *Yahoo!* reported that honey required no refrigeration, no special storage. It could last forever. Perfect for hurricane preparedness, she thought. She grabbed a large jar of Madhava Mountain Honey.

"Hey, Vicki," a man's voice from her right said.

She didn't look. Only people from long ago called her Vicki. She wanted to avoid the spooky roar of her past. The unforgettable fragrance of cheap cologne—Brut, Aqua Velva?—found her nostrils. Cold boney fingers touched her shoulder. She turned. "Twice in two weeks," she said and forced a smile. She caressed the safety of her wedding ring.

With his premature white hair—at what, forty-eight—Desi St. Albares failed to look like just another stranger. His blue eyes were so piercing they could have been knives. Large forearms scripted in intricate tattoos scrolled out of his wife-beater t-shirt. Both arms entangled in black and red designs, expertly accented with green and even blue highlights, the details that only prison time could inspire. Most noticeable, a bright picture of Papa Time with a scythe in hand and the words *Tempus Fugit* covered his right shoulder.

“Johnnymoon’s coming to town,” he said.

Johnnymoon, a name, a word, a whisper to her heart. In spite of the cool air blowing from the ceiling Louise felt her body heat up. She wanted to re-track the entire route of the morning, of her life, whatever it took to free herself from that name. But something had already stirred.

“I told Johnnymoon New Orleans had enough problems.” Desi picked up a container of raw honey. He held it so close his eyes crossed. Like an idiot he gazed at the complexity of the honeycomb through the glass jar. “Life is amazing.” He pointed at the jar.

“I thought yall were on the outs,” she said.

“I let bygones be bygones. What about you?”

The tattoos covered his arms like shirt sleeves, but he looked clean. She could smell his cleanness. It was a cheap clean, both the cologne and the soap. Somebody doing their best with limited resources. Something admirable on any other person but not on Desi St. Albares. “What does he want with New Orleans?” She managed her breathing. But her heart raced.

“Do you really want to know?” he asked.

“Not really.”

Desi stared at her. “Then I won’t tell you.”

Goose bumps trampled up her back. She didn't want to think of that awkward situation—seeing Johnnymoon again. She would not do any harm to her twins, or her husband—*what one didn't know wouldn't hurt*—even though her husband failed to mention their anniversary at this late moment.

When she first met Johnnymoon she was nine, the age of her twins, with a runny nose living on Jawbreakers and Kool-Aid, a tomboy who loved both Barbie and GI Joe. It was during geography, Sister Edward's class, Johnnymoon smiled and loaned her a pencil. She got dizzy.

"I'll be in touch," Desi said.

A burn went off in her stomach. She shivered in the chilly supermarket air. She turned away.

"Why?" Before she could say anything more he walked away. His limp still in tact. Still a whackpot of unknown degrees. She felt bad about the limp. She wondered if he ever suspected her. Did he finally put it together—his betrayal, her revenge. Why did he have to ruin her day?

Time melted in her mind.

Then: Johnnymoon in the Time of High School

April, 1980, Reflecting Back

My name is Vicki Louise Joyce, and I'm a recovering human being. At least I think I'm human. I go by Vicki Joy. It's something I strive for, Joy. For the record I'm innocent. It seems like we're innocent until proven innocent. Right?

As a result of my recent arrest for fraud and deceit, my talk doctor, a tall blonde from Texas, has asked that I write everything out. Everything, I asked. Try to focus on the stuff that matters, she said. Get to the jugular as soon as possible. I like her direct Texas manner. Everything, as in how we recall things, she said. How we interpret our actions is what she told me. How we do and don't blame ourselves. We don't want to blame; we just want to understand. That's an important distinction, she said.

So you guessed it, this is a luv story. But also a story of horror and comedy and tragedy. And most importantly, *betrayal*. Above all, it's my story. My stage. It's Johnnymoon's too. His name still boils in my mind. I luv and hate him by the same distances. He is St. Michael the archangel cross-dressing as Lucifer.

It's over six-seven years ago, 1973 or 74, winter. I'm fourteen going on forty. It's after school. My sexual appetite—my mother who is ridiculous about using scientific terms, calls it a sexual disorder, which I find offensive. Let's just say my natural desires are starting to make their hormonal debut. I try to be a good person, except my *whore-moans* start to get in the way.

What it means to be a bleeding woman is clear to me. I mean what kind of sense of humor does God have? Is it sense, and is it humor? Bleeding from your vagina every month. Once a guy asked me, How does it feel? I said, Think about your penis starting to bleed in the middle of conversation. Okay, I get it, he said. Good, I said, I get it once a month.

So I'm with my best friend. I'm not mentioning names but let's just call her Tina. We're trucking down the railroad tracks that run through our neighborhood. Feeling heavy, because the weather is overcast and cold for Old Metairie. It's 1974 for Chrissakes. The weather makes us feel heavy. Everything is heavy. High school, my parents, boys, rocknroll.

Tina goes, "I think Dr. John is really heavy."

“No, John Lennon is really heavy,” I go.

“No, I think Dick Nixon is really heavy. God, what if your first name was Dick?”

I mean these are the kind of conversations we’re having. Like I said, I’m fourteen or whatever.

“Your brother Kain is heavy,” I say to Tina. Kain is beautiful. I have a crush on him, but I don’t tell Tina.

“No, he’s not heavy, he’s my brother,” Tina says, just like the Neil Diamond song. We both crack up.

“*Freak Out*, Frank Zappa and The Mothers’ first album,” I say. “Heavy. Plus, it’s a really funny album. ‘Help I’m a Rock,’ I luv that song.”

“Hey, Vicki, help. I’m a rock,” Tina goes.

We both laugh again.

“Hey, Tina, help. I’m a Vicki.”

We laugh harder. Tina grabs her tummy.

So, Tina and I walk home discussing the personalities of the day when all of a sudden we both go, “What’s that smell?” And we hear this group of voices, like three or four guys, loud talking, laughing, kicking rocks.

Tina’s like, “Somebody’s smoking weed.”

And of course we have been hearing all of this stuff at school about the dangers of weed. My first thought was: I can’t wait to try it. My counterphobia started early. Tina and I walk up the train track embankment and spy on the guys. I guess they are at least two or three years older than us. They look like they are from another neighborhood. They appear wild and dangerous, like they’re ready to protest the war or something. Their clothes avoid the standard look of blue-

jean jackets, bellbottom Levi's, and hiking boots. It's more like patent-leather loafers, striped shirts with their tails out their pants. They're dressed how you'd think the Rolling Stones would dress. Their inability to coordinate fluorescent oranges with cobalt blues shocks me. Actually scares me. I want to make a citizen's arrest for Crimes Against Couture. Their hair, it's their hair that really startles me. It drops in long locks all over the place. Thick and werewolf looking.

All of a sudden the sound of a slide guitar twangs and these great vocals, which sound like a black man, spring into the day's heaviness. I know it's not a black man because all these guys are young and as white as Bobby Sherman.

It's a long way to your mind, ba-by.
It's a long way to your soul, ba-by.
It's a long way to your heart, ba-by.
But it's only twenty-five feet to the front door.

The song matches the dreariness of the weather. The slide's snaky sound caresses the neck of the guitar. The voice repeats the lyrics.

The singing stops. They all laugh.

I say to Tina, "Let's go down there and tell them that we want to smoke some weed."

"Vicki," Teen says. Then she adds something stupid like, "It can give you cancer and brain damage." She doesn't know any better.

"I can't wait to try it," I say. "It's supposed to make you laugh a lot. How can laughter hurt?"

"You can try it, but I'm not."

"Laughter?"

“No, weed.” She slaps her hands on her hips and cocks her head in this sarcastic pose reserved for parents and teachers. “I’ll be grounded if I don’t get home in the next ten seconds.”

“*Grounded?*” It’s the first time in my life I hear someone use the term grounded.

“Never mind.”

I’m wearing hiking boots my father bought me, a cashmere charcoal turtleneck with Lee bellbottoms, and a long peacoat along with a gorgeous, paisley, silk scarf and a broach my grandma gave me. The broach is worth major Washingtons. Tina looks great. She’s primo early ‘70s. She wears perfume; so, she’s sophisticated.

As soon as we walk up, one of the guys with really curly hair—like one of his parents might have been a poodle or something—cups the joint so we can’t see it. The smell reeks all over the place so cupping it is not going to help.

Then there’s this guy, this real eye catch—thin, with a long, blonde, feathered haircut. At first I almost take him for a girl. Think Rod Stewart and the Faces, but Rod with longer hair if that’s possible. I practically faint. He steps in front of the other three guys. It’s like they are his bodyguards and they’re protecting him. He’s got all of this rockstar dictator charisma going on. I realize he’s the one singing. That fact, and the way he looks, make him cool. I mean super cool: Frosty the Snowman with a chill, right. He frightens and excites me at the same exact second.

I’ve never seen such a mane of hair on any human being, girl or boy. The feathered look is new and exciting. I realize it’s Johnnymoon from grade school. His hair frames his face perfectly. He could get a job singing for any male-girl band. Real androgynous. Everyone in public must stare at him. I stare at him. I can’t keep my eyes off him. The only people I’ve seen

with hair like his have been hippies and David Cassidy, and those were pictures. Not in reality. Particularly not in my Nixon neighborhood.

We walk up and join them like we're all friends. These guys, except for Johnnymoon, are older than us, even though it's only three years or so older. Three years is a lot when you're fourteen.

"Fuck." Johnnymoon takes his jacket off real quick because a weed seed explodes. He's wearing a t-shirt without sleeves. He recognizes me. "Hey, Vicki, what's happening?"

"Nothing. Boredom." I don't tell him I'm feeling heavy.

He tells me how he's attending public high school now. He shares some sad family news. His mom's been really sick. She's got cancer.

"Wow, sorry," I say. "Cancer has to be the scariest word in the English dictionary."

He seems really sad, which I find odd because I remember him as one of these friendly people, so natural, like Frank, my old yellow Lab who wouldn't stop licking.

"Hey, whatever you have smells pretty good," I say, like I smoke all the time.

Tina slaps my arm.

This one guy goes, "What do you know about it?"

"I had some heavy Mexican Red," I say. I'm out now."

The guy with poodle-do goes, "Sure, you can have a toke. Here." He hands me the doob. "Get toasted."

My first toke ever. I make this hissing sound as I take on this big drag. It burns the shit out of my throat. I cough.

"I thought you said you smoked before," poodle-man goes.

I just stare at him. I offer some weed to Teen. "Go ahead," I say.

Teen shrinks and tells me something cowardly like she has a cold or something.

Johnnymoon asks this one guy to give him a shotgun.

A shotgun? It looks weird, seeing my first shotgun toke. The dude sticks the lit end of the reefer into his mouth and starts to blow smoke out of the end you normally toke on.

Johnnymoon gets real close to the guy's mouth like they're going to make out. Instead though, Johnnymoon inhales the smoke that the dude blows out with the joint in his mouth: a shotgun toke. It's a huge toke. Suddenly Johnnymoon starts to cough and can't stop.

Finally he gets a grip on his lungs. "You see, it can happen to the best of us."

Johnnymoon looks right at me, his stare a warm sunray. It's the first time he makes me feel good.

I Bogart about five tokes, and I start to get lightheaded. It's hard to get stoned your first time.

Just at that moment, a cop car pulls up at the end of Atherton Street, which has one of those dead-end barriers stopping cars from going up on the railroad tracks, not that a car has a chance on the tracks in the first place. We all scatter. Johnnymoon and his friends run down the opposite side of the tracks. Teen and I make a dash for her house, which is two blocks up and on the right.

"Ahhh," Tina screams. She falls and makes this desperate yelp. The railroad company uses these big stones, a nice pale gray to support the tracks, but they're big and easy to trip on.

"No, no, no, I don't want to get arrested," she squeals. "I'll be grounded until I die. No, no, no."

Then Teen starts to hyperventilate and makes this whimpering sound. I mean she is really scared, which actually *excites* me. I inhale the dark whiff of danger, enjoying it all.

I shake her. "Get your shit together."

Like a switch goes off, she stops whining.

We truck over the pretty gray gravel. I stop, pick up one of the rocks for keepses. Behind me I see Johnnymoon, skinny, his jacket off, his arms handcuffed behind his back. The muscles in his arms are busting out of their skin. The sight of him, the danger, the authority of the cops stopping him, his thin body, his inability to escape. It all excites in a way that doesn't leave me.

Now: Was She Cured?

August 19, 2005, 9:53am

In more ways than one Louise, years earlier, had dropped her first name Vicki. She transformed, transcended, and became Louise.

The little blue clock on the oven told her the time, and she hadn't heard from her husband, Judd. She poured the last bead of a burgundy into a glass. She would keep it chilled for her husband. It was his, but he now had the Cabernet Sauvignon she had bought earlier. She wouldn't drink the burgundy, of course not. She knew the consequences. Anyway, it belonged to Judd. She dropped the bottle into the recycle bin. It burst with a soft inward sound. Like her heart, she thought.

Her reputation as a human being was no longer up for grabs. Her life—career, family—offered her a pass to happiness maybe for the rest of her days. It was the first decade or so of living in the safety of *her* family. She enjoyed the comfort of an important job with the New

Orleans Museum of Art. She grew accustomed to these feelings. She was enjoying a three-month sabbatical that began on August first.

She thought of her past, every mistake she had ever made, all the imperfections in her judgment—as well as those in her bone structure and aging hands—but she had dealt with them and still made big steps to happiness. Her marriage and her success as a professional helped achieve that. Yes, she had it both ways. She summoned the ghost of a smile.

The obsession with her anniversary dinner continued. But no, her emotional connection to her anniversary lacked the lunacy of an obsession. It worked more like an obsessed commitment. Or lunacy already committed. Obsessed commitments made a marriage, dammit. Marriage was chemistry that never settled into anything comprehensible. She decided to prepare a gâteaux, one with plenty of berries for that night's dinner. She worried about her marriage. As though there were an ingredient in it that didn't belong, one that would ruin it. Or was it an ingredient that needed to be added.

First she pulled Judd's glass of burgundy from the fridge. She could drink again. It had been twelve years and she felt grounded in her life. The idea of drinking alcohol started last year, and it had been marinating ever since. A time would come when she was cured, kind of like a ham. That time had arrived. So, she wouldn't be drinking simply because she was upset with Judd.

He had traveled to Philadelphia on "tight time." He went for an admiralty case involving a Liberian ship called *Break*. She remembered the name. They were all from Liberia. Judd's time was limited on trips; she understood. But not even an email today. Last night a text message read: CU tomorrow LArmstrong 7:15, baggage claim. She imagined her husband

entering the dining room. A nicely prepared dinner would sit on the dining table. She would say to him: You forgot, didn't you.

Her eyes softened with tears at that thought.

Her call to Judd went directly to voicemail. She would take control of the anniversary situation, cook her anniversary dinner, eat it alone, possibly share it with the twins. Fuck her husband. Before she could reach the big silver door of the refrigerator her cell phone rang.

She knocked the wine glass over when she reached for her phone. Burgundy the color of animal blood splashed against the orange Mexican tiles. The smell, like a mild chloroform, rose from the floor. She tightened her voice to produce an inflection of someone still in full control, not rattled by her thoughtless husband, or her past. "Hello," she said.

"It's me, Desi."

"How did you get my number?" She wanted the voice to belong to her husband, not to a criminal from her past.

"You gave it to me."

She failed to remember if she had given it to him, to make him disappear the first time she ran into him.

"He said something about making amends," Desi said.

She knew he meant Johnnymoon.

"Whatever that's about," Desi said.

"I know what that's about."

"Do you?"

She didn't like the way he said that. Like she might owe Desi one. She did. He still limped. Was he stalking her for an amends? Or was he seeking revenge.

Since the beginning, Desi came in second behind Johnnymoon. Johnnymoon was the burning building she wanted to run back into, the cool danger in spite of the flames. Desi was not. He was the dark one, a brooder, a seeker of revenge.

Her anniversary, and hence her marriage, continued its threat of failure. She didn't need to get her past thrown in for special effects. Her heart pounded in a strange way that she didn't like. "Some things are better left alone," she said. The excitement of meeting Johnnymoon after twenty-five years thrilled her like a vague form of foreplay. She thought of the sex, or the lack of it with her husband. God, what was she thinking? Sexual thrills belonged to another lifetime. She'd be fifty-years-old in less than three years, and ever so slightly her body had begun to change. "What are you going to tell him?" she asked.

"He wants to tell you he's sorry."

"There's enough medicine in twenty-five years to cure cancer. An official *mea culpa* is unnecessary."

"The actual words are always important." *Desi couldn't suspect her now. Could he? Could he really care?* Without saying good-by Desi hung up. Did he still hate the fact that he finished a distant second behind Johnnymoon?

Desi felt good about revenge. It was about his growth. His power. His ego. He felt unleashed. He thought of Johnnymoon. Asshole. Vicki, fornicatory trust-fund bitch.

He inhaled the Satya Nag Champu incense. He had shithole thoughts about his teeth, his leg. Now his mind. Falling apart. Early Alzheimer. Al Capone had syphilis and tax problems. Johnnymoon. Cocoa Puffs. Karma. He felt good. He didn't need to dish out revenge. The Nag

Champu smelled good. Wild, like patchouli oil. As grown man he could complicated things done easily. Desi needed karma by the bulk. Instant karma's going to get them. Like the John Lennon song, *Instant karma's gonna get you/Gonna knock you right on the head/You better get yourself together/Pretty soon you're gonna be dead.*

Twenty-five years of shithole living. He was over his leg. But were they? Did they even know, *I mean know*, about it. Why the fuck did Johnnymoon make contact with him? Amends. AA shit. Shithole thinking. Bad decision. Some things can never be fixed.

Then: Desi Versus Johnnymoon

March 31, 1979

I finally open the letter. It's official: I'm a Tulane dropout, pre-architecture studies. You could say I enjoy looking at buildings. I just don't enjoy studying them. As Paul Klee said: One eye sees; the other feels. Somehow I think that says it best. If I had a third eye it could do the studying.

In less than twenty-four hours, on Sunday, April Fool's Day, 1979, I will mark and celebrate the twenty-first year of the great uterine explosion known as my birth. In the meantime I'm on my most recent and seemingly endless search for luv. I have a possible date with this guy who seems very intriguing, if not dangerous. His name is Desi, that's all I know.

I experience one of my arch anxieties: a first date with someone I think I can luv in a serious way. As part of my procedure I start to fantasize about a life with Desi, even though I can barely describe how he looks. Earth to brain, come in brain. Brain, come in. Okay, I was drunk when I met him.

It's not an actual date. Desi told me he'd be at the Contemporary Arts Center. It's going to be a happening. He said that and some other things to talk me into meeting him. I like dates like that, where commitment is optional. You can kind of casually do it or not do it. The exit door sits conveniently nearby, at least in your mind.

For my big date I've come up with a stunning retro outfit I picked up at a recent clothes swap with some friends. The piece serves up a black skirt with matching black jacket that ends at my waist like a military jacket. Mock epaulets hang from the shoulders. Specs of silver in the skirt make the material shine like the street after a rain. I'm wearing a pair of ballet flats identical to the ones Mary Tyler Moore wore on the *Dick van Dyke Show*. Or the *Dick van Dick Show* as Johnnymoon called it.

I'm at this place called the Dungeon. It has no windows, just brick walls and tables with candles, as though lighting will inappropriately expose and clash with the filthy shag carpet. Out of a party of five only my friend Tina and I remain. We look at the table stacked with green Heineken bottles and shot glasses. The candles flicker.

"May your joy be pure, may your pain be champagne." Tina holds up a glass of Brüt Champagne.

"Cheers," I say. "Here's to the state of luv." I gulp down the champ.

"Let's fold," Tina says.

"Onward," I say.

An hour later the United cab drops us off at the CAC, this old warehouse building known architecturally as commercial Italianate. There's a happening going on inside. Behind the tall,

front windows I see guys in white shirts with ties, dressed like the early Beatles and Stones. Girls in mini-skirts. Something about the night makes the CAC feel glamorous. I have this joy so intense I want to run inside and tell everyone I've arrived. Just in case they were looking for me, which I think they must be. Nothing wrong with being the center of attention, right? Maybe that's my whole problem, attention, luv, and all things of the heart. I never felt I got enough luv from my parents so I've looked for it everywhere else. Not unlike Johnnymoon. We've talked about that absence in our lives. His mother died when he was fifteen. Mine lives; she just pretends that I'm dead.

The CAC ceilings rise dramatically to sixteen feet. Canvases splashed with colors, sculptures with bubble parts, glass objects searing with colors fill the bottom floor. For the first time in my life it feels like *my* glamour. It has nothing to do with my parents' glamour. That ranks as a big deal for me.

Everyone's wearing New Wave couture, or as Tina has remarked, New Wave *detour*. I witness guys with short hair—some blonde, some blue, (yes blue)—shooting upward like they combed it using a light socket. There is a collective comment going on, social, cultural, couture based. Not only does short hair show up, but hair combed with a part on the side, and straight-legged pants. Bellbottoms have been erased from the landscape. Girls arrive in miniskirts with big, bold 60s-styled colors, and 50s bright lipstick. Sights I haven't seen since before, say, the fifth grade. Ice-pick stiletto heels click on the floor. People look squeaky clean, urban, retro. The era of the long-haired male is wrapping up. The whole hippie movement of dressing up like aspiring hobos will not be resuscitated this night in 1979.

I have this great thought that would have worked in my philosophy of architecture class or whatever it was called: We are in the *now*, but we are retro. We are our mixed-up selves. It's

like we can't decide if we want to be in the then or the now. They really are one in the same. Our culture is wrestling with another nervous breakdown. I can sympathize.

"Look at all the guys," Tina goes. "It's a real testicle festival."

"Right," I say. My so-called rendezvous with Desi makes me nervous.

"It's a happening," Tina says. The PA booms rockroll over the bottom floor. The beat ricochets around the towering ceilings. The music's great power of sex-appeal beckons. It's like this switch that goes on in me and all bets on good behavior are off. Guitar as extension of penis thrust will forever excite me.

"Like this way," Tina says. She grabs my hand. We strut through these tall doors that flip open like they belong in a hospital emergency room. Inside, a small stage bright with oversized lights sits like an altar. A soft petal of amazement drops in my tummy. It makes me think about how we receive our cues, messages, manners, and emotions from the stage. Who would we be without the stage? Nervous wrecks like Blanche Dubois? We'd never get to see how ridiculous we are. It's a species thing. We let one group of our species show how it's done. The stage helps us do that.

"Wow," Tina says. "I'm lost."

"We all are," I say, excited, like everything I say is significant. "That's the story of man. And woman. Remember, Eve was framed."

After fifteen minutes the PA goes silent. Then a female voice says—gone is the usual guy that sounds like Ed McMahon—"If there are any ladies and gentlemen out there"—I luv that, the sarcasm or whatever—"please welcome, The Normals."

Black curtains peel back. A crushing applause follows, and the Normals appear with all the energy of a kicking newborn. Guitars break out in tinny machine-gun strumming. These

guys are not hard to forget. They are four attractive creeps beyond everyday existence. Under the lights they resemble dolls, breathing art objects taking form as living humans. In the group's center a tall guy—so thin he could find cover behind the mike stand—slams his guitar. On his left, the bass player plucks his strings with a meaty thumb and swings his neck around like an out-of-control hose or something. It looks like he's doing method acting for an epileptic fit. Like his head will fly off into the audience and blood will shoot everywhere, and I'll have to go home and change. His neck alone keeps things tense. On the other side of the tall guy stands the lead guitarist. He has a talent for tedium. He pays attention to his guitar riffs like a draftsman in love with his T-square. The drummer with his big jaw and small eyes could pass as the *Flintstones* cartoon character Bam-Bam who has a fetish for hitting things. He is all about hammer-to-the-anvil drum playing. He'd do wonders in the center of an African war dance. I try to keep my eyes on the tall singer, but the drummer's energy and the bass player with his scary neck make that hard to do. I could only find peace in the irony of the lead guitarist who, in the middle of the chaos, remains as calm as a cat.

The music will never work in an elevator. This stuff demands all of my attention. The first helping is a song entitled "Almost Ready." It is their hit and has gotten some local radio play. The tune works wonders as a straight-forward buzz-cut number about being, I guess, almost ready. A state of perpetual expectation, right? The lead singer slams out bar-chord riffs quick and powerful. The lyrics are compressed and mumbled. Highly basic. For such a thin guy the lead singer has a voice that is Jagger, Muddy Waters, and an argument all rolled into one.

The Normals have this stripped-down sound that makes me think of an explosion, like a pipe bomb or something. All action. No complex hippie sounds there. If someone walks in

with a synthesizer right now they'll be arrested. Nothing here comes close to being called mood music.

Without stopping to catch their breath, the Normals punch the accelerator. The lead singer snarls on. He mumbles the next few song titles so fast I can't understand him. They pull off a stunning cover of The Ramones' "Blitzkrieg Bop." The crowd goes reptile.

The Normals have none of the regular characteristics of a British band—cockney accents, bad teeth, rigor mortis complexions. Instead, they are all-American as a Big Mac and fries, and they looked dangerously alluring.

Tina tiki-torches a doobie. "You think we'll get arrested? It's just a roach."

"Who cares," I say. We both laugh. She hands me the roach clip. It's one of those nights.

The skinny lead singer-guitarist shouts into the mike, "This one's called 'All This and More.' It's a Dead Boy's tune. I'd like to welcome our guest singer Johnnymoon St. Albares." The Normals' singer-guitarist shouts out again, "Johnnymoon St. Albares, people, Johnnymoon St. Albares." Like it's a warning.

Johnnymoon hits the stage with the impact of a Molotov cocktail, flaming, igniting everything. I take a deep breath. Excitement sings my brain. Charisma at such a high speed can only be captured by radar—and the human heart—not by eyesight. The flash slows and turns into a human boy. A sleeveless t-shirted boy with muscles for two. His arms pull the mike stand down like he wants to kiss it and fuck it all at once. Very, very, sexy. The Normals' guitars jam. They kick into this crunchy sound that pulls and pushes chords back and forth.

"Johnnymoon St. Albares, my god!," I say to myself. I know him. We go back to fourth-grade, Catholic songbooks, cafeteria noodles. St. Catherine's. That time on the railroad tracks.

The music cranks, and out comes Johnnymoon's vocals: bright, grim, self-destructive, beautiful. How I can relate. What a voice! Sex is not out of the question *it is* the question. When? How? I want to hug Johnnymoon and the words he sings. Molecules ignite. Hormones swell. Cupid shoots arrows in threes.

Can I describe what it's like
To have sex with the lights on?
And would ya feel right if I did ya tonight?
And put the bite on?

All this and more little girl
How bout on the floor little girl
No time to implore ya girl

The backup vocalists kick in with some three-chord harmony. It is a utopia of words and electricity.

I'm just a dead boy
You know that I'm just a dead boy
I wanna be a dead boy

This stuff is not about flower power. It's for real. It's about anger and anxiety and sex, things closer to my heart than dozens of daisies. A couple of people start pogo dancing in front of the stage. It's like we're all running in place together. Some guy films this happening with a shoulder-style movie camera. God, it is a great song.

The song ends and Johnnymoon shouts, "Good night." The band and audience take a collective sigh. It's like group sex, and we all need to light a cigarette.

The guitars pop and buzz when the musicians pull their cords out. The odors of pot and patchouli fill my nostrils. The air warms up, like someone turned off the air conditioner. I wipe sweat from my forehead. People move up to the stage as though to grab a piece of the

performers. I don't know where that urge comes from, but I want a piece too. For me, a star is born, Johnnymoon St. Albares.

"There's your friend, Desi," Tina says.

This group of new wavers surrounds Desi. From the start he looks dangerous, like he's ready for a good flag burning. He's got a tattoo on each forearm. He isn't what I would call a hot item. He's more like room temperature. A Stanley Kowalski t-shirt hugs his body so tightly it looks like snake skin ready to shed. I'm not sure where he falls on the evolutionary scale, somewhere between Marlon Brando and the Missing Link. The sheer sight of his biceps looks scary, and I have to say, exciting. My memory regains consciousness. I remember Desi and why I like him. He's filthy, trashy, someone who could turn my parents' world upside down. My choice would strike them with cruelty. But I realize I want Desi to spite my parents, not exactly a reason to luv someone.

And Desi is the un-Johnnymoon. Like that 7-Up commercial. In the ad they called 7-Up the *un* cola? Un-do it, the sexy male voice in the commercial requested, like your life was suddenly filled with things to *un*-do. I can't un-do my heart. I want to un-do Desi and do Johnnymoon.

"What are you going to do?" Tina asks.

"Don't worry," I say. "Someday I'll find a job, maybe meet a guy, get married."

"No, I mean tonight."

"Fuck," I say. "This was some serious shit."

"Black Vietnam." Tina holds up her feathered roach clip.

"What are *you* going to do?" I ask.

"Don't worry, someday I'll find a job, maybe meet a guy, get married."

We laugh.

“I’m going to go solo,” Tina says. “You go on your *fate*. I mean date.”

We crack up. But I’m too nervous to really laugh because of my date with Desi. Then—like a scene from *Star Trek*—Johnnymoon appears out of nowhere. Like he’s just beamed in.

“Hi,” he says. “What did you think?”

“You were great,” I say.

“Yeah,” Tina goes.

I goo-goo and gah-gah. Finally I say something halfway significant. “Do you remember grade-school?”

“Of course,” Johnnymoon says. “I had a crush on you.”

“Nooo! I had a crush on you,” I say.

“If I remember right I had the first crush,” he says.

“That’s ridiculous,” I say. “We didn’t even speak to each other.”

He smiles. “I sent you a Valentine’s card every year.”

“So close to the heart, yet so far away,” I say.

“Kind of how love works.”

We both laugh, but it’s really not funny.

Johnnymoon is not Desi. He is rough and tumble, smart and sensitive, Steve McQueen possessed by a beautiful flower acting like a sexy mood. You can feel his energy. It is complex and contradictory: Bodhivista under a tree meets a knife fight in a phone booth. His energy feels strong and out of control. But it feels controlled too. Sure of itself. Dangerous. Smart. Dangerous. And he has enough charisma to lead a cult.

So immediately—is it the power of the stage, I don’t know—I feel this powerful Johnnymoon-Vicki chemistry, a chemical reaction in the league of a Love Canal mishap. Everything is Love Canal. It seems so poetic: the word love next to the word canal. Kryptonite or whatever burning to the center of the earth, to the center of my heart.

I ask Johnnymoon about his life since grade school and the last time I saw him on the railroad tracks.

“Drama, drama, drama, sleep, drama. Flip it and play side two. It’s the same song. Then I go to work.”

He is no doubt funny and charming. “Work?” I ask. “You have a job?” That fact really impresses me, someone better than my father who really doesn’t work. Actually, he’s inherited a position at my grandad’s law firm. It’s more like a game of golf he goes to when he feels like it. So, he stays home a lot.

Johnnymoon chuckles. “Not everyone has a trust *fun*, Vicki.”

“I wish I had a job,” I say, trying mainly to be nice. “I mean I think it would give more meaning to my life.” It amazes me how people can go to work and stay still in one place. In some cases actually sit at a desk. Concentrate on one thing. *Work* at it. The horror of eight hours. I shiver.

“Watch what you wish for,” Johnnymoon says.

“I will,” I say, second-thinking the whole work idea. “What do you do?”

“Antiques. Buy and trade. It works out great, because I’m kind of a history buff.”

I told him how I was taking a sabbatical for like the rest of my life. “Tulane. Pre-architecture. Go Green Wave.”

“I’ve got a hot item, an *objet d’art*,” Johnnymoon says in this perfect Jacque Cousteau accent.

“Really.”

“Yeah, it’s something once owned by Napoleon Bonaparte.” Johnnymoon hands me a business card, *Levine’s Louisiana and European Antiques*. It has his name and phone number scribbled on it. This is the first mention of the tub.

Johnnymoon snaps open this piece of paper. “Here.” The note reads: *Tub is 71” long and 23-3/4” high by nearly 29-1/2” wide. Bathing well measures 59” x 22.” Approx weight, 1200 lbs.*

I’m like, “A tub?”

“It’s a marble tub. It’s one of the three that Napoleon Bonaparte had made for himself. One is in the *Louvre*, one has been lost in Europe, and the third one is now at Levine’s Louisiana and European Antiques, the place where I work.”

Obviously, Johnnymoon is into this piece, which I find intriguing, mainly because of the way he likes it. The stealing part comes later. My God, a twelve-hundred pound *tub*. I’m thinking a bracelet something smaller would be easier to steal. More practical. Bracelet versus tub: is it that we are both free, twenty-one and to an extent, retarded?

“Wow,” I say. A Johnnymoon-Napoleon connection seems like a natural. Two charismatic people with authority issues.

Before we could talk some more about the tub Desi joins us. He extends his hand to me. “Good to see you, again.” His voice is so delicate it could double as a purr. And it is very sexy, like a pinch to the right nipple. By the same token that he looks rough, his voice is soft, a deep

soothing hum of seduction. It's like at birth his vocal chords somehow got hooked up to the wrong body.

"Nice to see you again." I pack fifteen smiles into one and fire my bright blues at him.

"What are you doing here?" Johnnymoon asks Desi. "I thought you were going to Henry's house?"

"Yeah, after I pick up this angel." Desi's voice has suddenly lost its sexiness.

"Yall know each other?" I ask.

"Yeah," Desi says. "We're cousins and friends and bandmates and rivals."

"Rivals?" Johnnymoon says. He looks at me with a search-me look. "Let's move the party train to Pierce and Henry's apartment. Choo-choo." Johnnymoon pumps his right arm and leg in a circle like he's imitating a train.

"Noooo," I scream.

Everyone stops and stares at me like I'm nuts. I don't blame them.

"What's wrong?" Desi asks.

"Nothing, nothing," I say. "I'm confused. Life is confusing. And it's my birthday."

The two St. Albans boys stare at each other. Then they look at me and say happy birthday like a singing duo

"Sorry, Desi," I say, "I'm going with Johnnymoon. You won't mind will you?"

He looks at me with a sad, basset hound expression. As I said, it's the kind of date where if he didn't commit, I didn't have to commit. And vice-versa.

"Asshole," Desi says to Johnnymoon and jabs a finger at him.

"Dez, she's got taste, man."

"Fuck you, man."

“Fuck you.”

Tina has already split. The three of us pile into Johnnymoon’s little Triumph TR-4 sports car and split for the party at Pierce and Henry’s apartment.

Chapter Two

FAMILY

Now: Her Twins

New Orleans, August 19, 2005, 10:30am

A bouquet of chlorine filled the SUV. Summertime. Louise's twins sat in the back seat. They were nine-years-old, and Louise wanted to be more involved in their lives. That special participation that would give them a head-start in knowing themselves, in figuring themselves out, in pursuing success. Achieving happiness.

"No, Paul, I want my goggles back," Piper said to her matching brother Paul.

"They are mine."

"You are being *soooo* indigent," Piper said.

Louise smiled and looked through the rearview mirror at her twins on the mini-van's backseat. "It's indignant, sweetheart. *Indigent* means without money. Poor. *Indignant* is what Paul is being. Offensive."

"That's what I mean," Piper said.

Louise knew Piper had lost her mental balance in anger. Piper knew the word well.

"Thank you for the clarification, baby," Louise said. "I must've misunderstood you."

Louise didn't want them doing the things she had done without parental guidance. As much as she enjoyed her work at the museum and felt the soothing stroke of success, she knew her time would be better spent with her twins. She wanted to resign from the museum.

Through her tenure at NOMA Louise drew on her personal experience for exhibitions and public art programs. Her suggestions and ideas had worked well. Membership rose, the outreach and multi-cultural efforts succeeded through the museum's Van-Go program. It was a fleet of vans that brought art to all parts of the city, hence, Van Go

Louise had worked with the Houston Museum of Fine Art to bring the "Outer Space and Inner Grace" exhibit to NOMA for an October 11th premier date. It would feature the challenges NASA had faced over its lifetime. She hoped to connect NASA's role to New Orleans. She wanted to honor the great success of *Skylab*, even though it did crash back to earth. *Skylab* had a special place in her heart.

The space program used Hasselblad cameras to cover their endeavors. Louise recruited the legendary New Orleans painter and photographer George Dureau to create art out of the NASA feature. She marketed it as a show of photographs. Thematically it would emphasize human inquiry as an integral component of the human condition. The crowds would want to see it, particularly the children. They—like she once did—connected to the space program in their own way.

Louise announced the new exhibition to the twins. She almost mentioned the fact that she had dated a former rocket scientist. She didn't. She kept it simple. "The photographs are incredible. We'll even have pictures of the *Skylab*."

"I want to see it," Paul said. "*Skylab* was the first space station."

"It crashed," Piper said.

Louise remembered that horrible day it crashed.

"When will be here?" Piper asked.

Louise told her.

“Mom, Piper’s goggles broke,” Paul said. “And I know these are mine because the Speedo sign is being erased from using it so much. That’s how I can tell they’re mine. Everyday, I look at the same thing.”

“Okay, we’ll pick up a new pair tomorrow,” Louise said. “Maybe two pairs. Since one broke the other is just waiting on the sidelines.”

The twins stared at each other. They looked so cute when they did that, like they were sharing a piece of the same thought. It meant they understood.

“Paul, ask the coach if he can spare you a pair,” Louise said. “He always has some sitting around.”

“Hey, Paul, can you spare a pair?” Piper asked.

“No.”

“Watch your tone, mister,” Louise said.

“Spare, pair. It rhymes,” Piper said.

“Mom, I’ve got my pair, Piper needs hers.”

“Bullshit.”

The twins shut down in silence. Louise’s choice of words, and her tone—*it wasn’t what you said, but how you said it*—conveyed her stance.

“Paul, you are a man. You need to come to the rescue of the woman, like your father did for me. Old-school style.”

“How did that happen?” Paul asked.

“Yeah,” Piper said.

“Dad, rescuing you?” Paul said.

“Yeah,” Piper said.

“It’s a long story. It’s a story of the human heart,” Louise said. She hoped that Judd didn’t forget their anniversary. Her thoughts continued to nag. And this whole Johnnymoon and Desi thing. What timing.

“Let her get her own goggles. I’m nine years old, Mom. And I’m a boy.”

“You’ve got the penis.”

The twins laughed.

“Chivalry is your duty,” Louise said.

She pulled into the Metairie Country Club. It was the type of socializing Louise wanted to avoid. She found it provincial. That’s how she referred to her dislike for it, which she knew was not only inaccurate but unfair to the members. Her parents belonged, but she wouldn’t. Her friend Kippi belonged, and she wanted Louise to join.

Paul and Piper hopped out of the mini van. She admired their pure beauty. Did she look that beautiful? She never knew family and normal could ever be combined. Those two words together—family, normal—in the same sentence, one complementing the other in any way alluded her for her whole life. “Bye. Call me when yall are through. If you can, get a ride with Bobby Waller’s mom.”

“Mom, we don’t do Bobby Waller,” Paul said.

“*Really*,” Piper said.

“I almost forgot,” Louise said. “It’s Kippi’s turn to pick yall up.”

Paul looked at Piper and they smiled like Kippi was also their best friend. “We’re going to Foster’s today.” Paul slid open the side door of the mini-van.

Louise watched her twins—*wow, they’re mine*—disappear into the distance. Piper ran ahead of Paul. He chased her and yanked on her pink backpack. Piper bent back and almost fell.

Louise slammed on the brakes. The car behind her blared its horn. Louise's heart sunk. She didn't want to see them fight, no, not right there. Dammit. She clutched her door handle, ready to keep the peace. Just then Paul handed Piper his swimming goggles. Louise took in a big breath. The car behind her blew its horn again. In her rearview mirror she saw a group of teenagers in their parents' Mercedes. Fools, she thought. She took in another deep breath just for spite.

Life—her twins, her past, her anniversary—started to pile up on her. Her emotions turned brittle. She didn't want the twins to have the life that she had had as a child. Quiet tears of joy sprang from her eyes.

Then: The Parents

April 1979

Two days after my twenty-first birthday, I go to see my counselor. (By the way this is well over a year ago, and this is not the brassy blonde Texas counselor I like.) I'm not seeing her like we're dating. She's a talk doctor. She has a doctorate degree in Listening. I talk to her because The Parents, my parents, pay her to listen to me. In all fairness The Parents can't listen to me. They don't know how. They are display parents only.

The counselor's place is on Metairie Road near said Parents' home. I think they even know her. The office's interior is nice, *tres* pricey but a little overcooked. She has some modern look going on—sleek phones and recessed lights and whatever—working with this crazy hodgepodge stuff that looks like it was influenced by a Genghis Khan's garage sale. *Cray-zee!*

Our meeting, like her office, borders on cockamamie.

I tell her, “We’re all living through things that are hard to believe. Things we could never imagine doing. If I’m afraid of something, I want to eat it, drink it, drive through it, have sex with it. Whatever.”

She says, “If there’s a burning building would you want to run into it?”

I say, “That’s my first impulse.”

“Is that the best, or *right* thing to do?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Right and wrong depend.”

I talk for a while and she listens. Then she asks, “Do you ever feel like jumping from tall heights?”

“I once rode the Zephyr roller coaster ten times in row. It was P.O.P night, pay-one-price night. I kept wanting to get scared. It worked only the first few times. Kind of. It felt too controlled. I got off after the tenth time.”

There’s this pause.

I say, “One seeks one’s own level of destruction. It’s like a law of physics. Say, water finding its lowest point.”

The talk doctor looks at me like I just barked. A silence follows. Her frizzy hair half covers her face. She wears this earthy-type blouse and skirt finished off by these Birkenstocks sandals that complete her folksy feminine statement. Overall her outfit makes her look like a hippie harboring a fantasy to be a beet farmer. She doesn’t match her office. I guess you could call her a stylistic counterpoint.

A fancy clock ticks on her credenza.

She goes, “You have to understand certain realities.”

I say, “I do.” Like I’m marrying her. I tell her that I keep having these dreams that I’m freefalling. It’s actually the same dream. I don’t tell her it’s by these big power lines in New Orleans East near this pharmacy that I have fraudulently copped pharmaceuticals drugs from. Instead, I say, “The wrong direction is one direction I know well. Are freefalling and the wrong direction related?”

“I don’t see a connection.”

“That’s the point, there is no connection. I wouldn’t be falling if I had a connection.”

Like two hippies we go back and forth discussing the physics and psychological effects of connecting. Then she asks me, “Have you ever heard of counterphobia?”

“That’s your department,” I say.

“No,” she goes. “It’s your mind.”

Counterphobia. It’s living with your head in the lion’s mouth. You don’t suffer from it because it’s too much fun. So, I’m one of these people whose mind has a mind of its own.

Yikes!

That night my girlfriends and I go to our favorite place the Dungeon. It *is* a dungeon, except for the bathroom floor. I know. I won’t get into *why* I know, but the bathroom tile’s sanitarium-look appears ironic, and anachronistic, for a place like the Dungeon.

My girlfriends fill me in on Johnnymoon. He’s a singer, and he wants to form his own band, not only guest star with the Normals. He has a police record, which I already know about, and he’s just crazy. Not Thorazine crazy but fun crazy. The rumor is his cousin Desi is really the nut. Desi owns a gun. Actually two guns. There’s something attractive about a guy who

owns two guns. I just can't help it. It's almost erotic. I think it has something to do with my counterphobia.

But Johnnymoon sounds perfect for me, now. A singer. A renaissance boy. A leading punk in so many ways. Leading what, I don't know. His own sunbeam, his own plot to overthrow the world. Someone to catch a dream with. Get in trouble with. Fall in luv with. Have a child with. Run from the law with. As I said, perfect.

My crew and I end up dawn-busting. Meaning we leave the Dungeon somewhere around seven a.m. Since there are no windows in the place they actually give you these paper sunglasses to fight off the morning sun's vampire effect. You feel like melting anyway.

The rocket glare of sunlight hits me. The sky hurdles towards us—humankind, my friends, and me. And somewhere, his whereabouts unknown, Johnnymoon. The smell of sweet olive and jasmine seduces me with a berserk version of spring fever. I get spring fever like most people get the chills, except I become like this . . . well I won't pass judgment on myself.

The all-night partying has my head feeling like there's a grass fire going on inside. And the whole no-windows feel of the Dungeon hasn't helped. I take off my paper sunglasses and look into the sky to welcome the sun. There in front of me is Tina with black hair as dark as last night, eyes as blue as the sky above her right ear.

"Can I hold your hand?" Tina asks.

"Yeah," I say. We do that. It's a girl thing. Our girl thing. We're still hanging on to childhood that way. It's something we did on fieldtrips in grade school. Our feet shuffle on the quiet sidewalks. The fragrance of magnolia and fried eggs fills the air. We talk about luv and the personalities of the day, mommy issues, and babies. Our futures.

"I'm going to law school," Tina says.

“Why,” I say.

“It’s something to do.”

“I start next fall. Stanford Law School. It’s in California.”

A cloud pulls away from the sun. Sunbeams as sharp as glass cut my eyes.

“I’ll miss you,” I say.

We hug and kiss.

I’m on this constant search to find myself. What a search. I want to stop but can’t. The hunt is like a safari from a Tarzan movie wild, exotic, dangerous.

So where do we start: Napoleon, Tennessee Williams, *Skylab*? Now it does sound like a history book. Louis Armstrong, Lee Harvey Oswald, David Duke. Even New Wave music. The history of our lives. Of our luvs.

Skylab. For the record, last year circa 1978 in my twentieth season, I dated a rocket scientist. He worked for McDonnell-Douglas at their Michoud facility (that’s pronounced *me-shoe*, it’s French) on an important part of the *Skylab*. You guessed it; that’s why I fell—no pun intended—for *Skylab*. Attractive, smart, alcoholic, the scientist’s had all the right stuff. Our own special Ken doll. My parents wanted the rocket scientist as their friend. They got what they wanted. They are rich, charming, imposing. The Parents argued he was too old and declared him off limits. He *was* too old, thirty-five or was it thirty-nine. The point is that’s how I became interested in *Skylab*.

The Parents get me this apartment (actually they finagled my trust *fun*, so I could pay for it myself). I have the apartment partly because things deteriorated between us. Like in any

family, bygones are never really bygones. They just don't want to face me and my problem(s), which somehow attaches to them like an octopus.

So I have an apartment on Allard Place, walking distance to City Park. As far as size goes my apartment could give any shoebox a run for its money. It gets smaller every time I return home, like it's pulling its own joke on me. My place occupies part of the bottom floor of an Allard Place mansion. Some hotshit attorney The Parents know owns the place and supposedly lives above me. I've seen the Blessed Mother in cloud formation more times than I've seen him. He has an Italian last name.

The so-called mansion is decent. It's mock HH Richardsonian Romanesque architecture, which automatically comes with heavy block construction. The mansion looks like a house posing as a church disguised as an asylum. It's what architects call visually memorable. *It is* visually memorable. The fact that you can walk into a piece of architecture as though walking into a work of art fascinates me. Great architecture always has the ability to frighten. Think about skyscrapers. Their height alone unleashes three butterflies in my stomach.

The place came furnished. The styles are a mishmash, and I'm fantasizing when I say styles, and for that matter, mishmash. One wall in the living room is paneled. That's it. Dark and ugly. Log-cabin modern is what I call it. I wonder if anyone could have said, counterpoint, let alone understood it. Counterpoint can do wonders. I have no idea what they were on when they designed this apartment. The description I've come up with is neo-Garage. I plan to redo the whole place. I know about Eastlake, Second Empire, Bauhaus to name a few, or Dick van Dyke modern. That's what I call post-modern stuff giving a wink to Scandinavian influences. It's like the interior design of Rob and Laura Petrie's apartment. I have an inkling—more than

an inkling—I know what works for an interior and what doesn't work. That's at least one good thing I've inherited from The Mother.

Speaking of said parents, The Father has given me the Phonemate so he and The Mother can leave messages for me. They like talking to the answering machine more than to me. At least that's how it appears. The Mother called for my birthday. Late, but she called. Left a message. Most of the time I'm not home; so, she'll ask the answering machine how I'm doing. That time she called and told it happy birthday.

"Hope you're okay," she says to the machine. "Call. Your father and I are back from New York. Aunt Meg says hi. Hi." The Mother is originally from New York.

I want to talk to The Mother. And The Daddy. So I call back.

"Oh, hi, Darlin," The Mother says in her size-4 voice that I'm sure nicely complements her Cartier earrings and Suzy Perette bombshell cocktail dress she is probably wearing at the moment. She starts on about her trip to New York. She doesn't pause to ask how I'm doing, so I tell her anyway.

"I'm fine."

"She's doing okay, Paul." Paul is the assistant parent, The Father. He must have been near by. The Mother has this habit of repeating stuff right in front of The Father. Like when I was a kid we'd be going somewhere in our car. I would say to them, I want a hamburger. The Mother would repeat to The Father, who's driving the car only inches from both of us, She wants a hamburger. Like we were not in the same car.

I ask her if she saw anything interesting in New York. When I say interesting she knows I mean something related to fashion or architecture. We connect nicely in that way.

"Italian denim," she says.

I'm familiar with it. Nice stuff that's as soft as flannel, but it's a cotton denim with a great soft drape.

"The denim would work great for baggy pants," she says.

Little does she know no one wears baggy pants anymore, and if they do I don't want to know them. New Wave is a tight sight.

She tells me her sister, my Aunt Meg, is doing fine. Her sister lives with another women named Eve. For some reason that sounds like the perfect name for a lesbian. The Mother informs me that Eve has gained weight. Why The Mother is counting calories for Eve I don't know. Then we talk about nothing.

From the background I hear The Father say, "Let me talk to her."

The Mother tells me goodbye. "Love." That's how she does it—luv, not I luv you. Just luv, pure and ambiguous.

The Father is sweet, until he talks about Minnesota. "It's a twenty-eight-day program," he says.

The parents are on this treatment kick, like gnats on a scab. They don't even want me in their house anymore. They keep using the word enable. I don't know where they picked that up from. They don't want to *enable* me. That sounds highly clinical for me. They know people who own hospitals.

"Time is tight," I say. "I don't really have twenty-eight days to spare."

The place in Minnesota is a drug treatment institution, prison, or whatever it's called. I didn't want to hear any more about rehab. So I say good-bye to The Father, but in a good way.

Then: My Little Brother

This song goes off in my head: *My name is Michael/I have a penny/shiny and new. My name is Cindy.* The melody has to do with my baby brother.

The parents were not always of the genus, *maximus craximus* (assholes). A great change occurred to them after my little brother was born. They wanted another child, and I wanted a brother or sister. Marshall enters the world, and we are all happy. Great nuclear family. The term nuclear just kills me. Couldn't somebody have come up with a better word than nuclear. Nuclear family and Love Canal, they have the same weird wordplay. Nuclear family sounds dangerous, a little too close for comfort. Even our extended family enters a new happiness about Marshall. The Parents let me stay home from school to help with my little brother. That's how happy they, and I, are. At Marshall's birth my granddad, the inventor of the kickstand, cuts Marshall and *moi* into his will. All is sugar and sunshine.

Marshall's birth happens like eleven years ago, when The Mother is approaching forty, or is forty. I don't really know her *actual* age. She's always vague about that. It's like her age has its own version of physics, and it takes special knowledge to understand it. It's complicated with its own rules of sagging and physical deterioration.

This perfect piece of joy enters our hearts. Bliss fills our household. It fills me. Then it's time to baptize little Marshall. Of all days that it has to happen, it happens on the morning of his baptism. Is God or somebody sending a message? Who knows? Come in God. You really know how to send a message. I think of that submarine pinging sound, sonar or whatever it's called, they use it to talk to dolphins.

“Mark, Mark,” I hear The Mother scream from Marshall’s room. I’m getting ready for the baptism in my own room. I just left Marshall, and he looked fine.

“What is *it*?” The Father is never in the mood for female hysteria. He walks to Marshall’s room. “Ohmygod, ohmygod,” The Father goes. “Oh God, this can’t be.”

When my father squeals Ohmygod, I know bad things are happening. He never says it, particularly in that *Morgus the Magnificent Fright Night* tone. His voice makes this really spooky feeling come over me like an evil chill or some bad acid.

I run into Marshall’s room. “What’s wrong?” The mobile with birds on it rotates above his crib. He looks like a ball of wax in his blue outfit. The room smells of Johnson & Johnson baby powder.

“Vicki, Marshall won’t move,” The Mother says. She’s totally boo-hooing. Her face looks like she has Down’s Syndrome.

It is a charmless scene. An opera without words. Just faces distorting with sadness, like the sadness is trying to find its way out of the faces faster than the muscles will let it out. My heart and my mind undergo some strange chemical reactions at that moment. The chemicals set off attitude changes, short out nerve endings. Damage certain realities that are not yet realities.

Marshall’s death stuns my parents. It presents them with something that they rarely have to deal with, LOSS. Pure, simple, and mean. And, in a certain light, it means failure. These were golden people: success, talent, money. Things like that. Crib death does not compute. It does not belong in their world. It only belongs in other people’s worlds. Not theirs.

The Father leads the way in our reconstruction. He says: We’re all healthy. We’ve got the best daughter in the world. She’s really like having two daughters. The Father actually says

this, or a rendition of it, kid-you-not, more than once. His feelings glow with luv. I really feel his compassion and think that he means it. It marks the highpoint of us.

The world marches on, and we move on because we have to. Just like everybody else who encounters grief. I guess the hardest thing was the expectations of fun and fulfilling times, and the luv I wanted to share with Marshall. But after a while I realize those expectations are not part of my world. I put it in the Just-Forget-It part of my head.

Dead dogs, diarrhea, stinky perspiration, everyone has had it, but not a dead baby. It crushed my heart and disturbed my mind. On that day something got away from us. It was too late to round up. It would never return. Ever.

My name is Marshall/I have a penny shiny and new/My name is Vicki.

Now: Family Life

Four nights earlier, August 15, 2005, 7:00pm

At supper, Louise refused to mention their anniversary. It was important enough for Judd to remember on his own. He was supposed to leave first thing in the morning for Philadelphia. And suppertime belonged to her entire family. No smooching or cuddling. Affection, yes, but keep it G-rated, straightforward caring, a wholesome example, something easy for the twins to understand.

Louise enjoyed her family's evening meeting, not actually eating dinner, but the gathering. She wanted to establish and keep established, on a daily basis, the practice of time and togetherness. Supper was less formal than dinner. Supper sounded better, more democratic,

sloppy and social. Dining together helped that important experience for blood to bond, that situation, that togetherness and many other descriptions that Louise knew as *her* family. Supper was the meeting where hearts and souls could congregate. The dining table with its pickled oak top and Queen Ann legs was that spot for such a meeting. At dinnertime all devices associated with computer screens, *Wickywoo*, *Playstation-Two*, *Bond Game*, and *Gameboy* were verboten. It was time to unite her flock. A daily gathering would establish the connection that created family.

If she was unable to prepare a salad—she liked hers with raisins dates and other sweet objects—she would play with a regular portion of food on her plate. She preferred raw foods *sans* dairy products. She considered herself a part-time vegan. The twins hadn't noticed that for the most part she stage ate. She needed less food than she did in her past. Her natural lack of appetite kept her trim and fit looking.

The kids liked red beans and rice, still the traditional meal for Mondays in New Orleans. They liked plenty of smoked sausage in the batch. Tuesday through Thursday she prepared either fajitas, or bow-tie pasta with pesto, or spaghetti and meatballs. Veggie hamburgers were once mandatory. She cooked, not Lucinda, their domestic helper, as Louise and Judd referred to her. The twins convincingly argued that why eat at all if you don't like what you're eating. You might as well just starve to death. Veggie burgers were eventually removed from the DeAmas' menu. Once in a while on Friday nights, pizza and Popeye's fried chicken were allowed. Sometimes Judd would take the twins to Brocatto's on Carrollton Avenue for Italian ice-cream and biscotti. Louise stayed home. She feared, irrationally, of being spotted by someone she didn't want to see. Her past.

A white bowl—part of the Pottery Barn set—filled with bow-tie pasta dominated the center of the table. Her family arrived and settled in around the table. The odor of tomato sauce filled the house. It seemed to stick to the curtains and walls. It smelled like a home. She wanted it to smell that way. Basic, not cold and sterile and perfect like her parents' home. She wanted it messy, even unclean, roiling in germs, imperfect, but full of togetherness. Stuffed with love. Like you could smell it.

“Paul, all screens must be turned off, by seven,” she said. She had placed a deadline on the use of his computers. Already, she worried that he may have an addictive personality.

“It was school work,” he said.

“What are you working on?”

“Data systems, Mom. It's complicated, but I understand it. They're really important. We use them everyday in our world.”

“It's summer. That sounds—for lack of a better description—like a bullshit story to me.”

“I don't think that language is necessary,” Paul said stealing the line his mother would use on him. He read from a piece of paper. “I'm learning to analyze, predict, observe, and think scientifically.” He looked up at her and smiled.

“Paul, don't lie to your mother,” Judd said.

“Let's say grace,” Louise said.

“Grace,” Paul said.

“Grace,” Piper joined in with a conspiratorial voice.

They giggled. They enjoyed the audience of their parents. It was fundamentally a good sign that the twins wanted to entertain their parents.

“No, guys, Grace is a prayer,” Louise said.

“We know,” Piper said.

“I was concerned you didn’t know,” Louise said.

Judd, still a Catholic, was one of the few people Louise knew who gave the Church a modicum of respect. The idea of apostatizing—even in the shadow of the pedophilic scandals—never entered his thoughts. The early brainwashing worked thoroughly on Judd. Louise thought of herself as a cradle Catholic. Her parents imposed it upon her without a choice. Louise looked at her twins and would kill anyone, priest or not, who sexually assaulted them.

“Okay, okay,” Judd said. *“Bless us O Lord and these our gifts, which we are about to receive, from thy bounty, through Christ our Lord. Amen.”*

In perfect union, softly, they said amen. The word’s gentle pronunciation, like a choir, was a kiss on Louise’s heart. They made the sign of the cross all in one perfect group motion. It was a moment of flawless togetherness. She might have cried but couldn’t, not in front of them.

“Okay, Mom, I’ve got a joke for you,” Paul said. “Dad, you too. Yall look too serious. Yall look, I don’t know, run over.”

“Yeah,” Piper said.

“Well thanks, Paul. You are so endearing,” Judd said.

“Really,” Louise said.

“Endearing,” Paul said to Piper as though Piper didn’t hear it and as though their parents were not in front of them. Something Louise remembered in a bad way from her childhood. They giggled and made faces with their mouths wide open like they had just eaten a portion of bad pasta.

“Here it is,” Paul said.

“Here’s what?” Louise asked.

“The jooooooooooooooke, mom,” Piper said.

“Where did the spaghetti go to dance?” Paul asked. “The meat-*ball*.”

Then Paul and Piper went through a few rounds of knock-knock jokes.

“Very funny, Paul. I’m laughing, Paul,” Louise deadpanned. “Listen to me laugh. Can you hear me? Hah. Hah-hah, hah. Hah. Hah, hah.” She wanted to instill at least a sense of seriousness over the meeting. Serious was good thing sometimes. Kind of an emotional counterpoint.

“Your laugh is funny.” Paul’s laugh scraped his throat. “I happen to think it was very funny.” He bent over holding his stomach. “I knew this one would find a place in your heart.” He was toothy package of confidence—and Louise admitted—charm.

“Okay,” Louise said. “Here’s one. Knock-knock”

“Who’s there?”

“Police.”

“Police who?” Piper looked at Paul with a contorted face.

“Po-lice stop these knock-knock jokes.”

Police. Louise didn’t even like the word, not even in a joke. Louise wondered if her children would ever encounter the police. Their formal authority so overwhelming, and their sense of obedience so pure it could intimidate. But they never frightened her. Now she found them all too scary, not for her but for them. That aside, Judd failed to mention their anniversary. She couldn’t help but wonder where her marriage was headed?

“Excuse me.” A light-headedness came over her when she rose from the table.

Chapter Three

LOVE AND LUV

Then: The Search for Luv

On the fireplace mantle in my apartment Barbara “Barbie” Millicent Roberts and Ken Carson (better known as Barbi and Ken) stare at each other. At twenty-one, I’m still holding on to the last remnants of childhood. Life can be this constant battle against maturity. I witness true luv flashing in Barbie and Ken’s plastic eyes. I want to have an example of true luv in front of me. That’s why I’ve put them there. If I see it every day I will eventually have it. If a plastic doll can find luv, I can, right?

Barbie always wears her one-piece swimsuit with a peppermint striped top and solid blue bottom. She insists on light-blue, open-toe shoes. It isn’t a good match, but she’ll have to live with it because I’ve lost all her clothes, *circa* the eighth grade when boys entered my life. What timing. So this works as her second coming, her post *début*. Barbie’s bangs and shoulder-cut curl are real 60s looking. She stares at Ken with curved eyebrows and blue eyes. True Luv! My heart thumps like a volleyball in a long-ago fourth-period gym.

Ken is always in his camouflage Vietnam War garb, except I’ve lost his pants. He looks so funny without a penis. Next to them in the background, sitting comfortably against the mantle is Francie, this kind of assistant Barbie. Mattel (It’s swell, it’s from Mattel, right) has come up with her. Francie is not only swell, she looks great in her pink, striped, one-piece swimsuit. The only problem is that she can’t stand up because she’s missing a leg. At least she’s not missing her heart.

I've been in communiqué with Johnnymoon over the last few days. I'm just waiting for him to ask me out.

I straighten my apartment. Then I check my Phonemate messages.

"Let's make contact," Johnnymoon says into the machine. Like we're aliens or something.

The phone rings. I grab it before it makes it second ring, like it's a race I'm having with it. I need to beat it before it can ring a second time; otherwise I'll lose my life or something.

"Hello," I say.

"Vicki?"

"Yes."

"It's me, Johnnymoon."

"Johnnymoon, hey it's me, Vicki."

He laughs.

We talk, mostly chit-chat.

He asks me if I want to go to watch him sing tonight. "It'll be a date." He says he's been leaving messages. "I hate the answering-machine treatment," he says.

I tell him my answering machine is acting up, like it has psychological issues. "It's a descendent of one of Sybil's personalities," I say.

He cracks up and asks if I want to meet Tennessee Williams.

"The writer?" I'm sure something got caught in my ear and I have misunderstood him.

"Yeah, the writer," Johnnymoon says.

"What about your gig?" I ask. "I want to see and hear you sing."

“It’s still on.” He tells me we’ll meet Tennessee before his gig. “This is the date of your life.”

“That’s so sweet of you.”

“So what about it? Tennessee Williams?”

“Stella, Stella, *Stellaaaaaa*.” My voice crackles on the last Stella. It sounds like I broke a vocal chord. We both laugh at how ridiculous it sounds, like John Belushi on a *Saturday Night Live* skit or something.

I tell Johnnymoon I want to make sure we were talking about the same person.

“Tennessee Williams, the one and only. From my high-school English book.”

“He has a place in the French Quarter,” Johnnymoon says. “I’m heading to the Old Absinthe House. Wanna go?”

“What about Tennessee?” I ask. “What about your gig?”

“Tennessee said he’d be at the Absinthe.”

I think I notice a lilt in Johnnymoon’s voice.

“The gig is later. Let’s go,” Johnnymoon says.

“Now?” He’s taken me by surprise.

“No, let’s wait for the Christmas Holidays.”

I crack up.

He says it will be a date, and he’ll pick me up.

I say okay. I feel so happy.

Funny, as if he were reading my thoughts, Johnnymoon asks if I’m happy.

“What does that mean, am I happy?”

“I don’t know,” he says.

“I guess that makes two of us,” I say. “Luv is the only thing that gives you happiness.”

He doesn’t say a thing.

My goal for my date with Johnnymoon is to find luv. I guess that’s really THE one quest of every date, luv. We can deny it all we want but that’s it. Luv, luv, luv. Luv is all you need, particularly when you don’t have any. You look for clues that can mean something in the long run. It’s like the *Dating Game* but in real life, but with real-life consequences.

Johnnymoon shows up at my pad pretty much on time. He knocks. I let him in. He wears this shiny suit that grips him tight. His straight-legged pants are too short and his coat too small, but it looks great. A slim tie with a square end—just like George Peppard’s in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*—drops over his shirt.

Johnnymoon’s hair is dyed this kind of orange blonde. Gone is his brown-blond hair. In the good light it looks handsome and Nordic. In the bad light it looks like his hairdresser needs to look for another career.

He enters and stands with his legs stretched apart in a V. His arms go downward in a matching V. The palms of his hands are stretched out Jesus-on-the-cross style. His head is turned completely to the right. He wiggles all of his fingers and taps a beat with his Cuban heels. He pauses, jams his hair upward with both hands. He gets right back in the V position tapping his heel. He’s part Iggy Stooze, *Moulin Rouge*, Elvis, and Elvis’ pelvis all rolled into one. I want to taste him.

“Total, retro,” he says.

He looks like he's bigger than life, like a famous person. He could give charisma, charisma. He turns his head straight and breaks out in song. *I've been loving you/too long/to stop now*. He sounds just like Otis Redding. He let's his head droop, like he's waiting for an applause.

I clap. Wow, what a way to get to a girls heart and panties.

"Thanks," he says. He pulls a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket. Lights one. He holds his hand up to his hair. He has beautiful hands. They are long and elegant and even though he's not Italian he uses them a lot when he explains things. Like they're adjectives or something. "It's Henna. The hair dye. I did it myself." The Camel Light almost burns his orange hair.

"Ummmm." I give Johnnymoon a kiss on his cheek, the first intimate contact with my most favorite mammal.

He kisses me on the cheek, a fat puckering sound that brings me back to second grade. Then he hugs me like I'm a big loaf of French bread. He squeezes me all over, G-rated places. He leaves my tits and ass out of his touch process. I really don't mind if he wants to go further. Touch the area above my ass where it curves up onto my back and my panties are on the floor in about a second. The other day I read that the clitoris is a circuit—*circuit*, like does it come with its own electric bill—with over 7,000 nerve endings. I won't mind if Johnnymoon touches just one of them right here and now.

Instead, Johnnymoon lifts his straight-legged pants to show me his Beatle boots. "Looka. Cuban heels and all."

"I noticed," I say. "Nice."

I wear this polka-dot green-and-white miniskirt with a matching sleeveless top. I mean bright green as in it looks like the colors glow in the dark. I'm sure a black light would do wonders with the colors. It's easy to see why the person (I'm naming names, but it looks like something Tina would have worn) gave it up at the most recent clothes swap.

I have already doused some water in my hair and combed it up and back *a la* Elvis. I realize I need to get a haircut to look more New Wave. I want to cut it short like Elvis in *Jailhouse Rock*. The water has given it this greasy other-side-of-the-tracks *chic* look. I also think I'll switch from blonde to black.

"Let's hit the road before it hits us," Johnnymoon says. He holds his right hand up, lets it drop to form a fem wrist. "Let's rock on." He stops and looks toward the ceiling. "I am in the Land of fucking Do."

Johnnymoon jumps into the air. His head almost hits the ceiling. He falls with his legs split open into a banana split, a big move made famous in the 60s. "*I've been loving you/too long. Whaaaaaaa.*" He sounds just LIKE Otis Redding.

"God, Johnnymoon, that was perfect."

"I think we're going to break from New Wave custom and do some Otis tonight."

"I can't wait."

We walk outside into the moonlight. Johnnymoon pets the fender of his TR-4 sports car like it's a golden retriever. I like the car. Instead of some spiritless materialistic type car like a Mercedes or BMW, or God forbid, a Cadillac, this car is all spirit with little materialistic value whatsoever.

We crash into the nighttime. We head to the Quarter down Esplanade Avenue with the top down. The right front fender is smashed in. The car's right headlight dangles like a busted eye on one of my old dolls. In front of us the city glows like a cigarette in a nearby solar ashtray.

Johnnymoon points up at a small plane above us. "Look."

The plane sounds like an oversized moth. "*Da plane boss, da plane*," I say in a munchkin Spanish accent. It is obviously a light aircraft that's probably landing at the New Orleans Lakefront Airport. No biggie.

"It's the *Skylab*." Johnnymoon makes this frighten face. "It's crashing. Here. Tonight. Oh my god." He folds his fingers in and puts his closed hand up to his mouth like a damsel in distress.

I laugh. "That's a plane," I say.

"You're right, my child. Yes, you're right," Johnnymoon says in this calm fatherly voice.

We start talking about *Skylab* and how it is doomed and going to crash back to earth. How McDonnell Douglas built part of *Skylab* in New Orleans, another connection with history—the theme of the evening. I tell him I actually dated a guy who worked on *Skylab*, a connection to my history and one connection to a string of bad histories.

"History defines us," Johnnymoon says. "Good or bad."

Johnnymoon luvs history. That's his thing. Be part of history. Make sure were are in it. For God's sake, Steven Ambrose the famous historian was one of his teachers at UNO. Johnnymoon is majoring in business.

"So when is *Skylab* going to crash?" I ask.

"They don't know."

“Who’s they?”

“They, Vicki, *they*.”

“Isn’t that the name of a punk band? *They*.”

“It is,” he says.

We look at each other and smile on cue, like in the movies. It’s an official connection, one of those moments that create chemistry, and its cohort luv. Under the few lights of the nighttime a shifty smile flickers on Johnnymoon’s face.

He is all excited and tells me about the new group he’s helping form. “Hold the Lettuce is our name.”

“I luv it,” I say.

“Yeah, thanks. I’m writing our first album with our guitarist Bryan LaBryan. The albums called *Blue*.

“Wow, you’re not wasting any time.”

“Desi, who’s our drummer, wanted to name us Outboard Penis. I insisted on something more Dada related, more artistic, more New Wave than Punk. The word penis has Punk written all over it. We’re more artistic than Punk. We’re New Wave. Hence, Hold the Lettuce.”

“What about Hold the Penis,” I say in all fairness to Desi. “Or Outboard Lettuce.” I wonder how Desi is doing these days. In a way I think I should be on a date with him and not Johnnymoon. But such is life and luv.

“Of course we can change our name every week if we want to,” Johnnymoon says. “Just like Jethro Tull did back in the day in London.”

Without saying a word Johnnymoon pulls to the side and stops under this huge oak tree on Esplanade Avenue. The rattling underneath the car stops.

“Look.” Johnnymoon points to this beautiful two-story house that’s at least a hundred-and-fifty years old. Italianate design. It’s painted a calm yellow pastel. Great condition. The house hides under the branches of this live oak that looks, and suddenly feels like a monster. Like it can breath, walk, talk, and audition for a horror movie.

“That’s where Edgar Degas lived when he visited New Orleans,” Johnnymoon says. “Right around the corner on Canal Street is Warren Easton High School, Lee Harvey Oswald’s high school.”

Johnnymoon’s car door makes a big squeaky sound, like *it’s* haunted. He bends over into the open car and tells me people put a big value on history. “Why do you think we’re going after Napoleon’s tub?” he says.

“Going *after*,” I say.

“Need to know basis only,” he says.

Johnnymoon walks next to one of those brown, historic registrar signs. Bars of moonlight angle through the oak branches. The name Degas stamped on the brown metal shimmers in the moonlight.

“Degas,” I say. “Like Renoir and Cézanne, right? As in blur?” I suddenly aspire to be the next curator for the New Orleans Museum of Art. I feel my future inside of me: it feels like a bad case of the cramps.

In front of me, Johnnymoon leans on the car’s windshield. He tells me how the whole blur “thing” got started with Hilaire Germain Edgar Degas. “That’s his complete name.” He informs me how he’s related to Degas. His great-great-great grandfather was Degas’ first cousin or something. “There’s this Degas painting entitled, ‘The Interior of the Cotton Bureau,’ ” he

says. "In the painting the first guy on the right is my great-great or great-great-great uncle. I forget how many greats."

I laugh. He is so funny.

"I thought you knew that about me," Johnnymoon says. Like he's Billy Carter or somebody and I should know all about him.

"I did hear about you," I say. "But I never heard about you and Degas."

"Uh oh, what did you hear?"

"Good stuff. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't good."

"I've got letters, documents, birth certificates. Proof for the Degas thing. I may donate all of this to the New Orleans Collection. That way I'll be mentioned in New Orleans history next to my long-lost famous relatives."

Johnnymoon continues to tell me that Degas had vision problems and because the light is different in New Orleans, Degas' visits to New Orleans had a big impact on his paintings and the whole Blur Movement, which I know as the French Impressionist Movement. From my art appreciation class I remember those hairy French men and their dashing intelligence and what they did with light and haze.

"We live in a bowl," Johnnymoon says. "It creates a different light here. Not to mention if we get hit by a hurricane we'll flood and die."

I stare at him as though he's just informed me of a great tragedy. "I hope I don't see the day."

"Because of geography and administrative reasons, France will never take us back. We're part of the United States. For Good. Or Bad."

I never thought of it like.

He smirks. “History is in the air. Let’s fucking celebrate history: *Skylab*, Degas, New Wave, Lee Oswald.”

“Don’t forget about Napoleon,” I say. “And Hurricane Betsy.”

“And Tennessee Williams.”

Johnnymoon walks into Esplanade Avenue. An oncoming car blasts its horn at him.

“Phew, *I* was almost history,” Johnnymoon says.

“Good thing. I think I like you.”

His face makes this, oh no! expression. He breaks out into song, “*I’ve been loving you/too long/to stop now.*”

There’s no place like luv.

Now: Lost Love

August 19, 2005, 12:15pm

How could love slip away? There were many ways. Louise didn’t know. She looked at the bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon she was saving for Judd. If he wasn’t going to be at tonight’s dinner she could drink it.

She moved around their large kitchen, their silver-based kitchen. Because of the children she took someone’s suggestion and installed two dishwashers. An island and circular floor plan allowed plenty of room for her and the children to cook together. Did she need so much metal? It comforted her, she thought, the idea of sleek strength. The oversized stainless steel Jenn-Air refrigerator stood tall and fat as their marquee appliance, a stainless-steel island stove followed

it, along with a stainless-steel oven, and a stainless-steel blender. Metal even enclosed her Apple Powerbook, which she kept on the kitchen counter to stream indie music through their home's speaker system. She only enjoyed indie music off the Internet. Old-school radio music—with the exception of Tulane's station, WTUL—played tunes that had been sweetened up, commodified for mass consumption.

The wildness in rocknroll that once thrilled her now sounded like a product. Rebellion had been cheapened and put on the shelf for sale. Worst of all it had been made okay. Rocknroll was no longer truly subversive. It would be controlled by whoever was in charge of running the cultural propaganda of the country. She thought of Elvis Costello's lyrics: *And the radio is in the hands of such a lot of fools/tryin' to anesthetize the way that you feel.*

Why did rebellion again give her comfort? This recent urge. Maybe it had to do with her counterphobia. She didn't want to think that. Last week she actually got in her mini-van to go shopping at *Robérts*. A strong compulsion to go downtown overtook her. She wanted to pass this address on Frenchman Street. Where the night before a young man and woman were killed in a drug-related incident. She drove as far as Warren Easton High School and turned around.

Louise stared at her apron in the small hand-mirror above the basin. Her apron, as though tie-dyed with batter and cherry juice, made her smile. She knew she looked younger than her age. More like thirty-nine than forty-seven. Why whimper over eight years? There was no way of escaping middle age—or age, or mortality—and only three years separated her and her first letter from AARP. Judd had already received his letter.

The years had flipped off the calendar. The age marks on her hands just appeared. The smallest lines and shades of color defined one's appearance. She thought about the damage a blemish could cause. Just a millimeter of soft skin under the eyes revealed decades of earth time.

Age made her feel underpowered, subject to the haunting force of time. Her hands looked strikingly old—the brown spots, the tubey blue veins, the faded I.V. marks. The tiny scars, virtually invisible, gave her a private glory, and an embarrassment about her former drug use. Her narcissism ended with a little burn to the gut, a kind of pinch that reminded her of life's transient terms.

She needed to get away from her thoughts, get distracted, take in a movie. She needed to stop thinking it was okay to drink. It wasn't. No Sauvignon today. Ever. She could visit the Wyeth exhibit at NOMA, stroll the tall rooms as long as she wanted—an hour or two, or maybe never return home. And the New Orleans Museum of Art, resided close to the neighborhood. She could bike to it if she chose. The convenient location of her work nicely connected her to the neighborhood and the feelings of the city.

Last year, New Orleans marked the 170th birthday of Edgar Degas who created some of his most notable works in the city. Louise partnered up NOMA with WWL-TV for a half-hour special. Under her direction the museum created a human-sized diorama of the Degas' masterpiece "Portraits in an Office: The New Orleans Cotton Exchange." It came to life as two local reporters walked through a full-scale model surrounded by ghostly workers from the past. The television hosts toured the Degas house and ended up on the balcony of Esplanade Avenue house where Degas lived and worked. The one Johnnymoon showed her. She wanted to give him credit for inspiring such a well-received idea by her boss and the people of New Orleans. In spite of their fight in 1979—she could have had him arrested—she wanted to thank Johnnymoon for many things.

Her cell-phone rang.

“Mom, I think you need some time off,” Paul said without a hello. “We’ll be okay so take some time off. We’re going to come home this evening.” He told Louise how her friend Kippi—the only adult there besides the hired help—offered to give him and his twin sister a ride home. “By seven, Mom.”

“*Seven.*” Louise said.

“Yes.”

“Five, make it five,” Louise said. She needed to pick Judd up at the airport for seven-fifteen.

“We’ll see,” he said.

“We *will* see.”

Louise felt like going into a mild seizure. She needed some kind of clue from Judd. A fucking smoke signal, a carrier pigeon with a message strapped to its claw would do. Maybe he could channel his intentions to her. This was not like him. She thought she smelled steam coming from her ears.

“Mom, come on. *Mom.* We’re checking out *Wiki Woo* and a slew of e-games.” Her son had recently discovered the word slew and started to overuse it. “We’re with Foster and their new dog Max. Max de Spaniel. He is so nice.” She could hear the dog panting. “Mom, you know what?”

“No, I don’t know.”

“We need a dog.”

“We’ll see.”

“Good, Mom, good.”

Her twins were a “late” pregnancy. She was so grateful to have them. If her husband wouldn’t love her, her children would. She would control this situation if it were the last thing she did.

“It’s okay to stay until five. You haven’t heard from your father, have you?” She regretted asking that.

Her son giggled. “No.”

She walked to the refrigerator and held the cold bottle of 1999 Cabernet Sauvignon in her hands. She studied the rustic label. The cork made a gentle puff. She gobbled the wine down, like an act of oral sex, down the erogenous zone of her throat. She hated love.

Then: Yikes! Luv, Johnnymoon

My deep and dark search for luv continues. Luv, luv, come in luv. Johnnymoon and I leave Degas’ former pad and turn into the Tremé neighborhood, which borders the French Quarter. We pilot through the old neighborhood. Potholes rattle the TR-4 like it’s a bucket of bolts.

“What are we doing in this neighborhood?” I ask, reeking with bafflement.

“I want to show you where Louis Armstrong once lived.”

“I thought Louie was from Uptown?”

“Lock your door.”

“It might help if we put the top up.”

“We can’t. That got fucked up in the wreck.” Johnnymoon looks at me with a lopsided smile.

The *wreck*? I don't want to know.

New Orleans is one of the scariest cities on earth. And we are suburban kids in a bad neighborhood. That adds to the danger, and of course it creates excitement.

To turn up the nuttiness Johnnymoon cranks up a doobie. "Let's get retarded," he says. "It's creeper weed. Sinsemilla. Boom, first thing you know it hits you, and you've got the IQ of a fucking gnat. The mental skill of a clown. It's that good. You forget what day it is, and if you're lucky, you might forget your name." Then Johnnymoon looks at me and goes, "You do smoke, right?"

"No," I say, "I'm a narc posing as a girl posing as your date."

Johnnymoon smiles and goes, "I thought so." He could be very charming. The luv points keep adding up for Johnnymoon.

"*Two negatives make a positive,*" Johnnymoon sings softly, "*And two positives make an explosion. Bang, bang, you and I.*" He hums a melody. "*The kiss held back. Go ahead, let the world attack. You and I.*" Okay help me," Johnnymoon goes.

"*It's not a lie,*" I say/sing. "*Let's get together before we die.*"

"Nice," Johnnymoon says. "I think I'm going to include it on *Blue*."

"Why *Blue*? Why not *Black* or *Green*?"

"Blue is a color. Blue is the sky, the ocean, the color of your eyes." He looks at me and smiles. He's like a human luv letter.

He lights the doob and takes in a huge, I mean, HUGE toke. His face starts to take on a bright red color, like another face wants to break out of his original face. He lets out a big puff of smoke as though there's a brush fire going on in his lungs. He starts coughing.

We drive around the neighborhood. Houses wreck the landscape. It looks like it belongs in Haiti, not America. The people in these neighborhoods blame us for their plight, and I think by-and-large they are right to do so.

To counter his coughing jag, Johnnymoon starts breathing deeply. He looks like he's on the verge of exploding. His eyes shine like aluminum. "Listen." Johnnymoon points to the radio as though pointing at it will make the music sound better. His head bobs with the song as though he's communicating with it.

I turn the radio up. "I like it. It's the Jam," I say. "They're one of my favorite groups."

Johnnymoon's cheeks bullfrog. His eyes bulge like he's being strangled. He smiles. He can only smile. And cough. It's like he's possessed by the cough. He hops out of the car to deal with his cough. Like standing up will help. It doesn't. I expect to see chunks of his right lung or something shoot out of his mouth. I ask if he's okay.

"Good shit," he says. He starts to laugh, and then I start to laugh.

Johnnymoon gets back in the car. A half-block down he stops in front of this really beat-up house. A lady sits on the front steps. A cigarette burns in her left hand, and it looks like it will tiki-torch her hair with the simplest of wrong moves.

"Look, this is where Louie lived." Johnnymoon pronounces Louie as though he personally knew Satchmo. He looks at me as though he's just revealed the mystery of the universe.

The woman on the porch goes, "Whatta you *wont*." She takes a drag on her cigarette. "Sounds like you gotta can underneath your caw."

"Yeah," says Johnnymoon. "It's—" he mentions something about cranks and pulleys and pumps.

“Oh, yeah,” the woman goes. “My brother fixed my *Bruick* when I had it.”

Johnnymoon could start up a conversation with a ghost, right. He’d do wonders at a séance. I suddenly feel stupid, Johnnymoon and the lady sound like two *Skylab* engineers.

“My brother’ll be home in about twenty minutes if you wanna wait,” she says.

The kindness of this woman stuns me. In these conditions, in our bigoted times, it amazes me how someone can display so much kindness. If she can luv, then Johnnymoon is capable of luv too. It’s in this neighborhood, a hundred-and-fourteen years after Appomattox, where people don’t appear to be any better off than on a plantation. And I know the poor don’t always act like us, and if I had come home to a neighborhood like this (I can barely deal with my shrinking apartment) I don’t think I’d be in the best frame of mind either. The birds are not chirping, and the air is not sweet. These living conditions are history too. I do not want to ever be prejudice again. Ever. As Sister Edwards said, Loving your fellow man is how God will test you. That is one test I want to pass.

From down the street I see a group of dudes heading our way. White t-shirts, tennis shoes, loud talking, danger.

“Let’s blaze,” I say.

“This is not a safe place to *pawk*,” the woman says.

I get the impression that she knows trouble is walking our way, and this is her way of telling us to leave. I want Johnnymoon to get in the car and leave. These are the kind of neighborhoods that people like Johnnymoon and I get killed in, or eaten in. Recently I read an article in the *Picayune* about a guy who ate some tourists. So it happens.

It's as if Johnnymoon wants these three guys to come up and hassle us. He keeps talking to the woman about *Skylab*'s fiery entry back into the atmosphere. Like she knows the difference between *Skylab* and crime lab. Although it sounds like she does.

She says, "I wouldn't mind them using that money to put some food on my table."

A rock pops the TR-4's windshield. A small chip in the windshield sparkles under the streetlight.

"Did that guy chip it?" Johnnymoon asks. He looks down the street at the guy who might've thrown it.

"No," I lie. I don't want trouble. "Let's go, Johnnymoon. We've got a long night—and life—ahead of us."

"Hey, motherfuckers," Johnnymoon shouts to the group of three who walk toward the front of our car. More rocks hit the hood. Most of them sound like pebbles. They probably don't have the big rocks, because they would be using them. The dudes keep walking towards us. I can't tell if they are teenagers or adults. But the darkness fails to hide their trim bodies, the ripple of their muscles.

"Nice talking to you," Johnnymoon tells the woman. He hits the accelerator. Tires spin. I smell rubber. The cool wind sneaks over the car's top. The car bounces in the potholes. The three dudes stand in the street and try to block us. At least they expect us to stop for them. More rocks fly our way. They mumble and shout. I hear the words "white boy" several times. These guys don't realize they're dealing with some serious, skinny, white-boy rage.

Johnnymoon slams on the brakes. We skid. I put my hands over my eyes. I open the fingers over my face to take a peek. We stop right in front of one of the dudes. The other two

have moved to my side of the street. I think Johnnymoon is going to actually run over the one guy.

He peels backwards for a couple of feet and then hits the accelerator and slams on the brakes, but too late. He strikes the one dude defying the TR-4. The fender makes a pinging sound.

The guy bends over and grabs his leg. “Mothafucker, mothafucker, mothafucker,” he yelps. “I’m gonna kill you.”

“No, I’m going to kill you, motherfucker,” Johnnymoon says all of sudden like he’s possessed by Ted Bundy. He puts the car in reverse. Johnnymoon stops the car and opens his door. The engine putters. The streetlights behind the other dudes create muscle-bound silhouettes. They freeze. The one guy howls. I hear some people on their porches shout at us. I wait for the other two dudes to start thumping on us at any moment. Maybe they don’t, because they see me, a girl.

Johnnymoon takes off his jacket and tosses it on the back seat. He has taken them by surprise with his boldness. But they are not giving up by any means. I’m sure they want to kill both of us, but they seem confused. I’m confused. This all happens very quickly. They don’t expect Johnnymoon’s response. *I* don’t expect his response.

The guy Johnnymoon hit crawls between two cars that are parallel parked. I just don’t want him to put his teeth in Johnnymoon’s ankle.

He yelps, “My fucking *laig*’s broken. My laig, man, my laig. Fuck.”

At first I can’t understand his pronunciation of leg. I think he’s saying egg.

One of the other guys throws another rock at Johnnymoon real hard. He grabs his cheek like it has just been electrocuted. “Motherfucker.”

The other two guys approach Johnnymoon. One in front of Johnnymoon, the other on my side of the street.

“Be cool, Vicki.”

Like I have a choice.

A blade flashes in the streetlight’s milky glow.

“Knife,” I scream.

Johnnymoon starts to walk to the back of the car. His Cuban heels clack on the blacktop.

“Johnnymoon, get in. Let’s go.”

Johnnymoon, like my knight in shining hair-do, turns around and runs directly at the guy with the knife. He lets out this kamikaze-style yell in French. It’s the only time I’ve ever heard him speak French. It’s like French embarrasses him or something. And he doesn’t really speak it; he just yells it. He flies feet first. The guy swings the knife at Johnnymoon, but before he can slice him Johnnymoon kicks the guy feet in the chest. I swear I hear something that sounds like a piece of wood crack. The guy sucks air.

“You want some, motherfucker?” Johnnymoon asks the third guy who has backed off to the sidewalk. He seems younger than the other two and a little smaller.

“Yeah, motherfucker. I’m not afraid of you,” the guy says. But he just stands there. There’s talk but no walk.

“Let’s get out of here,” I scream.

Johnnymoon leaps into the car James Bond-style. I’m more excited than scared.

“You call their fucking bluff,” Johnnymoon says, “and you can get away with a lot of stuff before they have a clue what to do with you.”

We speed off with the black scarf of the nighttime around us. The smell of exhaust rushes over the open roof into the car.

I want to be angry with Johnnymoon, but I feel too excited. Peace enters me like I've just had an orgasm. I actually dampened.

"Tennessee," Johnnymoon says, like it's place and not a person. He grabs his cheek where the rock hit him. He says he's okay, but he's not okay.

For five minutes I just listen to the low hum of Robyn Hitchcock on the radio and wonder what's wrong with me.

"I've been loving you/too long," Johnnymoon kicks out in song. His coughing has ended.

I smile and give him a peck on his cheek.

We head to the Old Absinthe Bar to find Tennessee Williams.

Now: Post Rebellion Mom

August 19, 2005, 1:00pm

Louise left her house with a go-cup of wine. She had done it. She ended her twelve years of sobriety. In her mind, rockets were not exploding, and there was no Mardi Gras celebration like she wished for and somehow hoped for. Instead, a big bass drum thumped a heavy slow beat. A group of monks chanted something in Latin, something that choked to death the possibility of a happy ending. Louise knew that your disease never slept. That fact was proven, scientifically. Your disease just grew bigger and deadlier. Once you drank, it came raging back as though you had never stopped drinking. "Jesus, help me," she said to herself.

The wine drooled down her throat, oh God! that was good. There was something primal, maybe even sexual about it. After all, her throat was a sex zone. The ethyl alcohol—that’s what they called it in treatment—and its team of molecules hooked up with Louise’s pre-disposed chromosomal craziness. It all sent a buzz to her bloodstream. She entered LeLong Drive in front of the museum. She parallel parked under the sweeping cover of an oak tree.

She walked into the New Orleans Museum of Art, a towering building done in compelling Greek-revival architecture. She loved the place where she worked. The setting would be suitable for a baroque painting, rococo and elegant, perfect for poets to relax with their lutes and lovers. She imagined an overgrowth of jasmine and honeysuckle imposing itself on the architecture.

Jean Nit’s book *The Ultimate Mom* had recently inspired her. Her mom *du jour* was post-rebellion mom. Without children for the day she welcomed that form of *momma rebellious*. And that’s why she didn’t wear a bra. She needed the freedom. Nit said that the momma must have an “out” that allowed her to incorporate the world into her love cycle. Louise needed to be out, on her own, at least to forget about their anniversary. To enjoy the orgasm of the alcohol.

She figured out her husband’s motives. A feeling like gravity leaving her body shifted her stomach. She didn’t like his motives. She felt like vomiting, and she felt like drinking. Her husband would forget about their anniversary on purpose. He would say, Louise, we need to separate. This marriage is all but dead. Maybe he met someone at work, and this would be the way to communicate his change in plans. Forget their anniversary.

Judd was an achiever. Things were done mechanically, goal after goal: the big job, the great kids, the faux-perfect wife. *How could he forget our anniversary?* A wife required time and attention, affection, and “touch time.”

Louise inhaled deeply. The museum's air chilled her. In the entranceway she found a marble bench to sit on. Her days of throwing up in public were over. She inhaled deeply and grabbed her stomach.

She people-gazed to see how many and what kind of people the exhibit attracted. Tweens wearing green hair, tattoos, and body piercing passed her. A man held the hand of a young child with thick curls, green eyes, and café au lait-colored skin. She made eye contact with the child and smiled. The girl tugged on the white-haired man's dashiki. Natty couples, septuagenarians, the age her late parents would have been, who looked like they really knew how to appreciate art, walked the soaring rooms. Their scrutinizing expressions gave them, Louise thought, the mistaken impression of snobbery. The men wore blazers but without ties. On the women she saw pearls. Diamonds from elegant positions winked with social status. She wished her parents were one of those couples. But that was a sorry thought. Not an Ultimate Mom notion at all. Watch emotion, Nit instructed. She thought of the son she and Johnnymoon's gave up for adoption, the one Judd never knew about. The son she did and didn't want to keep. She remembered her little brother who died mysteriously.

To start the tour she snapped on a headset and pressed the number "1" followed by an asterisk. The sensible voice instructed her to enter the first room. The paintings had an immediate presence, like a light electrical charge you could feel. She played an important part in getting *Helga* to come to NOMA. She helped put together the funding, the logistics, the marketing. The diverse crowd proved her effort a success.

The recording told her that the entire exhibit was based on one subject, Andrew Wyeth's longtime model Helga Testorf. According to the audio she was Wyeth's neighbor in Chadds

Ford, Pennsylvania and his private project for fourteen years. *Exploration of the human body, what a project.* Helga looked stunning.

The soft talk of patrons, the quiet drift of bodies, and the refined entertainment of visual art brought her peace. There were no clocks. The high ceilings expanded the appearance of the rooms. The air conditioning felt soft on her skin. She found refuge in her own secrecy. Every so often she needed something more than the company of her twins. Their brief absence would inspire her to love them that much more.

She strolled and studied the paintings, captured and complete, frozen moments dramatically representing their subjects. Wyeth drew Helga in the studio, in the shadows and sunlight, during every season and time of day. He painted her clothed and nude, awake and asleep. The intimacy and honesty of the flesh made her sexy without being vulgar or pornographic. She thought of what Paul Klee once said: One eye sees, the other feels. She felt the picture's sorcery. The adultery. She thought of Johnnymoon St. Albares, but her family imposed itself on those feelings. Former boyfriends did not work for real moms, not even post-rebellion moms. There was happiness in the air and love in her life.

She and Johnnymoon once asked themselves, what will we be like when we're fifty? Old, they had said to each other. They would reunite. They would be friends forever. Of course the naïveté of that statement sounded so absurd now. And they made that promise before their big fight. But somehow, her love endured, in spite of what he did to her. She wanted to look at him, stare at his wrinkles and his bone structure. See the weight of time on his skin and hands. She wanted to talk to him. Her former hatred so small now. Time cured; it forgot. It even forgave betrayal.

She studied the paintings that were a compilation of tempera and dry brush, watercolors and pencil studies. The artist had created over two-hundred-and-forty individual works from 1971 to 1985 without telling a single person, including his wife. The power of Wyeth's secrecy inspired her. Naturally he wouldn't tell his wife, Louise thought. He was having an affair. *What you don't know won't hurt.* According to the audio, the artist stated that he would not have been able to finish the project with everyone looking at it. *Really!*

She noticed this young man, butch blonde hair, a grim expression. From in front of the painting entitled "Boy," he beamed at her, two dimples tucked into diamond specs on his cheeks. Did the young man want to tell her something? He looked only at her. She looked around to make sure he was looking at her. She gazed back. He was gone.

She wanted some more wine.

Desi's power was sweeping. People worked for him. They needed him. People with records. Not recording records, criminal records. The boy would do anything for him. The boy had a record. The boy hurt someone in Denver. It could've been bad. Warrants flew anyway. The boy needed to change, hide, transform. The boy needed disguises. He needed places to live. And hide. Always hide. New Orleans, Connecticut. The law could never find him. He trusted Desi. But Desi needed something in return. The boy's name was Julian.

Then: Betray Me, I'll Kill You

We leave Satchmo's house. Crowds pack the French Quarter. We ankle express it to the Old Absinthe Bar, and not Marti's, Tennessee's usual place.

In school we studied the Old Absinthe building. It is remarkable because it has an entresol, which is this special area between the first and second floor. The business owners once stored stuff in the entresol or sometimes had their offices there. They quit building entresols about a hundred years ago. I think they're pretty cool.

The big and mighty load from the weed we just smoked sneaks up on me like Johnnymoon promised.

He looks at me and goes, "What's so funny, Vicki?"

"Oh, I'm just starting to have a good time. I think." My IQ breaks up like chunks of Nestlé's Quik crumbling in a glass of milk.

"Oh."

"I'm glad we're alive." I give Johnnymoon a peck on the cheek. "I almost asked you to take me home."

"Glad you didn't."

The weed creeps further into my brain. I nearly forget that it's 1979. I mean it is that kind of weed. It's known as "pullover" weed. I want to pull over and park, but I can't. I'm not driving; I'm walking.

An upbeat crowd packs the Old Absinthe. You can find more wiggle room in a can of sardines. The place has a fun interior. Brass beer spouts poke from the marble counter. Football pennants hang on the walls. The amber glow of beer gleams in the darkness as people knock

back big mugs. Everyone looks half cocked on something. “Strangers in the Night” pours out of the sound system. A spring breeze blows through the front door and keeps down the heat of the human mingling.

Johnnymoon and I lean on the bar just like cowboys in a John Wayne western thriller or whatever. Johnnymoon looks so cute. It looks like he combed his orange hair with a blender. Very new wave. We talk about *Skylab* again, and I tell him about the guy I dated who worked on it.

“So whatever happened with your rocket scientist?” Johnnymoon asks and scans the crowd.

“He betrayed me. I can’t forgive betrayal. That’s where my buck stops. Betray me, I’ll kill you.”

“Breakups are all tough,”

“Betrayals are the toughest,” I say. “Unforgivable.”

“Tell me about it.”

I told him.

He looks at me weirdly.

“Luv is pain,” I say. I touch the red spot on his cheek where earlier the rock hit him.

Johnnymoon strikes up this very serious look like the stare The Parents used the rainy night they told me to get out of *their* home. He starts to tell me about how we have choices, but most of the time our choices are limited. And how certain things are taboo. “Sexual things,” he says.

“You and Tennessee?” I ask, I pause, I ask, “Sex?” I hold my breath.

“Tennessee wants to.”

“Don’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“*Cuz*,” I say. “It’s not you,”

“What *is* me?”

“That’s the question of our lives. We’re twenty-one. We’re supposed to be confused. It’s part of the script.”

“*I’ve been loving him/too long.*” Johnnymoon takes on Otis Redding again.

I stare at him. I can’t buy a word. “Don’t sing that,” I say.

He cracks open his silver Zippo lighter and flames a Camel Light. Big ghosts of smoke rise. Johnnymoon is like a cigarette, something that burns and needs a warning label, and is very bad for me. But I want him anyway. I look into a spoon to check my hair.

“Tennessee is like from another galaxy,” Johnnymoon says. “He’s more evolved. He’s got more presence than a fucking ghost.” Johnnymoon takes a French drag on his Camel Light. Like a thick fog the smoke streams back into his nose. “Next thing you know I’m at Tennessee’s apartment after work. Talking about history. It’s like this really weird feeling I have for this guy. I’m sick. You’re sick. We’re all sick. We’re human. He’s old.”

I make one of those brief and polite excuse-me coughs. I’m like, “Who’s sick? Please, speak for yourself.”

Johnnymoon looks at me funny like I should be the last one commenting on sanity. He laughs. “Tennessee was so vulnerable. So human. So delicate. So desperate. I felt like crying for him. I wanted to hug him and say everything would be okay. But he’s a man. And I’m not gay. I guess I must be stray.”

Johnnymoon raises his hand to order. The bartender comes over. “Al, did you see Tennessee this evening?” The barman wears a white shirt, green bowtie, and matching green vest. The bartender stops wiping a glass. With the towel inside the glass like a hand warmer, he motions both hands to the back of the barroom.

“Let’s go,” Johnnymoon says excitedly. He grabs my hand. I like it when he grabs my hand and leads me somewhere. We wiggle through the crowd. I see two guys who could both pass as my father make out. *What!!!!* I don’t see any women. It is gay night or whatever. What was I thinking, or *not* thinking. Hand hits forehead.

A crowd circles the back booth. We peer in. A beautiful woman with a deep voice sits and talks. People listen like they are gathered around a campfire. The woman looks so perfect: big red lips, long eyebrows like Joan Crawford, sloping cleavage. The music pauses.

“Who’s that I see over there?” the woman says and points our way. It’s really hard to think of this person as a woman. It sounds like a whole platoon of Marines have been jammed into her voice box.

“Hi, Blinky,” Johnnymoon says. “You see Tennessee?”

“Not tonight. He’s probably at home.”

“Thanks, Blinky.” Johnnymoon actually knows this person.

“Johnnymoon, did you see the show?” Blinky asks.

“Show?”

“Have a seat.” Blinky seductively passes her hand over her cleavage to the top button of her red dress.

“Some other time, Blinky,” Johnnymoon says.

Now: Transforming From Vicki to Louise

August 19, 2005, 3:00pm

Louise remembered. Years ago she had forgiven Johnnymoon. She had shared part of their story—never all of it—with her counselor and various talk doctors. Her counselor told her that she couldn't see herself, but John—she remembered how the counselor called him John—saw her and maybe understood a part of her better than she did. He was going through a traumatic event, the counselor said. Louise never mentioned Braxton, not even to herself. John was overly concerned for everyone around him, the counselor said. He had already lost his mother, and his father had terminal cancer.

With some maturity behind her, Louise finally understood that Johnnymoon's feelings, his awkward way of showing them, came right from his heart. He cared. How could she have missed that?

After years of living away, Louise DeAmas returned to New Orleans to bury her mother. Her death bewitched Louise. Her mother was too young to die at sixty-four. Her maternal and paternal grandparents made it into their eighties. Her mother smoked and drank heavily. She hid it well. *What one doesn't know won't hurt.* Although it did hurt. Louise could have helped her mother. Louise felt cheated out of the time to make things right between them. She was no longer a chronic thrill seeker. Her counterphobia seemed to go into remission.

Louise woke the day after her mother's funeral and realized that self-preservation and the expectation to live at least another thirtysomething years—longer than her mother—would require re-thinking her lifestyle and in particular her relationships with men. Her quest for love.

The same-old-same-old needed to be revised into the same-old-same-one. She needed to go monogamous.

The revelation of her new status arrived just as stunningly as Kippi Blanchard. Kippi, five years older than Louise, was not a close friend in their youth. The Blanchards were dear family friends, and so Louise and Kippi were attached that way. A certain loyalty existed between the two families. For Louise's whole life her only problem with Kippi was that she bordered on perfection. Something Louise lacked in many ways. Never veering, Kippi stayed on that computer-simulated route of perfection.

Besides perfection, Kippi seemed capable of only two other life forms, assertive and stunning. She had arrived at Louise's mother's house to assuage Louise in her grief. Kippi told her that at least Louise was an adult, and not a teenager like Kippi had been when her mother passed.

Those were tough words, but Kippi's voice brought total love and genuine compassion to Louise. It was like fixing a broken bone; the setting of it hurt the most. Her kindness made Louise cry. But there was no way to conceal the reality of those words, *an adult*. In rehab Louise had learned how the chemically dependent didn't mature like normal people. It was a realization that readjusted her entire mental condition. What had she been thinking? She'd never grow old? It added to Louise's sadness, but it incited her transformation. She shed the snakeskin of Vicki and became Louise.

So the dangerous acts of youth, and youth itself, had been completed. She remembered her favorite Tennessee Williams quote: I don't believe in villains or heroes, only in right or wrong ways that individuals are taken, not by choice, but by necessity or . . . uncomprehended influences in themselves, their circumstances. . . She loved Tennessee and never forgave herself

for being so nonchalant when she met him. She actually had hitched herself up to history that night.

After her mother's death she stepped from her darkness into the bright lights of love, to only to be inspired further by the ancient idea of mommahood. A simple strategy that assured love. She had a right to be normal, the great American status she suddenly felt entitled to. She readied herself to make *adult* choices and endure the ups and downs of a real commitment. Her years of therapy were paying off. She uttered and then embraced the M words: marriage, monogamy. At first she only whispered them, and then after a few practices she said them aloud. It became easy, and marriage turned into a good idea.

Initially, she found it hard to meet someone who suited her many requirements and who would not probe into her past. And then she finally understood romantic perfection: it didn't exist. But her expectations were upside down. For all she needed was a decent guy and family that would love her. She was back to *luv*, and this time she would find it. She could get it, because she'd share her love with the right person. Not the perfect person, just the right person.

At thirty-four, she decided not to return to Mill Valley, California. Instead, she remained in New Orleans. She enrolled for a semester at the University of New Orleans where she met Paul "Judd" DeAmas, a visiting business law teacher she ran into by chance in the UC. They talked. They laughed. They realized the world was a tiny place. Bonzi, Louise had said.

She had known of Judd's family for years. He was five years older than she. Their parents had known each other and occasionally socialized. Judd didn't have the luxury of a cushy trust fund. By the time they married his trust fund no longer existed. Hers too was greatly depleted by living chemically. His had paid for his education. He wanted to make partner at the

law firm of Hardy, Archer, Culver, and Savarese. He worked his ass off, but he found time to marry up, Louise, a girl from his Old Metairie neighborhood. The kickstand heiress.

Only six weeks after she ended her last relationship with a younger UNO student, she fell in love—and it was love, she knew it—with Judd. She understood love, but more importantly she knew how to apply love, how to give it away, to share it. The trick with a commitment was that you had to give love away without expecting something in return. She gave it to Judd. He gave it to her in his own way, not always how she expected. Her idea had worked. But where was he now? Where was their marriage, their future?

Then: Tennessee Williams

We leave the Old Absinthe Bar. Johnnymoon takes me through Pirate's Alley then over a couple of streets. We go down another street towards Esplanade Avenue. I think. I get lost really easily. I need a compass just to make it to the bathroom. We pass a shabby Creole cottage posing as a nightclub. The neon sign says Crawfish a Go-Go. A piano boogies into the night.

"Here it is," Johnnymoon says. He motions his hands and holds them out like a magician showing the audience they're empty. The place looks like a regular French Quarter building, heavy Spanish influence, three stories, wrought-iron balcony, no front yard. Under a corner streetlight (I think it says Toulouse Street) a folk singer howls into the night. An open guitar case scattered with loose change sits in front of him collecting some dues. The guy is very skinny and old with a long beard that could easily be mistaken for a snag of Spanish moss. He

wears a torn t-shirt and tattered shorts. He would look perfect as Last Year at a costume party. He strums his silver Dobro and announces hard times to the world like a death sentence.

A panel of doorbells with little names and initials sits under each buzzer. Johnnymoon presses the one with TW under it. He looks at me and smiles. It isn't exactly a moonlight moment.

"Yes." Finally this voice crackles through the speaker like it's coming in from outer space. I feel like saying, roger Houston.

"Hi Tennessee, it's me, Johnnymoon. I tried to call."

I wonder when he tried to call.

"Oh, hi. What are you doing out there? Don't you think you should be in here?"

"I've got a friend with me. That special young lady I told you about."

"Oh, John, yes," Tennessee says. The intercom scratches up his voice. "We are all torn with wonder and by the greatest force of nature, love. And called out by love. And love is more than a wonder; it's a force like gravity that propels life and makes us fall too often. Love gives ourselves to ourselves and much strangeness to our behavior." Jesus, this guy could win a Tony over the intercom.

The door unlocks. Johnnymoon pushes. The narrow gate opens. It's like we're entering this castle, but it's not a castle. It's a French Quarter apartment jammed into an alleyway.

"Okay, I'm not nervous," I say. Tennessee has to find Johnnymoon quite a catch—twenty-one, sexy, considered very desirable by both sexes. I don't like that thought. I take a deep breath and feel like fainting.

Half pissed off, I huff and puff down this flagstone alley. The brick walls on each side of us nearly touch our shoulders. The place is nice and well kept. Expensive. The Spanish

influence obvious by the presence of the courtyard, which has banana trees, short palm plants, and a fountain. Spanish architecture dominates most of the Vieux Carré. It should be called the Spanish Quarter. Wicker lawn furniture, classic, something left over from a plantation estate sale sits in the open area. Very nice. Understated. I luv it.

Lights shine behind white see-through drapes that cover the patio's entrance. A recording of Spanish guitar music comes out of the apartment. Johnnymoon pops his Cuban heels on the flagstone and shouts out, "*Olé, olé, olé.*" He does this great rendition of flamenco dancing. He moves his hands up and down and snaps his fingers. I wait for a bull to run out of the place. Instead, two sloping male figures move behind the diaphanous curtains like ghosts who can't hide.

"Bravo, bravo, bravo," one of them says from behind the curtain.

Johnnymoon leads me to the drapes. "Knock, knock," he says and motions his fist in the air without really knocking on anything.

"Enter *amigo*, enter," a voice says. "You are always welcome here."

Johnnymoon moves the see-through drapes and looks around them. He doesn't need to do that to see who's there. He's just being charming. The music stops. Not to let the ending of the song get past him, Johnnymoon makes this final cha-cha-cha for about ten seconds and ends it with his hands above his head and his arms in a snake formation just like Charo did on *Donny & Marie* the other night.

"Brilliant," this small older man says. "Johnnymoon, brilliant. When are you performing?"

"Tonight."

“Wonderful.” The man waves at me and says, “Oh, what wonders are present in the human form.” He sits on a wicker club chair covered in a natural fabric the color of cotton candy. The man, it has to be Tennessee, because he looks just like the pictures in my high-school literature book. He wears khaki linen shorts, khaki-colored linen shirt with, I think, khaki-colored sandals. His open shirt exposes what I’d call a chestless chest. Meaning, you’re not going to find him posing in *Playgirl*. He holds a wine glass with a light gold liquid. His hair parted on the side is slicked back and wet as though he just walked out of a thunderstorm. A pencil-style mustache angles over his mouth. It looks cute on him. The rest of his face looks unshaven. It has to be Tennessee. Reality is hard at the moment. It blurs and expands and re-blurs.

He doesn’t stand. It’s almost like he’s propped up in his chair. Johnnymoon bends over and shakes his hand, hugs him, and kisses him on his cheek. They mumble, exchange secret smiles and coded expressions.

Tennessee looks at me and says, “Beauty never ends. It just seems to repeat itself, improving with each rendition, and I see that proof in the goddess next to you John.”

I know when I’m being patronized. I feel my face heat up with anger.

“Well,” Tennessee says. He nods at Johnnymoon as though to cue him.

Johnnymoon makes this jumpy motion. “Oh, Tennessee Williams, Vicki Joy, Vicki Joy, Tennessee Williams.”

“My real last name is—” But before I can say it he interrupts me.

“Vicki Joy. Joy, how emotional and I’m sure, appropriate. To have a name like Joy, you must be wrapped in that word.”

I don't know how to respond to that one. My overriding thought is: I wish. Then he says he knows "all about me," like Johnnymoon has been talking.

"I don't believe in villains or heroes," Tennessee says, "only in right or wrong ways that individuals are taken, not by choice, but by their circumstances."

I *think* (I'm not totally sure) it's the nicest thing anyone, including my therapist, has said to me in a long time. I make sure to keep my poker face on. I step over to Tennessee to shake his hand. I don't know why, but I trust Tennessee Williams. But how can I trust him? He's after my boyfriend. "What did you just say about villains?" I ask.

Tennessee just looks at me with this puckered face. "At first Johnnymoon brazenly kept your name . . . that piece of his heart from me."

"Why would he hold a piece of his heart from you," I ask.

"We have to distrust each other," Tennessee says. "It is our only defense against betrayal."

Just as my hand drops Tennessee rises, just a little. Literally, my eyes blur. It's like I'm seeing things through one of those surveillance videos, like Patty Hearst robbing that bank, hazy and soundless and slightly warped by the angle of the lenses. What's going on? Tennessee has the presence of an arresting officer. It's *really* him.

"*Well*," Tennessee says. He holds my hand, studies it like he's looking for a clue to something, then he kisses it. "Please excuse me for not rising. My endurance fails me. And because of the natural rights endowed by age I don't, or can't, or. . ." Tennessee winks my way. "Or I am just too lazy—and drunk—to rise and greet such uncluttered bliss, a shock of moonlight appearing in the heavens. You my dear, Vicki Joy."

He doesn't rise because he is my rival. That's why, plain and simple.

“Love is a pure flame,” I warn him. “So don’t get too close.”

“It is,” Tennessee says. “How astute.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“I have met the great screen idols,” Tennessee says. “And you my dear match their presence in beauty and mere loveliness.”

Elegant, that’s one way to describe Tennessee Williams, and he’s obviously a charm machine in his spare time. He works me on angles I don’t even know I have. He is good. Very fucking good.

“And you, man,” he says to Johnnymoon. “Have you sold any decently priced antiques lately?”

“Business has been surprisingly slow,” Johnnymoon says. “Larry is crapping on himself.”

“Please Johnnymoon, tell him to do something for me.”

“What’s that?”

“Tell him to relax.” Tennessee raises his voice, which slurs a little before it falls, and he mumbles something I can’t hear.

I crack up. I expected a different response, something more businessy like, Larry should advertise more, or have a ten-percent-off sale. I could think of at least ten more good bargain gimmicks.

Tennessee goes, “You may want to get a pencil and piece of paper and write it down for him. It’s a concept his mind is not constructed to accept, so, seeing it written down may make it clear. Writing has a way of clarifying reality. I’ve done it my whole life.” Tennessee pauses,

takes a sip of wine and says, “The written word puts things down to specific emotions and often confused realities.”

“How’s your book coming along?” Johnnymoon asks.

“I’ve changed the title to *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*. Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald were themselves tragic conditions with doomed souls in human bodies.”

Two suitcases sit next to Tennessee’s chair. “Are you leaving?” Johnnymoon nods at the luggage. I feel like saying, No, he’s going to a fucking slumber party, lover boy.

“I’m leaving in the morning. I will be in the clouds in hours.” Tennessee looks upward and waves his hand like a wizard whose arm has just turned into a wand. “I would have told you last time we spoke but it’s unexpected.” Tennessee speaks exclusively to Johnnymoon and not *moi*. “I won’t be gone for long.”

“Mr. Williams.” A man steps out from a door behind Tennessee. He’s dressed in a blue blazer but with a face that looks like he just finished a 20-to-25 stay at Angola State Prison. “Are you ready for the morning?” he asks.

“Ready is a term beyond discussing right now, but to answer your question, yes Randall, I *am* ready.” Tennessee looks at us and says, “Remember, time is the longest distance between two places.”

“Tennessee, I wish you didn’t have to leave,” Johnnymoon says.

I wait for a tear to break down his cheek. “Do you mind?” I announce. I find it all too much to handle. A boy and an old man. Ordinarily I don’t care, but we want the same boy.

“Why don’t you call your play *The Boy Thief*?”

Tennessee and Johnnymoon stare at me. “It’s a novel,” they both say.

“How about *A Boy’s Heart*,” Tennessee says. Sarcastically, his hand falls like a fem, and he makes this funny smirk.

“Some of us find it so hard to keep our pants on,” I say.

“I can keep my pants on,” Tennessee says.

“Not what I heard,” I say, even though I never really heard that.

“I just can’t keep my heart on. I have a funny heart. It seems to thrive on punishment.”

“Don’t jive me,” I say. I hunt for a more powerful word, but jive is the best I can do.

“I don’t jive, *Madam*. John and I are just friends,” Tennessee says. “Love is an act of magic. That’s for you and him.”

That powerful comment blows my shit away. It touches my heart by surprise.

“Pass by the store when you get back, Tennessee,” Johnnymoon says. “We can go out and knock back a few at the Old Absinthe.”

“Marti’s,” Tennessee says.

“Marti’s it is.” Johnnymoon kicks his Cuban heels again and snaps his fingers. “*Olé*.”

He and Johnnymoon hug. We say goodbye and leave. I just walk away. Johnnymoon catches up with me. He’s visibly shaken, like all the muscles in his face have given up. Disappointed I guess. Heart broken, maybe. We walk back to his car. He doesn’t hold my hand. We don’t talk.

“I’ll miss him.” Words finally emerge from Johnnymoon’s lips.

“So, Johnnymoon, what’s the status of *Skylab*?”

“Hopeless. Falling. Disaster. July,” Johnnymoon says one word at a time like he has just turned into Tonto. “Want to see it glow?”

“Sure,” I say. I give Johnnymoon a twelve-second three-note kiss that featured dueling tongues. Then I retreat to a one-note peck on his cheek. “Cheer up,” I say.

He frowns.

At that moment my heart falls like how I imagine *Skylab* will fall, scorching through the atmosphere returning back to something related to nothing. Poof, disintegration.

In Johnnymoon’s TR-4, we ramble towards Jed’s Nightclub off Live Oak Street. He takes a left on Jeff Davis and a right on Canal Street.

“Where you going?” I ask.

He first ignores me. Then the sonic thing call talking comes forth. “Lee Oswald, I promised.”

He pulls to the side of Canal Street and nearly hits this huge sycamore tree. The can sound underneath the car comes to a stop. He points to this building that I’m sure has to be Warren Easton High School, because the name Warren Easton High School runs above the front entrance. Shadows made by oak branches move along the wall like they’re on the hunt for someone to scare. The building looms in commercial Tudor style, sometimes known as the English-school look. Spooky, along with dark and gloomy, best describes the place. Four turrets sit in the corners at the top of the entrance.

“Look, history,” Johnnymoon says.

“So,” I say.

“Guess who went to high school here? This is Warren Easton High School.”

“I see that.”

“Guess.”

“Uh, I don’t know. Lassie,” I say.

“Close. Lee Harvey Oswald. The scapegoat in the Kennedy assassination. Or I should say the Kennedy *coup d’etat*,” Johnnymoon says in a sassy French accent.

“How’s that close?” I asked.

Johnnymoon stares at me. There’s a longish silence. Then he says, “The 60s, that’s the connection. Lassie and Oswald are historic figures from the 60s.”

“Oh,” I say.

Suddenly the gloominess of the building turns into spookiness. I wait to hear a cat snarl, someone scream, an ax hit a chopping block.

“Let’s make like a tree and leave,” I say.

“History is definitely in the air.”

I inhale this huge lung-shifting piece of the nighttime. The night smells sweet, sexy with its own set of imbalanced hormones.

“*Skylab*, Degas, Satchmo, Tennessee, and JFK,” Johnnymoon says. “All part of the city’s history. Don’t forget Hurricane Napoleon.”

“You mean Hurricane Betsy and Napoleon’s tub.”

“*Na-po-leon*,” Johnnymoon and I say in unison, only like close friends can do.

“History.”

Love spotted on the horizon. Somewhere.

“Let’s blaze,” Johnnymoon says. “I’ve got to be at Jed’s by eight-thirty.”

We make it to Jed's Music Club. It smells like an ashtray doused with Jack Daniels. Just like any nightclub. There is nobody in the place except for about twenty empty tables, the bartender, and an older guy who I think is Jed. Johnnymoon nods to the people at the bar front. "Okay, baby," he says to me.

All of a sudden I've made *baby* status. It's so intimate and endearing. Luv coming into focus. Do I hear luv. Suddenly I feel like I'm at a séance. Come in, luv. Speak to me in this dimension, or whatever they say at séances.

"Let me get a table for you. I just hope we can find one." He raises his arms and looks around at all the empty tables. "Look, over there, I think I see one."

He's so funny.

Johnnymoon picks a table that faces the middle of the stage. "This is so I can see you when I'm in the middle of a vomit song." He opens up his arm to show the fact that nobody's showed up. "This is going to be like band practice. That's Bryan LaBryan over there with the guitar. That's who I'm working on *Blue* with."

From behind the stage, through a small door that drops to the street, guys load amps and guitars with stickers on them. The drums are just about assembled.

"What the fuck, Johnnymoon," Desi says. He's the band's drummer. It's nice seeing him again. He looks good, better when he's on stage. "Who do you think you are? Joey Ramone. Fucking Johnnymoon Rotten."

"Fuck you, Desi," Johnnymoon says.

The guitarists click on their amps and strap up their guitars.

Desi sits on his little drummer's stool the whole time. His ass looks too large for the stool, like it might really work as a dildo. He plays a pair of black-and-white leopard-skin drums that look just like Ringo's.

I go to the bar for a cocktail. I turn around to head back to my table. Johnnymoon and Desi are on the floor. Apparently they're confused about the fact that this is a music gig and not a wrestling match. I run up spilling my Dean Martin martini all over me. "Stop. Stop."

"Give," one of them says.

"No, you give."

"No, you give."

The guitarist, whom I think is that guy Bryan LaBryan that John spoke of so highly, pulls them off each other.

" 'Hello There,' by Cheap Trick," Bryan LaBryan, shouts out to me, Jed, and the empty tables and chairs.

Johnnymoon leaps to his feet. Desi moves back to the drums. The guitarist starts hitting the two notes that's the beginning of "Hello There." Before Desi can sit on his little drum stool, he strikes the bass drum with the foot pedal in time with the guitar. He slaps the snare drum. Johnnymoon kicks into song:

Hello there, ladies and gentlemen.
Hello there, ladies and gents, are you ready to rock?
Are you ready or not?

The guitars rev up in perfect chord formation.

Hello there, ladies and gentlemen.
Hello there ladies and gents, are you ready to rock?
Are you ready or not?

Johnnymoon yells into the mike like a drill sergeant yelling at a recruit. He has a line of blood running from his lip.

Would you like to do a number with me?
Would you like to do a number with me?
Would you like to?
Would you like to?
Would like to do a number with me?

The sexual thrust of Johnnymoon's voice nearly seduces me. He wags his finger at the mike like he's trying to start a fight with it. Like it's really Desi he's angry at. What a great song, and the way they pull it off is perfect.

Then in a flash the band bangs into the Iggy and the Stooges number "Be My Dog." The song is complete with crashing power chords and lyrics like, *Now I want to be your dog*. How poetic. Johnnymoon does some punk sneers and moves his body like he's trying to pimp it out. I'm surprised how tight the musicians sound. Bryan gets into some pretty good fireworks on lead guitar. He cranks into some solos filthy with distortion. Johnnymoon acts like he's trying to throw up on stage but nothing comes out. His best move is when he stands at the mike and moves his arms in front of him like he's demonstrating how to swim. Also, when he holds his arms behind himself in V formation. I'm surprised how good Hold the Lettuce is.

They play about ten more songs.

"This one goes out to my girlfriend," Johnnymoon says into the mike. It's official: I've outdone Tennessee Williams. I'm his girlfriend. Desi hits his snare three times. Then it's like Johnnymoon's voice falls in a trap door and Otis Redding eats him alive. Right then Johnnymoon turns to me and points: *I've been loving you/too long*. He sounds like a real live

black man. He dives in the air, his legs open like he's turned into Gumby or something, and he banana splits on the stage.

I smile all the way to Texas. "*I've been loving you/. . .too long.*" The guitars do the part where the horns usually blare out. Really well done. The song has plunged into matters of the heart—my heart—with enough realness to give me something like a stroke. I want to run up and kiss him. I luv Johnnymoon.

Chapter Four

CRIME

Now: Braxton Dooley

August 19, 2005, 3:30pm

After a ten-minute doze Louise awoke. The smell of brewing coffee rejuvenated her. The *Oprah Show* droned in the background, something to do with abused children who kill, or was it fantasy wedding dreams come true, or mentally ill celebrities, or secret sex in the suburbs? Or was it how to clean your house in your sleep? A haziness clouded her thoughts. She couldn't remember her dreams. Once she gained consciousness they popped from her memory like a soap bubble.

The first thing that came to her mind was her age, forty-seven. An unbelievably big number. Over half her life had already ended. Her fiftieth birthday loomed like a death threat. It scared her. She would die someday. She thought of her parents and how she would have liked for them and her little brother to be alive, to know *her* family. *My* family. *My family*. It sounded powerful and complete. It helped her to accept her age.

The kitchen's Mexican tile felt cold on her feet. She gulped her cup of coffee brewed with fresh Arabica beans. Sweetened with honey, the flavor—sweet, hot, bitter—filled her stomach.

Her cell phone rang. The name Max T appeared. It meant nothing to her, probably a wrong number or an unwanted solicitation. She didn't answer it. The phone chimed with a message. She snapped open her cell and listened.

“Hi, Vicki.”

She didn’t want to be called Vicki.

“It’s me.” Desi was so assuming he refused to leave his name just in case she didn’t recognize his voice. Or maybe it was his blunt way—the way he used to pinch her cheek just hard enough to piss her off—to impose himself on her. Was Max T an alias? These days she distrusted aliases and anyone who would use them. Couldn’t Desi grow up?

“I need to talk to you. It’s important. All I’m saying is, Braxton Dooley. Braxton Dooley, Vicki. Braxton Dooley. That’s all I’m saying.” His tone sounded like someone asking for ransom.

She didn’t want to hear the name Braxton Dooley ever again. She wanted to grab her heart and ring it out. Over amped on caffeine, her mind sizzled. She shouldn’t have drunk any alcohol.

Now she wanted to drive down to the Ninth Ward, to feel the danger, the possibility of harm so close. No, she couldn’t do that. What would her children do without her. A low gastronomical burn in her stomach let her know she was alive and being hunted by her diseases.

The thing about Braxton that touched her heart the most was that Braxton didn’t have a family. Either he had been running from them, or they had wanted him out of their lives. How could she ever have complained about her parents and the cushy life?

She thought of her youth and realized how the stupidity of her acts had hidden well under the cover of experience. Just Do It. What a ridiculous suggestion for her. She had done everything. And more. Some people looked back on youth and regretted the experiences they had missed. She didn’t. Braxton happened over twenty-five years ago.

Braxton couldn't touch any of them now. She felt tears pressing on her eyeballs. She needed to lie down again. She wanted another drink.

Then: Braxton Dooley

May 1979

The phone rings. It's Johnnymoon. "You gotta get a ride down here."

"I'm there," I say. "Just tap your feet and close your eyes for thirty minutes."

"Hurry."

I grab a United Cab and truck down to Johnnymoon's workplace in the Quarter. I make it within two hours. Johnnymoon knows how to time me. It has to be luv for him to be that patient. He stands cocked against the building smoking one of his Camel Light death sticks. A pair of Wayfarer Ray-Bans slides down his nose. A skinny tie undone at the collar droops over his white shirt, and his hair is electrocuting upwards. Get a camera, he looks that hip. There's a time, a place and moment when something hits you, strikes you, does whatever. Johnnymoon's pose would work as a great photo, one of those classic ones, something like James Dean walking on a beach in a 1950s black-and-white. The Beatles with Pete Best in Hamburg, Germany, 1962.

The cab stops. I rush over to Johnnymoon like I can't wait to touch him. He pecks me on the cheek. I luv the feel of his lips, the smell of his skin, the sound of his voice. The gentle touch of his fingers. The way his says, yeah.

"My place of employ." He points to a sign of dark pine, shiny with lacquer, and very tastefully done. Burnt into the wood are the black words *Levine's Louisiana and European*

Antiques. The front doors curve perfectly around the building's corner onto Royal Street. This is my first visit here, and we're back on the tub heist.

We enter. A deep silence presides over everything. The place creates its own vibe, like this big hum so strong and so deep you can hear it, but it's pure silence, so you really can't hear it, but you think you can hear it. It's really the frequency only a dog or a dolphin or maybe a ghost can pick up. From the back office Frank Sinatra croons over a scratchy radio: *Scadooby dooby do/strangers in the night/ ba-dooby/let's smoke a dooby*.

This old guy with a shiny, bald head moves toward us in this wobbly walk that says he should have stopped three martinis ago. But he isn't drunk; he just walks that way.

"What about a bracelet?" I ask Johnnymoon. A sense of the practical overtakes me.

"What bracelet?"

"Wouldn't it be lighter than a *tub*?" It feels dumb going after something so big. Chalk one up for being twenty-one and mentally deranged.

"We don't sell jewelry here. Here comes the man of my dreams. I mean, schemes."

Johnnymoon whispers the word schemes into my right ear. You want to get me on my back in like a second, put some breath in my ear.

"Don't worry, in a matter of days our wealth will increase," he says.

"Yeah, how much do I get out of the deal?"

"You're worrying."

A brow vein protrudes from the oldster's skull. A red blush fills his face. With the exception of a beard growing out of each ear, he is as hairless as an eight ball.

“Lawrence Levine,” Johnnymoon says. “Pardon me.” A pause follows to make his announcement that much more important. “Lawrence *Larry* Levine, I’d like to introduce Vicki Joy.”

“A pleasure,” Levine says. “If I wasn’t married for the past fifty-five years I’d steal you from this guy.” Levine looks younger than the eighty years old he’s supposed to be. He has fine skin with few wrinkles. “You might be the most beautiful girl. . .” Levine pauses and squints his eyes like he can’t find the word he’s looking for, “*woman* in New Orleans.” He takes my hand and puts this sweet little peck on it. In spite of his age, the man has more pizzazz than a Fabergé egg.

Levine looks up at Johnnymoon and goes, “I’ve got proof.” Excited, he tells us how an appraiser has declared the piece a *special* antique: an original hand-carved marble bathtub built for Napoleon Bonaparte and once owned by him.

“Wow,” Johnnymoon says. He acts perfectly impressed.

“Napoleon’s bathtub,” I say. “I never knew they took baths back then.” I thought the comment doused the conversation with some natural skepticism. Gave it some realism featuring a sense of detachment. Make Levine think the tub was the farthest thing from our minds.

“Napoleon did,” Levine says. He fills us in on Napoleon. Supposedly a manic depressive, he was always in a hurry. Napoleon ate lunch in a mere five to seven minutes. Dinner was eleven to twelve minutes. He was a general at twenty-three, first counsel at twenty-nine, emperor at thirty-three, resigned at forty-four, and dead at fifty-one.

“How long did it take him to bathe?” I ask.

“Ten minutes,” Levine says like he really knows. “Come see his tub.”

We follow him to the back of the first floor. The smell of Pledge furniture wax fills my nose. Gorgeous clocks, crystal chandeliers, candelabras, shiny wood with gold trim—all *tres* pricey—jam the floor. We reach an isolated corner in the back of the store near tall armoires with broken doors and scratched credenzas, stuff not ready for display. It's like being backstage.

Levine points at a pile of moving pads. "Look." One by one he pulls off the pads. Underneath sits a marble bathtub with blue lines running through it like varicose veins on my mother's legs. "It's marble."

No shit. And fucking heavy. Why didn't someone I know (I'm not mentioning names, *Johnnymoon*) choose something a little more portable. I crave a small priceless bracelet, something easy to hold. Anything you could, say, wear. An *objet d'art* would do.

Tall armoires tower over us. Cracked mirrors reflect on us like damaged dreams. Stained marble rests in broken pieces. Then out of nowhere this person, this man, appears next to me. "Ah," I say, like I've just been pinpricked. Very sneaky how he walked out of the shadows. It's as though this guy has a certain skill with shadows. It's a dangerous business, playing with shadows.

"Oh, this is Braxton," Johnnymoon says, like Braxton is a mistake or something.

"Nice to meet you, ma'am," Braxton says in an accent that sounds as though he might be related to Gomer Pyle, a member of the genus *Goober erectus*. Levine and Johnnymoon pay attention to Braxton's arrival like a shadow off a Louis-the-Fourteenth armoire, no big deal. Braxton acts subdued, cool and collected, more of a listener than a talker. He's young, but older than us, maybe twenty-six, virtually bald. Blue eyes sit deep in his head. He's not ugly. I can see where a girl might fall for him. His only shortcoming is that he gives the impression that he may be mildly retarded.

“The other tub is in the *Louvre*,” Levine says in a nice French accent. “And nobody, up until recently, knew where this one was. It has been found.” Levine holds his arms up like Moses parting the Red Sea or something.

“Cool,” Johnnymoon says.

“Really,” I say.

“It’s *bona fide*,” Levine says. Bliss packs his toothy smile.

Johnnymoon elbows me hard. I elbow him back. Eyes pop.

“Wow, *history*,” Johnnymoon and I say at the same exact moment, like it’s a chorus line or something.

Johnnymoon tells Levine he wants to call it a day. “Okay with you, Levine?”

“Sure,” Levine says. “The insurance company wants me to move the tub upstairs. I’m preparing a special perch for it. A kind of shrine, a tourist attraction. Ready to go with it, Braxton?”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Larry.”

“Wait, John,” Levine says. “We need to take a picture.” Levine goes into the office and returns with a Polaroid camera. “Okay, over here.” He lines the three of us up in front of the tub. Braxton stands between Johnnymoon and me.

Levine snaps the picture. The flash sparkles my vision with tiny burst, like how they show sugar bursting on TV commercials. The camera makes its grunting sound and the picture comes out like a baby. Levine spreads this tiny liquid sponge over the photo. “It’s yours.” He hands me the photo. “Here, take our picture.” Levine hands me the Polaroid.

I take their picture.

We tell Levine and Braxton goodbye and split. It's a great picture. But Braxton is the only one smiling.

Johnnymoon opens the front doors to the sweaty day. "That's the treasure. We got to get to it before Levine moves it upstairs."

I look at Johnnymoon with a stare that says how could you do it to Levine. Johnnymoon looks all sensitive and melancholy.

He tells me how the "situation" is too convenient. He tells me his father is very sick, and he used up a lot of his savings to get well. "I'm not lucky like you. Besides, Levine's got insurance coverage. Don't worry about him."

"Still, he treats you like a friend. I really like him."

"He'll probably make more money on the insurance."

I ask Johnnymoon about Braxton. He tells me he's like Boo Radley from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. He learned how to form sentences, left Mississippi, got a job in Satan's hometown, New Orleans.

Johnnymoon informs me Braxton is basically a drifter with no friends or family. Braxton started out living in the back of the store for about a month. After he earned enough money to rent a furnished room on North Rampart Street he moved out.

Some questionable circumstances surrounded Braxton. Levine learned that a few years back that Braxton, well into his twenties, took a teenage bride. The bride's father didn't think his daughter was ready to marry so far down. So, the father ran him out of Dime, Mississippi. Not an unfamiliar story. The only mention of Braxton's family was that they never wanted to see him again.

“Levine took him in,” Johnnymoon said. “Braxton’s just a little slow. An employee for life though. But I don’t know if Levine will keep him for life. He wanted to fire him last week.”

Now: Divorce?

August 19, 2005, 4:15pm

Before she reached the big silver spoon, her cell phone rang. “Hellllo.” She adjusted her voice as though preparing to sing. She couldn’t sound drunk. Louise had warned Kippi to stop her from drinking, put her in jail if she needed to. Why did she ever tell Kippi that? Jesus, for times like this, that’s why. Her self-help strategy angered her.

“Hi, Hon, it’s me,” Kippi, said. “I first need to apologize, but I am *not* going to be able to give your two angels a ride home.”

“Dammit, Kippi. I have a big event here tonight,” Louise said. “It involves my ten-year wedding anniversary.” Immediately she wanted to take back her tone. She knew it lacked the pleasantness Kippi deserved. “I’m sorry.”

“For what? God, they’re beautiful children.”

“Oh, this is not good news, Kippi. I need to get them over to the babysitter’s house.”

“*Mea culpa*, hon, *mea culpa*. I wish they could stay here for the night. I will make it up to you, I promise.”

She knew if Kippi said she’d make it up, she would make it up. If anything, Kippi delivered on her make-ups. Louise told Kippi how odd and disturbing it was for Judd to forget

their anniversary. “I’m just angsty out.” She reiterated how Judd hadn’t called her all day. They had been together ten years and that was significant. “I need to scream.”

“Here, I’ll scream for you.” Kippi let out a howl.

“That’s not a human scream. You sounded like a wolf.”

“A werewolf.”

“This is not funny.”

They laughed anyway.

But it was serious. Ten years wasn’t twenty or thirty years. There were people who got married at seventeen. The number ten achieved double-digit status. That number was important, and it made Louise proud.

“Oh, goodness,” Kippi said. “Don’t worry I have a feeling he won’t forget. Ten years, think tin, tin for ten, something substantial.”

“I will shove this bottle of Merlot up his ass sideways.” Louise searched for the wine opener. “Tin. I’ll corkscrew his ass with this wine opener.”

“You’re being kind. If mine forgets, I’ll get my father’s twelve-gauge. He gave me that gun for domestic protection, and he told me that if my husband ever struck me to shoot first and ask questions later. He, my father, would protect me. Which means bail, law firms, greasing palms, etcetera. Anyway. I’ll see you in five, huh, hon?”

“What if he forgets your anniversary date?”

“That’s worse than striking me.”

“I’m walking out now.”

Divorce, Louise thought. Oh, God, no. An ache came to her stomach.

Then: The Fence

May, 1979

Two months ago James Brown played the Grand Ole Opry. So it's official, anything is possible.

"Let's get some threads," Johnnymoon says.

"Take me to the Kingdom of the Button," I say.

We boogy in Johnnymoon's Triumph TR-4 to Amvets on the corner of Tulane and Carrollton Avenues. Amvets, which sells used, sometimes vintage threads, sits in this old shopping center built in the 50s. I luv the place because of its architecture. "Googy architecture," I say.

"Googy?" Johnnymoon points a slim finger at the buildings.

I tell him how Googy's venue was the highways in the 50s and 60s. They had this restaurant in LA that had a character with goo-goo eyes on it, so, the name Googy, like *became*.

"Look, some punks," Johnnymoon says. On the corner of Carrollton and Tulane Avenues some orange-hairs get off a bus.

"What's going on next to them?" A commotion rumbles near the corner.

A crowd of people, actually it looks like two crowds are in this massive argument with each other. The police and the TV stations are there. The groups jab these political signs into the sky. We are a block away on the corner of Ulloa Street and Carrollton Avenue.

"It's David Duke," Johnnymoon says. "He's having one of his street-corner rallies."

"David *Dick*?"

"*Duke*. David *Duke*. Like the Duke of Earl."

"Thanks for the clarification, Captain."

“He’s this Ku Klux Klan guy running for congress.”

“It looks like he’s going to get lynched,” I say.

“Ironic.”

“Painful.”

Johnnymoon loops his TR-4 towards the meleé. Surrounded by all of this antagonism David Duke stands on his stage. Calm within the storm. He yells into this white megaphone, words I fail to hear clearly.

“Doesn’t look like a friendly crowd,” I say. David Duke looks young and handsome. In a bad way this surprises me. I want to hear what he has to say, even though I know I won’t like it.

Johnnymoon pokes his head above the windshield. “Dude,” he yells towards David Duke. “Give black a chance.” He falls back into his seat. We both look at each other and crack up.

Directly under Mid-City Bowling Lanes Amvets sits. Even during the daytime you can hear the big thump of balls and the crashing of pins. Amvets, which stands for American Veterans, buzzes with patrons. It’s the first time I’ve shopped there, and I feel like I’m cheating. About to buy the stuff the regular patrons should have firstees on. I see a couple of people who look like they should be shopping at Maison Blanche or DH Holmes. They are worried about being the first to capture the next style, not their next meal, although for them the next style is just as important to them as someone else’s next meal. Am I guilty of material greed, couture ambition, style nuttiness? Probably.

Inside, rows and rows of used stuff—men’s, women’s, kid’s, even pet stuff—line up under buzzing fluorescent lights.

Johnnymoon takes me to the women's section then leaves me to shop solo. There's some cute things: Capri pants, sleeveless tops, Mary Tyler Moore ballet slip-ons. *Tres* cheap price tags hang from the threads. I breathe heavily and get light headed. I grit my teeth and lock down on my jaw. My mother will hate me wearing used clothing. I want to load up on them.

My fellow parasite Johnnymoon returns. "Look." He holds up a striped, pullover shirt that looks perfect for Destin Beach. "Jackie-O." He points at a piece and disappears.

In front of me sits this incredibly cute outfit: pink skirt with a matching jacket, hat, and *minaudière*. It's the same outfit Jackie O wore as the First Lady. The piece looks like it has never been worn, and someone has stored it for preservation. I pause and shiver at its perfection. *But is it a size four?*

Just as I put my hand on the pink piece this hand, as though from a ghost, grabs it. The grip sends shivers through me. "Excuse me, but I'll take that," I say. My hand welded to the hanger's puffy skeleton. I can't help but think of *Mommie Dearest* and Joan Crawford's fanaticism for that same type of coat hanger.

"Tie goes to the fag," this guy says. His hair is red, cut short on the sides and jolting up on top. The haircut looks greatly influenced by the rooster.

He flips his hand out in fem anger and goes, "*Well*."

I strike him with one of my bitchiest stares.

His mirrored sunglasses can't hide his fiery glare.

I shoot back with my best I'll-burn-your-balls-off counter stare. The gay guy should have been dressed in black, not the orange-and-black tiger tights, snug red shirt with Sex Pistols written on it, black wraparound shades ready for an atomic blast (yes, it's inside) and penny loafers with white socks. He is, as they say, a fucking disaster.

“Mine,” I say.

“Somewhere over the rainbow, *sweethawt*.” He has moved so close I can tell you that his last meal was cheeseburger and fries with a Marlboro for dessert.

“No, howbout in Amvets on South Carrollton,” I say.

“Sweethawt, this won’t work at the Junior League. It really won’t.”

“Good, I’m not wearing it for that.”

“Besides your *chesticles* are too large for this piece.”

I want to shake a fist at that comment. Just before I try to take this guy down like one of the lost, possibly violent personalities of Sybil, Johnnymoon walks up. He somehow knows the guy. They start chit-chatting about the local music scene. Then Johnnymoon whispers to him. The guy pauses, ducks his head and raises his mirrored glasses. Puts his glasses back on his nose and the conversation shifts gears.

After a rude minute or so, I walk between them.

“Do you think your Uncle Gee would be interested?” Johnnymoon asks.

“Not antiques. No can do. Nothing large. He likes small.” The guy holds his thumb and index finger apart. “Bonzi. Easy to move.” He squints his eyes and bobs a stare at me.

“She’s okay,” Johnnymoon says.

“Easy to hide,” the guy says, ignoring me.

Johnnymoon asks if he knows anyone who might be interested in helping us “move” the piece.

“Here.” The guy hands Johnnymoon a piece of paper with a name on it.

“Suitcase Tony,” Johnnymoon says.

“He’s mid-league. Young. Talented. He can handle it.”

The guy says bye to both of us and departs.

“What was that about?” I ask.

“The fence. We need to sell the tub as quick as we can.”

Johnnymoon and I shop like bandits for about another hour. There are people there that need these bargains more than me. I feel bad about buying the stuff but good about having it. Such is life.

It’s the day after I saw Napoleon’s tub. My phone rings. “I’ve got some Rod Stewart tickets,” Johnnymoon says. “This new wave act THEY is opening for Rod.”

“He’s supposedly into disco now,” I say. “I guess that makes him *Odd* Stewart.”

“So.”

“So why go?”

“We can wear our new clothes.”

“Well, I think I could like going,” I say. “But I don’t know if I feel like going out tonight.” I always feel like going out. I have at least one CC of hard-to-get left in me.

I know Johnnymoon is itching to show the world his AMVET threads. You can get more attention when you go somewhere where people wear the opposite style. Take the disco look for instance, it sits at the opposite style end of new wave.

“More importantly. . .” He tells me we need to meet this person known as the fence.

“The fence,” I say.

“The deal is on.”

“Deal,” I say.

“The tub.”

“As long as we can lift that thing.”

“We can lift it. I have the dollies and a pickup truck with a hoist in it.”

“Um, Vicki, I’ve got some bad news. You’re not going to be able to . . .”

There’s this long unhealthy pause.

“Not be able to do what?”

“Look, if something goes wrong, I don’t want you around.”

“Bullshit. I’m in. You’re not going to keep me out. Fuck you.”

“Vick-ee, think about it.”

“I’m doing it with yall. Period. Beginning and end of story.”

“Take some time to think about it.”

“I don’t need time.”

“Okay, let’s go meet the fence.”

The Rod Stewart gig sounds intriguing, but I think I’m more interested in seeing what THEY is all about. Even though I have been liking Rod and the Faces for years. *Gasoline Alley* and *The Rod Stewart* are great albums. “I luv that song, ‘Blind Prayer,’ ” I say.

“We can meet the fence,” Johnnymoon says.

The date starts to feel like a real-life spy thriller.

Ten minutes later, another phone call. Sometimes I think the phone has its own life, its own spiritual advisor: me.

“Hi, Vicki, it’s me.”

“It’s me too,” I say.

“Heeh-heeh, heeh-heeh,” the person laughs over the phone. I know that laugh. “It’s me, Tina.”

“Ahhhhhhhhhhh, I thought that was you.”

“What’s happening?” she asks.

“The *uze*: sex, drugs, rocknroll. One at a time. Although all at once wouldn’t be bad.”

Sex, drugs, and rocknroll is this new *cri de coeur*. It got started with Ian Drury and his punk EP entitled *Sex, Drugs, and Rocknroll*.

Tina tells me about a phony prescription scam she’s working tonight. It’s a cough medicine, but there’s nothing cough about it. It’s ninety-nine percent narcotic. I treat narcotics like a blood relative. I tell her about tonight’s date with Johnnymoon. She tells me she needs to use a bathroom, bad. She’s coming down with the sick. The sick are what happen when you withdraw from narcotics. The sick give a clear meaning to the expression, To hell in a hand basket. Think about it. Tina is at the moment.

“I’ve got someone I want you to meet.”

“Who?” I ask.

“Sharon.”

“Sure.”

“See you in a minute,” Tina says.

“Great,” I say.

Tina appears. She looks great. She has this small, upturned nose, large eyes, full lips, and a smile that's as quick as a booby trap. She's always sweeter than sugar substitute. She's wearing jeans, flats, and this gauzy shirt that looks like the Shroud of Turin of sunsets. Colors all over. Melted, colorful, and worn out. It looks like it was leftover from a 60s sit-in. As great as it looks it isn't the best thing to be wearing for busting phonies. She'll walk in the place and look like a drug addict who's trying to fill a phony. One reason people seek me out is because of my ability to work the innocent look. Tina could look innocent too, but she doesn't want to.

Tina introduces me to the girl with her. "Sharon, Vicki, Vicki, Sharon."

Heidi blonde hair with bangs that look influenced by one my Barbie wears falls over her forehead. She has an airbrushed complexion, a trim body with bulging cleavage, and blue eyes that match a clear sky. Her one-piece dress might work, but its colors look like something that could pass as a paint spill. Its short hem gives it a length not much longer than a tennis skirt.

She extends her hand and goes, "Good to meet you." She has a sweetness in her voice. "I've heard so much about you."

"Uh-oh."

"All good."

"I didn't think that was possible."

"*Scriptageddon*," Tina says.

Tina gives me the run down on their plan and how this new cough syrup has hydrocodone bitartrate in it, a kind of nitroglycerin of narcotics.

"The pharmacist will be expecting a Dilaudid or Demerol script," Tina says.

"Everybody's doing those. So, we'll fool em. We'll pull the cough-syrup card on him."

“Ooooooooooooo, sounds like something Elvis would do,” I say. We like to joke about Elvis, newly dead, and how he ODeD on some great pharmaceuticals. He liked the same C-two narcotics we like: Hycodan cough syrup, Demerol, Dilaudid, Valium, certain barbs, and other lesser pharmaceuticals.

“This is a new one,” Tina says. “This shit is fucking serious. Nirvana does this to achieve Nirvana.”

“You want in?” Sharon asks. She has this certain gaze in her eyes when she speaks to me. She is part here, part there, part somewhere else.

The cough medicines are actually the best. Only the most advanced dope fiends know about them. The fact is that the idea of cough syrups turns most people off, which is okay because it leaves more for me and my friends. And if it is good enough for Elvis it is good enough for me.

Busting a phony can go on for hours, plus phonies are against the law (I think of the four or five minutes I’d last in jail) and unless you have some kind of scheme to work, phonies are too much of a hassle. Getting busted already happened to me two years ago. But I got out of it. The parents are so well connected I could have gotten away with murder. The charge was Fraud and Deceit, a tall, dark, and ugly felony. That began the whole Minnesota rehab thing. The Parents started talking to their friends. Trying to find *help* for me. When really they need to find help for themselves.

“We’re just a little concerned about bringing the script in,” Tina says. “Look at us.” Obviously she knows she looks like someone who has been miscast as someone who looks like a dopefiend.

“Sharon got caught with a phony last month and has to play it cool. Her trial is next month. She’s looking at jail time. She can’t take the script in.”

I’m like, “I’d feel more comfortable in a disguise.”

“You have one built in. You look innocent.”

“I’m going to have to pass,” I say. I reiterate my plans for Johnnymoon that night.

“Awwwww, I understand,” Tina goes. “Bathroom? Remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” I point to my four-by-four molecule wide bathroom.

Tina struts to the bathroom while Sharon and I wait.

“Where’s the fucking light switch?” Tina shouts. “Nevermind.”

“So you know Desi and Johnnymoon,” Sharon says.

“Yeah.”

“I’m dating Desi,” she says. “I don’t know why we call it dating. We stay home most of the time getting loaded and having sex when we’re not getting loaded.”

Tina comes out of the bathroom. “It’s official. I’ve been accepted to Stanford Law School.

“Great, congratulations,” I say. “I hope you don’t go there with a drug habit.”

“I’m leaving in July.” Tina says, like that’s going to cure her. “Let’s step on it, Sharon.”

“Call me sometime.” Sharon gives me a Jack’s Motorcycle & Repair Shop card with phone number written in blue ink. Her penmanship looks like a six-year-old’s, a doctor’s handwriting, perfect for writing phony prescriptions.

“Did you write tonight’s script?” I ask.

She shakes her head and blushes.

Tina grabs me and holds my face between her hands like my Aunt Meg used to do. But Tina kisses me on the lips (not like Aunt Meg), and then we get into this hug that feels like a mugging.

“Oooooo, gotta go,” Tina says.

Sharon kisses me on my cheek. “You smell great.”

I blush.

They split.

Johnnymoon arrives. We hop in his TR-4 and blast off into the darkness. I look into the black sky and think of *Skylab*. By the second it moves towards home. Often I think about the peace of outer space, the possibility of God, and why the world is so chaotic.

Johnnymoon cranks up one of his super doobs. We inhale and start to get stupid.

To park in the Auditorium’s parking lot we pay two bucks. People walk to the auditorium like the dawn of a new species, creatures ascending from the sea and taking foot. Concerts always amaze me how the weirdest people come out to play.

The smell of marijuana covers the place like the darkness. We enter these big gates that surround Municipal Auditorium. The place reminds me of ancient Rome, specifically the classical Greek revival design of the building. Pontias Pilate, Kirk Douglas as Spartacus come to mind. Instead, I see two freaks, one guy with straight black hair, the other with a white-Afro, hopping over the tall fence. The t-shirt of the guy with the white-Afro gets snagged by one of the fence’s spearheads. He slides down. He’s suddenly shirtless. He lands and starts raising his arms like a triumphant football player. It’s going to be a wild night.

Inside the Municipal Auditorium the bright lights strike my eyes like an interrogation. It's as though someone knew everyone was going to be stoned so they turned up the lights to full blast. From an architectural perspective, one could say we live in the Fluorescent Age.

We get loads of looks in our New Wave outfits. I spot lots of silk shirts and gold chains. Disco, yuck. I see some punkrockers who are obviously here for THEY. Some promoter wanted to capture two different groups of people at once. What a bad idea.

To follow up our weed load and pick up on some mellow we buy a cup of Schlitz. Just as we stare, people stare at Johnnymoon in his orange-ish hair and collarless Beatles' coat and me in my glow-in-the-dark green.

"Okay, where is the fence we're suppose to meet?" I ask.

"Let's just circulate," Johnnymoon says. "We'll find him around here. He's expecting us." A foam mustache washes up on Johnnymoon's upper lip. He doesn't have the face that would look good with a mustache. It's too boyish.

"Wait, stop." This stare takes over Johnnymoon's eyes. He could be a cowboy staring in a western sky looking for a trace of *Skylab* flaming into the desert. "The fence." He points into a glob of people.

"I can't wait." All I see is three-hundred people heading to the doorways to cop a seat like we should be doing.

Johnnymoon speeds up. I follow.

"Suitcase," Johnnymoon shouts out to nobody in particular.

And I don't see any suitcases. Just people. It reminds me of looking at fabric. There's just too much of it at once. Too many people to zoom in and *distinguish* as The Mother would say about fabric. I couldn't *distinguish*. The textures, colors, and shapes dash past me.

Out of nowhere we're on top of this pale-complexioned, swivel-stick of a guy about our age. He wears straight-legged pants above flat shoes. He has the muscled body of a danseur. Mirrored sunglasses that look too large for his face cover his eyes. His short hair is spiked out like he used electricity to get it into place. A black-and-white bowling shirt drops over his belt loops. He holds up his head up as though his nose has just picked up a really bad smell.

"Hey, Suitcase, what's happening, man?" Johnnymoon says.

"Where yat, Smooth. Who's the angel?"

Johnnymoon stands next to him and moves his hand towards me like I'm a game show prize or something. "Anthony Coconini, Vicki Joy." Johnnymoon moves his hand to Suitcase. "Vicki Joy, Anthony Coconini."

Suitcase Tony raises his head in a dramatic way that allows his small nose to scoop up air. He holds his hand out which I grab. "I'm all Suitcase. Or Tony. No Anthony whatsoever. Thank you."

I try to look into his eyes; instead, I check my hair in the reflection of his sunglasses.

"Good to meet you. Johnnymoon said you were a stunner."

My face: instant fire. "Good to meet you."

"Suitcase is the fence," Johnnymoon says.

"*Zackly* right, but let's keep it quiet." He put his finger up to his lips.

"Let's cop a flop," Johnnymoon says.

“I hope we’re ready to go with the deal. I’ve got a buyer who’s willing to pay some serious cheese for the tub,” Anthony Coconini says. He excuses himself and goes to the bathroom.

“Good,” Johnnymoon says. “I could use the cheese.”

We enter and look for some seats. David Bowie stuff drops from the PA system. The tunes are classic: “Jean Genie,” some *Ziggy Stardust* stuff, “Ballrooms on Mars,” “The Man Who Sold the World.” This part of the gig excites me. You get to see all of the creeps walking around.

The place starts to fill up. We find seats right by the doors that swing open. The lights simmer on low. Seats quickly become a commodity. Suitcase Tony enters. He forgets to take off his sunglasses. He holds his hands out in front of himself like a blind man.

“Suitcase,” Johnnymoon shouts. “Suitcase. Over here.”

“There you are, Smooth,” Suitcase shouts. He has no idea where we are. He gazes ten rows in front of where we’re sitting and starts waving at some other people.

“Suitcase, up here, up here,” Johnnymoon yells.

Suitcase pretends to see us and sleepwalks in our general direction. He looks about ten rows above us and starts calling this girl, who is not me, “Vicki, Vicki.” He walks up to her and realizes it’s not me. He finally spots us.

The crowd has consumed the place except for the spot next to me. A setup I don’t really like. Suddenly I stand face-to-face with Tony.

“*Scuze* me,” he says. We touch. I smell patchouli oil, the sour tang of beer, and his last cigarette. We both try to get out of each other’s way, and at the same time we get into each other’s way. We do this like twice. I finally grab his thin shoulders and hold him. He’s packed

with slender muscles. I let him ooze past me. We both sit. I look at him and give him a snooty smile, one The Mother would use. God, what am I doing? The idea overwhelms me: I will someday give up and become my parents. Or not even give up, just become them without actually noticing the change. A chill runs down my spine.

Tony holds up some brown bottles of pills and shakes them like dice in a cup. “You interested?”

“Goodness,” I say.

“I guess that’s one way to put it. I’ve got Tuey’s, Seconal, Christmas trees, and Diazepam. That’s the generic name for Valium in case you don’t know.”

“I *know*.”

“Jelly Greens and Jelly Reds.”

“I’m trying to maintain consciousness,” I say.

“That’s not fun.” The blue Valiums in his hand look like tiny Sweettarts. “Blues,” he says. I think he’s going to offer some to me; instead, he loads them into his mouth.

I guess if Suitcase ODs we will just leave him and call an ambulance. I hate to say it, but it would be convenient. No, I don’t hate to say it. Proper dope etiquette requires that your friends drop your body off at the nearest dumpster so it can be found without incriminating anyone. He’s not a friend; he’s a business acquaintance, the fence.

“What’s your favorite?” Suitcase asks.

“I want to see THEY. I don’t like these disco creeps.”

“Your favorite dope?”

“I don’t know. Dilauids, Demerol. Vintage cough syrup is nice, Hycodan or Tussionex. Anything Elvis liked.”

Anthony Coconini laughs. "I saw the thing on TV by Geraldo Rivera."

"You mean, Horrendous Revolto." It was an expose on Elvis and his drug habit. It ruined Geraldo's reputation with me.

"Zactly. I like Elvis's choice of dope more than his music."

"I hear you," I say.

Johnnymoon has his opera glasses out and he's scoping out the stage. He's totally oblivious to my conversation with Tony.

Suitcase tells me he's got a great getup I've got to see. With it we can cop any drug we want, with ease. "It's a scam, man," he says. "It'll even be fun."

I ignore him, but I have to say I'm intrigued by the idea. Johnnymoon seems happy taking in the sights and sounds.

Okay, I give up and ask Anthony, "What's the getup, man?"

"Top secret," he says. "But I'll tell you. Only you. It's a nun's outfit."

"You mean a habit."

"Right."

"Nuns wear habits."

"I know."

"A disguise, that's clever," I say.

"This is top secret. President Carter doesn't even know about it. So keep your lips sealed." Suitcase puts his index finger to his lip as though I'm a fourth grader who needs to be quiet.

I feel my face heat up with anger. "I didn't say anything."

I people-watch while Suitcase rambles on in far too much incriminating detail (I know a little about criminal law) about how he stole two cruets, a chalice, and the nun habit from the convent at St. Mary Magdalene's in Kenner. "It's a size four."

That's my size, but I don't tell him.

Johnnymoon taps me on the shoulder and goes, "Vicki. *Skylab* to Vicki, I'm crashing. Wooooop, woop, woop, woo, wo, wha. . ." His siren sound quickly fades.

I look at him.

"I took some Ludes," he says. "*Ed-a-lert*, seven-fourteen *kwash*, code word Rorer. Repeat, seven-*fourteen*. . . *cash*, code *erd*, *Wore-wer*. Take it away." Johnnymoon hands Suitcase his cup of suds and fades into seven-fourteen oblivion.

Suitcase grabs the cup before Johnnymoon's hand drops. "Thanks, Smooth." Smooth, like the name Johnnymoon isn't enough. "Don't forget, you'd look good, Sister Vick," Suitcase says. "Any pharmaceuticals we want. Remember."

Even though Suitcase Tony could double as a worm, there is something human, possibly charming about him. He knocks back the beer. In a few minutes he leans back in his seat, closes his eyes, and his head falls to the side like he's just been stabbed.

The lights dim. The auditorium darkens. Whistles, claps, and a large bubbly roar follows. I look at Johnnymoon. Slouched in his chair he holds his opera glasses in one hand and a lighter in the other. He looks like he's just been mugged or something. Apparently he didn't have enough Ludes to share with me.

To improve my vision I grab his opera glasses. Instantly, without introduction, the lead singer for THEY, Ian Something—I forgot his last name even though I read his interview in *Figaro*—jumps into the air and scissors open his legs. His short hair jolts upward. His t-shirt is

ripped. He's wearing these gray, straight-leg pants, something an aspiring gas-station attendant would wear. I think I actually see grease on them. He has on regular-looking shoes that look like The Father's wingtips. He lands at the mike stand with his shoes in a rocknroll, pigeon-toed stance. And, oh, the timing is perfect. In the auditorium's pin-drop silence he plunges into the lyrics: *It's all because you want to piss on me, babe*. As soon as the word *babe* flings from his puffy lips the rest of THEY join in like a round of artillery. Loud, heavy, and very tight. I shimmer.

His arms slam tight to his side with his hands on the mike. All at the same time there is something both boyish and girlish about him. For a second he reminds me of a white version of James Brown who's possessed by Marilyn Monroe. He grabs the mike and tilts the stand. He glares down into the crowd kind of Elvisish but with this James Dean-anxiety thing vamping the girl-next-door.

The crowd erupts, the earth rumbles, that communion between band and audience happens. Somewhere inside of me a pure white light goes off. The same one that burned when I was just a kid, with my much older neighbors who were thirteen and fourteen (me like eight or something), in line at the Areon movie theatre for the Beatles movie *HELP!*

I stand up. Johnnymoon is plastered to his seat. To my left Suitcase Tony has slumped into his chair seat like a piece of slime in clothes. He just lies there as though he's dead. I'm too into THEY to care.

Ian Whatever's body works the stage like smoke. His voice turns into a blaring scream, his face twists in and out of classic rocknroll grimaces like he is seriously fucked up with pain and shit. The bass player bangs fatty notes. The rhythm guitarist slams the breast of his guitar and rips out tinny chords. Minimal stuff that reminds me of Patti Smith. The lead guitarist

plucks a meter of heart-rendering riffs. His mouth frowns, and his face smudges into these early-man guitarist looks. The drums boom like Fourth of July fireworks. I will always, I mean always, be attached to this sensation that rocknroll gives me. It ranks with how I respond to food, breathing, and sex. It's as primal as it gets for me.

Between songs Ian speaks. His English sounds better when he sings than when he speaks, which is often the case with the British. The opera glasses are fab. Ian's lungs bust out with more song. He heaves off his lovely white-trash looking shirt. The knotted muscles in his stomach glitter with sweat. His eyes smolder. His forearm veins look as though they have been pumped with corking or something. His temples pound. Eyes bulge from his sockets like they want to pop out.

THEY jam for like an hour or so. After the final piece of excitement, the guitar, drums, and bass make one final ebb-and-flow. The equipment dies, and the house lights flash on. It is marquee time. Rod Stewart.

Thirty minutes later Rod comes on. These two guys in front of us stand up and do some disco moves. They look at each other and get lost in this dreamy gaze like Ali McGraw and Ryan O'Neal in *Love Story*. They start making out.

With all the workings of a Vegas act Rod performs songs that sound too disco for my ears and soul. After about three songs I want to vomit. I hate disco. Rod has turned into silky shirts and spinning ball lights. I want to leave right then and there. But Johnnymoon lies in his chair like a piece of protoplasm. Lucky him.

After about a half-hour Johnnymoon wakes up, and we blow another doob. The weed really fucks with my perspective. But I hate to admit that as much as I once loved Rod he now speaks to a world I don't want any part of. I need to hear something by the Sex Pistols before I faint.

We leave. Suitcase tries to follow. He makes it as far as the aisle. He falls to sleep in the last chair. I am actually looking forward to possibility of the nun scam.

Midnight. The night is still in diapers. We steelbelt it back to my pad. The can sound still chases us from underneath the TR-4. Johnnymoon remains stoned and silent. A big moon hugs the sky. The huge oaks, which look like a setting from some *Morgus the Magnificent Creature Feature* rerun, arch over Esplanade Avenue.

I open my apartment door. It is stuck and the lock is nearly broken. My apartment looks smaller. A musty smell fills it. The place flooded during last year's May Floods, and the mildew refuses to leave. The odor seems to only come out at night. "Uh, it won't go away," I say.

"What?" Johnnymoon asks.

"The odor."

"I don't get it."

"It's an odor," I say. "You're not suppose to get it, you're suppose to smell it."

Johnnymoon's loadedness is starting to inch to the short end of my nerves.

"Whatever."

We sit in silence. So I try some sound. “So, Johnnymoon, tell me more about the heist. Suitcase wasn’t exactly what I expected. What’s next?”

“Um, Vicki, I’m looking out for you. You stay here why we heist the tub and bring it back here.”

“Bad idea, Kemo Sabe,” I say. My ears are still humming from the concert. I’m not in the mood for a yelling match.

“Look.” Johnnymoon holds up a Quaalude in each hand clutched with his thumb and index finger. “You ready to melt?”

“*Ready*,” I say. “Are *you*? Why don’t you wait?”

Johnnymoon hands me a Lude. He grabs me and shoves his tongue into my ear canal.

“Ummmm,” I say. Although it’s not really romantic. “You should wait,” I tell him.

I head to my twenty-four-square-inch kitchen. It’s big enough for me and a pair of well-fed American roaches who happened to be fighting in the corner. I get some water and toss back the fun bomb.

I hurry into my bedroom and find the retro piece I want. I get comfortable in this red bra trimmed in Frederick’s of Hollywood furry stuff. An Amvets special. Bad taste and retro all at once. To top it off I slip on some slippers with stiletto heels and fur trim. The shoes help my posture and make my ass look healthy and hard. I guess, after all, that’s what the shoes are for.

I walk back into my livingroom. The walls are so close it looks like they’re almost fucking. My female circuitry goes berserk. I’m an amped-up gob of skin and sin, a woman in the hunt for some semen. For starters one big-screen smooch to the lips would be nice.

“You look wonderful,” Johnnymoon says.

I walk to the sofa. We kiss. Our tongues duel.

“God, these Quaaludes get me *horn-nee*,” I say.

In seconds we are—with mutual consent—raping each other.

“The bed,” I say.

We move to the bedroom.

As wet as I am he still hurts. His size startles me. “God, it feels like an arm.”

We both laugh. Its size alone could make a girl lose her heart.

I want to open for him as far as I can. I have too. “Slow,” I say. “Easy.” Even though I’m very wet.

We do it bareback. He finds his way as deep inside me as he can. Farther, I want to say, but that’s not necessary. I don’t want to end up at the Charity Hospital emergency room with a damaged uterus. I grip his back tightly with my thighs. For a moment I touch my feet together behind his back to better hold him. He reaches behind my head to grab my shoulders, as if he could go farther inside of me. I’m face-to-face with my right knee. Consciousness becomes optional.

I’m not sure why, but I tell him to slap me.

“What?” he says.

“Just for fun, slap me in the face.”

He does.

“No, harder.”

He does.

“Harder.”

I've got all these stimulations going on, both pain and pleasure. We pound. I come. He pulls out. It's possible he left some potion in me. We pause and groan like we just finished a workout in gym class. Nothing like rough sex on cool sheets.

He lies against the backboard and lights two cigarettes. "One won't do," he says.

We both crack up.

"My hand hurts, are you okay?"

"Yes," I say dreamily.

The Lude starts to melt me away. My face throbs in a good way. The pain creates pleasure to make the pain go away. I snuggle up to Johnnymoon. He crashes. I go into the living room. I flick on TV and the newscaster Alec Gifford talks about how the *Skylab* is falling to earth. I'm glad someone cares.

I rise and switch stations. A late-night Japanese thriller about Godzilla's third cousin or something fills the screen. The English dubbing makes it sound dumb. I can't tell which character the dialogue belongs to. I switch channels. *The Ten Commandments* are on with Charlton Heston, co-starring the locusts who are eating up the Middle East.

I switch stations to *The Birds*, a little Hitchcock for the late-night soul. Squeeeek, squeeeek, the birds say. I luv Tippi Hedren's clothes. She defines the retro look. Finally the Ludes overwhelm me. I crash like James Dean in his little car.

A slumber ten-miles deep. Dreams again. Big chunks of *Skylab* fall from the sky. I'm in City Park, the boulevard in front of the Greek-styled New Orleans Museum of Art. Oaks arch the street. But it's not a street. It's a path. The night is ten feet of velvet.

Suitcase Tony appears with a beard. He's growing out of a tree. He blends perfectly with the Spanish moss and the tree bark. He's Treeman, like in a school play. "Run," he says, "the Quaaludes are coming."

It starts to hail. But it isn't hail. It's *Skylab*. Its pieces have burned up and reshaped themselves as Quaaludes. They have little trails of smoke. They make hissing sounds right before they hit the ground.

I enter the museum. The museum has turned into a courtroom. My jury is the Class of '76 at St. Missy's my high school. They're wearing their white blouses and plaid navy-blue school skirts. I see Degas, Lee Oswald, Louis Armstrong, and Tennessee Williams. Satchmo's wearing a skirt, sandals, and a gold headpiece. He blows his horn (buggy eyes, bullfrog cheeks) like an Egyptian, just like in the *Ten Commandments* when the pharaoh arrived. But the tune is "St. James Infirmary."

Outside Quaaludes rain down like hot shit from Mars. They explode as they hit the ground. I don't why but it's Desi. See Desi run. Run, Desi, run. Desi screams like he's getting hit. Real screams. Sliced flesh. Blood. It scares me. They slash his face. He won't make it. I see Desi lying in the street. Blood. Dead. Gross. I smell burning flesh. My heart thumps me awake.

Now: Dangerous Feelings

August, 19, 2005, 5:30pm

Louise told Kippi 5:00pm. The cabernet penetrated Louise's thoughts. In the mirror her face moved and shifted. She hoped no one would notice. She stuffed her breath with a round of mouthwash. A spinning went off in her mind. She enjoyed the danger of driving while semi-intoxicated (without the twins).

Before she went to Kippi's, Louise wanted to drive downtown. Last night a young man was stabbed to death at Rampart and Louisa Streets. She wanted to see the murder spot, that connection to infamy and eternity. But it would be more dangerous at night.

Outside the humidity crawled over her flesh. She backed her Odyssey out of her driveway. On the street a car blew its horn. The driver, a man, waved. Again his horn sounded. He waved again. He wore aviator sunglasses, and the cover of the car's interior kept his hair and face unrecognizable. Louise refused to stop for anyone on the streets of New Orleans. The statistic that pressed her thoughts like a pistol to the temple was that during the first year of the Iraq war more Americans were killed in the streets of New Orleans than in Iraq. She wondered why that statistic excited her. What deep chromosomal crash made her want danger again? An address on Kerlerec Street written on pink sticky clung to the glass over the van's speedometer. She wanted to pass there soon.

She ended up on Marconi Drive and drove past the English Countryside landscape of City Park. She loved its elegance. In her rearview mirror she saw no one behind her. She reached Old Metairie. Drove down Freidrick's Place. She veered. The tires slid along the concrete edge that separated the median and the road. On her right she noticed a black BMW

SUV with a big red bow tied to it. What a lucky gal. Probably a gift from a thoughtful husband, one who cared and didn't forget anniversaries. The BMW, a direct descendent of the V2, all 5.0 liters of pure German firepower was how her indecent husband would put it. *A small gift would do.* The SUV sat in front of a neo-classical mansion with dentils in its overhang and a driveway in the shape of a crescent moon. She liked the pale pink of the mansion's bricks.

Jealousy raised her blood pressure. All she wanted, all she wanted, all she wanted was her fucking absent-minded husband to remember her ten-year anniversary, *their* ten-year anniversary, not just hers. *Theirs.* She couldn't put Johnnymoon out of her thoughts. She remembered his body, how could she forget it. The alcohol filled her with danger.

Kippi lived in a palace, a residence you would expect from a hot-sauce heiress. Louise pulled into the Blanchard's circle driveway on Vineyard Place. Ever since childhood the mansion reminded her of the Palace at Versailles, but in miniature. Maybe the home transcended the status of miniature. Still it almost intimidated her. Rococo and French looking, a classic Second Empire design, its seven-thousand square feet overwhelmed any one with a sense of decent consumption. Louise loved the Mansard roof and the quoins that gave tasteful emphasis to the corners. What made architecture so amazing was that you could penetrate it. Walk into it. Experience it.

Is anyone home? Where were their cars? Her mood twisted and turned. She didn't want to cry. Love's illusiveness hurt? Yesterday she thought she had it in her pocket. She stepped out of her mini-van, which made her feel poor and underbred, although she didn't mind that. Somehow it gave her comfort. Poor, underbred, and half drunk furnished her with a superiority she found hard to describe. Were those feelings tough and rebellious? Dangerous feelings? She

didn't need Kippi's Versailles. Never did. She had her absent-minded husband and the twins. The twins always demonstrated their love. She only wanted love.

Then: The Heist

Johnnymoon and I are breeders. It's that stage of life when you have sex so often your toes hurt. His band has actually played five gigs. I've asked if we should rethink the tub gig, and he says, I need the money. It's enough to get me through college and get the band going. It's going to be my first and last time. Good, I tell him.

I have more dreams over this whole tub ripoff thing. Just as I get frightened, I want to do it. I guess it's how counterphobia works. At times I find myself getting sexually aroused over it. Then depressed about it and thinking about what my parents would say. My own craziness starts to go crazy.

Outside the humid weather feels like a wet dishtowel. At my pad, 6:30pm, I get a call. "Vicki, the gig is on," Johnnymoon says. "A guy is going to show up at your place with keys to a truck."

"Sure," I say. The great feeling of nervousness, which is related to its cousin excitement, ignites me. My stomach twitches, and a slow burn starts.

Twenty minutes later someone knocks at my door.

In spite of the bubbly effect of the door eye, I see a guy who looks like a teenager. I open the door. He is compact and cute. Punkdyed blonde hair makes him look highly Aryan, a short version of a cleancut Viking. He has more muscles than the gymnastic team.

“Hi, Vicki?”

“Do I know you?”

“We’re all related,” he says.

I’m like, “Okay.”

“We all go back to the Garden of Eden.”

“True. Right. How could I forget.”

“With the first two humans, Adam and Steve.”

“Steve?”

“Eve was really Steve. A man. Steve. It’s a typo. It’s not *Eve*. It’s *Steve*.”

“A typo?”

“Yeah. The Greek version or whatever.”

I laugh. I don’t want to get into a debate about how impossible that is. Instead I smile. He smiles. The universe is reduced to he and *moi*. No way, for I luv Johnnymoon only. Plus what could I do with a gay man.

“Looka,” he says, “you never saw me here tonight, okay. I was never here. You got that. I’m a ghost. I don’t exist. Legally I’m dead.” Suddenly his tone sounds like one of The Parents talking business or something.

“Of course. No problem.”

“Here’s the keys to the pickup truck, which doesn’t exist either.” He holds up two keys on a small silver loop. He walks back into the darkness.

Fifteen minutes later a quiet tap comes on the door.

“Who is it?” I ask the door.

“Desi.”

I look in the door eye.

“It’s me, Desi. Let me in.”

I open the door to a small crack. Desi steps in. He’s wearing this black “Zorro” outfit that fits perfectly. He smells like a gallon of Brut Cologne. He looks good. The first night I saw him, the night I saw him play drums, and now tonight, I think I may have a crush on Desi.

“Dawlin, hi.” He shakes my hand and kisses me on the cheek. “I need to take a look at your walkway.”

“Be my guest.”

Desi walks out the door and examines the flagstone with close attention, like he is looking for ants or something.

The unmistakable rattle of Johnnymoon’s car pulls in front of the house. My landlord, an older attorney friend of The Parents, is in Italy with his mistress. Supposedly he’s doing research on his genealogy. Probably adding to his family tree as we speak.

“Dez,” Johnnymoon says. He and Desi shake soul style. He kisses me. “Hold this, please.” He gives me this long flashlight that weighs about ten pounds.

“I gotta ask you,” Desi says, “why don’t you want to put it a storage somewhere?”

“Storages make me nervous,” Johnnymoon says. “You don’t know who would break in and steal it. This way Vicki can keep an eye on it.”

My fear and excitement expand in my stomach. I’m in way over my head. I don’t want to be involved, but I do at the same time. Some voice keeps telling me something bad is going to happen. So I need to go. “I need to go with yall. The only way you’re going to put that in this house is if I help yall steal it.”

“Why,” says Desi.

“Why,” say Johnnymoon.

“Because.”

“Your answer is so deep, it will take me years to ponder.”

“This is your gig, man,” Desi says.

“I know.”

“It’s my gig, too,” I say.

“You sure the tub is still in the same place I saw it in the other day?” Desi asks. “Levine didn’t move it upstairs yet?”

“It’s there,” Johnnymoon says.

“What about the fence?” Desi asks.

“We’ll speak to him tomorrow.”

Suddenly it dawns on me: we can all be in jail by the morning.

“Here.” I hand Johnnymoon the big flashlight.

Twenty mintues later, we leap into the truck and slide into the cover of night. We four-barrel down Esplanade Avenue. I sit in the middle. Desi drives and Johnnymoon rides shotgun. “The corner of Toulouse and Royal,” Johnnymoon announces. Excitement nibbles on my nerves.

Minutes later Desi lets Johnnymoon and me out two doors down from Levine’s Louisiana and European Antiques. Quickly we huddle in the front door’s alcove. Johnnymoon points at the brassy globe above us. “I made sure the light didn’t work tonight.” A day earlier Johnnymoon pellet-gunned the Toulouse Street light.

“Two shots,” Johnnymoon whispers. “Puff. Then a little glass fell to the street. Ding-a-ling-a-ling. Like fairy’s dust.” Johnnymoon opens his hands like he let some angel dust fall.

“Nice and neat.”

I find his mood particularly upbeat. Maybe it’s all adrenaline.

He unsnaps the front door’s lock. “Wait here. The alarm.” He jogs to the back office with his very long flashlight guiding his way.

From there Johnnymoon signals me with a lighter’s flame. I hear it clap shut. I quickstep to the rear. I feel like a real bad-i-ac. The pale, mahogany armoires glow. The crystal on the chandeliers finds a way to flicker in spite of the darkness. The smell of Pine-Sol rises off the concrete floor.

“Here it is.” Johnnymoon pulls a moving pad off the treasure. It faces Toulouse Street, where just outside Desi is supposed to be copping a spot for the truck. Johnnymoon points to the tapping on the back door. “It’s Desi.”

I walk over.

Even though I don’t say anything Johnnymoon goes, “Shhhh.” He pushes the tub towards the door. The four-wheeled dollies that hide underneath the tub squeak as they roll the twelve-hundred pound load. I feel like saying, shhh.

A stairway that goes up to the back offices sits three feet from the side-door entrance. At first I don’t think anything about it. Standing on the first step it looks like an antique mannequin, maybe a faux boogeyman or something. Over his head a glow caused by the upstairs nightlight startles me the most. I can tell there’s flesh on his face, not mannequin plastic. I can’t help it. I scream.

“Shut the fuck up,” Johnnymoon says. Anger bulges in the whites of his eyes.

From the first step, the man bends over to grab me. It's a gentle, harmless grip. "I'm going to call the police," he says. "You shouldn't *bay* here." Where do I know that the southern accent from?

"No," I say.

"*Comb* here." The man reaches for my throat.

"*Yew*," he says when Johnnymoon approaches him. "I never trusted *yew*."

Before I know it, Johnnymoon smashes the man twice in the head with his huge flashlight. His cracking skull sounds like a crunchy bite of fried chicken. The boogeyman falls and rolls over. Johnnymoon shines the light on his face. There lies Braxton Dooley. My scalp freezes.

"Jesus Christ, fuck, goddamn it." Johnnymoon bends over, then stands straight. Surprise snares his face. He swings his flashlight crazily in the air like his regret is coming out of his arms. Perfect for someone who just lost it. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

"What was he doing here?" I ask. I know it's a stupid question. Goose bumps rise so quickly they sting. I feel the blood heat up in my stomach.

Johnnymoon shines the light on Braxton's face. It's hard to not recognize the stare of the dead. "What were you doing here, Braxton, what?" Like Braxton is going to sit up and tell Johnnymoon.

"He's deader than Huey Long," I say. I actually lose my breath for a second.

"Oh, no, what did I do?" Johnnymoon drops the flashlight. "No, no, no." He puts his face in his hands and makes this crying sound, but he's not crying. He can't. It has happened all too quick. It hasn't sunk in yet, but I know it won't take long. The knocking at the side door doesn't stop.

“Fuck,” Johnnymoon says.

I open the door. Desi steps in. “What happened?”

“Shut the door,” Johnnymoon says. “What are we going to do?”

“We?” Desi looks at us.

Johnnymoon shines the flashlight up to his own face as he speaks. He looks like a ghoul in a puppet show. “We can’t take the tub.” He flicks the light off. Darkness, which goes well with the color of our souls, covers everything.

“Why not?” Desi asks.

“Don’t be stupid. If it’s missing it’s going to attract the cops over here. We need to get rid of the body.”

It is a *Twilight Zone* moment, felony theft to murder in a matter of seconds. Talk about life changing. I feel a knot tighten my stomach.

“Let’s get his body out of here,” Johnnymoon says. “There’s no murder if you can’t find the body. He’s a fucking drifter. A drifter, Vicki,” he says like I want to argue. “A fucking drifter. People don’t miss drifters because they drift.”

Johnnymoon shines the flashlight back on Braxton’s corpse.

“Can’t you close his eyelids?” I ask. Braxton’s deep-set, blue eyes have a look as starry as the night sky. A string of blood, the color of cherry syrup, scrolls from his pig-like nostrils. Johnnymoon grabs one of the moving pads. He and Desi roll Braxton up burrito style.

Johnnymoon scans the floor with the flashlight. He searches the concrete floor. “Check for blood stains.”

Me: “It’s too dark.”

Desi: “Let’s get out of here.”

Me: "Really."

Johnnymoon: "Fuck, there's some blood."

The glare of flashlight prevents me from seeing the blood. I want to get out of there and be overtaken by carefree thoughts as soon as possible. If we get caught they'll throw us in jail and melt the key.

The enormousness of Braxton's dead body throws me into a trance.

Johnnymoon: "We need more light. I'm going to turn the overhead lights on for about five seconds. Check for any blood on the floor."

Desi: "Someone will see the light from the street."

The lights shock my eyes. "Look." I point at a spot of blood on the floor.

Desi: "That's all I see." He searches the floor like he's looking for his car keys.

Johnnymoon: "Fuck." He leaves and returns. A bottle cap snaps on. The smell of Pine-Sol starts to work on my stomach.

I suspect Braxton weighs no more than one-hundred-and-sixty pounds, a size 12 if he were a girl. Desi and Johnnymoon lift the wrapped body. They grunt. Their feet shuffle.

Johnnymoon: "Give us a hand, Vicki."

Me: "What do you want me to do?"

"The door."

The side door squeals when I push it open.

"Give us some muscle."

They have the body over their shoulders. I move under and push up, adding zero muscle to the cause.

"Where's the truck?" Johnnymoon asks.

“Across the street and three cars up,” Desi says.

“Fuck, Desi, we couldn’t roll the tub that far.”

“We’re not. We’re lifting a dead body worth nothing.”

For lack of better way to put it, the Quarter at three a.m. on a Tuesday night is as quiet as a cemetery.

I’m useless. Desi and Johnnymoon huff and puff. The body makes a loud thumping sound when they roll it over the side of the pickup truck. This big piece of metal we were going to use to hoist the tub into the pickup grumbles when Desi moves it. I hope no one heard it.

“Dez, cover him with the other blanket,” Johnnymoon says. “Put the cinder blocks on top.”

Desi pauses and shoots a stare packed with resentment.

A small dog yaps on the balcony three buildings down on our side of the street. A light goes on. We all look back at it then hop in the pickup truck.

This time Johnnymoon drives. His face droops with dread. His eyes glare into the nighttime. I’m full of emotional concentrate, fear, regret, and shame glob up inside of me.

We drive out of the *Vieux Carré*, turn on North Rampart and from there head to Esplanade and take a left back towards my pad.

We’re not far from Degas’ house. “Slow down, a cop,” Desi shouts. On our right a NOPD car sits in the shadows of a huge oak tree. Johnnymoon punches the brakes. Too late. The cop lights flash on. A very strange thing happens. The fright of capture is so intense and so exciting I dampen with sexual arousal.

“Oh fuck, Jesus,” Johnnymoon says. He finally starts to cry. Big sobs sucking up his oxygen trying to take over his breath. He pulls over. The cop car slows.

“Get your shit together,” Desi says.

I grab Johnnymoon’s hand and look in his face. I pack two smiles into one big one.

He smiles back. “Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’m okay.” His nose dribbles when he draws in a big dose of the nighttime air.

The cop speeds past us. He goes up to the corner of North Miro Street and U-turns back towards the Quarter. His lights disco on.

Johnnymoon just stares at me. His Adam’s apple rolls in his throat. “Wait,” he says. He opens the truck door and vomits. He wipes his mouth with his hand.

We drop Desi off at his car parked around the corner from my pad. “Go back to your alibi, man,” Johnnymoon says. Desi has purposely stayed at his mother’s house in Metairie. He still knows how to sneak out and get back in without waking anyone up. A decent alibi if one exists.

He doesn’t even tell us goodbye.

“Fuck you, too,” Johnnymoon says.

“What are we going to do?” I ask.

“Don’t worry.”

That’s all I do.

Johnnymoon and I take I-10 out to Manchac, about forty miles west-northwest of the city. We listen to WTUL at a low volume. Something by Joy Division murmurs over the dial. Johnnymoon swigs from a half-pint of Jack Daniels he hid under the seat. Tears gloss up his eyes. Outside the night’s darkness looks like a bruise. As though from a wicked fairy tale a gibbous moon shines our path from I-10 to I-55.

We drive down an exit ramp onto old Highway 51. Swamps surround swamps. Cicadas shrill like they know we're guilty. We cross some railroad tracks and turn on a dirt road and stop at this abandoned camp. The moon lights up the small pier as though it's waiting for us.

Johnnymoon wants the corpse to decompose as rapidly as possible; so we undress it down to its pubic hair and small penis. I can't hold up Braxton's legs. Dead weight is so heavy. Johnnymoon does most of the lifting. It seems to take forever. He lugs the cadaver to the skiff. Low tide has dropped the skiff down below the pier. He sucks air and cries again.

"We'll drop it on the bow." Johnnymoon pushes the body off the pier. The aluminum thumps. The sound travels through the night. I hope no one is listening. Johnnymoon brings five cinder blocks from the truck that we were originally going to use to place the tub on. Part of the body hangs over skiff's bow almost touching the water.

"We won't sink when we push the body in," Johnnymoon says. "Sit back here to bring up the bow."

Moonbeams help with our navigation. I never knew a moon could offer so much light. The water shines like black glass. The waves gobble at our boat. The frail sound of the old motor makes me feel so small. My shame gives me a round of chills.

Johnnymoon wants to cruise out as far as possible, but he doesn't want to be spotted either. He compromises, and we putter out for no more than ten minutes.

He cuts some ropes and works quickly. Around Braxton's neck and his crotch he knots up the anchor rope. He ties the four cinder blocks to Braxton's body. He bends over the side of the boat and dips a long paddle into the water that submerges part of his shoulder. "We should be deep enough," he says. "If the blocks don't hold him, then the anchor will." Johnnymoon makes the sign of the cross. He's a long way from first communion. We move around each

other, a few times almost falling in. He rolls the heavy load over the bow. For a second, water pours into the boat like it's a glass.

"Ahh, we're sinking," I shriek.

"Shhh."

We quit taking water. The anchor clanks on the skiff's aluminum side and falls into the lake. When the cinder blocks hit the water they make ka-plump sounds like little belly busters. Braxton travels down into the water's darkness. He belongs to the fish. He belongs to the ages. He belongs to our lives forever. I start to feel so sorry for him. Really bad about what has happened. We wait a few minutes for Braxton to hook to the bottom of Lake Maurepas.

"As long as the fish get to him first we'll be okay." Johnnymoon snuffles and looks down at the dark water. "The body will fill with gas and will want to rise, but the blocks and the anchor should hold him down. In no time no one will be able to recognize him. No one will care." He turns the skiff around.

The shoreline's jagged shore confuses and scares me. I can't tell where we motored out from. It looks so different on the ride back in. I feel lost. I think of my life. I feel lost again. The rich smell of the engine's fumes makes me queasy. It has been a long day. It has been a long night. It's been a short big life for all of us. I lean over the skiff's side and puke.

I've missed my period.

Now: Love

August 19, 2005, 5:35pm

Louise knocked on Kippi's door and rang the doorbell, which sounded like it belonged in a palace. No response. She wanted to make it snappy. The deadline to beat up her husband approached quickly. She would feel good breaking some china. She wanted to get rid of the plain, white place-setting she bought at Pottery Barn three Thanksgivings ago. Its understated elegance now bored her. It could go, and she could effectively get her point across. She'd simply slam things down on the floor. She would avoid chipping any cabinets. But she could hurt Judd. She didn't want to hurt him. She wanted to kill him. The sight of her husband getting whacked with a Pottery Barn plate—his eyes crossing and his knees weakening—had a certain appeal. She hated how the alcohol confused her. Why was she thinking about trauma to the head?

"Come in," a voice that sounded like Kippi's said. But it sounded disguised, like from a cheerleader's megaphone. Louise didn't want to see or speak to Kippi or have a conversation with a megaphone. The twins would soon be living in a home like the one Louise grew up in, one where her parents never had time for her. Time to get her thoughts together.

A car pulled into the driveway. The Toyota she nearly backed into at her house. A young man got out of the car and shouted, "Wait. . ." The rest of his words blurred.

He wanted to talk to her. There was something ominous about someone coming after her now. Particularly when she didn't want to take a sobriety test. "Why, who wants to know?" She didn't like the way this young man looked—thin, muscular, blonde, the blue eyes so piercing she thought of her own eyes. A burn entered her stomach.

“Julian.” He held a bouquet of yellow roses, the color that meant friendship.

“Come in, Mom.” The tiny voice of her daughter called from the other side of the door.

She pushed her thumb down on the door’s handle. For a second, maybe two, she stared at people she knew, all of them familiar, some very familiar. She was consumed by the full effect of the silence. She was about to ask, what are yall doing here? Instead, “Surprise” exploded in her ears. Party hats and faces with exaggerated smiles and the blurring of those stupid horns greeted her. Her heart dropped. It felt like a spacecraft scorching back into the atmosphere, burning back to something that had to do with her maker. All of the faces, smiling with that hey-you’ve-just-been-tricked look stunned her. Hired help dressed in livery holding silver trays paused for the moment. They too smiled. Oh God, they touched her heart the most. Camera flashes brought spots to her eyes. To her right a guy was holding a poster that said, “Did you say, Up His Ass Sideways?”

Louise laughed, pointed to the poster.

“Oh my God.” Tears of joy emerged.

Kippi Blanchard stood in front of her. She held a wine glass at face-level, cocked to the side of her face the way Marilyn Monroe did. Kippi’s freckles, those deep eyelashes, and her piercing green eyes met hers. The stare deepened when Kippi smiled and squinted. She raised her wine glass and said, “To you, Hon, happy tenth. He didn’t forget. You deserve your happiness.”

“Hi, baby, I really wanted to surprise you,” Judd said and hugged her. He looked at Kippi. “I’ve—we’ve—been planning it for weeks now.”

“You bastards.”

All emotions, all of the daily pressures, all thoughts, mean and loving, associated with Kippi, and her husband, all feelings—even the crashing of that plain-white place setting from Pottery Barn against her husband’s forehead—reversed themselves, like one of the movie scenes where everything was put back together in reverse. Things were going in reverse. She always thought happiness was elsewhere, never in her life.

With her children clutching her, Louise DeAmas put her face in her aging hands and wept. She released big sobs of happiness, a happiness she never, ever, thought she would experience in her life. Her twins grabbed her around the waist.

“Look.” Judd motioned to the open doors. In the curved driveway the X5 BMW driven by a man in livery pulled into the driveway. It was the one with the red ribbon she saw down the street.

“I know you wanted it,” Judd said. “You really deserve it. I love you.” He kissed her on the forehead. She didn’t want to go out into the driveway with that young man out there. She looked around; her heart thumped against her ribs. His car was gone.

Desi liked the boy, Julian. Rough life: foster homes and more foster homes. Rejection a part of him like his left arm. Shithole world. The boy, why did twenty-five seem so young, told him everything went well. “Maybe I’m a dead ringer.”

“I never saw the kid, but I bet you are,” Desi said. “Okay, Julian, you’ve got to get back to Connecticut now.” Desi handed him a ticket and an envelope with cash. “Stay the fuck out of trouble.”

“Of course,” Julian said.

Chapter Five
TROUBLE AGAIN

Now: John's Doppelgänger

Monday, August 22, 2005; Mystic, Connecticut

"Julian," John St. Albares said. He pushed the guesthouse door open. Since his return from New Orleans Julian had entered a state of self-inflicted gloom. His condition disturbed John. Maybe Julian needed more time. It had only been two days, and John wanted a chance to catch up with him. There had been no phone calls, no emails, not even a howl from Julian. John wished he could participate in that level of detachment from the real world. Once, at Julian's age, he had.

He kicked a beer can across the living room. The tinny sound made a small echo. The echo came out crisp. The tiny noise died in the silence of the apartment and in the depth of his ear. There was an ominous feeling about confronting Julian this morning, and the feeling was intimately John's. He would see more than his long-lost son. He would see himself, a sight that would excite him in the wrong way. He did not want his son to be like him. Even though their reunion had just begun in April, he loved this young man, and the young man loved him. It seemed.

In his attempt at privacy, Julian had covered the living-room window with aluminum foil. Both John and his wife disliked the idea. Julian had claimed the intentional darkening of his apartment as a right to his of privacy. John respected that. Sunlight glowed through a pirate X

slashed in the aluminum. Dust motes swirled. The faint smell of sewage mingled with an old odor of cigar smoke.

John walked through the living room to the kitchen where a light shined from a crack in the refrigerator's door. Cool air poured out of the G.E. He spotted four six-packs of empty Budweiser bottles and a spoon sticking out from a can of French-style string beans. The refrigerator's bleak contents and their nonsensical arrangement gave him ideas about Julian's mind. A chill—one chillier than the refrigerator's air—came over John. He realized that people were composed of strange psychological ingredients: consciousness, sub-consciousness, unconsciousness (once an intentional condition of his), the lizard brain, primal urges, shadows. Dreams and love. Fear and death. Memories like ghosts. Julian's mind. *You need to stop*. But the list went on.

We all needed our own lists: John believed this. Lists were commanding. Powerful. Curative. Civilizations were defined by the great lists: the Ten Commandments, the Bill of Rights, the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. The seven deadly sins. This morning Julian moved to the top of John's list.

He shut the refrigerator door. A calm filled the apartment. It was an untamed moment, restrained, held in check. He flipped a light switch. A shadeless table lamp lit up. A framed poster of Napoleon Bonaparte that John gave to Julian hung above the sofa. The poster dated back twenty-five years to John's days in New Orleans. The model—who looked uncannily what Napoleon should look like—had his right hand shoved sideways under his navy-blue Napoleon jacket. Haughtily, his left riding boot rested on a marble bathtub. The model wore a shit-eating grin that John had never seen in real Napoleon portraits. The caption read “Bathe in History, Le

Pavillon Hotel New Orleans, Louisiana.” He stared at the poster. How well the poster had endured surprised John. How well his past had endured frightened him.

He scratched his nose. John and his wife, Addy, had asked Julian not to smoke in the guesthouse, which originally served as an apartment for John’s dying father-in-law. Towels and clothes littered the place like remnants washed up by a flood. Sloth, John thought, was one of the seven deadly sins.

He entered the bathroom. Feces clogged the busted toilet. How could anyone live in his own shit? A twelve-gauge shotgun, cracked open, lay in the tub next to an empty red-and-yellow shell box.

From the living room, John heard someone at the front door. A pounding sound, then the door opened. Like a ghost, the draft slammed the closet door in the bedroom. John grabbed the twelve-gauge shotgun. With the gun breached he proceeded to the living room. He slammed the gun shut. The ominous dry click changed the mood of the place. It was a sonic note familiar to all Americans. One of determination, a sound that meant righteous protection, one tied down to that great list, the Bill of Rights. The click sent an important sound to the person hearing it. It served as an audible indicator that his life could soon end.

John turned into the living room. “Halt.” John’s own inflection surprised him. He sounded like an asshole.

A man who wore a dark navy blue t-shirt turned around. “Who, me?” He held his arms in a downward V. His palms faced John. The t-shirt said Boston in old-time red letters. With the exception of a ponytail he had long lost the rest of his hair. The rattail, squeezed together in tiny braids, swayed from each side of his back as the man bobbed his head.

“No, Napoleon Bonaparte, motherfucker.” John remained calm.

“Mister, you can put that rifle down.” The intruder’s eyes bulged. His mouth had an Elvis twitch.

“What are you doing here?” John disliked his own distinctively threatening tone. For a brief second his inflection and the situation landed him in the middle of an identity crisis.

“I’m a friend of Julian’s. He owes me some money.”

“For what?” John asked.

“Business.”

“What kind of business?”

“Business. He told me to come by.”

“I’ll tell him you came by,” John said.

“You’re his dad, right? The singer.” The man raised his index finger like he had come upon a great revelation. “*Blue*, right?”

That specific information surprised John. At some level—a more intimate level than he felt comfortable with—this guy must’ve been Julian’s friend. He knew about *Blue*.

“Good shit.”

“Glad you like it.” He felt flattered that the man liked his one and only artistic creation that had endured through the years. A sense of satisfaction surged through John. Suddenly, he realized he could like this man.

“I play.” The man told him he had a Gretsch Les Paul and a Fender Twin Reverb amp.

John didn’t like the guy coming in, searching the place, but he understood the behavior of musicians. After all he wasn’t sure he understood his own behavior. “Please leave.”

“Tell Julian I came by. And hey, let’s get together and jam.”

“Have you seen Julian?” John asked. He hated asking this guy where he could find his son.

“He was supposed to be here,” he said. “I need my money. Things are tight.”

“He’ll pay you.” John didn’t want to know how much Julian owed the man. “Please leave.”

The man left. John shut the front door. He took several deep breaths. His hands stayed calm. He was almost under control. He had a strange and deep premonition. A feeling no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t change. In the near future, he would not be under control.

He moved back into the dining area that adjoined the kitchen. Duct tape held the dinette’s glass top together. He perused a pile of envelopes: a Connecticut Light & Power bill, a Mystic Seaport flyer, a Mohegan Sun Casino brochure. At the bottom of the pile he found a Visa bill.

As a forensic accountant, John could read a person’s lifeline by his transactions. He fingered open the credit-card envelope. Transactions could tell the most intimate stories. For every action there was a transaction: for every transaction there was an action. It was John’s theory of *sell-ativity*. He understood the penetrating effects of certain transactions and the psychological bang they could deliver to people. This phenomenon astounded John. Today he did not want to be astounded. Regardless, he prepared to be.

He found comfort in taking inventory. It gave him relief. A dollar-twenty-seven Groton Public Library late-fee receipt for *How to Find Your Birth Parents* sat in front of him. From Visa receipts he discovered two books purchased at Amazon dot com: *Regrets, A Ten Step Program to Living in the Present* and *Adoption for Dummies*. Julian had attended Andrew

Wyeth's "Helga Exhibition" at the New Orleans Museum of Art. The most curious receipt was for flowers. Julian had purchased them from a St. Charles Avenue florist in New Orleans.

On a legal pad, John found the name *Louise* written in columns. The columns continue on the page's back. The blue ink covered the yellow pad with the precision of Sanskrit. He rested his hands on the tabletop. The glass's chill ran through him. He wiped a pencil-line of sweat from his forehead.

"Louise, the mystery woman," he whispered to himself. "Louise. Louise. Louise." His thoughts bent. A familiar ring in the name crackled over his ears like scratches on a vinyl album, Vicki *Louise* Joyce. Vicki Joyce. Vicki Joy. Julian's mother. He could never forget her nom de guerre. When the adopted meet up with their birth parents they called it reunioning. Julian used the word in the letter he had sent to John when he wanted to meet him. Julian had asked John if he knew the whereabouts of his mother. Not knowing how—or wanting to find her—John had made it clear to Julian he had no idea of his mother's location. He had even told Julian in a distinctively somber voice, hoping he might drop the idea, that she may be dead.

The saliva-soaked "finish" of a *Joya de Nicaragua* cigar poked from under a Dime Bank statement. Next to the ashtray the bad news sat: a crack pipe. A feeling—one that caused things like ulcers—moved to the tender tissue of John's gut. Angry thoughts lingered for a moment then quickly converted back to concern and love. John examined the pipe. He sniffed it. A metal fragrance came from it. Black stains streaked the glass. It reminded John of those childhood photos, warnings against cigarette smoking that displayed black lungs filthy with cancer. He stared at the tar that stretched to the pipe's end like it had been caught in a force more wicked and uncontrollable than the user's breath. Lately that was what John's memories had been doing to him: blackening his mind while it was being sucked out of him. He put the

pipe in his mouth and sucked on it. The metallic flavor tasted filthy and strange. He searched the house for contraband but found none. That disappointed him.

John drove to his office. He felt vulnerable, like time would either run out on him or confront him in the form of his past. Julian, Desi, his chef-d'œuvre *Blue* and now Vicki Joy.

Psychological comfort eluded his overcrowded mind. He felt his past taking up too much room, causing tension, making him angry when before he had never gotten angry. He wanted to crush something.

He headed through downtown Mystic, his new hometown that he loved. He found pride in the little town and its bustling economy: Brown's Dental Group, his favorite restaurants the S-Car-Go and Maxie's, and the Ice Cream Prison—what a place to be condemned to. Nice Ash Cigar shop adjoined the Mystic Disc, a place he could order any album that belonged to his dented past. In spite of his love for iTunes, which had cut deeply into the Disc's market, he still enjoyed visiting the place.

Since its founding in 1690, Mystic's economy thrived on the ocean. Because of its proximity to the water John often likened it to New Orleans. Fishers Island Sound connected to the Block Island Sound, which adjoined the Atlantic Ocean. Now the new and unmatched pizzazz of the Foxwood and Mohegan Sun casinos brought jobs and money to the area. These gambling palaces featured top-drawer entertainment and an assortment of restaurants, not to mention a few ways to try your luck, win a fortune, lose your retirement, but always get a thrill.

Proudly, he had embraced the town's history, its understated wealth and identity. Unlike larger cities with tall glassy buildings, the wooden masts of ships highlighted Mystic's skyline:

the whaler *Charles W. Morgan* and the schooner *Brilliant*, both significant vessels in the world of wooden ships. Other sailboats—sloops, ketches, yawls—crowded the harbor, which by all standards were a beautiful clutter of wood, sails, and water. On Route 1, which ran along the Atlantic coast, John often watched people descend on the Mystic port as though a deep instinct, their inner-fish, had beckoned them to return to their origins. He and Addy were two of those people. They had planned to buy a Friendship sloop. He wanted to get Julian involved with the sloop as a business. He needed to be a good father.

John was a trusted man. But he would not tell his wife about the guy who had broken into the guesthouse. John was a man who lived by—at least he tried to live by—the four absolutes: honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love. An important list that helped him be a human being. He was a man who had had many lives, and he was also a man who conceivably should not be alive. Addy had told him to be careful, because he'd already run out of lives, as though they were minutes from AT&T. But John had been finding it more and more difficult to be careful. He had compulsions to use drugs again. *Why, after twenty-five years?* It had started with his anger. It had fermented then brewed into a desire to consume chemicals to alleviate his tension. He still tried to fight off this craving. But now it transcended compulsion and turned into a wild desire, something so powerful and feral it didn't know its own force. Everything he had learned in treatment, the Twelve Steps and all of its accompanying writings and wisdom had already been retrieved like a Jedi Knight retrieving his lightsaber to fight his foes. But too late. His desire was now a need. It wasn't unheard of for a person to lose a quarter century of sobriety. He wanted to be frightened by that fact, but he couldn't be.

John's office sat on Route 1, across the street from the Epicure Food Deli. He arrived before his office manager. She took care of the practice when he would leave town. He wanted someone more committed and dependable than she.

He checked his Outlook schedule: he had two meetings scheduled for the afternoon. His cell phone rang.

"*Jawn*," the voice said. It belonged to a client of his, the owner of the Mystic Disc and Nice Ash Cigar Shop. "I was down at Bluff Point State *Poc*." The owner had an accent that would sound perfect scalping tickets at Fenway Park.

"Okay," John said.

"Just about an hour ago," the client said.

"It's a beautiful day."

"Doesn't your son own a brown Saab?"

The thoughts of Julian, a desolated area, and foul play created a chemical reaction within John. He sweat. Mysterious pain scissored his gut, gray hairs yet unseen bloomed somewhere on his head.

"Did you see him?" John asked.

"I minded my own business."

"Can't blame you. Did he look like he was. . ."

"There's a woman with him. He's alive."

"Thanks."

"Stop by, I've got your *La Flor Dominicana* double ligero."

"Will do." John was trying to give up cigars.

He hopped in his car and headed to Bluff Point State Park. To maintain his composure he thought of many things other than Julian. He considered his adopted hometown of Mystic and the towns that connected to it: Groton, Stonington, Westerly. A green circuit of summer hooked them up. The oak, gray birch, and sycamores turned on in the summer's vibrant warmth. The grass appeared in a bold version of green. The yellow blooming goldenrod and lilac-purple of rhododendron stood visible in the summer weather. Fresh smells salted with the Atlantic filled the air.

The summer months in Mystic, Connecticut had this strange effect on him. Memories found a way of entering through his nostrils. Often, boyhood fragrances ambushed him and pulled him back to another time and place. This August morning thoughts of New Orleans performed their sorcery. In New Orleans he co-wrote his album *Blue*. It had all been New Orleans lately. Hurricanes Dennis and Cindy had just missed the city but killed three people on the Gulf Coast. He remembered the political, economic, and racial duress of the city. A place to visit, not live. But he grew up there. It was part Deep South, part northern Caribbean, always a part of his heart. For John, New Orleans died years ago. He left some guilt there, Braxton Dooley, Vicki Joy, and Desi. A thought came out of nowhere, like a rogue wave: he wondered if Julian was really his son. Of course he was.

The cause of his long estrangement with Desi had occurred when Desi invited a so-called friend to audition as lead singer for Hold the Lettuce, which had been John's job. John had just broken up with Vicki Joy and was in Destin, Florida on a three-day-weekend with a rebound girlfriend. When John returned to the warehouse in Kenner, where the band practiced, the group's lead guitarist, Bryan LaBryan, and their bassist, hoped to kick *Desi*, not John, out of the band. They wanted another percussionist. As the bass player had said, Desi's got asshole issues.

John told them kicking Desi out wasn't a good idea. He defended Desi. They told him about some wild conspiracy theory Desi had about John wanting to turn the band into a mainstream group.

John confronted Desi. One thing led to the next. Desi brought up resentments that went back to childhood. He even accused John of stealing the poster from his Beatles *White Album*. They pushed each other around. Desi had always been bigger than John, but John was total muscle, quick and strong, a cruel street fighter when he needed to be one.

The conversation turned into an argument, turned into a shouting match. Emotions intensified. They wrestled. They exchanged oaths and punches. John rammed his head into Desi's gut. He slammed Desi into the wall stapled with egg cartons and pointed foam rubber.

Among other things, John damaged Desi's snare drum and bent one of his cymbals. He swung a mike-stand into Desi's gut like he was connecting with a fastball. He broke ribs and knocked the wind out of Desi. He pinned Desi's throat down with the mike stand. Desi wheezed for air. He gasped for life. Even today John could still feel the tender construction of Desi's windpipe, its fragility. He shuddered at the fact that it was a millimeter and one freaked-out emotion from being crushed.

Just after Desi started to bang his right hand against the floor, literally in one of his last gasps for life, Bryan LaBryan pulled John off. Not an uncommon effort for people being strangled to death. Desi couldn't scream uncle because he couldn't breathe. His face changed from red to an unusual shade of purple, and he quit banging. His grim expression and the color of his face—not much different than Braxton's in the moonlight—made a memorable pose. John rose, hurled the mike stand against the wall and left. Someone called EMS. Supposedly Desi had lost consciousness. Talk of filing attempted murder charges followed. It had stayed talk.

John finally made amends with Desi in April, over twenty-five years later. It had been too late. The past needed to be repaired in a timely way. This lapse in time had started to affect his sobriety in a very bad way. It had awakened deep angers and his compulsions to use again.

He missed the warm winters of New Orleans, but it ranked as one of the most dangerous cities in the western hemisphere. On a deeper, more personal level the city gave him temptations that too often challenged his sobriety. He had wondered if his and Addy's retirement plans should be reconsidered. In so many ways the city was a shithole. But it was also gorgeous decay and forever good times. Violent. Corrupt. And regrettably, his past.

Outside of Mystic, John took a left at the light onto Depot Road and followed it to Bluff Point State Park. Only a section of the park was developed, and no one was in a hurry to build up the rest of it. Little vegetation covered the flat area. Beyond a row of no-parking signs Julian's Saab sat in the fiery light of morning. Waves snapped in Fishers Sound. Gulls with their aching screams soared overhead. The smell of saltwater filled John's sinuses. It had a wonderful cleansing effect.

He paused and wondered if he was going to be walking up on a dead man. In his prior life—some twenty-something years ago—he saw a dead man. The man he killed. Braxton Dooley. The experience still enjoyed haunting him. He remembered Braxton's nude body under the creamy moonlight of Lake Maurepas. Pubic hair covered his small penis. The smell of shit and other wicked fragrances were there. The strange twist on Braxton's mouth. The dead had a way of staring into oblivion.

John approached Julian's old Saab. A fresh "whiskey dent" blunted the car's rear fender. Cumulus clouds as big as zeppelins coasted overhead. Across the way, a Toyota Land Cruiser sat with a woman and two children in it. The vehicle faced away from John. The children

turned around in their seats and stared at him. As the woman talked on her cell phone she jabbed her finger in the rearview mirror at him.

For possible odors of Julian's death, John inhaled and then exhaled. He breathed in again, deeper and longer. No such vapors materialized, only the fishy smell of a nearby trashcan. He sucked in another gulp of air. The simple things in life, like breathing, satisfied him. But life was not simple, and his memory was not satisfying. It had turned into a nightmare with an attitude. He felt like he was repeating his own life. Bad habits always insisted on encores.

The front door of the Saab opened and a woman rose from the cocoon shape of the car. With the wobbly walk of a honky-tonk all-nighter she approached John in her stripper high heels.

"Hi, I'm Miss Jasmine," she said.

Miss. John wondered if virginity was somehow reversible?

"Do you think anyone noticed me?" Miss Jasmine asked. She wore a silky black shirt that barely covered her sleek, braless body. Hard nipples poked into the black fabric.

"Noticed you?" John asked. "Do you mean in the last ten minutes. Or is this a question about your life?" John motioned to the mother and children across the way.

"Okay, look," Miss Jasmine said, "I don't want to be here either."

John did not know which was smoother her skin or her voice. Miss Jasmine looked about thirty years old. Her black hair shined like a wig. Cleopatra bangs emphasized a long equine nose. He sensed a touch of breeding in her.

"He needs fucking help," Miss Jasmine the social worker said. "And maybe you do too." She jabbed a finger in the air at his chest.

"Sorry," he said, "my inner asshole is acting up today."

“I know what you mean, man.” She thumbed back to the Saab. “I’m sure he could bring out the worst in Mother Theresa.”

“Be careful, he’s family.”

“*Whatev.*”

“So what happened?” John asked.

“I had to use it—the bathroom,” Miss Jasmine said. “I get back to the car. I couldn’t wake him; so, I crashed. The next thing I know the bitch across the way is staring at my crotch.” Miss Jasmine pointed towards the Land Cruiser. “I think she took my picture with her phone. Her fucking phone. That’s an invasion of my crotch and my privacy. I don’t want my pubes ending up on the web.”

“The nerve,” John said.

“I think he took some Xanax.” Miss Jasmine pointed up and over to the backseat of the Saab as though pointing to a bad dog she feared waking. She tilted her head, arched a brow with concern. “I hope you loved your mother.”

A black Miata sports car waited with its top down.

“My mother?” John asked.

“That’s all he talked about.”

“His mother?”

“Foster care. Rejection. Love.”

John thought a family near Houston raised Julian.

“There’s my ride. Gotta go. *Ciao*. Good luck.”

Outside of the white Land Cruiser the two red-haired children gathered around a woman whose hair and bright white skin matched the children’s. The general paleness of New

Englanders still amazed John. They stared at him as though he was about to step into a booby trap.

John poked his head inside of the Saab. Julian lay on the backseat with his right hand over his eyes. His breathing was marked by rattled snoring, reminiscent of a cartoon character where Z's purred through uppercase balloons. He wore his black-and-white livery, his maitre d' attire for his job at the S-Car-Go Restaurant. A twenty-five year old man sleeping in his car—a lost cause in the middle of a pause.

“Julian, it's a new morning in America,” John said. He remembered Ronald Reagan and the 1980s. Julian snored. Waves crumbled on the shoreline.

The mother and her two matching children departed. The big clouds soared away and revealed a sky as blue as John's pressed shirt. Over the Atlantic a small plane with the penetrating sound of a pissed-off insect wrote a message in the sky. The first word in the dot-matrix print read GOD. A warm surge of hope pushed through John. Jim's Skywriting from Providence, Rhode Island chalked up the sky for the Congregational Church of Mystic, Connecticut. Both the skywriter and the church were his clients. In jest he had mentioned the idea of skywriting to the church and connected the congregation to the skywriting company. John had told the church that everyone associated God with heaven, which symbolically meant the sky. Apparently the Congregationalist liked his idea.

“Hey man, what happened?” John asked Julian in a deliberately robust voice.

Julian looked like a crash-test drug-addict needing reconstruction. He groaned and twisted his upper body. His wrist flexed like a baby's. Through the open window he stretched his legs. “Stop.” Julian tried to shoo John like a sand fly. He rose on his elbows.

In spite of his attractive features—chopped blonde hair, well-placed dimples, Lincoln cheekbones—a look of desperation covered his face. John thought that his face belonged mostly to his mother's side of the family, some distant relative. The stare was John's, dead on.

"It's you." Julian dropped back to the seat. The sour smell of liquor and cigarette smoke wafted from the car. "What are you doing here?"

"That's my question to you."

"Long night. Broke up with my girlfriend."

"Why don't you get home before you get arrested?"

"I need to get my own place." Julian's blue eyes mirrored the sky in color and vacancy.

"I don't think that's going to happen in the next ten minutes. Besides, the guesthouse *is* your own place. Addy and I want you there."

"Addy's been throwing lightening bolts at me."

"That's not true."

"Where's Jasmine?" Julian asked.

"Where'd you get her?"

"Cuddles."

"The strip joint?" John looked around the park. "She left. She said she'd blow you next time."

Both men laughed.

"Did you think about the Four Absolutes?" John asked. "Try to tune-in to your inside. That's where peace comes from. It wasn't always easy for me either. You know that."

"What wasn't easy?"

“Life, Julian. Life. Being normal.” He didn’t want to tell Julian about his recent urges. About his overwhelming sense of hopelessness. His anger. Above him a squad of gulls helixed downward. The skywriter had completed his message, GOD LUVS U. “Look.” John pointed to the sky.

Julian craned his neck.

“See that, God loves you,” John said.

“How does that help anything?”

“It does,” John said. “It does. Did you see your mother in New Orleans?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Is she still alive?”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“I lost my job.”

“No, what happened in New Orleans?” As usual Julian would make John pry information from him. John knew Julian would ultimately come through with the truth, or a version of it. In Julian’s stare John saw himself, genes imbedded so deep he thought he and Julian shared the same eye blink. He had to be his son.

“I wonder if God can get me another job.” Julian looked up at the sky. He sniffled.

“Are you okay?” John could not tell if he was crying.

“No.”

“No what?”

A long pause followed.

“Julian?”

“I’m having problems talking about things.”

“I’m fat and you’re mute.” John had gained a pound each year for the last quarter century. Twenty-five extra pounds now weighed his short frame down. It showed.

Julian chuckled. “You’re not fat.”

Another long silence delivered a fresh serving of tension.

“You and Addy have been good to me.”

“Thanks.” John gazed upward at the wide blue yonder. “Did you find Vicki?”

“Yes.” He exhaled loudly. “No.”

“Which is it?”

“She’s now Louise. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I thought you’d at least call me when you returned.” John did not want to fight with him. Julian had to have been exhausted, probably delirious after a non-stop night of partying. John needed to give their conversation pause, put a positive spin on something.

“Some guy was by your apartment today, said he played guitar.” John didn’t mention the debt the man spoke of.

“Fucking, Mario.”

“Does he play?”

“He’s an incredible guitarist.”

“Huh. He said he liked *Blue*.”

“Hope you didn’t mind I showed him the lyrics and chops you wrote for it.”

“No. Glad you did. Is he available?”

John and Julian strategized about how they could recruit Mario for their band. With Julian playing bass and John singing, all they needed now was a drummer.

“All we need is a drummer for people in need of beat,” John sang.

“You sounded just like Sly Stone, John.”

John smiled. “Addy and I are buying a Friendship sloop. We want to start that business I told you about. We keep one half; the other half belongs to you.”

“Huh, it’s got possibilities.” Julian sucked in a slug of phlegm.

“It’s important that you stay busy. You’ve got to be focused on something productive.”

John needed to find a way to practice what he preached. But he wanted to be a good parent. Instant parenthood had overwhelmed him. It too, had thrown off his sobriety. After he and Addy lost a five-year-old daughter to leukemia, he had lost his chance at parenthood.

“It’s not that simple.”

He knew Julian was so right. “Sailboat trips for the tourists. Possibly some long-range stuff: Maine, New York. Blow south to Baltimore.” John paused. “Julian, you okay?”

“Yes.”

John knew he was not okay. In spite of all the big plans he had for Julian, his expression looked as helpless and irretrievable as a dinghy adrift in the Atlantic. John’s sense of hope paused.

The rush of an accelerating engine broke the morning sounds. A Groton police car had entered the park. With its flashing lights it sped toward Julian’s illegally parked Saab. The cop car reached them and stopped. The siren made a squeal of an announcement and fell quiet. Its honeycomb red-and-white lights pulsed. The cop leapt out of his vehicle. He gripped his belt and twisted it back and forth his trim waist. Enough technology filled the strip of leather to call in an air strike. He spoke into the radio velcroed on his shoulder.

Julian yanked his legs in from the window and pulled a bottle of pills out of his pocket. He tried to hide the bottle under the passenger's seat, a place John knew the cop would look. John ducked into the window and picked up the bottle. With its label ripped off, he realized the bottle was illegal. He stared at it and wondered what chemicals of joy were in it. What it would feel like to achieve that sense of euphoria he used to live for. He hid the bottle in the grip of his hand. He could take it home with him.

The cop pointed at John. "Step away from the car." John slipped the bottle in his pocket. It was too late to flip it backwards onto the open ground behind him. The cop shouted towards the Saab's back seat, "Okay, out of the car."

John couldn't possibly look like a suspect in his freshly pressed shirt and the nice pair of dark-blue, merino wool pants he had bought online from Land's End. Not to mention he wore his third favorite tie, a Beatles tie entitled "Ticket to Ride." Without being outré, the tie's red and blue conveyed deep and bold images that intrigued yet conveyed a sense of calm. John believed the tie had hidden strategies, ones particularly helpful during negotiations.

From his prior life, John had four arrests (although no convictions) along with an FBI file that he had been too frightened to request under the Freedom of Information Act. He had worked hard his whole life expecting to be someone else. Who was he now? That was a question that kept appearing to him, bursting with neon clarity. The question mark even flashed in red. He looked at Julian and saw himself happening again. Frightfully, he felt himself happening again, cell by cell, thought by thought, compulsion by compulsion.

John's last arrest occurred over twenty-five years ago, a lewd and lascivious charge for stripping and supposedly masturbating on stage. Was Julian a stand-in for him? That thought was so powerful it made his stomach rumble.

“You okay, sir?” the cop asked.

“My son.” John had reduced all of his thoughts to a cryptic message, but internally one as clear to him as a gull’s shriek for garbage.

“Hands against the trunk.” The cop pointed to the back of the Saab.

The indifference of the command startled John.

The car door that Julian rested against opened. He rolled out of the Saab, fell into the grass, bounced upright and wobbled to an erect position. Blades of dead grass poked from the top of his head.

The cop told Julian to put his hands on the trunk. “Okay, you guys holding anything you want to tell me about?”

“I’ve got a twelve gauge stuck in my ass,” Julian said.

“I want to see it,” the cop said.

“Don’t be an asshole,” Julian said.

“Shut it, Julian,” John said. Memories that dealt with the police found forgotten pains. Even after all these years, John still had a distaste for the police, their licensed authority, their indifference in dealing with people’s freedom. He felt his anger heating up his body.

“Do you have anything?” The cop slowly swung Julian around to face him. He rested his hands on Julian’s shoulders. In the calm voice of a schoolteacher—an understanding tone that offered a student the fundamental wisdom of life—the cop told Julian, “I’m an asshole; you’re an asshole; he’s an asshole; we’re all assholes. *Capiche?*”

John walked to the back of the car. His past and present converged, crimes and cops, he and his son. He thought of Vicki Joy. She was both a rational and irrational thought, a dream and a nightmare all at once. Some things never changed. He had a bottle of pills in his pocket,

which gave him an erotic feel, like the one he got when he would meet Addy for an afternoon romp. Suddenly, John, who could always count on that simple ability of breathing, felt his lungs fail. He bent over and pulled deep breaths into his lungs.

“Sir, Sir? Are you okay?” the cop asked.

“No.” John rested his hands on the trunk. He never *ever* wanted to be shook down again. Bending over humiliated him. In spite of the cool, summer air a layer of perspiration formed on his brow. Distress had dampened his underarms. He could now smell his anguish.

“No,” Julian shouted out apropos of nothing, except maybe bad luck.

The cop kicked further distance between Julian’s feet. “ID.”

Julian reached to his back pocket.

The officer fingered through the folds of Julian’s wallet then set it on the trunk.

“Stand, hands around your back.” The handcuffs snapped. Julian’s face grimaced. “I’m arresting you for Indecent Exposure and Public Nuisance. Pissing in public, *asshole*. The woman’s children saw you pissing.”

“I didn’t. . .”

“Shhhh,” the officer said. “What are you doing here?” he asked John. “What’s your name?”

“John St. Albares.” He felt like adding I am a trusted man. I am a man who lives by—at least I try to live by—the Four Absolutes. I am a sober man. I haven’t had any mood-altering chemicals in over twenty years. So don’t look at me like that. John would not mention his attraction to lists. Or his recent battles with memories. His stories. His crimes. His addictions. His reborn compulsions to use. He wanted to tell the pig—that’s what he and his friends used to call the police before he owned property and sought their protection—I serve as treasurer on two

family foundations. I counsel individuals. I help the rich get richer, and I help the rest of us protect our financial worth and preserve what we'll need for that period of life known as retirement, that long awaited pause before our final resting point. Instead, John said, "He's my son. I want to get him back home."

"Well, you're late. You carrying anything you want to tell me about?"

"Me?" John pointed at his head with his index finger and thumb in the shape of a pistol.

The cop shifted his body and bobbed his head. A smirk formed on his face.

"Of course not," John said. He entered this long, controlled hyperventilation. He didn't know how to answer him without lying, something he hadn't done in a long time.

The cop repeated, "Okay, anything you have in your possession you want to tell me about?"

"Yes. I have this." John held out the gold-colored pill bottle. The bottle's design had changed little in the past twenty-five years. John remembered how the caps did have a simpler design. They lacked the crown of plastic now used to insure the safe use of the product.

"I thought you said you didn't have anything?"

"This is not mine." John shook the bottle. He stopped when he realized how incriminating the rattling of pills sounded.

"But you have it."

"I'm now giving it to you."

"Sir, don't get smart with me."

"I'm trying to cooperate."

"Hands back on the trunk. Spread." The cop tapped John's feet apart, gentler than he did to Julian's. He thought the cop wanted to extend some respect to him. The strange gurgling

sound of his intestines confirmed the complication of John's anguish. An instinct to vomit assaulted him, and he wondered if he was entering a fainting spell.

"You don't look like a dope fiend," the cop said.

"Thank you. I'm not." John would not tell him he's a recovering alcoholic and drug addict. He certainly wouldn't mention the emotional excitement the pill bottle had just caused. That would complicate and even bias the cop's assessment of him.

"So what's up with the pills? Why. . ."

Julian interrupted. "They're bars, Xanax, and I have a script for them."

"You just decided to scratch the label off. Okay, that's believable." The cop squinted his eyes, and his mouth grimaced like he had just tasted the bullshit itself. "Anything else?"

John shook his head.

"He's my father," Julian said. "My only chance."

"Your only chance?" The cop squinted his eyes. "Chance at what?"

That was a good question, John realized. A surge of affection and love for Julian came over him. It was a feeling—one he never experienced before—a feeling that John was somehow loving himself when he loved Julian. He looked forward to playing music with Julian. But could John all of a sudden be a good father. The intimidation of that thought made his adrenaline charge through his body.

"Okay, the pills are yours," the cop said to Julian. "Everyone happy with that arrangement?"

"Yes," Julian and John said at the same moment.

"I'm not," the cop said. He read both of them their Miranda's and charged both of them with Possession of a Controlled Substance. John thought that somehow it must be karma.

Now: Déjà Vu

Monday, August 22, 2005; Mystic, Connecticut

The stale smell of floor wax struck John's nostrils with an odor he associated with humiliation. Penal gray walls enclosed a windowless room with a shiny, green floor and bulky steel furniture. He hated the impolite nature of the justice system, especially their employees when he faced them as a criminal. It was like they were trained to humiliate him. It infuriated him and made him feel reckless. And angry. It all had happened again, this time over twentysomething years later, hundreds of miles from Orleans Parish. At least Groton had a new and fresh jailhouse with a gentler clientele.

"Turn," the woman said. She was as fat as John. They shared that strike against themselves. Except maybe she was a little heavier with her bulk more disproportionate. "Let the plate rest on your fingers." She held her hands out to demonstrate.

As the woman suggested, he posed the arrest plate on his fingers. He looked at it. It contained information about his arrest, the date in reverse-order next to the words Groton Police.

"Don't look, turn," she said. "You do not need to know that information now." There was something mechanical about her pronunciation.

The civilized world had jails longer than it had had sewage systems. Humankind—or human *un*-kind—had perfected the routine of degradation. John had worked hard his whole life expecting to be someone else, but he was not. His past was in the present. The past and present were one, and they were now him. At that thought he felt his face heat up with outrage.

"Sir?" the woman asked. "You okay, sir?"

He stared at her. There was an essence—a vibe—he picked up on people. Besides seeing himself in this woman, he had seen himself in others. Like the destitution in the guy he often passed on Bank Street near the Pfizer building in New London. The man always pulled a shopping cart like a detached body part. He looked biblical—not to mention doomed to drink—with his gray, shaggy beard and ever-present bottle of Mogan David. John wanted to think of himself as the lady at the Mystic Florist possessed with caring love. Her serenity matched the soothing bouquets she primped: white daisies and pink roses, delicately pitched to the public in tinted pink glass cubes. This mythic self, the one connected to the cosmos was neither gender or racially sensitive. John admired the integrity of Jake Ross, CPA, his African-American colleague from Providence. The visions of these people were so real he felt like shaking them. He saw himself in the jailer. It was all in her uncomfortable weight. It felt just like his. It was in her vibe.

“I’m okay,” he said.

“You get one phone call.” The woman pointed to this silver phone that looked strong enough to withstand the most belligerent of inmates.

He used his one phone call to contact a guy he knew from AA, a man who happened to be a criminal judge in the local courts. Their weekly AA group convened in the basement of the Congregationalist Church on East Main. He had the judge’s cell number as he did of other group members, informally known as The Professionals.

“Hell-lo,” the judge said.

His voice surprised John. John knew the calls on that number were as important to the judge as an emergency call from Governor Rell. Maybe more important. John apologized for

disturbing him and for possibly compromising their relationship. He explained his and Julian's arrest to the judge.

"John, I know the disease," the judge said.

John wanted to cry at this man's understanding.

The judge told him he always enjoyed John's comments at meetings, particularly those related to the four absolutes. "The law is crude. I know you know that. The police officer didn't know you, but I do. So the system is working at some level."

John and the judge spoke for three minutes, and then the large lady told John to end the call.

"Let me speak to Clara."

"Clara." John handed her the receiver.

Her face tightened with surprise.

"Yes. Yes. Yes sir. I will." She hung up the phone. "Follow me. I'm going to give you some privacy." She led John to a small office with a private phone.

John called the judge back and they spoke for a half hour.

"I won't need my AA meeting tonight," the judge said. "We shared some good stuff here."

"I feel better too," John said. But he didn't feel that much better.

The two recovering alcoholics agreed that they couldn't just let Julian back into the world. He needed to feel the consequences of his disease.

The judge said, "God in the form of the Groton Police Department spoke to Julian today."

"He's becoming me," John said.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Plenty,” John said. He took a breath and wanted to tell the judge about his latest and irrepressible compulsion to use. Instead, he hung up.

Now: It’s Rap It’s Got to Snap

Monday, August 22, 2005. New Orleans, Louisiana

Desi knew John would be returning, burning with a desire to help Julian. Come back to New Orleans soon, meet some doom. Desi would make some room. Yeah, it was Johnnymoon’s turn to churn and burn. And Desi had a plan. He always had plans. The patient buildup. The emotional fill up. The magic. The tragic. A scam. A jam. Break an emotional dam. Desi knew his scams. Take the money and run. Bask in the sun.

“Julian,” Desi said.

“They want me to go to rehab,” Julian said to Desi.

“Go.”

“No.”

“Go. You said you’ve wanted to get off the pipe. You’re full of hype.”

“I’ll try it.”

Desi knew Julian would try it, he’d get him to buy it.

“I want my money when I get out.”

“It’s waiting for you.” Desi knew Julian deserved his do.

He studied the universe and the laws of karma. How bout here on the floor farmer? It made him think of Frank Zappa. He needed to go to the crapper.

“See you, J.”

Now: Julian’s Black Eye and Cut Lip

Wednesday, August 24, 2005, 5:35pm

I-95 shined like black glass. Cars whooshed by. John and Addy needed to visit Julian before John left for New Orleans. For John’s Southern blood, a particularly chilly breeze for summer swept through New England. Temperatures had dropped into the low seventies. The area expected temperatures to drop into the high fifties overnight.

John feared that Julian had gone inward, turned dark on himself and self-destructed, a metamorphosis John himself now feared. Within the first twenty-four hours of his incarceration Julian had two altercations: one with an accused shoplifter from New London and the second with a drunk insurance agent from Groton. The guards subdued Julian. His behavior earned him a black eye and a cut lip. Eight hours later the court assigned him a counselor. New London County, with the help of the judge, had officially considered him chemically dependent. So, in a court-ordered arrangement, the judge directed Julian to a thirty-day stay at the Life Healing Center of New Haven, something expensive that John had to pay for. He just hoped it was worth the money.

The facility treated a range of disorders from post-traumatic stress, to compulsive disorders, to chemical-dependency problems, to old-fashion momma issues. This was the first meeting they were allowed with Julian.

“The doctor’s concerned about Julian’s future.” John gazed into the wet night. The idea of Julian’s *future* was announced, in a way, let loose. It linked John to his own past and present in a way John hated. He felt his blood pressure rise. His fingertips tingled.

“It’s all about managing expectations,” Addy said.

“The doctor didn’t say Julian was going to be okay,” John said. “But he said he was concerned about Julian’s *future*.”

“Doctor Guantánamo told me we’ve got to move quickly,” Addy said.

“Move? Move what quickly?”

“John, please, just listen to the doctors. He’s *your* son.”

“Is that what it’s about? My son.”

“It’s about a lot of things. You know that.” Addy sat straight back with an aristocratic bearing.

“It’s about me and my past,” he said. “It’s about Vicki Joy.”

“Please don’t mention her.”

A single story building, part of the Connecticut Mental Health Center, housed the Life Healing Center. Addy and John signed in. Calm and quiet filled the entrance. Even the sign—written in green letters, cluttered with pink lilies and vines—promoted serenity. *Where the Healing Begins*, scripted below the organization’s name revealed their noble quest. Already this communication

began to dampen John and his expectations. The word *begins* dropped a small tang of acid into the center of his stomach. John wanted Julian's sickness to be complete, not beginning. Regardless, John found hope like he always did. He liked hope, its surging feeling. It gave him the best bang for his psychological buck. Hope could even be charming.

A woman dressed in a dark business suit directed them to a large room that appeared to double as a dining area. The area somehow worked in both a communal and intimate way. Other families convened around hospital dining tables, which sat far enough apart to prevent eavesdropping. A sense that John's family was not the only family bewildered by mental misbehavior gave him a feeling of shared disaster. It was a shitty feeling—he hated to feel comfort in others' doom—but he found comfort in it anyway. Group misery. Already the healing began.

Julian sat at a table in the center of the room. Addy gave John a magazine she brought for Julian. She excused herself for a phone call. Under shadowed lighting Julian appeared like a model posing for an Edward Hopper painting. An eerie glow enclosed him, like he was filled with a radioactive poison.

After a series of letters, which began in January, Julian finally showed up at John's house in April. He had chosen to arrive after the stress of tax season. He had said, I wanted to come after your busiest time. Julian held his gig-bag with his bass in it. You look more like me than me, John told him. A resemblance existed but not that dramatic. They laughed. They would like each other. Their connection grew, like a broken bone making a quick and healthy healing.

Now, Julian's condition laughed at John's hope. But his hope told him that Julian's silence would break, just a like a fever. At anytime Julian would become irrepressible, charming, chatty with music facts and song titles. Julian would tell John and Addy what had

happened to him in unattractive detail. He would try to shock them, until one of them grimaced and Julian would retract the gory details, but after it was too late. They would go home and Addy and John would want to kick him out of the guesthouse. But they wouldn't, because they loved him. And they liked him. Addy would joke with him again, talk to him like he was an extension of John. He would flirt with Addy. In the end, Addy and John would enable him again.

Julian only stared.

"Hi, Julian, it's good to see you again." Julian's blonde hair, oily and chopped to spiky ends reminded John of an early punk cut *à la* Sid Vicious. John held up an old copy of *Esquire* magazine with Lance Armstrong on the cover. "Some meaningful writing here." He dropped the magazine on the table that separated Julian and him.

Lance looked raw, tough, determined. The special *Esquire* issue entitled SURVIVAL contained stories of other men who had taken on the great challenges of Mother Nature. John wanted it to inspire Julian, even though none of the tales involved men gaining their sobriety. The edition contained hope. It just about fell out of the pages. Lance made hope into an icon, a product for God's sake. John knew Julian admired Lance. Julian had brought his Trek tour bike to Connecticut, one just like Lance's. But the bike now sat in hock for crack cocaine.

From his composed exterior Julian stared at the magazine on the table. "Fuck, Lance."

"He doesn't look like your type," John said.

"Not funny, John."

"So what happened?"

"What do you mean what happened? You tell me, John."

"I've missed you, Julian," Addy said, returning from making her phone call.

John appreciated her kindness towards Julian.

“Can you get me out of here?”

“I’ve never seen you like this.” John stared at Julian who sat court ordered. He faced John with glazed blue eyes, his mother’s eyes.

“I’m different today. I come in different shades. Different personalities. I guess today, I’m Lance with a chemical-dependency problem.”

“Not funny.”

The florescent lights scrubbed Julian’s pale skin.

“We’ll be out on the sloop in no time,” John said. “That’ll give you some color.”

“Okay, let’s start tomorrow,” Julian said.

“Nah, stay here, get better.”

“Don’t you know the judge who sentenced me?” Julian asked.

“Sort of.”

“Then get me out, now.”

“He’s an alcoholic. He won’t listen. He wants to get your attention.”

“Telling him I’m at attention like a Marine in boot camp.”

“Try to relax,” Addy said. “I know it’s challenging. Your father went through treatment, and he came out a better man.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“So what happened in New Orleans?” John asked.

“She didn’t want to talk to me.”

“Vicki?”

“Who else? Her name is Louise.” Julian moved his face into his hands and pushed his hair back. “Why don’t you contact her, John?”

“I don’t know if she’ll see me.”

“Why not?” Julian asked.

“Try to get your shit straight,” John said.

Julian’s psychiatrist, a thin man, sartorially dressed in professional-casual walked up. He stood over six-feet tall with brittle, salt-and-pepper hair and dark eyes. According to the residential-treatment plan, John and Addy were entitled to two meetings with him.

“John. Addy.” The psychiatrist waved his hand and flickered his fingers like a showgirl waving hello. In a friendly South American accent he introduced himself as Dr. Guantánamo.

“Julian, I thought you might want to talk to your family?” The doctor spoke to Julian like he was part human, part collie. John didn’t know if he should be angry with the doctor or with Julian.

“I spoke to them. I informed them that I want to get the fuck out of here.”

John wanted the doctor to blow the heart right out of Julian’s darkness.

“Glad you’re speaking to them,” the doctor said. “That’s nice.”

The doctor bent his lanky frame back. His right elbow rested in his left hand, his index finger touched his chin. He observed Julian closely, as if examining the severity of a wound.

“Julian, would you please excuse us for a minute?” The doctor’s tone now contained compassion.

Julian stood. His robe hung on his slouching body. He was twenty-five years old, too young to be hunched back. The doctor motioned the direct-care professional who oversaw Julian. Julian sat back down. The expression in Julian’s eyes looks incurable.

The doctor invited Addy and John to a set of winged-backed chairs in front of glass windows speckled with rain. He stood in front of them. His legs appeared too long for the rest of his body. His glossy shoes, green wool pants, and navy-blue blazer furnished him with the sense of success. The clothes worked as an effective marketing prop. John felt Julian's wellbeing rested in the hands of the competent, at least in the hands of a competent marketing department.

Doctor Guantánamo told them that he and his colleagues had completed their initial tests and assessments. "He's dealing with abandonment issues," the doctor said. "He's on a journey to find himself, to bring together the split parts, to be transformed into the whole self."

"I can understand that," John said slowly. He knew he was halfway responsible for this, Vicki Joy owned the other half of the fault.

The doctor's knowledge of Julian's history offered some relief. He went into a long explanation using some jargon, but mostly keeping the language clear and accessible. "Apparently, he feels his mother has rejected him. At least Julian thinks so. It would be nice to have her participate in his recovery."

"Participate?" Addy asked. She looked stricken.

"The sooner the better," the doctor said.

John looked at his fingernails. The tips of his fingers shook. "So what about the alcohol and dope?"

"That's a symptom."

"How did it get so complicated?" Addy asked. "Do we really need her?"

“Julian does.” The doctor held his left elbow on his right hand. His fingers fluttered at eye level. He told John and Addy how Julian had been living a “momma” fantasy, by showing up at her door and gambling on immediate “restitution.”

“Restitution. It sounds legal,” John said.

The doctor looked away, aloof, detached. The doctor’s hope was gone as quickly as the smell of his passing cologne. John hated to think it, but it was all about selling a service.

“He is genealogically bewildered,” the doctor said. “He’s doesn’t have a connection to wholeness. Before you take Julian home, he needs to, in some way, resolve his mother issues.”

John did not want to *take* Julian home. He would rather do many things other than *take* him home. He had accepted his role of parent; it was time Vicki did the same.

“Setting up a reunion with her would help Julian. He needs to complete himself. He’s made it clear that’s what he wants.”

“It sounds messy,” Addy said.

“It sounds easy,” John said. “A reunion,”

“It’s very easy,” the doctor said. “They meet and the healing begins. We can help in the long-term too.”

“What if she doesn’t want to participate?” Addy asked.

“We will do our best. We always do our best,” Doctor Guantánamo said. He held his hands up to them like a priest making an offertory.

John stood, he looked out at the acres of steel and glass. The architecture’s glamour imposed a sense of the possible trumping the impossible. It inspired hope.

Now: *Lose Yourself*

Mystic, Connecticut, August 24, 2005

John stared at his list: Vicki Joy, New Orleans, *Blue*, a sailing business. Months earlier he became interested in a Friendship sloop named *Lose Yourself*. With Julian's help he could start a business. The seller had agreed to let John and Addy take the restored sloop for a test voyage.

The weather report warned of early-morning winds. John wanted to strike the wind, charge into its danger, kiss the shark's tooth, and smile for the camera. He pointed to the swaying elms above their house. "Too much?" he asked Addy. The wind soared of the south-by-southeast. A chill bubbled goose bumps on his arm. Above them a ragged moon glowed. To the east stars stitched the sky over the Atlantic. John took in a deep breath of the salty air. His adrenaline tighten up in the pressure system of his body.

"I like." Addy pointed to the elms bending over their house. She grew up sailing. She worked as a naval architect for Electric Boat in nearby Groton. Her skill and talent far exceeded John's abilities, and she was as brave as a pirate.

Two years earlier Addy sold *Bliss*, the sloop she had inherited from her father. Neither of her brothers wanted it. They were not close to the old man like Addy. After returning to shore on their last trip she cried. The next day she put *Bliss* up for sale. A week later a couple from Point Judith bought it. John remembered their trips on *Bliss* and how daring Addy acted.

John always found it difficult to part with Addy, even for a trip to New Orleans—particularly for a trip to New Orleans. He needed her and her fix of emotional support. He had planned to enter the world of music again, an ethos with deep and dark shadows that provided incalculable acts of bad behavior. But he needed to sing again, to get up on stage, dumb and

clueless, a rebel in mid-life *manopause*. He knew, he was absolutely sure, it would help bring peace to him.

John and the guitarist Bryan LaBryan wrote the lyrics and music to the fifteen songs on *Blue*. Deep in his fantasies John imagined a record deal for *Blue*. His new group's appeal—and it would be *his* group, his album, no sharing, no fighting—would be to middle-aged listeners with an ear for alternative tuneage. *Blue* was already written, an original punk opera as programmatic as Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, as perfectly rocking as *Jesus Christ Superstar*. What made it so compelling, John thought, was that it wasn't a reinterpretation of the whole punk, new wave movement. It *was* the movement, a cryogenic body of work, ready to be defrosted and given some heat, a voice. His voice.

But now he was forty-seven years old, alive and well—at least for the most part—and he wondered how the stage, how rocknroll would feel again. But he wanted the rights to *Blue*, the collection of songs that was his *chef-d'œuvre* that belonged to Bryan and him. Julian was going to play bass, although he never really heard Julian play a note. He seemed to play around playing the bass, more than playing it. John thought he had his first guitar player, the guy whom Julian owed money to. He knew it was a strange way to meet someone, but it certainly would make a good story. A client of John's who owned the Harley dealership in Groton had agreed to play drums.

Bryan LaBryan had sent John a friendly letter in 1995. He had indicated he wanted to someday record *Blue* and that he wanted to retain his share of the rights “forever.” John spoke to his attorney who said that Bryan had a legitimate claim on the songs. So, he needed Bryan to assign the rights to him. He wanted to see Bryan anyway. He was the only band member from his former group Hold the Lettuce he could call a friend. But from the larger darkness of John,

Bryan probably had ways of copping drugs. *Of course that's not the reason to find Bryan, it's for Blue and for artistic reasons.*

The gravel crunched as John arrived with Addy at Smith & Scott's Charters. John looked out the window of Addy's English SUV. The morning sky was as dark as coals. He hoped to catch the sunrise for Addy. She loved to see the sun burn into the darkness of morning.

The snap of the SUV's doors cracked the morning's quiet. Out of the darkness came the sound of talkers. Gear slammed onto decks. The sounds grew. Ice crashed into chests. Crews piled equipment onto sloops and fiberglass rigs. Car lights speared into the darkness. Silhouettes resembling hobgoblins in a modern ballet moved along the dock walls.

From a car's open door a radio blasted with a hip-hop song. John liked how hip-hop lyrics slammed into each other with their tyrant drumbeats and then with tight wordplay they locked up nice and neat. The tune sounded familiar to John.

*Look, if you had one shot, or one opportunity
To seize everything you ever wanted, one moment
Would you capture it or just let it slip?*

Someone yelled, "Nicky, give it a break." A car door slammed. The music stopped. *Just let it slip.* John could not let his chance slip. Life was not a dress rehearsal. There were no second takes.

"Come see." He motioned Addy to the dock. They stood in front of *Lose Yourself*.

"It's remarkable," she whispered. "Eye-catching. It's got people appeal. Perfect for a business. Good choice for you and Julian."

"Me and Julian?" John stared into Addy's gray eyes still glassy with sleep. "It's for you too, Addy. It's *our* business." He wanted her to beam with enthusiasm.

"I think you and Julian need something," she said. "Not me."

“This is a family project. A family business.”

Addy laughed. “I’m not used to you being a father. And I’m really not a mother.”

“Julian loves you. He thinks you’re hot. Madonna. He wants to go out with you.”

“I can’t go out with him. I’m married. I thought you knew that.”

John kissed her cheek. “I’m going to New Orleans.”

“John.”

“Yes.”

“You know I’ve got things on the *Seawolf* project to clear up. I can’t make New Orleans until October.”

“I know.”

“New Orleans is not good for you alone.”

“I’ll be fine.” But John knew she was right. For their visits John depended on her companionship. The strange pull of the city couldn’t seduce him as long as she held his hand.

“You know what that city does to you,” she said. “And you’ve got to meet the mother. I want to go when you go. A team. Can’t you postpone it?”

She knew that Julian’s doctor wanted them to try to contact Vicki Joy as soon as possible. John stared at Addy. “It’s the mother, isn’t it?”

“The mother?” Her face dropped into a perplexed expression.

“Julian’s mother. Adair, there’s nothing there. Believe me.”

“I do. Does she know that?” Addy looked into the silk-black sky.

“I’m going after *Blue*.”

“*Blue* is fucking cursed.”

“*Blue* is not cursed.”

“You guys could never get that album completed.”

The seller, a squat man with a shaved head, greeted them. “I thought the wind might scare you guys off.” He covered some technicalities like signing an injury-release form and a damage rider. “Her general condition is very good; regardless, in this weather I need you to wait before you leave the sound.”

“No problem,” John said.

The seller told them the boat had a complete suit of sails, a Lowrance GPS, along with new sail covers and berth cushions. Two years ago, *Lose Yourself* sailed as a captained charter-vessel in South Carolina and Florida. She had been consistently licensed and inspected every season. “She’s ready to carry passengers,” the seller said. “This is your family’s opportunity to start your business.”

The word family startled John. He actually had a family: his wife and now for the past four months Julian. He needed to live up to his parental contract. There was a lot of catching up to do. He felt his chest tighten.

“Thank you,” Addy said. “We need to get going. We want to catch the sunrise.” Her blonde hair—there was no sign of gray—cut in a short bob curved around her ears. Her Mikimoto pearls glowed from the shine of a nearby floodlight. John stared at her pearls. They were a gift to her years ago, back in New Orleans, just before they left for Connecticut.

“He said, ‘your family,’” Addy said.

“I know, it sounds weird. Look at the stern.” John pointed at the sloop. Its wooden construction, elliptical stern, clipper’s bow tipped by the bowsprit gave it the appearance of a vessel from somewhere and someplace long ago. “It’s almost impossible to think they could pull this design off a century ago.”

“If I were a tourist I’d want to go out on it,” Addy said.

John studied the sloop’s gaffed rigging and dual jibs. With its sails unfurled and full of wind it would appear stunning. He had researched the sloop’s history. Friendship, a town where many of the original sloops had been constructed, was how the boat obtained its brand name. Built in 1978, *Lose Yourself* was a replica of Wilber Moses’ hundred year-old design.

Before they departed the seller boarded the vessel. He grabbed the line clutch and showed them where each rope went to. “I’ve got another buyer today,” he said.

“We’ll let you know soon,” John said.

With John at the helm they embarked and motored down Mystic River, a body of water no wider than a bayou. Crews became visible, voices clearer. On shore, Mystic broke its slumber. A cowbell clattered as someone opened The Scuttlebutt’s front door. The drawbridge’s big hunchback of concrete dropped and hoisted the tiny iron-grid roadway for them to pass. Moored yachts and sailboats cluttered the harbor. An Amtrak train bulletted over the second bridge a half-mile away. A cool breeze pushed in from Fishers Island Sound, their access to the Atlantic.

The second bridge twisted opened for them. Three motorboats, a nice looking yawl, and a schooner followed them. They motored into Fishers Island Sound. Stars washed away into the pink lip of dawn. The salty air rushed into John’s nostrils. Ahead of them, white caps that looked like teeth, gobbled up the sea. John relaxed and enjoyed nature’s beat.

“Tell me about your New Orleans agenda.” Addy’s voice crackled.

“I’m in touch with Desi.”

“He’s trouble, John. You know that.”

“It’s the seventh moon of the seventh house or whatever. It’s time I fix some things with him.” The thought of waiting so long to make amends tensed up John.

Music echoed from a building on shore. John peered over the water. He thought of long-ago sailors—their courage, their not-knowing what to expect—their joy when they spotted land on the horizon of a new world.

“Desi, *Blue*, New Orleans, and the mother.” Addy looked at John. She stuck her finger into the sky. “Life is a test. Today it’s coming out of the south, southeast.”

“Crew, let’s get ready,” John said. He checked the sheets and sails. He felt synchronized, coordinated, bound by instinct to the wind and ropes, sails and sea.

“Wow, I’ve taught you well,” Addy said. “You look like a pro.”

Addy descended into the cabin and came out with a life vest splashed in colors. “Want a float coat?”

John stared at it. Its design looked like it could have been based on a Jackson Pollack t-shirt. Pink and coral were slashed on top of blue, yellow, and white. He found order and beauty in the disruption of colors. He signaled it off. “I just need to know where it’s located. In case.” John remembered that in Connecticut waters no matter what season one would freeze to death before they drowned. He appreciated that danger, any excitement in his life. He wanted to fill the needle’s plunger, inject his mind with excitement. It seemed to sooth him from his failure as a father, from his betrayal of Vicki Joy, his harm to Desi.

He needed to get a grip on himself.

A pattern of green and red buoys on their port and starboard sides marked the channel. Addy took a seat behind him at the helm. “Look.” John pointed to the sky. The sun booted up.

Crepuscular rays shot through thick clouds. The sight looked like it had been extracted from a biblical painting.

“Yeah,” Addy whispered. “Jesus rays.” A small piece of joy as charming as the dawn itself came from her voice.

The Connecticut state flag popped at the top of the mast. Off the starboard side a signal-buoy sounded with a cowbell that clanked in metronome time. The wind’s chill tightened John’s face. He looked back towards Mystic. Sails were rapped tight on masts that spiked the sky. Ropes appeared no larger than strings on bottled boats. The big schooner *Argia* posed in the port like the best-looking girl in her class. Off *Lose Yourself’s* bow gulls hung in primordial elegance. The wind rushed past John’s ears. The current worked in their favor and sucked them out to sea. The yawl and the sloops, which followed them, began to go their own way.

John enjoyed the bigness of the Atlantic in front of him. He wanted to become nothing more than a dot on the horizon. He clutched the helm and focused on the waves ahead. The boom extended above his head back to the stern. He studied the bobbing compass. Clouds moved in overhead.

John’s past worked inward to his soul. He remembered that night some twentysomething years ago when he first met Addy. He had performed with his band Hold the Lettuce. The first words of affection she had expressed to him were: You are so dangerous.

During one memorable show—one he could never forget—in an alcoholic haze, John dove into an audience of swaying arms. The crowd usually carried him around like a Dionysian offering. He always enjoyed riding on the centipede of hands: the unpredictability of their up-

and-down support, the grabbing of his body, the occasional sensation to his crotch. But the expected support of arms arrived only in part that night, an evening preceded by a day of wrong turns. He fell to the floor.

Nonchalantly the band paused. They sensed a change in vocals, that's all. Maybe with the exception of Bryan LaBryan, they were by no means concerned with John's wellbeing. Hold the Lettuce tapped into some surf sounds, Dick Dale stuff that required no vocalist. John knew the circus must go on. He understood. His fun-to-destruction ratio put him on the verge of worthlessness that night. But God worked in mysterious ways, particularly when it came to love, and that night the big man was there, powerful and unseen like the gravity that had injured him. Somehow he needed to be stopped in his tracks.

Already he had broken his glasses. Half-cocked on a pint of Jack Daniels, sweaty, part blind, disoriented from the fall and with the fresh taste of blood drooling down the back of his mouth he staggered alone towards the dressing room.

Adair Yates. She would always be Addy unless he was angry, or he wished to get a point across; then she became Adair. She stood in the dressing-room doorway in spiked pumps, black leather skirt exposing plenty of thigh. She wore a matching biker jacket and her blonde hair was done in a chopped Bavarian-do with streaks of pink in it. Her knife-sharp physique and her smile, a flash from her heart—bright enough to light any stage—stunned John. Compared to the Goth, grunge, jagged coiffures, and the dirty Bohemian anti-glamour of the fanatics who worshipped his madness, because it was really *their* madness, Adair Yates appeared overdressed like a lost Sophie Newcomb sophomore. He was wrong though. She was from the University of New Orleans School of Naval Architecture. Regardless, her glossy rebel couture looked stunning, a supernova of glamour that resuscitated his busted heart.

She made the dangerous comment, then said, “and you’re so elegant.” He dripped with sweat. Blood drooled from his mouth and nose. He didn’t exactly feel like Fred Astaire. Gently she grabbed his injured arm and helped him enter the dimly lit dressing room where half the makeup lights were smashed, and the mirrors were smeared with cottage cheese. On stage, Hold the Lettuce, which that night performed using the alias Outboard Penis, continued to kick out the jams. Human emotions fell beyond their capabilities. They could only sing about them.

John remembered how Adair’s look said money. She had a fine-air presence. When she spoke her genteel voice lined up words like lyrics. Her vague New England accent sounded sexy and intriguing, like a ghost of Katherine Hepburn. She didn’t need to brag or exert any pretensions. She had class and sass all rolled into one face and body worthy of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition. But she wasn’t in training. She didn’t need to practice. Her only character defect as far as John could tell was that she liked him.

He knew the Adair-type of good-girl, who, to escape their white-bread captivity, sought sensitive showoffs like him. They wanted guys who were illegal, grown in the dark, mild barbarians who walked in the ashes of their torched souls.

An only daughter, Adair grew up in Stonington, Connecticut with two brothers. From the start John loved her direct and assertive personality: one portion no-nonsense Yankee, one portion gender politics, the last portion a serving of her own nature. Life exhilarated her. She was half full and exuberant. She cared. Managing the pursuit of happiness moved her. After she uttered those unforgettable words about him being dangerous, she claimed (only to be partially true) to have been trained in first aid. Her heart outdid her from the start.

Several people banged at the dressing-room door. She looked at John. “You’ll be okay.”

John looked up at her with dog-tired eyes. “I’ll never be okay.”

They ignored the pleas outside the door. She smiled. His darkness met light; his despair met hope. Their bond became utterly fast.

That balmy spring night she insisted on paying to have his injured wrist patched up. She drove him to Ochsner Emergency Room. Afterwards they ended up at Lake Pontchartrain and made love in his van. A place he hadn't used in years. They shared stories. Hers about her family, his about his family that was gone or dead. The morning sun spread like fire. His van baked. He woke and walked over to the concrete steps of the lakefront. Waves broke in staggered ranks. Love, or something posing as it, appeared with large breasts and cottoncandy-colored nipples in the van's back door.

Wind raked John's face. The smell of salt water filled his nostrils.

"Just head for Latimer." With a crooked finger—one she broke in an equestrian accident—Addy pointed toward the bottle-shaped lighthouse. It marked Latimer reef, a hazard that had taken many a ship. "Are we going to wait in the sound like the seller wanted us to?" she asked.

"We've got to see what she can do in a little blow."

John captained *Lose Yourself* past Latimer. The lighthouse's soft tuba sound used for navigational guidance faded. The water turned blue. The white caps made the Atlantic look like the world's biggest soap dish. The mist fattened into raindrops. John covered his head with a Boston Red Sox cap. He slipped into his Mohegan Sun Casino windbreaker. Off the port side a cormorant submerged and rose from the water. Its wings in the middle of its body reminded John of the U-2 spy plane. He knew Addy considered it her favorite bird.

She pointed at it and smiled.

“Nice,” John said. “Maybe we’ll see a brown pelican.”

“We’re too far north.”

“We saw one our last time out.”

Addy smiled. “Three. We saw three.”

“You remembered.”

“They’re impressive.” She stared at John. “Are you okay?”

“I’m excited,” John said. He felt excited because the Atlantic wanted to gobble him up, but he wouldn’t let it. Excited because the Atlantic could not capture him, like his past was doing. Excited because the Atlantic offered a fair fight. Excited because he felt he was going to explode out the shell of sobriety he had created for himself over the past quarter century. Excited. Maybe that wasn’t the right feeling.

“So why do you want *Blue*?” Addy asked. “Now?”

“I’ve showed it Julian. He likes it.”

“Can I join the band, too?”

“Of course. What instrument will you play?”

“Never mind.”

John looked up at the mast to check for any unnecessary wobbling. Out of Fishers Island Sound, he cut the engine and looked up at the Windex wind vane. He turned the bow into the wind so they could open the mainsail.

“John, be careful.”

“I think I can handle her out of the sound.”

“I mean in New Orleans,” Addy said.

“Always.”

“Anything can happen.”

“Anything won’t happen,” he said. “I’ll be back in four days.”

A light rain fell. John guided *Lose Yourself* into the Atlantic. The rolling waves recycled themselves and tumbled as they had done for millions of years. The weather’s predatory force had already been unleashed.

“Hoist the mainsail,” Addy said.

John turned the wench. The gears clicked in their tight, grinding sound. The canvas unfolded and rose up the mast. He guided *Lose Yourself* around and headed north towards Rhode Island. “Let’s head to Point Judith.” They would pass Watch Hill, Weekapaug, East Beach.

The wind struck the mainsail canvas. The sail scooped the wind. Minutes later he undid the line to the jib. The rope fired through squealing pulleys. John’s stomach felt the bow surge forward. A falling sensation like he was dropping in the Zephyr roller coaster followed. *Lose Yourself* moved into the chop. John trimmed the mainsail. The sloop ran into the back of the waves. Its hull rose then nicely flopped down in back of a wave. Water crashed into the bow. The sloop cut the water. Surprised at his ability to captain gave him a feeling of confidence.

“You’ve taught me well, Addy.”

The clouds had thickened. A squad of seagulls bawled.

“How’s this trim look?” John said.

“That’s well,” Addy said. “If the wind picks up anymore let’s take in the mainsail and go on the jib.”

John admired her knowledge and how skillfully she maneuvered over the deck. The rudder torqued into the water's power. The wild wind harnessed by the simple device of the rudder appealed to John's most fundamental sense of security. The primitive fastening soothed him. It was a connection, a mastering that he needed to do with his mind and spirit. The Lowrance GPS showed the sloop heading north-northwest at almost 10 knots. The tell-tales streamed backward from the mainsail.

He let the mainsail out too much and the boat lunged. Water crashed over the port bow and washed the mahogany deck. The sea chilled his bare legs. The taste of salt fell onto his lips. Sea foam drifted to the deck sides and fell back to the ocean ready to do it again.

"Keep an eye on your tell-tales," Addy said.

He pulled the trim in, and again the tell-tales streamed backwards. *Lose Yourself* rose and ducked between rising waves. The sloop ascended. It came down and slapped into the next wave. Its wood echoed like an empty barrel.

John thought of the Atlantic's massiveness, its openness, its viciousness, its inability to harm him, yet he was in her teeth. His ability to feel so large and so small at the same time excited him. He imagined the ice chill of the water and the minutes it would take for him to die of hyperthermia. "I love it," he shouted. Salt water stung his eyes. His buccaneer spirit soared. His heart pounded.

"One thing for sure, she's worthy," Addy said. *Lose Yourself* shuddered deep in her timbers. The creaking of the hull rose to a tiny moan—more like a squeak—it subsided and rose again.

On the crest of a wave, weightless, the sloop dropped. John's stomach surged unexpectedly. The bow came up to face a wave. Over the stern behind him he reached out and touched the water. The chill stung his fingers.

For over an hour *Lose Yourself* rode the tall ranks of waves and took on their challenge. John pulled the sloop behind the smooth pull of the waves, but a few times she got away from him, and the water tossed her sideways. John had locked his arms in the spokes of the helm to regain control. Occasionally the sloop paused at a wave's crest. Then the bow came down blasting into a wave. Water rushed the deck in a soup of foam.

The weather had taken him out of his skill level. Finally, he yelled for help, but Addy ignored him. "I'll let you take her back," he said again. An albatross joined their journey like a dedicated mascot.

"You need to take care of yourself," she said.

It was Addy's way of making him take care of the situations he got himself into. He resented and admired her for it. "Okay, crew, let's turn back," he said.

He skillfully brought the sloop back into port.

"I'm impressed," Addy said.

"I learned it all from you."

Addy disembarked. "I'm going to find the seller."

He knew she had called to let the seller know about their possible tardiness. He checked his watch. The chronograph function showed they had returned in just over two hours. He needed to use the bathroom before he tidied up the sloop. He cleated *Lose Yourself* to the dock and rushed towards Smith & Scott's lockers.

On the concrete dock only the sound of rap music could be heard coming from a Toyota Tacoma. John recognized the hip-hop from this morning. A truck tire and a long single-bolt lug wrench sat on the corner of the Smith & Scott building.

“Get this stuff cleared up,” a man said to a teenager who stared at the naked intricacies of his rear-wheel brakes.

“Hey, man, what’s the tuneage?” John pointed towards the Tacoma.

“Eminem.”

“Yeah, okay.” John let the beat enter him. His head bobbed with all these primal moves. He liked how the words drove the beat. The song’s simplicity surged inside of him. There was something fearlessness about the song.

With pain poking his bladder, he entered the locker room-style bathrooms. It smelled like toilet-bowl cleaner. Latrines flushed. Toilets roared. Sailors talked about the challenges of the weather. They discussed Atlantic sturgeon, bluefish, and blue marlin. Laughter echoed on the cinder block walls. From the outside—in one of those sonic peculiarities that brought distant sounds up close—John heard the seller of *Lose Yourself* yelling. The cinder block walls worked like conk shell. In a low but clear sound, the seller’s voice echoed in the walkway of the locker’s entrance. He heard Addy speak calmly and say something like, “We just wanted to make sure the boat could sail.”

The seller yelled something else. Addy Spoke calmly. The owner said something about another looker. He said looker, not buyer. Everyone’s a looker, John thought.

He stepped back into the morning. The sun came down unmolested. Down the street to his left the Dime Bank’s digital letters read seventy degrees. To his right the seller had his fangs out. His red face was plump with excitement. Spittle flew from his mouth. John could not

remember the guy's name. He only saw him as an asshole hassling his wife. He did not see reason; he only saw unreason. He saw a man who thought he could talk down to Addy because she was a woman.

John felt his face heat up. He ran towards his wife. Anger powered his legs and throbbed in his chest. His rage needed a target, and it was the seller. His anger had a deeper motive, something he was losing control over. It fueled his compulsion to consume chemicals. A very common trait of addicts and alcoholics. At the moment he denied its mysterious power. One of the skills he had learned in treatment was to count to ten—one-thousand-one, one-thousand-two—before he gave into his rage. This morning his disease stopped him at one-thousand-two, like his addiction had been planning a mutiny.

“What’s the problem?” he asked, panting like a fat tourist.

“You can’t have *Lose Yourself*, because I have a deposit for it.” As though it were a victory flag, the seller waved a check at Addy and him.

One could do only so much to hold back his disease. John was in the middle of a soul-quake. He formed fists. To avoid breaking a hand when he hit the guy, he kept the ball of his hands loose. He still knew how to fight. To hurt. To give his sickness its violent side, let it explode into life. Splash blood.

The seller with his competent-looking flattop, and his big biceps told John his fists alone wouldn’t do the job. John estimated he could kick this guy in the nuts without a problem. He mentally measured his distance from the guy’s crotch. He stepped closer. The trick was to snap his leg, just like a karate kick. But a smash to the balls wouldn’t do it. “Okay, for starters,” John said, “no one talks to my wife like that. *I* don’t talk to her like that.”

“I’m not you.”

“Pardon the metaphor, but you sure the fuck are not me.”

“Watch your language, sir.”

“You’re telling me to watch my language after you’ve just yelled at her. What are you on?”

“John, honey, he didn’t yell,” Addy said. “It’ll be fine. We want to shop some more anyway.”

“Listen, pal.” The seller stepped towards John and brushed into Addy who stood on his left side.

“You pushed her. I saw you. You fucking hit my wife.”

“John,” Addy said. “Let’s go. It’s not worth it.”

“Look, pal, you need to back off.”

The guy was a size-and-a-half bigger than John, and he was too smart of a street fighter to think he could take this guy without a weapon. “Okay. You know you’re right,” John said. “Hang on right here. I owe you an apology.”

John felt unleashed. He went to that spot in his brain, that place, those thoughts he stored to calm himself, to talk himself down. The spot was no longer there. There was no counting, no special list that his mind could summon.

He turned around and ran to the corner of the locker-room where Eminem’s beat yanked rage out of his lyrics. The kid worked on his Tacoma. John looked around. The kid sat on a beach chair, his knees poked up. He stared at his rear brakes in trance-like state. John grabbed the long, single-bolt lug wrench on the corner of the building.

“Hey,” he said when he saw John take his tool.

“I’ll bring it right back. I’ll clean it too.” John swiped the lug wrench and carried it like a relay baton.

“Come back with that, man,” the kid shouted.

John ran towards the seller. He was going to smash his head with the part of the lug wrench where the wrench angled to the single socket. His disease had already rehearsed the swing for him. No one spoke to Addy like that. Period.

In front of him he saw Addy’s face stretched in anguish. A strange frown covered the seller’s face as though he had just been humiliated. Bigger than John, the seller nervously bounced on his feet like a fat asshole who didn’t know whether to flee or fight.

“Hey, where you going with my lug wrench.” The kid ran next to John. He panted and grabbed John’s left arm. “You can’t have it.”

The touch of human flesh in the middle of his rage gave John pause. It was the voice of a boy, innocent and forgiving. He stopped. “I was just going to borrow it for a minute and return it.” *What was I going to do? Good lord.*

The kid looked towards Addy and the seller and then looked back at John. “Be careful, man.”

“Always.” John handed him the piece of iron. “Thanks.”

John walked up to seller and Addy.

“I just received a very nice apology.” Addy smiled. “And if these people don’t buy it, we can.”

“Yeah, hey, just a misunderstanding,” the seller said.

“Let’s go.” John grabbed Addy’s hand and led her away. “Are you okay?”

“Let me know if you’re still interested,” the seller yelled towards them.

“God, John, you are in no condition to go to New Orleans.” Addy grabbed his shoulders.
“Look at me. What’s wrong?”

Now: An Emotional Museum

Thursday, August 25, 2005

The clock on John’s Apple iBook read 5:15 AM. John’s English springer spaniel Toulouse arrived as he did every morning. The dog flopped down. His liver-and-white coat blended with the oriental rug’s deep colors and intricate designs that looked as sinister and mysterious as time itself. Before John opened his email, he spun in his desk chair to catch the weather forecast on TV.

“It is a historic year for hurricanes,” the local meteorologist told him. With red fingernails flashing under studio lights she skillfully pointed to a map showing the twelfth tropical depression of the hurricane season. The meteorologist’s voice sounded better with the volume low. It had a sexier, more refined, more independent inflection. She transcended the status of mere beauty. Smart and complex began to describe her. But she was about many things: barometric pressure, ice and heat, breasts and hips. Puffy lips. In her tenure at WTNH this specific weatherwoman had accurately forecasted five nor’easters and countless sunny days for John. He did not know why he thought about this women in this way. These feelings—at least their connections to his sexual fantasies—had to be stopped.

He doubted if that gray puff of cotton on the TV screen would become a hurricane packed with Hiroshima destruction. It looked like all it needed was the slim landmass of the

Florida peninsula to kill it. Hurricanes always headed for land, a kind self-destruction like an alcoholic heading for his next barroom. The addict for his final fix.

“As it looks now it will strengthen and become Hurricane Katrina by this evening,” Ms. Danahey—he finally remembered her name—said with her usual confidence. She was probably a soothsayer in a previous life.

The feel of a hurricane’s danger still thrilled John. It remained a part of fall, like football and fresh foliage. With property still in New Orleans, he needed to pay attention to every hurricane season. While conducting an appraisal on his New Orleans property last year he got caught up in the evacuation for Hurricane Ivan. He had experienced the wind of four hurricanes. He hated to run from trouble and regretted the evacuation for Hurricane Ivan. He never wanted to evacuate again.

A breeze pushed the smell of clover into John’s second-floor study. Connecticut summers arrived so much more politely than those of New Orleans where the heat chased you down and mugged you. John had planned to fly out of Hartford and be in New Orleans by tomorrow morning. He planned exit the city before the first Floridian could call his Allstate agent.

John clicked the remote, and Ms. Danahey dissolved. Appearing and disappearing so softly impressed him. He wished he could move through life with the touch of a remote.

The ceiling fan ticked like a clock. A month after Julian’s arrival, John reconnected with Desi. It had been twenty-five years. John hoped for a rapprochement. Particularly with his slipping sobriety, he thought he needed to make a deeper amends with Desi. But the idea of a comprehensive amends with Desi began to denigrate his sobriety, instead of expanding and deepening it. It seemed to ignite his disease and inspire it.

He had asked Desi about Vicki, if he had seen or heard of her whereabouts. He also needed Desi's help in contacting Bryan LaBryan. John wanted *Blue* for Julian. All attempts, like searching the Internet or contacting old friends, had been highly unsuccessful. John even subscribed to Gilligan's Island dot com, the priciest and reportedly the best Internet people-search package, but to no avail. It had been a long time. He knew these people had penchants for aliases.

By equal measures John was excited and guarded about entering the cuckoo's nest of Desi St. Albares. He and Desi dated back to deep childhood—Rice Krispies, silver pistols, and lariat shirts. As teenagers, life had been reduced to the survival of the coolest. They had been dream-ridden kids caught up in rock fantasies and the drama of being cool. Rocknroll had swooped them away with its excitement and sex appeal. They found themselves. At least John did. Rocknroll had set him on a fifteen-year trajectory arcing into trouble and other forms psychological oblivion. And then the fight. The 9/11 of their lives.

An hour after the morning weather report John flipped open his cell. The keypad lit up with Desi's number.

"Johnnymoon, *tawk* to me," Desi said in his stony New Orleans baritone. He owned a construction company and always answered his calls in a pissed-off tone, as though John had just dialed the wrong number.

"Hey, man, good morning."

"John, I'm getting your shit ready."

"What shit?" John chuckled. He tried to avoid taking the colorful metaphor literally.

"Bryan LaBryan, man," Desi said.

"Any luck?"

“I could find Osama bin Laden before I could find him. By the way, it’s more like Osama Been Hiding, instead of Osama bin Laden.”

“Thanks for that insight.”

“I’ve got some good news,” Desi said. Desi spoke to someone in the background. “*No, it’s got to be a Moen. M, o, e, n, faucet. A faucet. It’s a fau, cet. Running water, plumbing.*”

“Dez?”

“I found Dominic Poux, just for you,” Desi said.

Dominic Poux, a/k/a Poux-Poux, was a local impresario who had managed Hold the Lettuce for three years. He was actually the person who cajoled and stroked John and Bryan into writing *Blue*. As manager of Hold the Lettuce, John knew Dominic had been a fanatic about remaining in touch with people.

“That’s great.”

“*Moen. It’s faucet, I know you know what a faucet is.* Sorry, John. I’ll call you back. I’m in the middle of an asshole crisis here. We’re still on for tomorrow, right?”

“Yes. Dez, did you . . . ?”

“Gotta go, man. I’m trying to get my money back.”

The call ended.

From the left corner of John’s iBook’s screen the blue stamp of his email icon rolled out.

Besides a Land’s End email announcing daily sales, only one new email popped up.

To: John St. Albares

From: MaxT@tmail.com

Re: Braxton Dooley

Dear Johnnymoon,

Forensic pathology is amazing. You need to know.

Best regards,

From the dead zone,

Braxton Dooley (hee-hee-hee.)

John took a deep breath. Braxton Dooley was a name he never wanted to see or hear again. He closed his eyes and drifted into a rumination filled with regret. He exhaled. He took another breath, a little deeper. Then another one. The oxygen lightened his head. He saw weird paisleys and sparkle signs. Toulouse barked in his sleep trying to keep his own nightmares at bay. John's eyes snapped open. He wanted to jump to his death.

The email had to be from his cousin Desi who was playing a joke on him. John's stomach calmed down, but a tension began to press his forehead. His reconciliation with Desi remained fragile, too frail for a prank like this. Never for a prank like this. With the help of an exotic crime record—extortion, fraud and deceit, grand larceny—Desi's life had been a series of ups and downs, including time in Angola. A mysterious email wasn't Desi's style. So who would have sent it? Vicki? No way, she would be indicting herself.

John made a quick list, a dangerous one: extortion, blackmail, con job, pain and suffering, the truth. *I'm overreacting. No, I'm not.* Old feelings about crimes and shame took shape in his mind. His stomach felt like it was being cut with sharp objects. *Johnnymoon*, he quit using that name years ago when he moved—or as Addy would say, escaped—from New Orleans. John did not want anyone in the privacy of his life. He barely let his wife in. He

barely let himself in. The email had to be a joke. He stared at his daily list. He put a check next to pain and suffering.

John exhaled. He rechecked his emails. An attached audio file sat in the corner of the Braxton email. John's adrenaline throbbed. His face heated up. Big powerful heartbeats thumped in his chest. He snugged the headphone plugs into his ears. He felt the pair of white wires frame his face and drop past his shoulders like his hair once did as a teenager. Ordinarily John used his iPod to listen to Internet streams like SOMA FM, or music by groups like the Toadies, IV Thieves, and Radiohead, or more recently, a throwback, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. A longing for rock operas had filled him lately.

He clicked the audio file on. A young girl said, Marco, and a boy in the distance said, Polo. The recording sounded like something John had heard before. An episode from *The Twilight Zone* came to mind. Violins in the background made a dramatic crashing sound as though something tragic had happened. The recording ended.

John stared at his list: extortion, blackmail, my past. He added, *stay sober*. He then scratched through it.

Thursday, August 25, 2005; New Orleans, Louisiana

Desi looked around his house. He saw nothing, not even a mouse. He was alone, on the phone. With Johnnymoon, planning his doom. He turned down the background sound; he wanted John in town. The effects, like Home Depot, kept the call in perfect context. It tricked Moon like that number nine tune. What's next? The hex.

Friday, August 26, 2005; Mystic Connecticut

John loaded his luggage into Addy's SUV and left for Bradley Airport. Using the back way to Bradley, Addy swung her English-made SUV through the green hills. The scent of clover mingled with the cool New England morning. A damp breeze pushed the fragrance of the ocean into John's nostrils. In a front-yard a six-point buck appeared. John admired the deer's radar ability for flight. Their sense to race for their lives. Their ability to flee. Addy merged onto I-91. John did not look forward to his jet ride to New Orleans. He hated to fly. The mere concept of frequent-flyer miles scared him.

They arrived at Bradley. John stepped down from Addy's SUV and unloaded his duffel-bag along with his backpack. Long goodbyes were painful. He and Addy knew how to sneak around them.

"Love you," he said. The two powerful words gave him a physical strength. He kissed her cheek. He wondered how Vicki looked.

"Umm, love you," Addy said the words quickly.

John smiled.

They both knew that crying was childish, weak. They never thought they would weep. It just crept up on them. The idea of separation hurt.

"Call. Keep an eye on that storm." Addy shut her SUV's door and made a quick getaway.

John strolled the subdued concourses crowded with early-morning fliers. Soft good-byes echoed below the gate calls. With the same melancholy as hospital summons, flight numbers and destinations reverberated from the PA system.

Time was the world's greatest commodity. In a way he was going back in time. Everyone wanted to hurry to have more time. Speed, the greatest achievement of the last hundred years, was a deal to get as much done as possible in a limited amount of time, of life. Speed, John had long realized, ranked as the signal act of the modern age. Fast and faster. He thought of man's trip from fins to feet to fast. Americans put speed on the road, in the air, and even in their veins. Why couldn't the world just slow down. Do less, maybe do it better. Everyone prayed and payed for quickness. Now, ASAP, yesterday, Jesse Owens debunking Hitler. Quick, hurry, 70 in a 20. *Blitzkrieg*. Keep going. Drive through, drive by. Just do it so we can do it again. Give me a brown bag to keep it all neat in. He hated to fly.

Families and friends stumbled over farewells. An African-American family—a mother, girl, and young man dressed in a US Army uniform—hugged each other. They worked themselves into a group hug, a transaction of togetherness.

To John's left, he watched a young man and his father. They stood tall and offered each other farewells. Curly hair dropped to the father's shoulders. Small oval glasses sat on his pointed nose. He appeared to be John's age, and the man's buzz-cut lookalike son about twenty.

"When you get to London, call," the man told his son.

"Well, *Dahd*, you'll hear about it on the news if we don't make it."

"*Naught* funny, naught funny. Tell your mother hello."

"I will."

"Let's make this quick."

The man and his son hugged. "Bye," they said. With heads down they walked away like beleaguered boxers to their corners of the world. John wondered about that great connection between father and son, Julian and him. Those transistor feelings wired hard to the heart,

beeping across to each other like unheard sound waves. If his father were alive it would be nice to stop by his home in Metairie, watch his father's favorite team the Chicago Cubs on TV. Play *bouree* with him. John thought of his daughter Jade, his daughter who died of leukemia at the age of five. Julian was the only one now. He felt like a failure as a father and even as a human being. John's gut moved in a strange, uncomfortable way.

The man walked away. He stopped and raised his small oval glasses to rub his eyes. As though to head off a sneeze, he ducked his head into his hand. He released a deep almost silent sob. It was the type of cry John had meted out at funerals. The man sucked in air and phlegm. John knew that subdued yelp. It had burst out of him as a teenager at his mother's deathbed and years later at his father's burial. It was a little-boy cry, one without control. A cry that surprised. Sobs that could damage the heart. The man gasped for air like a swimmer. He raised his head and saw John. As a cryptic form of support to his fellow father John nodded okay.

"Goodbyes are tough," the man said through a scratchy voice.

"I know."

The man smiled.

At American Airlines Gate B7 John boarded his flight. They took off. The jet punched a hole in the sky. It defied gravity. The plane roared against time and space. Out of John's window, clouds as black as an explosion's filled the sky to the south. The 737 made a swooping turn and roared directly for them. John breathed deeply.

He sat next to an older woman and a boy who must have been about thirteen. The back end of the boy's Yankees cap faced John. On his feet bloated tongues flipped from Nike hightops. His oversized pants drooped down past his ass. John and the boy scoped out each other.

“Hey, man,” the kid said to John like he knew him his whole life.

“Where you heading?” John asked.

“New Orleans.”

“Me too.”

“Are you from there?”

“A long time ago.”

The kid smiled and nodded his head. “Cool, man, cool.”

John hated being a small speck in the nothingness of sky. Sitting next to a boy less than half his age—with twice his ability to remain calm—intimidated him.

A white trail of air blew over the wings. The sound of wind, like someone had left a window open hummed from somewhere behind him. But it couldn’t be an open window. Anything open in flight meant danger. Someone must have turned a valve, and the sound went away. Every reverberation registered with him: a hydraulic grunt along with three distinct tones. They repeated in a rhythm that could do wonders with a techno-pop beat.

In minutes the boy fell asleep, his Yankees cap turned around and the beak tipped over his eyes old-school style.

John thought about when he was a young boy.

September 9, 1965. The exact date would never leave him. His parents had *made* him stay home from school. They had never let him stay home.

“We have to get ready,” his mother told him.

He stared at her

“Don’t worry, it won’t be bad,” she said. “We’ll make it.”

All of a sudden they were going to “make it.” For Hurricane Betsy his and Desi’s family had planned to hunker down in their cinder-block apartment. The apartment adjoined the grocery store that Desi’s father owned, where John’s father worked as a partner. Their new house, which his mother had always referred to in a dignified voice as their new *home*, was not yet built. She had told him that one buys a house so they can make it into their home. She put an elegant emphasis on the word home. John wanted a home. The word home deserved a special emphasis, he thought.

Their apartment ran on the backside of the building in an east-to-west direction. A set of metal bars protected the grocery’s front doors. The store’s butcher shop sat between the main entrance on Clearview Parkway and the apartment’s den where the two families had gathered.

Late that night the big spirals of wind started to pummel the city. Each roar mounted on top of the previous gust. It sounded like Betsy would take a deep breath and then blow out. Deep breath and deeper blow, until one constant force of wind began its scariness.

By eleven o’clock John’s sisters slept, or pretended to sleep, as did Desi and his sisters. Desi’s older brother Dale stayed awake and helped the adults. As the oldest boy in his family John needed to do the same.

The monster sounds of breaking tree branches and exploding transformers scared John down to his last pulse of GI Joe courage. He had to act like a man, be afraid of nothing. Like when his father took him on fishing trips in Lake Pontchartrain with high winds and a big chop. And one time to Empire, the fishing depot that led into the Gulf of Mexico. His father and his uncle had called him a man.

The gate’s iron bars thumped against the front of the building.

To discourage burglars, the set of iron bars that resembled jailhouse bars—just like on *Gunsmoke*—rolled across the glass-and-metal front doors at closing time. The dual tracks of iron, one on the bottom and top of the entranceway, were connected to a structure of beams that ran through the building like its own nervous system. A year earlier, John had watched the TL James Construction Company build the entire addition.

Then the banging started from the front of the store. The metal slapped its beat against the front of the building. At first gentle, like a farrier striking an easy blow to a horseshoe, then it grew louder. Each time it went deeper into the building's metal spine until it reverberated through the building's belly. The weird sonar sound came from another dimension, as though it was communicating with the dead and summoning ghosts.

It sounded like the wind had a certain determination to enter, to seek them out and kill them. It felt personal to John. He lay on an army cot, which he had taken pleasure in assembling. He felt like a courageous young soldier readying for attack. A sense of fun and seriousness filled him. They were camping out. They could be soldiers readying for the Nazis. The North Koreans. The Godless Communists. He could deal with a catastrophe like World War II. A chance to be brave. He could prove himself a hero, a man. But Betsy turned real, bigger than anything he had ever met. And his parents made it feel real in a bad way. He noticed their nervousness. They never got jittery over anything.

"You hear that?" Dale knelt in front of Johnnymoon's cot. "It's ghosts coming in to get us."

"No it's not. I'm not afraid." John liked it when Dale tried to scare him. It ended up being a test that Dale always allowed John to pass with flying colors.

The electricity went out and the apartment plunged into darkness. His sisters and cousins, except Dale, didn't see the experience as fun, or as a campout. He waited for another explosion outside of the apartment. He prepared to hide his cringe at the sound of tin scraping down the street, or a transformer shorting out and exploding. He heard everything. The metal gate thumped on the building. He thought the wind conspired with the iron bars to enter their apartment and blow the life right out of them.

The big gusts made a hushing sound sucking up the corners of the building. The distant concussion of thunder stomped closer. It was like in the movies when the German's big guns cleared the way for their soldiers. Just like it.

With his silver flashlight John moved his hand above its shine to make monster silhouettes on the ceiling until the rhythm and sound of the storm became too spooky. It was the iron clanking, which struck the building in a well-known cadence, a beat his uncle used when he knocked on the door. He knew everyone recognized the familiarity of the rhythm. At once the adults, except his mother, asked him to, "Stop with the light." The den tensed up. He knew it wasn't the light. He felt their fear fill the room. The adults never got scared.

The building continued to hum. The monstrous sound started loud when iron doors hit the front of the building. The vibrations faded into this strange sound similar to the sonar ping submarines emitted in war movies like *Run Silent, Run Deep* with Clark Gable and Burt Lancaster. His mother loved Clark Gable. He wished the banging sound of the iron ghost would stop. No matter what though, heroes didn't get scared.

He sat on the side of the cot and inspected the terrazzo floor with the bright glow of his flashlight. He kept the light to himself. The voice of Bob Walker crackled over the transistor radio as though it was the DJ's job to buddy with John. Only a few people in the city had

evacuated. The call letters WTIIX announced by the chorus of singers in mod voices gave John hope. Because of “Tix,” as they called the station—like they were cool to call it Tix—he knew the rest of the city wasn’t destroyed like in one of his science-fiction movies.

More and more the bang annoyed him. He studied the terrazzo’s dazzling, chaotic patterns. He admired the stones frozen positions, their peace. It was impossible to find identical stones. He liked to search for identical stones. He marked them with pennies and studied to see if they were really identical. If Betsy swept the building off its slab, the Terrazzo would remain. It was strong, indestructible.

His dad and uncle were serious Cajuns, descendents of buccaneers. Sometime after 1890, long after privateering had become illegal and deadly, they became a family of cotton farmers. The brothers were never subject to fright. For the first time in John’s life, he heard their French work through stutters.

In an effort to stop the banging, the brothers ventured out. His uncle returned with an injured hand. The banging kept its beat. In the kerosene light his aunt and parents gathered around his uncle and bandaged up his wrist. John saw blood.

The wind howled like a tortured ghost. His aunt and mother held their rosaries like they were clutching a lifeline. They prayed in French, their first language. Even though there was little they could do, his uncle and father couldn’t keep still. In the kerosene lamplight their faces appeared stricken, weighted down with something more than their regular adult moodiness.

Without electricity the apartment warmed with thick air. His clothes clung to his body. His father rigged a crack in a window to help with the air’s circulation. The crashing sounds outside kept him awake. He twisted and turned and then would sit up. Every so often his aunt would whisper, “Go to sleep.” His mother knew he would sleep if he could.

It was the banging, the ringing through the vertebrae of the building that kept him awake. It spoke to him. It hypnotized him with dread. The iron reverberations told him of a danger too mysterious and powerful for him to understand. Betsy was cruel and careless.

He wondered why they gave hurricanes human names. Why were they all women's names. Hurricane John. He liked that. Why not a color, or a flamboyant name like a race horse, the Big Swipe, Late Arrival, The Blow Hard. Or just give them a number name, Hurricane Five, like football players. Why make it a person? He realized someone could be ruined if they had the name of a bad hurricane.

"*Mais* let's go," his uncle said to John's father and Dale. Outside the hurricane's eye had arrived with a spooky calm, like it was a trick.

"I want to go," John said.

"I don't think so," his uncle said.

"I want to go." He felt too scared to stay, and he wanted to be with his father so nothing would happen to him. "I want to go, Daddy. I want to go. Dale's going."

The men looked at each other.

"Okay," his father said.

"No," his mother said.

"*Mais*, let him come," his father said.

He was his father's only son, so he had to be a man as soon as possible. Along with his father, uncle, and Dale, they walked out the back door into a night so black John felt like he was blindfolded to play pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey.

"*Mais*, this is worse than I thought," his father said.

Using his own flashlight, John navigated around shredded branches, leaves, and warped tin. He picked up the number “8” used for pricing at the Shell station across West Metairie Avenue. Somehow it made it into their backyard. It looked bigger on the ground than up on the sign. He held onto it as a souvenir. He’d always wanted one of those numbers. They passed the small horse corral and barn in what his family used as a backyard, if one could even call it that, it was so jammed up. He wanted a real backyard with grass and a slide and a spaniel. The setup was a remnant of the “country,” his father’s reluctance to depart from his provincial roots. From behind the stable, closed-in with rusted tin, he heard their horse Pepper acknowledge their presence. It was the same snorting and scraping of hooves John heard when Dale fed her. Pepper’s name suited her temperament, but she too expressed gratitude that humans still held a sway in events.

To keep Pepper calm, they asked the horse in French how she was doing, “*Comment ça va, girl?*” They spoke to her like she was another human. “We’ll make it, girl,” Dale said. She made a relaxing sound, the same one as when Dale poured feed into her trough. Pepper snorted again. The men spoke to her. Their French sounded clear. The calm of the eye made all sounds crisp and scary.

A moaning like a baby crying came from the top of the barn. John twitched with fright. He and the other men aimed their flashlights toward the sound. The sound made the night seem that much more wicked. John’s dad laughed. “Johnnymoon, it’s your friend, Cash.” Cash was his tabby who had been missing for days. John called out. She kept howling. He walked to the barn’s side entrance, which was nailed shut.

“She’ll be okay, Moon.” His dad motioned him away from the door.

Through the small backyard they found their way to the main parking lot and its blotchy concrete work. Moon shined his light on the cement's bumpy surface. He had found his bearings. He recognized the rocks in the slab where he popped wheelies with his Schwinn. The flashlight gave him a sense of importance. He was a man with men, serious men.

The hurricane's eye, its stillness, both soothed and frightened him. He wanted the storm to be finished. He recited some Hail Mary's to our Lady of Prompt Succor, the patron saint of hurricanes. The idea of Betsy made his stomach worry. Danger lurked everywhere. How could God do this to them?

Only their flashlight's stark beams lit the dark pit of the outside. They approached the front of the building. The wind tore off all but one corner of plywood that had protected the front door. The wood was tacked up with concrete-penetrating nails, ones with swirls in them.

"Dale, hammer that side in," John's uncle said. He inspected the gauze bandages on his injured wrist. "Mais, come on Dale, let's fix it. Come on," his uncle said again, more urgently. Johnnymoon didn't like when his uncle yelled. His uncle always meant business. He was far more serious than his dad. Johnnymoon wanted his uncle and father to ask him to help. He could rise to manhood, get their admiration, be a hero.

"Dale, come on son," his uncle whined.

At once they all turned around and shined their flashlights behind them. A nauseous feeling entered John's stomach when he saw Dale lying on the patchy concrete. Pins and needles soared to the top of his skull.

"Mais, watch that wire, Johnnymoon," his uncle shouted. His voice crackled like he was about to cry. "Mais, no. No."

“Don’t look, Johnnymoon,” his father said. “Don’t look. Don’t look. Godammit. Oh, no.”

John shined his light. Dale lay face down and backwards. His arms were tucked under his body, his feet pigeon-toed into the concrete. From Dale’s tilted head his tongue stuck out. The hurricane’s eye was so serene and peaceful, just like Dale at that moment.

The men turned Dale over. What looked like charcoal streaked Dale’s face. His father stood and jerked John’s hand to lead him back inside. He dropped the number eight. His father’s breathing took on a strange rhythm like a frightened boy.

His father spoke to the women in French. John’s aunt howled, and his mother said in a gloomy voice, “Dear God, why? Dear God, no.” Then she said something in French. His cousins woke up. No one told them what happened. They just started to cry like a switch had been turned on.

His aunt ran outside. “Mais, be careful,” his father shouted.

John told his mother his stomach ached. He lay next to her, and she rubbed the pain out of it.

Dale had always acted friendly towards John. He loved the Beatles like John, and he told great jokes. Like John he believed in UFO’s. He liked the movie *The Mooncussers*. Dale was the person who had started calling him Moon and Johnnymoon.

The families had no choice but to keep Dale’s body in the back bedroom so the coroner could haul it away after Betsy left town. The men poured ice on the cadaver to preserve it. His aunt started a Rosary. For an hour they prayed out loud.

Hurricanes, nor anything else, ever scared John again.

The airliner's fat wheels screeched. The jet engines sucked air to slow it.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to New Orleans. The weather is sunny. It's already seventy-eight degrees with humidity at seventy percent. Have a nice stay," the pilot said absent of irony or sarcasm. The McDonnell-Douglas taxied to Concourse B.

John looked out at the tarmac and memories only time could romanticize surfaced. *N'awlens* made him feel invincible again. The city was his emotional album. It brought back attitudes. Bad urges took fresh forms. Sights and sounds entered his mind like the orchestra at the start of a movie. He reeled back to steamy nights when moonbeams splashed wrought-iron balconies and shadows broke on shaggy Boston ferns. Lickety flames bounced in doorway lamps. From a shabby Quarter nightclub a grieving trumpet dropped blue notes into the night. The gritty fragrance of good cooking mixed with backbar rot. The sinister aura of darkened entranceways beckoned. They led to seedy cabarets blocks from the Mississippi where John once sang with the Trash Cans, an alias—one of many—for his group Hold the Lettuce. He saw the predatory glow of Jack Daniels sitting in a shot glass. He imagined the liquid easing down his throat. He felt its immediate burn. He took comfort in its sinister warmth.

He snapped from that fatal thought. He considered his own life and his past, full of love, fun, and death. He didn't know why but it all made him smile.

Chapter Six

NEW ORLEANS, LOVER AND COHORT

Now: Desi and John

Friday, August 26, 2005, 11:30am; New Orleans, Louisiana

John grabbed his bags and stepped into the late-morning heat. From the curb of Louis Armstrong International Airport he waited for Desi to pick him up. The sun devoured the morning. Steamy odors from an earlier downpour spiked the air. On nearby Airline Highway a siren screamed with disaster. The smell of damp concrete rose. The sauna-hot day started its punishment. John began a list: Desi, *Blue*, Louise.

An Audi TT pulled to the airport's pick-up area. The car had the shape of something John had once shot from his pellet gun. The Audi's engine made a quick hushing sound. A sticker on the front bumper read: *It drove me crazy, but I drove it back*. On the passenger's side the window hummed down.

"I thought that was you." From the car Desi's unmistakable voice came out, thick and guttural like he had a pound of brimstone stuck in his voice box.

Desi emerged from his car. His snow-white hair startled John in spite of seeing it in the pictures Desi had emailed to him. Tattoos covered his arms like another skin. He still stood inches taller than John, and now, pounds lighter. He limped to John. He still had his limp. Of course. John hated seeing that.

"*Tawk* to me," Desi said. "It's been a long time."

“I wish it hadn’t been,” John said. They shook hands soul style. John moved his shoulder into Desi’s chest, and they braced each other’s backs. “That’s my fault.”

“Gina said no motorcycles, so I bought this,” Desi said. “Can I tell you something? It’s a fucking rocketship.”

John thought the shiny, cobalt color could have been smeared with a dab of sky upon its re-entry into the earth’s atmosphere.

“All I’m saying is it helps me to get things out.” Desi raised his hands, made a dumbfounded expression. “Right?”

“It’s nice, Dez.” John could not help but wonder what “things” and “out” meant. The car must have served Desi’s psychological list of needs: an act of rebellion, an eight-cylinder getaway, a cockpit with a rush.

The Audi’s interior smelled new and leathery. The air-conditioning offered some refuge from the throbbing heat. Next to the word “airbag” sat a silver fish done in loopy Vatican II artwork. Did Desi now have some clue to a spiritual life? “I like the artwork.” John pointed to the modern fish.

“I fucking hate it. It reminds me of grade school. It was there when I bought the car. It had just under sixteen-thousand miles on it.”

“The fish?”

Desi laughed. “No, John, no. The fucking vehicle had sixteen-thousand miles on it.”

“Right.”

John wondered how much Desi of old would remain. The maniac with legions of misgivings and resentments? Desi wore nothing on his sleeve; instead, he snuck his big feelings under his skin and gave them life, made them permanent like the murals of ink on his forearms.

Would he be Desi or Dizzy, the moniker he hated? Unless one wanted to fight him, no one dared call him that. He was never dizzy, just un-focused and highly unpredictable. A time bomb with a face, an un-guided missile. His penetrating stare? His smile to the face; his knife to the back? Did his wife furnish him with some form of emotional terra firma? Who was his wife? Gina? Gina who? Desi excelled at surprise. What about his inner brat? His expert rage? His cruelty? Would he excuse himself by blaming some force beyond his control? Always plotting, ready to hate. Ready to love. Just ready. His sexual impulses? His conspiratorial smile? What were the differences between then and now? Did he still have his charming kindness to redeem himself, to fool you into feeling okay? His ability to deceive? What about his need for revenge? Revenge, John thought, revenge. No.

“It shifts and gets,” Desi said. His foot hit the accelerator.

“Whoa.” The leather seat gripped John’s body like a baseball glove clutching a fastball.

With the ardor of an Indy driver Desi downshifted out of the Louis Armstrong International Airport parking lot. In seconds they passed up three cars and rocketed through two blinking yellow lights with striped walkways. A woman pushing a baby stroller stared. Desi pulled the shift into a lower gear. The engine sucked in speed like a landing airliner. They looped around the entranceway and swerved onto the two-mile approach to I-10.

“It’s good to see you, man,” John said.

“I wish I could say the same.”

John looked at Desi. His heartbeat hit a speed bump. All of John’s efforts, the taming of his emotions, his attempt to connect and make things right between the two now meant nothing. Desi meeting him today, helping him contact Bryan LaBryan. “I’m sorry to hear that,” John said.

“Just kidding, man.” Desi laughed. “It’s good to see you too.”

John exhaled.

Desi accelerated then slowed the Audi as though to demonstrate the car’s prowess.

John pushed a smile through the emerging reality of Desi and his past, which cloyed at him like the unseen humidity that still clung to his sports shirt. “Where to?” John asked.

“The Country Club,” Desi said. A faint buzz of nervousness came off his voice.

John looked at Desi. His flaring nostrils, his sloping Napoleon chin, his drummer’s forearms, and bowling-ball midsection remained just where John had left them twentysomething years ago. “The Country Club?” John asked.

“It’s a B and B.”

“I’m not getting it.”

“Poux-Poux, John. Poux-Poux is staying there.”

“I’m glad to hear he’s alive.”

“Yeah, well, he’s gay now. Openly gay. Openly something.”

“He was always. . .” John wobbled his hand like an unstable airplane.

“Well, he probably has a line on Bryan for you.”

“Good.”

All the angles of Desi’s chiseled face had been brushed down by time. The letters *DSA*, the Indian-ink tattoo, his *ur*-tattoo, remained above his right wrist. Now the three letters sat below a glacier of intricate designs highlighted in vivid blues, greens, and reds. They surrounded the old tattoo as though they were paying homage to their forbearer. He and Desi were both thirteen when John conspired to mark Desi for life. They used cheap ink and a sewing needle sterilized with a Zippo lighter. Time had blurred its letters. Time had blurred many things.

A smell came off of Desi. John couldn't determine its origins: lingering pot smoke, maybe a cigar fragrance, or just bad BO. Desi hit the pedal again. His foot was heavy: half flesh, half lead.

John asked about the car Desi was supposed to furnish him with.

"It's in the pipeline," Desi said.

"I can go to Budget."

"I am Budget."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

Desi's hair hugged his scalp, Nero-style. His eyes, blue flames under some unknown biological mishap of his white hair, intensified his stare. John wanted to ask him why was his hair so white, what caused such a *melt-up*. He was only forty-eight. Desi could give an answer that might involve John. He scratched the berserk color off to aging. Few wrinkles covered Desi's complexion. The skin belonged to a younger man. John checked off these physical oddities to the power of Desi. The car zoomed forward. The road and their past lay ahead.

"I've got a twelve-thirty court date," Desi said. "Hang on." He glared at John like they were about to do a suicide run up an on-ramp. He punched the accelerator and jammed the shift upward for a higher form of energy. A tiny g-force thrust John back into his seat. Again, an *external force*—a court date, not Desi's own choice—gave him an excuse to break the rules. *Check that one off.* John experienced an odd moment of clarity, a spark of insight. It felt like the sensation of speed, but it was not fleeting like speed. It could not ever flee. It was a revelation, grounded and just a little bit disturbing: Desi was still seventeen.

“You like opera?” Desi dabbed a button on the dashboard. He handed John a CD with Cecilia Bartoli on its cover. She was a dark beauty with alluring eyes. Desi listening to opera? *His ability to surprise. Check.*

“All I’m saying is how’d you like to bang that?” Desi’s gnarled finger touched Cecilia Bartoli’s picture. His finger seemed like a scar on the beautiful face .

“I’m married.”

“Right, me too, but I’m flexible.” Desi grinned.

His sexual impulses. His conspiratorial smile. Check. Check.

The pureness of the soprano’s voice flowed from the speakers. John imagined the voice drifting from the balcony of an Italian villa. He could not deny the beauty of her voice. It made him question if Desi were trying to comment on John’s singing ability. *His cruelty.* Probably just a paranoid thought. *Check anyway.*

“Actually, I like rap,” Desi said. “It’s so. . . accessible. I’ll see something or think something then I’ve got the words coming to me.”

“Yeah. I know what you’re talking about. It’s got appeal, man.” John had forgotten how often they could agreed so closely on certain things. Like twins. He couldn’t check that one because he didn’t include it on his list. That flustered him.

Desi veered onto the stampede of I-10. A large pickup truck with raised wheels capable of crushing the Audi dropped back to their left side then caught up with them. “Oh, come on, Bubba.” Desi’s voice reverberated against his window. Did Desi know John was the only human being in ear distance? He must have. *His expert rage. Check.* Chunks of black mud clung to huge wavy tires. The pickup looked as though it had just emerged from the bottom of a

pond. Desi mashed on the horn. Like an angry Italian he raised a cupped hand at the truck driver. The truck swerved in front of them. The big tires hummed. John's stomach dropped.

"So what do you think?" Desi asked.

"The truck didn't do anything wrong."

"The car, what do you think of the car?" Desi accelerated, and like a proud salesman he took his hands off the steering wheel and opened them.

"Nice." There were no drag coefficients or whatnot kicking in. They were on an unknown trajectory, in a bullet with wheels and a kickass stereo full of Desi and danger. John's mind moved fast and crazy like Desi's driving. Feelings flashed by like a picket fence at high speed.

John asked Desi to drop his suitcases off at the Le Pavillon Hotel. "I need to check in. Get situated."

Desi stared at him.

From the truck in front of them chunks of mud tumbled onto the road and rattled underneath the Audi. Desi swerved back into the left lane. An angry horn screamed from behind.

"You gotta keep an eye on falling debris," Desi said. Apparently death by fiery explosion had no place in his thoughts.

John gave Desi a rundown of his itinerary. He emphasized a sense of urgency and his need to meet Vicki Joy, who now went by the name of Louise. He elaborated on Julian's unhealthy condition and possible identity crisis. "Julian's finding himself."

"So, what are you, the Coast Guard?" Desi asked. "Search and fucking rescue? He'll never find himself. And if he does, he won't like it. Look at me."

John looked him. Desi had been born with an identity crisis. How many times had John heard Desi mope: I need to find myself. John would always say, Dez you'll find yourself if you quit hiding from yourself.

Desi peered into his rearview mirror. He touched his temple like something was bubbling up in his mind. Like something needed to be filtered through. A Camaro hotrodded passed them. Its cherry-bomb exhaust blasted John's eardrums. "Go back to your fucking cave, pal," Desi said.

John lowered the volume of Cecilia Bartoli. The long flight in, the traffic, Desi's whacked-out driving, all drilled down on his nerves. He sighed.

Desi soared down I-10 towards New Orleans. A state trooper flashed its light on behind the Camaro.

"Oh, wait, can I tell you something? Here's the latest: I think I'm going to let my hair grow out into a mullet cut."

John laughed.

"I'm serious. The fucking Santa Claus mullet. That'll shock some people. I'll get some stares again."

It had always been about getting attention. The Audi's engine ground out the horsepower. Traffic trailed behind them. The modest shapes of downtown New Orleans unfolded in nonsensical slopes, obscure angles, panes of glass and concrete. The pot shape of the Superdome sat at the city's entrance. Just a few miles away the draping iron of the Mississippi River Bridge hung at the city's backdoor like a garter belt. New Orleans was busy with life. It was a life that still beat in John's heart.

To slow the car's adrenaline Desi searched for a lower gear to smash into. He tapped the volume control and the stereo's volume rose. The aria approached a crescendo, the voice pure and dramatic.

"Say Desi, what's the hurry?" Desi's eyes were tight with a feeling John could not define. Was it joy, or maybe anger? *His penetrating stare. Check.*

"I need to sue an electrician. I need to give a deposition." Desi entered a harangue about how a contractor he had hired had been using defective materials on his jobs. "Every fucking job he worked on for me over the past three years. Second hand junk is what he used. He's going to make things right. I'll guarantee that." His fighting spirit soared from zero to sixty in less than six seconds. He stared at John. *The glint of battle in his eyes. Check.* "And I've got to get you to the Country Club first," Desi said. The opera thundered to a stunning climax, and then silence followed. The disc-changer clicked.

"Boy, I wish I sounded that good." John pointed to the CD player.

"You sounded better," Desi said. "Way better."

John smiled. His heart warmed. *Desi's charming kindness to make him feel okay. Check.*

"I'm looking for Vicki Joy," John said.

"*Whoa.*"

"What's the problem?"

"You don't want to fool with her."

"Why not."

"She's fucking nuts."

“I need to decide that. Besides, it’s not for me. It’s for our son, Julian. And I owe her an amends, too.”

“Amends? She owes me a fucking amends. She owes me a fucking leg.”

John would not respond to that statement. Tension filled the cab. Desi downshifted as though possessed by a NASCAR driver.

“She might not see me anyway.”

“So, you got my email?” Desi asked. His tone gave John pause. “I hope you appreciated the humor.”

“What email?”

“Marco.” Desi let go of the steering wheel and looked around with the expression of an insane clown. “Polo.”

“The Braxton email?” John asked. “What the fuck was that about. You could have told me you sent it.”

“I’m telling you now.”

“Okay.” John felt his face drop with a sense of dread and relief.

“I told Billy Trenton I had no idea who Braxton Dooley was.”

“Billy Trenton?”

“*Detective* Billy Trenton,” Desi said. “Yeah, man. We’ve got problems. Really, *you’ve* got problems.”

John knew that if they were somehow caught—it angered him to think that he could be “caught” for something—Desi would expect him to take the blame. The statute of limitations applied to breaking and entering charges, but not to capital murder. “As far as I’m concerned there was never a person named Braxton Dooley.”

“You want me to tell that to Detective Trenton?” Desi’s tone sharpened.

“Tell him what you want.”

“How did he know about me?” John asked.

“He doesn’t. Not yet.”

“Braxton Dooley is non-issue as far as I’m concerned.”

Desi handed John an article from the *Times-Picayune*. John perused it. The article stated that the skeletal remains of a body had been found by a small fishing boat trawling in Lake Maurepaus. “I refuse to worry about something twenty-six years old.” John folded the newspaper and put it on the car’s console. He thought of the Braxton email. A rogue shiver traveled through him.

“How about lunch?” John asked.

“Poux-Poux,” Desi said. “The Country Club.”

“I thought we’d hit Mandina’s or Liuzza’s.”

“Hey, don’t you think you’ve had enough to eat.” Desi pointed at John’s mid-section.

John hated the reminder.

“I don’t have enough time anyway,” Desi punched John in the arm. The pain stung. Couldn’t Desi grow the fuck up. “John, I didn’t kill Braxton.”

“But you were there, Dez. You were involved. You’re not going to be given a Get of Jail card.”

“Trenton’s not going to go after me.”

“How do you know that?”

“He told me.”

Friday, August 26, 2005, 12:30am; Foubourg Marigny, New Orleans

The Country Club, a two-story rectangle building, looked to John like it had been built in the late nineteenth century. The white overhang highlighted the clapboard's pink pastel. Iron bars cluttered with flowers enclosed the front porch's entrance. Unlike the neighboring homes there were no burglar bars clutching the Country Club's windows.

"I'll find a parking spot," Desi said.

"See you inside." John's backpack with his Apple laptop, his rental house's documents, and contact information lugged down his shoulder. He left his wheeled duffle-bag in the Audi.

"Dominic Poux, a/k/a, Poux-Poux. Jesus," John said to himself. He couldn't imagine what could have happened to Dominic. He had always been strange. How could he get any stranger? Dominic had an ego that was as imposing as the August heat. Did time rebuild him into someone that John wouldn't recognize? Would Dominic recognize him? Between the two there had been no love lost. The day's air punished John. He wiped beads of sweat from his brow.

A second gate, another wrought-iron design with Roman soldiers wearing breastplates and Mohawk helmets, squeaked when John opened it to a spacious courtyard. Cumulus clouds bubbled up in the sky and offered a moment of cool shade. The dense air smelled of a swimming pool, an aqueous chlorine bouquet. John inhaled. The fragrance of smoky barbecue provided John with memories of boyhood summers. Potted ficus trees and spiky cacti sat strategically on poolside flagstone. A short-course swimming pool, half an Olympic size, glittered like shattered turquoise in the courtyard's center.

Mostly men gathered at poolside, some in tight Speedos. They lounged and chatted. A few belly laughs roared into the air. An Edith Piaf song broadcasted over the pool's stereo system, as though the lyrics announced an emotional emergency.

John noticed a bearded guy dressed in a short-sleeved shirt and tie wearing black quadrangle glasses. He bore a distant resemblance to Dominic. The bearded guy spoke intensely to another guy in a fluorescent-green swimming trunks.

A young man approached John. "Hi stranger," he said. Traces of Tupelo, Mississippi rolled off his accent. The young man's black hair began at his forehead and piled upward in waves to form a wall of hair. He pulled a tiny umbrella from his martini glass. John had forgotten that the umbrellas actually opened and closed. He clearly remembered that alcohol filled the glass. Suddenly, it was the first time in years he was so close to alcohol, away from Addy and his cloistered world of Mystic, Connecticut. A powerful compulsion to drink ate at him as though he were being ravaged by a tropical disease.

The young man spun the umbrella and removed a tiny red-and-white-striped straw. John could not believe the detail that went into the art of drinking. Its seductive powers already abundant. It needed few additional accouterments. He thought about how it would be okay to drink. How, in one velvety gulp, the spirit would singe a path down his trachea and combust in his stomach. Poof, like a wizard's clever explosion, euphoria would arrive. He should have brought Addy with him. A jolt of fear went up his spine.

In one boney swoop the young man bent back his skinny egret neck and swallowed his drink. His Adam's apple rolled through his throat. Like a contortionist he snapped back to a standing position. "Ahh." The young man displayed the red stain of his tongue to John. "This is so good." He flicked the straw to a nearby table.

A sudden urge to leave rushed through John. He looked to the iron gates for Desi.

“You staying?” the young man asked.

“Actually, I’m looking for someone.”

With his lips the young man formed a distinct O. “Can I get you a cocktail?”

“I happen to be looking for a friend of mine named Dominic. Do you know him?”

“I would like to.”

“So you know who I’m talking about.”

“I’d *like* to.”

“Mid-forties, are we talking about the same person?”

“Who cares?”

The proof of alcohol wafted from the young man’s Coppertoned body. He wore green flip-flops and baggy swimming trunks that added artificial pounds to his slight physique. John remembered when he was thin as the young man. He felt like trading twenty-five pounds with him. Both bodies would benefit.

At poolside a guy wearing a chef’s toque poked food on a stainless steel barbecue pit. The chef picked up a cocktail, and in his other hand a long fork with a grilled piece of sausage glistened. “Hun-*ga*-ree,” the chef announced to a group of men sitting under a green Heineken umbrella. They laughed.

“His name is Dominic,” John said “Dominic Poux. He’s an impresario.”

“Impresario?” A deep, questioning expression covered the young man’s face.

“My former band manager.”

“I need to expand my vocabulary.”

“He’s not worth it.”

“I won’t. Dominic. Room two-four, fourth room on the second floor.” The young man pointed to the room. His brown eyes came to life with mischief. “I think his company has left,” he said. “She was a gender bender. A trani, you know, the third gender.”

“Really.”

“Deep voice, sounds like a football star. She was a looker this time. Think Grace Kelly with breasts *annnnnd* a peee-nis.”

“So, room two-four?”

The young man smiled. He kissed his index finger and turned it to John. A dimple sparkled in his right cheek. John wondered what was taking Desi so long. He was acting like Dizzy. Access to all of the free-flowing alcohol made John nervous. His urge to drink failed to relent. He thought of how anonymous he would be in New Orleans, his friend and co-conspirator. Time was not on his side.

“Excuse me,” John said.

He hurried to the steps in the back right-hand corner of the courtyard. The stairs shifted and squeaked as he double-stepped up. He kept his complex math straight and found room two-four (not twenty-four). The door with the number two-dash-four sat above the pool’s center. He knocked and glanced down over the pool. The young man waved. John looked toward the front gate for Desi.

John rapped on the door. “Dominic? It’s me, John St. Albares. *Dominic?*” Again he pushed his wedding ring with his thumb and tapped on the door. He placed his ear against the door: feet shuffled, a door shut. Maybe it’s just Dominic’s ego roaming around while Dominic slept. He snapped open his cell phone and pushed Desi’s number. The answering message came on.

From behind the door a voice shouted, “*Entrée, Entrée*, lost one.”

The sound of that human voice surprised John, strange how Dominic’s speech registered instantly in his memory. Its most basic tonalities had not changed. How many times had John heard that voice.

The cold man-made air struck John. The smell of incense filled the room. A ceiling fan ticked like a clock. It must have been sixty degrees. Dominic Poux sat folded up in the lotus position in the center of a bed. His hands rested on his kneecaps. He wore a body-size Dashiki with bright colors that could have come right out of an African village. His spiky hair, full of gel, shot out in all directions. His hairline had receded into a tongue formation. He was, John thought, a kind of historical reenactment of himself. “Hi, Dominic, it’s good to see you.”

“Johnny. Moon. Saint. Albares. Come to me baby, let me kiss you.”

“Um, no, Dominic.” John remained standing in front of the door.

“You little egomaniacal rube. Still stuck up, huh.”

There was something, maybe it was happiness, in Dominic’s wide green eyes. He had the open face of a child. It looked how John remembered it. But he was really fat, way more than John.

John started with the small talk. His voice remained friendly, businesslike. “So, Poux-Poux, how’s life treated you over the past twenty-five years?”

“Can’t complain.”

“You remember *Blue*, right?”

“Yeah, *Blue* was an exquisite piece of work?”

“I want the rights for it. I’m looking for Bryan to make a deal with him.”

“I think *Blue* was cursed. You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“O, kay.”

“Desi said he spoke to you about Bryan LaBryan.”

“That’s news to me.” Dominic squinted his face. Fat had merged his chin and neck into one body part. “I haven’t spoke to Desi.”

“I wonder why he said that.”

“Wait. I ran into him at La Peniche about two weeks ago. Hello, how ya been, good to see ya. Bye. That’s it. He looked like a fucking creature. What happen to him?”

John felt a surge of pity come over him for Desi. He didn’t want Dominic to say anything bad about his family. A sorrowful sensation moved through his stomach. He flexed his fingers as though that would make his worry go away.

“I think prison, or wherever he went, did him in,” Dominic said.

“Maybe so. I’m looking for Bryan, Poux-Poux. Bryan LaBryan.”

“Hold the Lettuce, what a fucking band. Good God, little man, we had so many aliases for that band I forgot that its original name was Hold the Lettuce. What a band.”

John stared at Dominic.

“Well, that whole name-changing thing was really brilliant,” Dominic said. “And that was your idea, wasn’t it? Not the caveman’s, Desi’s, right?”

“Right.”

“Okay, here’s my story, I’m an artist now, a cineaste, that’s me. I’m into film now.”

“That’s great, Poux-Poux.”

“Uh, I don’t go by Poux-Poux anymore. Did it ever dawn on you how vulgar and grotesque that sounds?”

“No, not really. I actually like it.”

“It’s as if my name were Shit-Shit.”

John wanted to laugh; instead, he smiled.

“You still have that sexy smile, Johnnymoon.” Dominic rotated his massive ass on the mattress and stood.

John thought that he was so large he had his own gravitational force. A mini planet with an atmospheric density, weather systems, seasons. He stood under six-feet, but he must have weighed over three-hundred-and-fifty pounds. Suddenly, John felt like Twiggy.

“Are you still in touch with the musicians, the bands?”

“I’m filming, baby, filming. I’m making documentaries now. How *it* is. I have brought reality to your greatest fears. I am the First Amendment your parents warned you about.”

“Do you have any contact information on Bryan?”

“I have contacts on the universe, and yes, I think I have his information. That’s my lifeline, contacts.”

“So you’re into films now. That sounds. . .exciting.”

“Yes, John, yes. John Waters, Cecile B. DeMilles, Jean-Luc Godard. Dig it, man.”

Dominic sat back down on his bed. The bed springs squealed. His dashiki’s size looked like it had been inspired by the creator of the circus tent. “Hate, Johnnymoon, hate. It’s popular again. It’s made a big comeback, recently with Bush and others.”

“Okay.”

“*Okay*. I’m producing an indie documentary on hate. It’s going to be a Jorge Dequintez film.”

“Sorry, but I’ve never heard of him.”

“I’m sure you’ve never seen Jorge’s face, but you’ve seen his shit: *The Exxon Valdez: The Duck’s Story*. Received very well by the green scene, people who care about our environment. And then theirs the Christian trilogy: *Jesus of Uzi*; *Shoot Out at the Last Supper*, and *Judas the Bipolar*, all exposés in truth, pure honey.”

“Were these actual movies?”

“Mockumentaries. Extremely low budget.”

“Dominic, I need Bryan’s contact information. Please.”

Again Dominic stood on the mattress and dropped on his knees careless as a waif. Sounds like the snapping of springs came from the bed.

“Jesus, Dominic.”

“No, not Jesus, but the Blessed Mother. She’s the icon of our time.”

“I wish I had time to play,” John said.

“I play the universe, Johnnymoon, the universe.”

“An address Poux-Poux. I don’t need the universe. Orleans Parish will do.”

“Can’t you stay a while?”

“Actually I can’t. I’m on a deadline.” John had enough of Dominic for another twenty-five years.

“Would a blowjob be out of the question?” Dominic made a pulsing O with his mouth.

“Bryan’s phone number. That’s all, his phone number.”

“I’ll think about if you let me see you naked.”

“No.”

Dominic paused. A hurt expression covered his face. “Okay, have it your way. But I’m telling you, Desi’s nuts.”

“I hope you’re wrong.”

Dominic pulled a laptop from his nightstand, flipped it open. He put on reading glasses studded with faux diamonds. “Here he is.” Dominic read off a phone number and address that he wrote on a sticky note.

“Thank you. Good luck with your film endeavors. Good seeing you.”

Dominic held the blue sticky out to John.

He walked up to him, grabbed the paper and shook Dominic’s hand. Dominic pulled him close. His whiskers brushed against John’s face. He kissed John on his cheek.

“Jesus, Dominic.”

“I always wanted to break into your crotch.”

Dominic’s breath smelled of alcohol. In spite of its sour odor, it lifted memories of good times. John wanted to drink. He pulled away.

“*Ciao.*” John shut the door. He looked over the balcony. At poolside he heard laughter and the silky slush of someone who just dove into the pool. The day’s humidity like a wet beach blanket pulled its discomfort over him. The young man raised his hands and shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of wonder. He seemed generally concerned.

John walked downstairs. He wondered what was up with Desi. A feeling of loneliness and vulnerability sank into John’s gut. He was hungry, ready to eat. The young man signaled him over. His company would give John cover until Desi showed up.

“Your luggage.” The young man pointed to French-blue LL Bean duffle-bag on wheels that sat next to his table. “Someone just dropped it off.

“Who?”

“White hair, Pontius Pilot looking.” An iron chair clattered on the concrete as he pulled it back for John. “He had more tattoos than Mötley Crüe.” The young man looked into John’s eyes. He introduced himself, but John failed to catch the odd name.

“Did he by chance say anything?”

“I said, ‘hello strane-ger.’ He stared at me like I was a dog with two dicks. But, hey, I don’t care.” The young man moved his arms above him like marching band’s drum major. “It’s summer, days of heat and *sexth* and barbeque and martinis. And Edith. Oh, God, Edith. Mmmmm! There is a mother of God. Hail Edith, full of grace, the lord is with you.” He grabbed his crotch and raised his martini glass to the sky. Music trailed out of the speakers. He motioned towards the sound.

Edith Piaf’s frail French voice sang from the despair of Nazi-occupied France. Her song soothed John and told him we were all born into a world of dashed hopes, dark nights, and sometimes darker days. Her sonic expressions and the brittle sound of her band merged her desperation with John’s.

The stereo speakers went silent. John tried Desi’s cell-phone. Again his call went directly to voicemail. The alcohol’s presence made John’s body tense up. A rank smell caused by the stress came from his underarms. He took three deep breaths and thought of the Four Absolutes, which seemed inaccessible and something he didn’t want to think about. He thought life had more to give than constant discipline. He told himself not to think of alcohol, because it didn’t exist for him. He couldn’t wait much longer for Desi in the presence of all the alcoholic possibilities.

In his direct line of vision, behind the back stairwell near the pool’s filters and pumps, two guys kissed. It was the bearded guy with the short-sleeve shirt and tie with his boyfriend.

They exchanged passionate tongues. Their throats bobbed. The guy in the rainbow Speedos rested against the wall. The other man wearing the shirt and tie moved from his partner's mouth and sucked his nipples and fondled his crotch. The seducer took off his glasses and placed them on the stairwell's dais that turned to the second story. He dropped to his knees and pulled his friend's Speedos down. The stairwell's chamber provided an echo chamber for snapping elastic. The pale skin of his ass flashed. John saw a penis spring out and disappear into the seducer's mouth. His head of black hair bobbed back and forth. Small groans and the sloppy sound of lubricated skin ricocheted out of the stairwell.

"I guess anything goes around here," John said to the young man and nodded toward the lovers.

"I told you this is a fun place." A big smile made an appearance on the young man's blushing face.

John watched the guy leaning against wall: his eyes closed, his head tilted. He appeared dizzy with something related to ecstasy. The bearded seducer's head moved back and forth. He then stroked his lover's dick.

"Believe it or not, the festive switch here is always set to go," the young man said. "Power on, alcohol flowing, thongs a showing, asses a glowing."

"I need a cab," John said. A craving for alcohol, one he hadn't experienced in years wouldn't leave. The power of this latest urge took him by surprise. His compulsion seemed to grow in him like a fever.

The young man waved his hand in a quick Z motion. "Cab. Cab. Cab." He looked around. "Okay, my magic didn't work."

John readjusted his gaze and stared up at the messy meringue of cumulus nimbus that drifted past them. The chair made a grating sound on the flagstone as the young man moved it closer to John. His hand moved towards John. The alcohol and its smell, the young man's hand, and the humidity produced a perfect itch of aggravation. His discomfort index rose, but his craving to use failed to leave him.

"I've got a pair of trunks in my room," the young man said.

"No thanks, I've got to be leaving."

"You haven't come yet." The young man laughed at his clumsy double-entendre.

Under the stairway, the head motion of the guy stopped. Panting followed. There was a pause of silence. The guy against the wall appeared to have gained consciousness. He looked down and laughter erupted. The man on his knees pulled his friend's Speedos back up. His white ass flashed. Elastic snapped. They both stood and gave each other a long kiss. Giggling and holding hands they ducked underneath the stairwell and returned to poolside. As though on cue, Edith Piaf's voice reemerged.

The young man stared into John's eyes. "I don't know if you know it, but I like older men."

John moved the young man's hand off his knee and scooted his chair back. "I appreciate the invitation, but I'm not interested." John stumbled as he rose from his chair.

"Whoa, guy, you don't have to get scared."

"I need a cab." John eyed the Roman soldiers on the iron front gate. "Do you have United Cab's phone number?"

"Sorry."

Desi's pursuit of vengeance. Check.

“He’s a tourist now,” Desi said. He didn’t want Johnnymoon dead.

“Yeah, man, yeah. I *unnerstand*.”

“Watch him. If the motherfucker can do anything, he knows how to fight dirty. He’s uncivilized. He’ll chew your eye out if he gets a chance. And he knows how to dance.”

“Man, you don’t worry. I just want my money. Fuck all that rap shit.”

“Here’s half.”

“I’m going to get my teeth fixed,” the man said. “This shits ugly.”

Desi looked at him. The black stubs for teeth. He tapped the top of the Mini Cooper. He wanted Johnnymoon in a stooper. He walked away. Into the clear day. He’d finally have it his way.

Now: What One Doesn’t Know Won’t Hurt

Friday, August 26, 2005, 12:45pm

Louise had put off her meeting with Desi. She had dealt with the police before. So she knew she could handle the police but could her family? She needed to keep Desi away. The stakes were too high. She needed to probe, to find out if he suspected her of ratting him out that day in 1979. What a time to bring up the past.

The sun pulsed in a fuzzy, yellow impression of light, something Degas once found inspiring. The humidity brought out all the discomfort of her physical existence. In late August it took only seconds for Louise to sweat.

Before she went to Café Degas she drove down Orleans Avenue and entered the Iberville projects. She looked at the old buildings, built sturdy in red brick that was now faded. *What magnetic attraction brought her to the danger?* There had been a murder last week, a twenty-one-year-old girl.

A man stopped and stared at her as she passed the spot. “Hey,” he shouted. “Hey, hey.”

She knew her expensive SUV looked dangerously out of place. She accelerated. It excited her, and she wanted to go back ask what the fuck his black ass wanted with her white ass. “Oooo.”

She drove to her meeting with Desi.

She chose Café Degas on Esplanade. The Jockey Club building, which hadn’t seemed to change in twenty-five years, sat around the corner from Café Degas. Originally a cottage built in the 1940s, the café lacked the twelve-foot ceilings that went with buildings from previous centuries. Too bad because the tall heights could have given some relief to café’s tight interior. Space was space, Louise thought. The restaurant had a tree in the middle of it, which she thought made it special, a part of New Orleans’ unique craziness. She wanted to avoid a secret meeting with Desi. She needed something polite and public, but out-of-the-way public. She expected the environment to make Desi feel out of his element, make him uncomfortable to possibly rattle him.

Desi sat hunched over a small table. White-haired with his mural of tattoos he looked lost. She chose well. He moved a demitasse to his mouth, part man, part primate. Obviously, the tiny cup's refinement required a finesse Desi lacked.

At the sight of Desi her past came roaring into her lens. The then and now collided. The meeting gave her the trapped feeling of a bad date that she couldn't walk out on, not unlike the first date she was suppose to have had with him. But worse, she realized, he may want to resurrect the time he earned his limp. She thought maybe this whole Braxton thing was about revenge on Johnnymoon and her. She approached and wondered why Desi ever appealed to her. Now she didn't know why, or how, she had found *that* attractive. It felt easy to reduce Desi to a pronoun, *that*. Was it darkness? In some way we're all attracted to darkness. Desi stayed in the shadows. He became a shadow. He was still a shadow. A bar of sunlight angled over Desi's head.

"Hi, Desi."

He didn't rise to greet her, a gesture she would receive and had come to expect from the men she now met with—professional men, Judd's friends. Was this a planned slight? She didn't socialize with men any longer. She only associated with them. It was okay when she met Kippi and the girls.

"Look, I needed to contact you," Desi said. His voice sounded rougher than last time, like he had new scar tissue on his vocal chords. He looked at her with a plain but urgent expression.

"Desi, I need to tell you, I'm not happy about raising my past from the dead. Or maybe I should say, raising the dead from my past."

“You think I am. Look.” He flopped a messily folded *Times-Picayune* onto the table. “Fucking next thing you know we’re on *America’s Most Wanted*. And we’ll both have more problems than a fucking algebra book.”

“Jesus, keep your voice down. We won’t need TV to broadcast this.”

Uneven red lines highlighted a small article entitled Remains Found. It popped out at Louise. It filled her head with a slow blur. The print bypassed decades of time. It was a form of karma exotica returning to haunt her. The sun had moved. The words glared in a blade of sunlight that sliced its way through the small front window.

The article stated how the skeletal remains of a body had been found by a small fishing boat trawling for shrimp in Lake Maurepaus. She took in a deep breath to calm her surprise. She would drink again.

“I know that’s where yall dumped it.” Desi said.

“How do you know?”

“You told me.”

“I didn’t tell you anything.”

“Whatever you think, Vicki.”

She had distrust to spare for Desi. Fifteen years ago, while living in Mill Valley, California, Louise met her old friend Tina Acosta, and she had told her that Desi ran into some trouble. Prison trouble, Tina had said. The news had failed to arouse any sympathy on Louise’s part.

A waitress arrived at the table. “Something to drink, ma’am?”

“I’ll take the Cabernet.” Louise stared at her hands.

“Sir? Another espresso?”

“I’m more revved up than a V-8. No thanks. I’ll take a Shiner Boch.”

“I thought you quit drinking,” Desi said. “Your disease doesn’t sleep. Knowing you you’ll be in rehab by the holidays.”

“Let’s stick to the facts.”

“Okay, how many times have you been to rehab?”

She jabbed her finger at the newspaper. “I mean these so-called facts.”

He looked at her with a mocking expression.

“For your information, I had twelve years of sobriety.” She would not tell Desi she’d been to rehab six times in her life, finally achieving twelve years of continuous sobriety. Twelve years in middle age passed like twelve months in her younger life. Time could be kind and cruel all at once.

“Okay, sure,” Desi said.

“Speak, Desi, speak,” she said as though she were talking to her old Labrador Frank.

“One of the cops who busted me has contacted me and asked what I knew about it.” Desi set his demitasse out of his way. He moved his hands above the cup as though to cast an evil spirit from it.

“Come on, Desi, you can’t bullshit a bullshitter.” Louise placed her hands on the table. They still looked old in spite of the Chantecaille's Retinol Cream she had used this morning. She wondered why her hands decided to age first. One day her whole body would match her hands. The evidence of her hands, *her* old-looking hands, that firm and clear-as-day realization made her light-headed. She feared aging.

“Don’t believe me. It’s up to you.” Desi smiled. His top front teeth looked too white and too perfect to be real.

“Okay, try me,” she said. He tossed an NOPD business card onto the table. He folded his hands and rested his elbows on the table’s oilcloth. A dose of dread tightened her spine. She erected her back into a perfect posture. Outlaws and danger didn’t scare her; instead, they excited her these days in ways she didn’t want to be excited. She needed to stop drinking. Maybe she could send the Cabernet back and order a Perrier.

She grabbed the detective’s card, which looked crisp and new. She inspected it. Oddly, it didn’t have an email address printed on it. “Where’s his email address?”

Desi smirked and moved his fingers in a “who cares” motion. “Apparently, the case has been cold, but somebody talked.”

“I certainly didn’t say a word, and as bad as Johnnymoon felt about it, I know he didn’t.”

“Who then?”

“This is over twenty-five years old. Your cop friend must not like you.”

Desi leaned over his folded arms. He rotated his thumbs around each other. His head bobbed. “I’m just giving you a heads up. You don’t want your family finding out about this.”

“Where is Johnnymoon? You said he’s in town.” She stared into Desi’s eyes. Were his teeth dentures?

Desi told her about John’s plans for *Blue*.

“*Blue*.”

“Yeah.”

Desi said he dropped John off at a place in the Faubourg known as the Country Club.

“He said he wanted to walk back to his hotel. I asked him if he wanted a lift. He said he wanted to *feel* the city again. Even though it’s fucking August.”

“Jesus, can you please keep your voice down.” She looked at him hard, into his eyes like she wanted to kill him if he harmed her family. “This heat would make Hell feel like a vacation.”

She felt herself relax. “My friend Tina works for the US Attorney General. I’m going to find out about this.” Louise watched closely for a response, for him to “blink.”

Desi puckered his lips. “John said he needs to speak to you. Real bad.”

“I don’t want to speak to him. There’s nothing to talk about.”

“That’s not romantic.”

“I’m happily married. And it has nothing to do with romance, if you’re trying to get at something sleazy.”

“Ohh, pardon me.”

“Do you have any children?” Louise asked.

Desi glared. “Does your family know about me? Johnnymoon? Your son? Your drinking?”

“What one doesn’t know won’t hurt,” she said and immediately regretted how that statement revealed her dishonesty, her vulnerability. Some things never change, Louise realized. They only became more obvious. Always full of drama, full of trouble, when would it change for Desi?

“You getting something to eat?” Desi picked up the sleek menu.

“I lost my appetite.” She stood.

“You still look beautiful, Vicki.” Desi flipped open his cellphone.

“Who are you calling?”

“Someone to pick up Johnnymoon.”

“I thought he wanted to walk.”

“Who knows?”

The waitress appeared. Louise grabbed the Cabernet and in one long gulp finished most of it. She took a final sip, and the tiny tear of what remained vanished. She paused. Why did she drink that? The alcohol warmed her face. She opened her purse and searched for money to pay the waitress. Her purse slipped from her hands. “Goddamn it.” She bent to pick it up. “Oh, my God.” She couldn’t rise. Her head spun with a rogue wave of vertigo. She felt her ass stick out like Carol Burnett in one of her fool roles. It was the cleaning-lady role. She waited for her balance to return. Shame forced her to focus. She made it to her feet. She spun around and knocked into the next table. The glass settings tumbled. A goblet fell and crashed on the floor.

The wild imbalance fled from her ear canals. She found her balance and sat in the chair she had been sitting in. She stared at Desi. “People call me Louise. I’m no longer Vicki.”

“Miss, are you okay?” the waitress asked.

Chapter Seven

PEOPLE FROM THE PAST

Then: Bryan LaBryan

May, 1979

Reality has been a big disappointment. Last night we killed Braxton Dooley. I can't believe I'm saying that to myself. The word kill. Fright and shame crawl all over my stomach, poking and stinging. I feel like I'm emotionally self-cannibalizing. Like I have an exposed nerve in my soul or something. Why did it have to happen like this? My life zoom-lensing to this one bad event, one that affects eternity. Last night I cried a keg of tears. For a minute, the sad rhythm of my tears were actually making me feel better. I started to wonder if tears were addictive.

There's this kind of stupidity about death. On the surface it's easy to understand, like two plus two, but you still don't get it. My little brother will not change the world. He will never speak. Elvis will never sing again. Death's finalness is so hard to get my head around. I guess that's why it's so spooky. Nobody can understand it. But the biggest problem is that no one wants you to understand it. If we knew that basically we just went to sleep—no heaven, no hell—can you imagine how that would change our behavior? It would take about ten minutes for the human race to wonder off a cliff.

I have this very haunting feeling, a very personal feeling towards Braxton, like the moody feeling I went through when I lost my virginity. It's that personal, highly strange. It's as though Braxton's a part of me. If I don't get over these feelings, I'm going to be ready for the barbiturates and straightjacket.

A knock comes on my apartment door. I hate when people just show up. It's so nervy.

"Who is it?" I ask.

The person mumbles something I can't understand.

"You'll have to speak English," I say.

"It's me, Desi."

What does he want? I look through peephole then crack open the door. "Hey."

"Hey."

"You wanna talk?"

That's so sweet for him to ask, his concern and shit.

"I've got a motorcycle.

"So."

"A chopper."

"Let me process that." Intrigued, I open the door.

"Hey, I guess yall took care of business last night?" Desi goes. He's dressed in black leather like he's posing as a mortal sin or something. He looks good in black. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

He is both tender and barbaric. I luv the combination. I tell him how I feel. Like I've taken something from the world. "It's not a good feeling," I say.

"Did yall go to my uncle's camp on Lake Maurepas?"

I do like I don't hear him. "Let's do some chopping on your chopper," I say. "I need something to get my mind off of last night."

"Did yall?"

He doesn't need to know. I tell him I need to get dressed. I excuse myself. I put on my bikerette outfit: Lee overalls, black t-shirt. Go me! I head to my front door to get my tennis shoes. Last night I left them there. I picked up too much mud on them when we dumped Braxton into infinity. The mud smelled like they had swamp gas all over them.

I walk back in my living room and Desi's gone. I open up what serves as my front door, and there's Desi with one of my tennis shoes in his hand at eye level.

"Muddy," he says.

"Yeah," I say. Desi's probably put two-and-two together.

On Desi's chopper we cruise to this guy Bryan LaBryan's pad. He has the only apartment in the old Jockey Club building off Esplanade Avenue on Leda Court. It's not a court, just a tight street. The old Italianate design is covered in a dirty plaster that rises three-stories. Basket balconies line its top floor. Its mustard-colored paint is peeling off flakes like potato chips. The place looks highly abandoned. Tall St. Augustine grass fills the yard. A gigantic oak stringy with vines hangs over the building. I wait for Tarzan to come swinging down. The building is beautiful, fat, architecturally significant, and intriguing. It looks so dangerous, and we *have* to enter it. There's no telling what's inside.

Desi knocks and just walks in. Seconds later the apartment door slams behind us. This guy with a giant, frizzed-out hairdo enters. It's Bryan LaBryan. He looks like the descendent of a Brillo pad or something. He is thin and wears a shirt that says, FUCK FOR PEACE. I crack up. I happen to agree with the cause.

He's like, "Oh, hi. Oh, nice to meet you. Oh. Yeah, oh. You're beautiful. Yeah, oh, yeah. Wait. Wait. Did you hear that? Yeah. Silence. Peace. Love is all we need. Kick out the jams. Kick out your mother, or she'll get you in the end."

I laugh again. "My mother will probably get me in the end."

Bryan LaBryan's apartment, which covers the first floor, is dark with big, square columns. It reminds me of the pictures of a salt mine I saw in the *Picayune*. Bryan of course is the hot genius guitarist for Hold the Lettuce's. Besides an amp and three guitars—two electrics and one acoustic—he has all these iron sculptures sitting around the place that look like big insects. I count at least five of them, all sizes. Sheets of Visqueen lie on the floor and some of the plastic hangs from the ceiling. Back in the corner a mattress and boxspring sit on an oriental rug next to a nightstand with a lamplight turned on.

Desi walks up to Bryan and me and starts talking about getting involved with some heavy chemicals, like Dilaudids and Demerol.

"Nah, not doing the hard stuff," Bryan tells Desi. "You'll never catch me doing that. Weed is as high as I go on dope chain." He gives Desi this hard stare like he really means it. He turns to me and asks, "Hey, you got a sec?"

"Yeah."

Bryan walks into the center of his apartment. Like a magician revealing a rabbit in a hat, he pulls this white sheet up into the air. What appears is a Les Paul-styled sunburst guitar on a stand. Behind it sits a black amp that has Marshall written across its top.

"Okay, okay." He flips on the amp. A little red light goes on. He turns around to Desi and me and says, "I've got a master volume on this animal." Like we need to know that or something. He hits this chord. It sounds like that chord George Harrison hit on *Let It Be*, and

John Lennon in the background goes, Hold it. Bryan picks the riffs of that ZZ Top song “Just Got Paid.” I mean perfectly, with perfect finger force. The amp is a band in itself. He’s so in command, so authoritative. It’s like he’s the amps master.

“Okay, I just needed to do some stretches,” he says. He kind of runs through “Just Got Paid.” The amp-guitar romance is loud and to the point. The notes have this incredible humbucking sound, like there’s all this distortion jammed into each note but it can’t get out. Like an electronic raspy voice or something. He pauses and plays with some of the dials on the amp. He says, “This is from *Blue*, the album me and Johnnymoon are working on.”

He plays this incredible song, all guitar. It soars with these long riffs then comes to a stop with some chord crunching. Then it kicks out into a rhythm that makes “Johnny B. Goode” sound like a dirge. Then the rhythm stops, and his guitar howls with these long elegant riffs that could pass as tears if they were coming from a human being. He stops.

My jaw is on the fucking floor. With out thinking I clap. It was so emotionally draining.

Bryan bows.

“What’s it called?” I ask.

“I Just Want to Live Forever.”

I weep.

Now: Rage and Relapse

Friday, August 26, 2005, 1:15pm

John stepped out of the Country Club. The sun had smashed open the day with heat and humidity. There was no escaping the weather. His Le Pavillon Hotel destination amounted to a walk less than two miles away. He could make it before he could find a cab to get him there. The big sop of dampness slowed his blood. In spite of the weather's barbiturate effect, he needed to hurry, particularly because of Desi's no-show.

He pulled his LL Bean duffle bag like a disobedient dog. Its French blue glowed with betrayal. It had turned into a sign inviting danger. The fact that he walked the streets a long way from Mystic and a long time from being a New Orleanian cornered him with a realization that he did not like: he was a visitor, a *tourist*, someone provincial and worthy of jokes from people like he used to be. Where was fucking Desi? He felt like smashing something. John pushed his cell-phone's redial button. No answer. He felt asinine. He felt set up.

Call it an instinct, or maybe it was just a fine line between self-doubt and paranoia, or just feeling like a tourist, John suddenly sensed that he was being watched, spied on. Someone was holding him in a visual check. Anxiety tightened up his spine.

The sunlight ducked behind the high cliffs of clouds. It was one of those Friday afternoons when the city stayed busy with itself, self-possessed, buzzing with energy, possessed by the impending weekend. A sense of abandonment covered Burgundy Street and the old neighborhood. He wondered where everyone had gone. There were no cabs to hail down for a ride.

Across the street, Car tires scratched the concrete. A black Mini Cooper driven by a guy in a pork-pie hat slid from a parking place. John stared. The car's shiny rims fanned forward. In the passenger seat someone ducked into a hiding position and then looked up. John thought he saw corn rolls before the passenger ducked again. The sound of the engine rose and fell between gears. The feeling of danger invigorated him.

He passed a squat woman with spiky hair. Teardrop tattoos—the velvet-black color matched her hair color—dripped down from each eye. The tears from an eye meant the person wearing it killed someone while in jail. A jagged metal collar identical to the one on the pit bull she walked gripped her throat. She wore clunky Doc Martens and a black t-shirt that proclaimed, Death: It's For Everyone. He smiled at her. She returned a look that could have kept cancer at bay.

John remembered how he had evacuated last year for Hurricane Ivan. He hated to imagine himself in a hurricane evacuation, getting stuck on a sweaty school bus next to that young woman and her friends. Avoid all evacuations. He would add that to his list. He hurried. His baggage seemed to pull him back.

The wheels of the duffle bag clacked on the sidewalk. The sound had a rhythm, like a metronome tick. Clack, pause, clack. Parked cars lined the street. A Coca-Cola sign that said Claude's Grocery hung over the sidewalk a block-and-a-half down the street. He would stop there and get United Cab's phone number.

Footsteps, soft and scratching the ground, broke John's heat-induced daze. Before he could turn, the yank for his backpack shot pain to his elbow. "Damn it." He grimaced. The blow pulled him forward. He locked his legs and held onto his bag. He stared upward to a tall,

boney man. Thirty-five, maybe forty. Hair in corn rolls. A tiny mole—a beauty mark of all things—sat to the side of his upper lip. There was nothing pretty about what was going on.

“This yours?” he asked John and jerked again at the backpack. Jagged stubs of rotted teeth blackened the thief’s gums.

“No motherfucker, it’s the Queen of England’s,” John said in his best badass baritone. It was meant to convey the fact that he might be creepier and more dangerous than the perpetrator.

“Motherfucker, it’s you and me,” the man said.

The intimacy of that statement was almost sexual. John found it repugnant and frightening. His pulse sped. Anger pumped his adrenaline.

“Gimme your stuff, fatboy. Gimme.”

“Fuck you, asshole.”

The punch was quick. He saw it firing towards him, but he could not move out of its way. In John’s life it was not the first fist to his face. The fist was boney and felt like iron. But the iron was bone and the world was damp and the world was hot and the world was mean. The addict’s rank aroma, he must have been an addict, was replaced by the taste of blood and something lumpy. It was like he discovered an object in his food. He felt the gap where his tooth once belonged. It was his front upper tooth. There was blood and pain. And there would be no tooth fairy.

The perpetrator fled. He stared back at John. Galaxies exploded. There were too many things to comprehend. Too much pain to suffer. Something rode the thief’s back. It was familiar. It was John’s backpack. The addict continued down Royal Street towards the Quarter. A half-block up he turned and flipped John the bird.

Only the distant pulse of New Orleans traffic penetrated the sky. John heard the word, asshole, being yelled. A piece of skin moved where his tooth once sat. “We’re all assholes,” John whispered. The words hissed through his lips. Blood drooled. Air stunned the open nerves.

The thief took a right on Kerlerec Street. He headed north. John’s head spun. He scanned the street for a cab. He searched for a handkerchief in his backpack, but his backpack was missing. He remembered there was something on the thief’s back. From his suitcase he pulled a handkerchief and shoved the cloth into the cavity of his gum. Traumatized, disoriented, his ears hummed like he was a busted amplifier. His mouth throbbed.

Who am I? Why am I here? Why do I love? Do I love myself? Why did certain things happen to me? Okay, this was your life, John thought. His shoulder throbbed with pain, simple thoughts came to him, more uncomfortable than the humidity. He heard his breath seep in and out of his nostrils. The air, no longer hot and sweet, traveled far into his sinuses and hurt them. The wind hit the nerve where his front tooth no longer hung. The sunlight jabbed his eyes. Behind a stairwell he bent over and vomited. It was red with blood.

The doors to Claude’s Grocery Store were locked. John banged on the door, but the vacant inside told him it was out of business. He wanted to hurry. In the next few days—in the next few hours—he had a lot to do. He passed Washington Park Square. The fanatical colors of life exploded in his eyes. The clarity of his existence and the power of his alcoholism startled him. For a single deadly moment he wanted to enter the French Quarter like a kamikaze boozier and drink up all the alcohol alphabetically. Like he used to do. But his mouth was bloody now. The alcohol would sting his mouth.

He crossed Esplanade Avenue and entered the French Quarter. The sun burned all comfort out of the earth. The concrete cooked. The hot air opened a box of fragrances: fresh-cut St. Augustine grass, sweet olive, the earthy smell of the Esplanade Avenue's neutral ground. In the French Quarter, crowds took advantage of the day that shined like a knife.

Ahead on Royal Street two police officers dressed in polyester shorts—the kind phys-ed coaches once wore—they balanced themselves on their hybrid-style bicycles. They kept guard on Royal Street for the bad guys. The cops sat several blocks up, too far away to notice John's predicament. He would report the crime to them. He touched his tooth, which was now in his pocket. The cops pedaled away.

He made it three blocks into the Quarter. He passed Ursulines Street. With rays as bright as klieg lights the sun speared the day. For a moment he thought that a movie was being filmed. Two blocks ahead in the sun's path a man, skinny as a refugee in shabby boat-people clothing—a wife-beater, brown pants, red high tops—hurled himself in John's direction. It was the addict who robbed him not fifteen minutes earlier.

A pair of mirrored sunglasses now hid his mosquito-hawk face. He dodged between people. In long rubber-band strides the addict ran off the sidewalk onto the street, then back onto the sidewalk. That was his life, running. On his back, the unwanted ballast of John's backpack swayed him back and forth.

Like someone had put a cigarette out in John's gut, rage fired through him when he saw the man. His mind told him to think of something good, like forgiveness. But he could not think of forgiveness. The Four Absolutes—purity, honesty, unselfishness, love—had evacuated from his being. Instead, rage made him taut and hateful.

The thief swept past the tourists. He moved around slow walkers and sudden stoppers. His strides were mechanical, like a character freshly hatched from a computer game. No one except John and God noticed the runner. Everyone looked elsewhere, enchanted by the Vieux Carré and its tie to world history. To the civilized world.

John tasted his own blood. He tasted his adrenaline. His heart pounded. He tried to find mercy for the guy. He looked hard for mercy. He bitch slapped his soul and asked it to produce mercy. His soul spit in his face. A small breeze that felt like a sliver of ice skimmed his face. Breathing hurt his tooth's socket. It made him hate more.

Life stirred. A UPS truck cooked in the sun. The smell of popcorn wafted through the air. Humidity simmered inside every move John made. He squinted in the sun's glare; its heat refused to leave him alone. From the sidewalk the faint sting of street-cleaning ammonia found his injured nostrils. A pigeon landed in the gutter for peanut shells. It cooed in three different notes.

Silence came over everything. The thief's prize became evident: a green-and-red Gucci purse, one like Addy owned. The bag dangled from the arm of a woman, slim and middle-aged, dressed in shorts, her hair gripped into a ponytail. She could be his wife. In moments she will be just like him. Her blue-eyed face appeared innocent, unknowing, and doomed. John knew the feelings.

At a eleven o'clock angle the thief and the three women faced John. The thief was focused, determined. In a different life the thief was a talented relay sprinter ready to swipe a baton and collect a medal. Today, there was no light at the end of the thief's tunnel, because there was no light for him. There was not even a tunnel. Seconds flew by. The thief closed in. John could see the sweat on his boney cheeks. His nostrils spread for oxygen. His thin facial

skin fluttered into the outline of his skull. Somewhere in John's brain he heard two drumsticks tapping together like the beginning of a song, that only he could hear.

John paused. He had a flash, a rare observation that could have stopped his rage: the thief's face had once belonged to a boy cheated of many things, maybe even his innocence. It was a face with its key expressions—those traits of hope and love—slapped off of it. It was hollow and rundown. The face's signal was uncomplicated: if you look upon me, don't. Look the other way. I cannot be saved, so don't waste your time on me. I am all about pain and loss. And I will hurt you.

The runner was seconds away. John pulled his duffle bag. Its tiny wheels bounced on the Royal Street blacktop. Timing—everything was timing, life, death—he quickstepped at an angle towards the runner as he headed up the street. He measured his gait with the thief's looping strides. For the last time the addict ran off the sidewalk, then back onto the street. John couldn't stop him from getting the purse. He snatched it. Stunned, the woman grabbed her wrist. Her middle-aged face was no longer carefree. Shock and pain filled her eyes. Her cheeks shivered. Her eyes welled up like she just took a slap to the face. John felt sorry for her. Her two friends shrieked. They announced the trespass to the world. Other people howled and pointed fingers. "Police, purse snatching. Police, police," words like that. "We've been robbed."

No one knew John was there. They did not know about him or his past. He hustled. The thief turned and made his way up St. Philip Street. John swung his right leg as though kicking a soccer ball, something he had never done in his life. But he'd seen it on cable TV. He clipped the thief's red Converse. It was not like TV. John did not hear a Mexican color-man screaming "goal" fifteen times in a row. The shoe's canvas rubbed against the thief's pants, and the

Converse scratched the concrete. The runner, who must have been over six feet (John didn't remember him being so tall), never saw John coming. The thief fought against the force of his fall and tried to keep his balance with bent shoulders and short strides.

"No motherfucker. No, no, no," the thief grunted. The palms of his hands scraped the concrete. The woman's Gucci bag crashed on the pavement. Its contents jingled. The thief rose. He tried to gather some of the spilled booty and head up St. Philip Street. John's backpack remained clamped to the thief's back.

The hard end of John's sandal kicked the thief in the face before he rose. He thought he heard cartilage snap. Spit and blood flew. John did not say a thing. His rage made this grunting sound, like when he fucked his wife. The thief fell back down. He sucked air. He spoke, but his voice was raspy and squeaky and damaged. John should have stopped, but he didn't. He couldn't. Rage had already entered his body. It extended down to his right toe.

There were no people around. So John tried more kicks. The thief grabbed his throat. He kicked the thief's hands that try to protect this throat. He kicked his ribs, his testicles. The thief folded into a fetal position. John's rage was unstoppable. It began to embarrass him. He had been reduced to something less than human.

The number fifty came to mind. He started counting his kicks. The thief was skinnier and lighter than John wished.

"Remember me?" The question of course was rhetorical. His voice shot out where his tooth once hung. A lisp formed over John's words. That fact shoved his brain into the realm of the uncontrollable.

From the thief a rasp of breath came from his mouth. John kicked him, like he was kicking the air out of a bag. He counted the kicks. He was good at counting. That was how he made his living. On number sixteen he stopped.

“Remember me?” The thief failed to respond. There was only silence. John pulled his backpack from the thief’s back who offered no resistance. His arms bent like rubber straps. John trembled with adrenaline. As usual his rage was now sorry for what it did, but as usual it was too late.

John slipped his arms into the backpack’s straps. He pulled his duffle bag and ran as best as he could. The two New Orleans police from earlier sped up on their bikes and yelled, “Stop.”

John looked back. They had yelled at the thief who could not move. One of the cops leapt from his bike like a Saints special-teams player ready to tackle. But there was nothing special, and there was no tackle to be made. John’s heartbeat pounded in his throat. He headed up St. Philip Street. A frantic older gentleman back on Royal Street pointed in John’s direction. Down the block he passed two people who wore “I ♥ New Orleans” t-shirts. Most of the people had no idea of what had just happened. John blended in. His friend New Orleans hid him. She was beautiful, sexy, filthy, always forgiving. His instincts were her instincts. He cuddled up to her and smelled her perfumed nipples. She would help him. She always had.

John turned up Bourbon Street, away from the action, and acted nonchalant. He looked into the window of Annette’s Rue Bourbon Antique Store. French 18th and 19th century chandeliers sparkled. Wall sconces, lanterns, and mirrors with oddly beveled glass overwhelmed him. Mantel pieces, trumeauxs, hunting paintings, an ink desk, detailed tapestries, and rococo clocks filled every square inch of the business of his mind. The pieces brought back big memories, but his adrenaline didn’t let him reminisce. He looked from one object to the next

with the idea it would bring calm to his mind. *Make a list. Breathe deeply. Count. Braxton Dooley. One, two . . .* The amount of time that had passed in the life of the antiques mystified him as it always had. We were all about our past. John had a scary thought: the thief could have been him in another life. He hoped time or Jesus or New Orleans would forgive him. Again.

John's arms and legs hurt. Specks of blood covered his Mystic Seaport sports shirt. Yet he pretended like nothing bad had happened. Even though he could now be a wanted man. To avoid attracting attention, he needed to clean himself, change shirts, shake the last tremors of his rage.

On the corner of Chartres and Conti Streets he ducked into the Chart Room Lounge. Years ago he frequented the place. Among dives the place was a bungee jump. The Chart Room ran along a small slice of building on the corner of Chartres and Conti Streets. Its French doors opened to the sidewalk. With the exception of two people who looked like they worked there—and Louis Armstrong's voice bellowing "Hello Dolly"—the place was empty. John identified Ray the long-ago owner who now flipped cards on the bar's far corner. He generally acted like he still owned the place. From behind the counter an aging beauty cleaned glasses.

"Hey, Ray, how's it going," John said like he last saw Ray the day before yesterday, not the decade before last.

Ray stopped flipping the cards. His jaw dropped; his head bobbed. "Yeah. Yeah. Yeah." He looked the same except his hair had turned gray and a big flap of skin hung from his neck.

“Johnnymoon, the singer, friends with Seth David, right?” Ray tilted his head and looked over his reading glasses. “I thought you were dead.”

“Just a rumor, Ray. Just a rumor.”

“I see that.”

The smell of Clorox rose from the floor. A queasy sensation filled John’s stomach.

“You scared me, man. I thought you were dead.”

“I heard ya, man,” John said. “Your bathroom? It’s in the same place.”

Ray nodded to the back of the place. “I won’t ask what happened.”

“Thanks.” John was glad Ray didn’t probe. The old rumor had been that Ray spent time in the big house for a seven-figure fraud mishap. “Ray, would you call me a cab?”

Ray signaled the woman behind the bar.

“Thank you, I appreciate it.” John looked at both of them.

“You’ve always been polite, Johnnymoon. That probably has something to do with the fact that I’m even speaking to you now. Polite. I remember that. Yeah, I remember that.”

“Thanks, Ray. It’s actually good to see you.”

“Likewise.”

Since their last meeting, John had rearranged the fundamental order of himself. He had reinvented himself, had sleeked his edges, had improved his worth. But there he stood after twenty-five years of evolution: a caveman, unable to stand erect. Only minutes earlier he was acting primitive, not unlike that boozy night when Ray tossed out him and his friend Seth David. John and Seth had proceeded on a three-day ramble, each melting to the center of their madness. John eventually left New Orleans. Seth stayed. He perished in a motorcycle accident six years later.

“You need the police?” Ray asked.

“No. No cops,” John said. “Please.”

“I hear you. No heat. Take it easy.”

John swung open the two saloon-style doors to the restroom. He cleaned the blood from his fat lip. At the top of his backpack he found a dark-blue sports shirt with Mohegan Sun stitched in gold over the chest area.

He stepped out of the bathroom. On Conti Street a United cab blew its horn. He told Ray goodbye.

The pretty bartender said, “See ya, Johnnymoon.” John took a second glance but failed to recognize her. He realized she was no more aging than he was.

“See ya,” he said.

Cool air filled the lobby of the Le Pavillon Hotel. John put on his sunglasses. Their weight sent pain to his upper jaw. He sucked blood from his missing tooth’s socket. At check-in, Le Pavillon staff moved with ease and professionalism.

So they wouldn’t see his busted mouth, he spoke to them with his head turned sideways, looked down, or stared into his wallet like he was searching for something. Without much ado they directed him to his room.

On the sixth floor his feet sunk into the hallway’s carpet. The quiet of the hall hummed in his head. Two young adults with beach towels hanging over their shoulders passed him. A flux of chlorine entered his nose.

Inside, the room's window offered a glimpse of Poydras Street. The saucer curve of the Superdome's roof still impressed him. Quickly he moved to the bathroom. He looked in the mirror. His jaw ached. His head throbbed. Lights enclosed his face. Bright and white the dressing-room bulbs gave his bruises a theatric glow. Missing a major tooth, one central to his appearance, with one cut and a small blue spot on his left cheekbone he saw someone he didn't want to recognize. Himself. He inserted his top tooth. It stayed in place for a second to allow him to see how he used to look. His whiskers had moved in and gave him a black-and-gray shadow. He could have passed as an overweight pirate or an aging rockstar. Somewhere deep inside of him he liked the look. It energized him with a badass feeling. His swagger returned.

He dried the blood from the socket. For swelling he found two ibuprofens, courtesy of the hotel. From the cabinet he pulled the hotel's mouthwash and rinsed. His tooth's cavity burned like the punch all over again. His mouth stung. Pain brought tears to his eyes. Carefully he inserted a piece of cotton into the socket of his missing tooth. The pain struck again. A small piece of guilt in his soul made him feel that he deserved it.

Time was not on his side. It never was. He could not help but wonder, where in the fuck was Desi? He lay down to relax and calm his adrenaline.

After ten minutes he checked his cell phone for messages. Finally, a message from Desi. "Your transportation is a 85 red Nissan Sentra parked below you on Baronne Street. The key is above the front tire." Desi's voice sounded clinical and detached, a plain tone perfect for instructions, perfect for a machine.

John wanted to call Charity Hospital. To find out how badly he had hurt the thief, to find out how bad he may have hurt him. We were all linked by six degrees of likeness. He felt pain

and regret tightening his muscles. He wanted to use. Something with finesse, something discreet, something like heroin.

Now: Busted

Friday Night, August 26, 2005, 7:20pm

Louise stood in between the French door that adjoined the study and dining room. She waited for her friend Tina to return her call. Tina would. She was very dependable.

The idea of taking a ride excited Louise. It was as sharp as a bone chip. Pigeon Town, Back of Town, Hollygrove, Front of Town, Girt Town, Riverbend, Carrollton, and Black Pearl. Louise knew the *real* New Orleans. But she couldn't leave the twins alone. She needed to call Judd. She was sure he was working hard in Philadelphia on his quest for justice. Justice, whether fair or unfair, involved pain and grief.

She sat at the dining table. The children played video games in their room. She knew Judd didn't want to be away from his family. Addiction—even though it could be to something as harmless as work—made people act in nonsensical ways, fooling themselves with the most inane of half-truths. She pressed his number.

“Working late?” Louise asked. At least Judd's addiction to his work was honest, and he made money with it. Although like any addiction it caused damage.

“I'll leave on Sunday morning.”

“I hate when you travel.”

“It’s my first travel case in two years.”

“Your travel habits have improved.”

He didn’t respond. Louise felt a coldness come across the phone. Regardless, she thought it was a good time to mention her homeschooling ambitions. Just mention the idea. She first mentioned it in May; so, actually re-introduce it. It was something good to talk about. The twins were the strongest bond of their marriage. She never knew when the next time she would be able to speak to him face-to-face again. “Judd, it’s such a perfect time for me to be in the twin’s lives.”

“Louise.” His voice was hushed, concerned. “Homeschooling is quite a task.”

“I have this desire to teach them. To be with them. And with your schedule.”

“My schedule is not imposing on us.”

“As I said your travel habits *have* improved.”

“Pardon me for sounding so parochial,” Judd said, “but I thought only Christian extremist and Taliban types taught their children at home.”

“You remember my old classmate from school. . .”

“You didn’t remember her when she visited you.”

“She remembered me.”

“Now. What about *then*?”

“It doesn’t matter. You saw how beautiful and sophisticated her son turned out.”

“Agreed,”

“She charmed you.”

“Did.”

“And her son who was homeschooled *was* incredible.”

“Agreed. Very well poised. Adjusted, bright, unpretentious. Good social skills. Got accepted to the University of Texas.”

“It’s possible I could pull them out of Country Day by January.

“No, Louise, next year.”

“That is next year.” Louise rose and walked around the living room with her cellphone in her ear. The phone ending high on her cheek, she always felt like she was talking into space.

“Louise, I can tell.”

She didn’t like his tone. It was *the* tone. “Tell what?”

“What do you think I mean?”

“No riddles, please.” She stopped and sat down. She covered her mouth with her hand.

“You’re drinking.” He sounded frightened. “You can’t drink. You know that.”

She didn’t like to scare him. “Me and my life are very stable and grounded. I can handle it.”

“You’re an alcoholic. You’ll never be *cured*. You know that.”

Louise knew he was right. She had told everyone and their third cousin to never let her drink. Now those warning systems she had put in place began to work.

“You told me to protect you. I’m going to protect you.”

“It’s different now,” Louise said.

“Let’s look for a rehab center, pronto.” More tone.

“Let’s talk about this some more tomorrow.”

She and Judd went back and forth. He wanted to help her. She slipped further into denial. They hung up.

Louise told herself she didn't want to wake up with the shakes; so, before she went to bed she drank two more glasses of chardonnay. She thought she was months from the shakes. She enjoyed the wine. Her taste buds had matured. She could really taste the flavor of the grapes. Kind of a sour jam, liquefied. It filled her mouth with complex flavors. She loved the deepness of the flavor and its interesting aftertaste.

Louise held the remote control in her hand, ready to turn the TV off for the night. Then meteorologist Bob Breck revealed a NASA satellite image: Florida as a green log sticking into the ocean. The storm appeared as a smear of cotton messing up the blue Atlantic just east of Florida. The pictures convincing and vividness—down to the small lines of clouds that like veins in an eye—amazed her. Bob Breck changed the visuals back to the basic map and icons. The hurricane's path appeared at the end of the weatherman's hands. Its projected path would grind up the Florida peninsula like a mill-saw taking to a pine log. Louise felt sympathy for the Floridians.

Now: Bryan LaBryan and the Bag

Friday Night, August 26, 2005, 8:00pm

The ice melted, and cold water dripped down John's neck. The water woke him at the same time the radio alarm blasted with sound. He needed to meet Bryan LaBryan about the rights to *Blue*. Maybe most of all he just wanted to see Bryan. It had been years.

John's entire head felt like a bruise. Desperately he wanted something for the pain. He wanted to use something powerful, something possibly illegal, to eliminate the torture. He must

have damaged a nerve ending when his tooth got smashed out of his face. He hated to admit it but Bryan might be able to cop something. John had a reason to use: pain.

The blue lights on the radio-clock read 8:01pm. An urgent voice interrupted "I've Been Loving You," the Otis Redding oldie-but-boldie. "This is really scary," National Hurricane Center Director Max Mayfield said over WTIX-AM 690. The low-power reception produced a scratchy transmission that brought back memories of childhood and Hurricane Betsy. WTIX's reception had sounded so much stronger back then. "It is not a phase of the storm that will dissipate. We expect Katrina to enter the gulf and gain strength." Mayfield warned those intent on remaining, the hardheaded and risk takers. "We thought this was a solid category-one hurricane when it made landfall here in Miami, but we had windows blow in that were designed for 145 miles-per-hour winds. Now may be the time to start thinking about your evacuation plans." John had no plans to evacuate. He pushed the radio's switch to off. He shouldn't have overslept.

The nerve ending of his tooth sent transmissions of pain to his ears and the top of his forehead. Even the muscles in his throat hurt when he swallowed. He thought of his compulsion to drink that afternoon at the Country Club. The ability not to use left him by the second, like a balloon loosing its air. It made him feel he shouldn't have come to New Orleans without Addy. He wanted to run away. Where? He didn't know. Home to Connecticut, maybe. Out of his skin would feel better. Running wouldn't help. If he wanted to use in New Orleans, he would want to use in Connecticut. He wanted the pulsing in his head to stop. Hunger rumbled in his stomach. He remembered the days of his youth when he ate like a small rodent, practically starved himself without thinking twice about it. A single po-boy sandwich provided nourishment for at least a day.

He sat on the bed's edge. His thoughts merged into the silence of the rooms. His head tightened. He would use something that was discreet, not alcohol, something like an opiate.

John hurried and dressed. Instead of going to Bryan's house, he would invite him to dinner, a place like Liuzza's, which made great shrimp po-boys. His taste buds lathered up for a taste of the divine—meaty shrimp in crackly batter, covered with mayo, mixed up with the cool crunch of lettuce, turned up with the sharp fire of Tabasco Sauce. His stomach growled. A case of the chills came over him. He wondered if he was in a low-grade state of shock from his mugging.

At eight-twenty, using the phone number from Poux-Poux, he called Bryan. This time the voicemail message said that Bryan's cellphone had been disconnected. At the risk of acting seventeen again, he would visit Bryan's house without calling first.

John Googled Bryan's address. He drove to Metairie.

A bright crescent moon cut a slice in the sky. Two curvy poles clutched an oversized painter's palette with the name *Hillmore* scripted on it. The moon peeked through branches that lurched over the subdivision's peeling name.

Small houses built in the 1950s filled the narrow lots on Division Street. Oak branches soared above the street and crowded the glow of streetlights. Bryan's squat house, the only one with an overgrown front lawn, hid well in the night.

In front of John's car, a paper bag hung from a low-lying elm branch. The streetlight's glow struck the bag like a display. Black Marks-O-Lot lines dramatized the eyes that were cutout in the shape of stars, and the mouth formed a sloppy clown's smile. The bag's mock humanity startled John. Its attempt at gleefulness only made it appear more sinister. It stared at him, as though it wanted to talk to him, maybe confess a sin to him, perform an evil act on him.

John stepped out of the old Nissan Sentra. The darkness swallowed the door's click. He walked up to the tree and stared at the bag. He grabbed the bag by its top, held it in front of him and studied its life-like qualities. The ammoniac smell of sex jolted him like a small electronic charge. He stuck the bag back on the twig. It stared him down like it wanted something.

Traffic hummed on Airline Highway. A distant train blew lonesome goodbyes while a freighter on the Mississippi moaned with cries of passage. To his left a scrawny tabby rocketed from a trashcan. The metal racket broke the moment's thin silence. Across the street, a dog hacked a warning message.

A steady breeze pushed through the night. The smell of lawns—the very odor of boyhood and happiness—filled John's nose. Leaves on a tall elm chattered in tremolo. With his tongue John played with the fleshy gap where his front tooth once belonged. Was life all about loss, he wondered? Be born, collect people and things, lose people and things. Lose your tooth? So why was he here? What was here? He needed to rest. An impulse to bolt into the darkness and leave his own skin behind struck him. It was not a stable thought, but he ran low on stable thoughts. He needed to eat something. He needed something for the pain. He wanted to use.

For some reason Bryan's small house lacked a front door. Inside two druid figures shuffled by candlelight. They failed to notice him when he approached the front door.

"I'm going to find him and that's *it*," a man said.

A woman at the kitchen sink stopped cleaning dishes and listened. She said something. Her voice sounded frail, like a wounded bird.

"I don't care," the man said.

"*Bryan*," the woman said.

John knocked. The couple paused like startled ghosts.

“Uh, yeah, can I help you?” the man asked. John stood at the bottom of three stairs. The man ducked his head through the door. In his hand a candle rested on a saucer. Flames cut shadows on his gaunt face. They flickered before his long curly hair, streaked with oily gray strands. Many things came to mind at the sight of the man: healthy was not one of them.

“Bryan?” John asked. “Bryan LaBryan, right?”

“Maybe.” Bryan extended the candle and saucer to John’s face for a better look.

“It’s me, Johnnymoon St. Albares.”

“Johnnymoon St. Albares. Johnnymoon St. Albares. Johnny, Moon. No.”

“Yeah.”

“No.”

“Yeah.” John laughed.

“I thought you were dead.” Bryan’s eyes widened. The candle’s flame weaved shadows on his face. The concern in Bryan’s voice surprised John.

“I’m not. I hope you’re not disappointed.”

Bryan chuckled. “Come in, man. Come in.”

John stepped in and immediately a sense of claustrophobia gripped him. The small living room made him feel captured, like he and his skin couldn’t flee if they wanted to.

The woman said, “Bryan, I need those things from the store. *Please*. We need our electricity back on, too. I can’t. . .” The sound of dishes clanked and clattered. Small candles, the type parishioners burned at church, lit the sink’s backsplash like an altar.

“Johnnymoon, this is my wife Paula.” Bryan looked towards the kitchen. “Paula, honey.”

“Pleased to meet you.” She looked up for a second then returned her stare to the sink.

Bryan scratched a yellow lighter and relit the candle. "Paula, give me the checkbook." Bryan looked out towards John's car. The candle's light contorted his sunken cheeks and skinny neck.

"No," she said. "You can't have it."

"I hope I haven't come at a bad time," John said.

"Aw, no, man. Not at all. It's so good to see you."

John wanted to leave immediately. He avoided small talk. "I thought we'd go get a po-boy and talk about Hold the Lettuce and *Blue*."

"Sure."

"My treat."

Through the darkness John felt Bryan size him up, like young men meeting for the first time. Bryan's effort contained an energy, a kind of night vision that read John's body heat. He probed for an angle, his angle, his take on things. John saw his inner need glow in the white of his eyes. It was a desperation that came off of him like the piercing tang of his body odor, a junkie's odor. Like the dope had stung all the bad smells out of his glands. John knew the fragrance.

The first thing John wanted to ask was, what happened? Bryan looked as though he had used up all of his life. He now was running on darkness. John wished for the Bryan he remembered, kind and gentle with a brilliant mind. His surprise at Bryan, his aching mouth, and his hunger made him dizzy.

"Is that your car?" Bryan asked. "Nice."

“Tonight it’s mine. Desi, you remember my cousin, right? The Lettuce’s first drummer? He loaned it to me.” The car was fifteen years old and without an air-conditioner. By no means could John describe it as nice.

“Yeah, Desi, right? You and him had it out.”

“I’ve learned about the power of forgiveness.”

“Yeah, right, like Jesus on the cross. I get it. Is Desi still nuts?”

“He’s Desi. That’s all I can say.” John smiled.

“My son stole my car tonight,” Bryan said. “You know kids today: dope, drive-bys, food poisoning, rap music. *Uh!* I don’t know when he’ll be back with it.”

“Daddy, daddy, here’s my piggybank.” With the presence of a unicorn, a pre-school girl appeared. “Whooooooooaaaaa.” The weight of a pink Day-Glo piggy bank swung her in a small circle. “You can have my money.” Her blonde hair shined through the darkness.

“Oh, honey, that’s okay,” Bryan said. “Mommy’s going to be okay. She’s just upset about your big brother.” Bryan lifted the piggybank. His boney arms shook it and coins rattled. He examined the pig’s underbelly then looked at John. “Some of these things have a rubber plug you can get the money without breaking it. Fuck.” He gave the bank back to the child. “Thank you, love, but there’s not enough to help Daddy.”

John knew that breaking open a piggybank ranked as an important event for a child, even though the bank would only hold a few dollars in unwieldy change, lost M&M’s, and misplaced safety pins. In the fifth-grade John bought a Kodak-124 instamatic camera with his piggybank savings. His father had wanted him to save his money. The camera purchase had given him a sense of satisfaction. With the Kodak he took pictures of the old Audubon Zoo. He memorialized orangutans in cramped cages, polar bears with dirt blotching their white coats,

seals that resembled torpedoes shining underwater. He remembered how the seals' bark could be heard throughout Audubon Zoo. The smell of St. Augustine grass, the same fragrance he encountered outside of Bryan's house, would fill his nose. He even had a picture of his mother in front of the Greek revival gazebo that housed the seals' pool. The speck of her blue irises made a superb focal point against her wavy black hair.

In some form Bryan's daughter would remember the eventual looting of her piggybank. Terror and disappointment had to be part of this family. Bryan spun around to John and rolled his eyes. "Women, they get confused so easy."

John thought of Addy and all the women he had ever known. None of them could be confused easily. He told Bryan about his plans for *Blue*. "Remember we spoke back in June?"

"Yeah, right, yeah." Bryan raised his finger for John to wait. He craned over his left shoulder to his wife. "I need the checkbook."

The house's low ceilings, small rooms, and lack of air-conditioning made the air thick with humidity. Sweat oozed from John's body.

Bryan tiptoed to his wife. It reminded John of the Pink Panther, but Bryan was not pink. He fit into the darkness like he was part of it. The dark fed him energy. He kissed his wife on the cheek. Her hands clutched the sink as though enduring pain. Bryan mumbled something. In the candlelight John saw tears sparkle on her cheek.

"Give it," Bryan said.

"No! You're not going to have it." She grabbed a large knife on the sink's counter and pointed it at him. "There's nothing left."

"Whoa." Bryan held his hands up. "Okay, okay. Chill."

Bryan walked away like a teenager embarrassed by his momma. “Hey, look, let’s talk in private.” Bryan motion John toward the door. “Maybe you can give me a lift? Let’s talk about *Blue*.”

Bryan’s young daughter waited by the door. She clutched Bryan’s leg. “Don’t leave, Daddy.”

“Sugar.” Bryan placed a big loud kiss on the child’s cheek.

“Can I go, Daddy?”

“Not tonight.” Bryan unlatched her hand from his pant leg.

“I’m hot. Why is the air conditioner *bawoke*?”

John squatted and looked into the child’s brown eyes. “You are really pretty.”

“What do you say?” Bryan asked the child.

“*Tank* you,” she said.

“Bye, sweetheart,” John said.

Bryan walked towards the car. “Man, could you give me a ride to my bank? I need some money.”

“Howbout a po-boy?” John asked.

“I don’t eat. I gave it up. Look at me. I’m down to one-thirty.” Bryan held his arms in scarecrow formation to show his five-foot-ten-inch frame of skin and bones.

John stared at Bryan’s emaciated body. He looked like he belonged in a death camp. “I need to lose some weight,” John said. It was such an absurd idea to compare their weight problems. John dropped the dinner idea.

The car lights shined on the brown paper bag hanging from the tree in front of the car. John wanted to ask Bryan about it. The mask stared at him, like it insisted on taking a ride with him, tell him something, whisper in his ear and do something vile to him. John shivered.

“Yeah, I thought my boy stole our front door.” Bryan moved his hand through his hair; its frizz had given way to long locks, wavy and greasy. His once laconic speech patterns had all but disappeared. “He just took it to get it fixed. Sounds fishy to me.”

“No shit,” John said.

They left Hillmore and cruised down a dismal stretch of Airline Highway towards New Orleans. They passed squalid bars and dim hotels, a lowlife landscape of hard luck and lost ambitions.

Bryan told John how his seventeen year-old son had a police record. “I’m afraid he’s a lost cause.” Bryan shook his head in disgust. “The girl was an accident. She’s so precious. Like a doll that breathes and talks. And she loves me. I wished the world loved me like she does. You have any kids?”

“Yeah.” John didn’t want to tell him about the daughter he and Addy lost. “A son. Julian.” He nodded his jaw upward. “Where to?”

He recited a cross-town address. “Riverbend,” he said.

Located in the area where Orleans Parish dropped into adjoining Jefferson Parish. John remember the Whitney Bank on Carrollton Avenue and Oak Street. He filled Bryan in on his plans for *Blue*. “I want to do something with it.”

“You want to buy me out?”

“Maybe. I’d like to do whatever I want with *Blue* and give you an overriding royalty if something should ever come of it.”

Every experience in Bryan's hardcore life appeared in the lines of his face. "I've got a family to raise," he said. "I could use the money. I don't have my Rickenbacker, and I sold my Marshall-Fifty in 2000. I'm not doing anything creatively."

John smiled. "It's good to see you again. I wanted to see you."

"Oh, man, I can't believe it's you."

"You are the most talented artist I've ever known. In my opinion you *made* the Lettuce. You *were* Hold the Lettuce."

As though defeated, Bryan stared out of the window. "No, John, you get more than half the credit."

"If Hold the Lettuce had someone like Brian Epstein as its manager instead of Poux Poux where do think we'd be now?"

"We'd all be dead or institutionalized. I'm almost there without a record deal."

John remembered Hold the Lettuce and smiled. They were not musicians with a vision for a better planet. The quintet was a group of urban dwellers and hardened chemical users. It was convenient that Punk was fashionable. Without effort it suited their behavior.

Where some groups showed a certain promise and glowed with a friendly optimism and expectations of success, Hold the Lettuce remained attached to melancholy. John remembered how the group was skilled at the art of darkness. They were a five-piece tragedy. The band lost its rhythm guitarist Bobby Walker Red (Vicodin overdose) and their first bass player, Jimmy LeGrange, a/k/a Jimmy de Ranged (motorcycle accident). There was Mikey Tillings a/k/a Mike Kraphone, a manic depressive who hung himself.

The group members were not the friendliest people, although John thought of himself as the most diplomatic, and Bryan was never mean. Dark, moody, brooders they were wizards of bad behavior. They seemed incapable of love and most forms of affection. Just as fans loved them, the group returned the favor and frightened them back. They didn't need piercings or tattoos (they had plenty of "ink" before its recent vogue) to impose their collective shock upon their audience. Some said the members were aloof and even self-centered. John smiled at the absurd politeness of that statement.

The group's musical inspirations were vast. John liked to think they were something more than three chords and an attitude, rather creators of an original and genuine sound with artful constructs. He knew Bryan was key to their uniqueness. Bryan raised their acoustic compositions above all other local bands at the time. Their folk influences ranged from Woody Guthrie to the Stone's *Exile on Main Street*. And with superb results, Hold the Lettuce interpreted Dick Dale surf anthems, minimal electric pieces that tingled with reverb. They kicked out songs with nasty hum-bucking pickup stuff suggestive of the Ramones and Sex Pistols. John liked to think they started a post-blues movement. That's what he called it. Black Sabbath meets the Allman Brothers Band meets Iggy Poppy. They all got married to a male Billy Holliday: Johnnymoon St. Albans.

He could never forget the thrift-store suits he wore, skinny ties, sleeveless t's, straight-leg pants. His cuffs usually broke well above his father's cowboy boots, which he borrowed and later inherited at his father's passing. His look took on a kind of early-Beatles-Stones doing Jethro Bodine-whitetrash doing a stockbroker-who-lost-everything-including-his-mind look. Sometimes he wore eyeglasses. It was all about theatrics, but he needed his glasses to actually see. Smart-looking tortoise shell frames, or rimless ones like Robert McNamara popularized in

the sixties, or black 1950s Buddy Holly quadrangles. A hidden sports-band kept his spectacles attached to his head while he dove, often literally, into his stage antics. His distressed face along with his physical appearance—muscular, often shirtless, blood somewhere—prevented him from coming off as a geek. He thought of it as a successful display of irony for a society attached to appearances and irony.

John crooned through the power of his lyrics. Bryan created rhythms. People listened. One rooster-haired fan had told John—the fan’s high squeaky voice still resonated in his memory—Dude, you’re Elvis from the other dimension.

With regard to his and Bryan’s songwriting ability, the *Gambit* in a critique of Hold the Lettuce referred to John as an *Elvisoid*—a direct descendent of the king himself—and they called Bryan a Joycean rocker. Women swooned. Guys too were consumed by the pure power of the group’s calamity. Simply put: people could relate to their doom. It was marketable. It was their brand. They just couldn’t keep it alive. Because *they* couldn’t stay alive.

Often they fought among themselves. Their disagreements along with a deep-rooted inability to regulate their chemical intake, and stay alive, ultimately destroyed the group’s career. Even though other local groups—The Cold, Better than Ezra, Dash Rip Rock—found national success, Hold the Lettuce found drugs and death.

All of them had arrest records and serious confrontations with the law. Except Bryan. Bryan was all genius, and he stayed out of trouble. John had three arrests and an FBI file. Fortunately though—through cash and connections and the help of his father—he had no convictions. His last arrest, his fourth and final, was a Lewd and Lascivious charge he received while performing with the band. Ultimately his chemical dependency consumed him and his fellow band members. Somehow, Bryan escaped the doom back then.

In spite of everything, Hold the Lettuce carried on until John made his *hegira* to Connecticut with Addy. Bryan disappeared to Japan. Poux-Poux, who John thought was born with a nervous breakdown, moved to San Francisco to “catch his mellow.” Desi after the Incident was kicked out the group. Then went to prison. Time outpaced everyone.

John looked at Bryan and realized the power of addiction.

“I can’t believe it, but I don’t have my ATM card,” Bryan said. As though scratching a bad rash he moved his hands in and out of his pockets, patted his chest, and shuffled in his seat.

“Should I turn around?”

“How much money do you have?” Bryan asked. “I can sell you my rights to *Blue* right now.”

The idea of feeding Bryan’s addiction made John’s body tighten up, yet he himself wanted to use. “I’ve got about three-hundred.”

“It’s yours. Where’s a piece of paper and pen? I’ll make it official.”

John didn’t want it to be that easy.

“Can you make it four-hundred?” The desperation in Bryan’s counteroffer made the car’s interior feel smaller. “I’ll pay you a hundred back tomorrow. I don’t want a hand out. What do I look like?”

John smiled. Tension filled the air like the sour tang of Bryan’s odor.

“I *will* pay you back,” Bryan said.

“I’ve reached my daily ATM-withdrawal limit,” John said. “Three hundred is all I can get right now.”

“That’ll have to do, I guess,” Bryan sighed. His disappointment was part teenage head-case, part temperamental musician, part whiny dope fiend.

“Here.” John held his wallet against the steering wheel and pulled out the three-hundred.

Bryan stared at the bills like he wanted to eat them. He opened the glove compartment and found a piece of scratch paper. He pulled a pen out of the notebook’s spirals. “Okay. I . . . hereby grant and convey. . .” He scratched the pen on the paper to keep it working. “To John St. Albares all rights to the lyrics and music of *Blue*, and any work I collaborated on with him. Signed Bryan LaBryan August 26, 2005.”

“Thanks, Bryan.”

Bryan stared at him with a stricken expression. The muscles of his face lacked all strength, like his skin along with his soul was being struck out by a dark power. “Nothing personal but I don’t think that album is going to amount to much.”

“Probably not. But I wanted to make sure you knew about it if it did.”

John sped past a Billups gas station where a line of evacuating cars waited to fill up. The attendant glowed in the fluorescent cube of lighting. A group of men loitered in the shadows. Bryan mumbled a name and stared at the gathering.

“Did you see who you were looking for?” John asked.

Bryan grimaced and pointed ahead to an onramp.

John drove up the Palmetto Street overpass. In front of them an eighteen-wheeler growled and blew black smoke into the air. On Carrollton Avenue John joined a knot of traffic while a regiment of oaks veiled the avenue lights. The humid night mixed with the fragrance of earth and Bryan.

Bryan instructed John to a cranny of the city situated below St. Charles Avenue where River Road back-doored its way into Orleans Parish. “Riverbend,” Bryan said.

They turned onto Oak Street. Stooped behind the dark sidewalk, rows of quaint shops lined the street. The street’s darkness and stillness had the ability to frighten.

“You ever do crack?” Bryan’s voice sputtered with nervousness.

“No. I never liked cocaine.” John could barely hang onto his sobriety. Fortunately, he didn’t like the way cocaine sped his body up, and particularly with its high price tag and brief effect it failed to appeal to him. He made one last deal with himself: if he couldn’t get an opiate of some kind, he wouldn’t use.

“That’s a miracle. You were fucking the worst, man. The worst,” Bryan said disgustedly.

John’s face ached; he wanted something for his pain.

The distant look of a daydreamer covered Bryan’s face. “You sure you don’t want a little taste?”

“I need something for my pain.” John touched his face and smiled.

“What happened to your tooth? It looks fresh.”

“It’s a long story.”

“Jesus.”

“It hurts.” He told Bryan about the possibility of him being in shock.

“Whattya want? A Dilaudid? Oxycontin? *Heron*?”

“Anything,” John said. It was out. His disease made him speak. He said it in public. He asked for some feel good. Bryan made John’s need easier to talk about. It was as though Bryan’s disease had inhabited John’s body like a spirit. A deviant feeling excited John. He felt

fiendish and sneaky in the privacy of New Orleans. It wasn't alcohol he needed. He wanted a narcotic, something discreet, something that would sooth his pain. Something he could hide the effects of.

"You sure you don't want any crack?"

"No," John said. "Pain." He touched his cheek.

Bryan patted the dashboard and jabbed a nervous finger to a street on their right. "Here."

John jerked the steering wheel, and the Nissan lunged onto the street. The blue-and-white street sign read Dante Street. Houses had crashed on the landscape. Down the block a black car crossed their path. Rap music walloped out of the car as its shiny hubcaps spun like roulette wheels.

"Another right here." The tenor of Bryan's voice had transformed into an impudent teenager.

John turned again. The street shrunk to the size of an alley. Shotgun houses crammed narrow lots. Only one car at a time could pass down the alley. In a fireguttred Victorian on his right people shuffled with candles in their hands.

"Slow down," Bryan whispered. John was practically parked. Without striking the dashboard Bryan pushed his hands down towards it. John could tell the fresh scent of the hunt excited Bryan. "Quiet, quiet." Bryan reached for the volume of the radio, which had already been turned off. "There, there, there." Bryan shot his jittery finger to a parking spot on the right side of the alley.

John parked. Human shadows appeared in the busted Victorian. A man—pale arms, a scrim of facial skin under a brown bag—walked out of the scorched Victorian. The bag from Bryan's house startled John again.

Three houses down a Rottweiler shackled to a wooden stick howled from a dirt yard. A man emerged from the alley. With an obvious taste for adolescent flash, baggie shorts drooped past his knees. He wore a cap turned to the side like a street kid from an earlier generation. Patent-leather shined from sneakers that bulged with swollen tongues. The man spoke to the Rottweiler. The dog became quiet as though a spell had just been cast upon him. The patent leather flashed in the dark. The man's black eyes, wide and receptive, scanned the street like a hunter's. His stare looked like something angry had been jammed inside his body, and it now peered from his face. A prosthetic limb on his right hand curled up to a pointed end. It resembled an insect's claw, something that could double as a weapon and commit a wicked act like scraping the eye out of someone's skull. Suddenly John realized he was in felony territory.

The man spanked his palm with a blackjack. He then pointed at Bryan with his hook. The limb was bright and ostentatious, custom made like the bright rims on a low-rider that had just passed on the corner. Quickly, the man walked toward them like he wanted trouble.

"What the fuck does he want?" John asked. His body tensed.

Over Bryan's head the man slammed the blackjack on the car's roof.

John jumped. "Hey, man, fucking watch it." John locked into a two-way stare down with black eyes and a face sponged with acne scars.

"Shut the fuck up, Mr. Magoo." The man slanted against Bryan's window and looked into the car. His good hand drum rolled on the roof. The fragrance of expensive cologne mingled with his skin and body oils. He whispered to Bryan and touched his cheek like a lover.

"I'm here, man, I'm here," Bryan said. "My bad, man, my bad."

John wondered if this man would kill them without a second thought. He experienced a surge of adrenaline. He wanted to commit violence. He controlled his compulsion. That great

list of the four absolutes—unselfishness, honesty, purity, love—no longer belonged to him. They were as distant as Latimer Lighthouse.

“Hear me, hear me *niggaz*, this shit *cain’t* go on,” the man said. His inflection had the menace of a saw-off shotgun.

John controlled his feelings. At the same time he wanted to both fight and flee.

“Okay, *nuff* said. I ain’t daddy’s gold card, nigga. No A-1 Appliances here, dawg, no mothafuckin interest-free bullshit. Okay Mr. *Bry-ann*. You down with me on this? You need to learn how to transact your *bidness* the right way. I should slap your head around right now, Mr. *Bry-ann*. Scrape your brains out of your skull like monkey brains.” His claw slammed down next to Bryan’s hand in the car-door window. “They eat monkey brains in Vietnam, man.”

“I’m here to make nice, Hook,” Bryan said. “I’ve got some Washingtons for ya, man.” Bryan bent over and raised the pant leg from his ankle.

Hook recoiled from the car. A pistol appeared with a fat silencer on the barrel. Serious weapon in the most fundamental terms described the gun. John’s heart thumped in his throat.

“Yo, yo, yo, dawg,” Hook said. “You going to have more holes than a sponge. A loofah sponge. Your old lady can come get you and use you to clean her ass.”

“Nah, nah, relax Hook, it’s a gift,” Bryan said. “I’m on the motherfuckin rebound, dawg. I’m making good.” Bryan produced a black cartridge the size of a big cigar. A line of bright brass ran up the side of the sheath. “Watch.” Bryan moved his thumb over the cylinder. The sound sliced through the night as an ice-pick blade shot out.

“Give this man a bone,” Hook said. “*Boy*, you might go to heaven after all.”

“My boy stole it from a house he hit,” Bryan said. “It’s German.” He pointed to an inscription.

Hook held it in his good hand and inspected it with the curiosity of a child. “What it say?”

“I have enough trouble with English, much less German,” Bryan said. “I do know some Japanese.”

“Nuff said, Mr. Bryan. You know Japanese like I know motherfuckin Martian.”

“You ain’t seen the boy, have you Hook?” Bryan asked. “My boy?”

“Who do I look like the Child Protective Services? The little man better keep an eye on you, gangsta. You’re a grown-ass adult.”

It sounded absurd that someone like Hook could criticize Bryan’s parenting. On second thought, it didn’t. John wanted to leave, but found patience in the fact Bryan would surely know where he could cop some opiates.

“In fact, he saved your ass,” Hook said. “Your son been holding some dope for me.”

“Dope?” Bryan said, “Whattya mean?”

“When I say dope, I don’t mean Thera-Flu. He had it stored in your front door. I figured you wanted to know where your door was.”

“My front door. What the fuck. The little bastard. Godammit. That’s why it had a hole in it.”

“You cain’t have that dope anyway, dawg. Cause I have it. I’m about to sell you some. Your son’s a working man. He’s working for me. So you need to keep your cool, motherfucker. Don’t worry. He’ll bring your door back.”

“Goddammit. *Who* am I?” Bryan slammed his hands on the dashboard.

It was a question John wished he could answer for Bryan. He wished he could answer it for himself.

“Nuff said.” Hook pointed his limb at John. “So you bring Half Dawg here to get boxed with you.”

“He’s a friend, man.”

“You got friends,” Hook said. “I’m impressed. Half Dawg’s whiter than my underwear.”

“It’s the Connecticut weather,” John said.

“Mothafucka talks too.”

The humor caught John by surprise. He laughed. The other men chuckled. The stress level dropped a few degrees. He felt he might survive.

“My wife found out that my boy did a hit the other night,” Bryan said. “Had the fucking heat all over the place. She’s at home boo-hooing right now.”

“Ready to go, Bryan.” John looked Bryan in the eyes and nodded forward.

Bryan’s eyes bulged and he shook his head no.

“*Bry-an*, you are something, nigga. And you are a con-*sprear*-ra-tor, Half Dawg.” He pointed his hook at John. “Always conspiring.” He jabbed it at Bryan like a boxer wanting to tap gloves. “Hear me hear me, dawg, this shit cain’t go on. Fatherdawg and all that shit, I don’t care. Father’s Day is in June. We almost in September.”

“I know. I know, Hook. I’m a good client.”

Hook stepped back from the car and held his claw to his forehead like a soothsayer. “I need some dead presidents, Mr. *Bry-ann*. Don’t even let me tell you what’s on my mind. I’m seeing a priest and a casket and black. Everybody’s in black. Black as my left nut, dawg. Black, okay. Your son is in that funky-ass black t-shirt he always wears. And your wife is a widow. Fuckin crying. Even Half Dawg is there. Dressed in what?”

“Okay, dressed in black,” Bryan said. “I gotcha, Hook.” Bryan fumbled with the cash John had just given him. He snapped out some bills to display their realness to Hook. He counted two-hundred dollars.

“Okay, I can add. Major ups to you dawg for coming back. Give this man another bone.” Hook looked at John then at Bryan. “I’ll put this payment on your credit report, Bryan.”

“Man, you are harsh,” Bryan said. “I’m a good, paying customer,”

“You’re a living customer,” Hook said. “Life, that’s your mothafuckin rebate.”

Hook snuck a packet of contraband into the car. John turned away. He scanned the street for hidden walkways and mysterious pedestrians. Someone shouted from inside the Victorian house. All three men looked. Candles glimmered. There were more people in the house than John had first thought.

Enthused with dope in his possession, Bryan talked happily with Hook about the difficulty of breaking a C-note. The conversation veered to the topic of counterfeiting plates and replicating small denominations. Bryan said they could make some big money if they had some “neat” plates.

“I’m already making my big money,” Hook said. “You on your own, dawg.”

“Whatever,” Bryan said.

Bryan and Hook said goodbye.

A bagman appeared in the Victorian’s walkway. He greeted a guy who wore a baseball cap and sunglasses. John thought he was too well dressed for the environment.

“Let’s head.” Bryan pointed his hand forward like a referee indicating a first down. His excitement was so intense he panted.

John paused and looked into Bryan's face.

"Now you're Half Dawg," Bryan said.

John smiled. He felt a big sense of relief as the car moved forward.

"This is the last time." Bryan raised a piece of aluminum foil as though he were speaking to something in the darkness, not John, maybe it was something in his soul making a brief appearance before he gave it away again. He breathed heavily. As quick as a gag artist Bryan produced a small glass pipe and held it up. "Do you mind?" He scratched the flint of his yellow lighter and a flame appeared. "It's not really the last time. It's just an old tradition to say that. The last time," Bryan mumbled. "Been doing it for over thirty years now. The last time keeps coming back."

Bryan dismantled the tinfoil. He scratched his lighter back to life. He inserted a jaundiced rock into the glass tube with a rose etched on it. He fingered the pipe like it was a tribal flute. The rock crackled, John knew that's how crack got its name, from the sound it made while being burned. Its metallic smell filled the car.

Bryan and his disease had instructed John through a labyrinth of backstreets. John thought Bryan would find him something for his pain. Three times Bryan asked John if he wanted a "taste."

"I need something for pain," John said. In spite of Bryan's current condition, John's disease was back, speaking and wanting to be fulfilled. .

"You don't have to be so timid about it. Nobody's going to get you." Bryan smiled like a fiend.

A half-mile later they passed under an I-10 overpass. The odor of the dope lost its strangeness. Its burnt metal fragrance smelled like anything else that stunk. The street signs, brightened by a set of winking stoplights read St. Bernard Avenue. A distant truck grumbled on I-10, and cars hummed on the highway. The overpass's big bands of steel that connected the sections clacked as late-night vehicles crossed them. The St. Bernard Housing Project appeared on John's right. A certain neglect surrounded the word project, like the people inside were part of a experiment.

"Bryan, where are you taking me, man. This is not your neighborhood."

Bryan broke from his pipe. A big row of yellow teeth appeared. "Oh, look before we go home, can you just stop off here?" His request was succinct, penetrating, pure addiction. "This will be the last time. Please, Johnnymoon, I've got some business to take care of. Please."

Bryan suffered from a simple chemical imbalance known as crack cocaine. John would stay away from crack. Thank God for that.

"Do me a favor, pull up over there." Bryan pointed to an entrance.

"Can you cop for me or not?" John's own urges deep inside, desires quiet for decades, rumbled. He just wanted it this one time. Alone in New Orleans, away from Mystic.

"Gimme your phone. Give it to me." Bryan's fingers made a cocky flipping motion for the phone. "You want something for pain. Give it to me."

John handed the phone to Bryan. A feeling of happiness filled him.

Bryan punched some numbers. "Hello, is Cooley there?" With the phone against his ear he looked at John and pointed at the phone. "Cooley, listen to me, I've got a guy coming your way tomorrow. No, no, no, he's white. Very white. He doesn't even have a suntan. Okay, okay. John. His name is John, okay, John. White guy, forties, short, overweight. Okay. Yeah,

yeah. I'll get it to you. Dilaudids, Oxy's, *heron*. Right, right, tomorrow." There was a pause. "What storm? I didn't know. I'm not worried. It'll turn. Good. Later man." Bryan snapped the phone shut. "Satisfied," Bryan said to John. "I'll write down his how-to-find-him info for you."

They sped up St. Bernard Avenue and U-turned back toward I-10. John entered the projects.

"Two minutes, tops," Bryan said. "Then we'll head back to Metairie. Two minutes, that's it." Bryan pointed down the street.

John felt happy, a visceral joy filled him, that he would have something to use tomorrow.

Shopping carts littered the parking area that served several buildings. Clothes sagged from flimsy lines above a patch of unkempt grass. John felt for a moment he had slithered through the bars of the cat's cage at Audubon Zoo. The mere expectations of the dope the next day made him feel brave and immortal.

The grim stare of two-story apartments surrounded him. Suddenly he didn't know if he could find his way back to St. Bernard Avenue. "Look, man, let's wrap this up," he said. John knew New Orleans was still one of the most dangerous cities on earth. His hands were jittery, and a nervous burn moved through his stomach. His adrenaline had long replaced any hunger he may have had.

Bryan knotted a few bills into his hand. "Over there." He jabbed the air with his fist.

John steered to a parking area where four apartment buildings converged.

Bryan stared at knot of bills in his hand. "Don't cut the engine. When I say step on it, push the pedal through the fucking metal. No bullshit, please."

Before John could disagree, one of two young men approached the car. The young man's dark clothes blended into the night. He couldn't be a day over twenty. "Yo, yo, yo." The young man pointed at Bryan and walked over.

A long stretch of street with buildings looming on each side sat in front of John. A shot of fear ran up John's spine meeting his skull and blasting needle sensations through his skull. He was suddenly in the middle of something very wrong.

"What's on, Andre," Bryan said.

"You know it man, the *mean-ning* of life." Andre ducked his head into the car. Gold filling enclosed a front tooth. Sweat glimmered on his forehead.

"I'm always looking for *mean-ning*," Bryan said. "I'll take my life to go."

Andre shoved a fist of contraband into the car. Bryan released the crumpled bills. Andre grabbed them with his other hand.

"Floor it, man," Bryan slapped John's right arm. "Floor it."

John's arm stung. He stared at Bryan. It happened too quickly for him to understand.

"Go, motherfucker."

Bryan's voice rang deep in the cavity of John's ear. His stinging arm disoriented him. He felt his bowels loosen up.

"Go, go, go, motherfucker." Bryan moved his leg over John's and mashed the gas pedal. Pain scraped through John's ankle.

"Power, Jerome, power," Andre screamed and held onto Bryan's door. "Power, motherfucker."

The car paused. John drew in a lung full of air. The engine sounded like it had died. He turned the key and the starter squealed into the night. The car's motor found its power and rushed forward.

In the rearview mirror he saw Andre tumble into a patch of grass under clotheslines. A sheet hanging from a clothesline moved behind him like a ghost. He bobbed back up to his feet. Another figure joined him. They pointed. Their teeth shined in the dark.

Pistol shots flashed. Bullets hissed. A slug popped the trunk. The hissing rounds sounded creepier than the gun's blasts. John's throbbing adrenaline made it impossible to experience fear. One after another two rounds scratched the concrete. John yanked the steering wheel to the left. A slug popped the car's front fender. He felt lightheaded. His heart's thumping took his breath away. He took all roads east to St. Bernard Avenue. From there he turned right onto the entry lane of I-10. Numb and silent, John drove. Darkness on the outside, darkness breathing inside of him.

"Close call, man," Bryan finally spoke. "Thank you so much. Those dope dealers owed me one. You ask them for it, they don't respond. If they can't eat it or fuck it, they steal it. It was my time to hit the karma bank account."

Inside John a bundle of reactions—anger, disappointment, satisfaction—clobbered each other for attention. He didn't know who to blame: Bryan or himself. He remained silent and sped west on I-10 towards Bryan's house.

"My wife doesn't understand that I need some excitement in my life." Bryan said.

John stared at him. For all unflattering reasons Bryan couldn't blend into a crowd, not even in the dark. His gaunt face with his long thin nose was a face excluded from the book of faces. "We both could have been killed."

“We didn’t.”

To break the tension of the silence, Bryan filled John in on some highlights from the past twenty-five years. “I moved to Osaka, Japan with Matty. She was from there. I lived with her for seven years during the nineties. I taught English for the Berlitz School, and I even worked as a text translator for the Kawasho Corporation.”

Bryan’s ability to achieve proficiency in Japanese amazed John.

Bryan went on to tell him that his most memorable achievement was his translation of medical documents that assessed the chemical effects of plastic as a food storage device. “You know, cups and water bottles. Shit like that.” Bryan left Japan—and Matty—for the states. “I could really use a job now.” Bryan exhaled. “The pipe, man, keeps getting in my way. In Japan I found Buddhism.”

John realized that in America Buddha had left Bryan. A different form of salvation had taken up residence. Crack cocaine. A registered deity in its own right. Crack stole his savings. It damaged his family and reduced his life to a single instinct: more crack.

John drove into Hillmore subdivision. The Nissan’s piston’s tapped into the night like a drum stick on a tin can. The scripted letters of *Hillmore* with its 1950’s optimism now disappointed John. Streetlights glowed. Through overgrown oak and elm branches the night was quiet and delicate as a sleeping baby. John felt the night’s softness, the pull of its normalcy, its decency.

He rolled over a tree branch as he pulled onto the sloping curb at Bryan’s house. A thick mover’s blanket now served as the LaBryan’s front door.

“Yeah, well, now I’ve got to go face my wife,” Bryan said as though John should share in his dread. He stared at his house, and his face drooped.

John could tell that Bryan's body was still charged up, electric, almost shivering. The ghoulish paper bag still hung from the tree. John kept the Nissan running. "By the way, why did those people back on Dante Street have paper bags over their heads?"

"The old house?" Bryan raised his butt from the seat and shoved his crack pipe into the front of his underwear. "You *sure* you want to know?"

"I can handle it."

"They put the bags over their heads so they can make money." Bryan fidgeted with the car-door handle. "They've got perverts who go back there. You saw that guy with the sunglasses and cap?"

"Right." It surprised him that Bryan had noticed the details of the man.

"I happen to know he's a repeat customer. Some of those addicts are hard up for money so they give blowjobs to the spectators, the pervs. It's like a portable glory hole. The junky tells them, 'Don't worry who's in here, it doesn't matter.' For thirty, maybe forty dollars—rates change—the pervert puts in his cock in the bag's mouthpiece, and he gets it sucked. It's all anonymous. Quick, easy money."

With folded arms Bryan's wife stood outside of the blanket covering the house's front doorway.

"I guess they figure it's only flesh," Bryan said. He moved his finger to his mouth. "Like sucking your finger." His withering cheeks drew in. "Hey, Vicki Joy used to dress as a nun to cop drugs. People go to all kinds of extremes." Bryan stared at him. "Good luck with *Blue*."

John felt numb all over.

Bryan took a deep breath and rose from the car.

“Oh, yeah.” Bryan pulled the notebook from the glove compartment and wrote his drug connection information down. He tossed it back down. “He’ll take care of you. Tear this up when you don’t need it anymore.”

His wife yelled, “Where’s the food, Bryan? My goodness we’re hungry.”

John stared at the paper bag.

Saturday, August 27, 2005, 1:30am

John drove back to Le Pavillon. There was something lonely but soothing about the night. The coarse reception of AM radio brought the loneliness closer to him. A late-night host made an announcement. “An hour-and-half-hour ago at 11:00 pm, the National Hurricane Center said that Hurricane Katrina would strike the town of Triumph, Louisiana, sixty-six miles southeast of New Orleans. Landfall is expected for Monday morning.” The announcer already sounded tired. He paused. “That’s August twenty-ninth.”

He went on to tell listeners that Governor Blanco had declared a state of emergency. The declaration included activation of Louisiana's emergency response and recovery program. Federal troops would be deployed to Louisiana to coordinate the planning of operations with FEMA. There was a pause. Papers shuffled. Then in a dramatic understatement the commentator said, “The bottom line is this you can always rebuild your house, but you can never regain a life. You should evacuate. Don’t think twice.”

In his fatigue John thought about being washed out to sea. Giant walls of water, something Old Testament, cleaning the city of degenerates, hypocrites, crack addicts, and sinners. He fell in there somewhere. He sighed.

John remembered Ivan. He knew New Orleans would get lucky. For the past forty years, since Hurricane Betsy, she had been lucky. That was the only thing she ever had going for her. Luck. He would stay and take his chances with Katrina.

In Le Pavillon's parking garage the odors of concrete and carbon monoxide lingered under the weight of the humidity. Inside the hotel air-conditioning cooled his wet skin. He felt his nerve endings relax. The lobby lights had been doused, and darkness covered the white marble of the front-desk. Fatigue slowed his body and pain still filled his mouth. Hunger panged its way through his stomach. He was alone and didn't want to admit how excited he was about tomorrow.

He passed the keycard over his door lock. It made a polite buzzing sound, then a click followed. He flipped the lights on. On his the dining table a hotel card, obviously delivered by room service, sat elegantly in the glow of the recessed lighting. John flipped it open:

Johnnymoon, sorry. Urgent call from lawyer. Good news on the Braxton front. Po-boys tomorrow. Liuzza's. My treat. Let's talk in morning. Desi.

"Dizzy," John said to himself.

Addy had left a voice message on the hotel voicemail. John knew it was her subtle attempt to make sure he was at the hotel, the place he should have been. "Phone me as soon as you can." Her mood sounded relaxed. The soothing and sensible voice of an NPR announcer whooshed from her radio into cool Connecticut air. He missed the fair weather. "I need to tell you, Doctor Guantánamo called. Rather his staff called, this morning, to inform us that Julian left yesterday without being discharged. I was in meetings all day didn't get the message until this afternoon."

John felt his head tighten up. His skull hurt. His nerves burned a spot in his stomach.

“They would have called earlier but something about the HIPPA laws. Anyway, he’s coming down there to meet you.”

Chapter Eight

BETRAYALS

Then: Everybody Loves Somebody Sometime

I enter Levine's store to meet Johnnymoon. The furniture shines. Dean Martin sings on the radio, *Everybody loves somebody sometime/Everybody falls in love sometime*. I wish that song were true.

Levine and Johnnymoon stand near the back office. They seem to get along so well.

"Well look what the cat drug in," Levine says.

"Hi, Larry." I peck him on his cheek. He even smells sweet.

"Braxton hasn't showed up in three days," Johnnymoon says to me.

"Braxton?" I say, like I'm not quite sure who he is. My voice cracks only a little.

"Our assistant," Levine says. "You need a job, Vicki?"

"A job?" I give Levine this confused look. "Is that something you eat?"

They crack up.

"I ran an ad in the *Pica'yune*," Levine reads from a piece of white paper. "Wanted sales professional for French Quarter antique store. Experience preferred."

"Do you want me to go check on Braxton at his apartment?" Johnnymoon asks.

"It's a furnished room, not an apartment," Levine says. "Nah, let him go. He's probably moved on to Phoenix or someplace like that. He told me he wanted to live there, in the desert. It wouldn't take much to leave. All he owns is what's on his back, and the rest he could shove in his back pocket."

Levine tells us that last week he actually sent Braxton home. He made a pricing mistake on an Empire desk and bookcase, an error that hurt the store's bottom line. "Two-hundred dollars," Levine says. "There were other things too. Small things." He tells us how Braxton kept entering the store after hours, and if he did it again Levine was going to fire him.

I want to weep from the irony.

"We're going to take a walk, Levine," Johnnymoon says.

"Keep your clothes on."

I blush. "Bye, Larry."

Johnnymoon and I leave. The sun heats up the sky. I look at the big patch of azure. My eyes squint. Some bad weather passed through earlier and bleached the sky a fresh blue. The smell of ozone rises from the ground. The humidity attacks me like it's personal.

Johnnymoon is acting silent and grim, like this human version of Ash Wednesday. "So, Keemosabee, what's the status of *Skylab*?" I ask.

"Hopeless. Falling. Disaster. July. It's going to crash. We're all going to crash."

I don't want to think about that last one.

"Have you ever thought about changing your life?" Johnnymoon asks.

What a scary question.

"Doing something different? Being chemical free?"

"No, I never have," I say. "Things are going pretty well. Don't touch the dough; it'll rise. Right?"

"Your parents want you to go to treatment. You should go."

"*You* should go," I say. I've mentioned to him more than once how The Parents insist on me going to treatment.

“I don’t have insurance,” he says, “or the parents who can afford it. I don’t even have both my parents for that matter.”

I give Johnnymoon a one-note peck on his cheek, which moves into a twelve-second three-note kiss that features dueling tongues. “Cheer up,” I say.

“That helps,” he says. “I need some church real bad.”

“God won’t bring Braxton back.”

Johnnymoon looks at me woefully.

We end up in Pirates Alley and walk to the front of St. Louis Cathedral. Pigeons work the tourists who sit on iron benches in Jackson Square. Without saying anything Johnnymoon walks towards the front doors of the Cathedral. Hi-ho, hi-ho, off we go to holy happenings. He turns back to me. His skin appears pasty and very white, like he’s turning into a geisha girl or something. “Wait,” I say.

“I need to get my soul straight,” Johnnymoon says.

“Church, really,” I say, like church is another woman. Don’t most people quit going to church after a certain age, like ten? “So what’s the pow-wow with the soul going to do?”

“Please.”

“I hate. . . I don’t want to go to church.”

“Vic-kay.”

“Moo-oon.”

Inside the cathedral it’s dark, like we’ve entered a hole. The smell of candles and incense knock my nostrils right back into the fifth grade. A coolness comes off the marble floor, and sunlight spears stained-glass windows. We stand in the narthex, which is separated by another set of doors that open to where the pews and altars are located. On our left a lady slouches

behind a counter where they sell Rosaries, dashboard Jesuses, and other holy gear. I'm all of sudden thinking about white shoes and the Easter dress I once spilled a Shirley Temple on. I was in the thirteenth year of my Lord Jesus Christ. I don't want to be in St. Louis Cathedral, ever.

Johnnymoon and the lady look at each other and nod like it's the latest in secret handshakes.

"Johnnymoon," I say.

"Please, Vicki."

We push open the doors and enter the church proper, which is called the nave. Candles glitter on the different altars. Memories, sweet and mean, come forth. Suddenly I remember threes-ees and kiss-ees, and Tommy the big Mouseketeer, *The Sound of Music* and Julie Andrews, *and a spoon full of sugar helps the medicine go down/the medicine go down*. Quiet is everywhere. It creeps up from under the pews.

Catholic rococo dominates the cathedral's interior. They've piled ornate on top of more ornate. These architects had zero doubts about the look they wanted. Clearly, small and plain were not in their vernacular.

Through stained glass windows the sun kaleidoscopes everything with lemon yellows, orange oranges, cherry reds. On the windows I see our Fraud and Savior Jesus Christ doing the Way of the Cross stations: his first fall, the Blessed Mother, the crude nails, blood. Catholicism is tough. It's like the spiritual mafia. Violent, dishonest, cruel.

Johnnymoon finds a pew. He makes the sign of the cross, bows his head and kneels. Very serious. Totally Catholic. I think of what Jim Morrison of the Doors sang: *You can not petition the lord with prayer*. I locate a pew in the front. Nothing enters my mind except some complex, parent-induced guilt. I think of Braxton and a queasy feeling fills my tummy like a bad

dessert. I ask God to forgive me. I have problems forgiving myself; so how can I expect him to do it? It's confusing. And besides I feel like a hypocrite since I quit going to church years ago.

I visit the side altar, the altar for the dead, to light a candle for my dead baby brother. But I don't put any money in the donation slot. That makes me feel guilty, so I move to the front altar. I look down and study a piece of the marble floor for like five minutes. In my mind, my little baby brother Marshall appears, a fetus in my mother's amniotic sack, milky and umbilical-cord up like an Apollo astronaut. Then Braxton comes back into my heart. I can't believe what happened to him. Death, it's so hard to get a hold on. Its final-ness keeps slipping from my logic like some out-of-control math problem. My emotions become stylized and extra-dimensional, something cutout for movies and nervous breakdowns. Simply put, I want to be a good girl. I start to cry for Braxton, but I know there's nothing I can. God won't raise him from the dead. Only my soul can be raised from the dead. That's a ridiculously hopeless thought.

There is nothing left in my head except the creeps; so I stand and start to walk out. I strut past Johnnymoon who remains kneeling, deep into his soul treatment. "Let's go," I whisper. I run out of St. Louis Cathedral. I feel like a woman in a Japanese sci-fi flick. The only thing missing is the baby in my arms. The sun strikes my eyes.

Johnnymoon follows me over to the shade of Pirate's Alley. The calliope of the riverboat *President* pipes into the afternoon. The woody smell of coffee hits my nose. I start to get back to normal, which I don't think exists for me, but it's better than how I just felt. *You cannot petition the lord with prayer.* I can't do anything about Braxton except hold onto my soul.

"You okay?" I ask Johnnymoon.

"Braxton" A stricken expression covers his face. "It's hard to get my soul around."

"John." It's like the only time I've ever called him John. "There's nothing we can do."

“I feel so helpless,” he says. “There’s nothing I can do except hate myself.”

“That’s part of the pain, being unable to help.” I mention how my baby brother died on me.

“Tell me about it,” he says.

I tell him.

“Sad,” he says. He brims with this Jesus afterglow.

“I miss him.”

“I’m going to leave New Orleans,” Johnnymoon says.

“What? I don’t believe what I’m hearing.”

“I just don’t want to live here the rest of my life.”

“Why?”

“I can’t. She’ll kill me,” he says, like New Orleans is this real person.

Now: Possessed

Saturday, August 27, 2005, Early Morning

Louise had dreams, if you want to call them dreams, about Desi. One involved Barbie dolls. A whole empire of Barbies had invaded New Orleans.

In the dream, she left her old apartment on Allard Place and caught a city bus. People stared. There was no hiding behind her white skin. The Barbies gathered outside of the bus. Brooding, angry, demanding equal rights.

She found a seat in the back. It was hard to get to the seat. The driver was Desi. He wore a hat cocked to the side like Humphrey Bogart disguised as a cave man imitating a clean-shaven underweight Santa Clause but with too many tattoos. He looked handsome, except for the white hair. He looked innocent, except for the sleeves of ink covering his arms. His eyes beamed like blue headlights. He said, "I still limp."

She said, "The Barbies did it. There's no place like betrayal."

Then everything paused, and Desi's face squinched up like he was going to throw up; instead, he hiccupped. His lips mimed, you did. He said, "Things are different when you have the hiccups."

Louise ran from the bus. She stepped on the Barbies, which had shrunk to the size of wedding cake dolls. She wondered if that meant anything. The Barbies crunched like roaches. She woke up.

Saturday, August 27, 2005, 10:00am

Louise turned on her TV. Official governmental warnings about Hurricane Katrina filled the airwaves: CNN, MSNBC, and all the local stations. Mandatory evacuations were ordered for the surrounding parishes of St. Charles, St. Tammany, and Plaquemines. There had been no mandatory evacuation orders for Orleans Parish. But she did hear Mayor Nagin say, "This is the real deal." It was real, but who's deal was it? Mother nature never made deals.

Twenty minutes later Louise's phone rang. She hoped it was Tina with some information on Desi. Instead, Kippi's number appeared. "Hi, Kippi."

"Louise, are you leaving?"

“I just saw the news.”

“Well.”

“I hate getting in the car and dragging the twins through an eight-hour traffic nightmare.”

“Did you put the hooch down?”

“God, Kippi, I haven’t. It’s a little harder to stop than I expected.” Louise now regretted telling Kippi about her drinking relapse. She rued the times when she had instructed Kippi to call the police, or do whatever it required, including institutionalizing her, to stop her from drinking.

“Louise, you need to.”

“It’s overwhelming. More powerful than ever.”

“Jesus, it sounds like you’re possessed.”

“That’s a good way to put it.”

“Listen, we’re evacuating to Houston,” Kippi said “I’ve got a private jet,”

“My God, how’d you get that?”

Kippi explained how her husband had a connection with a consortium out of Atlanta.

“A consortium?”

“It’s not the mafia. I know that much.” Kippi laughed. “They simply own a jet at the Lakefront Airport. I have a friend in River Oaks who’s going to put us up.”

“Houston?”

“Yes, Louise, I thought I said that. River Oaks.”

Now: A Rerun of Himself

Saturday, August 27, 2005, 10:30am

John used a phone in Le Pavillon's lobby and called Charity Hospital. He felt a terror sweeping through his bones. He spoke to Jane, a Tulane intern. From two earlier calls he recognized her Boston accent. She had told him her family lived on the East Coast. Her brother attended Brown University in Providence. She had even been to Mystic, went sailing in Fishers Island Sound.

"I'm sorry to tell you, Mr. Smith," she said, using the alias he had given her. "No recent beatings here."

"That's all you can say," John said. There was silence. The cavity of his missing tooth ached. Pain traveled to the back of his neck and up into to his skull. He moved his head in a circular motion to ease his discomfort.

"Usually the police are all over the place when someone is criminally involved. Haven't seen them. Maybe it's because of the storm."

Criminally involved, what a way to put it. "Thank you." John's sense of trouble, his feeling of being caught made him think he was a rerun of himself. He was doing something that belonged in another part of his life. He checked his list: Louise, Desi, Detective Trenton.

Then: Betrayal

June, 1979

So, Johnnymoon has this kind of upper-class, soigné thing going on. What makes it so charming is that he doesn't know that he has it. I bet you he has some European royalty somewhere in his bloodstream. Except he isn't royalty, his people are conservative Catholics from Gentilly. His mother, originally from Montpellier, France, met Johnnymoon's father during World War II. Both were something like twenty. They called the women war brides, as though something was wrong with it. Why not war grooms? Luv happens to be the only thing capable of perfection. I mean, think about it.

Conveniently, Johnnymoon's father spoke Cajun French as his first language. So, for Johnnymoon, French ends up as his first language. Don't get me wrong, Johnnymoon is as American as Elvis Presley; you'd never think he knew French. He has this perfect guttural New Orleans accent that makes him sound something like Robert DeNiro.

Johnnymoon lives in a remodeled apartment in Mid-City on Toulouse Street, not far from my place. It's a two-story neo-classical built around 1910. Slate roof, pine floors, twelve-foot ceilings with tuck doors that can separate the living room and dining room, if one chooses to pull the tall doors out. Any house that has these features sits in that part of my mind reserved for things special.

Johnnymoon has invited me over for a *haute cuisine* dinner. I arrive.

"Welcome," he says at the door. He pops the cork on a white Zinfandel.

Perfect greeting. I smile.

"This way," he says.

We move to the living room, sit on his busted sofa and stare out the big windows that rise from floor to ceiling. “Check out the view,” Johnnymoon says. The apartment overlooks a typical Mid-City backyard. There’s no view: big television antennas, beat-up fences, dogs and cats sneaking down alleys. I still luv it. I find comfort in the city and all its chaos.

He talks about *Skylab*. It’s crashing, due back to earth in pieces sometime next month.

I find that very intriguing as the moon shines its big face through the eight-by-ten window. The whole *Skylab* doom thing grows on me for a number of reasons: the rocket scientist whom I dated, *Skylab*’s historical connection to New Orleans, and being born in the Space Age.

Johnnymoon tells me some more things about *Skylab* and then tells me it all comes down to one thing.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Gravity, man, gravity. It never gives up,” Johnnymoon says. He looks all wistful and shit. “That’s why people get flabby skin. Gravity. That’s why we age. That’s why it’s easier to fall than to rise.” He just looks at me. “It could be a song. *Gra,vi,ty, oh gra,vi,ty/you’re always working on my hu,man,i,ty.*”

“Nice,” I say.

“It would be an acoustic number, maybe add a single snare drum.” He slaps his hand on his right knee, tap, tap, tap.

I smile.

“Something different tonight,” Johnnymoon says. “Rockabilly.” He informs me that Hank Williams is father of the honky-tonk sound. “Get this. It’s completely rockabilly.”

He puts on some vinyl. Hank’s twang crackles over the speakers.

“Wait, wait, listen,” Johnnymoon says. Like someone has just broken into the house or something. He points at his RCA console stereo in its pecan cabinet. “That’s hard to believe how good that sounds.”

From the gentle spin of vinyl I feel the pain of Hank, *I’m so lonesome I could cry*. If my soul could speak it would be the aching male voice of a country singer, punished with personal problems and manic-depressive issues. Even though its country music, the guy sounds so woeful I’m waiting for him to break out in sobs. *I almost cry*. “He sounds so blue.”

“Blue is everywhere. That’s why I named our first album *Blue*.”

“Like Picasso’s Blue Period.”

“It’s what you see through your blue eyes. There’s a song on it for you.”

“I can’t wait until it’s finished.” I stare at him like Ali McGraw getting lost in Ryan O’Neil’s eyes in *Love Story*. I swoon.

Johnnymoon rises. He goes into his kitchen. “Dinner,” he announces.

On his petit dining table he’s got nice plates, napkins, and cutlery. It’s all set up like he just took a Miss Manners course.

We fang down on our pork and asparagus dinner. The chilled French Zinfandel goes great with the pork. Johnnymoon brings out our dessert, crème brûlée. It looks like a bigger mortal sin than premarital sex. I pass on it. He drinks. The crème brûlée sits and spoils.

I bust up a doobie that I’ve saved as a postprandial treat. I didn’t want it to blow our load by smoking it before the entrée. That’s standard procedure for pot smokers, to smoke after you handle the munchies. We burn down the reefer.

I go into the bedroom and get comfortable in my Fantasy Bridgette Basque Lingerie with 36D Plunge bra that nicely marquees my cleavage. For the sake of pacing I cover myself with on one of Johnnymoon's white Gant button downs that smells like thrift-store camphor balls.

Someone knocks on the front door. From the kitchen Johnnymoon pops a cork.

"I'll get it," I say. Johnnymoon loves his alcohol. I don't want to interrupt his romance. Instead of asking who it is, I just open the door. It is none other than my father, *daddus daddio baddio*, commonly known as Mark The Father. My dad. I chill up like the French Zinfandel.

The Father's stare could have just as well been a set of ice picks. "Get your stuff and get yourself home young lady." He wears his blue blazer, alligator shirt, khaki pants. He must have left his SS outfit at home.

"I beg your pardon," I say. I think The Father has lost his mind, or at least misplaced it.

"You need help," he says.

"Help." I suddenly feel deformed. "This is a civilized dinner." What else can I say? I stand in front of The Father donned in my black lingerie (hiding under the Gant shirt). The black makes me feel that much more guilty. I mean my father has interrupted my foreplay. Yuck.

The Father's like, "I've got some things I need to talk to you about."

"Couldn't it wait until I visit yall?"

"You haven't been home in weeks."

"I now have my own apartment." How could he forget?

"Still, you could visit your mother and me, and you haven't."

"I *have* too."

"Haven't."

"Have."

“Haven’t.” I suddenly think The Father is possessed by his sophomore year of high school. “You haven’t, Vicki *Louise*.”

As a typical parent he puts the middle-name treatment on me. This makes a scary feeling roil through my tummy and meet up with the rich dinner I just ate. My spine tightens up. My stomach enters a state of turmoil.

Johnnymoon comes out of the kitchen. I walk over for support.

“John,” The Father says. The Father has called him John. Like they know each other. They’re not supposed to know each other. Johnnymoon has met them once, as far as I know. They recently bought an *objet d’art* from him at Levine’s store: The Empress of Austria’s Jewel Case, something like that.

Instantly, Johnnymoon’s face looks like it belongs at the Wax Museum, white, dead, history. “Well, we were just dinner.” Johnnymoon can’t even speak right. The Father has taken even Johnnymoon by surprise. “I thought this was going to wait, Mark.”

“Wait, is this a conspiracy?” I ask, halfway joking. At first I think this is about me and Johnnymoon and how Johnnymoon is off-limits. Let’s face it I’ve dated some real greaseballs. I’ve even dated an ex-clown, and The Father never objected. But Johnnymoon. He can speak French for God’s sake.

Then The Father starts to mention some major shit that has to do with my “lifestyle” and how he doesn’t want me to die young. How he loves me. How he lost one child and doesn’t want to lose another one. For a second it actually sounds kind of touching. He seems to really care.

He always likes to say how things “have come to my attention.” This time a couple of take-out Methadone bottles and U-100 syringes in my room have come to his attention. It’s old

paraphernalia, and I don't know why I didn't throw it all away. I want to slap myself for being so careless.

"That's fucking illegal and dangerous to your health, Vicki." He rarely uses the word fuck. Unless he is extremely pissed off. He's trying to get through to me, I guess.

"Methadone is serious, Vicki. Serious. Johnnymoon, I'm sorry I couldn't wait any longer." He looks at Johnnymoon and touches his right hand to his heart like he's about to say the Pledge of Allegiance.

What the fuck The Father was doing snooping around in my room I don't know. It was probably Maria our maid, the Nicaraguan bloodhound who found them.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say.

"Bullshit," The Father says. "Vicki, I think you should leave at this moment. You need to re-think things."

"There's nothing to re-think," I say.

Mark The Father goes on about my dependence on drugs, which makes him sound like he's on drugs. "Help, you need help," he says. "You need some time by yourself, some time to reflect. To get away from this environment."

"I reflect everyday," I say. "*Environment*. I live in this city."

"There's a place in Minnesota. It's called Hazelden, and we can get you into it."

"*A place*." I pause and take several deep gulps. "*Minnesota*, not this again." I think I'd rather take my chances in jail, an idea I don't broadcast at the moment. "Not some nuthouse," I say. Many deep feelings slam into each other, nerve endings short out in my tummy. The pork dinner feels like it's looking for an exit chute.

"Johnnymoon is our friend, too," Mark says.

As if, I think.

“Johnnymoon’s helping us with this.”

I look at Johnnymoon. He rolls his head. “Jesus.”

What the fuck is going on?

The Father’s appearance is all about my recreational enjoyment of chemicals. The dope angle catches me by surprise. For all practical purposes it blows my mind, but in reverse.

“Johnnymoon, thanks for your help,” The Father says.

My heart turns into this instant wound.

“Vicki, maybe you should leave with your father,” Johnnymoon says.

What a lemon-yellow coward, I think. “*What?*” Betrayal, *the* black act of history. Johnnymoon has turned into Judas, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, Benedict Arnold, and a knife to my back—and heart—all at once. I have been bamboozled. Completely and neatly.

“Vicki, you need to get help,” Johnnymoon says.

The knives twist deeper into my heart. I’m like, “Look who’s calling the kettle black. You need help, Johnnymoon, at being a man.”

He’s like, “It’s for you. It’s for your own good.”

I hate that expression, *for my own good*. “What’s for my own good?”

“Treatment,” Johnnymoon and The Father say together like a singing duo.

“Treatment!” I exclaim. Images of a straight jacket, an iron helmet hooked up with wires sending electrodes or whatever to my brain and me being held down by goons in white outfits with matching white shoes but with mustard stains on them.

When I think that Johnnymoon wrote a song for me on his album *Blue* I want to weep. “Yall are the only ones who need treatment,” I say. “You get drunk every time I’m with you, Johnnymoon. What about your habits? I won’t even mention them, because they’re against the law. Just. Like. Mine. ”

All I expect is for Johnnymoon to say, Listen *Mark* she’s my luv. You get your ass home and you re-think your fucking daddyhood, daddio. Mark *you* need to reflect. But no, when it comes to something deeper than sex, when it comes to luv and dedication—what do real people call it—gallantry, Johnnymoon has displayed none-what-so-fucking-ever. I have misplaced my heart more often than my house keys. I’m starting to think it has something to do with me being left-handed or having a birthmark on the right cheek of my ass. Something weird. I can’t figure it out. “I thought this was for real, Johnnymoon,” I say. I feel tears gathering in their starting blocks.

“It is for real. I care for you a whole lot,” Johnnymoon whimpers.

If I didn’t know any better I would have thought he was born without balls. “Not *real* enough,” I say.

His betrayal puts a scar on my heart, like a branding iron sizzling a circle-B for Betrayal on it. Just like that, fuck you, Vicki. You are not worthy of luv deep enough for me to defend. His response feels like the shocking news of failure, or the shocking news that you have

accidently participated in a murder, or the shocking news that your little brother just died. Just another reason to rewind the whole day, better yet rewind my whole fucking life.

My life: I've lost the plot. *Un, deux, trois*, I tap my fingers waiting for luv. For the next couple of days I hide behind the force-field of booze, plus I promise The Parents I would get off said drugs. So, I get onto vodka. It doesn't have a big scent so I can sneak it. In my world, alcohol is not a drug. I guess because it's legal. So I try to get all of the chemicals out of my system, including Johnnymoon. I have some blue Valiums stashed in the Dopey bank I've owned since we went to Disneyland when I was something like nine. For the time being, The Parents have backed off from sending me to the snowcaps of Minnesota. It gives me frostbite just thinking about the place.

I start to get over the Johnnymoon betrayal and breakup. I hit the play button on my education. Somewhere in one of my fantasies my mind thinks about going to the Rhode Island School of Design. But it stays at the fantasy level. That amount of ambition gives me a weird case of the cramps.

So, about two weeks after the incident with Johnnymoon, I'm at The Parents' pad in the upstairs den, showing off that I'm a good girl. But they don't care that much because they've left me alone so they could go to the Southern Yacht Club. They're members. My grandparents were members for fifty years.

My old phone rings on my old private line. "Hello," I say.

"Vicki, hey, it's me."

“It’s me, too,” I say.

“*Vicki*. It’s me, Johnnymoon.”

“Gee, how could I not know it was you? I don’t have any other friends, and you’re the only person I know.”

“Vicki, I’m *sorry*.”

“For what? What did you do?” I ask. I’m obviously talking to someone who needs to change his emotional diaper. “You were just trying to help me.”

“I’d like to talk to you.”

“We’re talking now. The reception is good.”

“Can we talk in person?”

(Pause, lots of silence.)

“Look, I’d like to apologize in person,” he says. “I want to patch things up.”

Me: “I can’t make it to your apartment. Remember, I don’t drive.”

Him: “I’ll pick you up. This has to be patched up.”

I think, why not. I tell Johnnymoon I’m house sitting. The Parents are at the yacht club this evening. “Come on over. We can talk here.” The Parents’ house is a kind of a neutral territory, like Switzerland or something.

He must’ve been at the Metry Café or something, because the doorbell ding-dongs like three minutes later.

“Come in,” I say.

Johnnymoon enters the downstairs livingroom. He wears this green, poplin Brooks Brothers suit, *avec* tie, *avec* starched blue shirt. I have never seen him dressed up like this. I have to say he looks. . . good. Johnnymoon can always surprise you with a new look.

I shake his hand. He pecks me on my cheek.

“I got fired,” he says.

“I thought you couldn’t get fired.”

He smells like Jack and Coke. The whiskey dominates his words, and he gives me a speech about how he regretted collaborating with The Father. “I told your father I’d see what I could do. I had no intentions of collaborating with him.”

“Still, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Maybe you need help.”

“Like you don’t?” At least Johnnymoon seems over the Braxton ordeal. Or maybe the Braxton aftermath is just coming out sideways by way of trying to “help” me. By betraying me. So much of our lives is based on aftermath.

He goes on how he had my “own good” in mind, and how he now wants to patch things up. The word patch starts to get on my nerves. I can’t accept betrayal, and Johnnymoon has betrayed me. Our relationship is like my Barbie with her missing left leg: gone, broken, and it will never be fixed. I keep it diplomatic and formal. “Sorry about the job,” I say.

This funny expression covers his face. “What does it matter? I’m saying it. My mouth. Look, look.” He points at his mouth like an imbecile. “I got fired. Levine found out.”

“Levine found out what?” That statement catches my attention like a slap to the face.

“Found out what?”

“You remember the yapping dog. That was Mrs. Resnick’s dog, Linus. She said she saw three people. Three young people, two men and a woman.”

“No, she didn’t say, a *woman*.”

“Don’t believe me.”

I think about whether I should believe him or not. It doesn’t matter, because no matter how you look at it it’s not a good situation.

“Levine just said, ‘Get your stuff and go. That was rotten, Johnnymoon. Fucking rotten, buddy.’ That was the first time Levine ever got angry with me.”

“Jesus. Does he know about Braxton.”

“I don’t know.”

“Is he going to tell the cops?”

“That was five days ago. I don’t think he suspects that Braxton was even there.”

I shiver with fear. Spots start to explode in my vision.

“Vicki,” Johnnymoon says, “you are so incredible. Do you know that?”

“Thank you, Johnnymoon, but it sounds like the Jack Daniel’s is telling me this.”

Johnnymoon is drunk, and I’m not. Advantage, Vicki. One love. Funny how love means nothing in tennis.

“Why didn’t you say these nice things when The Father came to your apartment?”

“The father?” Johnnymoon appears dumbfounded.

“My dad, Johnnymoon, my dad.” The Jack and Coke have taken over his intelligence.

“I thought you meant a priest.”

He’s drunker than I first thought. “Right, a priest. Let’s ask a priest over to smoke some sinsemilla and bless my pre-marital blowjob. *Our* blowjob, since you would have been the other consenting adult.” Funny how women get blamed for illicit sex. A woman who screws a lot of men is called a whore; a man who screws a lot of women is called a *man*.

I can’t help it, but my feelings start to brew with more emotions than I want. “I think it’s time you leave, Johnnymoon.”

“Think about it,” Johnnymoon says. “Are you going to Minnesota?”

“What’s it to you?”

By this time I’m sitting in the middle of the sofa, and Johnnymoon sits like a Boy Scout in the club chair across me. He rises and I stand. He walks over to me and says, like he’s seen too many weepy movies, “I love you, Vicki.” Whiskey and potato chip odors fill his breath.

I say, “Nah, that’s not going to happen in this lifetime.” I feel like the thirty pieces of silver that Judas now wants to return to take all his betrayal back. Regret is a tough business. No refunds at *Chez Vicki’s*.

Johnnymoon pushes me down onto the sofa. I’m all of a sudden sitting up. Things get creepy. Goose bumps take over me like a second skin.

“Let’s pump,” Johnnymoon says.

“Please don’t be overly romantic,” I say.

All of a sudden his penis—hard, big, throbbing—pops out of his poplin green pants. He needs a weapon’s license for that thing.

“We can make this work,” says Johnnymoon. It looks like his dick is already working. His brown hair falls over his eyes early-Beatles style. His hair is the other thing that looks different about him.

“Fuck you, Judas,” I say. I can smell his cock’s fleshiness. He swings it like a tiny billy club and strikes me in the face. “Watch it, goddamn it.”

“Suck me, suck me.” He grabs my head. “Don’t choke this time. You can’t handle it.”

His charm underwhelms me. “You’re drunk.” I hear my voice crackle with fear.

Johnnymoon continues to be dangerously insistent. “Come on, bitch, suck my cock. I need it.”

I don’t really care about the language. We’ve talked to each other like that before. And a lot of guys say all of this vulgar stuff in the middle of hot sex anyway. I usually pipe up with something scummy too. But tonight I refuse to say anything, much less *consent*, to any acts of sex.

“Get the fuck out of here, tiny dick,” I say and try to stand. Just as I rise he pushes me straight down. His strength feels powered up like he’s going to overwhelm any strength I may have. I sit on the sofa again. He jams his baseball bat in my face. I feel trapped, like this rapist (shit, I’m being raped) might hurt me. He is going to rape me. He frightens me. I know what he’s capable of. All of sudden a very scary tingle trips off in me, something to do with not saying enough Rosaries and the real possibility of being in Hell before the ten o’clock news.

Feelings about my own mortality should not be part of sex. I need to go to confession first. The unthinkable is being forced on me.

In a second my fright turns into anger. A new tremendousness comes over me. This will not happen to me, concludes me. All of a sudden I turn into wolf girl. I stuff his dick in my mouth. I taste a salty bead of semen. I bite it hard enough to create significant pain. I don't want a major brouhaha on my hands. I just want him out of the house without calling an ambulance or the pigs. So I don't bite it off.

"Fuuuuck," he yelps like he's in primal therapy. He slaps the shit out of me on the right, then the left side of my face, and then he goes reptile, slapping, then hitting, then slapping, then hitting me. My head spins like a bad hangover. I suddenly have entered orbit number six or whatever. Bright electrons and fuzzy dots dance across my eyes. I think I see Frank, my dead Labrador.

"Bitch, you fucking bitch. Bitch. Fuck you." Then after running out of ways to use the word bitch, he *bitch* slaps me.

After that, the front door shuts, and I wake up about thirty minutes later. My face feels like a brush burn. I can't believe what just happened. Funny thing, I don't want to call the police. I'm allergic to them. I keep thinking they wouldn't believe me. Not to mention when something like Braxton is hanging over you, you stay away from anything with a badge. You even quit watching *Columbo*. But the big thing is I don't tell Johnnymoon—I'm pregnant with his child.

I spend the night at The Parents and wake up the next morning. Chirp, chirp, chirp, the birds in my old neighborhood take roll call. Both The Parents are gone. It's like 10:30 a.m. I underslept. I don't want to wake up. The world is not worth joining. I ache. Face, arms, mouth. My head is one major bruise that's made up of some minor bruises.

"Hello me," I say to myself in the mirror. Red marks come to life on each side of my face. Some minor black-and-blue joins the red.

A while later The Mother returns home. I limp downstairs to meet her. I get lightheaded like I'm about to enter a Valium load. At the bottom step, I grab the step's rail to stop me from I fainting.

"Hi," she goes.

"Hi," I go. I feel an ice-cream headache coming on.

She looks at me and says nothing. How can she *not* notice!

"Johnnymoon was here last night, and he raped me," I say. I want to say, How's that for a jolt, *Muh-ther*, now you can skip your coffee.

"Raped you?" she asks in her best country-club tone.

"It wasn't fun or romantic." I have to make things perfectly clear for The Mother.

"Oh," her voice emits that well-known puff of wonderment reserved just for me. What should I expect, a Band-Aid for my heart?

"Yes, Mother, sex without consent. He pushed me down and made me suck his cock. By the way it weighs about fifteen pounds."

"Good lord, I don't need the details."

“Here’s the details, mother.” I point to my face.

“What should we do?” Her concern lacks concern.

“The police are not out of the question,” I say. At that moment I drop down to my knees and cry. It all comes down upon me—the physical pain and the emotional hurt of how Johnnymoon has discarded me like a busted eight-track tape or something, and Braxton. He won’t leave me alone.

“Come on, it’s Johnnymoon,” The Mother says. “And if you wouldn’t lead these men on, this wouldn’t happen. Awww, let me see.” She turns and looks at me. “Oh, you’ll be fine, sweetheart.”

It’s another *Twilight Zone* moment. What appears to be an ordinary bitch is nothing more than your mother, a supposed human with a heart the size of a marble, belittling you in a place once known as your home, but it is really the twilight zone. Doo-doo-doo-doo. Doo-doo-doo-doo.

“You do need help,” she says. “We love you. We want to help.” This concerned, daytime-soap look takes over her face.

“Not that kind of help.” I know she has the Hazelden rehab thing on her mind.

“Bad things always happen around your chemical consumption.”

Whoa, that’s a fucking new one, chemical consumption. She’s been talking to her friends.

“I’m pregnant,” I say. “How’s that for some soap-opera action.”

She just looks at me like I'm a Klingon from *Star Trek*. "Say that again," The Mother says.

"You heard me."

"I don't think so," she says.

"Maybe you should tell my uterus that."

"I'm tired of you. . . embarrassing us."

"It's life, *Muh-ther*."

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"I don't believe in abortions." I just don't. "I'm glad people have a choice, and I'm glad I have a choice. My choice is to create life."

"We need to make arrangements," she says.

I'm like, "*Arrangements?*"

"I'm so disappointed," The Mother says.

"Me too," I say.

"In who?"

"In everything."

Chapter Nine
HIDDEN PASSIONS

Now: John and Louise

Saturday, August 27, 2005, 11:35am

Louise's inexhaustible taste appeared everywhere in her home, the house she wanted her family to live in for the next quarter-century or so. She sought stability, a comfortable level of certainty and predictability for her children. Her parents remained in their same Old Metairie address for her entire life. She wanted to achieve the same sense of security. The police showing up at her house failed to qualify as stability. The fear, the danger, the stupidity of it flushed her with a sense of failure, of the eternal fuck-up. She hadn't had that thought in years. She didn't want her family involved in her past. She wasn't a fuck-up. She achieved mommthood and had a successful professional job. She thought she had changed, but had she? She craved another drink.

For the home's interior motif, she had chosen a "sleek approach" for most of the rooms. She had selected fabrics for their textures and their touch, their "hand" quality. The big Mexican tiles helped bring a certain primitive charm and counterpoint to the kitchen's appliances. Among other strategies to attain the understated elegance she sought, Louise accented the living room with straw plants, minimal and dry, artfully cocked in bright vases. Blue and yellow glass sparkled in strategic locations. For the living room walls she had selected an earthy shade of green that Sherwin Williams called Forest Canopy.

She had painted certain spots on the walls, testing different shades of color on areas where the light changed dramatically during the day. She opened a can of very pale, yellow paint called Calming Cream. The paint's fragrance swept into her nose. The twins and their friends banged their way into fun down the hall. She closed the can. She went towards the room to issue them an official "time out." Before she made it they met her in the foyer.

"We're going to Michael's house," Piper said.

"Not a good idea," Louise said, even though Michael lived just around the corner, a safe distance for them to walk. "We're evacuating to Houston today."

"Houston," Piper said.

"Give me Michael's number."

"You have it, Mom."

"That's right." How could she forget. "Good-bye, guys. I'll see yall in about an hour. I've got chocolate chips."

"Okay, Mom," Paul said.

"Call me if it's any longer."

She worried about Desi's claim, his talk about the police meeting her family. The police never called. They just showed up, and they were rude, impolite, and imposing. She knew they probably wouldn't just appear, but what if they *did*? Old feelings cut into her stomach. Razor sharp. Piercing and intense.

Twenty minutes later the doorbell rang. Her heart thumped. Conceivably, she could go to jail if she opened the door. Her heels throbbed on the pine floors as she walked to the foyer. It started to feel like a Hollywood moment. Some irritating indie tune slammed through the ceiling speakers. It sounded like the singer was screeching, *bye, bye, bye* with an annoying

guitar riff that kept squealing the same note. She thought she had once liked the song. She took a deep breath. Through the peephole glass she saw a man, not a policeman. His sports shirt, jeans, and sandals reduced that possibility to zero. He looked around nervously. She watched him stare at his likeness in the front door's beveled panes. Louise realized it was Johnnymoon St. Albares.

Gone were his skinny waist and slim features. Seeing him so different, so the same, made funny feelings creep through her. For a moment she thought he was someone else. For a moment she wished he *was* someone else. Butterflies went berserk in her stomach.

She wondered what force brought him to the *now*, to her home. It was amazing how twenty-five years seemed like twenty-five days. The doorbell chimed through the house. Opposing feelings attacked each other. Maybe she shouldn't open the door.

"Johnnymoon," she said from behind the glass. The pronunciation of his name sounded like a ghost might whisper it. Second thoughts rushed her. But it was too late for second thoughts. She opened the door. The pall of heat struck her. Warm and humid fragrances of grass and earth seeped from the ground.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," he said. He was not an apparition, of course not. His voice was fleshy and human.

"How may I help you?"

"It's me John. Johnnymoon."

"I thought that was. . . you. Johnnymoon."

"It's just, John. John." He grinned without showing his teeth.

She wanted to see his teeth, that blast of white that made her feel alive. Made her feel she was more than alive. Made her feel special. A feeling her husband seemed unable to create.

There was still something natural and dangerous about him. “Louise DeAmas,” she said and extended her hand like he was a stranger. He was a stranger. “I’ve changed my name, too.” She released a big warm smile for him.

They both had changed. Like her, a time had come for him to shed his former self. He had a new name because the old one was too dangerous. Just like her. But it was hard to forgive someone who committed a violent act on you. You have seen this person at their worst. Their transition into Mr. Hyde. Seen them broken, and you always knew they could break again, double-cross you. Like playing with a wild animal that never realized it was scraping your face off with its claws. Like that trainer in Las Vegas who got too close to his cat.

His short hair was thick and combed upward. There was little gray in it. His attire bore no signs of the outré new wave couture they used to wear. His dark sports shirt with Mystic Seaport stitched on the chest appeared expensive. It looked like something Judd would wear, but unlike Judd this guy still had cool. He just exuded it. Maybe it came from the moodiness of his face. She did not want to think of her husband, because he would lose out to this icon of the living.

“Well, how are you?” she asked.

“Fine. Married with a trophy dog and beautiful wife.”

“I heard.” She wanted to laugh but didn’t. He was still funny.

“About the dog?” He gave her an impressive grin.

She found it hard to think that he could have ever been violent. He was drunk that night, certainly the alcohol had something to do with his behavior. And she had liked it rough once and a while. She wanted to see his smile again, that hundred-watt explosion of charm. Was one of his front teeth missing?

“I heard about your marriage,” she said in a quiet penetrating voice, her committee voice, full of calm and sense. The tone she reserved for important meetings. “I’m glad you got your commitments right.”

“Thanks. Addy’s wonderful.”

“She’s, I guess, lucky too.” She released a gasp of breath, which she knew made her sound like she was quickly losing her patience.

“More thanks. We actually bought a house. Everything matches. Our dog even goes with the living-room set.”

“You’re still the same.” She wondered if he worked his charm on every person he encountered.

“I don’t know if that’s good or bad. I tried to shed the bad stuff. But I gained weight instead.”

“You look good.”

“You’re too kind. I’ve had a rough day yesterday. I guess I need some levity.”

She wondered if he were the same, capable of violence. She didn’t think so. She thought she was looking at someone who a long time ago had transformed into an improved version of himself. And time had been good to him. He looked like someone in a movie who for the next scene was made over to instantly look years older. It was a face that remained attractive, still boyish, not beat up by hard living or chemical abuse. Although his face was no longer angled with the soft plains and curves of youth. But youth didn’t matter. It was strange how God designed your taste to coincide with your age.

“You look great, Louise. You’ve kept your physique and good looks.” He smiled. His tone was polite and kind. It lacked any hint of flirting. “Most people can’t do that.”

“Well, thank you.” She sounded clinical, like her gynecologist when she gave Louise her diagnosis. She appreciated the compliment. After a certain age it seemed she had become disqualified for male attention. But if he offered any more flattery she’d ask him to stop.

The smell of chocolate chips blew onto the porch. “Smells great,” he said. “Cookies?”

“That was for my twins and their friends.”

“Twins. Congratulations.”

“Thank you. What can I do for you?”

“It’s not all for me.”

From the ceiling speakers, an indie song that sounded like something by Radiohead played. Her heartbeat began its own syncopated beat. She maintained a straight face. “The twins will be returning in a few minutes so we’ve got to be quick. We need to evacuate.”

“Of course.” He looked at her. He smiled without opening his mouth.

She felt herself blush. She resented the contradictions of the human emotional system. She wanted to dislike him but couldn’t. His eyes were calm and focused, like those of a professional of some kind. He was still alluring and she, married. He brought conflicted urges to her heart. She wanted him out of her house, but she wanted his danger. But he still had a faint erotic effect on her. He was gentle; he had been reformed. He was now a good man.

“So what are you doing here?” she asked.

“My rental is near here. We may spend some of our retirement down here.”

“That’s good, I guess.”

“I owe you an apology, Louise.”

She knew what he meant, what apology. “That was a long time ago.”

“It’s never too late for an apology. I’m sorry.”

“I’ve had a long time to think about you. About us, and . . . it’s best I forgive you. It makes me better than you.” She regretted saying it like that. Why did she have to treat him this way? She really wanted to kiss him. What was wrong with her?

“Thank you,” he said. “That means a lot to me. To my soul.”

He seemed calm, at ease. She felt warm feelings move through her body. His humility impressed her. “That’s not the reason for your visit is it?”

“That’s part one. There’s a second and third part to it. Can we talk?”

“Come in.” Louise escorted him under the swooping archway that connected the living room to the kitchen. The new Uzbek rugs were spread over the pine floors. She led him to the L-shaped leather sofa fronted with an all-glass coffee table.

“It looks like a piece of a glacier.” He pointed to the table. “It’s beautiful.”

“A drink?” she asked.

“I gave it up.”

“I hope you don’t mind. I *will* imbibe.”

He shook his head.

“Let me get you something.

“You’ve got something for pain?”

“Some wine?” She went to her kitchen. She remembered the good things about him now. The incident, it was an incident, was an anomaly, something of youth, something punk and nihilistic.

She returned with a plate of chocolate chip cookies and a sweating goblet of soy milk.

“They’re so good they might even help with your pain. I hope you don’t mind soy milk?” She

set them on the coffee table and smiled. “The best memories—and I guess the worst ones too—always stay close. Too close.”

“You’re probably right.” He looked at her with a grim expression.

She saw a twenty-one-year-old boy, a boy with a different name.

“Can I tell you something very personal?” he asked.

“Everything about us is very personal.”

He looked at the cookies, staring at each one like her twins did. He whispered something.

“What.”

“I have an urge to use again.”

“I’m using.” She held up her glass of wine. “This month I had twelve years of sobriety.” She took a sip. “I wish I could help you, but I can’t.”

He told her he saw Bryan LaBryan last night and how bad he had looked. “He’s dying, and I’m thinking about using.”

“It’s the disease. It’s got me right now.”

She sat with him in their own privacy. In the living room—maybe it was the recessed lighting—Louise approved of how his thinness had given way to an extra layer of flesh. He wasn’t threatening. He excited her; he didn’t frighten her. She remembered their sex. She realized a funny intimacy remained with guys you’d slept with. You’d gone behind the mask of the superficial. Your flesh had touched. Your sweating bodies had glittered together. You’d exchanged fluids. Your backs had arched in orgasm together. You’d entered the most intimate of intimate domains. You’d even created life. She wondered where her children were.

He told her about his professional career, being a forensic accountant, a financial consultant.

“Judd’s an attorney with Archer-Hardy.”

“That’s great.”

“So, Desi told you about Braxton,” Louise said. “That’s what I thought you were here for.”

“That’s item number two.” He paused.

“John,” she said. His eyes appeared sad, tired, mixed up.

“Desi’s simple. The story goes like this, I don’t know anything about any tub or anything like that. I don’t know about Braxton, and I never knew anyone named Braxton.” The deception rolled off his lips like a politician. He paused. “Tell Desi you don’t know anything about it. Maybe I should call Trenton myself. See if the motherfucker even exist.”

It was not only funny, but it was more like magic, maybe tragic magic, how they were in simpatico on the Desi-Braxton issue. “I’m a step ahead of you.” She mentioned her connection with Tina Acosta who was doing some Desi research for her.

“I remember Tina.” John’s face brightened up. He reached for another cookie. “I guess we think alike.”

“I saw Desi yesterday,” she said. “He said he was sending someone to pick you up.”

“Pick me up? I got mugged.” John took a deep breath. His face became glum looking. “Pick me up,” he whispered like it didn’t make sense.

“He’s off the chain, as the expression goes.” She couldn’t help but smile. “Tina’s going to let us know.”

“Good.”

“She’s got a ton of connections.” Louise surveyed her home’s interior. She was glad it looked so perfect—slightly worn, the faint fragrance of food, comfortable but still haughty. A home. Her home. Not something belonging to an emotionally needy person. Having John see all of this filled her with a sense of accomplishment. She noticed a chip of paint peeling in her ceiling’s corner. She wondered how it got there. “I should have listened to you and stayed home that night. I never wanted to steal that stupid tub. It was dumb. And too heavy.”

“It’s too late now.”

“Desi loves the bad news, the drama,” Louise said.

“He’s full of shit too.”

John’s boldness made her forget about the betrayal, about the rape. Somewhere in her long-lost soul her heart melted. Her thoughts fought each other like a married couple who couldn’t get along. She kept her face emotion proof.

“What happened to your mouth?” She felt her guard slip. She looked at him like she did her own children. She touched his lip. He smiled. A gap appeared next to his left upper incisor. His missing tooth made him seem rugged, more of a man than Judd.

“I was mugged. I guess crime is still this city’s biggest industry.” He told her when and where the crime had happened.

He seemed pathetic as a victim. “Did they catch the guy?”

“Uh, no.”

“Figures.”

“After I’m finished being angry I’ll forgive him.”

“Forgiveness is hard.”

“But it’s rewarding and powerful. That’s something I learned in treatment.”

“Me too. That’s why I forgive you.” She did forgive him. Mitigating factors—alcohol, the other rough stuff—made it possible.

“I can’t believe I’m talking about treatment in the same breath that I want to fucking use again.”

“Our insanity only sleeps. It never goes away.”

“I have to tell you something important.” His voice dropped an octave. Its tenor changed.

A queasy sensation filled her stomach.

“Our son has found us.”

She stared at John, took a deep breath and stood. “Our son. Our son.” The words echoed against the tall ceiling. She saw the paint chip in the ceiling, how in the fuck did it get there? Why was she even thinking about the paint? She felt her face droop with deep clashing emotions. She couldn’t say, *what* son? It wasn’t like it was an oversight, something she just hadn’t noticed. She didn’t know why, but she felt petrified. She walked in front of the icy-looking coffee table to maintain her composure. It gave her something to look at, to focus on, like in an important meeting when she looked above the audience’s faces to avoid revealing her nervousness.

He stared at her. “The past is inescapable. No matter how small or significant an act, it’s part of us. It defines us. No matter how hard we try, we can’t avoid it.”

“It must be karma.” She didn’t want to believe that. “Things always change and transform. We do things that impact the previous things we’ve done. That redeem those acts. Post good acts.”

“Karma’s for everyone. For everything.”

She told John how she had received letters from Julian. Three in total. She ignored them. No, she really entered an intense denial over them. They were too real to *ignore*. Too imposing to embrace. Too poorly timed to respond to. “They stopped in April, when Julian said he had “crossed over” and met you. He said you had agreed to ‘reunion with him.’” That word reunion brought with it a connotation that reminded her of important and cold words like emancipation, conjugal, fornication. Words too clinical for a word like love. She should at least work with John before Julian showed up again at her house and hurt her family. But it wouldn’t be Julian who would hurt them. It would be her. Her karma. Her mind toggled back to those days of youth—kicks, crimes, and kooks. A feeling of regret consumed her. She felt nerves tighten at the bottom of her skull.

“You need to meet him,” John said. “To put it mildly, he’s been asking for you.”

“I have a family. One that can’t be disrupted.”

“Disrupted,” he said calmly, like he genuinely wanted to make sure he understood the word.

“This is a serious conflict.”

“Conflict?”

“Judd, that’s my husband’s name, in case you didn’t know.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Here’s my son from twenty-five years ago. Great, Louise, introduce him to the only children I thought you ever had. He’d use one of his tones.” She sat again and took a tiny sip of wine. “Then and now seem so close together the older you get. Like time is a big trick.”

“You got pregnant, Louise. Don’t you remember?”

“You got me pregnant. What did that take, ten minutes? No, you were pretty good, okay, twenty minutes.”

Feelings too rapid to identify whooshed past her. The smell of the Pillsbury Doughboy, her youth, the father of her child, and images of the young man in the museum, the young man in the car converged on her. And with it, a big, strange piece of shame and joy she couldn't identify.

“Every person's pressing question is who am I?” John said. “Julian wants to know his parents. We're a big part of him.”

“Like I don't know that.” She felt like a flop as a human being, all this inner talk about *her* children. She should have been with her son his whole life. He shouldn't have had to look for her.

“I'm leaving town.”

“He's here in town. Now.”

“I'm sure I'll be evacuating with my family.”

He didn't respond.

They sat in silence. The lyrics from the group Big Thud streamed from the speaker system. She thought the group sang about the past being strange and deranged. Maybe it wasn't time, but she kept hearing the words strange and deranged. “I need to think about it,” she said.

“You're number one on his list of to-dos. And he's got our genes.”

Louise found a way to smile. “I guess you're right about that.”

“He called me from Slidell about an hour ago. I'm waiting for a call back.”

“This is so fucking heavy.”

“We need to deal with this Braxton thing,” John said. “I’m so sorry for imposing all of this on you.”

“Are you evacuating?” she asked.

“No. And you?”

“I’m supposed to.” She wanted to—she needed to—be with John to meet her son, to deal with the Braxton issue. The danger of the storm, of confronting Desi, of meeting her son made her spine tighten up. She then shivered.

“I need to make some arrangements.” She made sure to smile a radiant friendly smile at him. “What’s your cell number?”

He told her.

She punched the number into her cell phone. His phone rang.

“It’s me,” she said. “You don’t have to answer it.”

“Okay.” He smiled.

He looked funny with his missing tooth. “Now you have my number.”

For a brief, tiny second, they both laughed like they were twenty-five years younger.

Then: What’s Up With This Girl?

June, 1979

My post-Johnnymoon era. Desi and I are now an item. He and I were supposed to start out together, back in April at the CAC. Johnnymoon got in the way, big time. Desi’s a natural fit. He’s dangerous, just how I like my men.

Johnnymoon will hate the fact that I'm dating Desi. The jealousy will burn him up like a cup of sulfuric acid to the heart. (I can't help thinking about the Wicked Witch of the West melting down to nothing, leaving her Halloween outfit spread out on Oz's floor). Desi's been kicked out of Hold the Lettuce; so, things are not going well between Johnnymoon and him. He said he left the band, like he had a choice. I don't believe it. The word is, there was a bad fight and Johnnymoon kicked Desi's ass. They almost called the pigs on Johnnymoon.

Desi couldn't stop talking about how he would "show them." He would "get them while they're sleeping." He didn't stop. He would not die until he dished out some karma. He'd give me all these detailed ideas. It sounded like he gave it some serious thought. He'd constantly tell me his little revenge plots. Like breaking into Johnnymoon's apartment and poisoning his food. Or disconnecting the brakes on the bass player's car. Killing the new drummer's dog. That was when I told him to shut the fuck up. Get a heart. Steal one if you have to, I told him. I've never seen a person find so much to hold against people. His ideas about revenge were the worst. Jesus, I thought girls didn't forget about things. He's a real bitch.

I answer my phone.

"Hi," Desi says. He tells me how he's meeting up with Suitcase Tony and plans to cop some drugs using the nun disguise, but they need someone to actually dress up in the disguise.

"Can you meet us in the Quarter?"

"Us?"

"Don't worry."

I take a United Cab to Café du Monde. I spy through the French doors. The whole place looks like it just arrived from Europe. Ceiling fans circle above tables for four. Makeup lights

enclose mirrors squared off on the walls. The waiters wear crisp white shirts, spiffy clip-on bowties, and white-and-green Café du Monde paper caps designed in the style military officers wore (The Father was an officer). The waiters waste no time in slapping down plates of beignets.

I see a waiter arrive and leave Desi's table. Desi's hair do, his *scare*-do, is all messed up like he woke up this morning and tortured it into place. He wears a t-shirt with Iggy Pop on it, jeans, and worker boots. A pair of granny, John Lennon-style sunglasses that make him look thoroughly creepy sit on his nose. Recently, I've been into the creep look. I think all the opiates warp your mind, and you become attracted to things that look different. But they don't really look different, they just look creepy.

I enter. The clash of cutlery and people chatting makes for a nice brand of daytime excitement. The gritty flavor of fried dough and powdered sugar blows through the thick air. The word yum strikes all my senses at once. I pine for a hit of sweetness. It's like sugar, danger, and Desi are all hooked up to the same sensation. I walk up to him.

"Hi," I say.

"You ready to do some crimes?" he asks.

"As long as they're safe."

"Driving is not safe." He pinches me too hard on my cheek.

It's a bad habit of his that always pisses me off. I'm starting to think he's a sadist.

"Dammit, Desi, that hurt. I wish you wouldn't do that."

"Um, nice."

"No. There's nothing nice about it."

All of sudden we hear someone banging on the windows that surround Café du Monde. The clank and clatter of eating pauses. Customers look up from their tables.

“Look, it’s Tony,” Desi says.

There is this face, flat-nosed against the window, hands X-ed above it just like the Stones on the cover of *Through the Past Darkly*. I wonder if the concept of a front door ever dawned on him. Desi says something under his breath and motions Tony around to the front door. Tony starts to run just outside of the glass windows, and all of a sudden he just drops out of sight. Cars zoom along Decatur Street.

In a few seconds, Tony reappears inside, dusting his pants off. He’s not carrying a suitcase but a Maison Blanche shopping bag.

“I’ve got it, Ace.” Suitcase Tony approaches us and opens the Maison Blanche bag. “Check it out.”

“Hi, Tony,” I say. Suitcase Tony looks at me like I’m somebody from a bad dream.

“Hi.” Tony turns to the entrance. “Sharon,” he shouts. “Sharon, over here.” He waves her over. As beautiful as she is Sharon was just hiding in plain sight.

She joins us. “Hi, good to see you.”

We wave with our fingers. She looks refined and beautiful with her sparrow bones, blue eyes, and German-looking blonde hair. She would look perfect on the label of St. Pauli Girl’s Beer. I get something like the hives just looking at her. I don’t know for some irrational reason I’m jealous. But isn’t all jealousy irrational.

“Look,” Suitcase says. “I think this is going to be a perfect fit.”

In the daytime Suitcase Tony looks very pale. I wonder if he's ever heard of, say, sunlight. His face doesn't look capable of facial hair; yet, a pencil mustache tries to make an appearance on his face. But all that's showing up is something that resembles dirt. He wears his black hair greased back. Maybe I'm just on a compassion spree, but there's something genuine about him.

I wonder how he can tell it's going to be a perfect fit. This black garment pushes the sides of the Maison Blanche bag like it wants to breakout. "What is it, a pup tent?" I ask. "This is what you told me about at the Rod Stewart gig?"

"Okay. Let's try it on." Tony holds his hands out like what's there to think about. We should have done this yesterday.

"Are we all going to try it on?" I ask. "Sharon, do you want to try it on?" I mean I'm not the only person here capable of nun fraud.

She tells me about her trial for Fraud and Deceit. "I'm on probation," she says. "If I break it I've got a two-to-five at Louisiana Correctional Institute, St. Gabriel."

"It's all you," Tony says to me.

Suddenly I feel like a hotdog being invited to a cookout. "Whoa, like slow down," I say. "Howbout if we make a date on this."

"I thought she was ready," Tony says.

"Put some calm in your storm," Desi says.

"I know a pharmacy that's ripe for picking," Tony says. "We could be loaded in a matter of hours."

“It’s not like buying a doughnut or something,” Desi says to Tony. “There are consequences to this.”

“Yeah, I might break out with acne if it doesn’t fit,” I say.

Suitcase opens up his arms and goes, “It’s a disguise, Vicki, a disguise.”

I say, “Fraud and deceit, Tony. Felony one, jail time, Tony. Plus, I want my fair share of the contraband.” I will not let these males (Desi included) take advantage of me. Sharon doesn’t seem to care. They are *men*, so they’re automatically have some kind of pass.

“Look, man,” Desi says to Suitcase. “Let me take the outfit back to Vicki’s place, let her try it on, get comfortable, and maybe we can take a ride later tonight.”

“You want me to trust you?” Suitcase points at Desi’s chest.

“Yeah,” I say. “Let’s be professional about this shit.” I ache for some chemical relief and have to admit I’m tempted to head out right then and there. Even though I’m pregnant. I’m in desperate need for a cage to keep my wildness locked up.

Desi and Suitcase carry on like two spies. They discuss several pharmacies and the actual pharmacists who work at certain drug stores. The hours they work and even down to their physical appearance. The whole expertise thing and planning aspect of the crime makes it fun. Like it’s something you are good at.

“You’d be perfect for Tony’s getup,” Sharon says. She has this great New Orleans accent that sounds like Rhoda and Scarlett O’Hara’s voices were put into a blender and someone hit purée.

“You mean the habit.”

“Yeah.” Sharon giggles in her deviant beauty.

“Look, let’s go to my friend Bryan LaBryan’s,” Desi says. “We can try it on there.”

“We have liftoff, Houston,” Tony says. Sharon giggles.

Desi’s chopper blasts its engine like it’s pissed off at the world. We all head to Bryan LaBryan’s pad.

Everybody walks in. It’s a mystery as to how Bryan just appears. I mean he just shows up like the Blessed Mother popping up in a cloud formation. “What order are you in?” he asks me. I’m still in mufti, so I guess he already knows about the nun gig.

“I’m an obscure Belgian order.” I just make it up.

“Heehee, heehee,” he cracks up. He has a funny laugh. Then he goes, “Yeah. Yeah. Cool, yeah.”

I can’t help but wonder if something is mentally messed up behind his gentle face. After you get past his hair the next strange thing you notice is his nose. It faintly resembles one I’ve seen on an aardvark. His eyes are brown with gentle eyebrows that look feminine.

“Hey, Bryan,” Desi says.

“Oh yeah, hey, right man,” Bryan goes. “Yeah.” He walks to Desi and hugs him. He asks Desi if he can get some pictures of me in the nun’s getup. Somebody’s been filling Bryan in on things. “It’s going to be interesting.” Bryan looks my way. “I want to get you next to some of my sculptures, smoking a cigarette, showing a little flesh.” He moves his leg like a

woman showing some leg in a slit dress. “Praying to them. You know the false-god thing. Come,” Bryan says to me and Desi. Suitcase joins us. Sharon hangs out on the sofa.

We walk into the black space of the apartment. Bryan stops at the first sculpture. It has the distinct appearance of an oversized bug, two-and-a-half feet wide and four-feet high. The intricacy of what looks like antennae actually impresses me. Heavy-duty Visqueen covers the welding equipment on the floor.

“Art, art, art,” Bryan LaBryan says. “It’s not only a man’s first name. It’s expression. Exploding watermelons. High noon. Picasso. Cubes and boobs.”

His mind or whatever he uses to think with overwhelms me. “And me,” I say. “The nun.”

Bryan looks at me. “And you.” He smiles. Bryan motions me to the far wall, to a patch of pictures thumb-tacked to the wall. It’s a bunch of photos from the local punk scene. “Look.” He’s points to one of Johnnymoon and me, that night at the CAC when Johnnymoon sang with the Normals. I don’t remember any pictures that night. I can’t help but notice he’s got several Johnnymoon photos. One in his collarless Beatles jacket with matching boots and Henna-orange-blonde hair. He stands shirtless wearing tiny sunglasses. A joint pokes from Johnnymoon’s mouth.

I look at Desi. Funny, the shades in the picture look just like the ones Desi has on.

Bryan peels two twenties for Desi. “I’m in,” he says. “Time for a bong?”

“We’ve got to try on the getup and split,” Suitcase Tony says.

“Let’s do a bong,” Bryan says. “And howbout some candy?”

Candy? We all just look at him with a four-way-round of what-the-fucks.

“The Musicman. Ear nectar.” Bryan LaBryan opens his hands up in the international expression of puzzlement. I’ve heard Bryan play; he’s an incredible musician. “Howbout—,” Bryan says. The musician’s name sounds like a bad-guy race from a *Star Trek* rerun. He strides over to this stack of stereo gear. There are enough electronics going on to contact *Skylab*. Suddenly this Middle Eastern stuff, let’s call it sand music, starts piping out of the Advents. Bryan returns.

“Bryan, your hospitality is appreciated,” Suitcase says, “but Vicki needs to try on her getup, man.”

“First you need to get your vibe straight,” Bryan LaBryan says. “It’s a negative world out there.”

“We need some narcotic cough syrup to get our vibe straight,” Tony says.

“Share,” Suitcase says to Sharon, “will you help Vicki tune into the nun getup.”

Bryan points to a door along the side wall. “Privacy,” he whispers and raises his eyebrows.

Sharon looks at me. She cocks her head and moves her eyebrows up as if to follow her.

In the room, a single bed that looks like it belongs in a dungeon sits against the wall. The smell of rotting wood hits my nostrils. In seconds I’m going to take my clothes off in front of Sharon. Alone. That is a wild thought, not to mention an erotic one.

She shuts the door behind her and opens the bag. She pulls out the black getup. The smell of cedar and camphor balls comes forth. The material is thick and heavy.

“Take your clothes off,” Sharon says. The way she says it startles me. Her fragrance against the mildew odors of the room make her smell like two million bucks.

I disrobe down to my black undies. Unwanted goose bumps bubbled up all over me.

Sharon's like, "God, what are you, a D cup?"

I give her this fake smile. I don't want to talk about my breasts in this intimate a setting.
I stand there in my black nylon, white flesh.

Sharon gets really close. Too close. Her clothes are clean and crisp and her hair smells like air. Marlboro smoke and spearmint Certs cover her breath. The deviant odor of patchouli strikes my smell cells.

She's like, "Have you ever made it with another girl?"

"Who's asking?"

"I am," she says.

She starts to make me nervous with this altered-state look of hers. It's her stare. Like she doesn't have the ability to blink like a normal person. Like her eyes are sown into her head like doll eyes.

"No, I haven't made it with another girl." My voice all of sudden sounds like it belongs to my mother.

"Really," Sharon says. This kind of blinkless glare serves as her standard expression. Its nuttiness gives me the heebie-jeebies. It's like she's concentrating with such intensity that she wants to see through me. "Your reputation precedes you," she says.

"What reputation?"

She giggles.

“It’s not funny. What reputation?” In a way it was like she’s talking behind my back right in front of me.

“The outfit should fit you.” She grabs me around the waist.

A whole set of interior buttons are being mashed. Buttons I don’t like touched. My waist, which I don’t like touched by another woman, is being touched.

“God, look at your nipples,” she says.

“It had to do with sex didn’t it?”

“Your nipples?”

“No. My reputation.”

With a big smile and sneaky eyes Sharon moves her scissor-shaped fingers toward my left nipple like she wants to cut it off. “Oops.” She pinches my nipple.

“I don’t think so.” I push her hand away. I want to deck her.

“Why not.” Sharon kisses me. She shoves her tongue into my mouth. What is *up* with this girl? I shut my mouth, pause, then implode with anger. She winks. I want to punch her, but I don’t know how to punch.

“Sex. Girl sex. It just doesn’t—,” I say. I start to put my jeans and black blouse on.

A knock comes on the door. “Yall doing all right in there?” Suitcase Tony asks.

“Fuck,” Sharon says. “Hold onto your dick, dick.”

“We’re not doing this,” I say.

“Maybe another time.”

“No.” I stare at her with ray-gun eyes.

She grabs my wrist.

“I heard you’re dating my guy, Desi,” she says.

My face torches with anger. “I thought Suitcase was your *guy*.”

“Stay away,” she says.

She glares at me with her nutty, blue-eyed, blinkless gaze. Bryan will have to wait for the nun photos. I storm out of the room.

I begin to dislike Sharon deeply.

Chapter Ten
ADDICTIONS

Now: Drinking Again

Saturday, August 27, 2005, 12:15pm

Louise sat at the kitchen island. She felt elevated on the barstool, the one she bought online. She had almost finished her last bottle of Kendall-Jackson Chardonnay. She needed to run to *Robéerts* for more. Pronto. Storm or no storm, she welcomed all danger. And she needed to call Judd.

Julian, John, Judd, the three J's, it was meant to be.

From the ceiling speakers, lyrics softly poured out, *You spin me right round, baby/right round like a record, baby/right round, round, round.* It must have been Eighties Hour. The tune made her feel both better and worse. It assured her that rejection was part of being human. Even though for most people it didn't involve the abandonment of their child. She hated rejection. Its misery filled her like a mental arthritis that ached in so many ways. It throbbed in her heart. Her chest ached.

She called Judd, and he answered on the first ring.

"Judd DeAmas," he said like his name was the answer to a difficult question.

Politely, she said hello. She told him the storm was coming their way. "Did you hear?"

"I heard," he said, still entranced with his lawyer voice. "I called the firm's travel agent. I'm making arrangements to get home."

“Judson.” She didn’t mean to use Judson, the gravest version of his name. The Judson version served as a clue to an approaching personal storm, some event of great, unfortunate magnitude.

“Yes,” he said. “Is everything okay?”

In the background an elevator chimed.

“The twins?” he asked.

“The twins are fine.”

“Are you drinking?”

“No.” She gulped the last of the Chardonnay and placed the stemware on the granite countertop. She looked at her blue veins creeping over the back of her hands. She remembered the same blue veins on her grandmother. How long would it take for her face to age? Would her neck go first? It would. Oh, God.

“Did you call any rehab centers?” he asked.

“I quit drinking. I’m going to AA again. There’s some meeting in the basement at Mercy Hospital. I’m planning to do ninety meetings in ninety days. I’ll get a sponsor.”

“In the meantime, you need to leave town. We can do rehab next week, after the storm.”

We, it would be a couple’s thing, a family thing for that matter. Did he really mean *we*? Other than her inability to drink in a civilized manner—something Judd and Kippi knew all about—Louise had never spoken of her past. Friends Judd had known from his youth, ones he had run into occasionally had been missing from her life. She only had Tina and Tina’s dazzling law career, which seemed to always impress Judd. For the most part, Louise’s past had remained a long series of mysteries to Judd. “You remember when the fertility doctor asked if I had ever

had a child?" Judd remained silent. The background sounds were gone, like he had turned a mute switch on his phone. "I told him I had a miscarriage."

"Yes, I remember." As though he let his hand off the receiver his voice just came through along with his *tone*. It sent a million negative impulses to her nerves. She hated when he did that. There was something annoying in that act of deafening the world, like he wanted to bill Louise for his time, for every sound she would hear from him or deliver to her. He was a worker, an achiever, everything had to be counted, and it all had to add up to some form of accomplishment. There was something unnatural about it.

She remembered that day when they left the fertility doctor's office. That cool spring morning when Judd asked her about the miscarriage. She could tell he didn't want to ask—or know—about that mistaken pregnancy. All she had said was that it was no one special and a "while back." She should have told him then. She had to tell him now. The omission had grown, like a small thunderstorm building into a massive hurricane. "I didn't have a miscarriage."

"*Oh-kay*."

Louise knew the sarcasm in his voice. He used the *oh* sound in a condescending manner on the twins. And the tone again.

"I gave birth." In the background Philadelphia came to life: horns blaring, a street-cleaner hissing by, the muffled sound of people walking. Then silence again. To show his disappointment he let the numbness of the quiet build. It had to be one of the longest moments in her marriage.

"Is this what the drinking has been about? Is it?"

She didn't want to say it started on their anniversary. She didn't know when or how it started. It was like the weather, hard to predict.

"You know, I wonder if I want to be married," Judd said. His voice rose over a siren that howled behind him. "At least . . . married to you."

In her mind she had rehearsed how his feelings would arrive. They stung. She could handle that gambit. But the blows to her heart could go on for the rest of her marriage, damaging her at will. There were other men to marry. That thought hurt. Deep and cruel. Her eyes softened. She wanted to weep, but she kept her composure. She took comfort in the higher power of her children, which included Julian.

"Louise, I spoke to a rehab place in Arizona."

She didn't want to hear about rehab now. "We're going to Houston with Kippi."

"I'll meet yall in Houston."

She gave him Kippi's cell number so he could get in touch with the twins. "Just in case my number goes out."

"Good idea."

"Julian is my son's name. I need to meet him." She told him how Julian had come to town to meet her for the first time. "He's having psychological problems. I need to be with him. I can help him." She felt so empowered by the fact that all she had to do was proclaim her motherhood to Julian. A chill—it had to be love—rushed through her body. Her blood pumped hard. She felt strength rise through her. She would have to quit drinking for Julian. "I need to stop drinking for him. He can't see me as a drunk. I need to do that. I will. That's my bargain with you." She didn't want to make that offer, but she did, without thinking.

"Who's the father?" Judd sounded like a prosecuting attorney.

She told him. "I don't think you know him."

"Is he on furlough from Angola?"

"No." Again the phone sounded like it had gone dead. The silence abused her slowly, like a sonic water torture. "Judd, are you still there?"

"Yes."

"He's a professional just like you."

He spoke again, in a whisper. He told her how one of his subordinates had informed him that the weather conditions were making Katrina into a monster. A perfect storm.

She disliked the way he used the words "his subordinates." Was she the subordinate wife? Was the world a hierarchy he always had to do battle with, something that had to exist to give his achievements meaning?

"You need to leave," he said.

"I need to resolve this. I hope to meet him this afternoon. The father and his wife will be there." Louise said.

"Are you drinking?"

"I told you I gave it up. I stopped."

"When was your last drink?"

She paused. "Yesterday. Why would you even ask?"

"Jesus."

She had more than lived up to her side of the marriage agreement. This was the time when she counted on her spouse, *through good times and bad, sickness and in health*, to do his part. She had a right to expect that. Here was *his* chance to love her, to go beyond the easy stuff,

to return to the marriage oath as Judd had always called it, to see if he could do his part. Help her meet her son.

“I need to think about this,” he said, “before I say the wrong thing.”

“I’ll see you soon,” she said.

“We need to go to counseling.”

The silence again. Silence was loneliness. Its void, its clear touch to emotional nothingness made her stomach queasy. It was the same emotional vacuum in 1979 that she had when she searched the earth for luv.

His phone clapped shut.

Louise She and the twins loaded into her SUV. New Orleans had started to evacuate, all at once. Ordinarily a ten-minute ride to Kippi’s, this morning took an extra twenty minutes. Of course that was the only way to evacuate, at the last minute, everyone at once.

“It’s going to be fun,” she said. “Kippi has one of those jets that you like, Paul.”

“A Lear?”

“I think so. It’s all private. First class.” Once, Paul mentioned he wanted to be a pilot when he grew up. How would they grow up now with a new big brother in their lives? God, why did this have to happen? She couldn’t remember when Paul said he wanted to become a pilot. It had something to do with a video game he liked, *Mach something*. She wanted to refer back to the time he mentioned it, that specific moment. The alcohol made that level of recall impossible. The juice clogged her thoughts as though plugs had been placed on all her receptors.

Only to a certain degree, could she step outside the alcohol's effect and add things up. That's what allowed her to manage her drinking. Somewhat.

"Yall will have Foster and Claire to play with."

"Claire's too old," Piper said.

"Foster Doooooodd," Paul said. "Piper, a Leeeeearrrr." He bent over the front seat and stuck his face in front of Piper's. "It's going to be an outrageous blast," he said too loudly.

Louise put her hand over her ear and laughed. "Paul, take it easy."

"Move." Piper pushed his head back. "Silly." She laughed. "Mom, we'd still rather that you come with us."

"Yeah, Mom," Paul said. "You're going to miss the Lear." Paul sat back down and stared out of the window. "Oh, well, we tried."

It wasn't like she was abandoning the twins. They had each other. Their like tastes, their thinking, their deportments. The same small toe found its gnarly way on both their right feet. She used to joke with them: Hey, Piper, it looks like you stole Paul's toe. Their eye blink, a quick flutter that usually occurred when something perplexed them, like homework. Louise wanted to be with them so bad she wanted to cry. But she needed to be with Julian, her other child. The one she fucking gave away. She needed to make that right somehow. She pulled into Kippi's crescent-shaped driveway and stopped.

They looked at her, two sets of blue eyes and blonde hair. Their presence overwhelmed her. Their perfect world would change for them, not hurt them, but alter them. Here she was imposing her bad life on their innocence. Her past misbehavior had become a generational thing. It must be karma. Shitty karma.

“Okay, guys, I love you.” She stared at them. Their childhood fragrances coming towards her brought her back years.

“Why aren’t you coming with us?” Paul asked.

She would tell them about their brother another time. Now was not the time.

“Mom, we want you to come with us,” Piper said.

Their requests played on her nerves. “There’s too much I need to do. Preparations, guys. We just can’t abandon the house.”

“But you’re abandoning us,” Paul said. “You’re not coming with us.”

Her body entered a state of high tension. “Listen to me, young man, I’m not abandoning anyone. I’m going to meet yall later.”

They stared at her. They blinked. That fluttering act of their nature that said they were perplexed. She didn’t have to react so angrily.

“Mom, you smell like wine,” Paul said. “Ugh! Your breath is gross.”

She could feel her face reddening like a grade schooler’s. She put her hands on the steering wheel. To gain her composure she gripped the rubbery handle like a squeeze ball. “Dad will fly to Houston from Philly.”

The twins just stared at her in a way she didn’t like. In perfect time, like they were connected by some genetic Wi-Fi, they blinked. She hated what the alcohol did to her judgment. She felt clumsy, like she just undid the blindfold from a humiliating try of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey. “I’ll see yall soon.”

“Love,” Piper said.

“I love you,” Louise said. “It’s okay to say all three words.”

Piper frowned and looked down.

“I’m sorry.” Paul hugged her hard.

She felt her neck stiffen. “It’s okay, honey.”

Kippi stood at the front door awaiting their arrival. She looked spring loaded, ready to pop into action. She greeted the kids. She helped Piper with her pink suitcase. Paul refused help with his backpack and suitcase. She gave some instructions to one of her helpers. He shook his head. The butler shut the front door after the children had entered.

Kippi walked to the SUV and hopped in. She clutched Kippi’s hands and kissed her cheek. Louise looked into Kippi’s penetrating cat eyes. Louise felt their gaze enter her. She wondered if Kippi would feel the same after she told her. Louise knew Kippi lacked tolerance on some matters. On occasion her unexpected snobbery reminded Louise of her own mother.

“I’ll hold the last seat for you ,” Kippi said. Untouched by makeup, her freckles appeared so clear. “You’ve can’t take too long.” Her freckles jumped up and down on her cheeks when she spoke.

“I’ll try not to be too long, but I’ve got to do this.”

“So what’s the big news? You’re going to rehab? Yay, I knew you could do it.”

Louise looked forward, past a splash of soft drink on the windshield. No, it couldn’t have been soft drink it must’ve been wine from her go-cup she used yesterday. The shape resembled a question mark. She focused on the large palmetto palm on the edge of the property.

“You’re not going to rehab.”

Louise knew the fall from grace was mostly unfelt and unnoticed. No parachute slowed you down. The drop was not accompanied with any strange shift in the stomach. But you knew when it happened, usually afterwards. The fall from grace was serious and clear in its humiliation. “You mean so much to me,” Louise said. She stared at the plastic-looking texture

of the fronds. Alcohol gave her the ability to observe certain details and to speed her mind past the obvious. She shouldn't be drinking. Alcoholism was a cunning, baffling, and powerful disease.

Louise told Kippi, in abridged detail, about her wayward ways as a young woman. She even mentioned her difficult and estranged relationship with her parents.

"You cried like a baby at your mother's funeral."

"I had so many wrongs to right. That's why." The SUV's air conditioner chilled her. She could smell her sour breath. Louise let the news blurt out. "I had an illegitimate child."

"Not in the last twenty-four hours I hope."

Kippi's humor felt good. Louise smiled. "No." She laughed. Kippi would stick with her when it counted. "They stamp illegitimate on the birth certificate," Louise said. She always found that description disheartening, like an insult to the mother. To life itself. "What's so fucking illegitimate about it? Nothing. That's so cold and legal. And not to mention oversimplified."

"My God, Louise, this is not good."

"It's not that bad."

"What will you tell Judd and the twins?"

The question formed a fist in Louise's stomach. "The truth."

"Do you have to let them know?"

"I've already told Judd."

"How did he respond?"

"I don't know if my marriage is over. Judd wanted to know if that's why I started to drink again."

“Was it?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t know. It’s complicated.” Louise felt her fall from grace begin.

“My son needs me.” She told Kippi how Julian, “that was his name,” had entered a bad psychological phase. How she needed to meet with the father to discuss reunioning plans. “I hope to see him this afternoon.”

“This sounds like the alcohol is talking,” Kippi said.

“Maybe it is.”

“Where is he?”

Louise told her how Julian left the Connecticut rehab facility. “He’s probably in New Orleans, right now. It’s a big deal for him, too. A bigger deal for him.”

“I don’t think anyone can get into the city now.”

“Apparently he did.”

“Well this is incredible.”

Always the socialite, was Kippi trying to avoid a face-to-face disapproval?

“I need to tell you something very personal,” Kippi said.

What could be more personal than an illegitimate child?

“When you start drinking you’re a mess.”

Louise stared at Kippi. “I’m quitting.”

“I can smell it on you now.”

“I needed to tell you about my son and my immediate plans.”

“Can’t your meeting with him wait?”

“I’ll meet yall at the airport.”

“Okay, the twins will be fine,” Kippi said. “Go ahead and take care of this.”

“It gets worse.”

Kippi stepped out of the SUV and held the door open.

“I think I still have feelings for the father.”

Kippi stared at her and frowned. The body language had the effect of a blow to the head.

“Please try to control yourself until you get into treatment. You *and* Judd mean so much to us.”

Her tone had changed. She had constructed a boundary, a restriction, a dare. Something her mother did to her.

“I know.”

Kippi shut the SUV door and walked inside without looking back.

Louise felt so lonely her chest hurt.

Saturday, August 27, 2005, 12:30pm

An unlit neon sign marked the entrance to Liuzza’s Restaurant and Bar, housed in a white-washed stucco building two stories high. An Italian-striped red-white-and-green canopy hung over building’s front door. The glass entrance opened catty-corner onto the Bienville Street sidewalk. John entered.

“We’re closing at two,” a young woman said from behind the bar.

“Thanks.” John walked past the bartender. On mirrored shelves liquor bottles glittered. They beckoned like forbidden thrills and dangerous mysteries. The smell of fried food soaked the main dining room with the kind of scent that after a while stuck to the walls and became part of the place like its wainscoting and red-and-white table clothes.

John's anticipation of an oyster poboy made him stop in his steps. The odors had alerted his taste buds and feelings. It was a flavor connected to his history. The oyster poboy asserted a powerful bearing on him and why he needed to eat something so strangely New Orleans. It acted as his communion with New Orleans and to an extent, his addiction. It was in its own way the New Orleans Eucharist. He could not wait to indulge in the crispy taste of fried oysters, the soft French bread, sweet mayo, the wet silky taste of tomatoes.

A light crowd of talkative softball players sat around tables, obviously taking the approaching storm in stride, or just not yet aware of its dangerous course. Some of them sat in chairs that had been turned backwards like cowboys in a saloon. Glass and cutlery tinkled. Laughter erupted. A table of pierced and tattooed Goths ate soft-shell crab poboy. The fried claws stretched from the sides of French bread. The Goths looked like they were ending their day, not starting it. One of the males wore a t-shirt that said: I'm Wearing Black Until They Make Something Darker. John thought of his compulsion to use again. Was there anything darker than that? He found a table. Seconds later Desi arrived and limped his way to the table.

"Game day," Desi said and looked around at the softball players. "I mean, what's this?"

"Dedication," John said. "Addiction maybe."

Desi made a gesture as though the players were doing something morally reprehensible. "I'm here," he said loudly so everyone could hear him. He sat.

"Glad you made it, man," John said. He smiled. He kept his mouth open until the air stung the nerve endings of his gum where his front tooth once lived. He told Desi about his mugging.

“Let me see.” John stretched his lip upward. Desi cocked his head up and stared at John’s mouth. His response reminded John of his own father. He waited for Desi to tell him something like, take it like a man.

John smiled again. He closed his mouth folding in both lips, like Addy applying her lipstick. If wasn’t for what he did to the other guy, he would have felt embarrassed.

“Huh. You can get another tooth,” Desi said, like John’s wound was no more significant than a mosquito bite.

John smirked. “Where’s Katrina?”

“I fucked her last night and told her to take the bus home?”

“No, the storm.”

“Out of the worry zone. At least for now.”

“You obviously haven’t been watching the news.”

“Ah, so what. I’m ready for it. Look at these assholes, you think they can fucking spell evacuate?” Desi motioned to the softball players. “I doubt it.”

“If you say so.”

A middle-aged waitress with a heart tattooed on her arm arrived. She took John’s request for an oyster poboy plate. Desi ordered a Bud-Lite, hush puppies, and a shrimp poboy.

“So, Dez, tell me how this whole thing with Trenton got started.”

“In case you don’t know I’ve been to prison.”

“I heard.”

“You heard.”

John didn’t like his tone. “You know I’ve been in Connecticut for that past twentysomething years.”

“I’m a suspect for anything that goes wrong.”

John felt Desi’s gaze burning him like a hot spill of Tabasco sauce. “Okay, I get it.”

“I didn’t kill anyone, *John*. You did.”

John’s past tore through his stomach.

The waitress returned with a Dixie longneck for Desi. He took a gulp and glared at John. John entered a high-school style stare down, seeing if he could out badass Desi. The meals arrived like mortal sin on a plate.

“Thanks,” John said to the waitress. She looked familiar, but he couldn’t place her face. She smiled like she knew him but walked away without saying a word.

John took a big bite into the French bread. There was nothing timid about his sandwich. The lettuce and mayonnaise took control of his taste buds. The flavors, one overlapping the next, consumed his mind. The sensations of taste captured his instinct to seek more. The rush of addiction was rich and powerful. He began to wolf down the rest of the sandwich hoping to sustain the euphoria. Such was the fury of New Orleans eating, such was the power of addiction.

The waitress returned. “Anything else? It must be pretty good, yall are pretty quiet.”

“We’re fine, thank you,” John said. She left.

“I’m not fine. I’m missing my fucking leg,” Desi said. “Do you mind keeping it down. I’m trying to have a conversation,” Desi said to a guy eating alone, several tables away, too far to eavesdrop.

John stopped in the middle of a bite. The heat of the fried oysters pricked his lips. He felt the uncontrollable sensation of surprise tighten his face. “Desi, I apologized for our fight. I’ll say it again, I’m sorry.”

“I had it amputated in January. It’s been giving me problems for twenty-five years. It reminds me every single day, every second of my life.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Now you do.”

John told Desi how he didn’t call the cops that day back in 1979. How he knew Desi would bring his car back. Where else would he have gone ? “I laughed it off and went to band practice with Bryan.”

“Laughed it off.” Desi held up his Dixie towards the waitress. “That waitress looks familiar.”

John didn’t want small talk. He wanted big talk. Words that reconciled relationships and soothed the soul. He also wanted to punch Desi in the throat, a cruel place, a violent spot, to punch anyone, and watch him convulse with pain.

“Look,” Desi said, “I’ve got an attorney who can make this all go away.”

“That’s encouraging.”

“Yeah, but it’s going to cost fifteen large ones.”

“Jesus, do I get a free watch too?”

“Hey, that’s the best I can do.”

“How much are you going to pony up?”

“We each put up five fat ones: you, me, and Miss Vick-ee. So it doesn’t get stic-kee.”

“She goes by Louise now.”

“Whatever.”

“So, who is this guy?”

“A lawyer.”

“Let me think about it. For that price I might want to get my own attorney.”

“Just be sure your attorney has the right contacts.”

“I will.”

John asked him if Desi and his wife planned to evacuate for Katrina.

“I’m not married.”

“I thought you mentioned Gina?””

“She was a live in. We’re no longer together.”

John thought for sure he called her his wife. Maybe he meant his common-law wife.

“So, you’re not evacuating?”

“I don’t think we have anything to worry about,” Desi said.

Desi stared at John. His eyes squinted like he was staring into sunlight. “This is another Florida storm,” Desi said. “So I’m not going anywhere. For Ivan I left, like the perfect asshole.”

“You still don’t like going by the rules.”

“I’m a born-again cooperator. Tell me the rule, if it makes sense I’ll follow it.”

John took a bite of his poboy. The crunch of the oyster, its juice, its saltwater tang toggled him back years, to growing up in Mid-City. “I was here last year for an appraisal. I made a promise never to return during hurricane season. Here I am.”

“We seem to always do things we never thought we’d do,” Desi said.

“It’s been forty years since Betsy. Maybe we’re due.”

“*We*. You don’t live here.”

“I have property here. I worry about hurricanes every year.” John felt his voice tremble with anger. When he raised his voice his words lisped over the gum of his missing tooth. His heart thumped. John composed himself and slowed down his eating. Lumpy with tomatoes and

oysters the primal urge to eat this cuisine—the delicious colors of red, green, gold—fled from his taste buds. Such was the power of Desi. John set the sandwich down and pushed it to the side.

Desi guzzled his Dixie beer. “Ahh.”

The waitress brought the bill. Without an offer to pay, not even his share, Desi shoved his chair back. He rose and left without even telling John goodbye. John stuck some cash in the bill folder. “Keep it,” he told the waitress.

He walked out of Liuzza’s into clear hot day. A Mini Cooper peeled out from the corner. It turned right and headed north on Bienville. The car’s mag rims looked frighteningly familiar. No doubt whatsoever it was the same one he saw before he got mugged. Desi was driving it.

Saturday, August 27, 2005, 1:30pm

John turned onto Toby Street. It ran along the eastern side of Louis Armstrong International Airport. Jets took off and landed at such a close distance it was like they parked in the neighborhood. The address written in a Bryan’s perfect penmanship rested in the palm of John’s hand. He looked up to the number on the house. A young woman frantically stuffed a van with belongings. Next door a Caterpillar bulldozer grumbled and huffed black smoke. The dozer’s blade curled up the earth like a spoon rolling up chocolate Haagen-Dazs by the ton.

John parked his car and approached. The heat and humidity soaked into him. The young woman shoved a Clorox box wrapped with freezer tape into her crowded Toyota parked close to the front door. “Can I help you?” the harried young woman asked. The non-committal look of a hotel desk clerk covered her face.

“I’m looking for someone.” His shirt clung to his wet skin.

“Of course. We all are,” the woman said. “That’s the sole reason of our existence: other people.”

John paused. “Cooley?”

A little girl with a thumb stuck in her mouth studied the woman. Her head rotated to and from the woman as she moved to the house’s tiny front porch and back to the van.

“You’re not a narc, are you?” The woman’s shaggy blonde bangs tumbled over her eyes. She squinted as though distrust were an eye function. “Sorry, *mista*, no offense intended.”

“Why would I be a narc?”

“My husband,” she shouted towards the house.

John introduced himself.

“I’m Cooley’s wife.”

“I think Bryan spoke to you last night.”

“Right, you want. . .” The roar of a jet reduced her words to an echo in his skull. She stared at him. A bubble scar in the shape of a comma sat on of her chin.

“I have some business with your husband.” At that moment John couldn’t believe how his addiction never slept. It grew in its host, like a monster. John’s was awake, healthy and coherent as though it had never rested.

“You’ve come to the right place.” She looked back at the house. “He’ll appear soon.”

In the lot next door the bulldozer grumbled. The ground rumbled.

“We’re doing a twofer here,” she said. “We’re moving out of this house, and we’re going to beat the hurricane rush all at the same time.” She loaded another box into the van’s rear section. “I can’t forget Ivan.”

John heard her gentle panting. “Yeah, I was here for that one too.”

“We’re going to leave in the middle of the night. I don’t want to die by traffic.”

“It’s definitely more exciting to die by wind.”

“Probably. I’ve got a child. My kicks are limited to birthday parties at Chuck E. Cheese.”

John turned and looked at the airport. About a half-mile away on the airport’s busy runway a red Northwest jet taxied up. He wouldn’t mind being on that flight heading back to Mystic, to Addy, cooler temps, and a bowl of chowder at the S-Car-Go. Back to his sobriety and his sanity. Back to Julian. In moments the jet’s engine would catapult the massive bird into the air. He considered the impossibility of that feat, thousands of pounds, hundreds of lives. The red jet furnished him with hope, both daunting and stimulating. Why did he have to use again? A chill tickled its way up his spine.

She asked where he was from. He told her.

“Connecticut, huh. I can’t stand the cold. Crucify me instead.”

“The summers beat this.” John cocked his head to his side and held up his hands in Jesus-on-the-cross formation. “I grew up in Metairie.”

“You sure sound like you’re from Connecticut.”

“It’s a long story. More boring than a traffic jam.”

Cooley’s wife stared at him with a concerned expression. He realized she was looking at his missing tooth. He pointed at his mouth with his index and pinky fingers. “I was mugged.”

“I don’t know if crime pays, but it surely can hurt.”

He laughed and stepped closer. Perspiration formed on the peach fuzz above her lips. A little girl came out of the house and clutched the woman’s leg. Somewhere in the child a gene made a perfect match with the woman’s brown hair and wide eyes. A sense of anguish that John

had once experienced covered the child's face. Not that deep inside of him a child still roamed. He wondered if the child sensed the terror of the approaching hurricane like he did for Hurricane Betsy.

John squatted and smiled. "Hi, sweetheart. I hate storms too."

The child nodded her head in agreement, with a thumb comfortably lodged between her lips. She backed into her mother.

"Was she here for Ivan?" John asked her mother.

"Sure was."

"I was frightened when I was her age."

"She's probably scared. She knows we're nervous about it."

"You are really cute." John squatted. The scent of baby powder came off the little girl. He thought he could hear fear beating in her tiny heart. She must have been the age of his daughter Jade when he and Addy lost her to leukemia.

He looked at the house. A man shuffled between rooms. The bare windows offered no cover to a shotgun breached in his arm.

In a kind of semaphore speak, the woman looked at the man inside and then pointed at the bulldozer. She mumbled some words and squinted her face for emphasis. The bulldozer revved its engine like a threat. With a box in her hand, she looked at John and nodded towards the Caterpillar. "You think this dozer could wait until after the storm before he scrapes us up. Katrina might do the work for him."

"I think Katrina'll turn and miss us," John said.

"She's not a sports car, mista. We're due. Come see, *hawt*." The mother groaned as she raised the child. Her skinny arms tightened with muscles. A crying jag had made the tot's eyes

glassy. She sucked on her thumb as though it were an addiction. The young mother whispered in child's ear and set her down. The mother and child grabbed hands and walked into the house. They were best friends. Their togetherness placed a warm touch on John's heart.

The red-and-white Northwest airliner cracked the sky. It roared into the expanse of blue skies and hard gravity. In seconds it would find safety in the clouds. John couldn't believe he thought of the clouds as a safe place.

The bulldozer pounded its way to the edge of the property. The ground shook. Diesel fumes mingled with the fragrance of mud. The operator shifted a cigar in his mouth. Like a football referee indicating a first down his fat arm jiggled as it motioned John out of harm's way.

"Come in, mista." Cooley's wife waved John in from the side door.

"It looks like this guy in the bulldozer wants to make your house into a lot," John said.

"No shit, Sherlock. The electricity just went off. Water's been off."

Inside, the coolness relieved John. He felt his tension drop. The home's interior looked freshly tornadoed. Everything was everywhere: dishes and Styrofoam packing balls, Beanie Babies and Barbies, tiny green Monopoly houses, work boots, overalls, an American flag messed up on the floor. The house's foundation shimmied. A Barbie doll leaning against a tiny metal stove shook and tumbled.

"They've been trying to flatten us for the last three days," she said over the bulldozer's clinking treads. "It's karma, man. Gotta be. The judge gave them the final okay two days ago." She arched a brow. "It's progress."

"Who needs it?"

"Progress always sounds nice." The woman held her hand up as though she were a sales person bragging about a product's indisputable capabilities. "I mean the word, progress. *Prah-*

gress. It is nice as long as you're not in its way. But this is it. It's the end of your world, man."

The working bulldozer made her arm vibrate. John realized he wasn't making progress.

A man, twentysomething, entered the room from the right. A twelve-gauge shotgun with side-by-side barrels lay cracked open over his left arm. The Remington looked just like Julian's, the one John confiscated before he left for New Orleans.

"Good morning," he said.

"It's afternoon, Cooley," his wife said. "Business Cooley." She motioned her head at John.

"No shit, Jennifer. I don't think he's here for a *Rolling Stone* interview."

"I'm glad you're thinking," Jennifer said.

"Are we going to just wait in here and let that asshole mow us down?" Cooley asked. A do-rag in the stars-and-bars of the Confederate flag covered his forehead. The ragged ends of his air poked out like straw.

John thought his eyes shined with an unidentifiable lunacy. He could have been a paramilitary nutcase ready for some version of a dope-induced biblical rapture. "Bryan spoke to you last night."

"Yeah. Hey."

John shook his hand. Cooley's grip was soft. For some reason John thought of the thinness of a bible page.

Jennifer nodded towards Cooley. "He's a victim of his own stupidity. They bought us out for the airport to expand. Cooley here takes our money and spends it. On what, I don't know: firearms, dope, hole."

John squinted questioning eyes at her.

“You know, whores. Titty bars, whatever. They wanted our fucking *air* rights. America is beautiful, man. Our fucking *air* rights, man, can you believe it? Now that’s progress. It makes me want to go out and vote.”

“We need some time to get our things ready,” Cooley said. He snapped the twelve-gauge shut. “Maybe I need to go speak to that man.” He nodded in the direction of the Caterpillar’s sound. “I’m sure he’ll understand the language of the twelve-gauge.”

“Can we take care of business first?” John asked.

“You had a year to get ready,” Jennifer said. Her right hand made a tomahawk motion towards the floor. Her neck craned. Her jugular vein protruded. Her brown eyes bulged. “They’re *not* going to give us more time. They already gave us that. That’s why this shit is all drawn out over months and years. Most people get a clue and prepare *a, head, of, time*. So they and their loved ones don’t get run over because they haven’t packed their fucking forks.”

“I’m sorry I forgot your name,” Cooley said.

John told him. “Whattya got?”

“Mexican Black Magic.” Cooley rested his butt on a sofa.

“Heroin?”

“Murder one. You got to be careful with this shit.”

“I wanted to stay away from the spikes.”

“You can’t snort it.” Cooley smiled. “It’s that tar stuff.”

“You have any spikes?”

“Yeah, I’ll *give* you some U-100s.”

“How much for the potion?”

“Twenty-five dollars a balloon.”

“I remember when K-4 Dilaudids were fifty-dollars a piece.”

“The markets stuffed with product. And you need to be careful. This shit wears off fast, but up front it’s stronger than Mike Tyson.”

The talk, a kind of foreplay, spread goose bumps up John’s spine.

“I’ve got five balloons left.”

“I’ll take em.”

Cooley pulled the dope from his pockets. “Here. Make it snappy. You gotta do one here. I’m not selling to any narcs. I don’t care if you *say* you know Bryan.”

John paid him.

“The Negro wants to huff and puff and blow our house down.” Cooley nodded towards the dozer’s sound.

John grabbed the tiny balloons the size of marbles. The rubber made a squeaking sound when he rubbed them together in his hand. Cooley led John down the small hall and motioned to a narrow bathroom. Rusted faucets sat on a busted Formica countertop. It smelled of urine and baby powder.

“We can’t flush the toilet.” Cooley handed John two syringes, a tablespoon, and a yellow lighter. “They turned off the water.”

John held the lighter in his hand and thought of Bryan LaBryan. *What was he doing?* But he wasn’t like Bryan. He’d never be that bad. He just needed a chip for the pain. Even though the ache in his mouth and head had subsided.

“I need something to draw this up.” He looked at Cooley who split the filter end of cigarette.

“Here you go.” He handed John the small piece of cotton.

The bulldozer stopped its rampage. Its big engine idled. John heard talking. He bent the spoon so it could sit level on the counter. “Water?” He looked up at Cooley.

Cooley left and returned. He handed John a small tumbler of water. “Ozarka Spring Water, just poured it myself.”

It could be rat piss, John thought. He knew he couldn’t count on any form of honesty in this world, and then sometime it would take him by surprise. He snapped the balloon open and squeezed the Magic into the spoon. He looked closely at the syringe’s orange cap. He searched for the tiny spot where the factory burned the cap into the barrel of the syringe. He wanted to make sure the syringe had never been used. His breaths were deep, as though he were running on a treadmill. He paused and inhaled one big gasp of air to slow himself down.

“How clean are you?” Cooley asked.

“Cleaner than the board of health.” With the syringe John drew up water (it looked clean) from the tumbler. He drained it over the bump of heroin that could pass as a piece of mud. The bulldozer’s engine roared again.

“Hurry,” Cooley said.

With the syringe’s cap, John broke the bump of heroin. He flicked the lighter and fired up the utensil’s bottom. The spoon’s edges bubbled. The Magic began to dissolve. He used the needle’s point to scratch the hot spoon like he was sautéing the junk. He took the lighter away and dropped the cigarette filter into the whiskey-colored potion. He drew in the fluid through the crude but effective cotton filter. His heart pounded. He could taste the excitement. He dropped his pants and sat on the closed toilet.

“Here you go.” Cooley handed him a bottle of rubbing alcohol.

John thought that was very thoughtful, almost professional. He rubbed some on his left thigh. Carefully he drove the spike down. Its sting somehow felt good. Slowly he pushed the plunger down. His muscle tingled and burned from the smack. It was not the big rush one received from slamming it into a vein, but the slow creep of the load would be nice. Ever so slightly, the heroin's warmth filled his body. He felt the back of his neck loosen up. "Yeah." He nodded and looked at Cooley.

Cooley bobbed his head. "Come back anytime, man."

John took a second syringe and drew up the remaining potion. He capped the syringe and looked at the brown-colored trouble for impurities. From his pocket he pulled a case he had once used for his glasses. He placed the second syringe in it. He needed to make it across town before the full force of the smack slammed him. John felt the big, smooth sensation slowly making its trek into his nervous system. Already the creeping euphoria began.

Outside, the Hurricane fence lay beneath the Caterpillar's treads. The big engine grunted. Black smoke rose from its exhaust. Its fat blade moved to the slab of the house.

"Wait." Cooley stepped outside with his twelve-gauge. He walked towards the dozer. A cigar stub cocked from the side of the operator's mouth. The man raised his hands in a surrender gesture.

"I'm out of here," John said. Cooley was too close to the bulldozer's engine to hear him, and Cooley's wife was nowhere to be found.

The car's interior temperature numbed John. The smell of baking plastic filled his nose. As though the discomfort raised the response of the heroin, he began to relax. All would soon be okay. Heaven on earth. He looked back at Cooley, and he pulled away from the property.

A light-headedness swooped over John. He felt relaxed but strong. A sweet sensation, a special ease with everything, with the universe, filled his body. His eyelids, his mind, his stomach relaxed. He hoped heaven felt this good. The warm air clawed at John, but its discomfort couldn't touch him. The H began the gracious fulfillment of its promise.

He drove down Williams Boulevard to West Metairie Avenue, the route back to New Orleans. A large drainage canal ran through the middle of West Metairie Avenue. Lush with grass and blood weed the sides descended fifteen-feet down. Only after heavy rains did water appear. The canal had been there since John's boyhood. It now looked ugly and neglected.

The heroin's big caress warmed his entire body. Somehow he thought of New Orleans as heroin. Her elegance, her euphoria, her wickedness. His strength grew and retreated at the same time. Good thing he didn't do the whole bump, he thought. He could feel the magic power of the dope. His brain wanted to ooze out of his skull in slow motion. The world was turning soft.

On the corner of Roosevelt and West Metairie Avenues people crowded a Shell station. Thirst tightened John's throat. He wished for a bottle of water. He needed to get back to Le Pavillon hotel. The dashboard of the old Nissan winked with a red oilcan. He couldn't remember if the light had just come on, or it had been there before. He didn't worry about it. Worrying belonged in another dimension.

He piloted down West Metairie. A frightened feeling struck him: he had underestimated the power of the heroin. Heavy traffic—Katrina traffic—headed west. John soared east. He drove easy. He needed to stay careful. But what was careful? He felt too good to be careful. Careful was unnecessary. His eyelids wanted to seal shut. Heavy. Too heavy. Magic, black magic. He nodded. The space where his tooth once belonged kept nagging his tongue to keep

touching it. His chin ducked into his chest. He made it to Clearview Parkway. He felt so good he needed to vomit.

He nodded. His neck felt like rubber. Awake. Nod. Red light. Concrete. He raised his head and turned the Nissan left to break his nod. The dip into the canal came quick. The car's rear end lifted and started to somersault, but it didn't. The Nissan lunged. It bucked. It descended. John's head banged against the roof. The exhaust belched. He crashed through a few rows of blood weed. Its grainy green—almost blue—stalks. It looked similar to marijuana plants. His forehead slammed into the steering wheel. The car stopped. The engine farted. The fragrance of radiator steam and mud filled his nose. He turned the engine off.

He felt wonderful. He nodded. The Mexican Black Magic was strong shit. It was magic. In spite of his new location, he felt like God on a good hair day. He fell into a load dream.

A rest-stop a mile ahead. The sun fired up the day. An Acadian cottage behind a sprawling live oak welcomed him. The tree shaggy with Spanish moss soothed him. He saw a family from an earlier generation overflowing off the front porch. More of them crowded into the yard under the oak's reaching arms. Cicadas creaked and mosquito hawks swooped with glassy blue-green wings. A man wearing a chef's apron stirred a black kettle over an open flame. The smell of jambalaya sagged in the humid air. People gulped black sassafras from Mason jars. Dogs barked. Children played. A bearded fiddler plucked happy notes while his foot tapped a syncopated beat. From the pearly keys of an accordion, a musician pumped creaky sounds. Hoots and laughter rang out. He saw a French beauty, not unlike his mother, dark haired and blue-eyed, skin as smooth as tupelo, wearing a gingham dress suspended to a Cajun waltz.

The convenient chime of John's cell phone with its orange bouncing splash interrupted his imagination to inform him that the world was no longer simple. His family was a thing of the past, and he was in a canal in Metairie. The hot odor of his radiator and canal mud, which smelled like a petroleum by-product, reminded him of the mud at Lake Maurepas. His forehead tighten, his stress deepen in the back of his neck.

"Hi, it's me, Louise."

"Louise?"

"Julian's mother. You remember, don't you?"

"Of course. Yes. Good to hear from you." John perked up. He gave her an abbreviated version of his latest predicament.

"Jesus, John, you're freaking me out."

Louise sounded kind. Her voice, besides being excited and concerned, was gentle and soft like a teenager's. All traces of the momma warrior had fled. He needed to hear the gentle abilities of a human being again. A single human commotion. Louise's female sense of justice and kindness. "I'm under the influence," he said. "I got loaded."

"I'm coming to get you. Get out of there before the authorities showed up."

Her generosity did not disappoint him. He thought of the four absolutes. He thought of his wife and doing the next right thing. He quit thinking.

"You can recuperate here," she said. "Get to a safe place and call me."

"Louise, I'm married."

"That makes two of us."

"I'll call you in about twenty minutes."

John opened the glove compartment to take all information related to the car's ownership with him. Except for the notebook with rights of *Blue* conveyed to him by Bryan LaBryan there was nothing to take. He pried his door open and squeezed out. He had hurt his chest from hitting the steering wheel, but the heroin's feel-good transcended all pain. His feet sunk in black mud. It smelled like the gassy emissions of a swamp. He latched onto a stalk of blood weed. Its course stalk burned his hands when he pulled himself up the side of the canal.

At the top a man had stopped in an old flatbed truck. "I saw you plunge. You need help?"

"I think I can handle it." Like a cop showing his badge, John held up his cellphone next to his head. "I've already called for help. Thanks anyway." The truck pulled off. John looked around. The world seemed preoccupied with itself. In case anyone was looking, he waved to indicate he was okay. He also took a bow, something he thought was very New Orleans. It just felt natural.

A new Krispi Kreme donut shop with a Save-A-Center supermarket behind it consumed the corner of West Metairie and Clearview Parkway. John headed into the adjoining neighborhood.

He walked as fast as he could. The connections between his head and feet were hard to feel. The inability to combine his walk to the rest of his body made him feel like he could be mistaken as a stumbling drunk. Carefully he slowed down to one step per second, one-thousand-one, one-thousand-two. . . He walked through the old neighborhood. Cars crowded the street and packed driveways. The neighborhood looked smaller and rundown unlike he remembered it.

He knew Sharon Dire and Suitcase Tony had married and lived in the neighborhood. John had heard that Sharon and Tony, with their two children, resided in the same house Sharon's mother owned. His mind swam with thoughts of Sharon, how he had once made it with her. How everyone, including some of the girls, made it with her. How kind she was to him, before Vicki. How Vicki never found out. Between Vicki and Sharon there was bad blood no transfusion could cure. He could even see Suitcase Tony again. Tony and Sharon would be more than glad to see him and help him.

He found the house on Prairie Street. It looked the same except now it was rundown. On the house's driveway side, worn-out Visqueen covered renovations that had been abandoned. A set of cinder blocks had replaced the front steps. The porch had rotted floorboards enclosed by a busted screen. Inside the house lights glowed through worn drapes. A TV blared. John knocked. Feet trampled on the wooden floor. The front door opened. A girl of about eighteen with blond hair and blue eyes, Sharon's doppelgänger. She stood in front of him. He almost called her Sharon.

"Hi, is Sharon home?" he asked. The smell of fried seafood blew onto the front porch.

The girl's eyes widen. She moved her head back; her nose pointed upward. She turned away. "Grandma."

An elderly woman who looked like Sharon's mother came to the door. John had met her several times, and now she was of course twenty-five years older and frail looking. A moldy fragrance came off of her. She stared at John.

"Is Sharon home?" he asked.

"Sharon and Tony are not here anymore."

"Oh?"

“They died five years ago.”

John just stared. He could only stare. No other response was available to him. The words bubbled up in his head. A rush came over him. His head lightened with shock. “I’m sorry to hear that.” He told her how he had moved up north years ago and hadn’t heard about it. Sharon’s mother just stood there, short on words as she had always been. He didn’t want to ask her how. “I’m really sorry.”

“Thank you.”

They stared at each other. She shut the door.

John walked away. He felt a special doom, a sense of mortality he had always felt when a friend died. He walked to the corner. A Jefferson Parish Police car with its lights pulsing sped towards West Metairie. The heroin kept all fear at bay.

He called Louise and told her his whereabouts.

“Wait there, I’m coming to get you.”

Forty minutes later a BMW SUV stopped. John stared into its dark glass but failed to see its driver. The force of the heroin took a dive, just like Cooley had said. It was very heavy up front.

The driver’s dark window descended into the door. “Hi,” Louise said. There was crystal in her voice.

“I’m glad you made it,” John said. She wore big Jackie-O sunglasses. A French bun held her blonde hair together. Her pouty lips with a silky red lipstick highlighted teeth as white as paint drops.

“Well get in, sailor.”

He walked around and stepped into the SUV. The aroma of Chanel emitted appeals to his heart and other parts of his anatomy. The air charged up. Louise's attire bore no signs of thrift-store basement couture they used to wear. Her sleeveless black shirt, something simple and expensive like an Ann Taylor piece, emphasized a pair of barbelled biceps. The shirt was something Addy would wear. But he did not want to think of his wife. Louise's breasts sloped. They astonished him. Her straight-legged jeans, clean and tight, hugged her thighs. Time had been very good to her. John realized she had dressed for him.

She looked at John. "You're going to be okay."

"I'm glad you think so."

"What's that smell?"

"Sorry, I drove into the canal. It's sewer mud."

"Smells like swamp gas."

"Lake Marepaus," John said.

"What a smell memory to have now."

Louise seemed, well, so glad to see him. She probably didn't care if he had shit on himself. She drove down Woodlawn Avenue to West Metairie. Two police cars had blocked off one of the lanes on West Metairie. A wrecker pulled the Sentra from the canal.

"Let's get away from here as soon as possible." John didn't want to take any chances in case someone recognized him when he ascended from the canal. He ducked and stared at the letters BMW on the floor pads. "That's the car I was driving." He pointed over the dashboard and snuck a peek. The red Sentra dangled from a wrecker's winch.

"I've got news from Tina," Louise said.

He looked at Louise.

“Tina Acosta, remember, my old friend.” She reminded him that Tina worked for the US Attorney General’s office.

“Right.”

“The long and the short of it: Desi is a professional asshole.”

John chuckled. “She sure? I never knew that was a crime.”

“It is.”

John laughed. “Come on.”

“Tina’s got access to all of these very exclusive and chichi databases. She can log on from anywhere at anytime. Once, she came over and showed me and the kids.”

John looked at Louise’s fine-boned profile, her flaring nostrils, her porcelain complexion. He saw a woman ordinarily deep in the world of mommyhood. She cared; she had turned into a decent human.

Heroin was not made for exercising or trauma. The walking and the psychological imposition of his wreck began to kill his load. Louise kept speaking through the blur of euphoria. She said there’s no Detective Trenton on the NOPD force. “Why am I not surprised,” John said. “Or even angry.” He told her that at lunch Desi offered to get them out the situation for fifteen-thousand dollars. John felt the heroin’s surge quickly dropping. His senses started to re-form, like sleep fading in mid-morning. “Desi knew this lawyer who would make it all go away.”

Louise continued to speak, the pure tenor of her voice, the purring of her words. A hot rush from the dope came and went. She conveyed to him—she was conveying, this was important information—how Desi was actually under investigation for conning elderly people for work he had promised to undertake on their homes. He had accepted a number of down-

payments only to vanish without making any renovations. “He’s done it in Mississippi, so he’s crossed state lines and that means the FBI has been involved.”

“Another weird thing,” John said as his eyelids turned to a heavy mud and tried to close on him. “The car he was driving today was the one I saw right before I got mugged.”

John nodded out, then on again. He straightened in his seat, as though a layer of the heroin had fled back to its magic universe, not available for his pleasure any longer.

Louise lived on Louis XIV Street, a leafy Lakeview street. A single story, her house consumed a large lot. Gas lamps and French doors filled with beveled glass sat on a tight front porch.

It was the edifice of the past: the deep odors of the summer, twenty-five years that now seemed like minutes ago. A counter universe existed for time. John had recently read where your mind actually released a chemical that caused déjà vu, and the same substance made time seem so brief. How you woke up one morning and wondering where the eighth grade went to. It prepared you for death, by furnishing you with a deep, intimate understanding of its power.

As a young man John had a number of friends from Lakeview. He still loved the neighborhood. At the moment its green odors wanted to haunt him back to childhood. Maybe he shouldn’t be here, John thought. His feelings fought each other.

Louise escorted him under the swooping archway that connected the living room. She brought him to the bathroom so he could clean up. He returned, fresh and coming down on the heroin. She led him to the L-shaped sofa where a slew of photos were strewn over a glass coffee table that resembled a piece of melting ice.

He perused the photos. He had very few of his own photos from those days. He remained an enigma to himself. Most of them were of Louise and her family. A younger Louise with what looked like the Golden Gate Bridge in the background. Pictures from his days with Hold the Lettuce rested on the table's glass top. He felt a deep yank within him. He saw his past, something that too often stung his memory. He was twenty-one, but he looked fifteen, like a kid. At that time he never thought he looked so juvenile. His remembered how his life was clockless then.

Louise sat down and began a rundown on all of the photos—the outings, the parties, the gigs. She even had a picture of John's TR-4. It had more rust spots than he remembered. His heart screamed with a wicked guitar solo as his mind toggled back to those days of youth and debauch and the living. In the photos, he stood in the right aorta of life itself. John studied himself: his hair, his eyes, his expressions. His fucking thinness.

First picture: He wore a Beatles suit with matching boots, Cuban heels. His Henna-red hair jolted to the sky. The sparkling dot of an earring shined in his nose. Stylewise, always ahead of his time.

Second picture: He was, to be specific, drunk at a place called Over the Rainbow, a French Quarter bar. He never thought he was ever so scrawny.

Third picture: He stood shirtless wearing tiny sunglasses. A joint poked from his mouth.

Fourth picture: A picture from the CAC, he could tell by the amps and stage setting. He was not alone in the picture, a blonde-haired girl stood behind him.

"That's you." John pointed at the girl in the picture. "You looked like Drew Barrymore."

"Looked? I still do."

“You’re still dishy. More than ever.”

“Thanks. Somehow the compliments fade with age.”

“Where did you get the photos?”

Louise told him how Tina had collected them and made copies for her. “The ones from the scene are actually ones Bryan LaBryan took. Somehow, Tina got them.”

He looked at her, he felt her beauty strike him with a sense of amazement.

“Tina knew the ones of you meant so much to me.”

He didn’t know how to answer that. He returned his gaze to the pictures. All the looks, the expressions, took residence in his mind. His past, which he had settled, rested, and made right, awoke. The images left his mind and walked around like ghosts and goblins. Again, he wondered if he should be at Louise’s. He looked up at her and said, “Wow.

“It doesn’t seem like that long ago,” she said and took a tiny sip of wine. A thin line dampened her lips.

“The then and now seem so close together the older you get. Like time is a big trick.”

“Paul, my son, wants to get his hair done like that.” Louise pointed at the picture of John. She looked directly into John’s eyes and smiled.

“Julian’s hair looks like that too.”

“Any word on where he is now?”

“He left a message. He said he’s in town.” Should I call him?” John asked. His voice echoed in the tall ceiling.

“A phone call is so inadequate. It’s odd, confusing, shameful.”

“He said something weird. He wants to go home to Clear Lake.”

Louise exhaled a gasp of air. “I hope not.” She pointed to the picture with John’s dyed hair poking up.

John remember that at the time the hairdo was like an extension of his mental condition finding its way out of his skull. He remembered the look. Even the simmering red beans and Italian sausage floating from Louise’s kitchen brought back memories, ones of his mother’s cooking.

“Okay.” Louise placed down what looked like an old Polaroid photo. Its ends had curled up from age.

John couldn’t help but feel the blunt force of the young man’s face. It made him think of spells and *gris-gris* and the great forces of coincidence and conspiracy. Braxton’s face looked timeless, like someone out of a Civil War daguerreotype. His simple, dumb countenance returned at that moment to haunt. John thought of “Instant Karma” the John Lennon song, his dead family and friends, Tony and Sharon, and now his living and dead past, Braxton. He studied the picture of himself and this other young man from his past. It was as though he was having an out-of-body experience.

“Braxton Dooley.” Louise pointed to the picture.

Braxton’s blue irises rimmed in a darker blue burned off the photo. John stared at Braxton and Braxton stared back. He looked at Louise. He felt shock creep into his face. “Fuck.” Time seemed indestructible and imposing. His adrenaline charged through him. He felt humiliated, like he was being arrested. The pull of the heroin imposed its power over him. “I need to crash.”

“You’ve already done that,” Lousie said.

They chuckled.

“Will the sofa work?”

“An underpass will do.” John flipped off his Keen sandals and laid his head on a throw pillow. A ceiling fan above him ticked like a clock.

Louise rose from her chair. She returned with a blanket and a pillow.

Her kindness made a warm feeling fill his stomach.

He slept.

John opened his eyes. Darkness filled the room. Louise sat next to him and rested her hand on his knee. Because of the heroin’s purity, the dope had left his body just as quickly as it had entered. There was no afterlife to heroin like with pharmaceuticals.

Above him indie tunes piped through the ceiling’s speakers, *Tell it to me slowly/tell it to me kindly*. The lingering smell of red beans found its way up his nostrils. He felt strong and rested and hard between his legs, a sure sign of the heroin’s departure.

“Is it still there?” Louise asked. Her hand moved inside the leg of his shorts. She set her wine glass on the coffee table.

“It better be,” he said. “I think it’s going to outlive me.”

She grabbed his penis. “It’s there, big and bad.”

They both laughed softly.

Louise unzipped his pants and pulled them down. She dropped saliva on his penis and stroked it.

John moaned.

She stopped and stood up. She wore small white panties and a bra that exposed her cleavage. From the glow of a kitchen light, John saw a blue vein that traveled down her right breast. John's trustworthy lists—the Seven Deadly Sins, the Twelve Steps of AA, the Ten Commandments, the Four Absolutes—were as far away as 1979. He needed to start his sobriety over anyway. The sweet whiff of Louise's perfume—Chanel, Givenchy?—found its way to his heart and hard on.

“Let's go to the guest room.” She bent over and wiggled her nose over John's. “Eskimo style,” she said. She grabbed his head and kissed him. Her tongue went so far down his mouth John thought it would touch his heart. “Vicki style.” She grabbed his hand like he was a lost child. “This way.”

Down the hallway, a light shined from a crack in a bathroom door. His toes sunk into the soft carpet, the air condition cooled him, even his missing tooth felt okay. In the guest bedroom, an odor that John associated with unused rooms filled his nose. Louise turned on a light in the adjoining bathroom and cracked the door. John pulled his shirt off, dropped his pants.

“I kept my furniture from childhood.” Louise unsnapped the front of her bra. Her breasts came out. Gravity had been good to her. The elastic of her panties snapped. John had always found that sound excitable.

She grabbed John's stiff penis. “Oooo. It feels like concrete.”

“It's been a long time.”

Louise pulled the blankets back and slapped a pillow. “Lie down.”

He stretched out on the firm mattress.

She took his penis in her mouth. She stroked his cock as her mouth moved up and down. “Yum.” She stopped and knelt over John and slid him into her. “Oh. Ooo. Oh, God.”

He loved Louise's soft body and her gentle touch. She rode him. Like a cowgirl riding a bronking buck, she arched back with her right hand dropping near John's ankle. He rubbed her clitoris. "Oh, God. Oh, God. John, John. It's been too long."

"Here," she said. She bent over in his face. "Slap me."

He did.

"Harder."

He did, and he felt the tension leave her body.

John's mind and body combined to a heady climax. He fell to the side. "I hope you can't get pregnant."

"I don't think so."

Then: Both Brains Play Tricks on You

July 11, 1979

I'm a sucker for trouble and those who make it. About a month after Johnnymoon raped me, Desi and I are a happening. Luv spotted on the horizon, Captain Kirk. The only threat in sight is Sharon, Queen of the *Bitch-ons*. If she worsens Captain I may need to take evasive action. Possibly engage in combat with her. Sorry bitch.

I've grown suspicious that Desi might be spending time with her. *Sha-run*. For every one good feeling there are two hurt feelings. It is my own law of luv. I thought she and Suitcase

Tony were an item. Actually they were/are. They're more on and off than a light switch. They actually make Richard Burton and Liz Taylor seem like a steady couple.

I rise around noon. I need to tell Desi about my pregnancy. I'm just trying to find the right time, if such a time exists. My body and brain start to short out from this whole dope-fiend lifestyle.

From outside paint odors creep off the neighbor's house and make their way into my apartment. The smell goes right to my stomach and makes me queasy. My clock-radio automatically comes on to the only station it can pick up. Trumpets blow the theme song and in the background the sound of typewriters click like people are busy typing up details about the latest crime spree. For some reason, I'm waiting to hear my name mentioned.

My front door opens. Desi walks in like a returning alley cat. Maybe I'm just paranoid or something, but it's another morning I wake up and Desi is *returning*, from where, I don't know.

"I'm sick," Desi says.

"Me too," I reply.

"I know a pharmacy on the Westbank Expressway," he says.

"I hate the Westbank."

Getting sick from withdrawals qualifies as cruel and unusual punishment. It's called cold turkey, and you're never ready for cold turkey. It's one reason why people stay addicted so long. They don't want to go through cold turkey. It belongs in the gallows. It is what you think Hell will be like, but there's a twist. It's worse. All the stuff described as withdrawal symptoms in the PDR (Physician's Desk Reference) happen, and *you* get to feel them. You get listless. That means really, I mean really, tired. Your muscles hurt. Pain sears your bones. You can massage

your muscles all you want but it doesn't help. Your legs start to kick. That's where the expression "kicking the habit" got started. You get the Hershey shits. Disgusting, I know. The chills strike you in the middle of the heat, in the middle of the shits. Then the sweats come in the middle of the chills while you're vomiting. And the worst is you get depressed. Finally, you turn into your own little version of Norman Bates. To make things even spookier, your brain starts to have its own brain. Both brains play tricks on you, and you never know these things are really happening to you. It makes you do things they don't ordinarily do, like go to the Westbank. In short, you become drug crazed. Suddenly your mind is a terrible place to be.

Through some trading up with Suitcase Tony, Desi has gotten a hold of the nun's habit. We've been on a spree, and this is no time to end it. I waste no time crawling into it.

"It's getting a little wrinkled." Desi points at my nun's getup.

"They won't notice." But Desi's got a point. There's something Tobacco Road-looking about it. We're going to have to have it dry-cleaned soon.

We walk out of my apartment. I don't see Sharon's car, only Desi's chopper. Desi always has Sharon's stationwagon. Why does Desi always have Sharon's stationwagon? I strike my forehead with my hand. Luv is blinding I officially realize, the hard way.

"Where's the car?" I ask. I don't even want to mention Sharon's name.

"Sharon needed it."

"I'm sick. I'm really sick." I also have to deal with morning sickness.

"What the fuck do you think I am, Fred Astaire on his best day?"

"God, you think I can even ride on that." I point to his chopper. "Dressed in this."

"You can," Desi goes.

"I don't think so," I say.

“Yeah, just get on. Maybe Bryan LaBryan will let us use his car. We’ll figure it out. Get on. Bryan’s pad is less than a mile from here.”

I hop on the chopper. My mood focuses on feeling good once we cop. I, for a moment, bolt with confidence in my nun-do. “Born to Be Wild” by Steppenwolf lashes out in my mind. The chopper ride usually does that to me.

Nothing can stop me, except when we enter Bryan LaBryan’s pad. And there is none other than Sharon, The Bitch, Dire. She sits on Bryan LaBryan’s uglier than ugly recliner.

“Hi,” she says to Desi.

“What are you doing here?” Desi asks.

“That was my question to you.” She looks at me, her face is a hotplate of fuck-you’s.

Desi, “Where’s Bryan?”

Sharon, “He’ll be here.”

Desi, “Where is he?”

Sharon, “He’ll be here.

Snap, crackle, pop, tension.

“Hi Sharon,” I say.

Silence. She ignores me. Then she goes, “Desi we need to talk.”

Desi rolls eyes.

“*Pla*-ease,” Sharon boo-hoos.

Take two, Desi rolls eyes again.

“Come on, *Sha-run*,” Desi says.

Desi and Sharon walk off into the vast backspace of Bryan LaBryan’s pad. I sit on the sofa watching a *Gomer Pyle* rerun. I hate to realize it but I do: Desi hasn’t left Sharon at all. It’s

like I have these battery cables attached to my heart, and this weird, spooky volt starts to jolt me. Anger jolts through me.

I feel betrayed.

I am more than completely and soundly pissed off. I'll get him back, but the situation doesn't allow me to confront him at this very second. My face burns with anger. My adrenaline amps up so much I feel faint. I start to sweat. Revenge becomes my only thought, and the fact that I am drug crazed makes me dangerous

On the coffee table in front of me sits a very cool looking ashtray. It's this rusted, round ball of iron about the size of a cabbage. Obviously something from Bryan LaBryan's art, his addiction to metal or whatever. I pick it up. It has this smooth flat bottom. It feels far heavier than it looks. I could really hurt someone (Desi) with this. The rest of the ball looks like a pot scrubber. Little bitty webs of iron linked together like the cells in your body or something. None of the rust rubs off in my hands. Clearly, Bryan LaBryan spent some serious time making this into a nice piece. I pick it up and walk towards Desi and Sharon. I'm going to smash it over his head. I stop, turn around, and sit back down. Revenge engages regions of the brain far from the rational. Some other time.

Just as Sharon and Desi walk back towards me, the apartment door slams open. Johnnymoon enters.

"Fuck, let's have a Beatles' reunion," I say.

"Where's Bryan?" Johnnymoon asks. "We've got band practice."

"Not here." I give him a long, dark stare. I hate being betrayed. I'm getting the group rate today with both the St. Albans boys.

"Y'all have a script going on?"

“I don’t have the time, Johnnymoon.”

Somehow Bryan LaBryan has appeared. He must have been sleeping in the single bedroom. He tries to seduce us with some weed. “Let’s do some ganja.” The last thing I need now is a case of the paranoids I’d get from the weed.

“Eight ball off the side pocket,” Bryan LaBryan says, “Let’s get tuned in. Believe me, you need it.”

“Your car will tune us in,” Desi says.

“Sorry, no can do. My car’s at my sister’s house in Metairie.”

“Damn.” Desi looks at Johnnymoon. “*Cuz*, howbout letting us use your car.”

“I wish I could. I’m here to pick up Bryan. We’ve got band practice. Bryan, you ready?”

“Let’s bong out first.”

Johnnymoon raises his shoulders.

“One tokes should blow you out to sea.” Bryan moves over to the sofa and picks up his bong. “We’ll pick you up in Mexico, Johnnymoon. This is serious shit. This will knock King Kong’s dick in the dirt.”

“So, where do yall need a ride to?” Johnnymoon asks.

“The K&B on the Westbank Expressway,” Desi says.

“None of your business,” I say. “That’s not the place. It’s the K&B on Orleans Avenue.” So now Bryan and Johnnymoon know our destination. Desi shouldn’t have let the dragon out the bag.

Bryan LaBryan stares at me with a look so odd that it could only be diagnosed by somebody like Norman Bates. Tiny red and purple streaks—like colors on the wings of a fly—flicker in his Brillo-do. “Bong?” he asks, like he’s a waiter.

“We’ve got to cruise,” I say.

“Sorry you can’t toké,” Bryan says. “Have a nice day.”

Like a nice day is a fucking option.

Bryan LaBryan looks at Sharon crashed out on the sofa. “Sharon, let’s bong out.”

Desi’s already out of the door. I pass Sharon.

“Bitch.” She stares at me like a member of the living dead. You stay away from my man.”

The words *my man* bounce around in my head like my skull is suddenly on reverb. I feel pain so sharp and deep it makes me think I’ve just been in a car wreck. The jolt goes through my head to the back of my spine and up behind my eyes. I want to tear my head off and give it a break. The hurt is so fierce and mean I bend over. I think I’m going to faint. I feel my nose and there’s blood.

I walk out. Desi gets on the chopper. All we need is a car full of nuns to pull up next to us and start talking about the Vatican Two Council. And for other reasons, I shouldn’t be on the back of a chopper posing as a nun on her way to commit Fraud and Deceit.”

The bike’s big strokes grunt to life. The engine beats like a broken heart. Desi guns the throttle like it’s a challenge to the world. I notice Johnnymoon’s TR-4 parked down the street.

“We can’t go on this.” I point at the bike.

Desi’s like, “You’re right.”

I feel the heat of the bike's pipes. The smell of its exhaust gets my stomach more upset. I throw up. "I'm pregnant," I announce and stare at the silver spangle of my vomit.

"*What?*" Desi's face drops. Then he smiles like a proud father. He pinches me on my cheek too hard. It stings. He is relentless when I don't need relentless.

"Fucking don't do that, asshole. I don't need more pain right now."

"How do you know you're pregnant?"

"I've been knowing."

Desi loses his proud-father look. "*Johnnymoon?*"

"Yeah. Look there's his car." I point down the street.

"What's wrong with your nose?" Desi asks. "It's bleeding."

"Fuck. Sick, nervous. Morning sickness."

"It's afternoon."

"Afternoon sickness."

"Don't fucking tell me it's Johnnymoon's baby."

"What do you think?"

"That *is* so. . ." Desi holds his head with both hands like it's a helmet and he's trying to pull it off his neck. "That is *so* negative. That is so fucking negative. Vicki, Vicki, that is so negative. That is so fucking negative."

"I can't help it."

"You keeping it?"

"I don't know."

"What about an abortion?"

"I don't believe in that. That's out of the question."

“So you’re keeping it?”

“I’m feeling so sick I might lose it this afternoon.” A miscarriage is a real possibility. Even though I have no plans to keep it, I have this instinct to bring the fetus into the world, screaming and raising *heaven*—I want my baby to be better than me.

We both look at Johnnymoon’s car that’s parked in a line of cars along Leda Street.

“I can jump start it, and we can take it,” Desi says.

“I don’t know.”

Desi and I discuss our options. One of them includes getting out of the nun getup and just bringing the script in like a normal human being dressed in mufti.

“We’ve never been turned down in the getup,” Desi says.

“You’re right,” I say. “We can’t drive over there and come up empty handed.”

We decide that our cold turkey is too overwhelming not to cop. So the nun’s outfit is a go. And we’re going to borrow Johnnymoon’s car. Desi hides the chopper along the Jockey Club’s side.

We walk down the street to Johnnymoon’s TR-4. The car looks the same, except the front fender that was once smashed is now done in this smooth gray that clashes with the rest of the car’s off-orange tint.

Desi opens the door, and he puts something bulky that’s wrapped in a cloth—like the cloth jewelers use to wrap their jewelry in—into the glove compartment. It’s like he’s hiding it or something. I don’t pry. I get in on the passenger’s side. The car sits really low. I forgot how the seat feels like you’re bouncing on concrete. Like your ass could scrape on the blacktop if the car hits the wrong bump.

Desi ducks below the dashboard. He pulls out some wires. He touches them together. The engine makes a grunting sound. “Fuck, it should have started. Fuck, fuck, fuck. It should start.”

“Hurry,” I say. “Johnnymoon and Bryan will be coming out any minute now.”

Desi gets up from under the dashboard and sits in the seat. “I’m sick.” He pushes the car door away from his legs. He pukes. Two gut-emptying gags come forth. Stings of saliva hang from his mouth. From the console he grabs a cloth with old lettuce and oil stains on it and wipes his face. He sits. His head drops on the steering wheel for a rest. Pulling energy from wherever he can, he sits up. He looks at the ignition. “Fuck. This should do it.” He squats on the street and ducks his head under the dashboard. I hear the wires sparking. The motor comes to life. He hops back in the seat and revs the engine.

“Oh, Jesus, I don’t believe this,” I say.

“What.”

“Oh, Jesus. Check underneath the floor pad.”

“What? What’s wrong? What?”

“Check under the floor pad.”

Desi holds up the ignition key Johnnymoon keeps there.

It’s one of those days.

Desi pulls out from the parking spot and nips the bumper of the car in front of us. “Oh, shit,” he says. “That’s fucking major damage. Fuck.”

“Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the mule they rode in on, let’s go,” I say. “Don’t stop to report it now.” Like he would report it anyway. My nerves are being sliced away by a million tiny razor blades. Desi steps on the accelerator. Some metal falls from the car he just hit. I don’t

look back. We drive past the Jockey Club building and out in the front yard are Sharon, Bryan, and Johnnymoon. They all look at us with these sad-sack faces.

Johnnymoon jabs a finger at us like he's poking it in this make-believe chest. "Stop, stop, stop," he shouts. He chases the TR-4. "I'm gonna call the cops. Fucking stop. Stop, Desi, stop."

We don't stop.

"Some other time," Desi says.

"Jesus, this is getting be like work," I say.

Days earlier I saw this painting called "The Scream." It's my life.

We reach the top of the Mississippi River Bridge. New Orleans is sprawled out behind us. We get onto the Westbank Expressway. There is nothing *express* about it. It's a mess. There's nothing but traffic. An overpass that must be about five miles long is being erected above the existing *express*-way. We pull into the crowded parking lot of the Katz & Besthoff drugstore.

A fresh wave of the chills comes over me, and it's almost ninety degrees outside. I shiver anyway. What sanity I have left fades like the daylight. Suddenly I have this urge to call the whole thing off and go back to The Parents' house and ask them to check me into a detoxification facility. I don't want to keep it, but I want to save my baby. Give it life. It just feels like the right thing to do. Not morally or anything, just physically.

Instead we follow our same routine: Desi will write the script and in the nun getup I will drop it off and wait for the pharmacist to fill it. Then we'll ride off into the sunset. Or

realistically the moonlight, because it's getting late and this shit can take so long it can give new meaning to the theory of relativity. "Let's get this over with," I say. "Give me the script."

"I gave it to you," Desi says.

"No you didn't."

"I did."

"Fuck," I say.

"You put it in your pocket," he says.

"This outfit doesn't have pockets. It's got pits."

I freak. Desi freaks. I re-check my pockets. Desi starts to scramble. He opens the glove compartment and two guns, yes, not one but two, have come unwrapped from that jeweler's cloth. He pulls the script out.

"I forgot, I put it in here," he says like an idiot.

"What's up with the, the, arsenal?" I ask. My whole concern is that if you buy a pair of topsider shoes you're eventually going to wear them, and you may even go sailing. If you bring guns to a crime it's highly possible you're going to shoot them.

"Some leverage," Desi says. "Just in case."

I don't get into a *Meet the Press* debate with him but *just in case* of what? Just as I start to leave the car, I feel that loose sensation of fluid draining from my nose.

"Fuck, Vicki, fuck. You're bleeding." Desi points at my face.

I tilt the mirror that's on the right door and look at myself. "Shit, goddammit."

"Ohmygod," Desi whines.

"Don't worry. It's a nosebleed. They'll understand." I'm too sick to be stopped. It's your physical sickness, cold turkey, that makes your sanity leave head like the blood dripping out

of your nose. Not only that, the pharmacy people will have sympathy on something as simple as nosebleed. Everyone feels for a nun. Right now, my mind is a terrible place to be.

I strut into the K&B, hold my breath and walk directly to the pharmacy counter. I try to look down at the bloodstain, but I can only see a portion of it. It looks like snowball syrup. I still have a little coming out of my nose. I kick my head back to get it back in my skull. No big deal.

Out of nervousness I look at the script and make sure it's properly written. It's supposed to read: *Dispense Tussionex*, not dispense the quantity, *eight-ounces*, first. Shit. I know Desi doesn't have any extra scripts with him, meaning we'd have to go back through this migraine we just drove through and do it all over again. That won't happen in this universe. I proceed to the back counter. A clerk with a beach-brown complexion whose face looks uncomfortably familiar waits for me.

"Hi." I hand Mira (that's what her nametag says) the script. "I need something for my nose bleed. Do you have anything?"

"Oh, hi Sister," she says in this kind of surprised tone. "What happened?"

"Standard nosebleed," I say.

"Check on aisle seven for the nosebleed stuff," she says. She looks at the script and goes, "Same address as last week?"

I look at her and without hesitating I say, "Yes. Same address." I have no idea what address I gave her last week. I'm sure my face has shock written all over it. She writes on it. Once they scribble your DOB or address on it it's hard to take the script somewhere else to get filled. It's like this secret code pharmacists use to say, beware. So this script needs to be filled here.

“Mr. Akers and I got transferred from the Kenner store,” the clerk says. “We both live on this side of the river; so, it was a nice transfer.”

Like I give a shit about anything in her life. I look up and behind the counter and there’s Mr. Akers, the Ryan O’Neil lookalike: big blonde curls, a child’s big, blue eyes, and a nice build. One part of me says to another part of me, Ahhhh! I have already turned in the script, which I think may be mis-scripted, to Mira, the same person I handed a script to last week or was it two weeks ago or two days ago. It doesn’t matter because she knows (her voice has *tone*), and I should not have been handing her a script, not on this day in 1979. A chill comes through me, and I nearly faint. I put my hand on the counter to regain my balance.

“Hi, Sister,” Mr. Akers says like nothing’s wrong. His words sound like they’ve entered an echo chamber of my brain.

“Hi,” I say. “How long will it take?” I whisper to Mira.

“How long will it take?” Mira parrots to Mr. Akers.

“Twenty minutes,” Mr. Akers says to both of us.

“Thank you,” I say. I need to get something for my nose I tell Mira. I retreat to aisle seven. Even though Mira is probably a moron in her spare time, I don’t think she is going for our gig today.

I regain my composure. I fall back one row to the right of Mr. Akers. In front of me Tampex and Kotex boxes sit. I notice the big pads that I used to use when my period first started, those big teenage gushers. I keep an eye on Mr. Akers to see if he picks up the phone. If he does, that means he’s going to call the pigs. So far so good, he doesn’t.

I have no money for the nosebleed medicine. I need to leave before Desi freaks out and comes in with guns a blazing or something. So I pass on the nosebleed medicine. As planned I

just leave the script with Mira and let whatever's going to happen, happen. I'm so tired I almost fell asleep on my walk back to the car.

I get back to the car. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," I say. "What else could go fucking wrong?"

Desi is zee-ing out on the front seat. His head cocked like he's dead.

"Desi, Desi, Desi," I say.

"What, what, what." He wakes up, startled.

I tell him about Mr. Akers and how the clerk looked at me suspiciously and knew who I was. "What's the correct way to write a script?" I ask Desi. "Think. Just tell me the words and the order you should write them in."

He recites what I think is the right order.

"You didn't write it in that order," I say.

"I didn't?"

"No."

"Fuck."

"Does it matter?" I ask.

"I don't know. I don't know. I don't think so. I don't think it matters. Shit." He's panicked, pissed, panting, paranoid, pathetic. I can't believe he's still got something going on with Sharon.

"Did the pharmacist pick up the phone?" Desi asks.

"It didn't look like it. "

Desi tells me that since the pharmacy closes at nine o'clock, he'll go in at 8:50, 8:55 and pick up the script. They'll either give him the script, or they won't. "They won't call the pigs,"

Desi says. “It’s a straight-up yes or no. Staff will be locking down, and it’s no time to have the cops coming in making an arrest with a bunch of customers around. The situation compromises everyone’s safety.”

“*Compromise,*” I say.

“It’s a situation. Everything is a situation.” He grabs my cheek and pinches it too hard.

“Don’t fucking do that, okay.” I look at Desi and realize I have not even noticed Desi’s fuckedupness. What a time to pick up on it. And what does that say about me? Jesus Christ on amphetamines, my day worsens by the second.

Desi goes in and comes out, physically a lesser person. There’s the shootout, he gets an injury that lasts for life, something I didn’t want to happen.

Chapter Eleven

HURRICANES

Now: The Meeting of Then and Now

Sunday, August 28, 2005, 11:30am

In the middle of the night a wave of guilt woke John. He had moved to Louise's living-room sofa. He thought of his life and why he did the things he did, an age-old question, a question he should not be asking right now. He pictured some rabbi unrolling a spiritual reading, something ancient, something to do with mysteries of the mind. The scribe who looked uncannily like Larry Levine asked, "Why my son, why?" *Why* was he using, something he had never wanted to do again? The rabbi recited the great lists—the Ten Commandments, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Twelve Steps, the Four Absolutes—and said, "You had guidance. What happened?" John wondered what had happened.

He slept too long. The pain around his missing tooth had all but disappeared. Only an occasional hissing of his *th* sounds went between his teeth. His expression of diphthongs had been altered too. In spite of breaking number seven of the Ten Commandments, he felt rested, but intensely shameful.

He found the coffeemaker and brewed a pot. He brought Louise coffee in bed. "I know you used to like café au lait." He handed her the cup.

“That’s been a while. Mostly, I drink tea now. Good Earth is my favorite.” She smiled and sat up in bed, topless, with her hair mussed. She looked like a satisfied woman. Her stomach muscles were firm without any flab or mommy marks.

“Judd never does this for me. He’s off to work before I even get up.”

John stared at her flesh. He didn’t want to get involved in an all-day bed-a-thon. He put his mind somewhere else. Louise’s house and his Toulouse Street rental needed to be prepared for the storm.

In all of his shame, John realized that he still had some heroin left. He did not want to realize that; he wanted to realize that. A piece of joy spiraled upward. He wanted the heroin to be a bad dream, like a slip dream, one addicts had that were more like nightmares. In them, they used again and were usually woken by the fear of that decision. He would wake up and be relieved that he hadn’t used heroin, that it was only a dream. He had four balloons left. *What the fuck am I going to do? I need to get sober.* The single bump he did yesterday now seemed insufficient. It was back to the old adage: one is too many; a hundred is not enough. Once started it was hard to stop.

Louise told him that she had already contacted Judd in Houston. He had resigned himself to the fact that he couldn’t get into New Orleans even if he wanted to. “I told him that you and your wife planned to join me in my wait for Julian.”

“I spoke to Julian,” John said.

“What did he say?”

“He’s mixed up, like me. He asked if I spoke to Desi.”

“Desi?”

“It was the way he said it. He said I needed to speak to him.”

“Well that won’t happen.”

“I don’t think so.” Julian’s tone went far into John; it scared him like something was very wrong. “I didn’t think he even knew Desi.”

She mentioned her recent drinking to John. “I just ‘went back out,’ just like that. Things were not going perfectly, but I think things were going well overall. Especially with my twins.”

“The children are a good thing. Julian’s a good thing. A real good thing.”

“I was arrogant to think I could drink again.”

John felt as though he was a fool for having giving in to his disease. Subordinated his soul to chemical abandonment. To have somehow lost touch, to have thought that he could do it without regret. To have committed acts he had not committed in decades. “We need to get back on the wagon, like *today*.”

“Jesus, don’t remind me.”

“We’re adults, Louise. We can’t behave like this. My God, in three years we’re both going to be fifty-years old. Five-fucking-O. That’s a daunting number.” He felt a sense of urgency coming on, to hurry up and make things right, like they never had happened. “You ever wake up in the morning and wonder where your life has gone to?”

“I do,” she said.

“God, it’s like I’m the same person when I left here twenty-five years ago.”

“Where’s the heroin?”

“In my bag.” He stared at her, waiting for her to make a suggestion. But what suggestion would it be. The only right one would be to flush it.

“What are you going to do with it?”

He still wasn’t ready to flush it.

“All the stores, everything will be closed today,” Louise said. “Hurricanes are so boring, and uncomfortable.”

“I’m going to get prepared.”

“Let’s do some needle work,” she said.

Those words spoke directly to his disease, to his past, to their past. He now remembered the scale of the beast inside him. Words he didn’t want to hear, by the same measure—but just a little more—he wanted to hear. “Don’t make this hard. Let’s think about something else.”

“How’s your marriage?”

“Shit, Louise, why choose such a light topic?”

“I’m just asking.”

“It’s fine”

“I see that.” She held her arms out with her wrist protruding and wiggled her breasts.

John looked up at the ceiling and closed his eyes. “It’s impossible to turn around.”

“Turn what around?”

“Our lives. Or our lack of lives.”

“Would you marry me?” she asked.

“Today?”

She laughed. “No, tomorrow. Noonish.”

He smiled and calmed down a few degrees. “I’m glad you’re not serious. You’re highly beautiful and you’ve been a part of me—my soul, something deep inside—ever since grade school.”

Her throat rolled as though she were frightened. Her eyes moistened. “Why am I’m hearing this now?”

“I’ve told you this before.”

“Twenty-five years ago.” She took in a big breath and wiped her eyes.

“Time is a trick.”

“A bad trick.”

“Are you planning on getting a divorce?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“We’ll have Julian. We’ll see each other for family reunions. With our clothes on.”

“With our clothes on.” She sounded disappointed.

“Okay, you can wear a bathing suit. Connecticut summers are the best. You and your family can visit and stay with us.”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen to my family, at least my marriage.”

“The twins would love to go sailing.”

“They could go sailing with their big brother.”

“Would you marry me?” John asked.

She didn’t answer.

John told her he thought he had worked things out with Desi. “Not only is this deal with the cops a scam, I also think he had me mugged.”

John retold her a childhood story about a paternal uncle who, in the middle of the night, for no reason killed all of his livestock. Then he walked a mile and killed his brother’s livestock. “They committed him to the asylum. He hung himself before the state could pick him up.”

“I didn’t realize how unstable Desi’s become.”

“Unstable. We’re the ones who are unstable. What are we going to do? I’ve got that junk downstairs, and it’s calling me. It’s being announced over its own PA system out.” He couldn’t keep his eyes off of her any longer. He moved to the bed and kissed her. He had broken the Seventh Commandment like a nose-bleeding Sid Vicious smashing his bass. Sid died at twenty-one of self-annihilation.

“I wonder why Julian said to speak to Desi.”

“Don’t worry about it now.” She moved the covers, opened the rest of her bathrobe and spread her legs. “Come here.”

March, 1980

Okay, I’m having a baby. My stomach feels like I have a basketball with a chemistry experiment in it. He dances and wiggles inside of me. Then kicks me like he’s ready for the Saints. More

than once he slams me under the ribs. After the kicking, I pee. It's our routine: kicking, peeing, kicking, peeing. Like rehearsal or something. My belly sticks out so much I can't see my feet, and I have to bend over in weird angles to pick up things. The other day when I try to clean up some popcorn, I have to push the vacuum cleaner sideways.

Seriously, though, he belongs to me (skin, chromosomes, genes) and that makes things personal and unforgettable. Particularly when you give *that*—a piece of yourself—away. Think about it. I have.

My doctor describes my pregnancy as textbook perfect. Last week he actually shows me his textbook from LSU Medical School. He tells me, "Everything that's going on is exactly how *they* describe it in the book. Relax. Just relax," he says. I want to ask him who are *they*? A group of men? He says, "It's all here, if you want to read it." Like that's going to help me relax or something.

After a while it gets uncomfortable to sit down. When I see myself in the mirror I look as big as an auditorium. Maybe because of the weight, or my hormones, which are melting down like a Love Canal mishap. My face starts to puff out. It gets fat, and my eyes squint. I look Mongolian. I become chemically imbalanced without the help of any illegal chemicals. A first for me.

Two days before I give birth I have a gynob appointment. My doctor checks my cervix and says I'm less than a centimeter dilated, that I have no signs of going into labor. His guess: it will be at least another week.

The next day I experience what I think are digestive issues, as my doctor likes to call them. I have a craving for Mexican salsa and things spicy. I eat jalapenos at Vera Cruz

restaurant on Decatur Street, one of my favorite places in the French Quarter. I only eat like three. It was a craving thing.

The following morning my friend Tina, who's visiting from Stanford University, calls and says let's go to the movies. "What's playing," I ask. "*Kramer vs. Kramer*," she says. I have a hunch that the movie is about divorce, but I don't know a kid is involved. I don't think Tina knows either. I mean the movie could easily be about something else. A story about two boxers with the same name, right, *Kramer vs. Kramer*? Okay, I guess I should have figured it out. Tina and I don't care. The point is to get out and relax, do something that is legal and doesn't involve drinking alcohol, taking drugs, or having sex. Simple.

Kramer vs. Kramer is playing at the Areon Theatre in Metairie. That sells me, because I luv the architecture of the place. The design is known as Googie architecture, sometimes called Populuxe or Space Age. Whatever you want to call it, it's one of my favorite favorites. Googie is postmodern. It started out in LA. Its vernacular is the highway. So, besides the movie, the Areon's interior interests me.

We get to the movie late. The Areon ends up as a blur of red carpet, ornate molding, darkness. So, so much for appreciating the interior. We're sitting in the theatre, about halfway through the movie, Dustin Hoffman (Kramer) is having it out with Meryl Streep (Kramer) over this cute kid, the third injured Kramer. They are a three-pack of damaged goods. There I sit, pregnant with a child I know I'll never see because the adoption papers have already been signed. I'm watching this movie, which I realize is the worst choice in the world, and suddenly without warning, I feel like I just peed.

I get excited and tell Tina I need to use the restroom. A couple of people go, "Shhhh." After I get up there's more leakage. I hurry up the aisle. Then this little leak turns into a big,

warm gush. I haul my ass and the rest of me, as well as a nine-month pregnant woman can, down the hall to the restrooms. By the time I get there, my pants are soaked and my clogs squeak like I've just stepped in a puddle.

I sit on the toilet. When I stand I leak again. Every time I stand up I start leaking, just a little. I can't leave without feeling like a broken faucet.

This female usher opens the bathroom door and goes, "Vicki. Vicki Joy."

I'm like, "Yes, I'm here. Is something wrong?"

She laughs and goes, "That's my question to you. There's a woman outside who says her pregnant friend went to the restroom and didn't come back. She's worried."

I go, "Why couldn't she check on me?" At that second, outside of my stall, I hear the shuffle of shoes and the talk of these two kids. Two *boys* talking about Han Solo and how they want to see *Star Wars* again, even if they've already seen it like twelve-and-a-half times. I'm in the men's bathroom not the women's. Jesus, or somebody, please help me. "Um. . . tell her I'll be out in a minute," I say.

I freak for a minute, trying to decide if it's okay to go out there in wet clothes. Fuck it, this is a medical emergency, almost like a gunshot wound (more like a reverse gunshot wound, somehow that idea gets stuck in my mind, death vs. life or whatever). I take the entire roll of toilet paper off its holder and stuff it in my underwear. I pull up my sopping pants and stroll out of the restroom. My clogs make a squeechy noise with each footstep.

Tina goes, "Let's cruise, Vicki. *Now*." She suddenly sounds like she's possessed by someone in the Marine Corps. Her eyes bulge. Not to mention the staff of the Areon has officially freaked out. These people do not have the threshold for shock and horror as I do. I squeeched out of the theatre with Tina.

And the funniest thing, just a couple days before, my mother asked me if I'm afraid that my water will break in public. No, not really, I informed her, I can be afraid of lot of things worst than that, I say. I tell her that I've read (even though I didn't read, I already knew this, but you need to tell her you read it otherwise she won't believe you) that only a small percentage of women have had their water break in public. And even if it does, it's usually a little leak, not a May flood.

Tina and I leave. The afternoon glare explodes like a sun-grenade. My eyes sting, and I get really light headed almost collapse. We catch a United Cab to Baptist Hospital, which is in Orleans Parish, across town on Napoleon Avenue.

This is my stage—life is a stage, right—I lean on the cab's backseat against the door in all this chaos, as wet as a fish. Even though I'm not a child, I feel like I'm childhood giving birth to childhood. Weird. I guess I'm just not ready. Maybe that's why I don't want to keep it. But you're never ready for anything, really. I just wonder for my baby's life, for my life. I think of Billy in *Kramer vs. Kramer*. What will my boy do after I give him up? *What?* Who will he become? I need to forget that.

The cab driver yells, "This is the type of thing you should plan for."

"No shit," I scream.

My contractions go crazy. They have the rapid beat that would do wonders in a Ramones' song. I'm cocked against the cab's back door. The sun moves in and out from oak branches that zoom overhead. I want the shade real bad. Right outside Baptist Hospital we come to a halt. I see a stop sign outside of the cab window. Stop, stop, stop, the sign says. I keep thinking, go, go, go.

The pain of childbirth? Think about passing that basketball with the chemistry set in it. Everything kind of makes a grand exit. It is like all the pleasure of sex I ever had returns as pain. But something about it is beautiful.

The baby comes out, alive, screaming like he doesn't want to be there. It's a clean, metallic smell, and the odor of the hospital. The fragrance of seawater and sweat. Blood and water. I want them to hand him to me so I can fall in luv with him. They don't.

I get depressed after I have him. I cry big sloppy tears, noisy, ugly, gulping with phlegm. I think I'm addicted to tears. In fact, I still may be depressed. I think of *Kramer vs. Kramer*, and how they were broken and damaged.

I wonder when I will see my son again. I wonder if I'll even want to see him. I will. I always will.

Sunday, August 28, 2005, 11:45am

John stepped into Louise's backyard. The day was peaceful and relaxed, like a relaxed executioner casually eating a meal, kissing his wife, or hugging his child. Again, John called Charity Hospital.

The young woman who answered told him that Jane the Tulane intern had returned to New England. "Her evacuation was easy. She went home," her replacement told him. "She wanted me to give you this top-secret number. It's the coroner's office."

"You don't know how grateful I am," John said and shut his cell phone. His gut fluttered then inflamed with fear. He took a deep breath. He could return to Connecticut and not know

one way or the other if he had killed the addict. Easily return to his life and live happily ever after as though nothing had happened. Or he could find out for sure. Know, let that certainty torture him. Or be like the shooter on the firing squad and wonder if he shot the blank and just live with his own special brand of doubt and humiliation. Why was knowing this such a deep urge?

He called the Orleans Parish Coroner's Office to see if the thief was there. With surprising ease he reached someone. "Nothing like working on a Sunday," he said.

"I do it for emergencies," the man told him. He told John he was a tech, and Dr. Minyard the coroner would be in at some other time. "We're going to be busy."

"Really."

"Yeah. It doesn't look good. So get out if you can. Other than that advice how can I help you?"

John told him how he had witnessed a purse snatching. "A good Samaritan saw the act and chased down the thief."

"Okay."

"Well the good Samaritan turned into bad Samaritan and beat the thief to a pulp."

"He was a thief. How should've the good Samaritan handled it? Buy him a drink?"

"I don't know. Maybe not beat him to a pulp."

"So what's it to you?"

"It's been on my mind. I can't shake it."

The tech asked John how he got his number.

He told him.

“I know Jane.” Papers shuffled. “I would have remembered a beating. Believe me, those are memorable. A gunshot, a knifing, and a suicide. No beatings. I hope that’s helpful.”

“Very helpful. Thanks. Be safe.”

“No, you be safe.”

John felt relieved, like he was capable of a second chance, of redemption. He wondered about man’s greatest urges—to kill, to screw, to seek more. He went back inside and tried to talk Louise out of doing the heroin. He caught her dressing, trim with muscles denting up her stomach, the elastic snap of her panties, she entered her arms into her bra straps scooping in her breasts.

“Calm down, I don’t even know where you put it,” she said.

He went to his backpack. He had one syringe already filled. He stared at it and put it back into the eyeglass container.

John called Addy first. He reached her.

“Please don’t tell me you’re calling me from Louisiana,” she said. “At least not from Orleans Parish.”

“I am.” The beauty of the day amazed him. He still didn’t tell her about the mugging.

“Did you find the mother?”

“I did, but she left town.”

“Maybe she’s not as reckless as I first thought.”

“I can’t leave now if I want to.”

“Jesus.”

“Our Lady of Prompt Succor is the patron saint of hurricanes.”

“I don’t need this now,” Addy said.

“We’ve been in contact but he has not shown up,” John said. He told her about Julian wanting him to speak to Desi. “Like he knew Desi. Like they were friends.”

“You need to protect yourself. Leave now, John. Now.”

“I will.”

“How?”

“I’ll protect myself. Don’t worry.”

Sunday, August 28, 2005, 12:30am

Louise poured a bottle of Ozarka Spring Water into a fresh, clean glass. She found a tablespoon from her “barbeque” cutlery she had stored away for backyard use. John set up “the tools” on the kitchen counter. He folded the spoon’s handle to sit its tiny bowl evenly along the countertop. He pulled a balloon of heroin until it snapped open. His elbows extending far from each other surprised her. She jumped.

He pushed the dope, which she thought looked like mud, into the spoon. John cooked the heroin. It bubbled. Then cooled.

She belted her arm and pumped it. She watched her arm reddened as the patent leather strangled it.

He ran his fingers down her arm; it just as well had been a pinch to her left nipple. “Oh, God,” she said. He found a vein on her, not an easy thing to do. He tapped it with his finger. He held the rig up with both hands. The needle looked sleek and scientific. Powerful. Dangerous. He tapped its body to get the bubbles out. The metal slipped into her vein. It barely pinched. He was good at this. A crimson orchid of blood bloomed in the U-100’s barrel. It would be coming now. That was the message, the blood. It was strange how blood gave life. He pushed the plunger in. She felt the dope zoom through her veins. Her body heated up. The Magic traveled down the back of her head filling her sinuses with a “taste.” She looked at John. “Oh God.”

The world shut down and softened just for her. Her nerves and fears slowed to a comfortable level. Then they dissolved. Bright clouds came to her mind and brought cool shade, with just the right amount of sun. Springtime. She relaxed with more clarity than reality provided. A purely functioning world. Purely. The smack took away the edges. A part of the world—the insecure section—shut down just for her. Things smeared and got brighter at the same time. She thought of Degas colors. Tunnel vision. Only she and John counted. The Black Magic still reminded her of orgasm. There was a secret affair between shame and bliss.

John left and returned with a syringe filled with a liquid the color of tea. She knew he had been saving it. He dropped his pants and sat on a barstool. Drove the needle into his thigh. “I like it nice and easy.” His eyes rolled in his head. His chest heaved in heavy breaths like he was having some kind of physical convulsion.

Sunday, August 28, 2005, 6:00pm

What did Louise get? She got a mess. It was a soft mess. She hated the chaos of alcohol. Heroin so elegant and discreet. Easy to hide its power. She got what she deserved she thought. No, she got her chance to be real about her love for her children. All of her children, which included Julian. It was a mess, but it fulfilled her. There was no hiding her hope to see Julian. She drove to the end of Pontchartrain Boulevard to meet John. She had thought Katrina would change course like so many hurricanes had done. Aim her blast somewhere else: the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the Florida Panhandle, even the Eastern Seaboard. She still hoped.

Twelve hours earlier Hurricane Katrina started her churn and gathered force over the hot, open Gulf of Mexico. Now the hurricane was all just a matter of time and space, Louise thought, like so many things in the human experience. *Time and space*. All day long, the details of Katrina's size, along with requests to evacuate, had been blasted over the radio and TV. The storm's barometric pressure had been reported as low as 920 millibars: the lower the pressure the meaner the storm, a fact Louise had learned through the excitement of all the meteorologists. It wasn't what they said it was how they said it. Winds extended one-hundred-and-twenty miles from Katrina's eye, which made her diameter two-hundred-and-forty miles and her circumference seven-hundred-and-fifty miles. Like Judd said, it was as big as a country. Louise suddenly felt small. Her shoulders tightened with a chill.

She spotted John. He stood on the concrete steps that for miles descended into Lake Pontchartrain. That afternoon he and his tenant had nailed tin over the windows on Louise's house and his rental property.

“Hi.” He hugged her. All the muscles in his face drooped. A glossiness covered his eyes. “The work is bringing my load down. I’ve got more.” The physical characteristics were virtually invisible from the layperson.

“I don’t know.” She gripped him hard, her body against his, more than just a hello hug. It latched on like a love hello. She let him feel her body. His solid build gave her a sense of confidence. “Any word from Julian?” she asked.

“No. He’s got your address. He could have made it, so it’s time we lower our expectations.”

Silky green strands of seaweed rose from the steps under the water. A Bud-Lite can sat on a step just above the water’s surface. In the fleeing day a gecko finished sunning itself. The lizard moved along the concrete and disappeared into a shadow where the steps met the crumbling earth. A western sunset of pink faded into blue and then into indigo. From the south a sky of supreme rareness—black velour—appeared. Katrina was going to blow a seam out of the world. Louise thought about eternity, the possible feel of nothingness, the way it would take her.

Her effort to be with her son would be a very large amends to him. Even though she had heroin running through her veins, she appreciated the dope’s subtlety, its discreteness. He wouldn’t be able to tell. She felt bad about that. She’d get sober soon. There was something about the smack that grounded her.

As though she had just re-gained her awareness—it was kind of an epiphany inside of an epiphany—she realized she was supposed to be an adult with good sense. She had a job and family. Shooting heroin and playing chicken with a hurricane was the last things she should had

been doing. God, where did her mind go during August. Her behavior had hit her like puberty all over again. She was trying to put on her brakes, but didn't have any.

"God, you feel that?" John asked.

The humidity had been siphoned away and replaced with a dryness that was more strange than comfortable. And there was silence with the stillness. A state of atmospheric elegance, a form of trickery, the legendary calm before the storm had fallen upon her and John. "It's the feeling of nothing," Louise said.

"I should have recognized it," John said. "I was once an expert on the subject."

She laughed.

To the west of her the Southern Yacht Club offered itself to Lake Pontchartrain like a face daring a punch to the nose. "The birds." Her voice came into control. "There are no birds. Even the birds have evacuated." The calm was exotic. The dreaminess of the smack was like witchcraft. She was outside the world and all its approaching terror.

John cocked his head. It was the expression of a musician listening for a subtle beat change. A distant seagull made its lonely call. John pointed his finger in the direction of the bird.

Through the silence Katrina told all in her path—as Louise and John stood brave and determined, and maybe even idiotic—to get out of her way. Katrina belonged to another physics. It was as though everything, molecules and motion, had been sucked out of the sky by this huge barometric wonder. This calm deceit that maybe Katrina had changed course was cruel. Louise had heard about this deception of the calm before the storm. That form of quietude was felt by only a few human beings in their lifetimes. It was part magic, part atmospheric slight of hand. It was a fair warning to all in her path.

“Look,” John said.

An old Triumph TR-4—any car at the moment was a rare sight—made the curve around West End Boulevard. It pattered towards the city. Its busted muffler sounded sharp and clear as a snare drum’s beat. From its open windows talk-radio blared, piling fear on top of fear on top of catastrophe.

Was time round? Louise thought so. Karma or whatever. We are all part of our actions, no matter how long ago they had occurred. We received their bounty and their consequences. No matter. Karma was like the butterfly theory for humans. Some acts were bigger and more powerful and lasted longer than others. Birth would never go away. Murder haunted you forever. Both birth and death had their dibs on eternity.

Louise looked at her Lakeview house. It sat like any other house in the city, a random target protected only by the hit-or-miss odds that go along with mass destruction. Sheets of tin covered the windows.

The dark clouds moved in over the city. The wind began making its rounds. According to the weather reports, it was an outer band of squalls. Rain staggered down through broken gusts.

She and John watched the Weather Station. The heroin seemed to just slide out of her body. “A big blast up front, but it doesn’t take long for the shit to hit the skids.”

“I’ve got more.”

On TV, Katrina appeared as a big counterclockwise twist of cotton. Again and again, Louise heard the overused words: devastating, monster, deadly, get out, historic.

Everything was about history. History defined everyone. Time would not eliminate Louise's responsibilities. Her past, anyone's past, could be inescapable if their past were so powerful. She realized this. It had chipped away at her.

After watching the drama unfold on TV for two hours a knock came at Louise's front door. She and John stared at each other. Alarm filled her. He stomach made a gurgling sound. John looked at her with squinted eyes.

"It's me, Desi. Anyone home?" A Gothic wind blew around the house. Louise thought of *Dark Shadows*, a soap opera from her youth. She remembered Barnabas Collins, the show's creepy vampire villain.

"The nerve of the bastard," John said.

Louise felt her body convulse slightly, a kind of mini shock. Her eyes rolled—almost automatically—like they did for her children. "Halloween is next month."

She and John laughed.

An idiot lived somewhere in Desi's alternative universe that included showing up at her front door. He would probably act as though nothing bad had ever happened.

She and John went to the front door. Desi looked warped through the doors' beveled glass. Louise looked through the peep glass.

"It's me." Desi smiled. His body bubbled up through the peephole. Both rows of his teeth—top and bottom—were missing. He wore old-style gym pants, those short, gray sweatpants thing. Louise thought they had gone out of existence with feathered haircuts. From his left leg a metal prosthetic limb began at knee level and descended into new orange Nikes with a gray swoosh symbol.

John looked through the peep glass. "FrankenDesi."

“What is he doing here?”

“I don’t have a place to go,” he said from behind the front door as though he had heard Louise. “I can’t go to the Superdome. Those fucking animals will eat me.”

Louise opened the door. “You need to eat them first. You’re a cannibal, aren’t you?”

Desi stared at her, then at John. “Yall are fucked up.”

“Not as fucked up as you, man,” John said.

“You going to let me in.”

“First tell me about the attorney who can get us out of the Braxton situation,” John asked.

Desi glared at them.

“Do we give *you* the money?” Louise asked.

“You want it now?” John asked.

“I don’t need it now.” His voice sounded sheepish.

“Why not?” they both asked, one at a time.

Anger and resentments were shorting out in Louise’s mind. Desi looked like a futuristic mutant with his white hair, prosthetic leg, missing teeth, and tattoos like a new-style skin disease. She thought he wanted to *show* them his leg. To make a point about something she could be blamed for.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Louise said. “We’re waiting for someone.”

“Who?” Desi asked.

“Our son.” She and John pointed at each other. They laughed. “Our son,” she said again. She appreciated John’s ability to deal with Desi. Regardless of the storm, she didn’t want Desi in her house. It was too private, too imposing. Too much of a set up.

Desi smirked. “Hey let’s sit back, enjoy the blow, die in peace. Kind of a group thing. A fucking die-in.” He stared at them with a trance-like intensity.

“Sorry, cousin, you’re not welcome here,” John said.

“We’ve got your number, Desi,” Louise said.

“Shoo, get the fuck out of here,” John said. “Shoo. Go to the dome. Let ’em eat you.”

“Yeah,” Louise said. “Shoo.”

She and John laughed. The heroin still felt good.

“I’ll get killed there.”

“What makes you think your odds are better here?” John asked.

“Shoo,” she said. It felt right to humiliate him. After all, he had tried to harm her and her family.

“Fuck you,” Desi said.

“Is that all you can say?” Louise asked.

John’s phone rang. “Julian,” he said.

“I knew he’d call,” Desi said.

“New Orleans,” John said. “At your mother’s.” John went silent as taken in by some deep voodoo. He listened intensely.

“Wait till you hear this shit.” Desi pointed to John on the phone.

Louise sensed triumph in Desi’s voice.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Desi said, “until one of you fuck holes tell me who called the cops.”

“I called them,” Louise said.

Desi looked like an angry dog. His eyebrows knitted up, his mouth—even without teeth—growling. He pointed his finger at her like he was boiling with vengeance. “Bitch. I fucking knew it.”

“Grow up, Desi. That was twenty-five years ago.”

“And one leg ago,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” Louise said.

“Hey, cuz, what did our boy, Julian, say?”

John looked stricken. Like he had seen two ghosts and both didn’t like him. “Julian’s not our son.”

“What?” Louise said.

“He’s not our son. He’s someone that Desi sent to us, to pose as our son.”

“Hey, my work is very thorough,” Desi said. “What goes around comes around, but worse.” He laughed a gut-wrenching laugh. He grabbed his belly.

“Motherfucker you need to get out of here,” John said. “Fucking now.”

Desi stared at John. Desi didn’t move. She felt violence about to happen, a kind of calm before the storm.

“We’re even,” Desi said.

He limped away.

Louise had slept little over the past two days. “I don’t know what to say,” she said. She now had to reverse all her emotions put a stop on every thought of redemption with her son.

“I’m wiped out,” John said. “I have nothing left. I enjoyed being a parent.”

They both decided to get some rest.

John had done his best; he had done his worst. What did he get? He got a view of himself, and he realized certain people and events have an impact well into the future. All of his acts would be attached to his soul and would tag along into the afterlife, if such a place existed. He had traveled through a time tunnel, reencountering those events that hurt his soul. It wasn't the erasure of his past; it was his past returning to haunt him. Our acts never slept; they just wait for the right time to return. What goes around comes around, but worse.

He tried to be a good father to the son he left twenty-five years earlier. He got hurt. But he had hurt too. Careless and self-centered, he had damaged people and realized that there were consequences to all deeds no matter how much time would expire. His life he realized was a single body of work. A pile of songs with infinite emotions, a mile of lists that all had to be conjoined, and someday would be connected. Acts of rage, those obscene jolts, needed to be cured.

He had arrived in place where the past met the present, and his comeuppance was do. The boundaries of time were more fragile than he had thought. Time's strangeness, its uncomfortable attributes, made it the greatest element of the human condition. The past was never done; it always caught up to itself until there's nothing to catch up to. The great terms of karma and of life's circles had become clear to him.

Monday, August 29, 2005, Early Morning

Louise woke to use the bathroom. The electricity must've been out for a few hours. Hot air thick with humidity dampened the house. On the tin-covered windows rain crackled like it was being fried. From the upstairs balcony, Louise gazed through the French doors unprotected by the tin. Rain swooped down in silver robes. The sky blinked with lightening. Wind cut at the French doors' bottom trying to slice its way in. As though from a child's fantasy, Louise heard the thirty-foot water oaks on the neighbor's property creak with danger. They swayed for several eerie seconds, with any more bending she thought they would snap. There was an emptiness so strange inside of her she couldn't define it. It was like the feeling that had saturated her the day she gave away her son.

The kitchen, which sat behind her living room, opened to the backyard. John inventoried the storm supplies. He placed beef jerky packets, flip-top Starkist cans, Ozarka water bottles, and a container of Madhava Mountain Honey on the kitchen's granite countertop.

"I'm sorry, John."

"Should we try to find him? It's possible."

"We could. We could." Louise believed that, but it would take time and would it be fair to her son.

Evidently, John had opened several windows to produce an air current through the house. It kept their existence bearable. The bones of the house groaned. The sound was a message sent to a part of Louise reserved for deep things like channeling (something she once tried) and praying. Her stomach tightened as it always did when she realized she stood in the middle of a big mistake. She thought of her family, but she knew they were in a better place than her. She thought of how foolish she had been.

She returned to her bed and took her pants off. She snapped off her bra and pulled it from under her t-shirt. In spite of the storm's sounds, she fell back to sleep.

She woke up at eight-thirty a.m., sweating, a flashlight blazed in her eyes. The tin that protected the windows kept the inside of the house dark as a bad dream. Wind battered her house.

"Come see," John said from behind a flashlight. His tone was subdued, spooky. The sight provoked a specific bad memory of John with a flashlight.

The hothouse temperature clung to her face. A skin of humidity covered the floor and furniture. The soggiess pulled out the deeper odors of wood and sheetrock. Katrina continued to strike the house. It sounded like the house was moving through the dryer at the Shell carwash. The wind hummed around the corners. It made a song. The same sound as blowing a tune over the lip of a pop bottle. Katrina haunted Louise with the possibilities of her split-second disasters.

With his flashlight in hand, John led her to the kitchen table. He shined the light on Piper's ghetto-blaster. "Listen," he said. The radio announcer, a longtime New Orleans reporter with a sonorous voice, gave information about the latest activity. "Sounds like my father," John said. A remnant of the commentator's French accent remained.

The announcer delivered the updates about last-ditch efforts and problems arising from the storm. "We have *confirmed* that the I-wall and the levee on the southeast side of the Industrial Canal have been breached in two sections. Repeat." The announcer again conveyed the drastic news. Louise thought of the harsh moments when the Twin Towers burned. Instead of facing the flames, people jumped. A feeling in her stomach, one that had to do with the love

for her children, stung her. What had she done? She had tried, in spite of her own sick behavior—it was sick, it was a disease after all—to get all of her first child back to her.

John told her that the area between the Orleans Avenue and London Street Canal levees would flood before the water reached them. “We’re safe for now,” he said.

Louise heard the distinct tenor of fear fill his voice. She listened to the roar of the weather outside. She shivered.

The announcer had used the word breach, not break. He never used the word “break” at all. Her whole life she had never thought the levee would ever breach. Breach seemed too delicate a word, too polite. Levees broke, they didn’t breach. From the museum, she remembered the photograph exhibition entitled “Water.” The haunting pictures of the Great Flood of 1927 came to her, when levees *broke*. Strange how things never end up quite like she had imagined.

The wind heaved in the overhang. She heard it scour the lush water oaks that loomed over the eastern side of the house. A large branch in neighbor’s backyard snapped. A loud cracking sound, like a gunshot blast, followed. It took seconds for the branch to swoop down. She felt like shouting, Tim-ber. Jesus, Louise thought. The branch’s destruction conveyed the intimidating strength of the wind, which was far more powerful than she had expected. Katrina made her feel vulnerable, like when she had given birth, lying there, depending on so many forces beyond her control. Outside, maybe six houses down from hers—she tried to place the precise location in her mind—she heard the electrical implosion, the noise of electricity turning on itself. It was the sound of an electrocution, like a death sentence being fulfilled. “What’s that?” she asked.

“Transformer,” John said.

She heard tin tumble and scrape along concrete. A trashcan rattled down the street. A deep thumping sound followed as the metal slammed into something. Wind whistled around the house's corners like it wanted to riff them off. A flashlight stood on the table and shot upward and casts shadows onto John's face. A cat cried from underneath the neighbor's house.

"You hear that?" John asked.

"Sounds like an infant," she said. The cat's howl was one of deep maternal bewitchment. She thought of her children crying in their cribs.

The wind whipped the house. Lightning flashed around the tin sheets that stopped the weather from smashing through the windows. Thunder blasted the top off the sky. Its horror entered Louise with a round of goose bumps. Her extinction was as real as the sweat on her brow. It was like Katrina was wearing an executioner's mask.

"It's going to pass," John said.

"Yeah, like a kidney stone."

At that moment the wind lunged in one of those breaths that had been mounting through the morning. Another round of thunder leapt above the house. Lightning flashed brighter than sunlight. A blast, like a cannon she thought, connected to something nearby. An enormous crash of wood traveled overhead. It felt like the entire sky slammed into the roof and broke in.

Glass and mirrors shattered. Her furniture—she pictured the exact pieces—squealed as it shifted and scraped along the floor and bashed into walls. The timber of the house's structure moaned. The table rattled. The flashlight toppled. Louise thought the roof would come down on them. She dropped to her knees for cover under the table.

It felt like the house had shifted on its pylons. It all stopped, except the wind. And as though to cross the final T, an opaque silver plate—the one she bought two years earlier at

Gump's in San Francisco—had dropped from its resting place and rolled out and hit the backdoor. It wobbled then fell.

She and John headed to the hallway. John shined the flashlight. A large branch struck the floor like it had been built there to stop entrance to the front door. John clutched his forehead as though a migraine wanted to pound right out of his forehead.

Katrina wouldn't stop. Another transformer imploded. She heard wires pop and snap. At the moment, her existence seemed small and doll-like. Katrina was a higher power. A bad higher power. The wind squealed through the roof's gash. Rain fell like silver bullets. Their faux antique mirror fell and shattered in the hallway. A bedroom door opened and slammed, opened and slammed.

She and John went to the front door. The tree reeked of rain and mud. The fragrance smelled creepily out of place. A big branch of the tree imposed itself through the ceiling down to the floor.

She moved around the oak. The runner rug sloshed. The raw toughness of the branches scraped her legs. Her home's interior had transformed into a new style, Aqua Indoor—hot, dank, and subtropical. She cracked open a bedroom window in the twin's room. Her ears popped like they did when a jet changed altitude. Wind rushed down the hallway.

John turned and looked at her. They were face to face. Her closeness produced a startled look on him. She stared into his brown eyes. Rain and sweat soaked his Mystic Seaport sports shirt. The downpour hacked against the tin on the windows. John worked a smile out of his stress. She kissed him on his cheek. She ran the back of her hand across his cheek. They hugged. John cried.

Monday, August 29, 2005, 10:00am

Louise leaned against the kitchen counter. John sat at the kitchen table. The humidity was granular. The wind sounded like a jet engine as it blew through the roof's gash. The radio was now just a tiny jukebox of scratchy sounds. Louise hit the off switch. "I don't think that's going to help."

From underneath the floor she heard water splash against the pine slats.

"Where is that coming from?" John rattled back his chair and looked down at the Mexican tiles.

Louise bent down. "I don't like that sound." She moved her head closer to the floor. Water stopped clapping against the Mexican tiles. The pine slats in the hall creaked. A thin layer of water crept up from under the wood. The water shifted an Egyptian rug that ran down the hall.

"It's not rainwater," Louise said. "Where is this coming from?" She walked towards the backdoor. Her feet slapped on the tiles that had three inches of water over them.

"Don't tell me this is from the Industrial Canal levee break," John said.

"Where else?" Louise said. "It's not rain. It's rising too fast."

"It's something else."

"That is not the kind of negative thing we need right now," John said.

There was explosion. Then another one. It was not the sound of breaking branches or a transformer detonating.

"To the front," Louise said.

John followed her. Louise moved around the tree branch. She entered the bedroom along the left front of the house. The morning sky glowed an ugly, dead gray. John opened the

French doors and stepped onto the porch. The wind, like an unseen wrestling opponent, took him down.

He stood and held onto the edge of the doorway. He resembled a man who had just stepped onto the wing of a flying aircraft. The wind blew like it wanted to suck his clothes off. From an angled view behind the French doors Louise saw the water rise on the end of the street. The water lifted a house off its pylons. The house exploded as it crashed into a neighboring house.

Six inches of floodwater covered the floor and cooled the house. The smell of wet sheetrock and the brackish odor of the water filled the rooms. Plastic containers meant for the recycle bin drifted around. The house creaked like the hull of a sailboat.

“We have a boat in the garage,” Louise said. She described the fishing boat Judd had bought for the twins to go on quick fishing trips in Lake Pontchartrain. “He wanted them to earn their sailor legs.” She didn’t know why she went into such detail at that moment.

“I saw it earlier,” John said.

Louise opened the screen backdoor. The wind caught it like an angry hand and slammed it back. The hydraulic arm that regulated its pleasant closure snapped. The door’s centerpiece of glass shattered against the house. The wind, invisible and deadly as radiation, soared around the house. Louise stood on the steps. Rain needled her face. She stepped back inside.

Nearby, maybe two houses over, a branch broke and it sounded like a rifle’s shot. The mere size of the wood crackled for a few seconds. It tumbled. The branch was so large the big bush of its leaves could be heard swooping to the ground.

“Wait here,” John said.

The floodwater's cold temperature rose up John's legs and tensed him up. He looked back at Louise standing behind the kitchen door. He waded through the current. The wind wanted to suck him up. The neighbor's water oak angled above the driveway onto the house's roof. At the garage's side entrance he turned the doorknob. The current pushed the door open. The seventeen-foot Mako sat like a prize. Brackish water the color of green tea had reached the boat's hull.

With an open bow and a center console, the Mako looked clean and well kept. The garage barely had enough room for some lawn gear and the boat. Oil and gasoline had seeped from the lawn equipment and streaked the water with tiny rainbows. The odor of fuel and brackish water filled the shed.

The garage's front door rolled up. The wind barged in. A surge of anxiety turned John's stomach. How did that happen? Was someone there?

The Mercury 115 touched the garage's back wall. John slid behind the boat and heaved forward. "I can't budge it," he said to himself. The garage had transformed into a wind tunnel. It felt like the storm's next victim.

Katrina howled. She wanted to scrape New Orleans off the earth and spin her into the air. Her wind would find every driveway, garage, and alley. She would create her own paths to spew her destruction. She would strike women and children, murderers, Christians, and crack addicts. She would pound on the doors of St. Louis Cathedral, God's own home. Katrina would not make the sign of the cross as she killed. She would not only kill, but she would huff and puff and break shit. She was all atmosphere—brute and indifferent—a godless pagan, mother nature's own psycho killer.

He needed to take the blocks from the wheels. Seconds later his head splashed out of the flood. John maneuvered past the tilted motor. He waded to the boat's starboard side. John dipped his head into the spooky brackish water. "Goddamn it." He gagged. He spit out the floodwater and its nameless pollutants that had gone down the wrong pipe.

The water rose by the minute, by the second.

From across the boat, a strap that held the boat on the trailer came over the boat, hard. "God dammit." John grabbed his nose. Blood filled his hand like food coloring. The metallic flavor flowed into his sinuses. The pain spread from his eyes down to his gums. His face throbbed. The socket where his front tooth once stayed hurt all over again. A shot above his right eye. Spots filled his vision. "Who the fuck is it?"

The front wheel of the trailer moved to John's side. The trailer's metal scraped John's shins and knocked him into the garage's wall. He felt the wooden wall against his back. A rake fell and hit his shoulder. A weed eater came unhooked above his head and dropped into the boat. He felt the force of the rising water tighten the boat against his body. The cold water rose against his nipples.

The water rushed through the door. The boat had pinned him against the wall. A second strap remained hooked to the Mako. The boat wouldn't rise with the trailer hooked to it. The stern of the boat had budged against the wall. It prevented John from getting out. The curve of the Mako's hull angled over his head. His nose bled, and his cheek stung. Of all the glamorous ways he could die, he would be drown *by* a boat.

John heard someone move. He felt regret creep into his stomach. The Mako pinned him tight. From the port side he felt someone pushing the boat into him. The water crawled up his neck like a killer wanting to strangle him. "Who is it? Desi?"

No answer.

“I don’t want to die. *Dez-ee*,” he screamed and spit water from his mouth. But he didn’t know if it was Desi. Fear, like the water, closed in on him. “Desi!” John heard his voice crackle. Fear had arrived, cutting his insides to a fresh rawness. *You’re not going to make it.*

The water rose above his chin. “We’re going to have to do better than this.” John’s voice was cool. He needed cool, its icy façade, its ability to control frightened feelings residing in his terrified, burning gut. He was trapped. Minutes, eternities, passed. He could not swim under the Mako to escape. Cool, be cool. Cool would not allow him to panic. Life was always reduced to the survival of the coolest. Cool let him take in Julian, ask Vicki for forgiveness, transformed him. Cool was his friend and had been given to him by his higher power, God. Cool was God’s higher power. He now asked God for some cool. He thought about his past, all that returned to him, his karma. It was packaged karma, as six-pack of karma, put into his last seventy-two hours. His list was simple: rage, adultery, gluttony, sloth. His karma enormous, overwhelming, deadly. He asked for forgiveness. That was his prayer. But there was hope. He realized that life was a series of reinventions and redemptions. He felt sorry for Desi, and his inability to cope, his lack of honesty. He forgave him. The power of his past could bully the present. Overpower it. He realized that now.

Inside him the illusion of time gave one great heave, twenty-five years collapsed like a dilapidated house, mixing old time and new time together into a single swirling mass. All sounds faded and the light around him shuttered. He lost his balance and fell into the waves of time. His heart throbbed in the back of his throat. His arms and legs lost all sensations. His last breath was soft and gentle, and there was no white light.

The Mako's engine gurgled. John coughed and gagged. The water had lifted the boat away from him.

"John, where are you?" Louise shouted from inside the boat.

The water's currents continued to break around the garage door, like a white-water rapid entering as fast as it could. The garage creaked. The windshield on the center console of the Mako stopped under the garage door, which had been rolled up as far as possible.

John sucked air.

She put down a skiing ladder. Feet first Louise entered the water. "Eye-ah. Let's go." She grabbed the ladder.

John stepped in the boat and sat on the front seat across from the captain's. The boat left the garage. Down the driveway, Louise maneuvered the Mako under the water oak tree that angled across the driveway. She pushed the boat past the tree. The engine roared.

"God, are you okay?" Louise asked.

"I'm alive and improving by the second." He coughed and spit out water. He gagged. His throat hurt with a froggy lump in it. He wondered what poisons he had swallowed. Pain burned off John's right shin, scraped up and polluted by floodwater. His nose continued its throb. His vision was blurred. He tasted the salt of his body. Across the driveway John heard the cat's infant howl. He thought of Hurricane Betsy and his cat Cash.

Even though the temperature must have been eighty-five degrees, John shivered. The pain from his nose moved to his entire face. The cut on his face hurt. The missing skin on his shin stung. His arms and abdomen ached.

Blood on his shirt where he wiped his nose looked like a gunshot wound to the belly.

At five o'clock the wind slowed and the sky cleared with only a patch of shabby clouds remained. The sun began its soothing descent in the west. Late afternoon, gentle and freshly scrubbed, allowed a few gray chunks of clouds to hang.

John pulled the boat out. Louise looked at him. "Jesus, what a hangover." He motored up the driveway and down Louis XIV Street.

In a large oak tree, on Bragg Street, a man with the stub of a leg, a skin of tattoos, with white hair dangling over his forehead hung over the branch. Apparently alive, but resting, maybe sleeping. John and Louise passed and looked at him. Desi's face turned toward them. He sneered. His white hair dangled in his face.

Rick Bolner was born in Franklin, Louisiana. He grew up in Metairie, Louisiana in a French-speaking household. In 1982 he received his B.S. from the University of New Orleans. He currently lives in Austin, Texas with his wife, Robin.