

Unwarranted: A Novel in Stories

BY

JAY SHEARER

B.A., Goshen College, Goshen, IN, 1990

M.A., University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, 2005

THESIS

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2011

Chicago, Illinois

Defense Committee:

Chris Fink, Beloit College, Beloit, WI
Chris Grimes
Chris Messenger
Eugene Wildman, Chair and Advisor
Luis Urrea

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
I. What We Chose to See	1
1. Superior Street	2
2. The Boos.....	21
3. Unwarranted.....	42
4. Never Been Pinned.....	62
5. Side Effects of Syndrome X.....	81
6. Five Hundred Sirens.....	98
II. Slowly Leaving View	117
7. The Woahs	118
8. Body Mass Index.....	144
9. Origami of the Masons	164
10. The Ax Riseth	183
11. Perpetual Union	195
III. Enthused	215
12. Beth Visits in the Dead of Winter.....	216
13. Extinction	242
14. Philip Lends a Hand	261
15. U-Haul at the Diner	279
16. Port Hope.....	295
VITA	311

SUMMARY

My dissertation project is born of my interest in the lives of a familiar stripe of urban artist or professional—those who self-identify as “liberal,” ache for political or social engagement, and who, despite their best intentions, speed gentrification and displacement of the “original” residents with whom they never quite identify. They habitually listen in to the lives of these “Others” who remain at an uneasy distance.

The project’s conceptual framework rises from another narrative concern: my investment in the formal structure of stories and novels and how they might be wed or webbed together. On its face, the structure of *Unwarranted* is not complicated: a novel in stories wherein each piece stands on its own yet contributes—in sequential fashion—to the arc of a traditional novel. What distinguishes it from the merely episodic or serial is a commitment to conceptual unity and specific, separate conflict within each given piece. Each story is governed by a unique thematic link, each its own distinct unit with its own distinct flavor, though a given general reader might only receive them as chapters.

There is, I hope, an emotional logic at the core of this book. The protagonist and point of view character, Philip Palliard, is a stay-at-home father and failed playwright whose wife runs a research project studying the side effects of spinal cord injuries. In addition to Palliard’s more private inclinations, the book examines the pressures and limits of monogamy and parenting in the cultural context of the post-9-11 Bush era. While Palliard and his friends debate the nuances of the war on terror, gangbangers roam the streets. Ultimately what the novel tries to get at are the limits of truth-telling, seeing truthfully, and the unreliability of memory.

I

What We Chose to See

(1)

Superior Street

The stick exploded only inches from his face but he pretty much stood his ground. With one shoulder scrunched, he froze there, staring at the silver-gray flower of smoke.

A second's pause and he darted off, after the one who'd thrown it.

A big kid here, no more than thirteen—brawny, quiet, soon to be intimidating—so often in that oversized Bulls jersey that hung like a smock to his knees. He was one among the Puerto Rican preteens who hung across the street from our place, a crew we called the *little league gangbangers*, which may or may not have been fair.

I watched from our porch as he dove at last and caught the ankle of the perpetrator: that leaner, slightly more menacing kid with the nerve to toss fireworks at faces. They wrestled on the grass between sidewalk and curb, taking sharp little jabs at each other's ribs.

And couldn't help but think: this wouldn't be happening if the soldier were here. No way. I guarantee he wouldn't stand for it. Firecrackers lit, then thrown at your head? His presence alone would deter them.

He used to sit so cool on the heavy stone stoop, lean and strong in the smart guy glasses, those slightly intimidating stylish black frames. He may or may not have been a gangbanger, but in his presence, the young ones kept the volume down. They were cooler, far more collected. Or at least they tried to be. And that seemed proof enough.

But now this older kid, their referee, was gone. Evaporated. Just like that. The crewcuts on government-sanctioned shoulders (those uniforms, those granite-eyed *types*) came knocking with their news just the evening before. A kid only nineteen—twenty tops—and dead apparently. Finished.

I tipped back my Powerade and stared across the street, at the empty 2nd floor porch. Where the blinds were drawn—no light, no motion. The mother of the son was in there, I knew, and I hoped she at least had air-conditioning. Going without for her, today, would be punishment way too severe.

I wiped my arm across my forehead. The nonstop sun would not give in. Only minutes past noon, and I must confess: I feared I was coming undone. I should have had the day off, my glorious reprieve despite the heat, but Shelley had killed all that. Her work—the never-ending ECHELON Study—again took precedence over all.

I leaned out over our stone “railing” and looked west toward the corner building. You could see the far fringe of the giant flag: a thin checkered strip of red and white at the very edge of the stripes. It appeared out of nowhere that very morning at the far west end of our block—a not very flag-baring block, actually, if there were any other flags at all. This one took the cake, though: twenty feet across, fifteen down—just huge—hanging on the side of the corner building like a loincloth for a flamboyant god.

Until Shelly reminded me at breakfast, I'd actually forgotten the holiday was coming. Tomorrow no less. An amazing lapse if you think about it. And now here flew the SuperSized flag, to remind us twice over—and loudly.

The cell phone in my pocket vibrated. I looked at the number on the caller ID and contemplated not answering, then came to my senses (it'd only make her nervous) and like a good boy, flipped it open:

“Hey.”

“Hi. So . . . how are things there?”

“Fine. Pretty neutral”—I looked down at the kids on the grass, still at it. The big one in the Bulls jersey had the other flat on his back. He sat solid on his stomach, straddling the hips and pinning the wrists, staring down dominant into his eyes.

“Beautiful,” she said. “He’s down then?”

I looked at my watch.

“Over three hours now.”

“Three hours?”

“Well over.”

A brief, concerned pause: “He’s okay? You’ve looked in on him recently?”

“He’s fine.”

“I’m only asking because three plus hours seems abnormally long. That worries me a li—”

“I do this every day, Shelley. It happens to be my job. He’s fine. Trust me.”

A not-pleased silence, followed by this: “No need to get belligerent.”

“That was belligerent?”

“A little, yes.”

I waited a second, not quite believing.

“That was *war*-like?”

“Philip,” she said, and paused a moment. “I really don’t want to get into it now, but . . . you know I worry about you there.”

“Well don’t. I’m at peace. We all are.”

I looked down at the kids. The big one on top, straddling the other, had started the saliva dare game. A long string of spittle dangled from his lips, which he’d suck back in, lizard-like, just before grazing the nose below.

“Where are you? You on the porch?”

“Just out here watching the action.”

“The little league gangbangers?”

Her Canadian accent warmed the term, made it sound almost innocent. The precise and elegant consonants (*little league*) leavened by the sweetness of the vowels or diphthongs (*gangbangers*.) I swear that accent saved me sometimes.

“Them, yes,” I said and again leaned over the edge to see. “But mostly the disturbing giant flag.”

I hadn’t told her a thing yet. Not the story of the dead kid nor the mourning mother. Great stories, grim stories, the sort of thing she’d expect me to share.

“What’s this about a flag?”

I’d start there. That I could tell.

“It’s bizarre, Shelley. Someone draped an enormous flag on the side of that corner building. That old brownstone across from the church? Huge flag. *Huge*.”

“Tomorrow’s Independence Day, Phil. It’s the high flag season. You didn’t forget again, I hope.”

“No no no—this is really something else, Shelley. It’s giant. Like, *aircraft carrier* giant. A very serious statement.”

“Well . . . I suppose that is a little odd. But really, not so weird for the 4th. I mean . . . it’s not like we’re Superior Street.”

“Wait now,” I said. “What’d you say?”

The current coursed through me pretty hard here.

She cleared her throat: “You know. It’s not like we live on—what do we call it? Old Glory Avenue? Isn’t that Superior?”

For the hundredth time that day, it seemed, I’d forgotten something I’d assumed was mine.

“Phil?”

“Yes?”

“Do you know wh—”

“New Glory.”

She waited: “Come again?”

“New Glory, not Old.”

She took a moment to remember what that meant, and then went, predictably, mmm. A loaded silence followed.

“You’re angry, aren’t you?”

I waited: “So you keep insisting.”

A longer, harder silence, some serious thinking going on here, and finally she said: “I’m right then. You’re livid.”

Of course she knew I should have had the day off. She’s the one who could have given it to me. The much under-recognized Independence Eve, a state-sponsored gift from the University. Would have thankfully handed the Monarch to mommy, yet no go, she’d informed me at breakfast—the insane and never-ending ECHELON Study had subjects to get through the measures.

For years, she’d been wed to it. The demands of ECHELON. Our imperious ECHELON. And the body fat of the Spinal Chord Injured had to have its picture taken. Though only, that is, if the bullet lodged in back—more often than not the reason for the wheelchair—was deemed safely enough placed for that harsh magnetic pull, the tide of the MRI.

Sometimes Shelley would leave her prescreen x-rays in the kitchen, and they never failed to unnerve me. Black and whites of some anonymous spine with a bullet—that grayish black phantom rocket—lodged in a shock white vertebrae. And nearly always as I examined them, I would touch without thinking at my lower backbone. For lately I saw the Study itself as a bullet lodged in *my* spine, paralyzing any plans for the future, shot from a gun I hadn’t heard fire.

“Phil?” she said. “You there?”

I looked down at the battle in the grass.

A torpedo of spittle had finally landed, and the victim was screaming in disgust. The big kid rolled off him and bolted away, preparing for the repercussions. Firecracker versus wad of spit: it really made you wonder. They were acting so weirdly, aggressively playful. Shouldn't they be mourning too? They'd known the soldier, respected him, where was the hard-earned moment of silence?

And now, strangely, I'd forgotten that Street, which disturbed me like I couldn't have predicted. For all the pram-pushing I'd done that summer, we hadn't gone there once. It was mere blocks away, right by the park, where we went nearly *every day*.

I almost had the sense of being called, though I'd bet that was just the heat and the anger. Still, I knew it from the moment she said it—at some point after the Monarch woke, that was where we'd go.

Shelley and I called it New Glory Street, this particular half-block near the park, a small segment of Superior no more than sixty yards long, where several officers of the Law resided, as well as, it was rumored, more than one core member of the Polish or Ukrainian mob. Mostly, though, it was about the flags.

In the high flag seasons (Veteran's, Memorial, the 4th, etc.), you might count 30, 40 flags total—regulation, miniature, medium, large—flipping in front of the houses or bungalows, in lawns, from windows, bikes, cars, as well as the actual steel flagpole looming at the end of the block.

I stared up at this flag, a bit in awe, thinking: that's hardcore. This street has its *own steel pole*.

And I was sweating through my T-shirt, down my back, everywhere, attempting to count the flags—ten, eleven, twelve, thir—but Shelley’s voice kept intruding; her parting concerns before she hung up, sincere, perhaps necessary sentiments I’d heard already at breakfast, like: should I see someone? Meaning: a licensed mental health professional?

And I was halfway down Superior, bristling at her phrasing—why’d she have to say “licensed?” Why “mental health?” Why “professional?”—that I just about almost missed it. An inadvertent glance stopped me cold.

I backpedaled with the stroller.

There, in someone’s lawn, side and front, stood a red white and blue display that out-gloried the entire street. Behind whoever’s wrought iron fence: a plastic blow-up Uncle Sam beneath two flagpoles with regulation flags—these guys had their own *private* poles. Tiny plastic Iwo Jima flag-raising surrounded, for some reason, a Virgin Mary, who bore flags in the nooks of her marble arms. Streamers, bunting, cut-out continental USAs. There were even—the topper—red white and blue flowers. Which, on close inspection, did not look fake. And I wondered how one arranged for this. Could flowers be *dyed*? Had some patriotic horticulturalist crossbred flora for the war effort?

In front of the building, festooned with red white and blue carnations, sat a benevolent lamb statue, straddling a mid-sized flag. Two saint-like statues stood behind the lamb, as well as another, wood-carved Uncle Sam, staring beatifically into the distance.

Looked like one of those overdone Nativity scenes on the lawn of a suburban church. Only thing missing was a Christ child.

Later, in the park, pushing the Monarch through the hanging carpet air, I kept recalling that display. It was all so obvious, so over the top, even the silly fact that the street itself was named Superior. And then the other, even sillier fact—that abbreviated, the street's letters spelled SS.

I winced at myself, thinking: hold on. A plastic blow-up Uncle Sam and some jingoistic daisies do not, in the end, make a Nazi. (Jesus, don't be simple.)

I passed a few mothers out with their strollers, and then soon enough, came that one guy, who I'd seen more than once but had never really spoken to, a thirty-ish father, unshowered, dazed, with that semi-compromised look in his eyes; in ratty cut-offs and a Pixies t-shirt, not unlike the crappy bermudas and Fugazi t-shirt I had on. I recognized this guy from a defunct local band whose name I can never remember—the guitarist, maybe, or bassist—now wed to his stroller with child.

Passing, we nodded hello.

With sinking feeling, I saw it clearly: I too had become a *type*. A stay-at-home dad with an *artistic interest*. Dime a dozen, right? Arty farty daddy domestics, filling the public parks of America.

I picked up the pace with the stroller. The heat was invading, really softening my mind. Beneath me the Monarch babbled contentedly, smiling up at me, as if he knew.

Seconds later, a *blip* passed us. Three or four kids whizzed by—grazing my arm, nearly toppling the carriage—one of them sprawled out giggling in a grocery cart that two of them pushed with wild abandon.

A hazy cloud of dust and trash swept up and floated in their wake.

I was stopped cold on the paved path. Hadn't seen them coming at all. I stood there then and watched them zoom off, the passenger's limbs—lanky arms, big sneakered feet—bobbing gently from the side of the cart. Very clearly amused.

Just a few of those kids from across the street. Beach towels draped over their shoulders, shipping their charge to the public pool.

But Jesus, all the same, so playful today. Like, having the *time of their lives*. It was strange somehow. Or even obviously. Where was the respect for the dearly departed? Where was the goddamn regard?

I decided they didn't even know. Or were stuck taking guesses, just like me. Hadn't been all that much time, actually, for anyone to know but her.

And right then I saw her (saw her in my mind.) The mother of the son. The lean Puerto Rican with the tall red hair who was always so lively, such a dedicated talker. I remembered her face from the evening before when she answered the door for those crewcuts, the messengers. How solemn she was. Not surprised in the slightest. She knew. She obviously already knew.

A few cars passed on Grand by the park, waving regulation flags from their windows. Peals of laughter floated through the air. I gritted my teeth. Everything was coming undone.

So I bought a polish and a milkshake on Western. No plan in mind, just hungry. And I was pushing the baby back home on Superior, invigorated somehow, almost floating (though clearly a touch unhinged).

And I knew when I got there I'd stop for a while, which I did. Just stood there with the stroller and gaped at those flowers, that benevolent lamb and the Uncle Sams, and four or five minutes in, not really even thinking twice about it, I genuinely surprised myself. Didn't even look both ways.

Just gently popped the lid off the paper cup and stuck my arm through the wrought iron posts.

Held the slowly tilting milkshake over the lamb and those zealous flowers, letting the cool brown viscous shake dribble out in a satisfying ooze. Red white and brown. Then chocolate all over. Nice. Beautiful!

At first, I was exhilarated. Take that, patriotic Nativity! You deserve it! The innocent and vulnerable die in your name!

But as I stared down at the mess I'd made, about ten seconds later, the feeling jumped ship. In came a stunning wave of shame. Sharp self-loathing. Lethal regret. My head darted up and I looked both ways. This wasn't like me. In no way.

This was rude. Just stupid. The prank of a sophomore, a snot-nosed pretender, a radical "activist" in search of a clue.

I glanced in the stroller. The Monarch's green eyes were sparked with joy. He was smiling as if he understood. I leaned down towards him in the stroller.

“Your father’s being an asshole,” I whispered, “Don’t ever do anything like this.”
The Monarch smiled. Wider, giddier. I whispered intensely: “Ever!”

I sensed a presence behind me.

“Aaaw, now look at that”—a wobbly, aged voice—“She’s beautiful!”

I slowly turned to see.

She was peering over my shoulder from behind the wrought iron fence: a large woman in a glossy blue muumuu, holding a pair of garden shears. She wore yellow rubber gloves and a plastic red visor and was sweating into the folds of her neck. She was formidable. A fortress. Though her peripheral vision must have been lax, for she hadn’t noticed the chocolate disaster steaming only feet from where she stood.

“Thanks,” I said, stepping back, sure not to glance at the smoking flowers.
“Actually, he. She’s a he.”

The woman stared off in the distance, then spat through the fence posts.

“Whatever,” she said, and shrugged. She squinted at the sun through the plastic visor; a wavy red tint cast on her face. “They’re all adorable at that age.”

I nodded with a tight mm-hm. I couldn’t seem to move.

“Hot day, though, huh?” she said, stretching her neck to wipe the sweat. “Like torture.”

“Yeah. It’s horrible out he—”

“Weird, you know, but this reminds me of the sixties,” she said, still gazing into the sun. “Early sixties. The summer, I think, of 1962. Right here. Right in this city. That summer was exactly like this, today.”

“Yeah?” I said. I should have simply excused myself. Just walked. The fact was I could not move.

“You know,” she said a long moment later, “they tell you this, uh—whaddyacallit?—this *global warming* makes it hotter, like a dangerous radioactive hot, like it’ll melt your flesh right off you, but I have to ask: is it all that different? We had this same kind of heat back then. This *same* humidity. Hot as a stovetop. Sticky as pudding. 1962. And on the 4th that year, my husband and me and the children, we drove down to the lake with a picnic basket and a camping thermos full of gin. We were just gin and bourbon kids, you know? The basics. The honest essentials. Not this crack. Not this *rock*.”

I nodded: sure. My breath was tight. She had me. Her hostage.

“The picnic that year was *absolutely* lovely”—she waved the garden shears before her, then wiped her forehead with the back of an arm—“Hot, of course. Egg-fry hot. *Crazy* humid. But still. It was . . . lovely.”

“I bet.”

She turned abruptly to me then and stared—almost glared. There was surprise in her eyes. Maybe a challenge.

“1962,” she said, her brow in a rigid V. “That’s the year my son died.”

I stiffened, gripping at the stroller, waited a moment, then blurted: “Your son died?”

“Daughter,” she said, eyes closed, shaking her head. “Daughter died. My, uh, my son’s a tax accountant in Schaumburg.”

“Oh. Well. In any ca—”

“Daughter’s gone.”

I let that settle in. Waited, then said, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

She grimaced, waving this off.

“Been gone a long long time. Forever ago. Eons. Oh, it still hurts a little when you think about it,” she said with a quick tight shrug, “but ah! You know. You end up not thinking about it. After this long? After year after year after year?”

“I bet.”

She turned abruptly to me—again, with that odd challenge.

“You bet, huh?” she said. “You bet a *lot*. You’re a betting man? A professional gambler?” She was deadpan here, maybe razzing me, though I honestly couldn’t tell. Then she reached through the fence and patted my shoulder with a tautly rubber-gloved hand. “I’m kidding. I kid you. You’re a good egg”—and she pointed to the stroller—“and that baby is a *gem*.”

Again, she looked away, off in the distance. We waited a minute; she clucked her tongue.

“Hit by a car,” she said at last, then closed her eyes and fluttered her head, “no, no, sorry—*truck*. Hit by a truck. Salt truck for the city. Poof—gone. Like that.”

My eyes were on the sidewalk now.

“God, that’s . . . awful.”

“Yep,” she said, and swiveled a little. “Right over here on Grand Ave”—she jerked a rubber thumb over a shoulder—“early winter, right near the holiday, with this blizzard like—oh I don’t know—like *locusts*, like swirling white locusts, the plague that never made the team. With God I guess on vacation. Or drunk at the wheel or what have

you. Cause all she was doing—all!—was playing over there. Sledding! With her brother. . . . Oh, I don't even know why I . . .”—the woman stopped herself, and at first I thought she might tear up, so fixed were her eyes in contemplation, hard and immobile, staring at the ground. I was moved; I thought I might tear up too.

“Oh no.” Her eyes, her face, were pinched with umbrage: “Look at this. Can you *believe* this?”

I followed her down to the milkshake mess and nodded tightly: “Yeah, I . . . I noticed that.”

“These kids!” she said, arms flailing out, garden shears stabbing the air. “These friggin’ *kids*! I swear, it’s . . .”—she caught herself then and lowered the volume, almost to a whisper—“I know they got problems not like kids from other families, from more comfortable homes or what have you, but *man* . . .” She shook her head at the soiled carnations. “It’s just different now. It’s *so* different. They do whatever they please. Any damn thing!”

I tried breathing even, but my voice came out thin and brittle. “I know. It’s gotten . . . really bad.”

“It’s disgusting!” she said, then looked up and returned to that muted half-whisper. “Do you know I once saw a little kid—maybe twelve, thirteen—on this very street, on the corner here”—she pointed toward the tall steel flagpole—“he was buying a gun. A little kid who should be playing Kick the Can or stickball or whatever—he’s purchasing a firearm from a grown man in a *dark car*. In broadest daylight! Exchanging his allowance money for a *lethal weapon*.”

I nodded in agreement. She'd made a solid point. I'd seen the same thing on my own street, watching from the porch only weeks before. One of those kids from across the street bought a gun from a grown-up in an idling car. Witnessing this had unsettled me for days.

"They get old too quick now," she said. "The confidence comes before its time, and they think they *own* you. Christ. Look at this."

She shook her head at the milkshake mess.

"Well, guess what, kiddies?" She was speaking softly now, with patronizing tone, addressing the soiled head of the lamb. "Guess who also *owns a gun*. Guess whose husband, who's passed now, God bless him"—she crossed herself with the garden shears—"bequeathed to his wife a shiny gift?"

She looked up at me then. "I'd never use it, not really, not unless self-defense—but sometimes, sheesh . . ."

She shook her head, gazing at the ground, then furrowed her brow. Really caved it in. She'd seen something she couldn't quite fathom. Her eyes swiveled back up to me.

"Now how did . . .?"

I looked down. There, on my right sneaker, on one of my crappy Vans, was a milkshake stain, a brown splatter half-covering the toe. In addition, the sneaker's side panel was liberally spotted with chocolate.

Well I had no reply. She had me. I waited, then slowly looked up to meet her eyes. She'd already noted the empty paper cup lying on its side a few feet off. She was adding it up, and her mouth hung open. How could you? said her eyes. A good egg, she'd thought, who'd fathered a gem, this stranger to whom she'd entrusted her sorrow.

I revved at the stroller; my brain was blank. I tried squirting out an apology.

“I . . . sorry.”

I was wilting in the blood orange sun. I looked down at the flowers (the sun was such a prick) and said—in a low tight voice: “I . . . think I did it for the dead kid.”

She popped her eyes; her scowl grew fiercer. How could she have known what I meant? You could see she thought I was mocking her. Her story, her life—everything.

I wasn’t quite sure we’d survive it. We stood there together in the icy silence, the chocolate steam rising from the lamb beneath us, when that savior, the sound from before—crack!—a firecracker went off behind us. Startled us both pretty bad.

I’m sorry to say but I did not hesitate. I pushed off as if I’d been cued. Another one followed—crack! Then another—crack! I started jogging, then took broader strides. Crack! Crack! A full sprint now.

I could see the bullets lying in my spine. Hot metal from a big gun dotting the lumbar backbone, sending me forever to a chair on wheels, where I’d offer my body to ECHELON.

And I motored the stroller like it shouldn’t be strolled. Down alleys, through parking lots, a reckless slalom, weaving through the stop signs and trees. Shameful, terrifying, stupid, stupid, yet the Monarch never looked so amused. His green eyes flashed with madness and light. With that ornery smile. (He knew.)

Later, near midnight, I stood at the edge of our 2nd floor porch, working on a beer. I still felt dangerous, not fully sane. I had yet to tell Shelley a word. She’d come home

around 8, whipped by it all, claiming she'd become someone wicked. A state-licensed predator, she'd told me, crossed with a deadbeat mom.

So I gave it my best. Tried to make it a holiday. Gently pressed a finger to her lips and said: "Forget all that. Declare independence." The baby being down, we wasted no time. I stripped off her cushiony aerobic shoes and gave her a footrub on the sofa; this seamlessly segued to a backrub, where her negative chi (a Shelley term) gripped at her muscles like a brace. They loosened in time, as did our clothing, and soon enough I was inside her, brushing a lush golden lock from her ear.

I whispered in her ear: "*I am a licensed mental health professional.*"

She laughed, whispered back: "*We'll see about that.*"

But it didn't work. I lost it, the hardness, and couldn't carry through. I kept seeing bodies—uniformed soldiers, little girls in the snow. It was hopeless.

Shelley was out cold now, snoring hard, as I stared across at the opposite porch. Where no one stirred. The place was dead black. No telling what was going on in there. That possibly air-conditioned meditation? A dark and body-less wake? For the son, the soldier, in whose name, apparently, I'd vandalized a lawn display. A name I didn't even know.

And in the middle of the street, directly before me, the little league gangstas were setting off bombs. One of them knelt down then, that lean twelve-year-old with the extra nerve—for all I knew, little brother to the soldier. Grinning, the kid lit the fuse.

A few of their fireworks had come close already, but this one was a screaming beeline, sailing straight for me. Straight at me.

But I didn't move. Didn't think to. I stood right there and stared it down. The thing popped open feet from my face—BOOM!—an obscene sound that would surely wake the baby, birthing this dense, erratic shape, a bright orange bloom like a thrown splat of paint, a Rorschach test against the night sky. It hung in the air for a second or two.

When it vanished, I exhaled. I laughed beneath my breath. I'd never seen anything like it.

(2)

The Boos

She was out there again, with her tall red hair formation, chattering a streak into her cell phone. Had something to do with *only living once*. I'm pretty sure that's what she was talking about. But my Spanish is poor—almost non-existent—and she stood a good forty feet away from me.

It was weird. She was acting like nothing had changed.

Knowing her son had died in the war—or taking that guess, and I was pretty certain—gave me, I'll confess, a sick little thrill. Made me feel somehow *plugged in* (beyond the newspaper, beyond TV). She used to frequent her porch all the time, but most of July had stayed out of view—and it seemed for good reason. Yet here: a sudden appearance. Her nonstop wash of unbreakable language peppered with that radiant laugh.

He couldn't have been dead more than two, three weeks.

This was the evening we unified behind her and she looked across the street and damn near cackled. Adam called it “civic camaraderie,” and maybe it was, our brief display of solidarity with this woman who may or may not have been grieving. It was

nothing so special, a minor event. Had little to do with death or dying or some mother's son at war. It was fun, actually. I'll go ahead and name it.

Four of us from four distinct 2nd floor porches ganging up on this guy I half-knew, this skinny shy loner with Axel Rose hair trapped on the sidewalk without a bag, withering there by the steaming evidence—be pretty hard to miss. As our neighbor in the mirror with the tall red hair ripped him, as they say, a new one.

This was a Tuesday, I think, around 6 pm. Tuesday or Wednesday, something like that. Plus late July and thickest humid—that I remember clearly. Shelley was inside with the baby, taking a precious moment as mommy after a long day as not. Of course I cherished the moment too. The Monarch had been difficult, needy all day, and I was beat and thirsty.

I tipped back my beer and dreamed across the street, into the wavy summer air—some dipshit fantasy, idiot dreaming, the sound of that high-speed Spanish in the background—*vive solamente una vez, no?* My idiot peace soon interrupted by the sight of an animal across the street. A vividly *active* animal. Laboring there.

His master, lost in thought, slouched on the sidewalk. This was the guy I half knew. All in all, you'd have to say the guy was pretty low impact: medium tall and monkish quiet with the dishwater blonde-gray hair. Malnourished-seeming with the angular nose. Sunken posture, doubting eyes. And he walked with those small rapid nervous steps that echoed the animal—or maybe vice versa. The two confirmed the notion at a glance: that pets grow to resemble their masters (or again, it might be the other way around).

This compact brown/blonde animal delivered its business on a patch of lawn, the swath between sidewalk and street. When the pet finished, the master started off, pulling the mutt along with.

“Hey!” said the woman, looking down from her porch, cell phone still at her ear. “You don’t just leave that.”

The guy turned. He looked up at his indicter, then down at the evidence, clearly at a loss for words. He stood there serenely enough, as if unfazed, but we could see. He was wilting. You could see his shoulders caving by the millimeter.

The guy was shy—probably always had been—in that fragile, maybe depressive way. But when drawn from his shell, I can testify, a new man unfolded who was pretty entertaining. I’d met him just once, but we’d talked for a while. And he spoke with a kind of muted enthusiasm—an almost *bouncy* conversational style belied by the fact he was standing rock still (his favored topics being experimental jazz and/or indie rock + the sobering details of guitar technology).

We’d been introduced years before, at this bar, where he’d come with his girlfriend to see a band. The girlfriend was the tenuous connection here; she knew this one bartender who Shelley went to college with. She was also something of a minor celebrity: a music critic for a local free weekly who let you know it when she didn’t like it. Seriously, she could be harsh. She *killed* bands. Even bands no one knew. And often pretty persuasively. Thus I was a touch intimidated meeting her, having read her for years, though she turned out, in the end, to be really very cool. As, in his depressive shy way, was her boyfriend.

But during this moment beneath the neighbor's porch, as he wilted ever so slightly, mute, this boyfriend was in no way "cool." I hate to go here—or use the term—but from my vantage point, he looked intensely "insecure," though saying so doesn't do the picture much justice. You learn to call someone "insecure" in high school—a catchall for vulnerability or neediness or the slightest plummet in self-estimation—but the judgment, in adulthood, loses some of its force. Likely from overuse. Here was—and I know I'm only juicing the cliché but—here was a case of *superinsecure*: a pained implosive physical emanation sometimes seen (in my limited experience) among functioning schizophrenics and the recently, deeply grieving.

The guy looked awkwardly off to the side, seeking words maybe.

"We don't want that lying there now," she said, leaning over. "We walk there and the children walk there and, you know, we don't want it. Nobody want that. You need to pick it *up*."

"I'm sorry . . . I . . ."—he shrugged, wilting further—"I usually—"

"Take your *responsibility*. That's nasty, sir. We both see that, right? That's fucking *nasty*."

"I . . . I know. I see that. I don't—"

"You want that on your lawn? In front of *your* house?"—she looked pretty hard at him. She was pointing with her cell phone—"Do you?"

This supersinsecure dirtbaggish guitar guy seriously looked like he wanted to cry. I'm not exaggerating. Looked like he was tearing up.

"I'm really sorry"—he shook his head here—"I don't have a bag with me today. I usua—"

“You go get one! I don’t need to step in that. I don’t want to smell it.”

He nodded tightly, sort of to himself, then stopped and went perfectly still. He was pondering the options. Considering (my guess) a run for it. Like, simply, childishly *fleeing*. Then a last blast of conscience shot through his body language, a superfine but visible vibration, and he braced himself and finally spoke (still looking, for the most part, to the side):

“I’m sorry. I forgot the bag today. I . . . can’t”—and too quickly, he started off.

“Hey!”

With those quick, nervous steps, he hung his head and motored west.

I was standing at my stone-brick “railing,” leaning over a little, loving, I’ll confess, the action, when Adam popped out from *his* side, from the porch just east of mine—didn’t even know he was there. Fifteen feet of brick and stone separate our porches, and we can’t see the other unless over the edge—but Adam appeared then, hanging over *his* edge, I already over mine.

Adam, of course, lives in our building, east across the hall with wife and child. And I wasn’t so surprised to see him there, his shiny white pate with ambitious combover popping out over the “railing.” Adam’s always ready for action.

And he leans out right then, in that crucial half-second, and takes a breath and goes *Boooo!* Down *at* the guy.

Across the street, on the 2nd floor porch just east of the woman, this other neighbor who’d been a witness—a hefty Puerto Rican in a Sox cap who I saw on occasion but never talked to (also, I believe, a stay-at-home dad)—stood at his seat and joined in. *Boooo!*

This all happened pretty fast. The accused halted a little when Adam started, but when this other piled on, he shipped off even faster. I grinned over at Adam and, after a half-second's hesitation—I'd met the accused, liked him, was ever so slightly sorry for him, but screw it, I thought, why not? and—*Boooo!*

The sound of civic solidarity echoed off the buildings, confident and sonorous.

In the movie version, of course, a mail carrier would look up, curious, from some mailbox being filled, and instantly sensing this nasty injustice—possibly sniffing at the air—boo right along with us. Followed by: a cop writing a ticket; a ComEd hardhat up on a pole; little kids on tricycles; cats, squirrels.

But really, it was only us. Three of us there. Sounded like thirty.

The skinny guy cowered, caving inward, sort of crouching to the side as he peppered off. As if our boo had a kind of gale force, a physical fierceness that might blow him over. His exit—the sight of it—was pitiful. But the feel of neighborly power was inescapable and real; we surprised ourselves. Surprised, I believe, everyone involved.

After the guy and his dog turned the corner, the woman with the regal red hair looked over, first at her neighbor in the Sox cap, then across the street at Adam and I—all the participant floor 2s. And then slowly, her shoulders hunched inward. That's when she laughed out loud.

A day later, I was pushing the Monarch in the stroller to the corner store, reading the paper as I went, a think piece about gang affiliations among American soldiers abroad, a whole new problem to guard against. I was totally immersed in this article. As you might guess, it struck close to home. The mother's son from across the street was even more on my mind, new doubts mixed with former certainties about his not existing. For this absent son had *been* a gangbanger (I think) who *became* a soldier (that much I knew), and now he was gone (maybe).

A few weeks before this, they'd come to her door—two stiff-backed military men in uniforms—and it sure looked like their news was grim. The mother appeared downstairs, perplexed-like, and let them in. I saw it all from my 2nd floor porch, clear as day. Sure *seemed* like something was up, something dark and hopeless and horribly formal, a house call from messengers of the State, the same who'd delivered the same the same about some mother's son, dead in a field, to some son's mother, alive at home, forever and ever amen amen, since there'd been wars and sons to send to them.

This was all I could think about—all I could see—as I read the paper and strolled to the store. Mortality, the blunt fact of it, was up in my brain, brimming there—like, about to *boil*—when I looked up from the paper in airy contemplation and caught a glimpse of that Axel Rose hair.

The accused (no dog) was entering the store ahead of me.

I folded the paper, placed it in the little shelf under the carriage, and quietly rolled the stroller in the store. Inside, he stood with his back to us—that familiar slouch, his signature stillness—at the end of the first grocery aisle. I pushed the Monarch, quiet for now, to the far back end with the breakfast stuffs. There were only two aisles in the

store, and as it turned out, the second had what I needed—on the opposite side of the shelves, in fact, from where our friend stood still. I made the hush sign—daddy’s finger to daddy’s lips—afraid the Monarch might give me away.

There, through a slim, random gap in the boxes, where the Sugar Pops ended and the Quaker Oats began, I could see the guy’s face. And it was truly grave. No longer “super-insecure.” More like super-fading. Super-lost. Like, barely even *there*.

He was emptily staring at (it appeared) a blue and white phalanx of Wonderbread. Then someone approached from the front of the store and said to him gently, “Hey *you*.”

He turned and sort of wince-smiled, though barely. This friend remained out of my frame. Her caring voice, face unseen, asked him: “So . . . how you holding up?”

The guy waited a moment: “I’m . . . well, it’s *hard*.”

“I’m sure.”

“I’m passing.”

“Passing?”

He nodded quickly, repeatedly, barely containing himself. A gentle hand touched at his arm.

“Oh, Kevin. I’m sorry. I’m so so sorry.”

And right there, the guy—this Kevin—broke down. He buried himself in her shoulder. I lost sight of his face; saw only the neck and that dirtbaggish hair. And after he’d had a good little cry—muted, eerie, twenty long seconds—his friend spoke up again.

“You know, you were . . .”—her halt was strange and he noticed it.

He rose again, sniffing, red-eyed. “What?”

“Oh I . . . I shouldn’t say.”

“No. No. Say.”

“It’s . . .”—and she waited a long beat—“You were *beautiful* together.”

He looked off to the side, back toward the Wonderbread. (I dropped down a little for cover.)

“Maybe so”—biting his lower lip—“At this point, it’s impossi . . . well, we could only . . .”

He couldn’t see it to the end of a sentence. He was shot. Her disembodied hand consoled at his shoulder. They were silent together like that for a while.

“You know,” she said eventually. “I don’t want to focus on this—and I’m sure you don’t either—but . . . I just *hate* that it had to happen that way.”

His brow tightened; he shook his head.

“The worst way *possible*,” he said—and again he was in at the shoulder. “She had to go and *do* it.”

“I know. I know.”

And he wept. Right there in the store. Wept and wept and wept.

A voice next to me whispered “*Hey. Yo.*” I looked to my left. At the front end of our aisle: one of the stockboy-cashiers, a burly Mexican kid who I vaguely knew from having shopped there. He had a can of peas in his hand and motioned with it toward the weeping (*what’s up with that?*)

I shrugged—honestly, what did I know?—grabbed a box of Quaker Oats and wheeled the carriage to cashier, the sound of that awful, half-muted weeping rising up through the store.

When we got outside, the Monarch started babbling. As if the baby had waited—and tactfully—to broach the subject until we were alone. It was like he knew. I had this sensation all the time now. He spoke to me, da da bo bo, et cetera, as if to say: *that poor guy's going through a real hard time, why'd you have to go and boo him?*

Well, my thoughts exactly. Spot on, Monarch. We'd been mean. Meaner than we could have known. The guy was having a serious crisis, and whatever it might be, I bet he blamed himself for it. You could see it in his eyes. Inescapable self-disdain. I bet he heard the boos in his head already. He didn't need bullies on second floor porches making the nightmare actual.

Just as soon, I was off taking wild guesses. Even sooner, I was sure I knew.

This guy's girlfriend, this music critic for a free weekly—I was suddenly convinced—had killed herself. She'd gone and *done* it.

She was warm and funny and superintelligent—you could tell just by listening to her talk—but she also had a morbid streak, a semi-romantic one. And she'd once *written* about suicide. (Though I forget why.) The commemoration of some rock star's death? Some Curtis or Cobain? I couldn't recall. Still can't. All I really “remember” was the effect produced by this one lucid passage concerning *the death draw*.

She italicized it like that: *death draw*, as if the letters themselves were *drawn*, pulled east on the paper by some unnamed force. Don't remember much else from that piece, but I think I've got the spirit of it. She was saying that *everyone* was pulled this way: somewhere back in the green rooms of consciousness, buried or not, all of us

drawn. There was nothing “wrong” with this draw, she was saying, it’s as “natural” as ocean tide, as the change of seasons.

Or whatever, okay? My point is she maybe, possibly grew to thinking it a bit *too* “natural.” Too “right.” And maybe—most likely, what else could this Kevin have meant?—she “had to go and *do* it.”

Now I couldn’t stop thinking about *her*. I kept seeing the night we met her (which came to educate my guess. Maybe even more than that article.)

This was two or more years prior—pre-Monarch. Shelley’s friend from college, Hugo, inviting us out to a bush league show, some band at the tavern where he tended bar, telling us *Melanie Trident* will be there, that we had to meet her, she was “fabulous talk.” How I fretted, intimidated—would she think we were lame?—then warmed to her, instantly *drawn* to her, in fact, as she glided, calm and keen-eyed through the bar with her gloomy partner shuffling behind.

I hate to say it cause it sounds a little lame, but I clearly remember thinking this: that she looked a little—or even a lot—like Morticia from *The Adamm’s Family*, Morticia from the original sitcom in the sixties, though not as wan or undernourished. This *Melanie Trident* was vital. Her complexion was pale, sure, but only by genetic default. Pale like robust ivory. Like Morticia on a multivitamin plan. With the long super-straight petrol black hair and the lean alluring body in thrift store clothes.

We met by way of the bartender Hugo—she and her boyfriend and Shelley and I—standing at the far end of the bar proper. And we got along well fairly quickly too. This Melanie Trident first immersing her charms in, of all people, Shelley. Not a match

I'd expected to flourish. I didn't know her at all of course—only read her—but I'd known Shelley for six, seven years. I lived with her, loved her—all that of course—but she was no artsy-polemical hipster obsessed with sound and word. Shelley was a bright-eyed nutritionist from Ontario. She was positive vibes and full of light and not scared to admit it—that's the face, at any rate, she showed the world—while I knew deep down she considered hipsterdom a tired, adolescent charade. Not someone you'd guess this Trident would take to. But there they were, chatting it up.

I ended up of course talking to her boyfriend (this Kevin), who chatted *me* up regarding his collection of vintage guitars and guitar amps and the genius obscurities he revered. We sort of half-watched the band; talked, drank. It was pretty fun for a while. Though I noted—how couldn't I?—that this Melanie Trident had quite the *thirst*. She tipped back beer after beer after beer, then shifted to whiskey, and barely seemed altered. Shelley in turn had a few more than usual; as did I; as did maybe Kevin. And the being altered was starting to show.

An hour or two later, the dynamic had shifted. Shelley yakked it up with Hugo and some other guy they knew. I sat solo at the bar. And Melanie and Kevin had taken a table in the far corner near the window, quietly arguing over God knows what. I watched them from my barstool, about fifteen feet off. And together, in this case, they were not so beautiful. Kevin would shake his head weirdly, flipping that Axel Rose hair, then wince and say something intense (or he seemed to.) The entire time, Melanie T. stayed deadpan, staring, and darkly so—a Morticia now closer to the mortuary. She said whatever she needed to say. Never lost it or gave herself away.

She did though, a little, to me, after her Kevin rose from the table and left the tavern in what seemed a huff. Through the bar window, she plaintively watched him go. I waited a minute or two and then—on an odd, uncharacteristic whim—slowly walked over and joined her.

After I arrived at her table, we didn't exchange a word for some time. I remember that much clearly. She half-smiled when I sat there but neither of us spoke. She would stare out the window, then take long despairing looks at the band playing down at the other end. Unclear if she liked them, though my guess was not. Wasn't the kind of thing she'd endorse: a middling, predictable funky folk set only serving as background noise.

Seven, eight drinks in, the vitality was starting to drain from her. With those long looks into nowhere and the inward-looking silence. She was serene enough, together enough, but I guess also clearly *troubled*. You could see this. At least I could. (Because I am too. Sometimes I am. I too have been drawn by *the draw*, okay?)

At last she spoke. Staring down at the band, she sighed, just slightly, then said to me: "Why do they play nothing new?"

"I uh . . . I think they're playing originals."

She waited: "Exactly."

She took another slow drink from her glass, then turned again to stare out the window. She touched at her super-straight hair.

"Phil"—she was like that, the kind who remembered you, who made you her familiar—"I don't know, man . . . it's . . . sometimes it's just so *wrong*."

I waited.

"What is?" I said, and gestured toward the band. "You mean—"

“Everything,” she said, interrupting, still looking off in the distance. “Every damn thing.”

She stared off a while more, then seemed to catch herself, as if suddenly conscious of what she was showing. She turned to me and touched my forearm, inches from where I held my beer. She looked down at the end of the bar proper, where Shelley was making Hugo laugh. She watched them in action for a while.

“Shelley’s a *peach*,” she said then.

Together, we looked over at her.

“Yeah,” I said.

Her hand crept up toward the nook of my elbow. She leaned in a bit. And now the effect of drink was showing. Openly exhibiting itself.

“You’d die for her, wouldn’t you?” she said, and swiveled toward me, letting the buzz take over.

I turned to her then and she looked inside me, way into the back of my brain.

“Yes you would, sir,” she said—slight knowing pat on my arm. “You’d *kill*.”

Now my neighbor Adam says *sir* like that. Exactly like that. (*Yes you would, sir. You’d kill.*) And I don’t mean to shift gears too abruptly here but this is what I’m talking about. Mirrors everywhere. I get this sensation. And all the time now. All the time.

I get it the night Adam and I have a drink at the *very same bar* from two years ago. Adam and me and my old friend Victor—my local remaining friend from college—came to this same bar two or more years later, all three of us out, all three of us daddies.

It was maybe around the first day of August, if not exactly that day. On a weeknight, for no apparent reason, we elect to go get a drink.

I've done this here and there with Victor for years, but lately I've invited Adam along. Who'd I'd never have expected to become a friend. He's self-involved and a bit of a prick but he's always got something to say. I'm afraid I've come to like him.

And we were sitting at a table in that same bar, two or more years later, and Adam was telling Victor the story of the boos—from the week before. Victor thought it was pretty funny, but he didn't seem to find it as momentous as us.

"That's wild," said Victor, not so enthused. "So you guys booed him."

"He's not impressed," said Adam, looking at me, showing slight surprise. "Come on, guy. Back me up here. That was an act of civic *solidarity*."

I agreed—of course it was—though I somehow neglected to mention the other less "civic" incident: that day the accused wept in the store. (I was keeping that one for myself.) I remarked instead about the woman across the street. How it was great to see her so vibrant so soon—though also, let's admit, a little creepy.

"That again?" said Adam, and he looked to Victor. "He's convinced himself of this"—then turning back to me—"You have no evidence that kid is dead."

"I have evidence."

"Let's be direct, sir. You do *not*."

But I told the story anyway, the story of the messengers of State: the stiff-backed men in uniform who came to her door in early July. That story passed quickly—both Victor and Adam had heard it before. And this in turn led to a detailed explication and full-bore discussion of the War.

Now drinking as a daddy with a brutal wake-up call is a different game. At least for me it is. What used to take four beers now only takes two, and if you get to four, you might be in trouble. And that night, I reached, I believe, five.

We talked and drank and half-argued—over exit plan strategies and the hatred of Bush and our New York Times knowledge of Shiites and Sunnis, Green Zones and body counts, Islamofasci-blah-yada-ya. I was conscious of my escalating anger, how it felt more like true anger now, less distance there. The war had made an appearance across the street. And I was holding court, impressed with my eloquence. I was saying it was *up to us*—something about how we *as a people* had to take responsibility, how we should gather by the millions outside government buildings and *boo* them in unison. Until something changed.

Victor thought that one was pretty good but Adam only rubbed at his failed combover, and actually sort of *hissed*.

“Oh, you don’t give a shit,” he said. “Not really.”

I stared back at him, frowning.

“None of us do, sir,” he said. “We do not give a *shit*.”

I started defending myself but he held up a finger, a stop sign, as in: *hold on, there’s more*—and said:

“The only thing that will *ever* get us involved”—he paused and sipped at his whiskey—“like *actually* involved—is a *draft*. It’s too obvious to even point out. That’s the *only* thing that would ever make you or me or anyone here give an actual, genuine fuck. If they *forced* us to go. Us or our children. That’s been our agreement with the

powers-that-be for decades now, right? ‘Us’ meaning white middle class America. Do what you want and we’ll complain but politely. Just don’t send anyone we know off to die.”

I stared back at him. Victor was nodding. Adam was giving me the sneaky grin.

“So hang on to your anger, brother,” he said. “You won’t really *use* it until they take something away from you. Or threaten to. Something you love or prize or whatever. Be glad no one has yet. You know? Shit, sir. Be *overjoyed*.”

I tell you this because of what came after. Because Victor left and then Adam and I stood outside the bar in the warm, drunken August evening. Because Adam got in a cab then, despite the fact I’d driven us there. He said he had “business to attend to.” And he grinned sort of evil as the cab pulled away. Well, I knew what that meant. He’d told me all about her—his “little machine,” his “partner in excess libido.” He’d been seeing someone beyond his wife for years now, a young girl, fresh out of college, who worked at the Copy Boss he managed and owned. And until then, I hadn’t really judged him for it.

Now I wasn’t so sure.

Because in a way, I knew he’d been right. Because no one *had* threatened to take anything away from me. Or him. Nothing we “loved or prized.” And this all blended—in my five beer mind—with memories of that kid across the street, the soldier, who I’d met a few times while strolling with the Monarch, who’d been cute with the baby while keeping his cool (that possibly gangbanger distance).

Because Melanie Trident had been right too. I would die for Shelley. Even more for the Monarch. (And I know I should really stop calling him that. His name is

Henry—who I hope is called Hank. I'd kill whoever threatened him *or* Shelley. I swear it, sir. I'd murder.)

All this swirled through my over-beered head as I drove the Civic home. As I coasted down the alley behind our building and found that our parking lot was full. This will happen sometimes, when a friend or relative visits someone in our building and happens to park in the extra space. I shrugged it off and parked out in front.

The problem was: I only had the back door key to our building. I'd lost the front key weeks before, which was annoying but not such a horrible loss. I almost always come in the back (from the parking lot.) But this means, when I *do* park out in front, I have to walk down a long dark scary gangway to get to the back door.

And I was doing just that, walking down the long dark gangway in a beery haze, thinking of all I meant to protect, how glad I was I had what I had, even though I'm a bit of a fuck-up. Just a fuck-up stay-at-home dad, okay? But you only live once, right? Only *once*. (Had to stop pretending I was only half living.)

Then I thought I saw this trace of a figure entering the gangway from the alley. I wasn't sure—it was a passing wisp, a motion, I'd been too involved in my head to see. Despite the cold rush of fear that swept up through me, I soldiered on without losing a step. It was dark. Perhaps I'd be mugged. Perhaps they'd come to take something away from me.

I heard the footsteps approach—light swift steps, unhesitant, fearless—and up through the darkness, she came into view.

I gasped, tensed. The cold shot through me. My heart skipped a stone and my hands jerked up. For a second or two, I swear to you, I really thought I'd seen a ghost.

The robust ivory indie Morticia, the suicide writer with the petrol-black hair, was feet from me and gliding forth. With that super-white vitality that seemed to glow. A phantom for all I knew. As if she'd floated up through the darkness and said to me, stereotypically: *boo!*

She didn't though. She only turned to me with her keen-eyed calm and said "sorry," then kept on moving. Sorry I guess for having scared me. But sorry also—I couldn't help but think—for not having been dead.

*

*

*

*

The next day, after Shelley got home from work, I went for a walk to think things through. I ended up back in front of our building, looking up at the 2nd floor porch across the street. But the tall red hair wasn't there.

I had no idea about her son. Not really. (I should just walk over and ask her.)

The night before had filled me with doubt, spooked me to the core, right after that rare moment of certainty. And I won't get too detailed about it here, but it's only fair you know: this Melanie Trident, apparently, was now the official girlfriend of Hugo. Hugo the bartender. They'd been secretly together for a while, I guess. I scolded Shelley for not telling me this, but she claimed she'd only recently heard. Hugo's purple VW was the extra car parked in our space—should have noticed that but didn't, too buzzed, I suppose—and Melanie T had driven separately. She'd parked on the street. Like me.

I had zero idea. I should stop taking guesses. I hadn't the slightest clue.

I glanced down at the end of the block and noticed Adam out jogging. In his cut-off shorts and ratty t-shirt: the lean and dedicated runner. He sprinted the last thirty feet to the building, then hunched over, breathing hard. He grinned up at me, sweat rolling down his pate, then fished from his pocket a rumpled pack of Winstons.

“I’ve got to stop this,” he said, lighting a smoke.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “You should.”

He winced up at me, still bent over. He exhaled: “I meant the *running*.”

I chuckled at that, and we exchanged how ya beens, then discussed a little the night before. A few minutes later, we couldn’t help but see: guess who was coming up the sidewalk? Across the street, just like last week? With those small rapid steps that echoed the animal (or maybe of course vice versa).

“Look,” said Adam. “It’s old No-Bag-On-Me-Today.”

“Right.”

“The Turd Santa,” he said, and took another drag.

I chuckled, repeating this. *Turd Santa?*

“M-hm,” he said. “That’s him. It’s off-season now so naturally he leaves his ‘em on the sidewalks and lawns, but . . . come Christmas time?”

Adam turned to me, brow up.

“He flies his trusty mutt to your chimney and lets it drop one down the hole.”

“Christ, Adam.”

“A sleigh pulled by thirteen rein-dogs. All prepared to squat for Santa.”

“God.”

He snickered to himself: “He’s a gift-giver, sir. He’s selfless.”

We stood there together in the gray August heat and watched him passing that woman's building. He kept his head down and motored west, making sure this time the mutt didn't stop.

(3)

Unwarranted

You could hear them pretty often now, going at it in the mid-afternoon. Nearly every day, around three or three thirty—unfailingly then, as the Monarch napped—and there I'd be, a slave to it. Standing rock still under the vent, often on a stool or stepchair, listening intently, my heart gone tight, as Adam and his face-free partner in excess pounded it out across the way.

You could hear them, I swear, like the two were in the room, which never failed to amaze me. They lived across the hall, not above or below us, off to the side—a good twenty feet of hallspace dividing us (oak, plaster, beams, air)—and the effect, due to the odd proximity, was less like innocent overhearing and more like we'd bugged their apartment.

All of this due to the vent in our living room, the wide shiny slatted one up in the corner, newly installed that August. It was snugly attached to this odd metal thing: an industrial grade tube-like box disappearing at a curve through our inmost sidewall. Had an odd bulk, this hard metal thing, like the ductwork from a failed spaceship, failing circa 1935. Ran through our drywall, just as theirs did on their side, to the internal organs of

the greater building, then shot straight down to the hellish orange throb of the furnace in the basement no one had the key to.

I'd stand there on a stool and listen.

Made me think *spaceship* also because of her. Well, him too. Their overheard performance like a countdown toward space. This slowly escalating heartfelt moan (*ten, nine, eight, seven*) rising over Adam's raw groan, that steady, unwavering guttural sound, one note repeated continuously, automatically, until one or the other of them came.

If hers was headquarters, his was machine: a snooze alarm malfunction, a truck backing up. *Runh, runh, runh, runh*. Wasn't clear if he was having all that much fun.

Weird to think of it that way—him as “machine”—for that's what Adam called her. Or used to. The confidential moniker: his “little machine.” Rarely uttered, cold and possessive. Came to surface somewhere or other only after the third or so whiskey. And only ever man to man (and maybe even only to me).

This is not his wife we're hearing. This is Adam's secret sneaking through the vent. In part why it bummed me out, I suppose. And it did. Both excited and depressed me. Though finally, frankly, let us confess: I really came to look forward to it. They were so consistent and the show was so available, and the Monarch, in his Radikul SafeZone Crib, was always so thankfully down.

Understand: the mid-afternoon for the homebound is already a quiet killer, what with its hazy dotted sunlight slicing through the half-up blinds. And that vibrant silence when you turn off the radio? The kind that creeps through your brain's back door to whisper insults and cruel advice? I guess you could say they erased all that. At least for

a little while, anyway. Five, ten minutes. Sometimes far longer. It was my secret too, let's not forget that, both sweet relief and sick forgetting, where no one needed to know—or *could* know, really—but me. That I cherished. That part I craved. I guess it's what I've always wanted. To listen in. Like invisible.

Until that one day in late September, when Shelley came home early and unannounced, to unveil me a couple times over. A week later, even stranger days came, but this first one was key. I was found out.

Just up there on the stepstool, inches from the vent, ear nearly pressed to the steel meshing, and almost soundlessly, in she walks. Without a word.

This was, say, 3:30, 35, and they'd been devotedly at it across the hall for ten solid minutes or more. I should tell you: they were in rare form that day. Slight variations in their performance styles rose or burst in tantalizing ripples I must confess were fast persuading me. I was in fact a touch “alive” down there, though the sound of Shelley's approaching footsteps nearly deflated us all.

But then again didn't. Let's be honest. And there she was, from nowhere, a practical ghost, Shelley, my lifelong partner, standing beside me—beside and a little beneath, to my left—staring up at the astonishing vent.

Not astonished by me—I was turned to the side on the stool, she couldn't see a thing, not yet—but rather by the intimate lurid detail floating from the silvery slats above. Chin up, her eyes sparkled. Her lemony hair hung lush behind her.

“Listen to that,” she said, mouth downcurling, eyes blooming. “They are getting it *on*.”

I only nodded in agreement. *Yes, honey. That is accurate.*

We listened in some more.

“My *god*,” she half-whispered, then waited, gaze fixed to the vent. “Maribel is a *tiger*.”

Shelley has assumed this is Adam’s wife. Why wouldn’t she? She’s heard sounds from the vent before. Never these sounds of course, but she knows the score. When we’ve previously listened in together, it’s mostly been mid-volume conversations, most of which we can’t quite decipher, or arguments, loud ones, too easily heard. And two voices rising with ecstatic and/or machine-like vigor from our silvery, addictive vent can only mean Adam and Maribel, the neighbors we’ve known for years. But this is not Maribel—what Shelley couldn’t know—and it is only Maribel, among the four of us, who isn’t present in our living room that giveaway afternoon.

This absence will in some sense be corrected—or filled—but in that moment, that afternoon, as Shelley (beneath me, to the left) stood in awe of Maribel’s imposter, I had other concerns pressing. To recap: I had been standing on a stepstool, ear to the vent, my old school Bermudas giving me away, when my partner soundlessly appeared. Though she hadn’t noticed yet. Then soon enough did.

When she saw, she went rigid at the neck and leaned in forward to confirm her guess. Then lifted her chin, not ready for eye contact. Even grinned, bemused-like (though also, I knew, a touch creeped out).

“Oh my,” she said, “. . . look at *you*.”

She crinkled her brow and grinned-frowned weirdly. As I’ve said, the gesture was mixed: if part cheeky, also part appalled. Neither of us knew what to do.

I chose awkwardly then—or “chose” is wrong, this was bodily impulse—my *body* decided to step from the stool—but “step” is wrong too, this was more like falling—and tripping sort of crumbling down there into her arms. Not as slapstick clunky as it sounds, actually. There was something almost smooth about it. And Shelley held me at a vague remove, just for an instant, then smoothed into it even more and there we embraced. We gelled, pressed. A famished kiss. Our hands advanced. Glided, gripped, felt, faltered, over curves and indents and outposts.

And for an instant or two, it looked like we both might get there, the airborne infection transferred joyous from the vent, what hadn’t happened for a while, believe me, but—like in a sitcom, and sitcoms sometimes have that pang of truth because this sort of thing will happen—the next instant, the baby cried.

He wailed. The Great Discharge. Instantaneous raw complaint. As if cued by the cheesy director. We unkissed, half-unembraced, and looked back over our respective shoulders. He was up. The Monarch.

Shelley hates it when I call him that. I guess I’m starting to hate it too. But harmless habits are hard to kill, and—well, it’s not like he understands what I *mean*. He’s an infant, right? Hasn’t been out here a year yet.

Shelley claims he understands just fine, that a snarky or part-condescending tone will communicate meaning galore. It penetrates, she says, like a secret code. A signal decoded in large part by the child, a secret kept mostly from the sender (who maybe didn’t even know he was sending).

But now our Monarch was returning the favor in escalating grades of anger and need, really tearing it up. And the combined output was chaos. Insane. The SafeZone Crib versus the Vent.

The Monarch wailed. She moaned. Adam did his odd disturbing grunting thing. With me and Shelley in a crumbling embrace—though crumbling’s wrong, this was more like wilting, like papery curling back into ourselves.

We stood there, staring at each other, listening to all three voices as they rose in volume and intensity. All together now. No end seemed near.

And I was just about to dare a half smirk or grin, to see if she’d take the bait, but instead came the other, first, from her. Pity crosses the brow. I don’t think Shelley even knew she was doing it. Just a wrinkle—a *ripple* of pity, like a flat sharp stone skipped across water. This said (the pity’s code): poor Phil. Poor poor Phil. My lifelong partner forced to play nanny, assigned to play maid, because I have to finish my dissertation and hold down the high-paying job. He’s slaving, trapped, bored to the bone, and now here he can’t even get some.

Gradually, gently, I pushed her away. That look of pity sort of pissed me off.

And then—right then—from outside, a gun was fired. *Crack! Crack!* Two sharp explosions, dominant and pointed, the first we’d heard since living there—by then, three years in the neighborhood. And this harsher sound stilled us all. Across the hall, they’d paused operations. Even the Monarch was mum.

Shelley gripped at the meat of my forearm.

“Go check on him,” she whispered. “Please.”

I nodded twice and stepped tightly away, moving north toward the baby's room, the SafeZone where all sound had ceased. It was extra still as I went, the air so silent; and the vibe began to creep me out. Why *had* he stopped crying?

Worried, I looked over my shoulder. Shelley held her palm to her chest. She gave me a weird little nod. And then—right then—he started up again. Just wailed.

Looking back, I lifted out my hands, palms showing, and nodded—*there we go*. But I didn't think twice about it. I walked without pause past the baby's room, shooting instead for the door to the porch.

“Hey!”

The big wooden door creaked; I opened the screen—“*Phi—*”—and closed both doors behind me.

Outside on the porch it was still, extremely so, far more than it had been in there. A gelatin silence. Perhaps aftermath silence. A quiet that grips and draws you in or down. Quiet like maybe quicksand.

I froze in this pudding for five, ten seconds—creepier by far out here—then stepped slowly forward toward the lip of the porch. I propped my hands on the stone slab “railing,” and looked down at the quiet street.

No one. Not a soul. No breeze. Nothing.

Just the old brick buildings staring back at me, their stone porches very much like mine, set gangway to gangway in a red-mustard row. Just the flags and steeples and malnourished trees. Not a little league gangbanger in sight. No bullies, no babies, no kids, no dogs. Not a peep.

The neighborhood was like this here and there. In some moments wildly alive; in others, motionless. A vibrant hive of life here gone undercover as a ghost town, which could swarm back to living at the slightest trigger. But then why use this word *trigger*? That seemed misguided. Too wild West maybe. Or too close to home. The shot *had* been near, unacceptably close, perhaps in the gangway that ran along the apartment below us. Had it been a gun? Might have been a firecracker. But no: that was a *firearm*. Can't say how I knew, but I was certain. The precise timing between explosions? The sharp force of the discharge? A gun. It had to be faced.

Early the next morning, before Shelley went to work, I walked to our corner store and saw Adam, who I hoped I might engage in discussion of the gun. Yesterday's anonymous gunshot: just the sort of situation Adam loved to unfold. The threat or threats in our local midst, our response to or denial of them. We talked about these things all the time.

He was sitting on the broad metal step to the store, reading the paper and smoking a Winston. A Rorschach blotch of sweat spread across the breast of his motheaten t-shirt—like a scorpion maybe or no, a rodent—a random stain from his a.m. jog. He was having, as always, his after-jog smoke, his hairy legs crossed, one stylish Nike bobbing as he read. He sipped at a bottle of neon blue Gatorade, and rubbed at his failed combover, leaving a localized patch of hair raised unintentionally skyward—a furry patch on the left, as if one side of the brain were startled and sending a nonstop signal to the scalp.

He was fiddle-fit, marine corps fit, yet a dedicated smoker all the same. As long as I'd known him, he'd been like that. Chiseled and contradictory. As I've said to

Shelley many times before: our Adam was a bit of an asshole, if not a complete and comprehensive asshole, yet I liked him. Loved him even. He was my favorite asshole by far.

As I approached, he gave me a furtive-seeming glance, then returned to reading his paper. I wanted to talk about yesterday's gunshot. He'd been jarred by it—must have been. The sounds from the vent had never resumed after those sharp explosions. He must have something to say.

I stood before him as he read intensely on the broad metal stoop to the store. He lowered his paper and met my eyes. He had a way of staring up with furrowed brow and letting you know it was time to listen. This was reflex for Adam, his need to hold forth, especially regarding politics, as if big Tim Russert had turned to him intently and asked him to the face the nation, the nation in this case (and in many if not most cases) being his neighbor Phil.

He lowered his paper and pointed to the cover, where some government official was answering questions in committee. He said:

"I have no idea, no one does, sir, how history will treat this one. No one treats it like, say, how we treat Watergate. Not yet anyway. It's nowhere *near* Watergate. It's more like . . . Whatever-Gate"—a long, tight draw on his Winston here, then exhaling—"The nation seeming to concur as one, like . . . warrant-less wiretapping? Brutal torture of prisoners? Raping the barely developing world with arrogance and sanctimony? Whatever. *Whatever.*"

I chuckled. Then he got that look: where he's in my eyes. Way back in there. He waited, then said: "But does it not make a basic kind of sense?"

“Doesn’t what?”

“Wiretapping the enemy.”

I looked back, half-nodding, not quite agreeing.

“I mean, without bothering to ask a judge,” he said. “You know, like . . . deciding who the threat is, then selling this threat to your people, then following it up, as any good worker will, with devoted, committed action. If necessary, beyond the law. Beyond the prescribed limits of *law*.”

He took another drag on his Winston.

“Because what’s the *law*?” he said. “What’s justice? Who decides? When? We’re all lucky enough, secure enough, safe enough, stuffed enough—on turkey and mashed potatoes and *pie*—to know that . . . it just doesn’t take that much to stay within the limits of the law.”

He waited, thinking, then said: “Doesn’t even take that much to stray a little outside of them . . . No. We’re safe”—he looked up at me here, a little dagger in his eye—“even with the random gunshot or two. You and I—we’re safe.”

I nodded softly. Okay. So somehow we’d come back to it. And I was just about to reply, to get the ball rolling, when Adam pointed across the street.

“Look,” he said.

I turned to look over my shoulder. It was one of those sleek skinny cameras that hang at every intersection as you go west toward oblivion after Western Ave. The tiny blue light blinked on, then off.

“See?” said Adam. “Everybody’s listening in.”

Of course this was true, or true enough—but also *too* true—and in other ways than Adam had in mind. He had no idea, at least not then, how his voice came grunting through the vent, that surveillance-like delivery system built into our building's anatomy. Cameras and microphones, in multiple respects, were showing up everywhere unannounced. Little ears and eyes, dotting the landscape.

The following week after the above—four or five days later, a Tuesday, I believe—I was strolling the Monarch back home from the park and encountered another little eye. Little ears came after, also unannounced, but that part's awful (I do not look forward to it.)

This was early to mid afternoon—2 to 3 pm—and as we approached our quiet mustard brick building, about ten feet off from the front door, I noticed the heels of a silver ladder peeking out from the gangway just west of us. There was a grunting sound too—a different sort of grunting—mixed with a muttered, muted swearing, under-the-breath and in a different language, jagged and harried and hot.

I gently pushed the stroller toward the gangway—the Monarch now nearly asleep—and stopped just parallel to those slanted silver heels. I followed the rungs of laddered aluminum up to the source of the swearing. Turns out it was that big guy, Yuri, the Ukrainian handyman for our place (and many places near.) He had a bolt gun tucked under an arm and was trying to twist a camera back in place—a sleek skinny camera he'd bolted to the wall, direct against the bright red bricks of our somewhat creepy neighboring building. He sensed me and looked down, annoyed and sweaty with a crooked forced grin.

“Look at this,” he said, meaning the camera. “It don’t move. This is shit, this thing.”

He had deepset brooding eyes and a hint of suspicion set faintly at the corners of his mouth. Quite an imposing presence, this Yuri. He was well over six feet—early forties, gruffly demeanored—and built like a linebacker gone to seed. I watched him go: this giant, our Yuri, perched on a tall lightweight ladder, weirdly angled and perilously placed, wrestling with this thing in the wall up there.

“Why do they want that there?” I asked.

“Landlord,” said Yuri and shrugged, then wiped the sweat from his broad forehead. “He want more safety here.”

“Safety,” I said, deadpan, not buying it. Again, he shrugged.

“From these gangbangs,” he answered and up-nodded with his chin toward the building across the street. “These guns, you know? These *kids*.”

At the mention of “guns” as coupled with “kids,” I half-popped my eyes. Yuri noted this and waved a hand before his face, like *aah* whatever—letting me know he thought the threat was overblown—when the bolt gun slid from under his arm. It shot straight down to the gangway concrete, bouncing violently, likely dying. Yuri cursed intensely then, in several languages. He shook his head and started coming down, then stopped himself and pointed up at the camera, which was swiveled not down at the gangway but inexplicably across the way—straight toward our side of the building.

“I fix this later,” said Yuri, and nodded. “This piece of *shit*.” He smiled as he descended, grunting a little, happy, I gathered, to be done with it.

The results of Yuri's labor, I knew from experience, tended to land a little shy of what you'd hoped for. He was overworked, likely underpaid, and too busy, it seemed, to answer every call from all the buildings he'd been hired to maintain. The wide set of blinds in our living room, in fact, had been broken for about a week at that point, bunched up near the top of the window case, refusing to unfold, thus leaving our extra tall living room windows exposed to the side of the building next door. I'd called him twice about helping us fix it but hadn't heard back (as will happen).

"Yuri?" I said. On the sidewalk now, he raised his formidable head and looked over with raised brow. He looked tired. Truly pooped. "When, uh . . ."—my inflection rising here—"when do you think you'll get around to fixing our blinds?"

His tired face bunched up in confusion. He waited a beat, glancing to the side.

"Blinds?"

He stared down the gangway, distracted now. He'd noticed the bolt gun's broken body, the black plastic shell cracked and half-gutted, its wires poking out like intestine exposed. He turned then, forgetting my question, and walked slowly, plaintively, toward the dying tool. It was actually kind of moving.

I gave up on enlisting Yuri in the healing of our blinds, and gently brought the stroller with sleeping child into our building's front "lobby" area. I lifted it up the first set of steps, then rolled the stroller with sleeping child into its assigned corner. I undid the complicated seatbelt harness thing and very softly, with insane caution, lifted him up from his SafeZone seat.

Well, the rest, in its way, came pretty fast. And right after I sort of half-guessed it was coming. That is, I should say, my body guessed. A toxic premonition. A feeling like an internal *gust*, a chill from the flu, goose bumps rising to crown the scalp. For nearly to the door as I hiked the stairs (Monarch to my shoulder), I could swear—out there, in the hallway—that I already heard Adam going at it (he and his “little machine”). A vague distant throb, that *runh runh runh*. Which surprised me, even disturbed me.

It just seemed all wrong. Right from the start. When they went, they went 3:15, 3:30. Always. Consistently, devotedly right around then. That fifteen minute window. I looked at my watch (my sleek black SportKing digital). 2:23. Weird. I turned the key gently in our lock.

Inside, they were a little louder, but not by much. You could hear her now too—just ripples. Little enticing teals and tingles, the beginnings of some serious congress.

My first thought, again, was what are they *up* to? They never start this early. Never. But my second thought was sharper, stranger, for I’d stepped into our living room, attempting to turn the corner toward the baby room, and then noticed, through our wide set of extra-tall blind-free windows, the sleek black camera staring back at me. A skinny uni-eyed robot insect, fixing its crosshairs directly *at* us. Inside our *home*.

I had to tell Yuri this was not acceptable. No way. Outside, I hadn’t realized the camera’s flawed placement was so personal, so bluntly invasive. And we will *not* have a sleek black surveillance camera trained upon our *lives*. Either fix the way the camera’s swiveled or fix the goddamn blinds. Yuri!

Faster now, I moved toward the baby room and lay the loosely splayed Monarch along the blanketed padding of his Radikul SafeZone crib (with posturepedic balancing system and secretly enmeshed massage vibration).

He was down hard; I stepped fast to the porch, hoping I could still catch Yuri. And I tell you it was physical, for I got another signal, that prickly rush, the nervous system's premonition shooting flares across the skin. I stepped onto the porch and leaned over its lip (that durable slab of gray concrete), looking for Yuri, west then east, where I saw—about thirty, forty feet off, right near the end of our particular block—his beaten blue Dodge pickup, huffing and puffing, heading east and away from us.

But I had no time to curse Yuri. For as I watched him chug off, I felt another, sharper chill. Not a premonition. Raw recognition. I saw, on the sidewalk, down at that corner, where my eyes had lazily strayed, Adam's wife Maribel approaching, holding the hand of their child Jorge, their remarkably composed three year old with the deadpan Buddha eyes, wearing for some reason a suit and tie.

My immediate response was panic for Adam. This could be bad. Had to think fast. Had to think uniquely. And when I stepped back inside, the sounds from the vent were louder, more enthused, that slowly escalating spaceship rising (and in this case, certain to crash).

I stood paralyzed in the living room, staring up at the vent, not thinking fast (nor at all uniquely), thinking mostly oh no. Oh no oh no. And I felt the eye of the camera then. I could sense its intrusion. I turned to see it staring, this uni-eyed robot insect mistakenly aimed through our living room windows. A little green light was blinking there, in the sleek black casing next to the lens. My God, was it actually *on*?

I stared back at the camera—it had me, I was stone—as the sounds from the vent grew in volume and intensity. I let out a little giggle, a kind of nervous dribble, and stood there a few frozen moments too long. Then I turned, remembering, and moved swiftly toward the porch—gently past the baby’s room, didn’t want to wake him—and out again into the open air.

I looked down over the lip of the porch to see Maribel and Jorge standing at the building’s front door. She had her key in the lock. Oh no oh no. She turned the knob and they entered.

I stood helpless on the porch and contemplated options. With slight hesitation, I decided. I would pound my fist on Adam’s door and deal with whatever followed. But when I got back inside and opened our front door—so prepared to take action—Maribel and Jorge were already there, making the turn up the staircase (oh no!)

“Hey!” I said, with a warped tight smile, stretched to my ears like a mask.

“Hello Phil,” said Maribel, in her sweet, soothing voice.

“Beautiful day out there huh?”

“Yes yes. So beautiful.”

“Not going to the park?”

Maribel grinned crookedly. She looked down at Jorge, then back at me. A truly beautiful woman here—what in Christ’s name was Adam giving up?—with her petro-black hair and wide-set eyes, so luminous and knowing, in her form-fitting Levis and breezy lime blouse, whose demeanor was vibrant, whose attitude light, with a patient tolerance that was antithesis to Adam and his stormy contempt, who also, if pushed, could explode like brushfire into righteous inconsolable rage (we’d heard as much

through the vent more than once). And now she was puzzled twice over, for her gaze was fixed on our slightly open door. She could hear them pretty well here—faintly, but clear enough. We all could.

“I think we save the park for later,” she said, staring at the door. She dropped Jorge’s hand and moved slowly toward me. “They say maybe rain coming.”

“I didn’t hear anything about rain,” I said. “*Nothing* about rain. Really, Maribel. I . . . think you’ve been misinformed.”

As she moved toward the door, I slid down, sort of *sleazed* over with my hand, and gently drew it closed. I felt her soft palm on my knuckles. Together like that, we listened: the *runh runh runh* beneath a rising *oh yes*. Icky escalations and telltale grunts. Clear as day. Just horrible. She stared hard in my panicky eyes and helped my hand turn the knob to open.

“*I am not misinformed,*” she whispered, and then tipped open our creaky front door. She stepped inside my apartment—did she think she’d find them inside? Her lips went tight and she glanced back at Jorge. “Quedate aqui,” she said. “Ya vengo. You . . . talk to mister Phil.”

A sidelong glance at me here (not at all amused), and she moved, sort of hovered, toward the horrible vent. There, she stood beneath it, staring up with her arms tightly crossed. I looked over at Jorge in his black suit and tie, a funeral director, a mob boss in miniature. Did he hear what we were hearing? In anything like the same way?

“You sure look nice today,” I said.

“Picture day,” he said. “They take my picture at the school.”

“I see.”

He was a good kid, a great kid even, soft-voiced and supercomposed. Had a quick way with the language—both languages, I’d guess—and lucid green eyes that seemed wise and confident, strangely capable of sizing you up.

“Mister Phil?” he said. “Where’s mama?”

I leaned in and looked at Maribel, her back, her neck, rigid beneath the vent. She nodded tightly, mockingly, as Adam and his partner came to a rousing close.

“She’s on her way,” I told him. “Real soon.”

I know the story now so I might as well tell you. Adam revealed the whole thing later (much later, in fact): why we were all there, all then. He’d started early with his other because it was picture day, because he knew Maribel would be leaving her intensive composition course at Harold Washington far earlier than usual, leaving to pick up Jorge from the preschool where his picture would be taken that day, where the kids first in line got out super-early. But not, Adam had thought, this early. Not nearly. They’d arrived a solid hour, in fact, ahead of the expectation.

Maribel moved slowly then, back from the vent toward me. Her eyes were red-rimmed and watery, her bearing defiant, yet also, you could see, pretty damn depleted. She looked into me then (through me.)

“You hear that pretty good over here.”

“I . . . yeah, it’s—”

“Good reception.”

“Look, Maribel. It’s not like—”

“How long you’ve known this?”

I tightened at the neck and my mouth dropped slightly.

“Just . . . I *didn't* know. I was—“

Maribel touched my arm. A generous touch. (Firm enough but still forgiving.)

“It’s okay, Phil,” she said. “Don’t lie now . . . it’s okay.” She looked the other way here, at the other apartment—hers—and eyed it as if staring through the wall. Stood there like that a good long while, then reached out gently for her child’s hand. She said, without looking at me (or anyone): “Everything is fine.” Her gaze was dreamy now. Distant, defeated. “Everything is perfect and clear.”

I watched them cautiously descend the steps. In thickest silence, descending at an angle, the mother and her baffled child. I wanted to say something, just didn’t have it in me. Jorge even looked up and caught my eye. You could see he knew. Something had happened. Something strange, ineffable, that lived in a language he didn’t yet speak.

I listened as their feet stepped softly through the hallway and they took the last of the first floor stairs. The front door swung open and then they were gone. I stood in the hallway and listened to the quiet, absently staring at their door.

Then Adam’s doorknob swiveled, and from nowhere, he appeared: the disheveled combover, the eyes, the stubble, his torso exposed through a furry red robe.

“*Hey*,” he whispered, then waited, eyes scanning the hallway. “Maribel here?”

I took a moment to mull that over, then said, “No. Why?”

“*Jesus*,” he wooed, visibly relieved. “I thought I heard her voice.”

“Not that I know of.”

“Thank God,” he said, then grinned at me, a wink without winking. “I’ve just now this moment been—”

“I know.”

That set him back a second. He waited, then said: “Oh yeah?”

I hated him right then. The look in his eye disgusted me. He nodded, grinning.

“She’s a wildfire, brother,” he said. “She’s a four alarm fire.”

“I bet,” I replied, and then turned to our door. “Good for you.”

My back to him there, I could feel his confusion. He’d heard the weirdness at the edge of my voice.

“Everything alright, buddy?” he asked.

My back to him still, I gripped at our doorknob.

“Everything is fine, Adam,” I said, staring at our door. “Everything’s just peachy.”

As I sat on the sofa in the living room, I heard the first of the thunder cracks. So Maribel was right: looked like a storm coming. Jesus. Wonder where they’d strayed? The rain came quick then, flaying our window at a violent slant with that slashing noise that can get a bit scary. I sat there and stared at the camera, that one-eyed insect and its blinking green light. On, then off, relentless, indifferent, filming me there as best it could through the angry sheets of rain.

(4)

Never Been Pinned

Adam had dashed right then for the john and left me alone in the living room. I stood there half-drunk on the giant orange carpet and tried to take in what I could. His apartment I'd seen before, a couple times over, but each time only briefly. And what I noticed here first, what really got me, was that photo.

Framed in glass on the corner mantelshelf, angled slightly inward toward another—his wedding photo, also framed—stood a stunning image of my neighbor Adam in maroon polyester singlette and flat-soled Dan Gable wrestling shoes. Seventeen, maybe eighteen years old: fresh-faced Adam hunched in his stance, fierce-eyed and rippled with muscle, a gold medallion hanging from his neck like the mark of a knighting by some unseen king.

This instantly brought us closer together—and in a serious way, an inside way. I'd been a wrestler in high school too and knew pretty well how the sport did you in. Its harsh demands and severity of discipline. I'd been through that shit too. Though I'd

never really won anything. Nothing important anyway. What high school Adam had accomplished here seemed momentous, of lifelong note.

The toilet flushed and Adam emerged, out from the bathroom and back toward me. He was lean as ever, ultrafit and overattentive, not the slightest ounce of fat on the guy. Not really all that different-looking from this other Adam on the shelf up there. Save for a wrinkle or crease or two and that leathery lived-in texture of skin. Plus obviously the hair—especially right then, his unwashed combover a staticky mess.

“Another?” he asked.

I nodded: “Certainly.”

I had no idea how many we’d put down. Didn’t care to do the math. Our wives and respective sons—Adam’s a 3-year-old, mine an infant—were both out of town: his to Mexico, mine in Ontario, leaving us here in America, set free to roam in the glorious middle, where, if we wished, we could drink until the birds chirped and the sun peeked over the malnourished trees. We were even going to see a band—due on stage at midnight! I tell you, for a while there, especially that night, I was brimming over with beer-fed joy.

But this rosy feeling faded fast and hard when I noticed the other thing, that 2nd revelation: a pair of worn pink panties on the armchair in the corner. I knew it straight off. These were not Maribel’s. Not the panties of Adam’s spouse but rather the panties of his secret other. That was my semi-educated guess.

A dingy pink, slightly torn at the waistband. The tattered elastic about to peel. With a possibly motheaten pinhole or two peeking out from the ass’s edge. These were

not Maribel's. No chance. Maribel was too together, too organized and attentive to the detail of hygiene, to be caught dead in such an underthing.

And these panties also told of my betrayal of Adam. A fading pink flag for the emerging turncoat. Though at that point, I was hard-pressed to say: was it really Adam I'd betrayed? I'd hidden something far worse from Maribel. Still, I felt cheap. Standing there, waiting on a beer in his living room? Knowing what I knew that he didn't?

He returned with two more and stood by my side, handing me mine. He cracked his own and sort of half-froze like that, his finger still curled in the tab.

"Oh Christ"—a wicked, slightly embarrassed smile—"That's nasty . . . sorry."

He stepped over, extended a finger, and levered them up from the chair. He shook his head, half-grinning. I up-nodded at them.

"They're hers, right?"

He crinkled his brow, a bit vulnerable here. "Hers?"

I turned to the mantelshelf, to their wedding photo, where a knockout Maribel in wedding cake white held bouquet to breast and smiled sweetly, her black tied and capable groom to her side, looking pretty fierce here too, actually. Fierce, I suppose, at having won her.

I pointed. "Well . . . not *hers*."

Adam lowered his eyes and went a bit sheepish. The room thickened with his silence. For the first time that night, in fact—most of it spent in local bars, a roving two-man bacchanal—there was genuine weirdness in the air between us.

"We were having such a nice time together," he said, gazing at the bristled weave of the carpet. He gently squeezed the panties in his fist. "Let's forget all that for now."

You could see he was unsettled, that rarest of states for my neighbor.

“Okay,” I said. “Agreed.”

I looked back to the mantelshelf and pointed again.

“But this is new.”

He saw what I meant, then grinned.

“You like that?” he said, warming some. “I found that last week. Just like . . .
chanced on it in some box in the closet.”

“No no, I find this very interesting. I wrestled too, you know.”

His eyes sparked up. “No shit?”

“Yeah.”

“What weight?”

“Senior year? Um, one forty five.”

Adam pointed to his chest, delighted. Partners in crime, he and I. He said:

“Guess what, brother”—and tapped at his heart with a finger—“Senior year? *One forty five.*”

“Really?”

“I shit you not,” he said, and pointed to the photo. “State champion of the state of Maryland. One hundred and forty-five pounds. Nineteen eighty fi . . . or maybe eighty four. Oh I don’t know—nineteen eighty something.”

“That’s astonishing, Adam.”

He took a slug from his can and shrugged. I shook my head. Couldn’t quite believe it.

“You were *state* champion?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Where I come from, a state championship in any weight class is tantamount to tenure earned among the gods. A place in history. A forever location. But it must be that way everywhere, right? Adam was a *state champion*. This must (I thought through my buzz-fed brain) *explain* the guy somehow.

“That’s a big deal, right?” I said, looked him square in the eye (tried to get way back in there.) “I mean . . . don’t you think that had influence over your—oh I don’t know—your *entire life*?”

Adam sniffed. Part laugh, part acknowledgement. Again, he shrugged.

“Seriously,” I said. “Don’t you think that *marked* you somehow?”

“You’re speaking too intensely.”

“Am I?”

Adam took another swig, then pointed to the photo of his high school self.

“It’s no golden ticket, sir,” he said. “It leads nowhere. Or whatever . . . maybe a college scholarship. Maybe some podunk dipshit ‘fame’ in a highly provincial and cultish environment. But ultimately, no—nothing. Just the hard-on of it. Of having accomplished it.”

I nodded: “Say what you will. I’m still impressed”—I took a long swig and raised a toast to him. “Cheers, my friend.”

He half-heartedly lifted his beer, amused enough, you could see, yet also with the slightest hint of pride mixed in there.

“And you?” he said, brow raised. “Think it marked you?”

“Everything marks you,” I said, letting the buzz take over. “Anything you do for any true length of time. Absolutely it marked me.”

He nodded. “True enough, sir. True enough.” He turned toward the armchair in the corner. He stuffed the wadded panties in his back pocket and sat. Took another slug from his beer and said, “So were you uh . . . you any good?”

I let the silence hang a little on that one, then told him how I hadn’t been great, never champion or anything, more of a darkhorse contender, the type without notable talent or finesse who nonetheless never gave up. Average ability. Exceptional pluck.

He nodded, liking my frankness.

“Never been pinned,” I said, inflection rising, as if this were a mark of distinction. Adam laughed reflexively, an abrupt discharge.

“Nice,” he said. “Well . . . that counts for something.” He nodded to himself, then added: “Sure it does.”

This was an old joke between Shelley and me. Years prior, we’d been out with friends at a most favored bar and got to talking about wrestling, specifically high school wrestling, about how strange the sport seemed to them. How brutal and intimate and ritual-hazing-like. These kids—just kids—half-naked at the center of a giant mat, mano-a-mano, where the ultimate aim was to force your opponent’s shoulder blades flat to the floor for three solid seconds. Didn’t happen all that often, but when it did, the sight was harsh, absolute: a pathetically straining crimson-faced kid squirming under some other kid’s body—under or next to, depending on the hold—like a suffocating fish or insect getting squished. When I won, it was usually by points, not a pin, but I watched plenty

others go down that way. I never liked to look at them after they'd been pinned. It was shameful. So diminishing.

Never happened to me though, and when I told as much to Shelley and Co., they laughed (much like Adam) and couldn't stop razzing me. Shelley in particular kept mocking me, spreading the ludicrous news. "Have you heard?" she'd say when someone new came to our table. "Phil's never been pinned. Not once!"

Never been pinned. Never been pinned. Back before the Monarch arrived and nights like the former simply evaporated.

Well, Adam was pretty entertained by this and suggested we go out on his porch for a smoke. But as I followed him out to the front porch door, placed in his apartment exactly as was mine—like every other unit in the building, in fact—I noticed again the wadded up panties peeking out from his back pocket. Reminding me, mocking me, my silent pink judge.

Oh hell I wished it hadn't happened. Even wished I was drunk enough not to care. But it had and I did and I knew I ought to tell him.

Adam asked me about it after, but I lied and said no. I hadn't seen Maribel in the hallway, not at all. I hadn't seen her standing before me, stunned, holding the hand of their baffled three-year-old as she listened to the sounds of being cheated on. But now she knew. And she knew I knew. And Adam hadn't the slightest clue anyone knew anything.

I looked over at him then, out on his porch, a week or so after that awful afternoon. He cupped his Winston with a curled hand and lit it in the easy breeze. I decided I'd tell him later. At the show or just after. Give him the dirty news off-site. He

looked too content here, he really did. In his ratty lawn chair in the soft evening air?
Let's forget all that for now, right?

Adam leaned back and took a long look across the street, where ten or eleven preteen-cum-teenagers, mostly Puerto Rican, hung on the first floor stoop of the building that directly mirrored ours. These same kids hung there every summer, and often quite loudly. Par for the course in summers here, though as these kids got older and the gunshots got closer, I really had to wonder if we shouldn't just move.

Adam flicked his remaining smoke over the lip of the porch. He sat up a little, dug a hand down his pocket—deep down, really digging for treasure—then leaned back again in his chair. He held a lighter's flame to a crumpled half-joint. Took a hit and passed it my way.

"Look at them there," he said, pointing with his Winston. "Those *kids*. Christ. They might not even get here."

I turned to him. "Here?"

"You know," he said. "Where we are, tonight. Fondly discussing our glory day careers as we drink and smoke and get old. They might not even make it, sir."

"I wouldn't know."

Adam shook his head as I handed back the joint.

"You ought to."

I nodded. "All I know"—keeping my voice low here—"is that lately they make me uncomfortable."

Adam waved this away.

“Oh, they’re harmless. For the most part they are. Sure, they deal a little dope, maybe crack, in the alley. They flash their signs and pose their poses, but they haven’t taken the full plunge yet. Not completely. What are they—twelve, thirteen? *Maybe* fourteen? The uh . . . what do you call ‘em?”

“The little league gangbangers. It’s Shelley’s term.”

“Well, it’s accurate. For now it is. Little league, thankfully, is not yet pro.”

I nodded, thinking.

“Maybe not,” I said. “But ‘pro’ in this case is far easier to get to. *Much* easier.”

Adam nodded back, took a drag, then a hurried sip. He thought about that one a while. We looked down at the kids across the street.

One of them, a wiry little guy in a Raiders cap, who I hadn’t seen before, was taunting the beefy one in the Bulls jersey, a ringleader of sorts who’d been present on the stoop for years. Then this latter kid, the big one, stepped swiftly from the stoop and grabbed the other, tackling him down with an audible thud. The stoop hooted, they shouted—action had arrived!

“Here we go,” said Adam. “Takedown.”

The big one was riding on top of the Raiders cap, taking brisk little jabs at his too-present ribs. The skinny one hollered out in agony.

“Not fair,” said Adam from his lawn chair on the porch. “No *punching*.”

And right then, seconds later, a cop cruiser—smooth blue and white with inactive siren—rolled by the scene real slow.

That stopped them pretty fast. The big one in the Bulls jersey stood humbly on the sidewalk and spoke with the officer, who stayed in his car. Adam leaned in toward me and whispered discretely: “*Thank God for the Law.*”

I laughed, whispered back: “*Well, I don’t know about thank God.*”

Adam leaned over even closer.

“Don’t give me that elitist hippy *shit*,” he said. “I know you thank whatever lord is yours they drive by on evenings and weekends.”

“Yeah well . . .”

Adam grabbed my wrist and held it tightly. His eyes were indignant.

“Don’t deny it, motherfucker,” he said, holding up my wrist in stiff reprimand.

“That’s dishonest. Do not deny your gratitude for the presence of the *Law.*”

“Oh my god!” I said, suddenly staring at my SportKing digital. “It’s 12:20!”

He dropped my wrist. “12:20?”

“Yeah! We should go.”

Adam looked away and took a sip from his beer.

“Seriously. They went on at midnight or probably right after. I don’t want—”

“I’m not going.”

This stunned me. He sounded so certain.

“You’re not *going*?” He shook his head no. “But Adam, that’s . . . impossible.”

This was crushing on multiple levels. Worst was this cold fact: our car, the Civic, was in the shop. I’d noticed something wrong with the steering alignment when I’d returned from the airport that morning. They’d said it might take a couple days.

“I’m carless, Adam. You forget?”

“Oh right,” he said, and winced. “Shit.”

He looked off for a while in the distance here, really chewing on it, then sighed and dug deep in his other front pocket.

“Here,” he said, dangling a key before me. “Take mine.”

I stared at the battered black plastic, the old school key-holder thing, absent of auto-locks or gadgetry, just an old piece of plastic like an industrial arrowhead, home to the long jagged key to the Dart. I grin-frowned, then looked him in the eye.

“Seriously?”

We sat in the parking lot behind our building, together in Adam’s Dodge Dart, the windows rolled down, as he showed me how to properly apply the club. He gripped at the red rubber casing and stretched the metal bar across the wheel.

“You absorbing this?” I nodded.

That Adam used a club surprised me a bit. It both subverted and confirmed my theory of club use (and/or any manually applied anti-theft device.) That is, that you only see the club on the cars of the poor, on dirtbag used cars or much-loved new ones, likely bought with little (to no) money down. Now Adam’s car was as dirtbag as it gets but Adam himself was not so poor. At least I didn’t think he was. What with his reasonably successful two-store chain of The Copy Boss shops? Made pretty good money—that was my guess. He kept the Dart, clubbed the Dart because he treasured and loved the Dart. No reason other.

He handed me back the keys: “Be careful now,” he said. “Exercise caution and discretion in your travels.” And he dug in his pocket for the remaining roach but couldn’t get the proper leverage. Arching his spine, annoyed, he switched to the pocket in back.

“*Damn* these,” he said, tossing the tattered pink panties on the dash. “There”—his leverage improved—“That’s better.”

The panties had landed on the far side of the dashboard, where I noticed, wedged in the corner beyond them, a set of cds that sincerely surprised me.

“No *way*,” I said, sliding them in toward me. “You listen to these?”

He looked over: “Sure. They’re alright.”

I stared at the covers: Public Enemy and A Tribe Called Quest, not the sort of bands or music I’d guess my neighbor would like. Even know about.

“Adam, these are two of the best hip hop bands *ever*. Absolute giants.”

He grimaced, amused. “I wouldn’t have taken you for a hip hop fan.”

“Me? Are you serious? I can barely believe you *own* these.”

“Oh no no,” he said. “I don’t. Those are hers.”

“Hers?” I asked, puzzled at first, then glanced at the panties on the dash. I nodded. “Aaah . . . I see.”

This was part of the charm, I suppose. She opened up worlds to him—spheres of influence, culture, taste—where Maribel couldn’t possibly compete. And she, this other, was also the reason Adam wasn’t going. This dawned only right then. I’d chalked it up to mere middle-aged lameness, but no—her.

She was also why, after Adam exited the Dart and moved toward the building's back door—taking pinpoint tokes on the last of the roach—he smiled to himself and flipped open his phone. I saw it all through the rearview.

Whatever—let them have their fun. I forgot “all that” pretty fast. Just sat out back in the soft summer air, the breeze easing in and out between the windows. I turned on the Dart's internal combustion—there you go—then pawed around for a treasured cd. I picked up *Midnight Marauders* (that'd do) and slid it in the slot. I bobbed my head, instantly taken, and kept the Dart in park.

Well I was damn near elated at that point. And it wasn't only the chemicals I'd ingested. They were part of it, obviously, but there were other factors too. The independence, for one. The recklessness, frivolousness, the *summer* of it all. I was set free, on fire, the untethered bachelor, just kicking out some tunes in an idling parked car! No wife, no child, no time expected home. Nary a care in the world!

I sat for a while in the lot like that, skipping past the random song or two, landing eventually on “Sucka Nigga,” which I remembered as a somewhat guilty favorite. It always made me queasy back in the day: an active dance floor of mostly white college kids singing along as if they'd earned the word: *Sucka Nigga / Nigga Nigga*. But there, that night, I did not give a damn. I bobbed my head joyfully and sang out loud.

Sucka Nigga . . . Nigga Nigga

I mischievous grinned to myself. Who cared if I missed that show? I'd do what I wanted *when* I wanted.

As if to answer this thought, its pride and its smugness, the guy in the hoodie appeared right then. That's when I sensed him at any rate. Who knew how long he'd been standing there?

"Hey," he said, with a deadpan chuckle, then looked around the lot to see if anyone was near. He looked back to me. "Hey nigga nigga."

I nearly shot through the roof at the sight of him, so shocking was the sudden figure. From nowhere: this light-skinned latino, pallid and lean, with a sharp hungry cast to the cut of his features. He was standing by my window in the dark. My God. Must have seen me there as he passed in the alley and decided to pay us a visit. With that wiry tense body next to the car? His hood inexplicably up in the heat? He was staring at me, only feet from me, really, with eyes like dull blunt blades.

I turned off the music. "Hey! . . . What's up?"

"We're going for a ride is what's up." He canted his gaze to the pocket of his hoodie. He had it like they did it in the movies, or rather, old movies—didn't see it much anymore—that is, a perpetrator with an assumed gun, possibly a fake or decoy, poking out from under their clothes. No mystery here though. He let me see it soon enough. He wedged himself up against the corner of the window and brought her out in the open air: a pug little pistol, silver-plated, with that fearsome black mouth that contained your death. He was poking it in, just slightly, through the window.

"You be a good nigga," he said in a taut whisper. *"Let's make this easy."*

I took a faint little dump in my pants right there. Just the tiniest escape of waste matter. My first, my only, communion with gunpoint. I'd never had the privilege to look one in the mouth.

Before I could think (should have honked the horn!), the guy was in the seat next to mine. He said “let’s take that ride.” I asked where and he told me don’t worry. Just go. And my first thought was yes sir. Whatever you say sir. Don’t shoot me. Just please don’t kill me. My next thought, however, after turning east down the alley (as instructed) was this: my friend here wasn’t very prepared. What—no ski mask? No disguise of any kind? I could easily pick him out of a line-up. His ash-gray hoodie hid nothing.

We drove down the alley in darkest silence, as if our destination were the waiting grave. I glanced over at him a couple times, taking snapshots for the memory’s archives: that dome of a skull, perhaps shaved (couldn’t tell with the hood up), his distinctly angular desperation, the pale lips and seen-too-much eyes. Some flavor of junky, I was guessing. Who knew? I could pick him out from a line-up though—easy. Even next to a look-alike.

I had the fleeting thought as we drove through the silence that this was the same guy from years before, the suspected purse-snatcher, who Shelley, along with a few other witnesses, had picked out of a line-up I considered a sham. That summer, we’d seen this guy steal someone’s purse at the outdoor patio of bar. That the suspect in the lineup was the same we’d witnessed at the bar became then abundantly clear. The cops didn’t even try. In his early twenties with a shaved head—light-skinned, dagger thin, likely Puerto Rican—he stuck out like a fluorescent siren. Next to him stood three dumpy-looking others in their late thirties, early forties, all dark skinned with full heads of blackest hair. All Mexican-seeming, a good deal older, thirty-to-forty pounds heavier! The line-up, I’d

thought, was insulting. I mean, while you're at it, why not a *black woman*? That'd fit too. Just fine!

Yet standing behind the one-way glass, I knew it was the guy. Recognized him right off. Still, I would not give him up. Just on principle. I told the cops I couldn't tell. Later, Shelley said my choice was irresponsible. *You contrarian asshole* I believe were the words.

Now here, years later, in Adam's Dodge Dart, I took furtive glances to my right, wondering if it might be him. Upgrading operations? Beyond the purse?

"I'm still here," he said, sensing my eyes. "Don't worry about me. You drive."

He'd just then chosen our destination: that one ATM at the bank on Western. And I'd grown more relaxed—though that's not the right word—with the knowledge of where we were heading. He wanted my money. No problem. My pleasure! (Just don't shoot me. Just please don't end me.)

We landed in the parking lot of the bank, innocently enough, as anyone might, and I moved toward the cash machine, keeping it natural. He stood in the corner of the ATM lobby space, up against the glass, where anyone could see—including, I was hoping, the camera. He kept it secured old movie robber style, underneath the ash gray cloth of his pocket.

I took out five hundred, placed the bills in my wallet. Thank God for the daily limit on withdrawals! He wasn't all that satisfied but seemed to understand. As a joke, I even asked him—sort of bravely, I thought—if he "needed a receipt." Then his eyes got mean.

"I will fuck you up if you push me," he said. I decided not to speak again.

We were back in the car when I forked it over and made my little misguided joke. The guy counted out the bills, then held a hand out for my wallet.

“That too,” he said.

He hadn’t taken much, considering. When I got home, I would immediately cancel my cards. God knew I needed a new wallet anyway. Plus it didn’t look like he intended to kill me, and for that, he had my eternal gratitude. Then, much against expectation, he said:

“Give me the keys.”

“The keys?” I was stunned. I’d thought the money and credit cards had more than sufficed.

“Give me the fucking *keys!*”

I nodded nervously, forked them over, and watched as he opened his door. He got out to circle the Dart toward the driver’s side. I noticed the club in the corner of my eye. The red rubber casing over stainless steel sitting on the seat in back. I reached over, grabbed it, held it tightly across my waist. Might just have to surprise him.

To my left, the door opened.

“Hey!” he said, stepping back quick. “Put that shit *down*. Now!”

“Okay okay okay okay.” I slipped out, tumbled out, sort of hunched from the seat, still clutching the useless club. He shoved me to the asphalt and jumped in the Dart. As a final insult, the rumpled pink panties came hurling from the window, landing on the pavement before me.

He pulled out, then peeled out, with a getaway screech, also cliché- seeming (more footage from the movies.) I sat there in the parking lot with the club in my fists and watched the Dart zoom south. I stared at my pink little partners.

We couldn't seem to part, these panties and I. We were trailing each other like abandoned strays.

Hours later, I stood before Adam's back door, which he'd left a little open. Just a sliver. I gently pushed at the painted wood.

"Adam?" But nothing.

He hadn't picked up once when I'd called from the station, and I noted here his cell phone, likely asleep on the kitchen table, next to a gaggle of empty cans. I picked it up and confirmed what I knew. It was off. Had been for hours. I turned the phone on and the text hit the screen. Thirteen messages, likely all from me. None of which—let's be frank here—had delivered the actual meat of the news.

"Adam. Phil here. Call me when you get this." [beep]

"Adam. I'm at the police station on Wood. Call my cell!" [beep]

"Adam! Call this number!" [beep] And on and on.

I didn't know the number for his land line. We only knew each other's cells. We were neighbors, after all. Mere feet from a knock on the door.

I walked gingerly through his kitchen, then the living room. I looked up at the old school ductwork of his vent (those sounds!) Strewn on the floor next to the sofa was a rumpled pair of knit black boxers. Next to these: a lime green bra and lime green panties—this latter pair in slightly better shape than the tattered pinks in my back pocket.

So the sofa was where it started. Where they likely *always* started, the get-together place by mutual reflex.

I stepped quietly through the sort of “second” living room, before the porch (just like in our place), noting the empty child’s bed in the corner with the steel safety guardrail thing. The air conditioner in the window was chugging hard, clearly overworked. I curled my head around the doorjamb of the bedroom and saw them there, dead asleep on the King size. Soft streetlight streamed through the blinds, casting stark white stripes across their bodies.

Well she was terribly beautiful. I’ll cop to noticing as much. Soft, vulnerable, so very youthful. I’ll confess I felt a small pang of basic lust.

I stuck my head a little further in the room. I took in a breath.

“*Adam?*” I whispered. I gripped at the smooth walnut doorjamb. Nothing stirred. I whispered more intensely. “*Adam?*”

So serene, so at peace, lying there together. I just knew I didn’t have it in me. I couldn’t shake them or touch or disturb them. Couldn’t speak out loud with actual volume. I was paralyzed at the doorjamb.

“*Adam?*” I whispered again, though softer, even softer than the first. “*Hey*”—a futile, almost soundless sound—“*Hey, you guys.*”

But no one moved. I tried to speak again but my throat was dry.

I stood back a few feet from the mattress and watched them there, serenely breathing. I stood there not speaking a good long while, failing to catch their attention.

(5)

The Side Effects of Syndrome X

It's hard to believe in retrospect, but I had no idea it was him. Something had changed, some small reduction—vitality, life force, just the slightest loss—as if a small stream of air had been let from the balloon. He'd put on weight too—good twenty, thirty pounds—and stopped wearing those signature glasses, the artsy-seeming Clark Kentish kind that on his face seemed a bit intimidating. I believe it was the glasses, or rather, their absence, that camouflaged him most. Like a Clark Kent the other way around, more undercover (and far less powerful) without the civilian disguise.

I was staring at the x-ray of the bullet in his spine when he rolled his chair up to Shelley's office. I'd seen many like it in the ECHELON years: black blobs in shock ivory vertebrae you wish you could whiteout or airbrush away. But the invasion's permanent nearly every time, and this guy's, clearly, was lodged in the money spot. An MRI risk, code red. No way he'd be allowed in. I'm a rank amateur but I knew that much. One glance from the doctor and he'd be dismissed.

He was silent at first—expressionless, gaze downcast, curled-up fingers wrapped in biker gloves, crookedly pressing pen to clipboard. He checked both Latino and African American. Age 23. High school diploma. Wants, like nearly every ECHELON Subject, to one day go to college.

And I was warming up to tell him he'd likely be denied, that his bullet had landed in a no-MRI zone. But I glanced at the clipboard and saw the notes from his interview, in the familiar black box under Cause of Injury, where it read: *Shot in combat*. Next to this in the margins, in Shelley's loopy scrawl: *Any guesses, Phil?*

It was not unlike Shelley to leave a note on the paperwork, cute little forewarnings like *You'll love this guy* or *This one's trouble!* but never *Any guesses, Phil?* That was new. It had a kind of flirtatious cruelty I wasn't sure I approved of.

"So," I dared, for we'd passed all formalities and it looked like he might half-trust me. "This was your first tour of duty or . . .?"

"First," he said. "First and last." He let that hang a sec, then said: "I'm officially underused."

"Oh that's not true I'm sure."

"One tour and out, this is what you get." He tapped at his wheelchair. "But fuck it. I was lucky."

"Lucky?" I sat at Shelley's desk, swiveled in her seat slightly toward him. I looked him in the eye (or tried to.)

"You mean because . . . cause you didn't—?"

"Die. Yes."

He nodded and neared a smile. I nodded back, then said, sort of surprising myself, “I suppose not dying is always best.”

He chuckled. “Against the other one, it stacks pretty high.”

I chuckled back. “Nice. Yes it does.”

He rapped the knuckles of a biker-gloved hand on the armrest of his wheelchair.

“Knock on wood,” he said. We both saw where he’d knocked, which contained no wood. He shrugged. “Or fuck it. Knock on aluminum. Knock on whatever’s near.”

“Agreed.”

“You know why we do that, right?”

“No actually,” I said, curious. “Why *do* we do that?”

He wheeled up an inch or so and leaned over with a biker-gloved fist; he knocked on the heavy oak desk.

“We’re waking up God,” he said. “Or the saints or whatever. Whoever it is that’s watching over you. Because whoever’s watching over you . . .”—he waited—“obviously hasn’t been paying *attention*!”

He knocked at the desk.

“Like . . . Hey! Wake *up*!” He knocked again. “Wake *the fuck up*!”

I shook my head and grinned. “Where’d you get that one?”

He shrugged. “Right here. That’s mine.”

“Nice.”

I leaned back in Shelley’s chair, nodding my approval.

At this point, I still had no idea who he was, or rather, who he’d once been to me. What I saw instead was a worthy diversion, someone who could pull me from my sick

preoccupation, from the toxic pudding of cynical suspicion that had engulfed me for nearly a week. Ever since I'd been carjacked in the parking lot, I'd been sulking around, listless and paranoid, certain I'd been marked by forces abroad as a low rent Job they were just getting started with.

But clearly this kid had it far far worse and seemed to be taking the hit chin-up. I liked his style and hoped some might rub off, like a vapor or fume of courageous perspective, a contact high of hope-for-the-best.

I looked up then from the clipboard and saw, held before me like a summons being served, the bright orange informational tract from his ECHELON Study package.

“What’s this?”

“Oh. That’s just a form explaining the study. What we’re looking for in subjects. What’s allowed, what not.”

“No no. Right here,” he said, pointing. “What’s . . . ‘Syndrome X’?”

I paused a moment, pawing through the backshelves and closets of memory. Syndrome X. Shelley had described this in detail some time ago. What was it now? I plunged on.

“Syndrome X is uh . . . it’s when your metabolic rate and your insulin—or no no maybe it’s your . . . insulin resistance, yes, I think insulin *resistance*—it’s when that’s out of sync with, out of profound *balance* with . . . something else that’s . . . *vital*.”

He lowered his chin. “Come again with that.”

I lightly tossed his x-ray on the desk, caving perhaps too soon.

“To be frank, I don’t understand it myself. I uh . . . I don’t really work here.”

“You don’t work here?”

“I’m covering for my wife. It’s her study, not mine.”

“Wait. You’re not *employed* here?”

I felt the sheepishness rise in my veins. I nodded tiny nods.

“I’m afraid not.” He looked me in the eye, both indignant and amused. I held my own for a moment there, then looked away to the hallway for help.

“Really sorry. Let me find someone who can explain this.”

“Forget that,” he said. “Whatever. I know how it goes. Here . . . look.”

He reached for the knapsack strapped across his chair, unzipped it and searched inside. He took out a cd, slid the little booklet from beneath the plastic cover, and opened it up to the page in question. He handed it toward me.

“That’s ‘Syndrome X,’” he said. “To me it is. That’s how *I* know it. How *many* know it, actually. Insulin resistance ain’t a part of it.” Stone serious, he held the booklet toward me. “Go on,” he said. “Read. Right there.”

His fingernail hovered under the title. **Syndrome X**. Track 5 in starkest bold.

I took the little booklet and started to read. And I got through half a verse or so, liking it, sort of, though also just slightly repelled. It was a touch bombastic for my tastes but still caught me, I’ll confess, in a personal way. And I was just about to ask him who the artist might be, where this curse had come from, when he said:

“Alright now . . . out loud.”

“You want me . . .? Is that necessary?”

“Sounds better that way.”

I didn’t have to yet thought I should. Perhaps to compensate for my recent incompetence.

“Okay then,” I said. “Out loud.”

I looked over his shoulder for passersby in the hall—worried this might seem weird to the staff—then cleared my throat and started in the middle.

Solemnly, I read aloud:

“I can’t be stopped and I won’t be stifled

Even crossing the hairs of the sniper’s rifle

I been hunted, I been blunted, I been ass-cocked and cunted

But my mind is steady and my soul’s never stunted”

I looked up at him. He nodded: *go on*. Again, I cleared my throat.

“Name it for the nurses, Give it clinical effect

Call it crazy, say it’s paranoid, hang it as a hex

But I know what I feel—that shit’s hot on my neck

Cross the hairs! I got the Syndrome X!”

I closed the booklet and set it on the desk, unnerved in a whole new way. A vision had appeared to me, as if summoned by the ceremony: the mouth of a gun peeking out from the hoodie of the mugger who’d chosen me the week before. That pug little pistol with the silent mouth that spoke to me more than whoever held the trigger. Only a second—just a flash of the guy—but enough to set me back pretty good. I rubbed at my mouth and bobbed my brow.

“That’s a strange one,” I said. “Who’s that?”

“Mutilation.”

“Mutilation”—I searched—“Hunh. Never heard of him.”

“Not many have.” He waited. “That speaks to you?”

I nodded, half-hedging. “I suppose it does.”

“Speaks to me,” he said.

“Yeah, well . . . I’d guess it would.”

“Okay but”—he held up a curled-in finger—“it’s not only because I got shot.

This is deeper, okay? Bigger and weirder. When Mutilation says ‘Cross the Hairs’?” He picked up the clipboard and pen, flipped over his MRI release form and drew a stark black X across the white of the paper. He held it up to me: **X** .

“That’s the sniper’s scope, alright? The rifles of the snipers who are all around us. The ones we can’t see. Including, though obviously not only, the rifles from *above*.” He looked up a second, then canted his gaze back to me. “That,” he said, mostly deadpan, the eyes sort of smiling, “that you must give your respect.”

I nodded again. “Heaven keeps the powder dry, huh?”

“Real dry.”

At first, this tickled me. The image was stark. Militant angels. Sociopathic angels. Angels aiming rifles from the cornertops of buildings, the insides of clouds, ready to take you out if necessary. If you crossed their code or just clearly deserved it. And at first, this lightened my heart. You get your own personal book depository in the sky! Insurgent angels. Lee Harvey angels. Trained commandos with wings and halos, with overdeveloped senses of vengeance, their heavenly scopes set hot on your neck.

I nodded, agreeing, chuckling along, when the force of the contradiction dawned.

“Wait,” I said, rigid now. “I thought God wasn’t paying attention.”

“He’s not. Never has been,” he said, shrugging. “God or the saints. Whoever.”

“But it would *then* follow,” I said, “that no one’s paying attention . . . including what you’ve just described. These uh angels with their rifles.”

“Oh I didn’t say they were angels. Did I say that?”

“You said heaven. Didn’t someone say heaven?”

He lowered his chin, perhaps disappointed.

“You think it’s only angels up there?”

The fluorescent lighting hummed above us. My cell phone vibrated in my pocket. I looked: it was Shelley, calling from her sister’s in Montreal. I stood at my chair.

“Just give me a moment,” I said, and left for the hallway. I flipped open the phone. “Hey there.”

“Hello Philip,” she said. “Where are you? You at the office?”

“I am. I’m with a subject, in fact. Well, I doubt he’ll be a subject. His bullet’s stuck where it matters. I wouldn’t even need a doctor to confirm it. But . . . he’s a *trip*, Shelley. You met him. You know. Remember your note? *Any guesses—*”

“Trip or no trip, tell him no. We can’t dither around with lawsuits-to-be. Don’t even take the measures. And sorry to be curt, but listen. I’m on the run here so . . . did you pay the credit card?”

“Was I supposed to?”

“Please do. I’m fairly certain my checkbook’s in my desk somewhere. I’m praying it is. If you find it, could you call in a check by phone?”

“It’s on the desk, actually. I think I saw it when I came in.”

“Good, great. Thank God.”

“But listen, Shelley . . .”

“Hold on.”

The Monarch was crying now, way up there in Canada, a fierce wailing from across the border, thankfully hundreds of miles away. I looked back at Shelley’s office, her open door.

“Shelley—you have to tell me.” I paced further down the hall, away from the door. “What’s up with this ‘any guesses, Phil?’”

“Excuse me?”

“*Any guesses, Phil?* Your note. That’s the guy I’m with now.”

“I can’t hear you, honey. He’s inconsolable. Let’s talk later.”

“Okay but—wait! Shelley!” I said, nearly shouting. “Remind me: what’s . . . *Syndrome X?*”

“Syndrome X?!” she said, nearly shouting back. “You know that. Come *on*. Are you h—” A muted click and shutter sound told me we’d lost the connection.

In the quiet hallway, I stared at the cellphone, at the dead black oval eye; I looked up and over my shoulder, toward heaven, for signs of my guardian sniper. (You there?) Only the harsh fluorescent lighting, beaming back its clinical cheer.

I meant to ask the guy more about this system—its statutes and laws and allowances—but when I returned to the office, he was gone. I stared at the space where his wheelchair had been. I looked in the hallway and both bathrooms, then asked the receptionist, who pointed toward the elevators. “Just now gone,” she said.

My first worry was I'd inadvertently scheduled him for an MRI, which would be unethical of me, if not murderous. My second concern, however, after returning to the office, involved Shelley's checkbook, which was not where I'd noticed it (far corner of the desk, next to the tower of post-its.)

I reached for the clipboard and looked for his name, which I hadn't caught. There: *Dominick. Dominick Lafuse*. My eyes slid down to his emergency contact—I believe I was drawn to the word *emergency*—and that's the moment all guesses were off. When I knew. Shelley, *goddamn* you.

I stopped in the hallway and stared at the clipboard, at the address that was almost ours—same street, same numbers—differing only in the ending digit, an even digit (ours odd), meaning this kid's emergency contact lived directly across from us, directly in *sight* of us. My mind went to ticker tape, alarmed recognition recurring in a loop, like: *holy shit, it's him*. The dead kid!

I grabbed my stuff from the office and dashed for the elevator.

This was the dead kid, the same who'd lived across from me before fighting, then dying, in the war. Holy shit!

I hurriedly race-walked down the hall.

We'd had a relationship, he and I, though it only ran one way. Years before, in fact, I used to spy on him. Though "spying"'s not right. I never hid. This was more like witnessing. Mere spectating. Nothing too creepy but the windows were generous. I hardly had a choice at first.

I'd be out on our 2nd floor porch in the evening air, relaxing or reading, having a beer, and look across the street and see him there, inside the apartment that mirrored ours, where the gauzy curtains would billow and curl and unveil to me glimpses of a half-lit life.

Didn't see much but I saw enough. Plenty. More than I cared for. And then the kid was gone forever. I penciled in the motive as college tuition but I really had no clue. Only knew he enlisted, then left town. And months later, as wars will do, the guy got done completely. Dusted, blown up, crashed, burned. That's what I thought—sincerely believed—for the longest time. All summer.

Holy shit was all I could say. Holy shit, it's him.

I stood at the elevator, tapping a foot. What was his name now? Oh yes—*Dominick*, which struck me as strange. I'd thought of him as more of a *Luis* or *Roberto* or even, say, a *Barry*. I wasn't sure *Dominick* fit.

He used to wear smart black Clark Kent glasses, which sometimes slid to the bridge of his nose at a stylish remove from their purpose. His presence was a settled-in cool, relaxed and attentive; whip-smart and at the ready. My knowledge of him felt real and full but of course this was all illusion, an aggregate of uninformed notes from afar. Added up, it seemed like knowing him (though the dead kid never knew me back).

I used to watch him, sometimes in the evenings, often late at night, at times in his apartment, sometimes out, while he hung on the stoop with the little league gangbangers, watching over them, keeping tabs. Don't think he gangbanged but it was hard to tell.

They'd have late night pow wows on occasion over there, in the dead kid's room, discussing heatedly what I couldn't hear. Shelley had a name for this sick curiosity: "underworld slumming once removed." She claimed I *wanted* to see something "criminal," that I desired a glimpse of a dark secret world I could talk about later as if I were there. Maybe she was right, but I knew what I saw (or what I thought I saw.) And once I thought I saw him roll a gun in his hands, someone else's, examining it closely, seeming to admire it.

But that could be wishful thinking too.

I stood at the elevator, tapping a foot: the sole of my Van on the sound-absorbent carpet, tapping 1-2 rhythm to the tickertape phrase. *Ho-ly shit, it's-him. Ho-ly shit, it's-him.* Tapping, waiting, hoping, doubting. Come on, elevator. Come *on*.

The dead kid had girlfriends too, a couple, but only one who mattered, the one who came over when his mother was out (or fast asleep.) She was the one who sent him, I think. Really *sent* him, like Shelley does for me. Sweet-seeming, fresh-faced, lively, lovely, but tough and keen-eyed when she needed to be. Her complexion, coffee with cream; her hair an immaculate inky black, like an illustrator drew it on.

I saw them slow dance once, half naked before the windows of his room at 2, 3 a.m. on a warm, wistful night in June. Sounds corny, maybe, but he was the graceful one, the one who could spin and softly twirl her, whose perfection of line and limb was the prize.

Alone in his room, he read magazines and books; he listened to tunes on his laptop. But one time he sat at the desk in his room, before the bright red funnel lamp that colluded so well with my watching, and held his skull in the meat of his palms, and wept and wept and wept. I had no idea why, no, yet felt it perhaps in its purest way, just the tableau of it, the raw picture played in the gesture alone.

The elevator opened. I was in, going down.

And what would I say if I did catch up with him? I couldn't tell him everything. Or really, nearly *anything*. I mean, for months, I'd thought he was dead. Assumed he'd been ash for a *while*. How could I tell him that? Like—hey! Sorry to intrude but I thought you should know: I used to spy on your life from my 2nd floor porch and then I thought you'd been killed! I would watch you like a creep, a full-fledged voyeur, up until I thought you'd been body-bagged! How about that? Is that not *wild*?

Okay: the checkbook. Stick with that. Or no—the MRI business. And why not just call him? No. I wanted to see him, to confirm this guess, to finally, gratefully, get *plugged in*.

The doors opened at the first floor, and I shot for the building's front door. Out in front: a multitude of wheelchairs. Or not “multitude,” no—more like a *gaggle*. All similar-seeming with similar wheelchairs, the high-end kind with a million little levers. Every other hand biker gloved, every other ear set to cellphone. My eyes flitted, floated, seeking him—from the cluster of wheelchairs to the honking traffic to the tight-walking passersby (med students, lunch-breakers), then finally to the backend of a city bus, that

giant lumbering slug. It was beeping loudly—*beep beep beep beep*—a grave calibration I thought I recognized. I moved toward it.

beep beep beep beep

I crossed to the opposite corner and watched. There he was, my Dominick, the dead kid, speaking intensely into his cellphone. He rose in increments on the wheelchair platform, inch by inch going out of view.

The bus pulled off and then he was gone. Once again, he evaporated.

There's one last part that seems to fit though Dominick was not so involved. Not present in body, at any rate. And not for lack of my trying to find him. I did, that evening. Try to locate him. In retrospect, I can't quite believe I went. I suppose I wasn't fully in control. I saw this, after all, as resurrection, and my life at that point craved the charge. Plus, as you know, I'd been mugged. This somehow felt like a chance at redemption. A momentary pass.

That afternoon, when I got home, I found Shelley's checkbook on the kitchen table—*that's* where I'd seen it, on the corner *here* (next to a tower of post-its). That much was solved, a big relief, actually. And I ignored Shelley's voicemail to "call her whenever" and went seeking Syndrome X on my own. It was waiting for me, right there in the living room, a familiar black X across the book's cover, this lucid gem on Shelley's top shelf, entitled of course *Syndrome X*. (More specifically, *Overcoming the Silent Killer that Can Give You a Heart Attack*.) I read it closely and tried to understand.

I hadn't been so far off the mark. It *was* about insulin resistance. And Shelley's explanation came back to me slowly. Clearly she'd cribbed from these guys. Fox and

Reaven laid the case out simply: after food's broken down, your glucose (blood sugar) needs to be "shepherded" to the proper cells, which is the job of insulin (a/k/a the body's "sugar cop.") People with Syndrome X, however, *resist* their own insulin, fight *off* this protection, forcing the body to make more of it than necessary. Eventually, the blood sugar gets to its proper home but only after all these extra "shepherds" or "cops" have torn up your arteries trying.

I took notes, made charts, attempted to paraphrase. With Syndrome X, the body's system of protection, its keepers of peace, its government, sent out one too many cops, an excess of peacekeepers, who got in the way by trying to save you. Thus, Syndrome X = an aversion to your own inner cop. In essence you *rebelled against your body's own government*, which then in turn worked toward killing you by making up the difference with a surge of troops.

But this left me deeply unsatisfied. I put aside Drs. Fox and Reaven and googled the website of Mutilation, under-recognized recording artist, where "Syndrome X" was a free song sample. Again, a bit much but I saw the appeal. In style as much as content. A kind of aggressive rap-singing crossed with a militant growl.

I can't be stopped and I won't be stifled

Later, that's how I went hunting for him, that martial roar running through my mind.

The primary address of Dominick Lafuse was a good ten, twelve blocks southwest of us. Apparently, after serving abroad, he'd decided to live on his own. I'd

called him multiple times by then, but an automated voice with a British accent told me the number was “unreachable.”

I even tried his emergency contact and watched through the blinds across the street, to the apartment directly mirroring ours, where he’d once lived and I’d often watched him. But when his mother came to the phone, which was sitting on the ledge of her porch, I hung up. She stood there, staring at the receiver, then looked up, it seemed, at *me*. I stepped back from the window, again the creep.

You could be watched as much as watching. That’s the part I tend to forget.

That evening, I went jogging. Or rather, pretended to. This was my ruse. I’d jog a couple blocks, stop, walk. Jog a few, stop, walk. It was brutal. And when I got there—a pretty rough hood, to be sure, with abandoned buildings and poverty in the air—I unfolded his personal info form and looked for the address, which I knew was near. I ran, huffing, nearly ruined, to the T-square dead end where the numbers on his street simply stopped. Just a trashed-out field with a charred abandoned building fifty yards off from where his address should be. The numbers just *stopped*. It was crushing.

I walk-jogged around those streets a bit, seeking signs of his wheelchair, his signature biker gloves, his depleted yet steady cheer, but nothing. Don’t ask me what I meant to do if I found him. Feign surprise, I suppose. *Dominick? That you? What coincidence I should chance on you while out on my evening trot!*

But nothing.

Exhausted, no more jogging in me—why would anyone *choose* such punishment?—I walked down the long street that led to the thoroughfare where I hoped I could gratefully catch a bus.

Two figures walked toward me then, stepping slow through the gathering dusk. Young guys, latinos, just rolling along. As we passed, one of them caught my eye.

It chilled me to the bone, this eye of his. I thought I might know it. The eye, the face, the wiry tense body; and wearing, it seemed, the same hoodie as last week, ash gray and unseasonable for August, the hood for some reason up. I couldn't be certain. A hundred kids around here look like that. Still, that tickertape raced through my mind. Same phrase, new subject: *holy shit, it's him*.

Or maybe more like: *Is that him?*

I picked up the pace, looked over my shoulder, only to find him glancing over *his* shoulder. Our eyes locked half a second. Alleged mugger to the clearly mugged: *is that you?* Seriously?

I didn't hesitate much or choose to play hero or spend time fact-checking if it was him. I glanced back again, as did he the moment after, sensing perhaps the heat of my eyes. We moved opposite directions at a newly slow clip with thirty or so feet between us. Then I looked one last time, as did he, but this time the hoodie kid stopped. Looked like he might come after.

I reached over to a withered tree and knocked a few times—*Wake up! Wake the fuck up!* Then ran—no, sprinted—at a vigorous clip for the thoroughfare I hoped would bus me home.

(6)

Five Hundred Sirens

That night the moon was the thing, maybe even more than the sirens. It was laughing. That's what I saw anyway. The same basic premise of the man in the moon, only here he looked like he was cracking up. A vague effect—at least at first—that leapt out at you like a corny cartoon the moment you realized it was hiding there.

But Adam didn't notice. Not until later. And Adam was the kind of guy you'd expect to notice, who'd want to be known for noticing, who'd use the occasion as a metaphor to condemn those less aware. Like, missing or avoiding the unavoidable moon as a glaring sign of denial, close cousin to the Elephant in the Room, only here the room was half the planet and the elephant was hanging in the sky. Laughing at us—and really pretty hard.

I stood at the window behind our back door, hoping my neighbor would come out for a smoke. I badly needed confirmation someone else saw this too.

Minutes later—which had been happening a lot around then, thoughts of Adam summoning Adam, as if mere thinking could function as a pager—he emerged from the

back door to his place and stepped toward his own back window. He gave a silent nod—up, tense and rabbity, hardly looking my way. In weathered Sox cap and merlot-colored robe—a furry monstrosity he called his “third skin” (no explanation as to the second)—he cupped a Winston and lit it. He looked up and cocked his chin to the side, but must have missed it entirely, for he looked down just as soon to the parking lot and asked me, blandly enough: “Shelley and the baby make it back okay?”

I waited a moment, surprised he hadn’t seen, then nodded and pointed to my door: “Dead asleep at the moment. Both of them.”

“Beautiful.”

“Maribel asleep?” I asked, returning the favor. “Her and the boy?”

He turned slowly to stare at his door. He took a long drag, then exhaled.

“Dead and buried,” he said, a bit woodenly, depleted-seeming, then caught my eye and sort of came to. “Just like yours. Precisely as yours.” The slightest grin rose in his gaze, or began to. “Look at this,” he said. “Look at us. All our attachments off in la la land. You and me all over again.”

“Two peas in a pod?”

“Two peas who want *out* of the pod.”

“Yeah, well . . . I’m not so sure that’s true.”

“No?” He stared at me a second, then faintly pshawed and turned to look through his window. “Oh you know it’s true.”

With all attachments back from abroad—his from Mexico days before, mine from Ontario only that evening—we were husbands and fathers yet again, a bit stunned by the

bluntness of that fact, as if caught in the headlights of a grave responsibility we'd forgotten could run us over. A week off! Now it was done.

I looked up at the moon (still laughing).

"Look at that thing," said Adam. "It's such a . . . *bully*."

"A bully?" I said. "You see it that way?"

"Absolutely. Don't you?"

I turned to see the confusion: I'd looked up where he'd looked down. My gaze gone to the laughing sky, his down to the sober asphalt, to the sleek black rental supplied by his insurance people, a potent new model of high-end SUV known as the Chrysler Mercenary.

"Let's take out the gift,"—he turned to me here—"Let's get out there in the big black *boat*. I need it, sir. I require it. I'd bet my deductible you do too."

"Aw man . . . I can't tonight."

"Come now"—you could see he'd had a few drinks, probably some pot—"Do your part for the war on terror."

I snorted. "I've done plenty already."

"Hardly!"

"Adam. Please." I hunched in disbelief, jerked a thumb at my door. "They *just* got back."

"Mine didn't?"

Big difference, of course. His had returned days before; mine, only hours ago. Yet still you could see nothing would stop him. That ornery sparkle had lit in his eye, the contrary damn-it-all air. And I liked this sometimes. I'll cop to that. I had real

appreciation for the push in him. Other times—and this was one of them—I considered it a childish imposition.

“I didn’t want to bring this up, or use such brutal language, but really now”—he nodded, egging me on—“don’t you kind of owe me?”

I looked down at the rickety floor. It buckled here, caved there, vague commercials of future collapse.

“Am I wrong?”

For the most part, he’d been very generous about it. It hadn’t entirely been my fault and Adam had acknowledged as much. For borrowing your neighbor’s cherished Dodge Dart is not a crime—not at all. But letting the engine idle in a dark unsecured lot as you sing along to the raucous stereo? Practically *advertising* you’re easy pickings to any passing thug who’d hoped to steal a car? I’d let my guard down. Exposed myself. I got cherry picked, plucked and pitted, when I might have had a fine night out. Instead: a gun to my head, and then the Dart was gone.

When he’d heard the news, Adam wasn’t angry—or even mean. I’d expected a raging explosion; instead, a meditative pat on the back. It’s alright, buddy. Happens to the best of us. You’re an oblivious dumbass but that can happen. Who knows? Maybe the cops’ll find it.

Didn’t once raise his voice. The downside, of course, was I owed him one.

I nodded along, agreeing. “Adam, I just . . . can’t.”

“*Nonsense*. Of course you can!”

His grin was up and running now: full effect.

“Damn you.” And he pointed a finger. “Philip Palliard. Do your *part*.”

Again, he meant for the “war on terror,” but several leagues beneath the standard understanding. Which terror? He meant to ask. Which war? Is this anything new or uniquely true?

An abrupt crashing came from my kitchen. A heavy thud and clatter sound. Startled, we stared at each other. I turned my knob and hurried inside, closing the door behind me.

When I flipped on the light, I found there, on the swirled mosaic linoleum floor, a mess of curved white plastic and shiny sharp metal implements. Clear plastic tube things. Screws, lids. As if the ceiling had rained symbolic rubbish, leaving us the diorama of a landfill. I remembered. (Oh. Right.) The ice cream maker from on top of the fridge. A mouse must have knocked it over.

I listened to the air in there. Nothing stirred. So the mouse had saved me. (I laughed at that.) The mouse had saved me from the war on terror. I looked down at the mess it made.

We had four, actually. Four fucking ice cream makers—all gifts: wedding, birthday, one probably Christmas. And I was thinking (a shout out to my neighbor), how about that for the war on terror? The weapons of excess and frivolous comfort, of a world that showers ice cream makers on people who do not make ice cream.

I wasted no time and stepped over the landfill, moving through the chaos of the bright mustard kitchen, then the darkened living room, its lonely air, and finally to the sort of “second” living room, where I stopped for a visit to the crib.

The boy was out cold on his back, a breezy lime blanket spread across his body. I gently touched him: his downy head, the unguarded face, that rare flesh, smoother than

smooth. I hunched down and watched for his breathing. You and me, I was thinking. Like it or not, you and me. Tomorrow it's back to Daddyland.

His little chest rose, then dipped.

I patted softly at his belly and stood again, then moved to the doorway of our bedroom. There was Shelley, splayed lengthwise across the bed, belly-down, a still-socked toe, nursery red, hanging off the bed like a slain fish. Half blanket, half alabaster body, fully dead asleep. (Just buried.) Snoring pretty hard too.

Adam says Maribel can snore hard as well. A sound (we agree) that was downright profound back when they were pregnant. Adam used to say that's how we'd get Bin Laden (long before they got him): put mikes on our spouses snoring-with-child in hidden beds next to Tora Bora. That'd root the guy out of his cave.

I was grinning there in the dark bedroom doorway, thinking this, seeing it—America's long most wanted smoked from his hole by the uvulas and adenoids of non-native spouses, sleeping beauties under bulletproof glass—when I first heard the bleat and whine of the sirens. Fainter there, back deep in the apartment, but pretty stunning all the same. Not an ambulance or fleet of cop cars. Something louder, stranger. Air-raidish or tornado-related.

I moved swiftly now toward the back door, smoked from, blown from my cave. I stepped past the crib, then the living room proper, the siren sounds seeming to lift before me like increments of oncoming waves.

When I opened the door, they doubled in volume.

Adam stood rigid-backed at his window. He turned to me, wide-eyed.

“That’s madness!”

“I know!”

“Pure!”

“I agree!”

The aim or source was pretty elusive. A tornado, we knew, was unlikely. The skies were crystal clear. Forecast said clear and sunny for *days*. We stared out our respective windows, in relative silence save for the sirens, looking neither up nor down, but *out*, into the wild night air, hoping to see it, to catch a glimpse of that sound, this wailing alien death knell you had to guess was a call to the basement. Or your bunker or whatever. Like *under attack*. Take cover!

Yet somehow we knew that wasn’t it. Too World War II. A bit corny even. Like, five hundred sirens screaming as one, in cacophonous off-key harmony: You. Are. *In Trouble!* But we didn’t believe them. Not in the way they meant to be heard. We were still—and still are—immune to apocalypse, certain as infants it could never happen here.

Adam felt the draw right off.

“We have to go find this,” he said, enthused. “We must drive *into* this.”

I shook my head: “Not me, man.”

“Yes you. Us.”

The sirens wailed, relentless and cheesy. I shrugged. “Sorry buddy.”

“Sorry buddy?” he said. “That’s all you got? Sorry buddy?”

Again, I shrugged. Adam shook his head, then thought about it, muttering. He swung open his back door and stepped inside, sort of pitching forward as he went. Half a

minute later, he re-emerged, slamming his door behind him. He marched toward me with steely purpose, his fierce eyes locked to mine. I stepped back as he neared, but he stopped before me and grabbed my wrist with militant precision. Cold steel gripped to my skin there. A click. Then I looked down.

He had cuffed us. Our wrists. My left to his right. Just like that, we were one.

He smiled bitterly. “Sorry buddy. I cannot endure it alone. Not tonight.”

The sirens wailed in the distance. He pulled at our door and it shut behind me. And I started to say something but stopped before saying. Pulled along, I followed. I was certain any protest would be useless. Though I must have flushed, for I felt a bit woozy, the blood seeming to flee my head. I stumbled a little as we descended the stairs. (Why fight it? I was his.) Neither of us spoke until we reached the Mercenary. Adam clicked it open with the autolock device.

“You first.”

Both of us grunting, I got in, climbing over the driver’s seat, then the gear shift. The fragile mathematics of handcuffs: hostage first, then hostage taker. Adam followed, closing the door, and our auto-seatbelts settled across us with a soothing Mercenary whir. He turned the key in the ignition, drawing me forward, then we settled back and he lowered the windows.

“Listen to that,” he said. We listened to the sirens. “What *is* that? It’s like . . . God must be sleeping through the snooze alarm.”

I chuckled—“Right”—then looked down at the cuffs. “You don’t have to keep these on. I’m in the car. You got me.”

He looked down at our wrists, resting together on the complicated beverage holder (heating, cooling, spill control.)

“I understand that,” he said. “But I like it. Heightens the sense of intimacy, you know? I mean . . . this doesn’t bother you, does it?”

I shot him a withering look. He snickered as he guided the soundless Mercenary into the back alley. “You need to develop a more mature sense of *trust*. You know the prayer, right? Accept what you cannot change?”

Staring ahead, I snorted, then glanced again at our cuffs. Why did he even *own* a pair of these?

“So are these like . . . a sex toy?” I looked up at him.

“They are actually.”

I waited. “But not a toy you use with Maribel?”

He lifted his chin, struck by that. “Right again, sir, but . . . let’s leave that matter to the side for now.”

I smiled. “So whatshername wears these? Or . . . you do?”

“Shelve it, Phil. Practice sensitivity.”

Out in the night, the sirens wailed.

It repulsed me, I suppose, to wear an aid to sexual domination—and perhaps one used quite recently—yet also (and this surprised me), it sort of half excited me. They brought me closer to her, his invisible other, his longtime secret thing or fling. So many times I’d heard them through the vent in the living room while the Monarch napped in the afternoons. Handcuffs were involved? What else? (Jesus.)

It amazed me how much Adam got away with, how he lived his contradictions with open abandon and hid his transgressions with relative ease. The guy was nearly forty. How far would he dare to take it?

“There’s a road cocktail in there,” he said, pointing to the glove compartment “Start us up, will ya?”

I took out the curved silver flask, had a swig and passed it over. We drove in silence, save for the sirens, passing the flask back and forth. We went south to southwest, where of course we shouldn’t. The sirens, it soon became clear, were not our true target or aim. A mere curiosity, background music. We weren’t driving toward them but rather *through* them, off to the places he’d sought before.

Adam had multiple names for this practice, depending on the mood. *Playing chicken with a drive-by* was one, but that had fallen from favor. (Drive-bys were shot *from* cars, not *into* them.) *Ghettospotting*, I’m afraid, was another (but we both agreed that was lame). I was partial to more lighthearted fare. *The Counterintuitive Tourist Bus*, say, or *Let’s Play Demographic Hopscotch!* But those were just names.

What he did—and I’d only gone twice before—was drive on purpose into iffy neighborhoods, into stretches of poverty, perceived ganglands, to the dealers and bangers and blown-out lights, the abandoned buildings and mostly black people. He’d blast aggressive music and see what he could see. (It was passive slumming is what it was. Spectating from the safety of a locked car and calling it active engagement.)

He pressed play on the cd drive, taking my wrist along with. The sounds of a genius aggression rose from the speakers, the opening friz of honeybee guitars, then the

bass, the drums, the riff had dropped. He bobbed his head, driving one-handed. We coasted under the ghost town tracks and passed the somber public housing.

Here it was in its furtive glory: doing your part for the war on terror. In Adam's way, a different way, starting with a basic premise: that the adversary *to* the war on terror could not be seen, could barely be named, was ipso facto invisible. Adam argued for a different kind of witness. Go seek the so-called invisible as revealed in your actual world. Go local, toward the visible terror that's been *made* invisible, or at the very least, swept to the side. The threat or threats in your very midst. Go to where they're visible, to where they've been *pushed*.

Well, I considered it a stretch. Vague, simplistic, conflating, self-serving. Yet something in it made perfect sense. Could it be the terror was closer to home? A steadily escalating humdrum life as manager-owner of The Copy Boss shops? Nominal monogamist, father of one?

We drove along into destitution, into a neighborhood I didn't know. We swerved and slalomed through alien streets, Adam seeming to know the way, then landed on some gloomy corner where half the lights had blown. He shifted to park, then turned off the music. The sirens wailed away.

We sat there a while, not speaking, just listening. And then, like that, the sirens stopped.

"Wait," he said, stunned by their absence. "That's it?"

I listened. "I guess it is."

"Damn . . . that's *abrupt*."

We were both a bit crestfallen. The sirens had grown almost comforting.

Adam nodded to himself, accepting the loss, then pressed the lever in the armrest and our noiseless windows rose. All of a sudden: hermetic in there. Safe and sound. He spoke to the control panel. “Air conditioning”—and on it came. He said, “Mercenary: massage us” and our seats began to vibrate gently, a soft soothing whir that pressed at our backs. For a while then, it was lulling and peaceful. We passed the flask back and forth.

Just sitting immersed in massage vibration at the dreary corner of a vacant street. Only that one guy smoking across the way. And this other loafing on the sidewalk here.

The latter guy approached. Stepped calmly toward the car. A short stocky black dude in a Marlins cap, with ass-low jeans that turned out to be shorts. Adam pressed the button and the window unrolled.

The guy leaned down, gripped the lip of the window. He was all business.

“What you need?”

Adam fake smiled. “Nothing for us tonight, my friend. We’re just taking a rest.”

“A rest,” he echoed, deadpan, then noticed our cuffed wrists. Adam touched at the guy’s hand.

“Tell me”—and he pointed—“what’s up with that building there? That used to be a club or a loft that had parties. What is it now? Anyone live there?”

He meant the big red brick building on the opposite corner, darkened throughout, with boarded-up windows and a shadowy someone smoking on its crumbling front stoop.

The guy half-laughed. “Looks pretty fucking dead to me.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” said Adam, nodding. “Well thank you for your insight. Best of luck, friend”—and they both moved their hands as the window rose with its silent

hermetic affront. You could see the guy was baffled. The questions, the cuffs, Adam's robe. The subtle sound of tiny rotors whirring through the posture-friendly leather. Were we cops to him? Creeps?

He moved down the street and out of view, only once looking back.

We sat there in siren-free silence, cuffed across the beige beverage island. Adam stared at the boarded-up building. "Massage off," he said, and it ceased. He gestured limply with his cuffed hand.

"Jesus this hurts," he said. "Honestly. More than I ever could have guessed."

I looked down at the beverage holder. "The handcuff?"

Adam stared ahead; he drew in a breath through his nose and sighed.

"Adam, what are y—"

"Maribel left me."

"Left you?"

He nodded, staring ahead. "Evacuated."

I cocked in my chin. Didn't make sense.

"Just . . . up and left?"

"Up and *stayed*. Never came back from Mexico. She's setting up shop in Michoacan as we speak."

"Shit, Adam, that's . . . she's been gone this whole *time*?"

"Never came back."

I took a moment to let that sink in. Since Thursday, I thought they'd been home. Adam had implied as much. This was Saturday, three days later.

"Where's Jorge?"

Adam looked over, furrowed his brow.

“With *her*,” he said. “You insane? He’s down there with mommy. Christ. Don’t be foolish.” He shook his head, resigned to the facts. “We both know better than that.”

I hardly had time to absorb it. His phantom family. The ghosts across the hall. The weird sense of betrayal at having been halfway lied to. Adam nodded toward the red brick building and started to look a bit wistful.

“That’s where we met,” he said. “That’s where I won her.”

He took off his cap with his free hand and rubbed through the underfed comber.

“Ten, eleven years ago. Third floor, I think. Huge artsy loft space where they had these parties. Art parties, performance parties, that sort of crap. Not precisely my scene but . . . back then? I *had* no scene.” He shook his head, grinning. “Just an aimless grad student, a fuck up with a head full of vacant opinions looking for some arty action. A thrill. Some tribal adventure. But that night”—he nodded to himself, dead serious—“that night Maribel was there. Maribel Jimenez of Michoacan, there with her cousin Placo, the painter. And just . . . the finest, most *exquisite* thing. *Luminous*. A vision of vulnerable grace. She was hot too. Obviously. Smoking hot, but . . . her way, that’s what drew the eye. The way she looked across an aimless room? A room full of fuck ups and toothless poets and over-talkative grad student types?” He ssssed through his teeth. “A song, brother. A siren song in a sea of chatter. I’d never been drawn like that.”

He nodded to himself, smiling. Then the smile faded.

“I knew the bassist in the band that night. Friend of mine. Decent friend at the time, actually, not *too* close but . . . well”—waiting a beat, hunching over, really starting

to tell it—"I was especially loaded. Not out of control, but feeling fine. Some advanced feeling. On a plane, as it were. And I don't recall why—they'd been playing disco classics or something, perhaps ironically but who could say?—and at some point, I just stepped up to the mike and started into—of all things, I shit you not—"Don't Stop Til You Get Enough."

I wince-smiled. "You mean . . . Michael—?"

"Jackson. Yes. His disco era masterpiece. And not falsetto or anything, not an impression, just me. Me and my little voice. Oh I didn't expect it to go anywhere, but the band surprised me—they followed like *that*. And once I knew they were behind me, well . . . I *sold* it, brother. Danced like a jackass. Gave it my untethered all. And do allow me to say, I don't think it inaccurate to say—in that moment, I *owned* them. I *possessed* them. That room was *enslaved*. And . . . I never do that. I'm not a performer in the obvious sense. I suck, in fact. My singing voice is horrendous. Not at all pleasing to the ear. And in terms of the stage, if you can believe it, I'm actually a little bit *shy*. But that night I wasn't. Not in the least. I sang that song with unconditional enthusiasm, like *recklessly*. I gave it up, Phil. Every inch."

He shook his head, remembering. His voice softened.

"She was charmed by it, sir. She was drawn." He reached over with his cuffed hand and lightly grabbed my shirt. "*She* came up to *me*. I had no idea that was feasible, that such a moment was achievable. You understand? *She* approached *me*."

He let go of my shirt and looked up at that building.

"Among the single most gratifying moments in my life."

"I bet."

“And one of the most *surprising*.”

“Ha.”

Again, his smile faded. I tossed in two cents.

“So that’s when you guys hooked up?”

He nodded, sort of grin-frowning.

“The bassist hung himself two days later.”

“Excuse me?”

“Hung himself. My friend the bassist killed himself. He’d always been the self-loathing inward type, and then he went ahead and did it. Two days after that party.”

He shook his head, then grinned a little, if not a little guiltily.

“You see, that was the joke. That my singing had sent him over the edge. Like ‘Don’t Stop ‘til You Get Enough’ was just too much to bear”—he mimed pulling a noose at his neck and made a *crrrking* sound. “He’d *had* enough, you know? Like, Stop! Enough!” Again, the gesture of noose and neck.

I chuckled uncomfortably. “Jesus, Adam.”

“But wait—that sounds cruel, but this is important. *That’s* the joke at the birth of our union. The grim bit that melded us together. Like, I’d killed a friend but scored a lover, the same who’d one day become my wife. She still brings it up sometimes.” He rubbed at an eye—“oh we weren’t cold about it. I grieved, she supported. We talked it to death, had lots of life-affirming sex. I mean, we’d *just* got together, but . . . in a very real way, it’s what glued us. That hanging as much as anything.”

He shook his head in remembered disbelief.

“A morbid sort of *dirty* joke,” he said, “that remained entirely our own. Told mostly in bed, never shared with outsiders. I mean, you’re seriously the first I’ve told.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“It’s true.”

Adam leaned up and nodded at the building.

“Right there,” he said. “Right up *there*.”

And just then he noticed. Finally. I witnessed the act of his noticing. His gaze rose, brow crinkled, he was seeing it quite clearly now. For just above that desolate building, you-know-who was hanging in the sky.

“Great Christ,” he said. “That’s insane.”

“I know.”

“The moon . . . you seeing this?”

“It’s laughing. Yeah.”

He froze like that, staring up at the sky. He waited, then said:

“Whatever he sees down here, it’s *awfully* funny.”

“Hilarious, apparently.”

Adam stared up at it, not laughing back, then looked down abruptly and started the car, his face gone mostly serious.

“I don’t like that,” he said, averting his eyes. “Don’t like that at all.”

“Come on—it’s lovely!”

“Don’t like it.”

He cranked the music and U-turned swiftly, fleeing both memory and moon. Didn’t speak once until we were home, only stole a glance or two at the sky whenever we

stopped in traffic. I suppose he thought it was laughing at him. He'd had, after all, some atrocious luck. Cherished car stolen on a fool's watch. Wife and child flee the nest. Still, I think he'd say he deserved it. You could see he was resigned to the damage he'd done. Multiple years of consistent cheating? Of problem drinking and an absent heart? That'll swing back to haunt you, sir. That'll come back to cuff you on the wrist.

But he never gave up. I'll grant him that. On the way home, he found new hope. He thought he spotted his stolen Dodge Dart racing by in the passing lane. We gave chase for a couple terrifying minutes, but then it turned and disappeared from view. Adam smiled broadly, sweating at the brow: "That was *her*," he said. "She's alive!" I wasn't convinced—we'd barely seen it—but Adam read it as a blessing.

He sought hope again later—again, perhaps desperately—after landing in the lot and setting me free, keeping his half of the handcuffs on. They dangled as he waved and entered his apartment. I rubbed at my wrist and entered mine.

That's the last I saw Adam for quite a while. He disappeared days later, leaving a ghost town across the hall. Left a serious hole in my life as well. The diapers and feedings and strolls through the park took on a different pall. I craved Adam's push. His drama, his war. I wasn't so sure I could declare my own.

That night, in his way, he'd kept on fighting. Fending off terror, avoiding the moon. Made the afterhours call to his available other, the little secret his wife had uncovered (and likely left the marriage over.)

Despite being outed, they got right to it; those two went to town. They woke me up around three, three-thirty, the moaning and grunts and icky escalations seeping through the vent in our living room. And when I turned on the lamp, I was shocked to

find her: Shelley, already there. In panties and tanktop, arms crossed, standing under the vent. I hadn't noticed she'd left the bed. It really sort of spooked me. She glanced my way then looked back up.

“Quite the performance here,” she whispered. “Maribel is simply on *fire*. Adam—I don't know. Adam sorta sounds like the guy from ‘Slingblade’ but Maribel's just so . . . *expressive*.”

I nodded. “She can be.”

“Poor Jorge,” she said, with a sympathetic pout. “No child could sleep through that. He must be terrified.”

I slid my arms around her waist; nestled my chin in the nook of her shoulder. I didn't correct her. I let it go. Give the ghosts one last haunt, I thought. Let them be there in Shelley's eye. Somehow that seemed hopeful. We stood under the vent in the lamp-lit night, swaying a little, listening in, seeing what we chose to see.

II

This One's True

(7)

The Woahs

When Adam Swivchek fled the building, and indeed our lives, he duct-taped a 9 x 12 brown paper package to the central panel of our back door, scrawling **At Last!** across its face in urgent magic marker. I like to imagine him writing this and cackling—maniacally sleep-deprived in his underwear or robe—then dashing cinematically down the stairs, and out to the alley, clearly insane.

His wife and child had left him. That’s about the stretch of it. He wasn’t necessarily the raving mad type, but ever since, I’d had to wonder. He’d cheated for years in more than one way and the chickens had finally come home. Is that what he meant? (**At Last!**)

I stared at the thing on our door there, then unstuck the package from the half-warped wood—at that point had no clue what it was nor the slightest what was unfolding—and moved the fifteen feet or so toward Adam’s back door, just slightly ajar. I pressed gently and it opened with a creak.

“Adam?”

Silence, barrenness, both absolute. I stepped in, amazed, and floated through the place. No furniture, appliances, no shelves, no pictures. Nothing at all. Stripped spotless. Must have brought movers in at night or something.

All I could muster was a *woah*.

“They gone, no?” said a voice behind me. “Disappear?”

It was Yuri, the building’s handyman, standing in the kitchen, grinning. Our Ukrainian Collosus with the deepset brooding eyes, bearing spackling tools and a bucket of caulk.

“*Poof*,” he said. “No more.”

“Did he call you guys or . . . ?”

He showed me the envelopes he’d found that morning duct-taped to Adam’s front door: two of them, one for the landlord—likely the last of the rent—and the other for Yuri, with a crass drawing of an upraised fist, **By Any Means!** marked beneath it. Fifty dollars he’d left him, explained Yuri, then shrugged, like, nice but eh! whatever. The money and this thing, this little lady here. He took from the envelope a tiny clay bust of—I believe it was—Emma Goldman, which stumped us both.

“Weird, no?” said Yuri, chuckling. “What this mean?”

“I have no idea.”

He noticed the package in my hand. “What you get?” he asked, as if we shared a kind of fugitive Santa.

“Let’s see.” As I cracked the seal, Shelley called from the back hallway: “*Phil?*”

Yuri grinned with knowing eye as I moved back toward the open doorway.

And there was Shelley, waiting impatiently behind our back door in summery stay-at-homes—lime blouse, salmon skirt, white canvas sneakers, no socks. She held the Monarch in his SafeZone Portaseat and eyed her watch, concerned. “It’s time.”

As I moved toward her, I shook my head, still stunned.

She raised her chin: “What you got there?”

“This? Oh . . . a gift. From Adam.”

“Adam, eh?”—some mockery rising, a glance at Adam’s door—“What’s your guess? Drugs? Explosives?”

“Be fair now.”

“Perhaps some sort of yellow pages for the available whores in our area code?”

I stopped in my tracks. “That’s not fair.”

“It most certainly is.”

“I said be fair and that is not the practice of fairness.”

“Don’t get so defensive, Phil. It’s not like I’m being unfair to *you*.”

“Adam left.”

She grimaced. “Left?”

“He’s gone now too. Go look,” I gestured over my shoulder. “It’s stripped of the slightest trace.”

She handed me the Monarch in his overpriced Porta-seat and swiftly stepped toward the neighbors’ apartment, glancing back just once. I could hear her speaking

briefly with Yuri, then all went silent as—stunned as me—she took the barren tour. Minutes later, she re-emerged, arms crossed, mouth open.

“Holy fucking shit.”

“I know.”

The Monarch nattered on beneath us, senseless, oblivious.

We rode in the Civic in hermetic silence, the Monarch spurring occasional syllables over the woosh of the air conditioning—*da da me no*, that sort of thing. Shelley drove with deft precision, accelerating often, passing all cars. I reached in and slid out the contents of the Adam package, which at that point, sincerely surprised me: a pristine copy of issue 4 (Vol. 23) of the fabled *Midwest Contrarian*, the obscure and since-defunct quarterly review containing Adam’s one published essay. I turned to the table of contents to confirm it.

The Ravings of Safety - A. Swivchek 46

He’d mentioned this essay multiple times but never got around to showing me. For years, he’d insisted I read it, and enough times, with enough insistence, that I’d come to doubt it existed. It was famous and elusive, this “Ravings of Safety,” and I think I preferred it that way.

Shelley leaned up into the wheel, accelerating, weaving, an advanced slalom. “He said nothing to you?”

“Haven’t seen him in days.”

She shook her head in wonder and briskly slalomed on. Soon enough, we pulled up to the clinic. The tires screeched. She waited, meditating.

“I can’t tell if I find this disturbing or cathartic. I mean”—she turned to me—
“I’m not done being angry with you. Over the other thing.”

I nodded. “The . . . not telling you about his family thing?”

“I can’t *imagine* why it took so long.” She stared ahead through the windshiled.
“Five days, Philip. They’d been gone *five days* before you told me.”

“Actually, they never came back from Mexico. Technically, they’d been gone *two weeks*.”

“Oh God, Philip. Whatever. I’m more disturbed by your silence on the matter.”
She winced, her crinkle of worry. “I can’t believe you’d leave me in the dark like that.”

“I know. I . . . guess I was protecting Adam.”

“*Protecting* him? How’d that protect *him*?”

She shook her head tightly. We sat in silence a while, then I reached in back for the clipboard and ECHELON materials. I got out, patted the Monarch goodbye, and leaned down through the window.

“I should have told you earlier. I’ll cop to that. I mean, I *did* tell you, but—”

“Not soon enough.”

“I know.”

She took in an even breath or two—a relaxation “process” she’d read about that nearly always made me nervous. She stared straight ahead.

“See, Philip. I don’t think you understand this but . . . it was almost like *you* had something to hide.”

I shook my head. I tried to gesture, but my hands were full.

“Just *Adam*. I was hiding *him*. I mean—come on”—I held out my arms, baring all that stuff—“*I* have nothing to hide.”

“No?” she said, turning to look at me.

“Well . . . nothing of consequence.”

“Consequence? I see. ‘Consequence’ enters the picture.”

“No no. It’s not like . . . *which* picture?”

“We should stop,” she said, and looked at her watch. “You’re late for my job.”

I nodded, agreeing. We gave silent goodbyes as I stepped back to the curb. Shelley jumped hungrily back in traffic. I watched the Civic zoom to the corner, where it turned and soon left view.

I had nothing actually. Not a thing to hide. For that matter, very little to *show*. And the fact of that whistled through the air of my life like a white flag trailing a limply shot arrow.

But as I waited for the elevator to the twentieth floor, a bright red memory sharply flew in, answering that arrow with another, this one flaming and shot with force. Only the summer before, in fact: Adam and I with two anonymous women we’d met on a lark at some indie store reading. Drinking whiskey with them later by the lake.

We'd laughed, flirted, paired off, frolicked; she'd brushed up against me, touched my thigh when we sat. Nothing happened—not for me, not really. It was softball flirtation, junior high stuff, I'd barely touched her, more like refused her—unless it was her refusing me. This subtle advance from (or toward) this younger someone in a fetching black knit skirt (the frivolous air, cannabis eyes, that steamy way of saying goodbye). I fantasized about her after—that's as far as it went. Felt a lot like cheating, though, its warm-up or rehearsal, a practice run in having secrets not to tell.

Adam, however, was advanced in this department. That night by the lake was child's play for him. There, he'd betrayed both wife and lover with someone whose name he'd barely caught. Straight from the holy book, his guiding tenets.

“Unattach yourself from the institutions,” he'd once advised me, a few drinks in and holding forth. “Snap those cumbersome loyalties in two, like the dried-out branches they *are*.” He grinned at this. “At least in your *mind*. Or—you know—in the way your mind sees things.” Then he'd whisper, only half-joking: *You can reattach the branch with some glue or tape. It'll come off easier next time.* Detach, Reattach, Detach, Reattach. Seek moments of transcendence in forbidden connection, individual pleasure. Then wake up and take responsibility! (That too.) Give back, as it were, after taking.

Always bugged me a little when he talked like that. A bit cake-and-eat-it-too, I thought. He wanted life both spartan and sybaritic, like a Walden Pond with a nightclub attached. A full-service Walden with a daycare center staffed by promiscuous art chicks. Here and there go into town to pass undercover as bourgeois. Now and then decry the evils of money while making gobs of it yourself.

The doors slid open to Spinal Rehab. The institutional glare and sea foam carpeting saved me from being swallowed. The Thursdays we swapped lives were a relief to me—as they were to Shelley, who got her time with the baby. I loved the out-of-house sense of utility; the hum of the lighting, smell of antiseptic, the antibacterial wash in there. Scales and stethoscopes and blue-coated nurses. Shiny steel instruments I couldn't name.

It had curative value; took your eyes off yourself; plus clearly there were the men in wheelchairs—the fact of them, what always caught me cold. I looked beyond the front desk, where the TVs hung in the corners of the waiting room, beaming their studio audience cheer. I was hoping no one showed. The ECHELON measure for SCIs was not the cure I craved.

I sat and opened “The Ravings of Safety” (46), which I'd had a little look at in the car. Adam had advertised his academic writing as a kind of “bombastic critical theory.” Yet I found the prose surprisingly formal, if not a bit wooden. Abstract, dense, sometimes hard to follow, but I think I got it all the same. And halfway down page 47, a paragraph leapt out at me, starker than the others. It read:

The intoxicated Social Body – blind drunk with comfort and amusement – roots out its freakish appendages, its extra limbs and unsightly protuberances, and never pausing to debate or ponder, severs them, pitches them into the darkness, where the severed and separated chance on survival, in retro-generative iterations of crassly discarded disease. This is the Obvious. Denial of the Obvious is Madness.

Though Adam had published this nine years before—right around when he’d quit grad school—it was speaking to me right then. I’d caught hints of what he meant while reading in the car, but now I could see, here in the clinic, evidence of what A. Swivchek called The Obvious. The Severed and Separated: a host of mostly black men in wheelchairs for life, nearly all of them pretty poor.

Yet this Madness itself is rarely obvious. This is especially true when manifest collectively, when the Social Brain smilingly succumbs, unable to smell its own synapses burning. Most of what makes Madness Mad is the quiet fact of its denial.

I read the last sentence again, then underlined it. (Wasn’t sure I agreed.)

Black rubber treads rolled up to my sneaker. “Hey boss.”

I looked up, laughed, set the journal aside. Walter. Nice. Here’s the cure! Six foot something, full-of-life Walter, chugging along in his manual ride. He had a long lived-in stretch of a face, dour when passive, that bloomed into smiling at the slightest tickle. We’d only met once but recalled each other well. He’d done another study Shelley’d co-authored, and I’d once helped lift him to the DEXA table. Thus I knew too well his bone density, the brunt of his body mass index. That single lift assist—five-to-six grueling seconds—had strained my back for weeks.

I weighed Walter in his chair on the giant scale and had him sign some paperwork. Then I interviewed him—as I had before, and with nearly identical questions. I was dreading the black box to come (**Cause of Injury.**) I recalled that well enough. Who’d forget? Years before, his wife had shot him. I don’t know why—still don’t—though apparently they’d stayed together. And when we got there, he told me so matter-of-factly—no shame, no embarrassment, no big deal—that I went ahead and probed off-

interview. He confirmed they were still a couple, yes. Yet something in the numbers seemed off to me. The year they'd married? Date of injury?

His bloom of a smile gently rose.

"Oh no," he said. "She shot me before we were married."

"Before you were . . . ?" He nodded, long ago resigned to it.

Under my breath, I went *woah*. I glanced over at Adam's journal. (*Most of what makes Madness Mad is the quiet fact of its denial.*)

I knew I was pushing it but continued to probe. The third question in, Walter went dour; he answered concisely; brief frosty phrases meant to shut me up. I did as asked, faintly blushing. I couldn't wait to run this by Shelley.

I never got the chance to, though. When I arrived home, our apartment was empty. I was just about to dial Shelley's cell, then heard some familiar voices next door. I went via the back hallway, as I had that morning, not at all expecting what I found.

She stood in Adam's empty kitchen in a form-fitting chocolate skirt, staring at a watermark above the cupboards, her petrol black hair in a pristine ponytail that hovered at the curve of her back. I watched her from the half-open doorway.

Lean, alluring, poised as ever; that strangely robust ivory skin. Her posture implying engaged thought; the blouse suggesting revelations (though not quite following through). Pretty much as I remembered her. That Melanie chick. The music writer. She side-longed a glance my way.

“Tell me,” she said, and pointed. “Does that or does that *not* look like a snake eating its tail?” I stepped toward it. You had to look a few seconds for the image to gell: an oblong circle, scaley-seeming from the wall’s damaged texture, with a stark demarcation, a swish of grime, where the “tail” seemed to enter the “mouth.”

“It does”—I knew that I knew it, and strangely, it came—“Like whattsitcalled . . . Ouroboros.”

“Exactly.” She was amused. “Bravo. Ourobouros. Archetype of the cycle of renewal.” She grinned, catching herself. “But enough with the lectures on tape.” She held out a hand. “Nice to see you, Philip.”

“And you too . . . I’m sorry”—I pretended I’d forgotten, then nearly said it with her. *Melanie. Melanie Trident.* The robust ivory indie Morticia who wrote about music and suicide, girlfriend to Shelley’s friend Hugo—a recent coupling by way of an affair. I found her quite fascinating, had for a while. (As did many others, I’m sure.)

Shelley entered the kitchen then, beaming in her salmons and limes, the Monarch in a snuglee against her chest. Hugo followed close behind—taut-muscled and superpoised in his ragged Polo and cutoffs and sandals.

“It’s settled then,” said Shelley. “We’ll be neighbors!”

Hugo shrugged indifferently, smiling (*why not?*) Shelley was exuberant. Melanie, charmed. Evidently it was settled.

The neighbor you know and love is a dying breed. At least in my experience. I’ve only known a few well and Adam Swivchek was one of them. That bastard. That self-sotted prick. Now we had to deal with *this*.

Shelley knew Hugo from college, one from her entourage back in the day, a “best friend” (among several) who she’d fooled around with, she says, just once (then they “went Platonic”). Colombian guy. Born there. Exceedingly, ruggedly handsome, if not a bit too much so. He’d been a med student at Loyola, then quit; was a bartender now, had been for years, with aspirations to write. I’d been a writer once as well—a playwright, but no longer—and their friendship bugged me in that regard only. My wife, it seemed, collected fools like us, and I wanted no reminders.

Among the lot of us, including A. Swivchek, only one wrote for actual money. Yet Adam would be entertained, I’m sure, by the accident of his replacement. He’d read the work of Melanie Trident, this music writer for a free weekly who destroyed bands in single sentences; who also digressed into fascinating passages that examined what hovered at the fringes of music, or—no—the forces *beneath* it, italicizing often for urgency’s sake. *The death draw*, as you know, was one of her favorites. *Sexual hysteria* another. *Crew ship complacency*, *Theme park adolescence*. Most of it was pretty persuasive.

With Shelley’s recommendation to our landlord, they’d take over the Swivcheks’ within the week. They’d been looking to shack up, she and Hugo, and Adam’s place had landed in their lap. It all seemed too fast, even disrespectful. Traces of the Swivcheks still haunted the room.

As best I could, I searched for Adam all week; tried his cell countless times but the number remained “unreachable.” With Monarch in stroller, I went to The Copy Boss—his original Boss, on Division—and asked around, hoping I’d finally meet his

grad student, the extracurricular thing or fling that so recently tore up his marriage. But she wasn't there. No one knew anything. He hadn't been in much that summer, they said. A call to his other shop—the Boss on Halsted—quickly confirmed the same.

I read and reread the “The Ravings of Safety,” as if I'd find some signal or clue. Erratic in tone, vague in its thesis, but still, something there held me. Probably the familiar ring. It was stocked with Adamisms I'd heard before, such as: living in abject comfort and safety meant others must live in poverty and terror. Adam argued—as he had before—that the right thing to do, the only *moral* thing, was to “sever and separate” from Safety ourselves. Cut away all institutional pressures—career, marriage, family, religion—as a statement of solidarity with those who'd been tossed aside.

Well, that “solidarity” seemed pretty suspect but I couldn't argue with the one-way page. I wanted my neighbor back, to spar with, be verbally abused by. Had the guy clutched his Ravings a bit too close to heart?

The week they moved in was uneventful; I hardly noticed. All was fine until the second week, that Friday afternoon, when a voluptuous guitar riff shot through the vent—the shiny slatted delivery system in the corner of the living room. This came around 3:15 or so, well into the Monarch's naptime, the very slot Adam and his other used to fill, his grad student from the Copy Boss (wife at class; son at preschool; secret other on the afternoon sofa.) Well, the shift in content was jarring. Where there'd been sex, subtly tantalizing, now there was music, overly loud. I stared up; the vent rattled faintly. Good God, that's loud. That could wake the baby.

I went swiftly via front doors, pounding on theirs—not angrily, just to be heard. She answered in a thin-threaded t-shirt (*Meat Puppets*); it hung to loose-fitting cutoff jeans. Smooth white marble thighs and calves. Unwashed jet black hair to her shoulders. That calm and keen-eyed carnal aplomb crossed with a faint scent of afternoon booze.

She tilted her head. “Too loud?”

“Could you . . . ?”—I made the universal gesture for turn it down.

She apologized sincerely and hovered off to do so, then returned to invite me in.

“Oh I can’t”—I gestured back over my shoulder—“the kid. He’s sleeping.”

“No no no. You must. Hugo’s out and I’ve finished for the day. Come on”—and level-eyed, she took my hand—“just one.”

“That’s um . . . that’s not exactly responsible.”

She shushed me, then came in close. “We’ll hear the baby crying through the vent.”

“The vent?”

“Yeah”—she looked over toward it. “It’s dependable. Besides . . .” She glanced at me coyly. “A breach of decorum firms the soul.”

I had by then—against my will—something of a halfway hard-on, or a quarter’s way, if that’s possible. I followed fast to the nearest chair.

“Whiskey okay?”

“Yeah uh . . . whiskey.” I waited. “You know, water will do.”

“Whiskey and water,” she said. “Done.” She glided off toward the kitchen.

I let it go. The fractional swelling was dying down and I figured a few minutes couldn’t hurt. Their place—clearly *theirs* now, no longer the Swivcheks’—drew you in

with its dark cozy feel. Amazing how quickly they'd set up shop. The lighting low, the lamps Turkish-seeming, candles aflame on each side of a laptop. Oil paintings of opaque abstraction. Dark blue everywhere, greens, blacks. Concert posters encased in glass (Zeppelin, Mingus, Sleater-Kinney.) A stylized bohemian wombness in there. (Slight scent of incense. Trace of weed.)

She returned with my unwanted beverage.

"Would have taken you for a straight up man."

I shook my head no. "So . . . what else have you heard through the vent?"

She smiled coyly and sat in the soft blue chair next to mine. "Oh not much. Only been two weeks. Sometimes voices we can't really make out. An argument once"—she tilted back her head, remembering—"and yesterday, *wow*—in the morning? You two really sank your fangs in. You're explosive, huh? *Both* of you."

"I guess we . . . I forgot that. Boy."

I turned to see it: the old school vent in the corner of the living room, where it ran through the drywall, just like ours, to the internal guts of the greater building. A secret twin. But how obvious (not so secret.) For all the three o'clocks I'd eavesdropped on Adam, I'd spent little to no time considering he might also eavesdrop on me.

I took a long bracing gulp of water and whiskey. Melanie, meanwhile, was staring at me, sort of *examining* me, her head tilted slightly to the side.

"Philip," she said, as if stating the fact of me. "Philip Palliard. Full time father. Tell me . . ."—holding her glass at a thoughtful remove, she made circles in the air, clinking the ice—"Do you feel at all *emasculated* by your role?"

The word hung before me as if scratched in the air.

“No. I . . . *No*.”

“No?”

I stared into my glass, tilting it slightly; the ice cubes softly rolled. “Well, a *little*, I guess. Just a *tiny* bit. But I wouldn’t use that word.”

She shook her head tightly. “Philip,” she said. “Don’t. Do not. Takes *balls* to do what you do.”

“Balls?” I said. “That’s debatable.”

“Don’t be foolish.” She took a long slow swig of her beverage, maintaining eye contact. “Don’t buy the eons of bad thought before you. You, my friend”—she pointed with her glass—“take part in an irreversible shift. In our evolution. It’s just true. There’ll be *adaptations* that respond to what you do.”

I laughed, maybe snorted. “Adaptations?”

She shook her head, annoyed. “Oh I don’t mean you’ll grow tits and nurse.” She touched at her hair. “*Social* transformations. Coup de’ tats of the presumed contract. And not merely the swapping of roles. More like . . . the elimination of them.” Her voice grew softer, she seemed touched (or perhaps just quite high.) “It’s a beautiful thing. Now if . . . only people would stop having babies.”

“Ha! Yeah well . . . don’t expec—”

“And started sharing bodies.”

I stared at her. Wasn’t sure I’d heard right. But something in her eyes seemed to confirm it. A serene sort of mischief or muted suggestion. I took another bracing swallow. She looked off toward the window, half-smiling.

“Oh don’t mind me. Seriously. Do not.” She took another sip, then said, almost soothingly, “You can clearly see I’m a self-absorbed diva.” Something occurred to her. She looked at me defiantly. “I rarely go to the bottle this early. Honestly. *Rarely*. But today’s special.” She pointed toward the laptop garnished with candles. “I’ve just now finished a book.”

An impressive tower of pages sat on the table, rising over the random kitsch.

“Oh! Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“What’s the uh . . . what’s the book ab—”

“I’m no breeder, Philip.”

I nodded. “No. I wouldn’t have guessed you were.”

“Think I could write with a yowler on my teat? Too much to care for in excess of career. Really. You people amaze me.”

I took another swallow. “Think Hugo wants kids?”

“Hugo wants nothing,” she said and polished off her glass. “Nothing he knows I won’t give.”

She stood and started back toward the kitchen. I stood as well, meaning to leave, and she stopped in her tracks.

“You’re not leaving?”

“I’m playing with fire here”—I gestured across the hall—“DCFS would have my ass.”

“Oh please. DCFS would yawn and have another donut. They don’t care about you. But I understand . . . *listen*.” She smiled serenely with inviting eyes. “Stop by again.”

I nodded, thanked her and left for our place, my heart pounding as I moved toward the crib. There: the Monarch on his back, down hard. His little belly rose and fell, so slightly. Still alive. Thank god.

I sat in the bathroom and—nicely buzzed on water and whiskey—masturbated more intensely than I had in years. When I finished, I saw, in the corner of my eye, open on its face by the sink, my well-thumbed copy of *The Midwest Contrarian*, set to its favorite place. I cleaned up, then took it and read randomly.

*What Madness sees is what Sanity abandons. This too is a false distinction.
When should we call Madness Mad or in accepting it, say that Acceptance is Sane?
Which are we when we recognize (or accept) our denial but continue the behavior once denied?*

I turned it on its face, then washed up again, avoiding the mirror as best I could.

All the same, it was a good September. Above average.

Melanie was home most days, writing, listening to music. I was home most days, caring for and feeding the Monarch. Shelley was immersed at her ECHELON Study, and Hugo was out more often than not, either bartending at his day job downtown or writing on his laptop at our local cafe.

Melanie would stop by here and there. Knock lightly on our door just to say what’s up? She was sweet with the Monarch, sweeter than you’d guess. Held him,

played with him, made funny faces. And then, of course, there was the talk. Long, conversations on the state of the culture. Politics, music, film, theater. Turned out she'd once seen a play I'd written—co-wrote actually—in which I'd also acted. She had her criticisms but claimed she half liked it. She even encouraged me to write again. A friendship was forming, but by no means a safe one. Sometimes we sat a bit too close.

Shelley in turn spent more time with Hugo, went out with him on random weeknights, returning home with a boozy levity I really think she needed. We both did.

Well over a month into having new neighbors—our newfound domestic balance or bliss—Shelley came home from the Study one evening looking tight-eyed and bitterly flushed. Towel on shoulder, I burped the Monarch. She crossed her arms and started in.

She could *not* believe me. What was I thinking? Grilling subjects about private histories? About sensitive material, ethically suspect? Walter Jorgenson had happened by that afternoon as she and Dr. Meng discussed the Study. Dr. Meng (internationally revered spinal specialist) was asking Walter about his injury, the nature and placement of the bullet. But Walter, strangely irritable, misread the question and told them instead the story of its *origins*. (Wife shooting him before they were married.) And he wondered why everyone was so damn curious. Mr. Phil had “already grilled him on that one.” Could he have his check please—he wanted no more of this. He wasn't some freak on Jerry Springer.

“He *said* that, Phil. He compared your interview to Jerry fucking Springer in front of Dr. Allen Meng. Do you have *any* idea how crushing it would be to lose Dr. Meng's endorsement?”

No time to answer that one. She whipped out a signed copy of an MRI request form with a stark black X across its back. My signature was at bottom, just beneath *Dominick Lafuse*. Evidently I'd scheduled the kid for an MRI he wasn't fit for. I'd neglected the ok on bullet placement. (Ouch.)

"Jesus, Phil. Seriously . . . I could lose everything. *Everything*."

Again, no time to answer or apologize. Livid, she dug into her big black bag and pulled out a solitary Polaroid. She straight-armed it toward me.

"And who's this?"

I took the Polaroid and knew at once. I winced. Now how the . . . ? This was Adam's mistress, his graduate *guma*, done up in a powder blue bonnet and dress as Little Bo Peep with cane. A pointedly "sexy" Little Bo Peep. Her dress billowed out like a soft explosion just above the thigh. The jacketed bodice, cleavage revealing; egg white stockings stretched to the knee; buckled black shoes; Bo Peep hat. That she was Asian—not the Peep expected—made the image all the more alluring.

"A fetish of yours?" she asked.

"Where'd you get this?"

"Floor of the car. I picked up this and it slid out." She dug in her big black bag and pulled out the Adam package—the 9 x 12 delivery system taped to our door a month or more before. Shelley swiveled it to read the face. "At Last? Why at *last*?"

"Honey—no—that's Adam. Adam wrote that." I turned the Polaroid and lifted it toward her. "That's her."

Shelley stared hard, drained of moral force. She squinted.

“No way.” She caught my eye. “That’s *her*?”

I nodded. Shelley took the Polaroid. She examined it for some time.

“Well she’s hot enough.”

I nodded, looking. “That she is.”

Shelley looked up. “You like that, eh?”

I shrug-wincing, Deniro-style. Then she remembered her anger. She flipped the Polaroid back my way. I took it; she stepped for the porch. The Monarch leaked or puked on my shoulder as I looked down again at that fetching image. So this picture was a party to Adam’s **At Last!** He knew I’d never met her and had always been curious. He was finally showing me by showing her off. What? Had it been Halloween? A dress-up game to get things going? Her gaze was hypnotic, so gently suggestive; that timeless expression of tender mischief I’d seen so recently across the hall.

Days later, on a bright Friday morning, Melanie Trident knocked on our door. The air outside was lush as mid-summer. A generous blast for late September. I opened up and she was all in blue. Steel blue vest. Sky blue skirt. Rare cowboy boots, dyed play-doh blue. And the day was so beautiful, she began. High of 75! Would I care to come down to the lake with her? She was meeting friends for a lakeside brunch. Come, bring the baby. Why not?

I thanked her, but just couldn’t do it. Too much stuff to prepare. Blankets, bottles, the stroller—all that. She hiked down the stairs, mock-disappointed. She waved. I waved back.

But when I returned with the Monarch that afternoon—our routine two thirty stroll through the park—Melanie was there again, fresh from her picnic, turning the key at her front door. I *sshhed* with a finger to my lips; the baby was out cold in the snuglee. She cooed at him, then raised a brow. Whispered: *care to come in?*

There were particles of magnet in the air, I'd swear it. Half the feeling was a curse of the weather. We moved through the kitchen, and she pointed to the watermark. Their tail-eater, our mythic snake, had grown a bit larger in the month since. A little more tail down the throat, I suppose. (I felt it in my own throat; really quite dry.)

In silence—deference to the Monarch—we entered the dark, cozy living room. I took the baby from his snuglee and, at her suggestion, carefully lay him on a futon in the corner. Without asking, she handed me a water and whiskey, which I downed rapidly. She lit a joint, then put on some Miles. *Big Fun*, volume low. We sat on the charcoal sofa and quietly discussed, if memory serves, baseball. Who knows why.

After the first of the lulls (there were several) she touched softly at my arm and whispered: *I really must tell you something*. And launched into a sincere if bracing defense of the conceptual scaffolding of her newfound lifestyle. Pursuits of happiness, individual liberties, constitutional props on flesh foundations. She'd been meaning to tell me; she felt I was a friend. And she knew I was devoted to Shelley, bound to her, no doubt would *kill* for her—and thus had no intention of harming that union. That said, she'd discussed the prospect with Hugo, and they both agreed that if we—by some remarkable stretch of fancy—somehow *also* agreed, well . . . oh don't mind me (she said) so that's out there. It's nothing. Nothing. Absolute air.

A lull dropped, lengthy and charged. Silence gushed forth as if from a hydrant.

All of a sudden, we were at it. I couldn't even tell you who led. A kiss, then groping, disrobing, unlatching. We made out a while, et cetera, et cetera. Soon enough down on the cobalt carpet, the Monarch asleep only feet away. She prepared herself for the final step and mounted gently, still in her skirt. She let out an *mmmm*. Like that, we were one.

Well, it didn't last. Just a few faint strokes. I'd seen my son in the corner of my eye—his fragile body in a baby blue onesy, little chest rising, then sinking. (My God.) Pretty small dollars to call it honor, but something—my body—revolted. Some ancient loyalty buried in the nerves. Were he sleeping out of eyeshot? Well . . . no telling.

I gripped at her hips and rolled out from under. She whispered *what?* I moved toward the front window area, naked from the waist down. I looked down at the empty street, the unoccupied sidewalks and porches. Aging steeples, ghost town trees. Spent a good minute there, half engorged, knowing she was waiting behind me.

Then, like insurance, they came. Rolling ahead, other side of the street. He in his high-end wheelchair—our Dominick, who'd once lived across the way. She right behind him—my life-betrothed—stepping intently, with professional purpose, flipping her chain of keys in a circle. Flipping them, catching them. Flipping, catching.

Again up my throat: *woah*. A hundred woahs. Lottery balls massing under the chute. I slid on boxers, harnessed the snuglee, put the baby back in—still asleep—and muttered my weak farewell. Smoking now, her back on the carpet, Melanie waved a silent goodbye; her eyes looked if anything amused.

"I guess that was a bad idea," she whispered.

I nodded. “Shelley’s here.”

“Oh!”

I used back doors again, just to be safe, but Yuri, our handyman, was out there on a ladder, fixing a camera to the building’s back wall. He glimpsed me through the window—I saw his eyes pop—as I motored home, sneakers in one hand, shorts in the other, still half-hard in flimsy boxers, drooling baby against my chest.

His camera caught a crime before he’d turned the other on. Yuri’d memorize that one for sure. He knew where I lived, who’d moved in. Any defense would be denied.

Inside our place, with rapid heart, I watched from the window as Shelley dialed her cell. Mine rang from the pocket of my shorts. And: *Hey hon. Could you help us out?*

She’d given Dominick a ride home. Felt guilty, she said. We’d denied him for the Study, if not nearly killed him. (Though I still say that’s a grand exaggeration.) So the biggest surprise might be Dominick. I talked to him some, filled a few things in, but that’s another story entirely. Shelley went up to our place to watch the baby as I lift-assisted Dominick up the stairs with another neighbor’s help. He’d come to visit his mother. And thankfully leaner than big Walter Jorgenson. By comparison, light as ash.

Later that night, Shelley surprised me. I’d taken a midnight shower, and walked into our bedroom in a furry towel. I found her kneeling—no, posing—on our bed.

“Wow,” I said. “That’s . . . *great*.”

“You like?”

My mouth hung open. It wasn't the sort of get-up she wore or game she played. She'd gotten the idea—was competing even—with the image of Adam's Bo Peep. And I sensed a slight awkwardness at the fringe of her daring, but the charged anomaly of it—even that whisper of insecurity beneath the pose of erotic confidence (would her husband like or laugh at it?)—set my pulse through the roof.

We even went a second time later that night, as if I'd harnessed the energy from the Melanie transgression and converted it, flipped it, coal to solar. Though that, I'd argue, was wishful thinking.

Sometime after midnight, Shelley snored at my side, still wearing her fetching hood and cape—the remains of her Little Red Riding gear strewn across the bedroom floor. I was propped by a pillow, the reading lamp on. Having another go at The Ravings. I'd found one more clue from Adam that evening and hoped I could string it together. *That* surprise slid from the package when I'd finally thrown it in the trash. But no—more! A *second* Polaroid (Peep's companion), which slowly altered my take on the first.

I flipped ahead to the essay's conclusion. It read:

Safety binds us to the language of psychology. It inures us to the Obvious, to the damaged and discarded, the doll parts in the dumping ground. Safety cannot see the crushed skull in its path nor hear the sound of the child being beaten, the neighbor's wife raped.

I glanced down at my wife in her hood and cape, naked under the covers. (If she knew. Jesus help me.)

Craven Safety craves more of itself. Excess Comfort feeds like a tapeworm on the belly of its own boredom. Both demand earplugs and blackened windows. Both say don't worry, I am the answer. Both say death is nowhere near.

I slid the newfound Polaroid from the back of the pristine journal. It was a rare picture of the four of us: Shelley and me, Adam, Maribel, out on their front porch. I could barely remember it. Some barbecue or party a few years back. We each had our arms around our spouses, everyone laughing at a joke just made. A nice photo, actually. That day at least, we'd enjoyed ourselves supremely. A moment's comfort captured forever. Safe, you could say. Death nowhere near.

I took out the Polaroid of Adam's Bo Peep and held the two pictures side by side. What *is* this? What's he trying to *say*? I examined the two together for a while, then slid them both between the sharp white pages and tossed the journal on the floor.

I clicked off the lamp, turned on my side, and festered there in the darkness.

(8)

Body Mass Index

It's Dr. Joe I'm indebted to, ultimately. Dr. Joe and Walter. I'm writing plays again, or starting to. Several Thursdays ago, the urge returned. And it feels so good. Spectacular, actually. Though I have my doubts. I do have my concerns.

We hovered that morning above Walter's body, at rest on the MRI platform. The formidable mass of Walter Jorgenson lying on a padded table, lift-assisted there only seconds before. The terrain of Walter on the ingoing bed, rising at an incline from throat to chest to the obvious mound in the middle, the adipose tissue that's serviced many studies (Epidemiology, Nutrition, etc. Walter has done some time.)

Fingers laced across this mass, Walter yawned broadly.

"Tired?" I asked.

"Long night," he replied, then smiled, his signature blossom. "Might have to take a little nap in here."

I looked over and across Walter to the radiologist I'd assisted, also quite hefty. Latino, early thirties, goatee and glasses. Dr. Jimenez, I believe (but as he says "call me Joe.")

"I've had it happen," he said, across Walter. "Couple of times."

"They fall asleep in there?"

"A few have," he said, and shrugged. "Can't help it."

Their bodies are quite similar, actually. If Walter hadn't been wounded at T4, where his wife shot him with his own handgun twelve to thirteen years before, these two could almost be twins. (Of the body.)

The story of this shooting is a sore point, actually, between Walter and me. At Shelley's bidding, I'd apologized. Had to call him on the phone and do it. I think he's exaggerating but that's his business. Every thing seems back to normal now. I simply have to stop fucking up.

We left Walter there and returned to the control room, where we sat behind the dense protective glass. Joe manned the board like a sound engineer. Or no—more like an editor of *film*, reproducing the guy in slices, the brief magnetism that radiates from tissue, lifted from the body like a shadow's stain.

And there went Walter, sliding into that supersmooth MRI tunnel—leather, beige, a perfect oval—drawn inward by the mouth of the magnet (into the eye that sees inside.)

At the corners of Dr. Joe's mouth, a grin rose.

"Let's hope this guy nods off," he said.

"Oh?" The tone surprised me. Seemed cruel somehow. "Why?"

Against expectation, Dr. Joe winked at me. "I ordered a scan of his dreams."

Now . . . as manifest in my play, or rather, my *notes* for a play—haven’t started the true composing—an ambitious if troubled night shift doctor (“Dr. Verde,” heftily framed) hypothesizes that our dreams have molecular composition. They are measurable and capable of being contained, like, as he claims, all brain activity.

Could it be that a dream (Dr. Verde asks the audience) has *actual physical density*? A *thing* we could bottle like a vapor or mist?

Of course the Dr. discovers how. Twisting the principles of magnetic resonance, he captures and bottles the brainwaves of dreams from the sleeping minds of his patients; redirects said vapor or mental mist into a complicated mammoth machine, then reconstructs and reconfigures until he’s got an image on a screen.

At first, they’re too fuzzy, hard to make out. He still has to work on the audio. Finally, he scores. *Clarity*! Complications of course ensue.

This is where the action in the play picks up. Where Dr. Verde’s patients’ dreams begin to change form in stunning ways. Stunning and somehow lurid.

They are altered by having been measured, recorded, though the patients have no clue they’re *being* recorded, before or after dreaming. “Like the Heisenberg principle with a blindfold on” (says Verde, Act 1, Scene 3-ish.) And then, strangely, his patients start to dream of *Dr. Verde himself*—often in compromising or embarrassing ways, the found footage of which places our Verde in some *very complicated waters*.

Shelley touched softly at my shoulder. I stared at the screen and typed away.

“You’re writing?” I nodded, grinned sort of sheepishly. She cooed, like aaaah.

And that’s when she said it. “Is he back then? The real Philip Palliard?”

I shrugged. “We’ll see,” I said. “He’s a little rusty. Cross your fingers.” I looked up at her a second, then returned to work. I stared at the screen. “It depends.”

She leaned over and plopped a kiss on my temple. I watched her move back to the kitchen, where she fed our Hank his carrots and peas.

At 34, my wife’s body is pleasing to the eye, perhaps all the more so for the additional tissue singing at her curves, a newly lit fullness it’s nice to see nearly a year after the fact. And more than that of course. The straight hygienic bloneness, the bright Canadian energy, the subtle wit and secret worry—it all feeds a resonance I’ve again found magnetic in new and exciting ways.

But I was telling you about my play. My notes for a play. *Magnetic Resonance*. Working title only. And that’s the thing. How it keeps shifting. Focus, I’m afraid, will prove difficult. For I was watching Shelley feed my son Hank—his little body just a dumpling with limbs, his face, his eyes all mischief and light—and admiring how she cares for him, the visible shift that occurs in her, a warmth and vibrancy that surrounds her like an aura every time he’s near—when she lifted her chin, and said:

“This should be me. All the time.”

“I’d like that,” I said, watching them there. “Is that . . . the real Shelley Canterbern?”

She grinned, though plaintively. “It’ll come,” she said. “When the Study’s done.”

That's the deal. Allegedly. Though lately I have to doubt it. For now, I escape only Thursdays. I cover for her at the Study; she becomes me at home.

"It went okay with Walter?" She shoveled a spoonful in Henry's mouth. "He didn't resent you?"

"Oh no no no," I said, waving this away. "I apologized. He forgave. The MRI went just fine."

"Well . . . now you know," she said, returning her gaze to the child. "Subjects don't want to have to tell their stories more than necessary."

"But Shelley"—I lifted my palms—"he offered it up to me! As I've told you—like, no *big deal*. I mean, if *you* shot *me* before we were married, I bet I'd tell that one too."

"It's a good story," she said, then glanced at me, smiling. "I'll grant you that."

"*Great* story," I said. "I'm not supposed to share it?"

She shrugged. "Just be careful over there," she said, and then, recalling something, pointed at me with the plastic spork. "And don't forget about *Dominick*." She half-nodded, sort of hedging. "I think he deserves an apology too." She turned back to Henry.

"You think?" I said, wincing.

"I do," she said, and looked up at me.

I'd been such the fuck-up at the Study lately—disastrously so. Before all the Walter business, I'd scheduled Dominick for an MRI that could have injured him further. If not *killed* him (though this remains, in my view, doubtful).

My fault, yes—undeniably—but here’s an equally icy fact: he’s not the only one who deserves an apology.

I watched my wife feed our son.

There’s another story that’s pretty awful, that I haven’t shared and *cannot* share. She’d kill me. Even kind of scares me a little.

I swung the door to the study shut. Back to the play. To (working title only) *Magnetic Resonance*.

For here I was thinking—against good sense—that, as an added complication, Dr. Verde will have cheated on his wife. Or no no—this: he can’t recall if he *has* or not. If it actually happened.

And did it? (Verde asks the audience, Act 1, scene 5-ish.) Did it happen or did it *not*? We *have* all the instruments. The tools of verification are in widespread use. Camera phones and wiretap kits and everything, all things recorded. Did it happen if you have no footage? Not even a basic photo or low definition sound recording? Things begin to get hard to remember. Unrecorded reality starts to look a lot less real.

So Dr. Verde may or may not have had fleeting, unfulfilling sex with a night shift nurse. Nurse Tyne, we’ll say. Margaret Tyne. A quiet elusive beauty he seduced on a slow night in the dark of the medication closet. Verde had fantasized many times about just such an encounter with this very nurse, and—sleep deprived in his secret work—can’t recall if he lived or dreamed it. Had he hoped it into memory (a false one)? Or hoped it into happening (reality unrecorded)?

Then, in one of his patient's dreams that he's captured and reconfigured—this Rubenesque redhead with a heart condition, quite handsome, nearly forty—she and the doctor sleep together. And in the dream, the dreamer knows she's party to Verde's cheating. She even feels guilty about it. Yet the sex itself is quite convincing, quite satisfying. On the video screen in his office, Verde watches the dream in wonder. He can't believe how smooth he is in *bed*. He's masterful. Turns out it's gratifying—even inspiring—to watch footage of yourself succeeding at fictional intercourse.

That is, until someone like Nurse Tyne walks in on you watching this dream, which she doesn't *know* is a dream and would *never believe* is a dream. She quietly opens the door to Verde's office and watches over his shoulder.

Verde doesn't notice. Then soon enough does. (“Margaret! What are . . . ?”)

There's a knock on my study's door. Shelley peeks her head in. I am sweating at the brow. I have the slight start of a hard-on. Little Hank in the snuglee smiles at me, as if he somehow knew. She tells me they're going to the park. I nod rapidly and tell her I love her. I love her and Henry very very much. She laughs at that, plops a kiss at my temple, and steps off peppily toward the front door, a trail of bright Canadian energy seeming to shimmer in her wake.

Oh it didn't really shimmer. Or even seem to. I was just nervous and enthused.

But I remained in this state, getting little sleep—quite little—something like half of what I'm used to. When I wasn't watching the baby—and even when I was—I took

notes for *Magnetic Resonance*. Voluminous notes. Considerable research. Hadn't felt this driven in *years*.

I read Freud, Jung on dreams, Foucault on the birth of the clinic; even read Dr. Joseph P. Hornak on the basics of Nuclear Magnetic Resonance. That's what an MRI *is*, after all. They've dropped the "nuclear" to skirt the issue, to avoid all the dark associations. Nagasaki, Chernobyl. Who wants that? Who wants the word *nuclear* slicing through them, drawing up their shadow like a mushroom cloud?

I planned to start actual composing any day. Very soon. My project now called *Nuclear Magnetic*. Working title only. Had a nice ring.

But the following Thursday, we were thrown a curve, me and my note-taking process. I was stepping at a rapid clip through the lobby of the spinal chord clinic, sleep-deprived and buzzed on lattes—two consumed in quick succession—when I passed none other than Dr. Joe Jimenez, guiding his girth through space. Proudly, patiently. Shoulders back, face placid, he noticed me coming, then smiled—slightly—and up-nodded.

I nodded back, seeing here not Dr. Joe but rather my own Dr. Verde.

I ought to change that, I was thinking. Verde doesn't need the goatee and glasses. Change to mustache only. Or a shaved head. Perhaps acne scars or a prominent mole. And what, I abruptly asked myself, was Dr. Joe doing here *anyway*? Shouldn't he be at the MRI Center, ordering a scan of someone's dreams?

Fresh from the elevator, 20th floor, I found another doctor waiting for me—smaller make, larger stature (at least professionally)—Dr. Allan Meng, the spinal chord specialist. He was standing behind the front desk, examining some materials in a manila folder. Shelley's Study, I knew, was a mere side project to him, if not an irritant. That was my guess anyway. He was a star in his field, internationally recognized. Shelley was a mere phd candidate, a sort of nutritional Epidemiologist—unless she was an epidemiological Nutritionist, I was never sure—making the fairly predictable argument that men in wheelchairs (with SCIs, T spine or higher) tend to gain weight around the belly. And me? Merely the husband of the perky Canadian who ran the study he had no time for.

Yet still, he always held up. The Meng manner always won you. Made you feel welcome every time. Light, attentive, receptive, generous. Unimposing or imposed upon. The Meng manner. Every time.

“Mr. *Phil*,” he said warmly, lifting his eyes from the paperwork. “Precisely the man I’m looking for.”

“Oh?”

He had a slight, lean body, five foot five-ish. At rest you’d have to call the posture rigid, a brace seeming to prop the back. But in motion he was rubbery, agile—even fluid. *At the ready* was the body’s message, crossed somehow with *relax, take it easy*.

He raised his brow. “I see you guys still use the BMI?”

I nodded. Body Mass Index I knew well; it was easy to calculate (Weight divided by Height squared = maybe you should lose a couple lbs.)

Meng ran his fingers through the coal black crewcut.

“BMI’s essentially the standard, I know”—he gently jotted his head to the side—
“but I’m suspicious of it. So many variables get tossed from the boat. Bone mass,
muscularity, frame size, et cetera. You realize there are alternatives that perform just as
well?”

I stared back in silence, a clinical dummy. Dr. Meng smiled.

“Just mention it to Shelley”—and patted my back.

I noticed then what he’d been looking at. Walter’s MRI. Dominick’s x-ray.
Again, icy darts up the spine. Meng noticed my noticing.

“So . . . Walter tells me you really fished for his story.”

“You mean . . . that his wife shot him?” I went a bit red here. “I’d hardly—”

“Before they were married.”

“Yes . . . I know.”

Meng touched at my shoulder with his immaculate palm. Something warm there
(also something forceful).

“Phil,” he said, catching my eye. “I’m not going to scold you. I’d bet Shelley
already ripped you a new one in this regard.”

“Yes, sir, she did,” I said, stiff here. “Still burns.”

He laughed lightly. “My more pressing concern, Philip, involves um . . .”—he
looked down at the file and took out the x-ray—“Dominick. Dominick Lafuse.
Remember this guy?”

I nodded. Now he had me.

“Clear as day,” I said. “He used to live across from us before he went to Iraq.”

“Oh? That I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, he’s our uh . . . an ex-neighbor.”

“You’re friends?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Enemies then?”

I looked back quizzically, shaking my head. “Not at all.”

“I ask because—again, I imagine you’ve taken considerable heat over this at home—”

“A rain of fire. Believe me.”

“Ha. Well”—again that sensitive force at my shoulder, the powerful palm of Dr. Meng. “You know how an MRI works?”

I nodded. A soldier now.

“Nuclear Magnetic Resonance Imaging. Know it in and out.”

Again, that laugh. Light. Encouraging. “So you know there are certain placements of metal where a given spine cannot bear its power?”

I turned to him. “Please, doc. Let me explain. I had a *very* rough week when that kid got scheduled. *Very*—”

“Don’t explain. I’m not scolding you. You didn’t *try* to do this, right?” I shook my head no. “Shelley says you didn’t even *know* you’d scheduled him.” Again, I shook my head no, a meek little puppy. If I whimpered a little and wagged my tongue, I wouldn’t be surprised. Then—gently, abruptly—the Meng manner went into lockdown.

“We have to weigh the factors of the circumstance, right?” That easy, soothing voice, so not-accusing. “Calibrate the balance?” He weighed abstractions with cupped

palms, as if they were balanced on a scale. “Knowledge versus negligence.” One cupped hand rose, the other sank. “Intent versus inattention.” One rose further, the other sank more. “Outright mendacity versus clueless malpractice.”

“Oh my.” I woke a little there.

Meng shrugged. “Which weighs more? What’s the heavier force guiding *any* behavior?” I thought about it but had no answer. “In your case,” he said, wincing a little, not liking to have to say it, “negligence. Extreme inattention. Were you a doctor, you’d be sued.”

I laughed, a nervous burst.

“Not funny,” he said, lips pursed. The Meng manner had its moods.

I nodded, went sober. Absolutely. Got you.

“Dangerous,” he furthered. “Very.” He looked me in the eye. “That’s all I’ll say”—another pat on the back—“You’re good people. Let’s keep the eyes open, okay?”

Then he glanced at his watch, asked about the baby, and turned on his heel with a bright little jump, heading off somewhere he was needed.

Well, it’s Dr. Meng I’m in debt to now. His gentle scolding changed everything. *Everything*. In the play, our doctor is no longer large and Latino but rather slight and Chinese (which I might change to sturdy and Korean). Dr. Kang, we’ll say. And this Dr. Kang—the former Dr. Verde—has learned to measure the *strangest* things. An added discovery in the second act, with all the attendant dramatic complications.

Kang captures and measures abstract forces no one knew you could stable. He starts with dreams, those recordable, palpable *things* from Act I. Kang captures hopes.

Kang captures fears. Kang captures passions, ideological aggressions. Kang captures futures and pasts.

But no, I realized. Stop (I said.) That's too much. Too weird. Way too out there. Strays too far from the first inspiration. Which, I had to ask, was . . . what again?

There's a knock on the study's door. I'm wide-eyed, tingling all over. Shelley enters with Hank in the snuglee. Before she can get a word out, I tell her I love her. I love you both so much, I say. She's taken aback, laughs.

"Go okay today?"

"Just fine," I say.

"How was Dominick?"

"Dominick?"

She tilted her head, puzzled. "He was coming by. For his check?"

"No, I . . . just talked for a while with Dr. Kang."

"Dr. Kang?"

"*Meng*. Dr. Meng. Sorry."

Confused, she looked at me; then let it go. Looked at her watch.

"I'm surprised Dominick didn't show."

"Yeah well . . . I've got a big juicy apology waiting for him when he does."

She nodded and looked at me, half-grinning. "Right."

She informed me they were off for a walk, then stepped away and muttered to herself, quizzically (Dr. *Kang*?)

When they'd left, I returned to my notes—the project I would now call, tentatively, *Body Mass Index*. Or no—maybe one of those cheeky titles that can't make up its mind? A wink of a title with its telltale *or*, signifying smarty pants complexity, like: *Body Mass Index, or . . . the Nuclear Magnetic Shadow Machine*.

I grinned as I wrote this, then realized I was weary of it. *Must start actual composing*, I typed (then italicized.) I walked to the far front end of our apartment and stepped out on the porch for air.

A crisp cool October day. Near perfect. Orange, damp, firmly set. A bit bracing but pleasing, focusing. Harvest seemed in the air. With my hands on the stone slab “railing,” I took in a breath, deep and grateful, then looked down and saw them there, together.

Shelley with the Monarch in a snuglee, standing in front of our building, talking to our neighbor from across the hall (oh shit.) Melanie. The fetching yet ghostly Melanie Trident. I took a half-step back and watched.

They were quite a sight, actually, these two: these pillars of serious womanhood (my pair). Look at them down there, chatting it up. Beaming, vital, crisp, cool. Shelley's robust Canadian health next to Melanie's hipster chick vigor (complexion so pale it seemed to glow). Nutritious reality, subversive fantasy.

Again came another. That icy stabbing. Then I saw a flash.

My neighbor hovering above me, my back on her carpet. She gently placing her body onto mine, this most recent neighbor sliding down *into* me—that's how it felt, her into me—briefly uniting us weeks before.

That happened. Not long. Just a few faint strokes.

Then, deciding against it, I lifted her hips up and off me. And she was light enough though denser than expected. The lean ethereal body—so alluring of line and curve—that in motion, while walking, seemed to hover or float but felt so substantial and warm up against you.

Just that once. Almost just that. Until it happened again. And did it? Shit. Shit. I keep forgetting (or denying): the other time, a week or two later. Our second go across the hall: longer, fuller, deeper, darker. But forget that, forget it, forget forget.

Down on the sidewalk, Shelley leaned over and hugged her. A friendly kiss. Melanie reciprocated, kissing Shelley's cheek, then the baby's. And this word whipped to mind—a bit flamboyantly, I thought: *Judas*. And who did I mean?

After Shelley left and they'd waved goodbye, Melanie turned and looked up and saw me. Together, we let the moment hang. Neither said a word. I doubt she felt guilt exactly. I knew her coupling with Hugo was "open." All the same, she knew ours was closed.

Wasn't her fault. Not only. Obviously. Still, it was weird to see her down there. We'd avoided each other for weeks—at least I had—behind front doors only feet away.

She semi-smiled. I nodded back. Then I coughed, waved and stepped inside, perhaps a bit abruptly.

Back in the study, I opened my file (*Notes for A Play*) and made some quick additions. But as I looked again over my notes (57 pages, single-spaced), I had a horrible sinking feeling. Had to face this thing. My actual life. I might not *ever* begin

composing. Had I killed the contest with preparation? Or did I need to atone? Before it began?

Days later, a Saturday, Shelley off with the baby, I made my way to the corner store. It was late October but a gorgeous day. High of 70, 71. The air of false summer sneaking under the radar, trying to trick us the cold hadn't come. On the corner, I saw two familiar figures, one standing, the other in his chair. Our neighbor Melanie held a can of La Croix, our ex-neighbor Dominick a burning cigarette. His thin earphones circled his neck; Melanie's satchel circled her torso. They were discussing something, charming each other, these living roots of my quest for apology.

Melanie was talking to him—ebullient, breezy—and Dominick was nodding yes yes I agree. As I approached, each glanced over, though neither stopped talking.

"Exactly," said Dominick. "*Exactly*. Music is changing so fast, who knows what we'll have ten years from now. We don't even know if hip hop's the future. That could die too."

"Maybe," she said, "but I doubt it."

"Some whole new creature, right?" he said. He took a drag, grinned.

"Slouching toward Bethlehem?" she asked.

He shook his head no. "Fuck Bethlehem. Slouching towards the *internet*."

"Right. You're right."

Now Melanie's a music writer, that's what she *does*—but Dominick? I blushed at my surprise. The easy references, sophisticated claims. This 23-year-old who once lived

across from us, discussing the culture like a pro? And *with* the pro I'd pretty much slept with?

"Hello Philip," she said, way too relaxed. "You know Dominick?"

"He knows me," said Dominick.

She looked at her watch and muttered *ohmigod*.

"Don't think I'm running away from you," she said, looking up. "I sincerely have to go."

We stared at each other. "But . . ." She shook her head, then leaned over and whispered in my ear: "*It would have been nice, but I want no secrets. If Shelley were on board, I would be too. So would Hugo.*" She pulled back and said out loud, a bit shockingly, "But I don't think she's one of us."

She nodded ruefully, waved goodbye, and glided forth through the odd October warmth with that hovering thing she pulled off somehow.

We watched her leave. To my side, Dominick said, "She is *fine*."

"Yes. Yes she is."

He chuckled. "I know you want that shit."

"Maybe I do"—I nodded again, then held up my ring finger—"Can't."

Dominick shrugged. A slight tilt of the head, slight smile.

"Of course you *can*"—he shrugged again. "But you shouldn't. Or whatever. I wouldn't judge you. I think your wife's fine too, she *is*—but . . . for my tastes?"

We watched her hover off, blocks away now. Dominick went *wooo*, then tapped at his wheelchair with a biker-gloved palm.

"Just be glad you can't in the way you can't."

I looked down at an angle. Paralysis from the waist down. I suppose I hadn't quite acknowledged all that meant. And *is* that what it meant?

"If I could?" His eyes slid up to mine, locked in. "I'd take that shit home this very afternoon." He watched her go, shaking his head, as if recalling a future he'd never get to see.

I laughed. "You sound smitten."

He went "ha" and waited. "Like it matters."

He coughed as we watched her turn the corner. "You smoke?" he asked.

"Sorry. Don't."

"I need some." He raised his brow, looked to the store. "You going in?"

I nodded. "I'll get 'em. What you smoke?"

But there in the store, I got that sinking feeling, tied to what came before it like attachable rope ladder, down to hell. Had to apologize on *so* many fronts. To start, right here, with Dominick. Though *apologize* seemed too light a word. Too fraught with status and basic white guilt. Though—face it—he'd lost nearly all. Quite a bit. He'd been sent abroad and lost damn near all. Yet this was the first I'd witnessed any bitterness. He was chipper, plucky—remarkably so—in the face of having been floored by the war.

So maybe I didn't have it in me. Maybe I decided against it. An apology about an MRI appointment—what never happened—seemed insulting in the face of what had.

I bought him his Parliaments and we shared goodbyes. He rolled west, I south.

Later, Shelley and the baby and I picnicked in the park. Absolutely gorgeous day. The Monarch's starting to form words too. Language production! Today he said the word *corndog*! Swear to god. I think he said *corndog*. My not-quite one-year-old son!

Much later that night, though, deep deep into it—after multiple glasses of pricey red wine and vigorous congress with my life-betrothed—I dreamt serenely, vividly, of an interwoven world, a sort of webbed *orb* you'd have to call a body—or a planet or cell or cellular culture—capping this intricate film of a dream. A full-length movie far better than my play. Far far superior. Some of the same characters, yes, but mostly just their inspirations.

Dr. Joe was there. Walter Jorgenson. Dr. Meng. Shelley. Dominick. Me. The Monarch, obviously. Melanie of course. Plus a nurse from the clinic I haven't yet mentioned (that Rubenesque redhead approaching forty who never fails to smile at me).

Now I sit awake, looking at my notes in the chair by the table in our bedroom. The black funnel nightlamp is on, angled down. I have my pen ready and I'm trying to remember it. Like, the first two and half *hours* of it. But I can only remember the ending. And that was just the very end. It was so good. So much better than what I had.

I look over at Shelley on the queen size, naked save for her red hood and cape. We role-play all the time now. Just for kicks. Wasn't my cup of tea at first, but recently I've come to crave it. I watch her snore into the funnel of her hood; I fish for my dream.

Never been a screenwriter, but swear to god—it was great. So odd and intricate. I have to retrieve it. I *must*.

I'm clenching my eyes, trying to see it, what came before the dream ended, before we were all one body and swam like a cell in the bloodstream of a giant. There were individuals, separate but together. There was intrigue, deceit, poetry, mystery.

I open my eyes to see Shelley snoring. She's out cold and it's not coming. The dream is nearly gone. I press pen to clipboard.

Must start actual composing, I write, then read, then underline. *Must start actual composing!*

I hear something out in the living room proper. A faint, familiar, tantalizing something. I step swiftly from our bedroom and walk the fifteen feet or so through the sort of "second" living room—past the Monarch's crib—then soon enough I'm in the more dominant room, where I plant myself beneath the heating vent, which is not yet seasonally obligated.

The god Eros has occupied our vent before, but this is the first I've heard the new neighbors. And now—yes—I recognize *that*. Or rather, her. Yes I do. I recall that voice in that particular trance. Or something a whole lot like it. A throaty purring, slowly letting go.

I stand there and listen to Melanie, to Hugo—part turned-on, part-tainted, part-infected—knowing somehow, in that icky instant, that *actual composing* had already come.

(9)

Origami of the Masons

I showed one of those kids across the street my secret trick with a twenty. It's Adam's stunt actually. He'd taught me months before. Some kid at the copy shop had done it for him and I thought I'd pass on the favor. Crease the back of your bill into itself via this intricate, sinister fold (three panels inward-creased), and you'll see the frozen image of the towers collapsing: the billow of smoke, the familiar caving in—as if 9/11 had been there all along. It's a mere accident of the shadows and ink. I put no stock in it meaning-wise. But still, the kid was as amazed as I'd been. Maybe even spooked a little.

Pretty cold out that day, colder than you'd guess for early November, and the little league gangbangers—at least on our street—seemed to have gone into hibernation. Then I saw this kid, about thirty feet off, interfacing with a guy I didn't recognize. There at the fore of the gangway, directly across from our place, exchanging exchangeables (whatever they may be): this kid I half-knew and some blade-skinny black dude in a furry-collared corduroy coat. Knotted brow, thick bottled glasses. *How old is this guy?* (I was asking.)

The kid, I knew, was no more than fourteen. Likely thirteen. This guy—I saw as we neared—was nearly (or over) thirty.

He trailed away with a furtive glance back as I moved with the stroller toward the kid. Sometimes I'd do this: stroll on the other side of the street. To see it from their side, their location, opposite our stone/brick 2nd floor porch, where I spent many evenings watching. This kid was a part of that scene. And something of an emerging kingpin, it seemed. Thirteen, fourteen, fairly hefty, with a premature poise that made him seem far older. Even thinner. In warmer seasons, clad nearly always in an oversized Bulls jersey that hung to his knees (**Gordon**, I believe), here in a blue bubbled winter coat and incongruous NY Giants cap.

We approached; he up-nodded.

“Hey there,” I said.

“Hey,” he replied, then leaned down for a peek in the stroller. We'd met this way a few times before. We were barely acquaintances, but I'd watched him for years. And he'd not watched but *noted* me. Each of us regarding the other faintly, with predictable doses of neighborly suspicion. He leaned in and patted Henry on the knee.

“How you doin', little man?”

“Hi,” said Henry, with some poise of his own. He scrunched up his shoulders.

“*Cold.*”

The big kid laughed and held out his arms, one hand clutching a bill.

“I know,” he said. “What *happened* out here?”

It slid from his fingers and hovered to the sidewalk, landing softly at my feet. He started to go but I'd already gone—“I got it.”

When I picked it up, we had a moment of weirdness. A very slight tension in the kid's face, the briefest suggestion of paling, perhaps the realization I'd guessed the bill's source (probably just a nickel bag or something like it.) And holding the twenty in that flash of oddness, trying to lighten things up, I surprised myself by saying this:

"You ever see the 9/11 thing?"

The kid winced. "What now?"

"Look," I said, and stepped back to fold the bill. "I can show you a trick that'll blow your mind."

It was an odd whim, my showing him this, though not entirely random. I'd been thinking a lot about Adam around then, and a few days before had remembered his trick. I'd even tried the fold already, to see if I recalled it. So it came quick—I was in practice—and again, there she was: the twin towers explosion, our overplayed history, so familiar, so *recent*—only five, six years before—frozen there in his dirty money in a stunning bloom of green and black.

His eyes popped. For a second he was speechless.

"Nice, huh?" I handed back the bill.

He took it, grinning, then looked up with slight suspicion. "That's *crazy*."

"I know," I said. "I agree."

He shook his head. I nodded goodbye. Thought I'd just leave it at that.

"You have a good one," I said.

As we rolled off, Henry chimed in: "Bye!" The husky kid only muttered in reply, staring down at his still-folded twenty. I strolled ahead into the clear sharp cold, passing what appeared to be another customer. A frizzed-out, aimless white dude, clearly

jonesing. His torn-up Member's Only was too light, still Septembery, and he moved with a tight nervy paranoid hop. Business appeared to be booming over here, even in the premature winter.

But I don't mean to harp on that, the illicit market or moods on my street. I tell you this, rather, because of what came later, and how it linked with the vanishing of Adam, who I'd sort of been *panging* for right around then. He was hardy conversation and liked his drink and I missed sharing both with him. Pretty badly, in fact. And a few days after this—a Wednesday, I believe—Adam in a way came back to me.

It was mid-afternoon, the Monarch napping, when the phone rang, breaking the silence. Caller ID coldly informed me that this was, in fact, the police. I held the receiver and stared at the tiny screen (**CPD?**) *Ring . . . Ring . . . Ring . . . Ri—*

“Hello?”

“May I speak to Philip Palliard?”

“That's me.”

“Hello Mr. Palliard. This is Detective Povich from Ward Thirteen. I'm calling in regards to a stolen Dodge Dart belonging to a uh . . . Adam *Swivchek*.”

“Adam's *Dart*?” My heart ticked a half-beat faster.

“Yes, sir. We've retrieved the vehicle. Located it this morning on the far west side. The cd player's gone but it's otherwise intact, catalytic converter and all.”

“Oh my *god*. That's . . . amazing.”

The detective cleared his throat (steady, indifferent.) “‘Amazing’ can happen, Philip, believe me. Seen it a bunch of times. This wasn’t it. We weren’t *trying* to find Swivchek’s vehicle. The Dart, you could say, came to us.”

“I see. And so um . . . how did it c—”

“Our initial report shows you were in the vehicle when it was stolen? Driving it?”

I waited on that one. Did not expect it.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes I was. Well, not precisely *driving*, but . . . officer, that was *August*. Long time ago. I was borrowing his car and . . . well—”

“You got jacked in your own parking lot. I understand that. Listen”—he waited, then took a bite of something (or seemed to) and chewed on it quietly, methodically. He swallowed. “Your buddy Swivchek is nowhere to be found.”

“I know I know.” I waited, breathing into the phone. “He’s been gone a *while*. Since around then, actually. He uh disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” said Povich, and took another bite. “In what way ‘disappeared’?”

“Well he didn’t—I mean . . . he moved *out*. Left willfully. ‘Disappeared’ on his *own*, if that makes sense. Took his furniture and all his stuff but never even sai—”

“This happened just after the car was stolen?”

“About a week after.”

The detective swallowed, then took another bite (or seemed to); chewed, ruminated.

“Listen, Philip,” he said, with that seasoned indifference. “We’re gonna need you to come down here.”

“Oh?” The plastic phone seemed to lighten—even float—in the nook between my chin and shoulder. “Right now?”

“If you can.”

A plaintive *Daaaaa*-dy rose from the crib near the front end of our apartment. Feather-phone at my shoulder, I gave Povich my affirmative, then hung up and walked in silence toward the child. They were having me in for questioning. How odd. But also—
—adventure! Out of the house to Ward Thirteen!

(*Daaaaa*-dy)

Might even prove redemptive. Official questions from the bona fide Law regarding the crime, that, for a while there, had gutted my mind, taken it captive.

(*Daaaaa*-dy)

I lifted Henry up to my shoulder and walked back through the living room, where I saw, I swear, in the mirror there—what other word worked but—*apparition*. A flash. Half a second. The nervy wan face of the guy who’d mugged me in the parking lot that August. (First my money, then Adam’s car.) Toxic memory, local terror, staring out from the mirror.

Now I’m not really one for apparition-seeing. Just a split second. Half a *half* a second. Noticed the source right off. A trick of the afternoon light plus its shadow from a hooded sweatshirt in a dark corner, hanging where a column of sinister sunshine had stretched to fill its void—but still. It killed. (Totally stilled me.) Henry even turned to look.

Adam would be entertained, I know it. The cops calling, his car retrieved. Even my bush league hallucinations of persecution by pistol. He'd call the whole of it a gift, what the doctor ordered (adventure, adventure, adventure.)

In the police station at Ward Thirteen, Henry on my lap, I waited in a hard plastic chair. We sat, unattended, just off from their desks, as two detectives—one hefty and sloppily mustached, the other lean and pristinely shaven—did their best to ignore us. The institutional fluorescent lighting hummed above us. We sat in silence. So far, adventure was far from the picture.

Something came, though. It really did. Not quite adventure, just the slightest thrill, when this other one entered the office, some cop or detective with nothing to do. Medium beefy in a Black Hawks cap, the back half of a glorious mullet riding his neck like a built-in cape. Eyes excited, holding a bill—and turned out, a twenty—he approached the younger well-coiffed one.

“Here. You gotta see this,” he said, and then started doing it—Adam’s fold! Tiny daggers shot through my veins, a tingling from the outside in. (My God.) The 9/11 crease must be sweeping the *nation*. The mullet in the Hawks cap showed it to his cleaner-seeming colleague.

“Jesus Christ,” said the latter, staring at the image webbed in the bill. “How’d you *do* that?”

“My kid showed me last night.”

The clean one leaned across his desk. “Hey Marty, look at that.”

The hefty detective with the droopy mustache examined it closely, chin up, mouth slightly agape.

“God,” he said. “What *is* this shit? Like—” He waited a beat. “Origami of the *Masons*?”

Both his colleagues laughed, but especially the clean one. The cleaner and younger busted a gut.

“Ha! Yes. *Nice*,” he said, taking back the twenty. “That’s good.” He examined the bill. “Origami of the *Masons*.” Then (weirdly, finally) he looked up at me, as if he’d just noticed. “Can we help you?”

Wasn’t much of anything, really. So they knew the secret fold. Just another network of need and neglect bubbling up its elusive signs, apparitions in other sorts of mirrors (U.S. currencies, private show and tells.) But I couldn’t help it; seemed foreboding somehow. I had fleeting notions of more cosmiclike forces, networks abroad, reminding me of god knew what.

That’s when I started thinking Adam was in trouble.

The interrogation room, if that’s what it was, didn’t ease my fears. An airtight bleakly carpeted square with a blackened one-way window to the side. On the dingy yellow walls hung only a calendar, strangely still at July. A cheesy pin-up girl—fake-titted, blonde, bikini-clad, toothy—stared across the empty room. Her, on one side, on the other, a tiny crucifix. On which hung a tiny bronze Jesus. This speck of church they snuck in the state. As if sex and suffering were facing off. Having a staring contest. (Maybe even flirting.)

My child was off to the side with big Povich, together there, with toys. Meanwhile, I sat in yet another plastic chair, sharper-feeling somehow, before a thin formica table. The clean, young one, who'd since introduced himself as detective Kozlowe, kept asking me questions about the previous summer, specifically re: getting jacked behind our building while sitting in Adam's idling Dart. Nothing too pushy. Just the basic what happened? While Povich played with my son on the side, digging in the Matchbox set I'd brought.

The "interrogation" itself was short-lived, essentially benevolent, just minutes, but I tell you—nearly soiled myself. Sleeves were rolled up on the long arm of the Law. With official-looking files, clipboards on tables. (What was up? Was I a *suspect*?)

Kozlowe started getting serious, bent over the table with his game face on. Just checking, I know now, that my story was legit, that Adam and I hadn't staged the Dart's theft to scam the insurance folk and split the booty. This is done a fair bit, Povich later explained (just after apologizing.) Questions like theirs in situations like this were reflex, routine, and I shouldn't take offense. Besides, *this* situation had some shady complexities only attributable to chance, right?

Big Povich *had* been listening. And when he'd noticed new fervor in Kozlowe's voice, he lifted his gaze disapprovingly.

"That's enough, Jerry"—and he stood. "Here."

Povich handed my son to Kozlowe, who looked irritated, then pretty soon taken. He goo-gooed and bobbed, walked Hank around the room, grinning here, laughing there, then stopped at the calendar and gazed at the blonde. Povich unfolded a Rueben from its wrap. He took a bite, smiling, and gestured with the sandwich.

“Look at this guy.” He gestured. “Real expert in child development.”

I laughed. Thank God I’d brought Henry. Should you be interrogated, I’d suggest you take a baby. But then it got weird. Povich swallowed.

“You should know. When we uh . . .”—he cleared away some sauce from the corner of his mouth—“when we found Swivchek’s car, there was a body in it.”

I popped my eyes (must have.) “A *body*?”

“That’s right.” The detective took another bite.

“A uh . . . dead body?”

“That’s how they usually come.” Povich paused. “Shot twice at the base of the brain. Execution style.”

“Oh my god, that’s . . . it’s not *Adam*?” My breath went tight. Povich coughed and looked down at his file.

“Is Adam . . . a 5’9” latino male with a shaved head and a lip beard?”

“Um . . . *no*. He is not.”

“Then Adam doesn’t have a bullet in his brain.” A heavy pause. He’d noticed the lapse in his logic. “That is, as far as we know.” He cleared his throat. “Not this bullet anyway.”

I nodded, grateful, relief rising through me. Povich sat, looking down at the file, then took another bite of his Rueben.

I thought about it then, and started taking guesses, and shouldn’t have, but did.

“You know . . . that sounds like—what’d you say? A latino male with a shaved head?”

“Shaved head and a lip beard. 5’9”.”

“Jesus, that”—not necessarily meaning to, I looked up at the tiny crucifix—“that sounds like the guy who mugged me.”

“Oh?” Povich looked down at the file again, holding the Rueben at a strange remove.

“Wait”—Kozlowe here, off to the side, carrying my baffled son—“That description fits the perpetrator?”

Povich nodded, then took another bite. “Apparently,” he said, chewing. “But that description’s not all that descriptive.”

“Sure it is,” he said and handed Hank back to Povich. Kozlowe turned to me, game face back on. “Think you’d recognize this guy if we showed you a picture?”

“Jerry, come now.” Jerry unfolded his palms for Povich.

“What?” he said. “This is SOP. Or it oughta be. Let’s do a photo array.”

Povich sighed with my son on his knee. “Those are a bitch to put together.”

“Ah! Hardly. Takes twenty minutes tops.” Kozlowe circled the table and patted my shoulder. “You got some time, right?”

A photo array lineup, Povich later explained, typically involves five photos of similar-seeming faces, one of course the presumed perpetrator. The problem here was Kozlowe only found two extra, one of whom had no lip beard. Essentially it was down to one extra face. And the other (with lip beard) had darker skin than I remembered. Thus down to one, and not so scientifically.

The remaining face—who really *was* the guy, they told me later, found dead in Adam’s Dart—rang a bell, but only a faint one. He did look a fair bit like my summer’s

carjacker. Wiry and lean; the dull, desperate eyes. Same coloring. Same angle to the skull and temple. But the photo—from a driver’s license, Kozlowe’d explained—was smudged-seeming, a tiny bit off, sorta muddy. Plus the guy in the license seemed relaxed, at peace, which confused the memory of edgy, tense, murderous. My mind wasn’t backing me up.

“That the guy?” asked Kozlowe.

I held little Hank on my lap (fidgety, getting restless.)

“I . . .”—it just wasn’t right—“I honestly couldn’t say.”

“But this guy *resembles* him?”

“Sure he does, but I just . . .”

“Couldn’t be certain?” said Povich, standing to the side now, arms crossed and Rueben-free.

“No.” I turned to him. “Not certain. Certainly not.”

Povich nodded. “There you go, Jerry. Our shadow of a doubt. And quite a long one at that.”

“You can’t say *that*,” said Kozlowe, clearly irked. “‘Shadow of a doubt’ is for juries. Juries deciding to *convict* or not. And I really don’t . . . would you say your uh ‘shadow of doubt’ was *long*?”

I shrugged, wincing. “*Yeah*. I guess I would.”

Povich laughed loudly, then motioned to me. “Come on. Let’s close down the show.”

In his office, detective Povich loosened up. Here's where he apologized and explained the situation. Here's where he confessed that a photo line-up should technically present five photos (not three.) He shrugged—yet unfazed—and opened his desk drawer, extracting a bite-size Snickers.

“My partner shouldn't have started all that,” he said, tearing the wrapper. “Waste of time.”

“Yeah”—I shrugged—“well, he thought he had his man.”

“Ah”—pooh-poohing the notion, taking a bite of the bite-size—“he thought he had an easy way to close the *case*.” He chewed, shaking his head, gazing through the window in his door. “He's young. You know? A little lazy. Unique combination of lazy and *overzealous*. But all the same—that *said*—you're uh . . . sure it's not him?”

He slid the photo from the manila folder and pushed the dead across his desk. (Jesus. Just a kid.)

“It wouldn't be conclusive. I'm sorry.”

He grimaced. “Naw. Don't be *sorry*. It's a good thing”—he took back the photo—“We're in Ward Thirteen, not Guantanamo Bay. Shadows of a doubt aren't welcome here.”

“Good good. I'm glad for that.”

“Anyway, it's highly unlikely,” he said. “Someone steals a car, *they* don't drive it around. It's no trophy. You sell it for parts or . . .” He stopped himself, staring down at the photo. He popped in the last of the Snickers. “Look at this guy,” he said, chewing. “Looks like a buddy of my kid's.”

“Yeah, well . . . he's certainly young enough.”

Povich nodded, swallowed. “A uh kid on the *track* team. Sprinter. Looks just like him.” He looked up and caught my eye. “My kid’s a shotputter.”

“Oh yeah? Nice. What uh what grade’s he in?”

“She. Sorry—my daughter.”

He turned the framed photo on his desk so I could see.

“Junior,” he said. “Lane Tech.”

Big girl here, nice smile. Steady, formidable, black shiny hair. Clearly they shared a gene pool. And she was cute in this eternal cherubic way that somehow unveiled the cuteness in her father, heretofore hidden by a Walrusy mustache and sandwiches and candy and gruffness.

“She’s pretty,” I said.

“Yeah?” He swiveled the picture back around. “She is, isn’t she?” He thoughtfully rubbed at his mustache. “Such a good girl. Really is. Smart, funny. *Top* notch shotputter. She keeps working at it, she could be world class.”

“Wow,” I said, trying my best. “I bet that’s exciting.”

“Philip, it truly is.” He looked over at Henry, napping in the corner. “You know, I felt your kid’s grip. He’s real strong for a one year old. He could shotput one day too.” He cleared his throat and leaned back in his chair, hands clasped behind his head. “You should consider it. It’s a challenging sport. Under-recognized.”

I nodded, obligatory. “Yeah. We will. Definitely.”

Povich grinned.

“Enough future family counseling,” he said, leaning back further. “Who am I to say what your kid’s called to be? His interests or whatever?” He leaned back down

toward the desk. “What color is your parachute? My old man used to say *pitch black*. Funeral black with holes in the fabric. Ha!” He stared at his desk, at the manila folder. “Dead now. The old man.”

“Oh. I’m . . . I’m sorry to hea—”

“I’m curious, Philip.” He crinkled his eyes here. Let the interruption hang.

“What about your buddy Swivchek?” He shrugged. “Where’d he *go*?”

This shift to Adam was abrupt; he had me. I shrugged in turn, shaking my head.

“I wish I knew.”

“Mexico?”

“I have no—” I stared at him. “What makes you say that?”

“You said something about Mexico to Jerry in the room back there.”

“Oh.” I remembered I had. “Yeah well, Adam’s wife is from Mexico. She *left* him. Split town with their son for Michoacan. Right before his car got stolen.”

“So I heard,” he said. “Swivchek’s a real swinger, huh? Got caught with some extra honey on the side?”

I felt myself go hot behind the ears. Had I said *that* much? I nodded reluctantly, bobbing my head side to side. “*Yeah*, he uh . . .”

“I tell you what I think,” said Povich, lowering his voice, leaning into his desk.

“And I speak to you absent of professional capacity. As a fellow human being. A curious human.” He waited, maintaining eye contact. “My guess is Swivchek’s gone for his son. He sounds arrogant, this one, a real asshole, but even guys like this feel the draw of their *child*. I mean, he was there as a Dad, right?”

Again, my reluctant nod, the side-to-side hedging.

“He wasn’t *deadbeat*?”

“No no. Absolutely not.”

Povich leaned back, shaking his head. “Deadbeat dads. They’re the ones I can’t fathom. Can’t stand your spouse? Fine. So be it! Split up then, work something out. But . . . *be there for the kid*. That’s the connection that cannot be cut, even if you try to sever it. Otherwise, they end up well—*here*, you know?”

He tapped at the folder containing the dead.

“Face down in a stolen car with their DNA on the dashboard.”

I grimaced, nodding directly now, steadily. From the corner, Henry woke. He cried, calling *daddy*. As I rose and moved toward him, Povich grinned widely.

“Solid kid,” he said. “Strong lungs.” He nodded at Henry. “Think about the shotput,” he said as I sat again, the boy at my shoulder. “Or at least track and *field*.” He pointed, grinning. “It’ll keep that little tank off the streets.”

Povich reached across his desk; we shook hands. They’d be holding the vehicle for forensic evidence. For both crimes, he told me (theft in August, murder in November.) If Adam returned or made contact—whatever—I should have him call their offices immediately.

The mullet in the Hawks cap opened Povich’s door. He smiled with mischief in his eyes. “Marty,” he said. “Come here. You gotta see this.”

Povich sighed and stood; I followed to where I’d left the stroller. As we left, I noted the three of them there—Kozlowe, Povich, Officer Mullet—standing at the latter’s computer, where crass icons of enemy combatants—hooded, arms outward, naked in a

row—danced the CanCan for cartoon prison guards, who in turn took sniper shots—this was a video game—at their periodically exposed gonads.

The cops looked gleeful, if guiltily so. Save for Povich—God bless him—who was still as stone, arms tightly crossed. Speechless, if not appalled.

*

*

*

*

A few days later, the air had warmed up—unseasonably warm for November, in fact. That illusory Shangri La that can fall a few weeks before Thanksgiving. This was Saturday morning—Shelley and the baby off at the park, me taking my time in the bathroom, reading—when the buzzer rang.

When I finally got downstairs, there was a package waiting. A thin brown envelope, 9”x12”. No return address but I recognized the handwriting. Plus this: an inky stamp across the rumpled brown paper indicating origins south of the border.

I had the fleeting sense he was watching right *then*. Like Adam was near but I couldn’t see him. Hiding behind someone’s curtains or blinds; behind a tree, a stop sign, car or van.

“Hey!” I asked the air, then shouted: “*Adam?!?*”

From across the street, the big kid looked over, curious. He’d been loitering at the fore of the gangway, wearing his knee-length Bulls jersey (**Gordon.**) This time, he had a partner with him, some skinny kid about his age with a buzz-cut and brightly hued Puerto Rican flag shirt. The big kid up-nodded. I up-nodded back, cracking open the package.

I tilted the envelope, reaching in, and found two photos. Polaroids. Adam had done this to me before. No explanations, just raw materials. Bits of him.

In this case, the Polaroids—nothing more. The first: a photo of Adam and his three-year-old on a streetcorner, eating chunks of mango. They both had ornery grins on, some joke they'd just exchanged, on a curb by a cobblestone street, the knobby legs of a donkey or goat off to the side in the background. So he *had* gone. For Jorge! This must be them right *then*. I flipped it over, saw Adam's loopy scrawl, confirming it:

Michoacan!

I slid this one behind the other he'd sent. Which stopped me cold. I'd forgotten all about it. Pictured here were Adam and me, Shelley and Henry, at the ballpark that past summer. Seated along the first base line, near shallow right field. Excellent seats (Adam's score.) And I wondered who'd taken this picture. No one else came with us. Adam had left his family at home and invited ours instead—what we didn't know until we got there. We sat puzzled at first, looking around for Maribel and Jorge. Adam had some explanation, but still, it seemed bizarre. Chilled us a bit actually.

In the photo, Adam looks lit. We all do. Even Henry looks like he's had a few. Together there only four months before, a muggy, softly lit night in July. A different time entirely. The last hours of a silvery era. Before it cracked open like a shiny plastic egg to the toxic surprise inside. Hidden there all along, I guess. Collapse, car theft, failure of family. Everyone leaving; Adam pursuing. Unless he was back—right there, right then—playing grabass with a friend he'd left for dead. Watching from around a corner? Snickering?

I almost shouted his name again. Then someone spoke.

“Hey mister.” It was the hefty kid from across the street, standing before me with his skinny pal. “Do that thing again,” he said. “With the money.” He held out a twenty. “You know—9/11.”

At first, I felt bad about it, twisting catastrophe into schoolboy show and tell, flipping it around like a paper football for the stoners in study hall, but then—I don’t know—I just did it. The towers collapsed in his folded bill, this obvious icon of the end of an era—another, far darker—a split second stake in the fold of history. A BC/AD kind of moment. The first my generation—at least in America—had seen (but never saw coming).

Well, I’ll tell you, the kids were mesmerized. That look of wonder on their faces alone—that *wow*—it made my day. Someone at the Treasury ought to get on this. I put no stock in it, but many will. Word spreads too fast or far or whatever, and they’ll have to print new bills.

(10)

The Ax Riseth

As suggested by many, we'd planned a date. This thing where overly occupied couples formally schedule a date together. Quality time is the phrase you hear. And our first order of quality-time business was discussion of my new play—a second draft of the first act—*Do Your Part for the War on Terror*, which I'd given Shelley to read.

She sat across from me, kitchen table, doing that thing where she makes me wait; where I've asked her what she thinks and she smiles (maybe) or not (often) and thinks about it, ponders it, the dead air rising and expanding around us. She was pensive like this a while, then, as if coming to, bit at a lip and said: "I don't know, Philip. I mean . . . with this one? I honestly don't know." She lightly wagged the manuscript at me, a weary gesture. "The point of the thing just seems too *easy*. At least what you've got here. I mean, the metaphor of it? If"—she waved a hand before her—"if that's even the right *word*. I'm . . ."—she seemed to be pointedly avoiding my eyes, which was strange of her, not like her at all—"Perhaps it's simply that it's quite a *stretch*. The whole

thing—the point, the conflict, the *metaphor*, whatever. And in—I hate to say this but—in rather obviously self-serving ways.”

“Self-serving?” I said, stung, brow up. “Really?”

She nodded firmly, twice. “Yes. Really.” She looked off to the side, mouth hanging open, smiling slightly, as if amazed. “I mean, *Philip*, you’re comparing—this is what you’re doing, right?—you’re comparing . . . basic male domestic panic to the terror in the ‘*war on terror*.’”

“No no no”—I hunched up my shoulders—“That’s not fair. That’s *simplistic*. You’re reducing it to something I never, ever inten—”

“It’s a seriously twisted thing, Philip”—she eyed me now, casting her whammy—“That comparison is *vain*. Totally narcissistic. But it’s also like . . . in a political or social way—what’s the word?”—she reached for it—“*Complacent*?” I shrugged; she shrugged back, though more tightly—“It’s *totally* complacent.”

“Jesus,” I said, punctured and deflating. “You don’t have to be so *forward* about it. God.”

“Don’t be sensitive.”

“I’ll try.”

She sighed with some impatience. “Philip, it’s just . . . I can’t tell what you’re trying to *say*.” Her lower jaw jut out to the side, a palsied, negative hunger. “I mean”—and again with that slightly amazed smile—“it’s so obviously about *us*.”

“Obviously?” I said. “You think it’s obvious?”

“*Philip*.” She stared at me, through me. “The protagonist is a stay-at-home father of Swiss-French descent whose Canadian wife runs a research study.”

“Sure,” I said with a quick tight shrug. “That doesn’t make it *us*.”

“Her study’s at a clinic for the spinal chord injured.”

“So?”

She shook her head, hunched up her shoulders. “And . . . what’s all this stuff about . . .”—her mouth hung open—“MRIs? And Magnetic Resonance? And dreams and dream machines and spying on people?”—a baffled smile to herself—“Like somehow seeing inside people’s *minds*.”

“Really?” I said, surprised. “That didn’t work for you?”

Weary, she sighed. “That’s not what I *mean*.” She flipped through the pages of the manuscript, looking for something specific. “There’s that one scene where our protagonist, Kendall—*you*, it’s hard not to see it that way—where . . . he contemplates an act of terrorism. We’re not exactly sure why. Maybe he resents something about the smug comfort of the American way. Maybe he resents his given role as the American househusband. But—and here’s the kicker—Kendall chooses instead, as a healthy alternative to bombing a bank or a mall, *instead*, he sleeps around on his wife.”

“Honey”—I shook my head repeatedly—“That’s not us. That’s not *me*.”

“You’re sure?”

“Sure I’m sure.”

Her mouth hung open; still baffled. “And then . . . all that weird shit with the insurgency, with the coming revolt of the unemployed and homebound, with Kendall—*you*—as the star soldier! And all that strange stuff with Bin Laden in league with the Latin Apostles. With Bush and Rumsfeld and the Gangster Disciples.”

“You didn’t like that? That’s *satire*, Shelley.”

She gave me a weary, withering look.

“Philip . . .”—she looked away—“are you implying that being married to *me* and acting as the primary caretaker for your *son*, who you insist on referring to as ‘the Monarch,’ even in your play”—she tapped at the manuscript, then turned to me—“this is, this being-*hemmed-in* feeling, this sort of domestic *sentence* you’re serving, this is . . . an *equal* terror to the terror of, say, the *Taliban*? Or *Al Qaeda*? Or even *Guantanamo Bay*?”

“No!” I said. “No no no. Honey, that’s crazy. That’s *insane*. You’re missing this thing about, all these themes about”—I was pretty worked up now, I counted them off on my fingers—“the alleged terror abroad and the obvious terror at home and poverty and gangbangers and the culture of *Bush*!”—I was exasperated. I shook my head tightly—“Jesus, Shelley, it’s . . . way more complicated than *that*.”

“Complicated?” she echoed. I nod-shrugged; she took a sip of wine. “Or is a better word *complex*?”

“Yes,” I said, though I didn’t like her tone. “One of those.”

“You,” she said, crossing her arms. “*You* are complex.”

“Oh?”

She nodded slowly, the bitterness in her eyes sliding toward a sadness.

“Philip.” She shook her head to herself. “*Why* would you give me this to read? With this character who seems so much *like* you? Who resents his life and bombs banks and cheats on his super-controlling wife?”

“I wanted feedback. Jesus.”

She shook her head. “You are difficult to fathom.”

“Shelley, please. What are you—?”

“I know, Philip.”

“You know?”

She nodded. Slowly, deliberately. “I know all about it. It’s not a secret anymore.”

There was a moment of confusion but I understood. She’d been leading up to it but I’d refused to hear. Melanie. She knew about Melanie and me. How we’d spent a little time together. I should have copped to the trouble right then, white flagged it and faced it head on, but something mulish in me wouldn’t give.

“Shelley,” I said. “Just tell me. What are you—?”

“Don’t make me do this.”

Without thinking, I lifted the package I’d brought—a gift regarding our in-house “date,” this kinky outfit wrapped in plastic from our local Erotic Warehouse. I lifted it absentmindedly, gesturing, shrugging—“Shelley, I’m at a loss”—I squeezed it like an accordion or squishy pillow. “Just tell me—“

“What’s that?”

She stared; it was a “sexy” girl-devil outfit with a photo of a girl-devil model on the front. Horns and cape and suggestive toy trident; inferno-red fishnets, laced demon bodice, the whole of it encased in industrial-grade plastic, a fresh accessory meant to keep things sparking.

“Something we might try,” I said, brow bobbing cornily, desperately. “You uh . . . you like?” I lifted it toward her.

“Oh my god,” she said, bridge of fingers at her brow.

The plastic-wrapped outfit hung between us, not so sexy here, not at all. I lowered it. She said, “You *are* at a loss. You are functioning at a loss.”

“Shelley . . .”

The phone—our landline—rang on the windowsill behind me.

“What exactly am I being accused of here?”

“Accused is the wrong word.”

“Of . . . ?”

“Philip. I *know*.” She stared at the ringing phone, then raised her brow (you getting that?) I looked at phone and shook my head no. “Oh I will then”—and she reached across me, lifting the receiver, aggressively grazing my shoulder on return—“Hello?” She glanced up at me, the bitterness/sadness afloat in her eyes. “Yes. He’s right here.” And she passed the phone over.

“Hello.”

“Hey Philip. This is detective Povich. From Ward 13?”

“Oh!”—I glanced at Shelley, who was holding the plastic-wrapped girl-devil outfit, staring at it, maybe even plaintively—“Well, this is a surprise.” Shelley looked up; I shrugged to her, then said to Povich: “What um . . . what’s up?”

I stood and stepped away from the table. Shelley sighed, shaking her head.

“We’ve made some progress regarding your buddy’s Dodge Dart,” said Povich into my ear. “The case just took on a different color.”

“Okay.” I paced toward the hall to the living room, glancing back to see Shelley waiting, bridge of fingers again at her brow. “Which color is that?”—and I moved down the hall.

Povich waited a moment. I kept moving toward the apartment's opposite end, out of the kitchen's hearing range. Povich said:

"Well, my colleague detective Kozlowe decided on a lark to search the Dart one more time. What he found in the backseat concerns us. A uh . . . a healthy little package of narcotics, Philip, hidden beneath the lining of the backseat cushion."

"Narcotics?" I said, half-whispering.

"Specifically cocaine."

I stopped at the far front end of the apartment, where the baby slept in the crib in the corner. I half-whispered, "Well that's . . ."—amazing how fast this took my attention—"what's that got to do with *Adam*?"

"It was Swivchek's vehicle, correct?"

"Well *yeah*," I said, hushed yet clenched, "it was his before it got *stolen*. Before it was driven around the city for *months*. I don't mean to doubt your suspicions, detective, but that package could be *anybody's*."

"Sure," he said. "Good point. We thought of that. But my uh . . . my colleague Kozlowe has done some extracurricular research, Philip, and it's starting, I'm afraid, to bear some fruit."

I waited a second, taking that in. "Regarding the cocaine?" I said. "Or Adam?"

"Both."

"They've found a connection?"

"Not really," he said. "Not a major one anyway, though I must admit, Philip, it's begun to show some legs as potentially compelling." He waited, half-chuckled. "Some

kid was dealing out of The Copy Boss. Swivchek's place—the shop on Division. Mostly pot but a little coke too.”

“I don't know anything about this.”

“Didn't think you did, Philip. Didn't think you did. Just wanted to apprise you of the shift in this newly colorful situation. I doubt the case gets made or goes anywhere useful but”—he paused, then lowered his voice—“Between you and me? I think Detective Kozlowe watches too much TV. He just got the luxury cable package this fall”—he sheeshed to himself—“but no matter now. He started playing detective in a stunningly thoughtful manner, and as I said, fruit has been borne.”

“Right,” I said. “The fruit. You mentioned that.”

“You need to let us know if Swivchek shows up in your life again. You knew that already, but I wanted to remind you.”

“I understand.”

“I knew you would, Philip. You have a good day.”

The connection clicked off. At the front end of the apartment, I stood rock still, swallowed by the dial tone. Seemed so cruel. Why *now*? I tried one of those slow breathing exercises Shelley taught me from her yoga class, closing my eyes, imaging as instructed. The gentle lap of waves on white sandy beaches; the breeze and the quiet and the soft hum of nature. But it was futile. I moved slowly to the kitchen, in no way salved, off to Shelley's shock and awe and whatever else awaited me.

No telling what Adam would make of this one. And I'd lifted the concept straight from the guy. “Do Your Part for the War on Terror” was his slogan, *his* notion. My hatless and debauched Uncle Sam pointing at me from my own private poster, suggesting

something off-center from the phrase, half-mocking or subverting it. The Terror at home; Terror already here; maybe, he'd say, from the very start (of our lives, our nation, our systems, institutions). And how would he name this one? This newly colorful situation?

My unhappy wife sat alone in the kitchen, looking up at me, depleted of her trademark grace. Her upbeat cheer and Ontario spunk had not come along this evening.

"Sorry," I said. "Had to take that."

She nodded, not so engaged. "Sounded serious."

"It might be."

"Do *I* sound serious? Does *this* sound serious?"

My mouth dropped; I nodded, conceding yes it does.

"Really now, Philip," she said. "The *neighbor*?"—again I nodded, searching for words. "Even on days when you had the *baby*?"

"Wait now, wait a minute," I said. "You make it sound like it was some sort of *routine*."

"It wasn't?"

"*No*." I jogged my head tightly side to side. "I mean . . . yes *and* no, but now I'm not sure we're talking about the same thing. Actually, it's not a . . . well, it's . . ."

"A lie. That's what most call it. Something you're not precisely skilled at delivering." She moved past me toward the hallway, where she opened the closet and rooted around. She pulled out a relative obscurity: her long conservative gray felt coat, which she didn't often wear, reserved, as far as I could tell, for funerals and church in winter (two places she wasn't often called). She buttoned it swiftly, looking down.

“Contracts and honor, mister. Contracts and honor”—she looked up—“It really does boil down to that now, doesn’t it?”

At a loss, I said nothing.

“It took Hugo to open my eyes on that one.”

“Hugo?!” I stepped back, shaken awake. “*He* told you? *Hugo’s* your source?”

She nodded slowly, then crossed her arms. “Hugo and Melanie have a *very specific* contract, Philip. As do we. Very specific.” She gazed at me placidly, with half-pity eyes. “Open means open. Taken means taken. And I must agree with my good friend Hugo, who . . . well, he feels you’ve broken *both* codes of honor.”

“Oh does he?” I said. She looked down, buttoning her coat. “Will he be challenging me to two duels?”

“Funny”—her fingers here at the final button, sealed now up to the neck. She looked up and took me in, then looked away. “Listen”—again, this avoiding of eyes. “While we’re at it, it’s only fair I tell you: I’ve been contacted by the search committee at MacGill.”

“The visiting scholar thing?”

“I’ve made no decisions but thought you should know.”

“That’s *great*, Shelley. I mean—well *is* it? Would we move up there or . . . ?

Arms crossed, she stared at me. She shook her head and grinned, still amazed.

“We?”

A chill ran through me.

“You need to take an extra long look at yourself,” she said. “Talk to someone close about this. Open your address book and make contact with reality.” She stood and moved from the table. “Give *reality* a call and see what it has to say.”

She turned to leave.

“Okay wait—honey!”—and she was out the back door. “What about our *date*?” The door closed. “I already ordered food!” I was shouting hard at a thick wooden door. “*Thai* food!” She stomped down the staircase. “Cashew *chicken*!” But she was gone.

I looked down at the sexy girl-devil outfit, its pristine packaging, so cheesy and deliberately tantalizing. Playful surprises galore, I thought. I’d frankly assumed I’d be getting laid.

Something caught the corner of my eye. A picture on the fridge: Shelley and Hugo back in college, where they’d been close friends, even fooled around a little—just once, says Shelley, and I don’t doubt her word. (Why should I? I never do.) They’re just friends now, buddies for years and years. I stared him down. Contracts and honor, huh Hugo? I lifted the magnet and turned the photo on its face.

Back at the kitchen table, the tattered title page of my unfinished play stared up at me. I’d even included a graphic on the cover, just for kicks: a cool-eyed daddy with a baby in the Bjorn, though also with a glock in his grip, an X-vest of bullets, a sniper’s rifle across his back. *Do Your Part for the War on Terror*.

I turned the manuscript on its face.

I moved back through the hallway, back toward the crib in the corner of the living room. Earlier, the babysitter had cancelled, and we’d been forced to move the date in-house. Surprises galore indeed.

I watched the sleeping baby breathe, splayed out on his back in the crib.

Before my eyes, the child swiveled his head—did he sense me? smell me? He stretched out his little tugboat of a body, then wailed, damn near screaming, a wild wounded animal sound, as if terrified for the both of us.

The buzzer rang, and I was sure it was Shelley. Returning, having forgotten her keys. Monarch in my arms, wailing away, I went downstairs to the building's front door. There, I found the delivery guy, a skinny Thai kid not yet eighteen, smiling broadly and holding our food. The baby cried harder, fiercer. But I had no money on me, I was trying to explain. My wife left abruptly and took her purse.

Well he couldn't understand me. There were language issues, yes, but the baby was a louder barrier by far. I could smell it—the Panang curry (my favorite), the cashew chicken (hers)—yet knew he'd walk off without leaving the bag. I had no money on me. Not a cent.

We stood in the cold on our building's front stoop, the Monarch wailing, this guy not understanding, me absorbing what I could of the maddening scent of the food I would not be eating.

(11)

Perpetual Union

Shelley found the photo on the kitchen counter in the silence that fell just after. A loud and lasting fallout silence (considering what she's proposed). She lifted her chin like a haughty professor, eyeing the memory that had come in the mail. I stood in the doorway and felt it good.

Little Hank toddled in the hallway behind us. He'd heard everything. The whole of it. Tones of bitterness, quivers of betrayal. Would the moment lodge inside him forever? A hidden infection in the folds of memory, later to impair his way of being?

Shelley'd say that's neither here nor there. What counts most is this: that I've *declared sovereignty* and it's *irreversible*. My secret is out, so why bother?

Her gaze slid up from the photo (really quite dark here). "How sweet," she said, and lay the photo on the counter. "I remember that. June, right? Or July? Where'd you find this one?"

"Adam sent it. From Mexico."

"Mexico, eh?"

I nodded sort of timidly.

“So he’s gone for his family then?”

“Looks like it.”

I stared back, trying to match her force.

“How noble,” she said, eyeing me (and winning). Abruptly, she stepped at me. I moved aside. She swept to the doorway, then hallway, making a beeline to the baby. As she passed, she said, sort of under her breath—“*You and your pal.*”

Behind me, she picked up Henry. I turned to watch.

The door closed, a muted click. Gone.

I stood in the hallway a long minute, then turned to the kitchen and remembered the photo. I went and lifted it; held it at the white-framed corners.

All of us together at the ballpark only four months before. Fabulous seats on the first base side in the soothing of late July: me and Shelley and the baby plus Adam, up in the stands next to shallow right field. Adam’s score, these tickets. My ex-neighbor, the neighbor I’d cherished, who’d been replaced by another—or rather, by two—one of them Hugo, who, it turns out, despite being something of an actual swinger had broken code and gone moral on the rest of us (the not-swingers who may have slipped). Gone conventional, from swinger to snitch.

Friendship before liberty, I suppose. Just couldn’t help himself. Fucking *Hugo*.

I looked down at the image pressed between my fingers.

Me and Shelley and the baby plus Adam. Jesus. So *much* in this photo. Acres of territory stretching behind it. Histories. Connections. Heady Deceptions. But also that

moment, that instant right then, a carefree vibe in the muggy evening air that remained unsullied until much later. Not, at least, until the seventh inning. Though that had nothing to do with *us*—Shelley and me, or even really Adam. It had everything to do, in fact, with *all* of us.

But perhaps that's hard to follow. Here's what I mean.

Adam, as I said, had these tickets to the game, which he'd score on occasion from an unnamed source—sometimes five, six tickets, usually nice ones—and had asked us if we'd like to come along. (Bring the baby! We'll have a gas!)

Well Shelley and I just assumed. Neither of us even asked. Maribel and Jorge would be coming too. But when we reached our seats, we found him alone.

"Maribel and Jorge?" Shelley asked, after we'd sat and ordered beers.

"Oh . . . they're not here."

We both stared at him, stumped.

"Are they not *coming*?" asked Shelley.

"No, they're—" He took a meditative sip—"Jorge has music class. So does Maribel. At the—whaddyacallit—Old Town School. 'The Mother and Child' or some shit."

Well, we both knew right off that was a lie. Though later, discussing it, we couldn't pinpoint why. Maybe its how he'd said it—the false casualness (not his style). But also, mostly, all the other things we knew about the sun going down on his marriage.

So he'd left them behind. We were their replacements. In lieu of a happy family, he'd taken ours instead.

But the weirdness about this faded fast. We were helpless against what surrounded us. The green green grass and the crack of the bat and the cheers and the laughter and shouting. We forgot ourselves. Two beers in, waiting for another, and all of us were having a ball.

You can see this in the photo. Dreamy carelessness is in the air. Aimless and beautiful. We do not care. Since Adam sent me this image in the mail, I've examined it multiple times. Look at it enough and it leaves you curious. For example, who's taking this picture? That's one question. No one else was in our crew.

I've since remembered, though. Came to me recently. A few things have, in fact.

First, the woman who took our photo, as you may have guessed, was simply a random passerby. We were in the front row of our section, where people would freely stroll by, and Adam just asked.

"Excuse me," he said, hazy-eyed, playful, several in at this point. He held up the camera. "Would you?"

Nice woman, you could see this. Real nice lady—mid-fifties or so, all plump and rosy. Her amber hair a touch overdone. Cubs cap, Bermudas, white canvas sneakers.

She took our picture, goo-gooed for the baby, and went on her merry way.

That's the first of what I recall. Just a flash. The second—and this part has lodged in me clearer—second was the seventh inning stretch.

That's when the camera pans out from our lives, our little enclosures—our needs and betrayals and confusions of heart—and hovers behind us, floats above; the crowd, the

mass before us now. Center stage, sauced and souffled. Beery enthusiasm rising like batter.

First, we all stand, relaxed, anticipating. Next, they introduce the soldiers. Random names from Iraq, Afghanistan. Ten to twelve of them standing in a uniformed arc behind home plate, four others about to sing from a smaller arc—this service quartet—in front of a microphone on the plate itself. The crowd erupts in generous applause. Lengthy and grateful. A bit proud of itself.

But thirdly—just after this, and pretty unexpectedly—they went ahead and read off a list of the dead. Dead in combat. Recent names, evidently.

Well, a heavy moment there, I can testify. A palpable bell-shaped something descended. These were the names of dead men. And this is when I noticed the flags. Digital flags, undulating on a lengthy band of screen that circled the base of the park's second tier, that half-arc, once only concrete, now waving like digital bunting. This long thin screen pulsing red white and blue. Old Glory, pixilated. Flowing proudly. Gently.

Finally: *America the Beautiful*. This chorus of soldiers who'd served together in the war, in the Green Zone (or something like it)—Green Zone Boys with golden voices—belted it out with soft aplomb.

Well, they sang it beautifully, I have to say. With, I suppose, that earned respect. Soft and funereal, aware of its weight. I have to say, we were rapt. Captured. Though a bell dropped that hard will echo complications.

A-mer-i-ca A-mer-i-ca

God shed his grace on thee

The digital bunting with the flowing flags? The dead soldiers gone and the living ones singing? It was hard to know how to take it.

Which is when I looked or glanced to my left and saw her standing there—the woman who’d taken our picture. She had seats in the row just back of us, practically sat *behind* us in fact, about five, six seats over, toward home plate. And she was weeping. Just overcome. Not hysterical—quietly, a stature in tears, barely moving, just whimpering intensely. At least as far as I could tell. From where I stood and stared.

The digital bunting undulated proudly. The chorus entered their rousing close. As she wept and wept and softly whimpered. I watched it. Don’t think anyone noticed but me. Freaked me out, to be honest. Surprised me in a way I wasn’t sure I liked. What?—had her son died in Iraq? Or grandson? Just an unrelated breakdown? Simply a gush of federal love?

The song closed and again, we applauded. A glorious unified wave. Hoots, shouts, whistles, clapping, the buzz of it lasting even after we’d stopped.

Then the bell lifted as fast as it fell and we sat in the chatter and ordered beer.

Well, it didn’t last long, I’ll cop to that—probably only half an inning. But I had that weeping woman in my head and couldn’t let her go for a *while*. And privately, at least for me, the evening took on a different pall.

I was reminded of this again—that night at the ballpark—when Victor came by about a week ago. He had Bulls tickets and hoped to cheer me up. The cheers and applause gone indoors now, reined and contained within four walls.

Victor didn't bring his family either. He'd never once considered it. He's an unmarried father with an easy ticket. Doesn't even live with her—or rather, them. A choice arrangement. I've thought this, I'll admit.

We coasted down Damen in his old school sedan, the mustard Volvo—rusted, lovable—he's had for just about forever. Stopped at a light, the engine chugging, he stared forward, shaking his head, that half-nervous inwardness that's always with him.

"This stuns me," he said. "She's *leaving* you?"

Reluctant, I nodded. "For a little while. It's not permanent. I mean, I hope not."

"But she wants separation?"

I took in a breath. "For now. Just for now."

He blew out a breath, his cheeks puffy; lifted his long rubbery neck and touched at the peppery stubble.

"Wow," he said. "Wow and wow *again*. I thought . . . I thought you two were rock steady. *Forever* rock steady. I'd have bet on it. This—seriously, Phil . . . this *totally* fucks up my worldview."

"Come on, man. It's not so catastrophic."

"Yes it is."

He sounded certain. I sighed. He drove on snail-like toward the parking lot. His Travis Bickel-ish intensity was flaring up. He glanced in the rearview mirror.

"This fucked me *up*, Phil," he said, and shot me a look. "I banked on you two." He shook his head, staring forward. "I reach over toward you guys in my mind sometimes to steady myself. That's no exaggeration."

"Ah, man . . . please. Don't say that. I . . . I'm sorry."

“No,” he said. “I’m sorry. I’m really very sorry.”

Victor hadn’t looked like this since college, a desperate, lost look best left behind. The kid’s known me sixteen, seventeen years. He’s seen it all, every glorious peak, dismal valley, every tiny triumph or colossal loss. As vice versa. As I’ve seen his. He knew Shelley and me from the start.

“Can we shelve all that for now?” I say. “Please. Let’s go watch these Bulls.”

A wiry, tense nod to the side. “That’s fair,” he said. “Agreed. Let’s forget all that.”

In the stands just before tip-off, Victor raised his beer.

“Here’s to forgetting,” he said.

“Absolutely,” I replied. We touched cups. “Cheers to that.”

But forgetting, I’ve found, can prove quite difficult when surrounded by the mass, by the cheers and the chatter. Especially right there, right then, in the stadium.

For *that* night—and I have no idea if they do this all the time, but it wasn’t at all like back in the day—that night, the game is nearly upstaged by the sideshow. A perpetual performance waiting in the wings. Every time out, every break, every unnatural pause for a TV commercial, they’d arranged an entertainment to keep you jazzed. (Every extra second, I swear.) Scantly clad cheerleaders dancing seductively. Actors in gigantic “bouncy” bulls costumes—like actual bulls, horns and all—running with basketballs at trampolines, then launching to attempt a dunk. Toy machine guns shooting soft stuff in the stands. Lotteries with ticket numbers, half-court shooting

contests, thirty-second rock bands, twenty-second songs. The game, I swear to you, seemed incidental to the spectacle.

All straight from the heart of P.T. Barnum, competing against itself. Like Barnum vs. Barnum. (Or maybe it was Barnum vs. Bill Veeck.) And the carnival strangeness kept escalating. What would they throw at us next? In the second half—no shit—they had a hypnotist. Not a very good one, I might add. If you’ve ever seen a convincing hypnotist, you’ll know a sham in a second. And having rank exhibitionists who’ve been hand-picked from the stands dance the Twist and the funky chicken—this is not impressive, this is quite weak.

“My god, it’s obscene,” said Victor, almost whispering. “It’s all so fucking *decadent*.”

I agreed, though something other was coming. They threw in a surprise for virtue’s sake. Just after the hypnotist, the next break in the game—I don’t know why, but there were breaks galore—they gave their obligatory tribute. To our fallen fighting men. Only this time, no names of the dead, but rather, surviving amputees. They hobbled or rolled toward center court. About six or seven of them. Some with prosthetic legs, others with no legs. One with no arm, etc. They announced their names, their tours of duty, and the crowd (halos on now) erupted passionately. A sustained wave of grateful proud noise. They hobbled off, wheeled off, limped—waving. It was hard not to feel it in the gut.

Then the music blasted (Tommy Tune) and the Luv-a-Bulls shook some taut young ass. A fifteen second number before the game resumed. We forgot ourselves. Forgot lost limbs. Heinrich tosses to Gordon—and we’re *on*.

That's not the thing I'm left with most. What's truly lasted was the last of the acts. One final flash of carnival strangeness that reminded me of something I'd long forgotten.

For in this final, most key break in the game—a TV commercial, I believe—they actually almost trumped war and invested themselves in political bias. I mean, just the *balls* of it. The frank admission of our regional leaning! It was equally—I suppose—obscene. Though you really had to laugh.

Who knows who came up with it, but I was entertained. Seemed everyone was. This actor meant to be Abraham Lincoln—a pretty solid likeness, actually, down to the wart by the nose—started playing vigorous one-one-one hoops against other actors dressed as ex-presidents. He creams Washington. Embarrasses Reagan. Abominates Nixon. Destroys Clinton. And this all happened very fast. Like, five-to-ten second “games.” Then, inevitably, came the final contest.

Lincoln vs. Bush. Our then-incumbent: Dubya. And no surprise here—Lincoln *kills* him. Dunked on Bush a couple times. Repeatedly, our Lincoln humiliates their Bush. And the crowd is going *wild*. Hooting, laughter. It was hard not to. The actors were both quite good.

On the way home, Victor mentioned aloud what I'd already thought much earlier. Or felt, I suppose. It involved no wording.

“You know that presidential bit?” he said, “the Lincoln-Bush thing?” Victor looked at me. (Exhausted, it seemed. Over-entertained.) “You know what that reminded me of?”

Here I felt it—or thought it. The words.

“No,” I said. “What?”

He stared ahead, driving. “Perpetual Union.”

“I thought you might say that.”

“So you *did* think of it.”

“Just now,” I said. “Just right now.”

Early next morning I hunted it down, though knew it would cost—and likely severely—in sweat and raw agitation. The basement was my only chance. It was down there somewhere, in some *box*.

But standing at the entryway in the dank gray cool, I saw it almost instantly. Well, not *it*. Not precisely. A funnel of soft white a.m. light had fallen through the far basement window, landing in beatific creepy manner on the face of a life size blow-up doll. She had Betty Page sweetness to her come-hither mouth, plus a sheen of black hair, petroleum smooth—her plastic head lit by that cone of sunshine with a weird sort of *holy* symmetry. As if the light of the Lord were feeling horny.

This was an old joke gift—a wedding gift, actually—from this guy at Shelley’s ex-office with limited social skills. And for a brief moment, the face seemed alive. But when I picked her up and held her before me, our pneumatic sweetheart’s eyes were

dead. Then I saw it, beneath her, in an open cardboard box: the “fancy” black font on a bound cover, half-lit by that horny sunbeam.

Perpetual Union

An original play by Bruce Habbit and Philip Palliard. On stage in this city a decade ago. '96. Maybe part of '97. I don't know. I was a young dumb buck. Something like twenty-six, twenty-seven. That era of unmanageable, relentless depression. (The age of endless good times.)

Among the three I've written that got produced—the others one-acts with brief runs—*Perpetual Union* was the only halfway “success.” Also my one collaboration. A Habbit and Palliard. Ran, I believe, two solid months.

Here's where Shelley first saw me act, when she got introduced to the whole damn *scene*. The egos, the excess, the limited funds. Quiet jealousies, soaring joys, crossed principles, outsized personas. Drinking, drugging, sleeping around. We'd only been dating a couple of weeks. I wasn't even sure how much she liked me.

But there we all were, the entire cast of *Perpetual Union* in glorious period costuming. I can't recall how we afforded it. In memory, it seems so authentic and expensive. Black buckled shoes, white powdered wigs, fussy postures, dainty hands. Our silk stockings stretched to the knee; the women in bodices—powdered, perfumed. Bit over the top but we liked it that way. And playing John Adams for a two-plus month run was among the sweetest thrills of my life.

Until the closing weekend came. When from nowhere, I had to play Jefferson.

We lifted the notion from *The Federalist Papers*. Perhaps you're acquainted with the phrase. "Perpetual Union," argued Madison, was what the colonies must see themselves committing to. If they hoped to birth the nation, no other words would do.

Nearly a century later, Lincoln would bet his ass on this abstraction, hitch his legacy to the very principle, his *modus operandi* as Commander in Chief, the only ever faced with real rebellion. The *Great* Rebellion. The South filing divorce papers, and Lincoln simply not having it.

But that's neither here nor there. Our play involved nothing Lincoln. Wrong era. This landed elsewhere. A boundary-pushing colonial sitcom featuring the Founding Fathers—that was the idea. Like, the steamy underside of the Continental Congress. Its hookers and whiskey and black leather masks. Its whippings and secret rages. Followed by mornings of reasoned debate, impassioned compromise. Sworn commitments to democratic principle morphing into all-night bacchanals. Adams smoking opium with imported French whores. Jefferson at it with his favorite slave. All that.

It was meant to scandalize—the Jefferson outrage re: Sally Hemmings had come back to life only years before. Thus the title's meaning was doubled: a critique of both the notion uniting the states and the cultural requirement of monogamy. And we let the thing get good and weird. *Transgressive*. Clearly *edgy*. Those buzzwords that Bruce adored.

Christ. I forget about Bruce. He was a different sort of friend than either Adam or Victor. A friend from back then, the bad old days, when I was headstrong and rising and easily swayed.

When Bruce and I collaborated, our company was in full flower—12 official members, actually, each in his or her own way a sovereign state. All of us committed to original work—full-lengths, one-acts, sketch shows, musicals—and performing each without a director. That is, with *us* as director, but no *one* director. Our unified Wave, often crashing.

So you claim that Ideal, call it the Reason, pretend to it, study it, and still never fails—here comes Reality. It always arrives. Roles emerge. They always do. The lawyers, bullies, the diplomats, counselors. And the *core* personality, without doubt, for our company (Theater Potemkin)—was Bruce Habbit of Richmond, VA. Founding father along with two others. Most importantly this one guy Noel. Noel Roth. Big overtalkative New York Jew who came from money and power. A little older than us. At that point, probably thirty, thirty-one. Brilliant mind, that guy. Jesus—Noel! *He* was the talent there. Vital brainy Falstaff type. (Overread. Underemployed. Smoked perhaps too much pot.)

And then there was me. Emerging unknown wanna-be playwright with a sizable chip on his shoulder. I'd known Noel from this bar where I'd worked. He was my ticket in. So I was a bit of an outsider, a kind of Rhode Island, but we little guys will also have our say.

Then, during a belabored rehearsal of a scene near the end of the play, Bruce decided we needed more *edge*, that the whole thing was getting too *cute*. And he holds up a finger and says, "I know!" Nods, smiling, shadow in his eye. "A rape," he says. "This play needs a *rape*." And right then makes the change.

The authors of *The Federalist Papers*, while on smoke break between sessions of the Continental Congress, would witness a rape in an alley offstage, making pokerfaced comments as they watched indifferently, not intervening.

It'll be strange, he said. Perverse. Awful. But also—let's hope—*hilarious*.

The silent cast stared back at him.

Now rape is a difficult fit with funny. Very difficult to make that funny, rape. The sound of the word itself resists it. Murder has a better chance at laughs. But Bruce wanted it—insisted, in fact—and the scene went in despite the protest.

Most nights I played Adams; Bruce, Jefferson; the authors having cast themselves in essentially starring roles. But closing weekend, Bruce got sick—violently so. Puked his guts out for days. Only I knew Jefferson's part down cold. Plus we had this kid from Columbia College—a lucky first—understudying the Adams role. Well, this kid, this Mark or Matt or something, ended up doing Adams quite well. Better than me. If not *far* better. He's a pro now. I've seen him on a Taco Bell commercial. He should have been Adams from the start.

Meanwhile, suddenly, I was Jefferson—the butt of the play, as well as its star. The play's success *hinged* on Jefferson. And Bruce was really quite good.

Let's set aside for now the fact that I was not. I was disappointing, I knew, but that's besides the point. Shelley had seen me already as Adams, then came again that final Friday and did not mince words later, at the bar.

"Jefferson's not your natural role," she told me.

"Oh Jesus," I said. "That bad?"

“Please. I just like you as Adams.”

She nuzzled up against me with boozy warmth and stretched up to whisper in my ear: “*I can’t be your Sally, but tonight, if you’d like, I’d gladly be your Abigail.*”

I looked back at her, taken. I know that sounds corny but think of it, see it: this gorgeous capable Canadian Nutritionist nuzzling up against me, offering herself. We slept together the first time that night. She’d kept me at bay for over a month. We had fun, I believe (though can’t quite remember.)

But that’s not what I’m getting at. Shelve that for now. Reality came knocking in a louder way that Saturday night, *closing* night, when Shelley wasn’t there.

I’d decided to take a smoke break. It was that simple, that stupid. It was the last night; I just didn’t care. Plus Bruce wasn’t there. So I went ahead and got cute about it.

Standing backstage in the dressing room, it came to me. To my left, Sally Hemmings was taking a nap, head cradled in crossed arms, her blue bonnet before the mirror. Why not? I thought. Just her and I back here.

I thought: I’m gonna go have a *smoke*. Fuck it. (I’d been craving one the whole second act.) This, back when I used to smoke. Assumed, at the time, I’d smoke forever. Couldn’t imagine not smoking. (A presumed—in its own right—perpetual union.)

So I step past the sleeping Sally, open the door, and walk through the weird musty back storage area—that long dark room—that came with the space we’d rented.

I stumble a little in my black buckled shoes, then find the door knob in the fading dark, and open the door, and I’m there.

Outside.

First, a soft gush of summer air. Then I take out my smokes (side pocket of my embroidered vest) and light up and say to the world: *ah*.

So beautiful out there. That air. The sky inky black and on on forever, above the bricks of building tops. Just having me a smoke on the closing night of a play I'd co-composed. That audiences had paid to see! That a critic or two had actually *liked*. (Sort of even recommended.) This, on the night after crossing into Canada, sleeping a first time with future wife—where I remember now, yes, it was charged and invigorating. Lovely! (We had such fun.)

So a bit smug here, I must admit. Lauded by critics. Recently laid. Having a Marlboro in the back alley. And relishing it, well aware of the irony.

For I'd re-enter the play in about ten minutes. Jefferson walking in from an "alley" off stage (stage right) to find the authors of *The Federalist Papers* having a smoke (and in the play amazed to see me coming.)

I was smoking out there, in an actual alley.

An off-stage real-life simulation of a fake simulation of never-lived history.

I was way in my head, tripping on this notion, nicely buzzed from the unexpected smoke, when it sounded—startling me. A loud sharp discharge. Two of them. (*crack! crack!*) Three or four teens—dark-skinned, black, latino, I don't know—came bounding sort of *at* me from down the alley. Ten feet off, then rocketing past me. Wild frenzied running away. Silence followed. Then a shriek.

Serious shriek too. Then again: silence. Another shriek. Then another.

I stood paralyzed, off twenty feet, dressed in immaculate period costuming. The sirens sounded and the cops came fast. Two of them, standing in the alley, one

comforting a young black woman in a yellow tanktop and flip flops, the other kneeling down, examining something. Though I couldn't see what from where I stood.

I was terrified, yes, but a lot more curious, which outweighed the fear by far. I stepped gingerly toward the scene. Nearly tiptoed.

And on the few final steps I saw him. Splayed across the sidewalk like a poached fish. A big one. Old gray black dude dead on the pavement. His head was collapsed in the back like a melon, a stretch of blood oozing, *blobbing* out, staining the pavement.

Well it froze me good. Bet it would you too. There he was, done forever. Old sort of grandpa black dude on the pavement. Jesus. What happened here?

Plus also that cop. That plump like pink-faced boy in blue, speaking into his radio, hitched to his shoulder like a pro. "Look. It's over," he said. "I'm confirming it." He listened, waited. The placid voice on the other end wanted to send an ambulance. "I'm telling you: no need to." He looked down at the body, then spat to the side. "Believe me. No hope here."

He glanced up then and saw me. He stared, sort of wince-smiled. I up-nodded. "Hey." He *hunhed* to himself, a halfway chuckle. And I'd like to think I represented hope to him. Perhaps I was proof it still lived in the world. A Founding Father standing behind him, done up in 18th century regalia. Bet for a second he thought he saw a ghost.

Then the cop stood and, again, looked down at him. This old guy. Sixty, sixty-five. Old black man in a shock white button-down short sleeve, his black-framed glasses sunk to his nose, his skull divesting itself of life in a strangely shaped oblong puddle. Looked like a liquid cactus. A purple three-fingered hand.

A minute—maybe only thirty seconds later—I stood there in the wings of the well-lit stage. Noel had called from the open back door, our Benjamin Franklin looking testy and amazed—“*Phil!*” he shouted. “Come *on!*”

Under a minute, and I stood there: in the dark, stage right, by the fake velvet curtains. That old dead guy, the horrible pattern of blood, stuck in my head, *potted* there. As I waited, sweating, for my horrible cue, a line from Madison or perhaps John Jay. After they’d observed a rape in progress and commented on it, not intervening.

HAMILTON: James, *look* [staring off-stage, to “alley”] . . . is that a . . . *rape*?

MADISON: I . . . [raising reading glasses to the bridge of the nose] . . . I believe it is. Yes yes . . . he’s raping her. With a uh, a kind of quiet vigor.

[a muffled scream is heard offstage]

ADAMS [from behind, no one saw him coming]: Oh come, boys. You can’t be serious. [they turn and notice it’s Adams.] You call that a *rape*?

And me, I’m standing in the dark dark wings, the image from the alley still hanging before me. I’m paralyzed. And here comes my cue.

HAMILTON: Wait—is that? . . . oh my stars . . . *Thomas?!*”

The joke is that they realize it’s Jefferson. He’s the one they’ve been watching in the alley. It sometimes got a laugh when Jefferson appeared. Sometimes only silence. He’d been sent up throughout as a playboy lech, a dainty aristocratic horndog. And this line was my cue to enter (from the “alley”), to stroll in with haughty nonchalance and announce my “commitment to personal liberty.” But I didn’t go. I spaced it and/or my body refused. I was sweating, pale as ice. Crippled to immobile, there in the wings.

Yes it was weird. Yes it ruined the play. Then that kid Marcus, who was standing next to me, gripped at my arm in the dark. Marcus played Jupiter, Jefferson's loyal, dandified slave, and would enter the stage behind me. *Hey*, he whispered. *You're on*. But I didn't move. The house went silent and confused.

Only that violent push from Noel, standing behind me, sent me out there. I stumbled, then fell, my wig askew. That got a laugh, but still, I was lost. We improvised through it—or rather, they did—desperately, awkwardly. It killed the play. Me, the deer; that crowd, the headlights. Man it was painful. Exposed. Exposed.

That's how I feel a decade later, I get this same sensation. I am watching Shelley put the baby in a cab (red white and blue, an *American United*) after a struggle with inserting his seat. And she looks up, not seeing me—or *choosing* not to see—as I stand, helpless, on our second floor porch. She gets in and closes the door, not waving.

I am paralyzed, just as then. I want to run down and stop her, grab her lapel, and say, like Lincoln to the rebel South—*no*. We *can't* break up. It's illogical and doesn't make sense. We are *One*.

I stand immobile and watch them go. The cab rolls off to the corner.

When would I absorb it? She'd taken Henry and left me. And appeared to actually *mean* it this time. And she never means it. Not the hard stuff. (Almost never.)

The taxi stopped at the stop sign, then turned, going north. I watched as it slowly hovered off, the fading blue stars on the taxi's back bunting slowly leaving view.

III

Enthused

(12)

Beth Visits in the Dead of Winter

Her coming was a sudden, stark surprise—she'd called to announce it just the night before—and like that (an airplane, a snap of the fingers) and my sister was on my sofa, holding a tall glass of pricey red wine, fresh from Midway and the cab ride in, to discuss what ailed me and the trouble attached.

She worried I'd grown too lonely on my own. Lonesome or lost, likely depressed, prone to self-loathing or acts of self-ruin—symptoms of what we're susceptible to, she said. It's *in* us, Philip. A genetic trait. That's the Beast. What nearly killed Dad. Maybe even half-killed Mom. Thin crystals of snow still stuck to her brow, her hair and shoulders, a vague confetti evaporating fast.

"You really must keep an eye on yourself," she said, brow raised. "This is the sort of life scenario when the Beast will invade without asking. When you're vulnerable, it

pounces.” She kicked off her shoes and reclined on the sofa in her skirt and nylons and soft pearly sweater. “Especially in the dead of winter.” She looked out the window at the benevolent snowdrop, only just begun (minutes before her arrival).

“This is when it visits,” she told me. “Nights like this. When you’re alone?” She caught my eye. “I mean it, Philip. Watch yourself.”

She calls it the Beast like it’s a living thing. And it kind of is. We used to make that argument. Like an actual organism living inside you. We would talk about it, name it, back in the day: when she was just finishing college and I’d moved out here to be an artist of the stage (or try to be). Then, she’d visit in the heart of summer. In July, for the festivals and balmy weather. Clearly those were easier days, far warmer, yet that’s when we’d named it (if not gotten off on it): the Beast. The Bigfoot in our DNA.

Beth kicked back on the sofa, glass held at a slight remove. And slowly began the interrogation.

“It’s hard for me to *fathom*, Philip,” she said and looked around the place. “Now that I’m here, it’s just . . .” She shook her head slowly. “They’ve left you.”

I nodded tightly. “They have.”

“They’re left the *country*.” I nodded. Beth shook her head slowly, then stopped.

“You think Shelley had this planned for a while?” I shrugged. “Even before the uh . . . *incident*?” Slightly wincing, I shrugged again.

“I think that’s possible but I don’t know. She went up there last summer to visit her sister. On a lark, she applied for a fellowship at MacGill but no one thought she’d get it.”

“Yet she did.”

Again, I nodded, taut and nervy, sensing fresh beadlets of sweat on my brow. Beth took a sip and stared at the ceiling, all cool and breezy, in command (though hardly yet begun). She took in a breath. “So,” she said. “Let’s review. The hard facts. You uh . . . you slept with your neighbor then.” She looked over. “And just once? Really?”

“Well . . . once and a half,” I said. “But the first time hardly counts.”

“It *all* counts.”

“No no, Beth, that was like . . . *nothing*.” She stared back, doubting me. My mind stammered. “We’d just started,” I said. “Like . . . three faint strokes. That’s *it*. Then I stopped it. I resisted.”

“Three faint *strokes*?” She grimaced. “You didn’t tell it like that to Shelley?”

“Well, no.”

“Honey, it was nothing, *really*. I put it in her for like, five, *six* seconds. That’s it!”

“Alright.”

“Three faint strokes, Shelley! Three *faint* strokes!”

I gritted my teeth and gave her a look. She shook her head, grinning (with a slight touch of pity.) “What happened there? You uh . . .”—she whispered—“*you came*?”

“*No*.” I hung my head, praying the questions wouldn’t last all week. And a dark regret rose up through me as I told it. “I . . . well I saw Henry on her futon, where I’d laid him down to sleep and I . . . just couldn’t.”

“Jesus. You had the *baby* with you?” I nodded, the shame shooting up through my veins. Beth looked aghast. “You didn’t tell me *that*.”

“How could I? It’s . . . sensitive.”

“It’s *awful* is what it was. *Goddamn*, Philip. What—were you high?”

I waited (the answer hurt) and said, “A little, yeah.”

“While you were watching the *baby*?!”

“It’s never happened before, Beth. Never will again. A one time thing! I *swear*.”

I’ve explained that to Shelley. Over and over I’ve explained it.”

Beth took a sip. Went contemplative. Meditated on it a second. She looked over at me. “But it happened for real later on?” she said. “Correct? With your neighbor?”

I dropped my eyes. “Yes,” I said, pretty weakly. “Just once.”

“Interesting. But once and a *half*,” she said. “I hadn’t heard about the first time.”

“Well . . . there you go. Now you have.”

She turned and propped herself up on an elbow, wine glass dangling in the other hand. She pursed her lips, keeping her cool.

“I’m trying to understand it, Philip,” she said. “I really am. I don’t think Shelley ever will but . . . you’re done with it, right? The sleeping around?”

“I’d hardly call it *sleeping around*.”

“You’re so *sensitive*. God. Well . . . what shall we call it?”

“Let’s change the subject.” I said and took a long bracing swallow. “How about that? You’re here to cheer me up, not practice your cross-examinations.”

“Ha.” She thought about it. “*Practicing*. That’s funny. Very funny.” She shook her head to herself. “I hate the fucking law, Philip,” she said. “I sincerely *despise* the practice of law. Why’d I ever wanna be a lawyer? And *this* kind of lawyer to boot?”

“Because you’re great at it.”

“Hardly.” She poured another glass of the Chilean red she’d brought with her from Philadelphia. “Let’s get drunk then,” she said. “Let’s put on some music and tell it like it is.” She nodded to the side (just as I do, as does Dad). “Except for your thing. We’ll leave that aside.” She looked over, raised her brow. “For now at least.”

“Thank you.”

She held up her glass. I followed suit. “Cheers,” she said. “To thing’s getting better.”

And this warmed me a bit but I knew it wouldn’t last. We hadn’t even gotten to the juiciest part, something she’d surely be curious about, what I then avoided as long as possible. And for a while there, an hour or two, I thought we might have passed it.

We drank and talked, the essential chatter: work, sex, parents, death, religion, politics, music. I watched her as we talked (much as, I suppose, she watched me); and she impressed me as terribly attractive—more than I could ever remember. Her sandy brown hair hung loosely to her shoulders, Arquette-style. Really quite fetching. And her puggish nose—much like mine, which before this I hadn’t thought an asset—was working for her now, ever since—for whatever reason—she’d lost all that weight. The warm, infectious smile and emerald eyes (neither of which I possess) adding up, it seemed, to someone quite different. I’d noticed this a bit at Christmas, sure, but here I found it striking. Little sister sixty pounds lighter. In a single year! And with a new kind of confidence—warmer, more at ease. Though this I later came to question.

Two or more hours later, we were standing in the kitchen, having switched to beer, checking out what I’d done with the place—the “grand tour,” etc.—when Beth

looked out the big back windows, where you could see the hallway area in back. The staircase, vestibule, etc. She stepped up to the window, looking sideways down the hall.

“So they live right over there?” she said. “Correct? Just next to you?”

“Afraid so.”

She shook her head. “It *amazes* me, Philip. You have to know that. I mean, *Hugo? Shelley’s Hugo?* Right over there? And so . . . inextricably *involved* in all this?”

So we’d finally come to it. In a way, it was relieving. I nodded solemnly. She leaned over my way and whispered. “*We haven’t talked about Hugo yet.*” I shook my head no. She whispered: “*Why is that?*”

“Take it easy,” I said, not quite whispering back. “We’ll get to him in time.”

“Why not now?”

I nodded side to side, sort of hedging (just as she does). And then, only seconds later, up the stairs he came, as if we’d avoided the subject so long, we’d summoned him up with the strength of our denial. Hugo Vinciente, looking sexy and collected, unbuttoning his navy blue felt winter coat, thin crystals of snow fading on his shoulders, on his hatless head of petrol black hair.

He caught Beth’s eye through the back kitchen window. Their gazes met. She smiled warmly. Hugo smiled back, then moved to his own back door. Beth nearly pressed her face against the window glass, looking sideways down the hall.

“That’s *him*,” she said. “Am I right?” She turned to me, brow raised. “I forgot about that. Good God. He’s quite hot.”

“Think so?”

A wince. “Are you serious? He is *fine*. No call for debate there.” She stared ahead, thinking it out. “I remember him from your wedding—and he was quite attractive then—but man, he looks even better now.”

“Just now you’ve assessed this?”

“Of course I have,” she said, and then squinted to herself, thinking. She stayed like that a while. “So . . . it’s because their writers, right? Is that it?”

“Excuse me?”

“Hugo’s a writer as well, correct?”

I shrugged. “Tries to be. Aspiring novelist. Mostly a bartender. But he’s published a little.”

“A lot like *you*,” she said, as if exposing the unexpected secret. “Is that part of all this?”

I winced. “I don’t follow.”

“They’re working writers. Like you used to be—or rather, *should* be?”

“*Naw*. Well maybe, but . . . I do still try to write here and there.”

“Do you?” Her eyes sparked, newly enthused. “You should *write*, Philip. *That’s* what you need. Not the free-wheeling fuckfest across the hall.”

“I know. I should.” I looked away. “At the moment, it’s difficult. Believe me.”

“*Do* it.” And this is Beth too. The encourager. The uninvited life coach. “Both your plays were terrific, I thought.”

“There were three.”

“So make it four!” Her hands were out; she was emphatic. “Philip, you should *write*.” She nodded, certain she’d found the answer. “That’ll keep the beast at bay.”

She leaned up and looked sideways down the hall, where her mind was still occupied (couldn't help herself). She waited, looking. "And so . . . Hugo's a swinger too, huh?" She turned back to me, wearing a crooked grin. "Obviously." She sheeshed. "Good God, Philip. Who knew? Your wife's *best* friend turns out to be a card-carrying—?"

"They aren't '*best* friends.'" I shook my head tightly, annoyed. "They're college friends. Merely *old* friends, and . . . the neighbors aren't necessarily quote-unquote 'swingers.' Not formally. Their relationship is just—you know . . . 'open.'"

"There's a difference?" I shrugged, not sure myself. Beth tucked a sandy lock behind her ear. She leaned up toward the window, looking sideways down the hall. "'Open' then." She tilted back a little and looked at me. "And how 'open' exactly?"

"Well . . . pretty damn *open*."

She took a sip from her can and grinned to herself. "I see."

I caught her drift and gave her a stare. Don't even think about it, Beth. Do not.

But I knew she would. She'd think about it plenty. Or just enough to tempt a little trouble. For public defenders of the broke and neglected deserve a vacation in the dead of winter. To do as they please. To forget. Public defenders on hard-earned vacations can think about whatever they *please*.

She'd come once before in the dead of January—before we had a baby or any sort of crisis, three, four years before—and then, that was her attitude. She went out—the works—to bars, clubs, really living it up, the public defender on a Midwest bender (with those sixty extra pounds still on her). One night she even brought someone home, an

overly tall and unwashed hipster who slept with her back in the guest room (now the study). That part got a little irritating, actually. The guy woke up before her, before anyone, in fact. I found him in the kitchen in a cloud of comfort. He'd helped himself to Raisin Bran. Nearly finished all the juice. Lit a fragrant joint right there by the fridge. But whatever—that's petty. My point is this: Beth had a ready streak of it too. Acts of self-ruin wrapped in flip amusement. My buoyant sister of the go-get-'em rigor wasn't nearly as stable as she seemed.

So I wasn't so surprised she ended up in Hugo's bed, as she did, later that week. What surprised me was all that came before and after. For the air got a little thick with my sister. Beth perhaps needed some saving herself.

She'd come on a Saturday evening. Sunday, she slept in, then, for the most part, watched TV (talking to me here and there). Monday morning, I had work at the warehouse. We had some fun in the evenings, sure—talking it up, renting movies, reminiscing, but still: there was an unexpected bleakness in the air. Not from me, from my uninvited life coach. She was lounging on the sofa like a flat-out lazyass, consuming, sleeping, watching, dreaming, munching on Pringles, downing Orange Crushes; smarties and Skittles and M&Ms. That, and reality TV. A steady diet of it. Show after show, from what I could gather. I'd come home from the warehouse, plum beat from the day—this job I despised—and find her there under afghans and blankets like a child pretending she had the flu.

She'd spring up eventually. I'll grant her that. Five or so minutes after I'd arrive, she'd suggest an activity to go with the evening, though always advising we stay inside,

at home, as she had all day (save for trips to Osco and the liquor store). My sister the encourager was perhaps in a funk.

I'm the one who first named it the Beast. Beth was visiting some summer, maybe a junior in college, and going through real psychological trouble. I was twenty-three and unsuccessfully striving, working in a bar and a bookstore and depressed. And we were at my place, likely high, watching for whatever reason cartoons, when an old school Bugs Bunny came on we knew well, involving the head-humped, near-faceless beast Mel Blanc nicknamed Gossamer. Those Gossamer episodes can get scary, actually. The Beast chases the snarky bunny down long dark tunnels and halls. The Beast makes no sound. He is mute. He is desperate and strange and fearsome.

We decided to see it that way: our conditions (little different, I'd imagine, than many or most's). The Beast (near faceless, hairy, mute) = depression and/or coming psychoses. Something like that, if not even heavier. Like the weapons grade blues, a hairy Superfunk, chasing you down a long dark hall.

Beth says managing oppressive moods, especially depression, is the ultimate mark of adulthood. She's quoting John Lennon with that, she says. The faster you can control it, get past it, the more "adult" you are. And Beth before this week had been in this way remarkably "adult" and together (or so appeared). To find her as I did that Thursday, out on our 2nd floor porch, smoking, staring into space, eyes a bit red-rimmed from having cried, this was disturbing. It really did worry me.

"What's up?" I asked, closing the porch door behind me. "You okay?"

She waved me away, curled up in a hard wicker chair; alone out there in the bleak winter stillness. "I'm fine," she said, then looked down and across the street, where a

little league gangbanger stood in the gangway, likely selling little league drugs. Beth took a slow drag, then gestured with her cigarette. “That kid,” she said, exhaling. “I’ll represent him in a couple years. I mean, not here—in Philly, but . . . you know. That kind of kid grows up fast to be the sort of man I defend.”

“Well . . . not all of them do. Maybe not *him*.”

She shrugged cynically. “Oh they’re all little timebombs. They’re *lost*. Supercool and totally confused. Trust me, the neglect takes it toll. In and out of jd centers. In gangs, getting laid. At like thirteen, *fourteen* setting the groundwork. Stealing cars. Dealing. Using. Fathering. Making babies they’re not fit to raise. I’m tired of it, Philip. Don’t wanna do it anymore.” She shook her head in a tight flurry. “I’m sick of this shit.” She took a long drag on her American Spirit. “Why in God’s name would I *choose* this? Some futile Quaker-girl mission of conscience? Some patronizing sense of noblesse oblige?”

“Well *quit* then. Join a firm. Make some actual money.” I shrugged. “Or don’t. There are lots of other options, Beth.”

“Oh?” She turned to me. “You think so? You’re a career counselor now? You?”

“I hate my job too, Beth. I fucking *hate* it. You know that.”

“Let’s not,” she said, snubbing out her smoke, shaking her head. “Let’s take a pass on it. Forget reality.” She looked at her watch. “Let’s go watch some reality *TV*.”

“But . . . Beth, that’s what you’ve been doing all *day*.”

She was already at the door knob. “So?” She opened the front porch door. “I’m on vacation, Philip. And I make my plans. And at the moment I’ve planned a serious date with my good friend Project *Runway*.” She nodded at me curtly and closed the door.

I watched through the window as the light from TV, its bottomless noise, came frizzing back to view.

Friday evening, however, was a different story. Last night in town, Beth's mood spun completely. 180 degrees it seemed. When I returned a little late—nearly seven p.m.—from yet another hardcore day at the warehouse, she met me at the door, eyes bright, smile warm, and wearing a tasteful black V-neck blouse plus form-fitting skirt with nylons. “Philip!”

I unbuttoned my corduroy winter coat. “Well, you seem energetic.”

She nodded, grinning, gone sorta jaunty, then shifted to apologetic. “I’ve been such a slug,” she said. “This visit’s supposed to be about you, not me. And . . . well, I seem to have gotten my second wind.”

“Beautiful,” I said. “Any special reason?”

She pursed her lips flirtatiously. “It’s a surprise,” she said. “And I’m not so sure you’re gonna like it.”

“Enough with the coy,” I said, and hung up the coat. “Translation, please.”

She cleared her throat. “I ran into Melanie and Hugo on the staircase when I was leaving for Osco for some Haagen-Daaz.”

“Okay,” I said. “And?”

“We’ve been invited to a dinner party.”

“Dinner party?”

“Precisely,” she said and looked up at the clock. “In about a half an hour.” She nodded soberly. Her brow rose. “Hugo especially wants to see you.”

She was trouble, my sister Beth. Always had been. Mostly “good trouble” was how we used to put it. But here that seemed a stretch.

To call it a dinner party, we’d soon discover, was also a sharp exaggeration. It was planned simply as dinner: one guest, Melanie’s friend Elaine, the alabaster redhead from the corner bar. I’d met her there at least—once, with Melanie. Classifying the dinner as “party” came only with our invitation, when my neighbors discovered my sister had come and I’d kept them completely in the dark. *You must*, Melanie told Beth, apparently. *Yes come, bring Mr. Philip*, said Hugo, as if I were the outsider and Beth their old friend.

Soon enough, we sat at their table, Hugo pointedly avoiding my eyes. He didn’t want me there; this was no secret; and he was trying to pretend he didn’t care. All ruggedly handsome and extra-artsy in his snug black turtleneck sweater. It was strange, I’ll admit, to sit in his presence. We hadn’t spoken in over two months.

My transgression with Melanie had angered him deeply. Hell, he’d actually *intervened*. And not because I’d slept with his lover, but rather because I’d betrayed his friend, his adored pal from college, who I’d hurt pretty bad. A complicated kind of anger, considering the scenario, though its execution came simple and direct. Just pretty much refused to address me.

The food sort of saved us then, that gorgeous spread. Curried pork with rice and mushrooms. Chunks of hangar steak with blue cheese butter. Salad, spiced potatoes, puffy grilled bread. They were fabulous cooks, my neighbors. And the wine was flowing. As soon went the talk.

Beth was really holding her own. You could see she was charming them; while I hardly spoke. Let her go, I decided. I'll watch over here.

But an hour or so into the meal, I found myself diverted and disturbed. I was off in a world: entranced by the poster framed under glass, hanging on the wall across from my chair: a young Bob Dylan, *Don't Look Back*-era, photographed lucidly in black and white over a steel blue background. My mother once had this very poster hanging on a wall in our home. For many reasons, the image hypnotized: the young Dylan utterly at ease, badass and way beyond you (yet looking *at* you, if not silently judging you, a cigarette set between his fingers just so). This poster had started things the 2nd time we slipped, not long after that first half-event. That's a whole different story but suffice it to say: it was almost like Dylan was involved (as well as somehow, my mother).

Beth snapped her fingers at me. "Phil?" [snap] "Come. Come back to reality."

"I'm here." They laughed. "Sorry."

"So what's your take on that?"

"On . . . what now?"

"He really was out," said Melanie.

"*Far* gone," said Beth. "Total idiot man-child"—then to me—"you have to contribute, Philip. You have been listening a little, yes?"

"The reality show thing?"

"Yes. Good." She gestured with her wine glass to her left. "Did you hear Elaine's?"

It was a cheap amusement started by my sister, a lowbrow/highbrow parlor game embedded in the conversation. We'd been discussing her obsession, reality TV—its ins

and outs and reasons for existing, its appeal, its stupidities, its grotesquerie, etc.—and the inevitable question arose, i.e.: how low could it *go*? How far? How heinous? How exploitative? It was a satire of itself already. What would push it beyond?

People threw out attempts, meant to be wince-inducing. A show featuring the homeless perhaps? The homeless becoming TV stars, competing at homeless-related sports and contests for a Gold Coast mansion or pricey RV. You'd have to pay them a little for competing yet also require them to *remain homeless*. It'd be awful, yes, crazy exploitative, but . . . possible?

At the moment, Elaine, the alabaster redhead, all ease and composure, was outlining a show featuring sexual competition. Half-porn, she said, half-*Survivor*. Contestants of all body types, of widely varying age, competing at challenges with random partners of either gender. You literally fuck your way to the top. I didn't find the idea especially compelling, though the way she told it really pulled you. You could see she was a pro of some sort, this Elaine. She had her powers too.

On a lark—a quick spark (lit maybe by the notion of forbidden sex)—I tried one. “How ‘bout . . .,” I said, “*The Real World Abu Ghraib*?”—which got a quick dirty laugh.

“Nice,” said Elaine.

“No I like it,” said Melanie. “You could interview the troops about those awful pyramids and dog collar games.” And on the spot, Melanie improvised a bit as specialist Lyndie England, a heartfelt ‘interview’ after special ops sodomy that transfixed and disturbed us all. Then Beth held out her hands.

“Wait now,” she said, smiling. “Wait.” She held up a finger. “I’ve actually thought about this. And at length. Here is the show that must get made.” She jogged her

head side to side. “Well it’ll never get made, but *almost*. Maybe.” And she had some wine and went to town. “Gangbangers,” she said. “Really do a cheesy one with gangbangers. Cheesy but also pretty *real*. Like, ethnography *and* exploitation. Challenge the audience as you give them what they want. ”

“I like,” said Melanie. “Let’s hear it.”

Beth waited, prepping, then said: “It’s a fairly brutal concept that highlights, as I’ve said, gangbangers. In big cities. Unified gang kids with one or two outsiders, the latter being white kids from rural areas or medium-sized depressed-seeming towns. Like . . . Carbondale kids and Elkhart Indiana kids. Wanna-bes from Allentown and Scranton. These small town hard-ons with big city tudes. And always white. Or usually. I have to decide how important that is. But . . . well, these kids will essentially ‘try out’ for gangs. They’ll be embedded and tested, either sink or swim. Barely educated, insecure, arrogant. From much smaller places, mostly poor, and placed into gangs mostly black or latino, and much much rougher than they’d expected. Like the Latin Kings, say. The Crips, MS-13s, et cetera.”

She paused for another sip of wine, her eyes sparkling. “And this *central* subject,” she said, “the tested subject or contestant—only *one* per gang—will be secretly referred to on the show as . . . ‘The Bumpkin.’”

Melanie nodded in appreciation. As did Elaine. Hugo, aloof to this, even seemed impressed. “So the audience thinks of him as ‘The Bumpkin,’” said Elaine, “yet ‘The Bumpkin’ has no idea he’s ‘The Bumpkin’?”

“Sort of,” said Beth. “Though he’d figure things out eventually. And maybe he’s not the ‘bumpkin’ they’d assumed. There’d be ritual hazings, drug buys, drive-bys, car

thefts, et cetera, et cetera, the Bumpkin tested at every juncture, every sick little gangbanger stunt.”

“And that’s the name of the show?” said Melanie. “*The Bumpkin?*”

“Oh I don’t know,” said Beth. “I’m terrible with titles. But not that.”

“I like *The Bumpkin*,” said Melanie.

“How about . . .” —I started, nicely buzzed on wine now— “The Real Real World?” I paused for effect. “You know? Like the *real* ‘Real World.’”

“We get it, Phil,” said Beth, wincing. “But no. That’s lame. Too obvious. Like . . . not even accurate.”

“And it’s been used already,” said Melanie.

“Has it?”

“A theater comedy. Parody of, I believe, ‘The Real World.’ The original.”

Hugo loudly scoffed. “Which ‘*original?*’” he said. “The stupid show or the world it mocks?”

Melanie gave him a mocking look. “Descend from the lectern, professor. Please.” She turned to us. “Jacques Derrida here refuses to be amused.” She raised her hand. “So who votes for ‘The Bumpkin?’” All but Hugo raised their hand. Melanie smiled at her new friend Beth. “Looks like you win.”

Again, Hugo scoffed. “Nobody *wins*,” he said. “Not with this. No way. *That* is not accurate.”

Melanie furrowed her brow. “We voted for *The Bumpkin*, honey. Let it go.”

“I understand that, I will, but . . .” He muttered to himself. “The ‘original.’ God.” He shot me a glance—half a second of ill-related malice—and said, “Perhaps you think it

too obvious to say. And maybe it is but still I'm gonna say it." He seemed exasperated, done with us. "The real world?" he said. "The *real* real world?" He hunched up his shoulders. "*That* is not filmed or recorded or captured. They don't capture *that*. Almost never. *Not* being on camera is ipso facto what *make* it 'real.'"

Melanie winced. "Um . . . *no* Hugo, that doesn't quite hold. What if they don't know the camera is *there*? That would capture it, would it not?"

Hugo took a sip of wine. "That is something different," he said, and nodded once to the side. "I'm not . . . I'm *sick of this*!"

This was jarring. We'd been having some easy fun. We sat in silence, awaiting explanation. Hugo was restless, eyes searching, biting a lip; he took in a breath, relaxed himself, and said, in a soft dark voice:

"I know a story of another kind of Bumpkin." He caught Beth's eye, then Elaine's. "A Bumpkin who tried to join a grown-up gang but didn't have the talent for it. Nor the nerve." He glanced at me briefly, then looked away.

The dinner party stared back at him. Hugo stood abruptly. Melanie scooted back her chair. "Honey," she said. "Come on."

He held up his palms. "No no. I'm sorry. So sorry my friends. I am not feeling well at the moment. I just . . . need time alone." He stepped away from the table. "Apologies, guys. I must excuse myself." And then left the room. Like that.

Beth has since told me she found him later, when she slipped from the room and went looking. Evidently, he was back in his study, writing on his laptop in a fever. They talked a little then, flirted, reacquainted. Not long, nothing happened there. But still, you

know where this leads. That part, at least. And know, an hour later, that Hugo re-joined us, just after we'd all gotten horribly high, and that Melanie then—fresh off her cell—apologized but she had to go; she'd been called by the Trib to substitute cover some special new band at the Riv. Yet note what she says just as she leaves, first, to Hugo, in earshot of all: “I don’t think I’ll be coming home tonight”—to which he nods (understood) and then she says to us: “But don’t let me break this thing up. Keep rolling, y’all. You four enjoy yourselves.”

See her sly little grin (meant for me) as she closes the front door behind her. Acknowledge my subsequent flirtation with Elaine, who, it turns out, is some sort of producer (drama pilots for A&E). Watch finally as Hugo and Beth pair off, how, immersed in conversation, they slink to the kitchen, leaving me and Elaine alone in the living room, under the eye of the stark blue Dylan (that wry cool, staring down at me).

My mother had this *precise* poster. I’ve never seen it anywhere else. She died when I was nine—Beth, seven—and this is one of the few things she left us: the love of an elite set of songwriters, including of course Dylan. And Melanie, our music writer-neighbor, had written a book soon to be published, containing a prominent chapter on Dylan. My first noticing this poster had been cursed from the start. It had led to the 2nd act (not long after that first half-event). And right there, right in that room, where I sat at the moment with Elaine (on the floor we did it, Melanie and me, down on the carpet, beneath the gaze of the cool blue Dylan).

All the same, I was really pretty surprised this Elaine ended up in my bed. She was a stunning marble beauty; I could not believe my eyes. That said, I couldn’t go through with it. I mean, we did plenty—I win no awards for purity—but when it came to

true congress, I balked. Had to decide against it. So sorry, I told her. You do uh you know I'm still married? That's alright, she replied. She knew the whole story. And she could tell my mind was elsewhere just then.

She was sweet, though. Really turned out to be. We laid back in bed and talked. Or in the end, mostly I did. She soon fell asleep as I nattered on. She left the next morning to little fanfare. Pretty early. Maybe 9 a.m. Didn't feel weird in the slightest. But when I reopened our 2nd floor door—after having walked her downstairs—the doorknob across from ours suddenly turned and out stepped Hugo, looking vital and lively and perfectly sated. He nodded hello and tried a slow smile, then descended the stairs without speaking, looking back just once.

I assumed Beth was still asleep, that Hugo had a breakfast date or work downtown or something. Yet it took her far longer to arrive than I liked. Forever, in fact. An hour slipped by. Then another. I tried her cell multiple times but it always rang in my place (her purse). I considered knocking—front or back door—but that just seemed rude and intrusive. So I waited. Waited on the sofa. Made some coffee, then some more, flipping between the news and cartoons (which are far more similar than you'd first guess). And I was eyeing her blue pack of American Spirits and seriously considering having one. (Haven't smoked in a good eight, nine years. And I used to have it pretty bad.) But then—thank God—around 11:30, the doorknob turned and finally, she entered. And biting her lip, half-shaking her head, then laughing out loud in a sudden burst.

“I can't believe this is happening,” she said.

“What's happening?”

She was weirdly grinning. Couldn't seem to get it out. "I . . ."

"What?"

She shook her head. "I've discovered something, Philip. And I . . . really feel I ought to share it with *you*."

"Well, Jesus, Beth. *Get* to it."

She shook her head tightly to herself. "I'm not so sure you need to hear it," she said. "Or if it's even fair play that you do."

"Fair play?" I held out my hands. "What the *fuck*, Beth? Cut to the chase. Just what is it we're discussing?"

She chuckled to herself with a half-pained look. "The Bumpkin," she said with a hint of whimsy. "That's what."

"What do you mean? Your fake reality show from last night?"

"Not exactly. This is different. This is . . . '*Enter the Bumpkin*.'"

"You're speaking in riddles."

"'*Enter the Bumpkin*.' It's Hugo's novel. Or whatever he's working on. Maybe a chapter—I don't know. But I saw it on his laptop, clear as day. I've just read it. Nearly forty pages! It's like he left it there on purpose for me to find."

"He's calling his book *Enter the Bumpkin*?"

"It's a chapter, I think, from a book he's been working on. In the middle somewhere. Like, beyond halfway way in. You know, I couldn't follow it completely, but . . . listen." She met my eyes, excited-seeming. "'The Bumpkin' is *you*, Philip. It's quite clearly you."

"What now?"

She shrugged, eyes sympathetic (but also gleeful). “He musta worked on it the better part of the night. I woke around 4 and he was up at his desk, slaving away.”

“*I’m* the Bumpkin?”

She nodded tight nods. “Oh yes. Clearly. He’s got you down cold. Your character’s been in the novel the whole while, I believe. It’s just last night that you were dubbed ‘The Bumpkin.’ It’s really pretty cruel and unusual. I mean, you heard what he had to say last night, but . . . funny, I have to admit. Funny and odd. The writing’s quite impressive. You’d like it.”

“I doubt that!”

She giggled to herself. “There’s this part where . . . well, ‘The Bumpkin’ has to wear an adult diaper. I mean, this is magical realism, so it’s sort of a *magical* diaper.”

“Excuse me?!”

“Your character. He’s incontinent. Incontinent and inarticulate. Chronic masturbator. Budding alcoholi—”

“That’s not me!”

“Well . . . not *that*, but . . . it *is* you. Obviously. Everything else is. The character used to be a stay-at-home dad. Works at a warehouse. Looks like you. Talks like you. I’m sorry.” She looked up at me with a strained smile. “It’s the most amusing thing I’ve read in years.”

This stung, of course. And seemed pre-designed to do just that. Hugo’d left a post-it on the face of his laptop: *I’ve got work downtown for a breakfast brunch, but help yourself to whatever!*

Beth and I discussed it some more, then we sat in silence, me aghast. I let it settle in and take root.

Eventually, Beth asked how things went with Elaine. I told her and she nodded, again amused. “You’re mister halfway, aren’t you?” she said. “With all your special *rules*. You get all Bill Clinton about it.”

“Don’t call me Clinton. That doesn’t fit.”

“Don’t think so?”

“No I don’t. I’m the Bumpkin, remember?”

She shrug-wincd. “So was Clinton. In his way, he was. That *one* way.”

“He was also the most powerful man on the planet.”

“Whatever. So’s Bush. And if *ever* there was a Bumpkin . . .”

“True.”

She rubbed at my back, then let out a muted little chuckle (couldn’t help it). She restrained herself. “Let’s go take a walk,” she said. “Come on. It’s beautiful out.”

Well, it really was. I hadn’t once noticed. It struck you the moment you stepped outside. Just gorgeous. We were bathed in becalming sunshine on a crisp clear day in the dead of winter. Just slightly over freezing, still pretty cold, but that sunshine, those beautiful beams, were fighting the good fight for all of us.

We walked around the block, pointing out houses we liked or didn’t. We talked a little about Dad, his recovery from the heart attack he’d suffered at Thanksgiving. Beth sees him far more than me of course, but we both agreed he looked great at Christmas (if not a little worried-seeming for *me*).

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and pressed her to my side. “How’d it ever turn out like this?” I was grinning, head-shaking. “Remember how it was growing up? *I* was the achiever and *you* were the wild one. You’re the one who worried Dad.”

She shrugged. “I know.”

“How did *you* end up the success and *I* end up the fuck-up?”

“Shush. You’re no fuck-up. You’re . . . confused. Or something. I don’t know.”

I unwrapped my arm from her; we stopped walking.

“I wish I hadn’t done it, Beth. You know that, right?”

“I know,” she said, then nodded to the side. “I think I know that.”

“Oh?” I said. “You’re not sure?”

Just then, the kid from across the street approached—the one we’d watched a few days back. We both noticed his coming: rolling slow, feeling chipper, the sunbeams on his side. He nodded and said hello. We did the same then watched him go. I was certain she’d make some cynical crack about the kid she’d represent one day. Which I didn’t much care for (seemed like profiling). And she was just about to, I could feel it coming, but any comment was pre-empted when we both saw Hugo.

He was walking up the other side of the street, heading back to the apartment. He saw us and smiled broadly (perhaps even smugly), a little dagger of victory in his eye. He considered approaching, then decided against it. Just waved and shouted: “Have a safe flight!”

“Thanks!” shouted Beth. And then he was gone. That was that. We watched him go, saying nothing on the matter. Too many Bumpkins and blue Dylans. One too many siblings in the neighbors’ sack. Neither of us cared to discuss it.

Well, she left soon after. Her flight was at four. I nearly cried standing next to the cab. “You should write, Philip,” she said through the half-open window. “Try, at least. Why not?”

“I will. I promise.”

“Good. Do.” Then final goodbyes and up slid the window. The cab zoomed off and she was gone.

Everyone was leaving, even Melanie and Hugo. In a week and a half, they’d disappear for Colombia, six solid weeks to visit his family and bathe in the southern sun. I’d be on my own in a thousand little ways. I had to find a way to deal.

So I took Beth’s advice and tried to write. The very night she left me. It was crappy, but that’s how it goes at first. I’d have acres of crap to plow through, actually. I couldn’t be sure it was worth it.

What I tried writing was an absurdist one-act, featuring our friend the Beast. With an actual on-stage character dressed as Mel Blanc’s Gossamer: hairy, head-humped, faceless, mute. Sort of *Harvey*-ish, but everyone sees him. Only the protagonist thinks he’s invisible (the one being haunted and chased).

It was crap. Trust me. I fell asleep at my desk; then woke with a start hours later after a troubling and poisonous dream. Beth and I were riding in a car on a dark highway at night, a mysterious figure tailing us—this black car behind us. But we didn’t care. We talked, reminisced, sang old songs. Until a silence fell abruptly. I looked over and Beth had disappeared. Meanwhile, in the rearview: the figure in the black car behind me. A faceless blackness following me. A figure with a black sheet draped over the head, like a

body-length burqa that covered the face. Fearsome and mute. Driving blind. Clearly after—clearly gonna *get me*.

When I woke with a start, I looked around the room, unsure where or when I was. I ran to the guest room, looking for Beth—had to tell her the dream!—but when I got there, the bed was empty, just the smoothed-over sheets and still dead air. She was gone, I remembered. Wouldn't see her for a *while*. I muttered to myself *damn*.

I could see through the window it had started to snow. Not a light drop here—a blanketing.

On the sofa, I stared at the silent TV, at the blank black screen before me.

(13)

Extinction

The downstairs neighbors are attempting extinction but just can't seem to get it done. Their bold little infant has plenty to say and simply will not be muted. Takes heartfelt discipline to finish the task. I know this. You can't go halfway. That's a slippery comfort, the slope of denial, like "managed drinking" for the lifelong alcoholic. For success, you must kill it.

His crib lies just beneath our bed, and he speaks to us proudly in hour-long installments, escalating increments of anger and need that rise to exhilarating primal peaks. I've come to look forward to this sound, this music. Such purity of heart. Such commitment! He pushes and pushes and they always cave. Somewhere after an hour or so (lately like an hour and fifteen, twenty), one or the other can't take it anymore and they go in and comfort him, raise white flags.

The trouble is the mother. She's the one caving. That was my guess even before I chanced on her, standing in the corridor behind her back door (directly beneath our own.) This came after an especially lengthy bout with her dogged and powerful

opponent. I'd been upstairs listening to the time scream by, when the crying stopped and the arguing began. Thought I'd take the opportunity to step out for a drink, but at the base of our building's back stairs, I found her smoking and staring into space, drawing on a superthin brown speckled cigarette. Her eyes were damp and rimmed in red, her walnut hair a bit askew, as if recently gripped. It was the afterlook of a futile marathon, where she'd held her own for the heart of the race then cramped severely at the 25th mile. She noticed me and exhaled a cloud, grinning uneasily.

"I very sorry for this," she said, shaking her head, "It so . . . too *loud*. My baby, he—" She mimed insane yelling, eyes popping. "It don't stop. Can't stop."

I shook my head and shot for sympathy. "I know how hard it can be. Believe me."

"You know . . .?" She furrowed her brow.

I wagged a thumb upstairs. "My uh *son*. We did it with Henry. Our baby."

"Your *ba*—?" She took a quick drag, wincing. "You have baby?"

She must have thought we had him trained pretty good. Ours an angel; hers from hell. They'd moved in only three weeks before, and she had no idea what had happened to me. Or rather, us. We barely knew each other, had only met twice before. Brief moments, also on the stairs, clouded in nicety and language barrier.

This had instant appeal, I must admit. I liked her thinking we were still a family: miracle lovebirds nesting above her, with our silent baby, super-behaved. A family life impossibly gentle, respectful, a stable of Quakers, argument-free. This theme park dreamland gave me real comfort (brought us back together much improved.)

"One year old," I said. "We uh tried the same thing you're trying. And I have to

say, ultimately, it works. Did for us at least. You just gotta . . . don't give, never give up." My voice trailed off near the end of the sentence; couldn't quite get it out.

"Never *give*?" she said, confused twice over. "I don't hear this. 'Never give?'"

"*Up*," I said, with fresh irritation. "Never give *up*. It's an expression."

She lifted her chin at a suspecting angle, mouth in a small tight O. She was sizing me, casing me. A short woman here, even shorter than Shelley—five foot, maybe five foot one—with walnut hair, quite pretty, and a sureness of bearing that added a dedicated inch or two. "I need talk with you wife," she said. She pointed with her cigarette.

"She know. Mama knows."

"She usually does."

"No." She shook her head. "*Al*ways."

"Ha."

I liked her style. A calmness and halfway humor that harbored in the distance the threat of explosion. Sweet but forceful. Perhaps a little nutty. Not unlike the spouse who'd left me, who'd returned to me now in this woman's mind. (Or for that matter, never left.) My neighbor's gaze slid to the corner of her eye. She considered something.

"She have red hair?" she said. "You wife? Long red hair?"

"Oh!" I caught myself. "That's—no. A uh . . . another story."

She took a long drag and stared at me.

"Other story?" Flat-toned with slight upward incline. (Either confused or catching on.) I gave the slightest suggestion of a smile. Or no—maybe she did. Hard to say. We were amused, I think, by the sound of her phrasing. At least I was. *Other story*? There was hope in that, a bounty of choices, second chances, imagined freedoms,

secret unseen chambers and tunnels winding off from the dreary what is. I sought this all the time now, considered it a top tier reason to exist, and I liked how she'd summed it up for me. In basic terms I would have muddled with analysis. *Other story?*

She pointed with her cigarette.

"I need talk with you wife."

I nodded. "I think she'd like that."

Their back door opened and—like that—the father appeared, newly placid baby at his shoulder. The sight jarred us both. He knew how to enter a space with force. Face-first with command in the posture. Placid accusation in the eyes and lips. We'd met only once, a couple weeks back—in the parking lot, the language barrier thicker. He was a stocky beefeater, real chest-firster, possibly a rugby fan or player. Muscled, rooted in earth and beer, face a bit slack and mostly deadpan. He gave the slightest up-nod, then turned to his partner, who was looking away. She smoked, staring stiffly into the distance, waited a sec, then—*zhoom*—said something sharp and flaming in Ukrainian. With those jagged consonants whizzing past the vowels, sentences like throwing stars, saying perhaps: *what is it you want? You talk to me like that? With such disrespect? And blame and hatred? Then arrive with those eyes and ask me to help? Fuck you, you selfish prick! Fuck you!*

He bobbed his head, maintaining his particular calm, then unleashed a whip of a sentence back at her. Then another. Another. She returned both serves in kind, pointing with her superthin cigarette.

They were off. At it. Leaning in, lashing out.

I stepped back and away. Didn't seem appropriate to say goodbye. After the back door closed behind me, I stepped down the gangway between the buildings, hoping for one last glimpse.

I stood beneath the gangway side window, next to a cone of pale yellow light. The father had his back to me, the mother out of view. Who I saw instead was their dynamic infant, now benevolent, staring down into oblivion as his parents went to town. Such a fragile-seeming elfin thing. To look at him you'd never guess his power. Our eyes met. For a second we communicated, like: *can you believe these two? Every night now*. But of course that's insane. What he saw was an unfamiliar figure in the cold, a ghost on the dark side of window glass, a lot, probably, like someone on television. About as real as the family living upstairs his mother was led to believe in.

Down the alley and out on the sidewalk, I decided to hoof it. February's gorgeous if you leave it be, with its itchy advertisements for spring's return, the glazed shiny snow over patchy brown grass and the more frequent getting warmer (then cold again.) I walked west to the corner, under the streetlights, a gust of wind needling into my neck. Ghost town time in my stretch of the city, a suspicious spectral calm there as I moved past the barely lit alleys, the half-lit homes, the darkened windows that noticed no one. Against better sense, I kept shuffling west, toward the unknown shades of ghostlier streets, as if asking to be messed with. Begging for it.

On and on and on. At some point, I lost track of my whereabouts. Where was I? But I knew where I was. Deep back in the streets and hoods where we'd practiced another kind of extinction, a collective kind, a crueller variety, with a different sort of

failure. We'd blotted out, X-ed out, denied, gone deaf. Turned off the lights and left the room. *Make behavior extinct by ignoring it.* When does that stop working? What age? What size of body?

I noted some kids on a corner up ahead, just hanging in the half-cold, in knit caps and oversized coats, their postures suggesting they awaited customers. I took an oddly curving side street to avoid them, to move toward a more active thoroughfare, toward the moving cars and working streetlights. When I finally got there, I realized: I'd walked a solid seven, eight blocks. Maybe more. Some serious unknown territory here. Plus my bearings were off—had I curved south? East? Both? How far? I stood stiffly on the corner and thought on it. (Where are you?)

A minute later, a car sped past me, then abruptly stopped with a screech. It waited, idling, as if mulling something over, then kicked into reverse and shot backwards my way. I stepped back as it approached, my stomach curling to a tight round fist.

It stopped; the passenger window slid south. "Hey. *Vagrant*"—but I knew that voice—"Loiterer." A smiling face leaned across the shotgun seat. It was Victor! Beautiful! Yes! Should have recognized the car (old school mustard Volvo rusted with patches of brown and silver.) I leaned in toward the window. Victor tilted his head, curious. "Christ, Phil. What you doing out here?"

"I'm . . . I don't know. Just out for a walk."

"Get *sane*, man. Jump in."

Victor, my college pal, who'd moved with me here fifteen years before, was pulling up in the car he'd had forever, advising me, strangely enough, to *get sane*. Victor was saying this. Victor. Who had not as of late been a model of stability. He'd been

going through some serious *issues* lately. Abandoned a cushy fulfilling job, broken up with the girlfriend who'd borne him a child, explored Eastern thought, lapsed on child support payments, frequented bars and off-track betting facilities, self-medicated and muttered to himself. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't have wanted to see him so much. I'd been avoiding contact for a month or more. Here, though, I was elated. Nothing like seeing someone you know when you suspect your safety is at risk. His chancing-by seemed fated somehow, as if he'd been sent to protect me.

I clicked on my seatbelt as he motored west. Or maybe it was south.

"Where we going?"

"Away," he said. "Wherever. You know, just driving. Meditating."

"I see," I said. With his shaved head (a recent practice) and oval rim-free glasses (also new), he looked like a benevolent but sinister professor, an outlaw Foucault by way of *Taxi Driver*. I said, "You meditate while *driving*?"

"That's redundant," he said, and glanced at me slyly. "Driving. Meditating. Same thing." He watched the road, clearly enjoying it, the ride, the moment, the coincidence of our meeting. He drove on serenely. Neither of us spoke.

He was calm as a candle. Settled as sand. Which wasn't like him at all. It came to disturb me, actually. This preternatural supercalm, a settled-in poise and stillness. Which wasn't my Victor. Just wasn't him. This calm hadn't necessarily come to his aid. (I suspected it of other designs.)

"You haven't been returning my calls," he said, staring ahead, driving on.

"I know. I'm sorry. I've just been so busy."

"Busy?" He nodded to himself, grinning serenely. "Don't make shit up, Phil."

“I’m making nothing up.”

“You lie,” he said, and turned to me. “You’ve begun to tell lies.”

“What now?” I stared at him. There was hostility in his calm. A prick of aggression.

“That’s a lie right there,” he said, eyes back on the road. “Your umbrage is a lie. Your defensiveness.”

“*Jesus*, Victor.”

“And don’t take this wrong”—he glanced over—“but you’re not very good at it.”

I nodded, smiling sharply, hot at the ears. “You don’t think so, huh?”

He shook his head repeatedly, slowly. “I don’t think Shelley thought so either.”

I stared out the window at the passing lights, the broken-down storefronts, the random gaggles of kids on corners. “You don’t have the first notion what Shelley thinks.” I was rising fast to his challenge. I had practice from earlier and thought why not? “We’ve patched all that up, okay?”

“What are you saying?” He glanced over with a flicker of the old nervousness, a slight tightness in the mouth and eyes. “Shelley came back to you?”

Without hesitation, I nodded a yes. “She did. A couple weeks now.”

He glanced at me, feeling this out. “For real?”

I stared ahead. “It’s going quite well, thank you. Maybe better than before. In fact, why don’t you take me home?”

He drove on, quietly smiling. “Phil, we haven’t talked in a *while*.” He nodded to himself. “And your news is crazy. Absolutely stunning.” He smiled broadly. “I really thought you’d . . . I thought you’d given all that up.”

“All that?” I winced.

“The whole sham and illusion.”

“Like . . . what? Having a family?”

“The whole tired bourgeois charade,” he said. “Not just that.”

We drove on in silence. He clucked his tongue.

“I um . . .” He grinned, lifting his chin. The ornery look of a secret coming. “I met that redhead you slept with.”

“You . . . ? *What?*”

“There it is again. There you go again. Don’t do that. It’s transparent.”

“All that’s over, Victor. That game is done.”

“Met her at the bar. She came in with your neighbor. And . . . beautiful, Philip. Top shelf. Both of them.”

“Jesus. This is . . . not how you *talk*, Victor. It’s simply not you talking here.”

He turned to me and thought this over. He bit at his upper lip and stared intensely at the speedometer, the dashboard. He looked up.

“Maybe not,” he said. “Perhaps you’re right.”

With a sudden swerve, he pulled the car to the curb, shifted to park and let the engine idle.

With his rubbery neck peppered with stubble—if you go to the bother of shaving the head, why not do the face while you’re there?—in his ancient blue pea coat torn at the shoulder, plus the oval rimless professor glasses, so brainy and above it all, Victor was a halfway mess, parts of him pristine, clean and together, parts of him shot to hell.

“I think you know what I’ve been going through,” he said.

“Yes, your um—what’d you call it? Passing your ‘spiritual bar exam’?”

“Final exam. The existential final exam. I’m taking it as we speak.”

“Okay.” I stared at a ratty American flag hanging limply in the windless cold. It hung from a pole that rose from the awning of a corner Food & Liquor. I said, “Still out of work?”

“No no. *At* work,” he said. “Perpetually. Or I should say at *play*. I’m an artist, Philip. Just like you used to be.”

I let that one pass; the dart was sharp enough but poorly aimed, plus I felt a fresh rush of rising power. “So you got a new job?”

“*This* is my job.”

“Driving around?”

“Meditating. Creating.”

I chuckled quietly. “Well you know, Victor, meditation won’t pay for child support.”

“Oh god. Here we go.”

“I bet Ann’s pretty damn pressed without your help. Seriously. You two had a deal.”

He grinned some more, a crack or two showing through the hard-earned calm. He stared through the windshield, amused.

“Shelley came back to you.” He laughed to himself. “Patched it all up, huh? Back in the saddle already?”

I nodded with relaxed conviction. I was starting to buy it myself.

Later, when I turned the key to our door, I almost expected to find them there, as if I might have lured them back by claiming to others they existed. Of course this made the place seem even emptier, the stillness heavier, thicker. I contemplated cranking a tune or two, just to drown out the quiet, but then thought of the downstairs baby (asleep by now) and quickly decided against it.

I sat on the sofa in the superloud silence and mulled over all that Victor had said, especially near the end of the ride; that lengthy, heartfelt monologue he'd delivered.

How finding me there on an obscure streetcorner seemed impossibly lucky. For *both* of us. It was either pure coincidence or purely not. And he was leaning at the moment towards *purely not*. For he'd been thinking a lot about me and Shelley lately, how the timing and origins of his crisis seemed to coincide with our split, how here and there he'd blamed us for it, even when he knew it was a bullshit excuse, even knowing his decisions were solid and sound and his search for transcendence just and worthy. Although ultimately, lately, to be honest, he said, he'd come to question that search. The notion of "transcendence" was a safe one, no? Above and beyond? Off to nirvana? Flying away on a magic carpet to the pink oasis in the sky?

I second-hand report this dialogue, which was mostly monologue, because of its first-hand excess. The guy went nonstop. Just tireless. Much much longer than I'm reporting here. Despite the supercalm, he'd become an interrupter, a gifted improviser of rants and ruminations, as if simply letting the Source run through him or reading from the ticker tape that ran across his mind. We sat in the Volvo in the street before my building. Victor spoke at length. I listened. Up until the last and ickiest revelation, just before I left the car.

He'd been hearing "the sound of suicide," he told me. Not a loud sound, he said, wasn't like he'd even considered doing it—or could—just the option, that word, off in the distance, singing at the fringes of consciousness like a faraway cricket or cicada.

I told him wow—and wow again. Now . . . *that* doesn't sound like Victor. Perhaps not, he replied. Maybe not. *Certainly* not, I told him. *Absolutely* not. If you ever need to talk, I'm here, okay? That's too heavy a burden to bear alone. Hereon, your calls will be returned.

Later, alone on the sofa, I felt pretty bad about it. Jesus. Victor. I had no idea.

He called the next afternoon and we talked some more; some of the Victor intensity was returning. Could you believe we'd run in to each other like that? This was a sign, he said. That maybe sounds kooky or flaky but fuck it. A sign, he said. A good one. I told him I had to let him go and hung up, unsure if I agreed.

Early that evening, when I returned home from the corner store with a pint or two, prepping to celebrate a solid day off, I again found my neighbor behind her back door, smoking a superthin shock white cigarette, looking firmer, stronger, prettier than ever.

She up-nodded at me, sort of sultry-like. Took a long slow drag and said, "I doing it tonight."

"You're doing it?"

"Tonight the night." She nodded once, took a confident drag. "He can cry for all he want. I am not there."

"Ah. Beautiful."

“I disappear. I got no ears.” She crossed her arms. Her eye contact was fierce, dedicated. “Tonight the night,” she said.

I nodded solemnly. You could see she meant it.

It’s a cruel act in some ways. In others, a gracious one. Make behavior extinct by ignoring it. Go deaf. Deny. X out. Deprive. Place the child in a crib in a dark (or mostly dark) room, give your good night and leave. At no point re-enter to comfort the child, regardless how demanding or terrified the sound. Child will cry self to sleep. Start this process at the same time each night and each night the duration of crying will reduce itself, until finally—*voila*—no crying at all. Put ‘em down at the assigned time and, with the faint ringing of Pavlov’s bell, they are down and out, blind to the count (and certain to sleep through the night.)

With ours, took forty eight minutes. The first time we tried, we won. Forty eight minutes precisely. I kept close count on the digital. The second time, nine minutes. The third (faint ringing of the sweet silver bell) no minutes at all. What stuck with me most, though, was the first time. Our powerful prince wailed a solid forty-eight, sometimes pretty wildly (scared us a little) then stopped—and abruptly. Sudden stunning silence. Down *flat*. As if he’d been shot.

Shelley and I did that one as a team. After a certain point, we each had asked if the other would rather just go. But no—we held the fort there together. Letting the child’s brain and body, both confused, battle it out with the air, the darkness, the terrifying sensation, the realization that no help was coming at all. It helps to have back-up in a situation like that. It’s a battle, a war, a few times over.

Well, I knew my neighbor meant it. She did. But their powerhouse infant was up to the challenge. His wailing seemed less intense at first, then more so—far more. Off and on. As if conserving himself for the home stretch, then attacking with shorter, fiercer blasts to remind them he still had the goods.

At some point, it got to me, more than ever, and I put on music. Loud, aggressive, thematically appropriate. Both blasting him out and singing along. The Beastie Boys “Sure Shot” (*You can’t / You won’t / And you don’t stop!*) Sonic Youth’s “Disappear.” Then loudest and most obvious, the Pixies’ “Extinction” (*And that’s Extinction! / Ex-tinc-tion!*) I’d crank it so his voice still came through, just the faintest little siren at the margins.

Each time I turned it down, he was still going strong. But after a while, it grew incongruous. I stopped playing songs and listened to his. An hour passed, then an hour fifteen, then—longer than ever—an hour and a *half*. Onward, forward. An hour forty, forty five. She wasn’t going in. He wasn’t stopping. Looked like the battle could go all night.

Then, just as I was about to blast Nirvana (“Rape Me”)—my hand holding the disc above the drive—the crying stopped. Like *that*. He’d been shot. And no argument followed. What’s this—success? I stood in the sudden silence, sipping at the last of the beer. Well hallelujah. A knockout.

A little later, to verify this, I waited on the enclosed back porch area with a garbage bag in tow. When I heard their back door open, I descended the stairs. Innocently. Perhaps whistling. And there she was again, having one out back. She smiled warmly, and raised out her arms. “We do it!” she said.

“It worked?”

“It work!”

We embraced. She stood on tippy toes and gave me a peck on the cheek. Their door was wide open and the father approached, dancing a goofy dance through their kitchen, holding a bottle of I think champagne. As if they’d had it on ice, chilled and ready, like a team certain they’d clinch the pennant.

I liked the father more here. For a moment, I understood them together. He danced with her, the bottle at her back, both of them acting like silly teenagers. They offered me a drink but I declined.

“Bring you wife here some time,” she said. “We have party, okay?”

“Sounds nice. But . . . not tonight.” I wagged a thumb upstairs. “Work in the morning. Both of us.”

I took out the trash, then went back upstairs, half-expecting again to find Shelley and the baby waiting there for me. My gift instead was a blinking red light at the base of the land line in our kitchen. I got excited a second—maybe Shelley calling? From Montreal? We hadn’t spoken in weeks; we were due. But caller ID revealed it was Victor. I didn’t even listen to the message he’d left. I was feeling the weight of things at the moment. Sorry, Victor. Maybe tomorrow.

I got in bed and absorbed the silence. Sooner than ever, I was dead asleep.

Until, hours later, our buzzer rang. This confused me at first, even scared me; then I drew back the blinds and saw who it was. I got back in bed. He rang and rang.

Buzzed and buzzed. I tried to blot it out, deny, go deaf, but he knew I was home. And I caved.

In pajamas and an unzipped parka, I stood on our 2nd floor porch. Victor stood on the stairs in his torn pea coat, his Volvo parked at an angle to the curb, the door still ajar, engine still idling.

“Come down here, man!”

“Jesus, Victor. It’s nearly three!”

“Get *down* here. Big news!”

I pressed my finger to my lips—*sshhh*. I conceded and went, pretty certain he wouldn’t leave otherwise. On the concrete staircase, Victor embraced me. Smelled of whiskey and crap fried food. The supercalm was mostly going; nervy agitation was back in the saddle.

“I’ve come to a very big decision,” he said. “*Huge*. And I have to thank you. The sound has stopped, Phil. It’s gone.”

“The sound?”

“The crickets, cicadas. You know.”

“Right.”

“Let’s celebrate. Come out with me, man.”

I winced. “I got work, Victor. I’ve got to be at the warehouse early.”

“*Fuck* work,” he said, then stepped back and recognized his error. “No no no. I got you. Work. That’s part of my decision, actually. Sort of. I mean . . .”—he looked up—“*money*. I need to and will be getting money. Mark that. I *desire* money. I crave money.”

“Okay,” I said. “That’s healthy, I think.”

“Hell yes!” he said. “To health!”

“Shhh.”

There was wildfire in his eye. What had I done?

“Listen, Phil,” he said. “I know it’s late and probably not appropriate, but I have to tell it. I feel called to, bare with me, it’s . . .”—he stared at me intensely—“it’s about *wanting*. You know? I mean . . . wanting *anything*. Everything. Including enlightenment. Or salvation, transcendence—whatever you’re after. Cause even wanting *that*, to free yourself of all desire, to save your soul and float above the trouble, clearly this is *still desire*. Maybe the most arrogant *kind* of desire. You know? You know?” He shook his head, wincing tightly. “I know that’s been said. Everybody says that. Sophomoric, right? Pretty goddamn collegiate. But I don’t care. It’s true! It’s selfish pride. It’s a lie. Seeking detachment? Detachment from *what*? From the wanting at the heart of being *human*? From its guts and its struggles and its hard-fought *joys*? From responsibility to the life we’ve been given! It’s bullshit, Phil! It’s complacency!”

I’d heard a similar version of this speech earlier that day, though this one had more conviction, even clarity. And he was talking about responsibility now.

“So, Victor, what is it you *want*?” I asked. “You said money but it can’t just be tha—“

“What you have.” Victor pointed up at our dark 2nd floor apartment. “I want *that*.” I looked up; a white shock of toxic regret coursed through me. “I want stability,” said Victor. “Togetherness.”

We looked up at the dark apartment. It was like he'd pointed out a floating pink island, the nirvana or heaven he'd mocked the night before; for a second, it hovered there; all was well. The pretty pink family slept soundly in the air. Victor had an ex-girlfriend, a permanent child, but for his reasons had never lived with them. He was conceding to a newfound desire for tradition. And this creeped me out as well.

"To health!" he shouted. I sshhed. The downstairs baby cried out. Victor cringed. "Shit," he said. "Sorry." He smiled at the ground. "But that's *healthy*," he said. "You get to hear that." He looked up at our apartment. "You go, Henry! Keep at it!"

The downstairs baby cried even harder.

"Victor." I gripped at his shoulders. I spoke in a tight whisper. "You need to go home and get some sleep."

"*Fuck* sleep," he said, then nodded, conceding. "No. No, I hear you. I got you. I'm on board." He trailed backwards, laughing to himself. He mock-saluted. "I'm on *board*." He waved dramatically at the door of his car, not unlike Nixon at the copter, and then the Volvo was gone.

When I turned, the mother was on their front porch, holding the pacified baby in her arms. She said nothing, didn't need to. The reproach was in her eye. As if the interruption were irreversible and somehow cancelled their earlier success. The aim, after all, was sleeping through the night. I've googled it since; it shouldn't matter, but my new friends grew frosty with me after that. The father came out and spoke sharply in Ukrainian; throwing star sentences with pointy consonants. I nodded, sort of ducking, said sorry, so sorry.

I hiked the stairs toward the peaceable island that was once again an empty home. As I pushed open our door, the phone rang. And I swear, I could hear it by the sound of the ring. That was Victor. He was calling from the Volvo on his cell.

But I wasn't getting it. Wasn't going near it. It could ring all night for all I cared.

And it did for a while there. Freaked me out, in fact. I even got up to check caller ID, where my guess was too swiftly confirmed.

It rang and rang and rang and rang. He'd call, let it ring until voicemail kicked in, then either left a message and/or hung up immediately and dialed back like that. On and on, he did this. Musta gone ten minutes. Then stopped—sudden silence (which freaked me out even more.)

I got in bed and turned on my side. I stared into the silence and darkness, hoping Victor was okay. But mostly thinking: *Henry, Shelley*. My family up there in Montreal, actively preferring that I not be there.

It was almost certain I wouldn't sleep at all. No—certainly certain. Not a wink.

I hiked down the back stairs and got in the Civic and drove southwest through the cold night air—window rolled down, radio off—toward the ghostlier streets I couldn't name.

(14)

Philip Lends a Hand

Each rotation was reflected in the shiny red formica. The wheels spun round and round and round—the actual wheels plus their distorted shadows—as we chatted it up last summer. Probably out in the back hallway there. Maybe in this very kitchen.

I sat and listened, mouth a bit slack.

Adam had recorded me without my knowing, which seemed a far deeper, more intimate transgression than the ways he'd cheated me before. But it wasn't such a bad performance. I'd held my own. Though mostly it's Adam you hear. In a way, I was listening a second time over. Like listening to myself listen. Then, from nowhere, comes my agitated voice, sounding tenser, squirrelier than I thought I deserved. Jesus, Adam, what's *this*? I'd never guess you'd actually go here.

Both sets of wheels spun round and round.

I'd found the tapes that morning in a shadowy pile in the back end of basement storage. Just nosing around for the extra set of windshield wipers. And our pile of extra

crap was butting up against Adam's, the considerable mound he hadn't taken, or forgotten, when he'd fled our lives six months before. I felt around in the dank cold dark, rooting for the stupid windshield wipers, but finding instead a pile of cassette tapes, the hard plastic feeling of that.

I lifted it out to daylight: a tattered old shoebox (running shoes, New Balance) brimming with coal black cassettes, each with a purple-striped stick-on label. Most were mixed tapes or tapes of old albums, recorded from the vinyl ages ago. Six or seven lying near the top, however, contained what had come to chill me: voices conversing, among them my own.

There was a tape of Adam's wife. A tape of our friend Victor. Two tapes devoted to someone named Grace (the mistress he'd cheated with for years.) Plus a few with quirky cryptic labels that sounded like album titles, such as *Ontological Infomercial* or *Chillin' with the Big Black Birds*, the sole tapes, I'd discover later, that contained his voice alone. Mine was right near the top of the pile, titled simply, directly, like a benevolent children's book: *Philip Lends a Hand*.

I tried to remember when he'd recorded me or invited me to do so but no memory ever arrived. So he had a whiff of Nixon in him. A low rent bush league fuck-up's Nixon with no real crime to conceal. No big league crimes anyway. No public ones. No—this was just some hobby. Some creepy *need* or way of capturing, and at no point letting the other know.

Actually, with Nixon, I believe they knew. Didn't they? At least the inner circle? Kissinger? Haldeman? Erlichman? Dean? Adam would know who among them knew. That's the sort of thing *he* knew—and like that. (One of those.)

Philip Lends a Hand is a hodgepodge of random conversation from the past year, most of which I could pin in some small way, at least to the given season. Some were just snippets, three-to-five minutes. Others far longer. Fifteen, twenty. I have no idea how he did this or edited it down to what remains (if that's what he did.) I never saw a recorder—ever—but then again, I wasn't looking for one. The instrument I found in the shoebox—what I had before me here—was unusually thin, a little thicker than a pop tart, with flat round buttons, essentially soundless. You could keep it in the waistband of your shorts if you wished. Even tape it to your chest like a wire.

I listened, fast-forwarded, part amazed, part amused. Some of the talk was tiresome or indulgent. Some of it, fairly entertaining. Then I found this, about two-thirds toward the end of Side B, and it gave me a sharp pause.

The funhouse reflection spun on formica. The sound of silence, frizzy nothing, then you hear Adam lifting his whiskey, sipping, setting it down (soft glassy clink.)

ADAM: But I understand it, I do. I get the impulse to wiretap. I mean, without asking if you can. I understand it perfectly. Only . . . I don't want to spy on my enemies with impunity. Fuck that. I want to spy on my friends. [PHILIP laughs lightly.] Or—okay—my acquaintances. My acquaintances too. Even the ones I dislike. Perhaps *especially* them. But still—I don't know—my friends. My friends and neighbors. I know them already.

PHILIP: [Clearing throat.] Well I am, in fact, both your friend *and* neighbor. You uh . . . ever think about spying on me?

ADAM: [Giggles archly.] How do you know I haven't already?

PHILIP: [A pause.] I guess I don't.

ADAM: [Laughter, some edge there.] No sir. No you do not.

(He had Nixon in him, clearly. Why was I surprised?)

The flat distorted wheels spun on the kitchen table.

ADAM: We all *have* it, Phil. It's not like it's unusual. The desire to see inside other people's lives? To spy? Or if we could, get invisible? Come on, wouldn't you do it if you could?

PHILIP: [pause] I'm not sure what you mean.

ADAM: [exasperated] Get invisible! Full-on *disappear*. Get cloaked in air like a fantastic Phil and go over to my place and *watch* me. See how I act with Maribel. See how I roll with the boy. Or—no. See me alone. How I am *alone*. That'd get your rock off for sure. Watching me talk to myself? Or drinking alone while the family sleeps? Muttering, staring into space. Or even—the inevitable—whacking off. Watching me polish it. Christ! Can you imagine?

PHILIP: [Brief nervous giggle.] Not until now. Until you just said it, I couldn't have—or wouldn't have—imagined it. But thanks all the same. Thanks for shoving that in there.

ADAM: [Laughs, lifts glass (clink), sips (slurp,) then gently returns it to surface.] Fair enough. That's unnecessary. I went blue too quickly but I bet you would too. If you had those powers? [pause] I know you would.

PHILIP: Well *you* would. That's clear.

ADAM: [Half-chuckle, half-scoff.] Please, Philip. Drop the sanctimony. My God. [Little pause, rustling, reaching over, etc.] You're the most dedicated voyeur I *know*.

PHILIP: *What?*

[The click of a lighter; ADAM inhales audibly, exhales.]

ADAM: It's nothing to be ashamed of. Mark me, sir: it's built in. You're just curious. We've evolved this way. The more enclosed we become, the more we want to see inside the secret enclosures of others. And sometimes—or maybe *most* of the time—we like the secret power that gives us. Now Bush and Gonzales and Cheney and the gang, those guys take it to the limit. They do it with the desire to *control*. Purely. They've got the tools and technology, the power of access, to essentially become invisible. To actually kind of *do* that.

PHILIP: Okay, sure, I agree with all that, but . . . I fail to see what it has to do with me.

ADAM: [Sheeshs.] Come on, we were *just* discussing this. The *dead* kid, Philip. Your dead kid across the street! The one you've been taking bets on? Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe he's disappointed you by showing up so inconveniently alive.

PHILIP: [waiting, mulling this over] Well . . . maybe there you're on to something.

ADAM: See? I am. I don't mean to play gotcha, but . . . well, I *got* you. Exhibit A: the neighbor you spied on, who you quickly grew to wish had died.

PHILIP: *Aaah*. I didn't *wish* for it.

ADAM: For a while there, you tried to make him your whole story.

PHILIP: [defensive] My *whole story*? Jesus, Adam. Barely any of it.

ADAM: All due respect, Philip, all due respect, but you tried to hitch a *ride* on that kid. On his literally *broken back*. You probably called it social conscience, the loyal itch of liberal sympathy, but you and I know it's the voyeur in you, the little peeper, that's what—

I clicked off the recorder. He'd grown tiresome and pushy, even at a six-month distance. It had been a while since I'd thought of the dead kid—Dominick, the dead kid who'd shown up living—and I resented the reminder if for any reason because what Adam had to say was fairly spot on.

I'd forgotten we called him *the dead kid*. For a while there, he really was exhibit A: the kid I thought had died in Iraq, who would take me abroad by not existing, who'd plug me into the grief of millions in the actual on-my-street way. He hadn't of course. Reports of his death just grand exaggerations. If I'd had the power to get invisible, I could have walked across the street and figured it out, planted myself as the so-to-speak camera. Get the real reality the camera can't.

Clearly, it boils to knowing and consent. Like naked vs. nude. Sudden shame vs. clueless beauty. Angrier now, I pressed fast forward (nude on tape, naked as I listen.) What else you got, Adam? What else you got for me? I hit stop, then play. Where I land, we're both laughing. Sharing some joke. Adam inhales, exhales.

ADAM: The dead kid's not even the half of it, Philip.

PHILIP: Man . . . will you please stop calling him "the dead kid?"

ADAM: Why? [pause, bewildered] That's what we *call* him.

PHILIP: He has a name now, okay? Dominick. He is quite alive.

ADAM: [pause] Okay. Okay. Dominick then. Dominick the dead kid who came back to life. Ra ra. Shish boom ba. We're all very happy for him, and especially for *you*. Philip's secret phantom appears in the flesh.

PHILIP: He's not *mine*. Come on. Now why—

ADAM: Albeit with a bullet in his spine. Correct?

PHILIP: [pause] Yes. Bullet in the spine. It's not going anywhere.

ADAM: [sheeshing] *Jesus*. And why? He put his literal backbone on the line for *what*? Some abstraction, some principle he barely understands? Democracy's advance in the Middle East? Is that it? Or is it he protected us from terror?

PHILIP: I believe he did it for the college tuition.

ADAM: Tuition! Beautiful. Exactly what you hoped to *hear*. Plumb in line with the plans you drew up. Nice find, Philip. Applause, applause.

PHILIP: I had no plan for this. And I don't like your tone.

ADAM: But what about you, sir? What about *your* condition? I mean . . . aren't you a little paralyzed too? At least partially? And in fact by way of the backbone?

PHILIP: [sharp pause] You're pushing it, Adam.

ADAM: Don't misread me. Do *not* misread me. I've got it too. In spades! That blow to the backbone? You can feel that, no? I can. [Long pause. Lowers voice.] Comes by way of the lives we lead. We could have used a little war but no one ever asked us to, never gave us a reason—not outside the little 'life wars' everyone fights. We got no abstraction, no shimmering principle. Just predictable middle-class safety. Half-baked achievement and the gloss of security. Goo-goo for baby, kisses for wife, beers on Friday, the Times on Sunday. Isn't it pretty and thoughtless and nice?

PHILIP: Oh stop. That's not you.

ADAM: [tone shifting] Feels like it is. More and more it really does.

PHILIP: Naw, man. You crave war. You go seeking it all the time. And in your brash little way, you sort of make it happen.

ADAM: [pause, liking this] You think so?

PHILIP: Your grad student, for starters. What about her? That's like . . . your *covert* war. Or one of them. Undeclared without notifying Congress.

ADAM: [scoffing] Oh that's only what everyone everywhere wants. You too. Again, it's not unusual. The difference is I actually *act* on it. That's no golden greater principle. That's just getting laid and scoring some companionship outside the one we've been told we're allowed, which—okay, I got you, I hear you, yes—that's fighting for one kind of freedom, right? [pause, thinking it over] But I wouldn't suit up with a combat helmet and a rifle to protect it. It's only a little appetite, brother. A side dish of secret freedom. Exactly what *you* want but can't find the—

PHILIP: Don't assume what I want.

ADAM: [sheeshing] Oh you *want* it. There's nothing wrong with *wanting* it. But you're a good boy. I understand.

PHILIP: You think so, huh?

ADAM: [heartless chuckle] I know it's not on the map you drew up. Not yet at least, but it may well arrive. And when it does, sir, what you'll discover is this: the fucking itself is overrated. It's the freedom, not the fucking—that's the heart of the prize. The freedom and the fresh attentio—

I clicked it off. Here he'd struck sharply—a knife to the head, landing with a *thwock* (as if against a tree): the fact of my present existence, of my relatively recent, so-called “freedom.” The little war I hadn't planned to declare.

I pocketed the recorder and moved toward the far front living room. There, I found Henry's overly large, picket fence-ish crib, empty as a desert. Barren over three months now. I gripped at the padded adjustable bar and stared at the pastel sheets, the puffy pillows, the stuffed pink pig with the sinister smile (the stuffed animal that creeped me out most. Is that why she left it here?) Behind me, the queen size in our bedroom loomed loudly, the smoothed-over perfection of the tucked-in sheets. Shelley would be amazed at the steady upkeep. Months of it, all on me.

The hazy muted light of March shot through the half-up blinds. Nothing stirred.

This didn't feel much like freedom. Early on it did, but no longer. Adam'd probably say I'd sold myself short, under-pursued the “side dish.” In fact, there'd been only the one time last fall. No—it was the cover-up that did it. The keeping it from Shelley. The Nixon in me.

I went for a walk to the corner store, trying to forget what was missing, the skinny recorder with the soundless buttons riding in the pocket of my jeans.

Down at the store, I surprised myself with an impulse I'd never guess I'd follow. Just standing in line with some chips and salsa while the cashier was talking to the customer before me, something about the Latin Apostles going to war with another gang. The skinny recorder was there in my pocket, so easy and soundless, and I thought why

not? It erased a few minutes from *Philip Lends a Hand*, but whatever—I'd heard all I wanted there.

The next morning, I tried it again at a diner, catching the conversation in the booth behind me; then at the warehouse that afternoon, as my co-workers talked some serious trash about the top brass assholes downtown. None of this was riveting or all that revealing. I taped over what I'd recorded more than once. Still, I couldn't seem to help myself. It seemed harmless and not quite Adam's disease if I limited the practice to strangers and work folk. Besides, I was capturing nearly nothing. Just unexceptional quotidian talk, the kind we produce more than not.

Two days later, however, I caught something cold. For I was down at the corner store again, buying a six pack, and I pressed play through the pocket of my jacket, hoping to ask the cashier about the gang war down the way. I set a five on the counter and waited for change, preparing my question (any casualties?), when I noticed who was wheeling by outside. I stepped from the counter and toward the door, ignoring the cashier's offer of change.

He had passed like an especially mischievous ghost. A kind of streaker. That uniquely tattered knapsack across the wheelchair's back? Those particular biker gloves (Puma, black-green)? That profile, so unmistakable (fattier features on a once-lean frame.) I stood on the corner and watched him wheel off. I picked up the pace, but he was motoring swiftly. I started a run. That's *him*. That's the dead kid! Hey! Hey, the dead kid! *Wait up!*

He turned west two corners up ahead, toward my place, which was toward his mother's place. I scurried fast, circling the block the other way around so I might "bump into" him. I ran hard, a full sprint, six pack cradled in my arm like a football.

You can hear me breathing hard on the tape. Here and there, I mutter inaudibly. Sounds desperate, actually. I'm amazed I got there without blowing a blood vessel. And I hadn't a clue what to say when we met but meeting right then seemed imperative. I down-shifted some when he came into view, sort of briskly race-walking toward him. He must have thought I'd lost my mind.

PHILIP: [approaching, feigning surprise] Hey! [catching breath] Hello there.
[catching breath] Thought that might be you.

DOMINICK: [chuckling] Shit, man. Someone after you?

PHILIP: Oh. No. No no. [catching breath] Just . . . getting some exercise.

DOMINICK: Always take a sixpack with you when you jog?

PHILIP: I uh try to, yes. Helps to have something to work for.

DOMINICK: Damn. [Laughs.] You're fucked up.

PHILIP: Yes. I am. I really am. That's observant of you. [pause] But uh seriously, it's been a *while*. So. Wow. You look good.

DOMINICK: Please. I look like shit.

PHILIP: Naw. You look *great*. You look vital. How's uh how's college?

DOMINICK: [long pause, amused, maybe suspicious] You're the guy from the Study, right? You work for your wife?

PHILIP: I used to, yes. That's right.

DOMINICK: And you used to live across the street from me.

PHILIP: Still do. I mean, still across from your mother. You moved.

DOMINICK: I did. [odd pause, slight laughter] That's very observant of *you*. Listen, jack. You need something from me?

PHILIP: I do kind of. I do. It's just uh . . . like, really good to *see* you. Life is . . . life is good? I didn't catch where you're going.

DOMINICK: Going?

PHILIP: Where's college?

DOMINICK: [laughs tightly] What do you know about me and *college*? How do you even know I'm *going*?

PHILIP: Well I guess I don't. I thought you told me—

DOMINICK: What I've got is college and something more. Starts in the fall.

PHILIP: Okay um . . . college and something more *where*?

DOMINICK: [chuckles] Afghanistan.

PHILIP: [laughter] Excuse me?

DOMINICK: Kabul. American University of Kabul. A special program for the injured vet. But *covert*. Hush hush. If you told a single soul, I'd have to kill you.

PHILIP: [light laugh] Understood. Mum's the word. So . . . you'll be a freshman in *Kabul*? Really?

DOMINICK: You study one semester in Kabul. The next semester, you fight.

PHILIP: Fight? . . . Fight *how*?

DOMINICK: [pause] You think I'm too weak to pull a trigger?

PHILIP: No no I . . . never said you were any—

I clicked off the recorder. On second listen, I knew he'd been playing me. But my, with what speed! He had a whole scenario mapped out here. Seemed he hatched it on the spot. Unless of course he wasn't lying. Either way, it was pretty elaborate, mostly concerning this *hush-hush* "program" for vets with Spinal Chord Injuries, involving but not limited to: college attendance in Afghanistan, study of the Koran, the engineering of hospitals and dams, and covert combat work as first-floor snipers.

But that was only the first part. Our encounter took a darker spin after I offered him a beer. He rolled up to his place and I sat on his stoop, and the interview in proper began. And I went a bit faux Charlie Rose on him here. It gets embarrassing in places.

Alone in my kitchen, I fast-forwarded the tape. Let it go for a while. I took a meditative swig from my current can. Pressed play.

DOMINICK: [laughs] First you ask me about women? Then you ask me about God? And now you want me to define '*freedom*'?

PHILIP: Not a strict definition. Just, you know, off the top of your head.

DOMINICK: That's some personal shit, man.

PHILIP: Is it having no responsibilities to anyone but yourself? Is that it? Is that what it boils down to?

DOMINICK: Fuck no. [dismissive laugh] Freedom has to be more than *that*. Last I checked, freedom was . . . *not being enslaved*.

PHILIP: Ha! Okay. [ponders this] That sounds right. Yes. That's more direct.

DOMINICK: But it's mostly in your mind, okay? Unless you're in prison. Or kidnapped or whatever. It's a state of *mind*. That's all. I discovered that shit in Iraq.

PHILIP: I bet. Do tell. This uh. . . this is what you were talking about earlier, yes? The uh 'dark thoughts' you had there?

DOMINICK: Man . . . that's some personal *shit*. I've been trying to *relay* that to you. These are highly personal, private matters. Between me and God alone.

PHILIP: I thought you said God wasn't paying attention.

DOMINICK: No. No. What I said was God is *asleep*. And out *cold*. Snoring very *very* hard.

PHILIP: Yes, right. I remember. [chuckles.] Fat, lazy. Passed out like a drunk.

DOMINICK: [pause] Did I say 'lazy'? Dude, I meant depressed. Like . . . hospitalized with it.

PHILIP: So he's an overworked depressed drunk the size of the universe who—

DOMINICK: I don't even *know* you, okay? Why you so curious?

PHILIP: *Well* . . . why shouldn't I be? We're having a beer on the stoop. Man to man. We're *talking*. And we haven't in a *while*.

DOMINICK: You keep saying that like we used to be tight. Like we *gave* a shit about each other. [pause, sip] I don't even know you, man!

PHILIP [exasperated] But I *do* know you.

DOMINICK: No. Not really. I signed up for your wife's study, but that's it. We've talked a couple times since then but—

PHILIP: No—I *knew* you. I knew you before that. Before I even knew your name. You were my *neighbor*. I saw you here. I watched you.

DOMINICK: [Little chuckle.] You ‘watched’ me? [pause] How’d you *watch* me?

PHILIP: From my porch, while you hung out right here, when you lived right *here*. And then you were gone. And—well, I shouldn’t say this, but—for a good long while I . . . thought you were dead.

DOMINICK: What? Like in combat?

PHILIP: For a while, I was absolutely certain of it. I stood right up there after you’d gone [PHILIP points across the street to his 2nd floor porch] and . . . I tried to face the fact of your death. These guys in uniform came to visit your mom, and I convinced myself of it. You died for me. I watched your mother grieve from afar. Or you know, so I thought. It made pretty good sense. Hell, in a way it was a comfort.

DOMINICK: Now that’s fucked up.

PHILIP: But it’s not! Because *you*’re not! And . . . who knew how close you’d come? Twice over, you escaped it. *Twice* you almost—

DOMINICK: How twice?

PHILIP: Well, first is obvious, your uh—

DOMINICK: The bullet I took. Okay. What else?

PHILIP: Well, you were just talking about it. Just right now. You said uh . . . you said you had some pretty bad thoughts while you were in Iraq. Pretty *dark* thoughts. You were considering um . . . I believe you implied you were thinking about . . . well, *suici*—

DOMINICK: Hey! I never *said* that!

PHILIP: [pause] I believe you implied it pretty strongly.

DOMINICK: That’s not your business, *motherfucker*.

PHILIP: Sorry. I'm sorry. I thought you were opening up that way.

DOMINICK: [Lowers voice.] You know what? I'm done with your questions. You don't tell a *soul* I said that, okay? That's *misrepresentation*. You heard wrong.

PHILIP: Okay. Absolutely. I must have.

DOMINICK: Yes you did. [He looks up at his mother's apartment.] Ma! Hey Ma! Let's go! [Silence.] Excuse me. I have a date with my Ma.

He hadn't mentioned that he was waiting for his mother. We must have been sitting there over half an hour. She was certainly ready to go. She'd been upstairs waiting all the while, evidently. She appeared at the door minutes later in a gray cloth topcoat buttoned to the neck. I hadn't seen or noticed her around in a while, but everything about her seemed the same: that tall red hair formation, the beanpole leanness, the lively eyes and taut proud bearing. She nodded at me, perhaps confused—she hardly knew me either—and spoke to her son in Spanish. Dominick shrugged, responded sharply and handed me his empty can. I said goodbye and he nodded, more to himself than to me. They rolled off the way he'd come, mother and child, quiet as a funeral.

*

*

*

*

A few days later, I came home exhausted from the warehouse and saw the recorder on the kitchen counter. I had no plans to listen any further. Still felt a bit cheap from what I'd done the other day. I also had a pretty strong feeling that this would be the last Dominick spoke to me. The tape recorder had colluded with this closure; I disliked

like it all the more for having been there. I ate my takeout burrito in silence, the skinny recorder before me, not moving.

I'd had this feeling before, however—that I'd never speak to someone again—and fifteen minutes later, my meal almost done, the landline rang to unravel all that.

Seeing his name on the caller ID—that alone was stunning. I hadn't spoken with the guy since August—seven, eight months before!

“Adam?!”

“Hey there, brother,” he said, and chuckled. “Guess who's on his way?”

He was calling from a hotel in northern Texas, taking it good and slow. He'd arrive on our street in a couple of days: my low-rent Nixon was coming home. For a little while at least. Driving a U-Haul up from Michoacan to retrieve all he'd left behind, including the pile of crap in the basement that had spilled so inconveniently into ours.

We yakked and laughed, told the stories we could. Filled in some gaps, connected dots, but we couldn't get to everything, if nearly anything. He seemed fairly surprised, even disappointed, to hear that Shelley and I had split (even if only a “trial” separation.) I was in turn surprised to hear that he and Maribel were doing the reverse: giving it another go. I couldn't help but think that was wishful thinking but I guess you never know.

And never got around to telling him I'd found that box of tapes. Didn't seem right to challenge him so soon. Prodigal neighbors who are practically ghosts deserve a welcome home.

Later, I went down to the basement and put the shoebox back where I'd found it. He can do with the rest of the tapes what he wishes. Maybe I'd tell him, maybe not, but

I'd had enough of the Nixon in me. I hiked the stairs, then the creaky black ladder that led to the building's roof.

Up there, on the roof of our building, you can clearly see the skyline. And airplanes and steeples and lights for miles. The night air hung on the edge of warmth—cool but not cold. Spring was on its way. I savored this a little but didn't wait long. Sometimes we are called to act.

I stood at the rear corner of the building and cocked back my arm and *whizzed* it, just *hurled* it—that flat little pop tart recorder with my secret cassette inside. It went head over heels, over the rooftops, into the cool night air. I watched it spin and swivel and arc until it caught the edge of an old brick building and smashed with a crack into smithereens.

(15)

U-Haul at the Diner

Adam's vintage Mexican U-Haul was a rare and gorgeous creature. A silvery-orange sort of spaceship U-Haul. Gently curved where you expected corners; wind-resistant and faintly egg-ish; like a "future" U-Haul from the U-Haul museum, a future (in Adam's words) already past.

We ate patty melts and fries and stared at the thing, parked directly across from our booth. He'd discussed the future at length in this way, earlier, back at the bar. He felt for the first time he'd been living *in* one: a time and place he hadn't seen coming. Michoacan. The future. His ass-backwards brave new world. If not, he said, a brave new *grave* (there, he'd chuckled).

He chewed, ruminated, stared at the U-Haul; lashed back a strand of his failed combover; lifted his patty melt and bit in. No. His decision was final, sir. He wasn't going back to *that*. *Fuck* that. Don't even question it.

I stared at him staring at the U-Haul.

"On the phone, you sounded so committed," I said. "Like *devoted*."

“Last week’s a long time ago,” he said, grinning slyly. “And don’t look so glum. My choice is a joyful one.”

I shook my head slowly. “I don’t know, man. How long were you down there? Was it long enough to even *know*?”

“This last time? A full month.” He shrugged. “I went for two weeks before that in November”—he looked up—“I sent your ass a postcard. Get that?”

“The snapshot of you and Jorge?”

“Is that not a beautiful picture?”

“It is.” I nodded. “It really gave me hope for you.”

“Ah”—waving this away—“Forget about hope for me. Focus on hope for *you*.”

I sighed, nodded, bit, chewed. “All this talk about staying split after all that talk about reuniting. I can’t quite fathom it. I mean . . . what about Jorge?”

“I’ll visit—and frequently. I’ll call, send money.” He gestured with his sandwich, a holding-forth gesture, a defensiveness present in the bracing of his shoulders. “Look: it’s not *abandonment*. He’s got the influence of manhood in *spades* down there. More uncles and cousins than anyone needs. Uncle Reynaldo?” He shrugged, resigned to it. “Already more the father figure. Jorge *loves* him. He expresses this openly. Meanwhile, the kid’s awfully iffy on me.” He shook his head, looking weary. “I fuck him up, Philip. I know it.”

“He’s *four*.”

“He’ll be stronger without me. I fuck him up. Trust me.”

A cop cruiser drifted by the diner. It slowed near the U-Haul, stopped, had a look, then floated off into the black of morning.

“But Maribel *wants* you down there?” I said. “Right? That’s her desire?”

Adam nodded. “You don’t think Shelley wants you up in Montreal?”

“She doesn’t,” I said and faced it square. “Not yet anyways.”

“Christ. That’s a crime.” Adam chuckled unfeelingly. He shook his head in wonder, looking down at his ketchup-and-cheese-strewn plate. “You’re such a better person than I am. I mean . . . in *that* way. In the settle-for-the-middle way. You’re humble, generous, essentially benevolent, though . . . let’s face it, that shit gets you *nowhere*.”

“Nice. Thank you.”

“I’m kidding. I’m half kidding.”

I nodded, smiled, thought about it, forgot it, then took a quick scan of the diner.

Not yet 6 a.m. and the place was filling up. Day laborers, uniforms, ne’er-dowells, suits. And I saw, just then—or felt—a pair of eyes. Watching me, then sliding away. Elusive eyes from the far back end, though I couldn’t make out whose.

Adam lifted some fries and pointed.

“They left us, Philip. *They* left *us*. Nowhere is it written that we have to follow. We will *contribute*—certainly. We’ll send *money*—absolutely. But no law says we have to trail behind.” He lifted his sandwich and grinned with bitterness. “Like two shamed strays seeking the wisdom of their masters. Fuck that. I won’t have it.”

Again: the elusive pair of eyes. I felt them, saw them, knew they were there. I looked over Adam’s shoulder at the backs of heads; baseball caps, random faces; cigarettes, coffee cups, forkfuls of egg. We’d been out too long; I was losing it.

Adam shook his head no (no no no). “There are other sorts of values,” he said. “If we must, let’s distill it to *that*. Redefine what it means to *have* a value. To hold or hold to a principle. Because the culture tells you *theirs* must be *yours*; that you have no choice but the choices offered and then they offer them up in striking, biblical black and white.”

I nodded, agreed—or sort of, maybe not—essentially tuning out. And then again (Jesus!): that pair of eyes. I felt—or saw—someone watching me. Who *is* that back there? I searched and sought and came up empty.

“You there?” Adam’s fingers snapping at my face.

“Right here.”

“Well whaddya think?”

“Think?”

“You should come.”

“Come?”

He pointed at the U-Haul. “Along.”

“But . . . you don’t even know where you’re *going*.”

“Sure I do.” He lowered his voice, looked over his shoulder, then back at me, grinning wickedly. “The future.”

“And where’s that?” I said. “I mean . . . specifically?”

He shrugged. “Maybe Portland. Maybe Alaska. Maybe some unseen Shangri La yet to be announced.” He ate the last of his patty melt; said softly, coaxingly: “You should come, brother.”

Another cop cruiser rolled gently by the diner. It slowed, stopped, just near the U-Haul, had a brief look and motored on. We watched this then laughed.

“Everybody loves your U-Haul,” I said.

“Especially the cops,” he said. “The cops are gaga over my U-Haul.”

“Well you . . . *are* a wanted man.”

“Oh good Jesus. Are we gonna run through all that *again*?”

“It’s the *facts*, Adam. I cannot imagine why you’d take this so lightly. Your Dart was—”

“They found it. I know. Somewhere on the west side.”

“Yeah well, they didn’t just find *it*.”

Adam sighed. “There was a body in it. I *understand*.” He traced a fry in ketchup, grin-wincing. “And a stash of cocaine inside the backseat of the vehicle. I know. I know. I *heard* you.” He shook his head to himself, more tightly here. “As if either had a damn thing to do with *me*. Christ!” He grinned, liking this (calling it preposterous). “You told me all about it last week on the *phone*. Then you filled me in with the *precise* same news—the mirror of this news—for an hour or more tonight at the bar.”

“It wasn’t anywhere *near* an hour. Come on.”

Adam looked out the window at the U-Haul. He said: “Seriously, it’s like”—he glanced at me—“you almost suspect *me* of foul play.”

“I suspect you of nothing!”

“When they found the Dart, it was what? November?” He bunched up his shoulders. “I was down in Michoacan, okay? Failing a crash course in family values.”

“I know I know. No one’s accusing you.”

Yet another cop car passed. Then another; each stopping for a look at the U-Haul.

I said: “What’s up all with the *cops*?”

“There’s a”—Adam took a bite, chewed—“there’s a station right near here.” He jogged a thumb over his shoulder. “Right back there.”

I looked sideways out the window down the street, couldn’t see it, and then, once again, felt the eyes (what is you *want*, pair of eyes back there?)

Adam stood, excusing himself.

“Ima let you pass on this one,” he said, grinning aggressively. “But don’t suspect me, sir. Of *anything*. In fact, instead, *come* with me.” He lifted out his hands, meaning: come now, it’s obvious, and said: “You got nothing going on here, Philip. *Nothing*.” He shrugged. “Why not get out on the highway and breathe some fresh air?”

I nodded. Yes. Perhaps I should. He lifted a discarded Sun Times from the empty table next to us, then crinkled his nose. “I may be a little while.”

I watched him go. Adam Swivchek. Off to the restroom with reading material. What a piece of work. You’d think after disappearing—and for eight solid months!—he’d apologize for never having said goodbye (or ever mentioning that he meant to leave). But whatever. That’s just him. Swivchek, face it, was a confirmed sneak, the kind of guy who chronically cheats on his wife, who philosophizes one way and lives another. The sort of undercover creep who secretly cassette-tapes conversations and saves them in a shoebox in the basement! A shoebox his neighbor might easily find! And open up. Then listen to.

I eyed his satchel in the corner of the booth. Was he recording me that *very minute*? Might be.

I looked out at the silvery U-Haul. Skip town with this prick? What was I thinking?

Another cop car coasted by slow. Jesus, so many *cops*. I craned my neck to see where we were. A station right near here, huh?

And way down the street, I saw—like a crack of plastic orange lightning—the Popeyes. I stopped chewing like someone in the movies stops chewing. I lowered my patty melt into its drippings, the cheddar and onions that had slid to the plate. Oh my. We're here. We're *near* it. The mustard brick station I knew so well.

It shot to mind that odd afternoon—early November, four months before—when I bought a three piece value meal and sat across from the Ward 13 station, where, for an hour or two, I'd been interrogated. Or rather, simply questioned—good-naturedly and without much pressure—though it left me feeling nervous and abused.

The detectives said let us know. If Swivchek shows up in town again, give us a holler. That'd help us out a lot.

After, I sat in that crappy Popeye's with the baby asleep in the stroller. I ate rapidly, famished, really dug in, counting the ways I might be cursed (unless I was lucky.) Jesus. So that's the Popeye's just south of the station. And I hate Popeye's. Hunger has sometimes forced me to its trough, but it always makes me feel like hell. If pleasing on the taste buds, hell in the belly. Like a parasite begging to be freed. A palpable knowledge in body and soul that the attempt at nourishment has not succeeded.

I eyed the hallway to the restrooms, then Adam's satchel. This *guy*. Everything he touches turns to cloaks and daggers. I reached across the booth and grabbed it, rooting for the tape recorder I suspected was spinning there. I searched thoroughly but couldn't

find one, coming up instead with a ream of bound pages. A draft, perhaps, of his book, the one he claimed to be working on. Or a chapter maybe, titled, with bitter certainty:

Don't Call it War if it Can't be Won.

I scanned the page, then started right in:

Don't Call it War if it Can't be Won

My neighbor has come to whisper a horror, another, the worst yet: two severed heads impaled on fence posts outside his uncle's car lot, one head belonging to the local police. He said they looked like *colmenas*—hives. Only insects live inside them now. The devils have come, he tells me. They said this little town could not be touched but *no mas!* He gripped at my arm. We been touched.

This act wears the signature of *La Familia*. Beware The Family, he tells me. But I already knew this—and absent the capital F. Beware the family and ties of blood. Beware all vows sworn at sacred altars. What an overrated underfunded sanctimonious institution—mafioso or no. Big Family, little family, same trip, same destination. Maribel thinks we want to be one again. But I see her seeing through me. My heart is hard and black and sticky and wants what it wants, to eat itself. So don't tell me I need to choose my battles. Don't call it war if it can't

“Any good?”

I looked up. “Excuse me?”

“Your story there.”

It took a second but arrived sharply. Scissors of recognition sliced through me. That uniquely large head (considerable, formidable,) the Walrusy mustache, the broad chunky frame.

“It’s not bad,” I said and laughed weakly. “How you been?”

My detective from back in November—one of two who’d questioned me.

“I thought that was you,” he said. “Philip, right?”

His were the eyes that watched me. (My god.)

“Yes. Good memory. Nice to see you, detective . . . I’m sorry—”

“Povich. Detective Povich. Call me Marty.” He held out his hand. His grip was firm, the palm fleshy and calloused. He released my hand and extracted a bite-size candy bar—Milky Way—from the side pocket of his undersized suitjacket. “You work around here?” He popped in the bite-size and chewed.

“*No*,” I said. “No work today. Just uh . . . out with a friend, we’re um . . . neither of us has work today.”

Povich nodded. “Celebrating?”

“I guess you could say that.”

“Up all night?”

“Pretty much. Yeah.”

He chuckled lightly. “You smell it.”

I stared back, set dumb from the bluntness. That’s the Povich way, I was recalling. “Really?”

“I don’t mean that you *literally* smell.”

“Oh. You mean I *look* it?”

He jogged his head side to the side.

“No. I mean you *smell* it.” He reached in his pocket for another. I winced.

“Just not literally?”

“That’s correct.” He unwrapped another bite-size (Snickers.) He chewed, ruminated, serious-seeming. “You don’t feel right about it.” He stared into space. “Being out all night, probably drinking. Maybe other nefarious activities—I don’t know.” He looked at me. “It’s the unease I smell. Very similar, I should say, to the smell of *lying*. Or more generally, shame. In extreme cases—and I may be a lunatic for saying so but—in extreme cases? It really *does* give off a scent. Faint, but it’s there.”

“But . . . not here?”

He chuckled. “Relax. You smell like a friggin’ tulip.” I smiled at him. He smiled back. “Albeit a tulip that’s been drinking,” he said.

I chuckled at that, then stole a glance at the slim hallway leading to the bathrooms in back. Adam would any minute emerge.

Povich said, “How’s the kid?”

I turned to him. “He’s great. Wonderful.”

“Don’t have him today, huh?” He licked at a finger.

I met his eyes, stealing a peripheral at the hallway in back. “I don’t. It’s . . . ”—I sat up in my seat a bit abruptly—“I don’t at *all* anymore. That’s changed. A lot. Our arrangement is . . . well, it’s not really—”

“Not really my business. I read you.” He nodded, slow: inquisitive. “Correct me if I’m out of line here, Philip, but . . . do I catch a note of defeat in your voice?”

“Well . . . *no*. I think you’re wrong there.”

“I can be,” he said, tonguing his gums. “But not all that often.” A mischievous smile rose beneath the mustache, which seemed bushier, bolder than four months before. “Enough with the third string psychoanalysis,” he said. “Who the fuck am I? Dr. Drew? It’s that I remember your kid, I guess. He was strong. A little force. And his eyes were so *alive*.” Povich pointed at his own eyes with two fingers. “Real sharp, real electric. A potent light there, Philip. *Cadillac* wattage. Which is rare. My daughter has that too.”

“Right, right. I remember her,” I said. “Or you know—her picture on your desk. Track team, right?”

“Shotput, yes. Thank you for remembering.” He reached in his pocket, took out a second little Snickers, then leaned down and lowered his voice. “Olympics, Philip.” His brow rose; he tore the wrapper. “No shit. They’re talking *Olympics*. My little girl! Her coach thinks, if not Beijing, then definitely London. Well, the trials. He means the trials. She’ll have to make the team. But . . . we all do, right? Trials first, games later.”

I nodded nervously. “Couldn’t be more true.” I stole a glance at the hallway in back. Take your time, Adam. Take your time.

Povich nodded slowly, deep in thought.

“I’ll leave you be, Philip,” he said. “And I *am* out of line, I know that. It’s disgusting. Side effect of the goddamn job. Now I won’t judge you—how could I? what do I know?—but I see you sitting there, shot sideways to Zion on a weekday morning, and at least allow me to suggest . . . well whatever happened between you and your wife, it’s not worth destroying yourself over. Don’t wave any white flags just yet.” He

knocked twice on the linoleum table. “Keep the chin up, buddy.” He raised his brow.

“You get no younger.”

“Well you’re right there.”

“No judgment from me, Philip. None.”

He patted me on the back—a hardy double-pat—and looked out the window meditatively. Then the thing caught his eye.

“What is *that*?”

“I know. Weird, huh?”

Povich half-grimaced, half-grinned.

“What kind of art deco turd is *that*?”

I chuckled. He shrugged to himself.

“Is that like a U-Haul *dinosaur* egg? It hatches and a truck is born?”

I grinned, nodded. He nodded, grinned. Then Povich looked down to me and said, “*You*’re not moving?”

I gazed at the U-Haul. “Thinkin’ about it,” I said. Over his shoulder, I noticed Adam in the background, approaching fast. oh shit oh no oh no oh no I tensed—real tight now—and said. “Just might have to.” Adam stopped in his tracks and patted at his pockets, then dug in them, searching.

“*Hunh*.” Povich snorted at me. “You’re weirder than I remember.” He sniffed at me, at the air above me, goofing around—and soon to leave, you could tell. “There *is* just the *slightest* scent there.”

“Oh?” I chuckled nervously. “Literal? Actual?”

“You need to decide that for yourself.” Povich stepped away and pointed at me.
“Though I do suggest you *bathe*.”

In the background, Adam was searching, scanning the floor as he walked, trailing back toward the restroom. I swiveled to watch big Povich go, that barge-like force for the door.

The klanky set of bells on the front door rang.

I stared down at my empty plate, smeared with ketchup and streaks of cheddar. What timing. (My God.)

The klanky set of bells on the front door rang. I looked to the hallway that led to the restroom, where Adam was still looking for whatever he’d lost. In a flash, Povich stood before me again, just slightly out of breath.

“I meant to ask you, Philip. You uh . . . ever hear from your buddy? Uh whassisname?”

Adam appeared at the lip of the hallway, still looking down at the floor. Whatever he’d lost had proved elusive.

“Adam,” I said. “Swivchek. It’s crazy but no. Haven’t heard a word.”

“I see.” Povich nodded. “Just thought I’d ask. Yours was a real unique case.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

“I mean—I imagine! I don’t know.”

Adam went to his knees, then all fours, searching under a table. Povich looked over his shoulder, having seen my eyes. Finding nothing, he turned back to me. “You okay?”

“Yes. Yes. I’m *fine*. It’s just . . .” I let out a long tight breath. “Long night,” I grinned guiltily. “Much too much. You know?”

Behind Povich, Adam stood. He started moving toward us, dangling the keys to the U-Haul before him like a long-dead rat he’d found. He grinned, shaking his head (approaching). Povich grinned, shaking his head (soon to leave). He patted my shoulder.

“I been there, mister. Not in a while but I been there. You keep us posted about your friend.”

“Will do.”

I nodded and turned to watch him go. I swiveled back and Adam was across from me. “Who’s that?” he said.

The klanky set of bells on the exit door rang.

“Someone I’m glad you missed. I’d never . . . I wouldn’t have known how to signal you.”

“*Signal me?*”

I looked up and Povich was passing on the sidewalk. He gave me a farewell up-nod, then glanced at Adam with the faintest little doubletake, a glint or pressure in the eyes. He slowed his pace, stopped a second, thinking it through, then moved on toward the station. Whatever had occurred to him apparently wasn’t worth his time.

*

*

*

*

That very evening—twelve, thirteen hours later—we were riding in the U-Haul, heading west, making our way out of city limits. And Adam thought we should read it as

a sign, a glorious karmic reprieve. Povich at the diner! It likely wouldn't have led to much, but we'd have had to stay at least an extra day. Perhaps a week. Or far longer!

I smoothed my hand across the dashboard (its immaculate old new school.)

We left that future behind, he kept saying. We chose another. This one *right here*.

The interior of the silver/orange Mexican U-Haul was consistent, I saw, with what the outside had to say. The dashboard in particular seemed before its time (though not before ours, which it was well behind.) It was padded bright orange via hard smooth foam that was somehow very *Space Odyssey*. There were shiny silver levers and knobs and controls, each striped creamsicle orange and white. The vinyl-encased seat cushions were remarkably comfy, pliable yet firm, and especially generous while the carriage was in motion. It felt, as Adam put it, "like you were riding on a carousel in France."

He was right too. It was gorgeous for napping. I fell asleep just outside Oak Park.

When I woke with a start, we were riding up an exit ramp to a shiny highway McDonald's somewhere. "How about it?" said Adam. "Up for a dose of the Great Satan?"

But over my Big Mac value meal, I couldn't get the dream out of my head. All I could remember was the part before I woke: me and Povich in the stands at the Olympics, watching the women's shotput. I'd brought the baby in the carrier seat, and we were having a ball. Povich was like, "Look at that. That's my *daughter*, Philip. That's my *kid*. Look at her go!" He glanced down in the carrier seat. "Where's yours?" When I looked, the baby was gone. Henry had disappeared. I ran and searched, through the stadium, the locker rooms, the alien streets, but nothing, nothing.

I shot up, awake, to see the golden arches.

“Up for a dose of the Great Satan?”

Sometimes Adam has an awful way with words. And it wasn't just the lingering dream nor the fast-rising indigestion. The force of this was something other. It's why, in the parking lot, after we'd eaten, I opened the passenger door to the U-Haul and took out my bag and knapsack and laptop; I said to Adam no thank you. Sayanora. I have other fish to fry. I knew where I was going. Not west but east. I started right off toward the highway.

“What the hell?” Adam stood by his U-Haul in the lot. “Where ya *going*?”

Earlier, admittedly, I'd been a willing passenger. We'd joked around, found the old camaraderie. At one point, Adam went off on a riff. He said he wanted to design a mirror—side or rearview—that somehow sees *ahead*, into the future, that shows you what's coming instead of what you left behind. A kind of “preview” mirror, he called it. And I say to him here as I walk away (silently, only in gesture): you don't need a mirror, Adam. It's *there*. I pointed back the way we came: See that? That's it. (I'm thinking, not saying.) Right *there*. (The future. That's the actual future.)

I crossed the highway, sprinting, panting, not looking back, plunging straight into it as best I knew how.

(16)

Port Hope

Twilight was sinking faster than expected and the border could not be far. The billboards looked cleaner, kinder somehow. Lights in towns seemed to gently throb. As if that bright Canadian energy had burst from its container and leaked across the line.

But not inside the car. Inside the car, it was still America. Our moment together another sort of leak, a different sort of sinking.

My passenger stared at the passing scenery, more plaintive now, darker, than he'd been before. In the car for no more than fifteen minutes and something seemed off or you might say troubled. New edge in his voice, shade in his laughter. Different weight to the drop of a silence. Seemed a different person from the guy I'd just met, just clicked with, I'd thought, at the roadside rest. This Drake. This mistake of mine.

Shelley, I'm sure, would not be impressed. A hitchhiker, Philip? She'd say. Really? A *hitchhiker*?

Enthusiasm did this. Enthusiasm distracted or blinded me. As it has before, and many times over, though never in this way, or not that often.

He wasn't precisely a hitchhiker, though. His was the soft pitch, the artful hustle. Never even had to raise his thumb.

I'd been having a break at a roadside rest, at a picnic table with a roast beef and cheddar. Out in the early April air where no one else had cared to dine. Cool and clear; damp, bracing; eerie and gray and snuffle-inducing. And this guy in an eye-catching get-up, becalming somehow—charcoal green suitjacket, pastel violet shirt, mint necktie with the subtle gold striping—walks up to the table, mopping at his forehead with a handkerchief (mint), softly humming to himself. He had a significant helmet of maple hair, like sportscaster hair without the spray, a bit tousled here, matted there, but mostly set in a solid Bob Costas. Boyish-seeming too, at least in the face, though close study revealed this was a ruse. He was well past forty—perhaps near fifty. Can't escape the wrinkles and wear. (Even the most cherubic get it.)

Standing there, he caught my eye, then raised his brow, as in: may I? I nodded: have a seat. I redoubled my efforts with the roast beef and cheddar. The stranger in the suit continued to hum.

Well, I knew the tune instantly. Or almost instantly.

"Nice," I said. "That's 'Buckets of Rain.'"

He stopped and smiled broadly. "You a Dylan man?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I mean . . . as much as the next guy."

"Who's not, right?"

I jogged my head side to side. "Some aren't," I said. "Some aren't at *all*."

“We are,” he replied, and nodded, still smiling, revealing that fetching gap between his teeth. “We’re Dylan men.”

“I guess we are,” I said, and smiled back.

He waited a second, liking that. And that’s when he leaned up into the table and broke full on into song.

Buckets of rain / Buckets of tears / All of them buckets comin’ outta my ears

He sang softly, soulfully, right there at the table.

Buckets of moonbeams in my hand

His voice came off a bit gravelly and raw but almost in the end kind of pretty.

“That was nice,” I said when he’d finished. “You a singer?”

Naw, he went, sort of mouthing it, waving me off. “I just like to sing.”

“Well you’ve got a fine voice,” I said. “I mean that.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I give a little effort.” He looked off, then dabbed at his forehead with the pristine violet handkerchief. “That’s from *Blood on the Tracks*,” he said. “The album for Dylan’s divorce. Did you know that? Those are divorce songs.”

“I did know that. I mean, I knew it came right after he divorced.”

The stranger grinned, raising a finger. “But that’s no divorce song,” he said.

“‘Buckets of Rain?’ That’s a love song. That’s a take-you-with-me-when-I-go song.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

“Hell yes,” he said. “He snuck that poison in there.”

“Ha. I guess he did.”

We nodded together, liking that. He stretched out his neck, then stared beyond me. “A song does it better than anything,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“Tells the story to the heart,” he said. “And in the heart’s *language*. That’s the most important part, right? Half the time you don’t even need the words.”

He hummed a phrase of the song again, then chuckled to himself, and took a granola bar—Nature’s Harvest—from his inner suitjacket pocket. He ripped the wrapper

“Who else you like?” he asked.

We talked songwriters out in the damp cool air. Talked of women and men, what worked, what didn’t. And my stranger in the suit was calling it imperative: you *had* to sing to your lover and/or sing together or be sung to. At least *listen* together. And hopefully, at some juncture, dance. Otherwise it’s doomed, he told me. Dries up. You retire from your heart. That, or you find someone else to employ it.

Well I was endeared to the guy pretty quickly. A little boy and an old man seemed wrapped together in the same skin. And we talked other songwriters we both admired. His tastes ran toward the older stuff—nothing, say, after 1990—but all of it I liked. Dylan, Springsteen, The Clash, Patti Smith, even Elvis Costello, who he only knew through the song “Alison,” which was his daughter’s name. That song always made him sad, he said, but all the same, in a necessary way. And he leaned back, staring off in the distance, and once more, broke into song.

Aaaaaaa-li-suh-uhn / I know / this world is / killing you

He sang only this, then apologized. He knew that probably got embarrassing. He’d had some trouble today. Awful trouble. *Car* trouble. Been going up north to see his ex and his daughter—or at least’d been planning to—when the car broke down. Kerplooey. Engine just *fried*.

“I have to tell you, friend, my emotions are running high.” He stood. “I’ll let you go. I have to find a way across the border fast.”

“That right? What’s the hurry?”

“Ah.” He waved me away, implying he didn’t want to waste my time. “My daughter’s in a school play tomorrow afternoon. Up in Port Hope.”

“School play, huh? Can’t miss that.”

“I miss too much already,” he said, then looked off in the distance. “Not sure what I’ll do, to tell the truth.”

“You mean . . . so you don’t . . .” I wasn’t sure what I meant to say, though I thought I knew what was coming. He raised his brow.

“You going up there? The border?”

So a different kind of hitchhiking. The subtle pitch. And I wasn’t an instant putz about it. I felt him out a bit, though not in the ways I maybe should have. Where, for instance, was his car? Didn’t he want to send help or a tow truck or extract valuables or see if I could jump him? But those questions started to seem intrusive. Plus it seemed too elaborate a story to invent. The specific town. Specific need. And my own situation had the built-in simpatico. We were bound in a sense for the same location.

I explained I was heading north as well, also for a wife and child. On the way—*all* the way—up to Montreal. He lifted his arms, palms out, very pleasantly surprised, as in: AAAAAAAYYYY—look at *that*. Well, we have to, yes?

In a flash, he was riding by my side, a tattered black knapsack resting on his lap with rips and holes in the flimsy nylon. This knapsack didn't match the suit at all, and it started to creep me out. Fifteen or so minutes into the ride, I really began to have my doubts. The Drake from the rest stop was not in the car. His sentences grew clipped; he seemed weird and bitter; he chuckled to himself, apropos of nothing. We rode on in silence, the minutes ticking by, the American sun sinking fast, when, half an hour or so from the border, we saw the first of the signs. Which read:

DO NOT PICK UP HITCHHIKERS

THUMB CORRECTIONAL FACILITY IS NEAR

Our quiet grew quieter (which is to say, quite loud.)

Thumb Correctional Facility. No shit. That's its name. And they have these signs on the highway for miles, warning us all: **DO NOT PICK UP HITCHHIKERS.** Any other circumstance, I'd have to laugh. Seemed so absurd. As if the roadside were overrun with upright thumbs, borne by men in bright orange jumpsuits, sawed-off chains still clamped to their ankles, hoping we wouldn't notice.

When we saw a second sign just like the first, Drake let out a little chuckle.

"I'm not a convict," he said, smiling, looking ahead. "Well . . . not anymore."

"But . . . you were?"

"I was. Yes."

"But not recently?"

"Been out like . . ." He looked at his watch, wiped some dust from its face. "An hour now." He looked up at me, sober-faced. "An hour, hour and a half."

A white shock coursed through me. He stared out the window, humming a tune. With a burst, he broke up laughing. I let out a long breath and shook my head. He chuckled, liking this.

“Been out fourteen years,” he said.

“I see. Fourteen years, huh?” I nodded, relieved. “Long time.”

“Not long enough.”

I saw another sign, a third, and just went ahead and asked.

“So were you uh . . . you at Thumb Correctional Facility?”

“Naw,” he said and waited. “Leavenworth. It’s in Kansas.”

“Leavenworth? That’s . . . isn’t that maximum security?”

“Was when I was there.”

I nodded tightly. He smiled (or seemed to).

“Relax,” he said. “We’re good. Though I been meaning to ask. You uh . . . you got any money on ya? Any *cash*?”

“Some. Why?”

“Cause I’ll be needing all you got.”

I hit the brake weirdly; we both pitched forward. He broke up laughing.

“I’m *kidding*.” Another burst of a laugh. “Hold on. Ha! No no no. I don’t need any. I don’t need that.”

I settled a bit. “Okay.”

He shook his head. A silent *naw*. Perhaps he hadn’t been to prison either (though this remained unclear). Then another burst of unexpected laughter, and he slapped at my

shoulder with the back of his hand. “You’re good people,” he said, then turned and stared through the window, grinning.

We sat in silence for a good long while. Watched the passing trees in the blue-green darkness-to-be. Little white ranch houses. Industrial plants. Billboards. Tim Hortons, NHL promotions. Everything warming, more accepting, quieter. Then he reached absentmindedly into his knapsack and extracted a glazed donut, wrapped in a grease-stained paper towel. And this seemed more his speed than a granola bar. Drake was chubby-ish but not all that overweight, in the manner of weirdly proportioned alcoholics or chronic bad eaters on mini-market diets. I have no idea if he was either but I’d bet Shelley—my inquisitive nutritionist (not yet my ex)—bet she’d make that guess. The lumpy allotment of adipose tissue seeming to circle the midsection? The glazed pale state of his skin? It suggested consumption of not quite food: Cheetohs, Pop Tarts, Slim Jims, booze.

He stared through his window, no longer smiling. He let out a sigh.

“I shouldn’ta played you like that,” he said. “I can be a real bastard. Sorry. I apologize.” He smoothed his hand across the sportscaster hair. An itchy patch in back stayed upright, sort of sprang back jauntily (it would not be moved). “I’ve got the devil in me still. I do. Probably always will. It gets the better of me sometimes and I’m sorry for that. You’re my *savior* today. Providing me transport and I paid you with what?”

I shrugged. “Well you did sing for me.”

“With *fear*,” he said. “You opened up your heart and the door to your Honda and all I could shove in was fear and suspicion. Like a stick of dynamite with the fuse lit. I

really must control that.” He shook his head, then hardily slapped at the side of my thigh.

“You’re my *savior*.” He contemplated that. “After Jesus Christ, it’s you.”

He finished off his donut, eyeing me from the side.

“You pray?”

“Sometimes,” I said, and glanced over. “Not often.”

“Only when the world’s really riding you, right? Assfucking you to *death*?”

I thought about that, then nodded. “Yes. I suppose. Mostly then.”

He turned to stare out his window. Softly harrumphed.

“Sometimes I find it’s futile,” he said. “Or you might even call it counterproductive.” He stared, smiling to himself. “The harder I pray, the more likely it is that the thing I *want* to happen will *not* happen. Like Jesus is saying: turn down the volume, Drake. You’re desperate and I’m busy. Work on yourself a little more and maybe I’ll send help.”

I chuckled. He smiled to himself, a warmth returning.

“Jesus playin’ hard to get,” he said. “Like a hot woman with a fabulous ass standing in a bar full of lonely men, the bar being, like, the whole of *souls* in the Western world, if not the universe, where everyone wants a piece of that *ass*. *Everyone*.” He thought about that, then said, “Most of the time, in my experience, Jesus does not put out.” I laughed out loud. He smiled broadly. “But what’s it all about?” he asked. “We ought to know *better* by now. Hell, even Dylan had a Jesus phase. You know that?”

“I do know that.”

“Look at you.” He turned to me. “You know everything I know.” He waited, staring at me, a kind of dare, then said: “*Slow Train Coming*? That album? *Bizarre*.”

Among the most favored Jews on the planet—the poet laureate of the century, really—and that Jew goes *Jesus* on us! Imagine!”

“I don’t think it lasted long.”

He nodded. “Lasted an album or two.”

“I think you’re right.”

“You do, do you?” He lowered his chin and looked away. “Professor thinks I pass, huh?” And he turned to stare out his window.

We rode in silence a while then, until, from nowhere, he broke it. He asked: “You still married?”

I nodded reluctantly. “I am.”

“Going through a rough patch?”

“We are,” I said. “But my sincere hope is we’ll be patching things *up*. And soon.”

“Hold onto that,” he said, “though I suggest you don’t hope too hard.”

“I’ll try not to pray.”

He chuckled. “Whatever happened, I suggest you get straight with her.”

“We’ll see,” I said. “That’s the plan.”

My cell phone, laying in the beverage container by my side, vibrated, jarring us both. I looked at the name and number on its face.

“Guess who,” I said, holding up the phone.

“Ah.” He lifted his chin, smiling.

I flipped it open. “Hey.”

“Hello Philip. So . . . where are you?”

Shelley’s precise Ontario accent, up there in Montreal.

“Real close to the border,” I said. “The place we’ve crossed before.”

“Okay. Just be safe. I worry for you. This whole thing unnerves me a great deal.”

I glanced at Drake, who was looking away. “I’m being totally safe.”

“Good. Please continue to be.”

“How’s Henry?”

“Sleeping. He misses you.”

“I miss *him*. So much, Shelley. *So* so much.”

She waited. One of her signature pauses.

“I shouldn’t say this but . . . I guess I’m a little excited too. About you coming.”

“I’m so glad to hear you say that. That’s beautiful.”

She cleared her throat. “Listen. Philip. I’ll admit I’m excited but I’m also frankly a bit *disturbed*. I mean, I think it’s wrong. I honestly do. I still think we should wait on this. You’re being rash about it. You are. That said, well, I can’t help it. You’re an impulsive prick but I miss you.”

“I miss *you*.”

“God knows I could use a hand with Henry.”

“Rachel’s not helping anymore?”

“I think she feels I’ve taken advantage. There’s only so much one can ask of one’s unemployed sister. It’ll be nice to have your help for a while.”

“The Monarch needs his top valet. He remembers my quality of service.”

“That may be.” She waited, then said to herself, “The *Monarch*. God.” She huffed, near chuckled. “Haven’t heard that one in a *while*.”

“See? You like. You secretly like it when I call him that.”

“Nope. Still hate it,” she said. “Don’t you dare bring it back.”

I looked over at Drake, who’d been watching me. He turned away, smiling.

“How long are you planning to stay?” she asked.

“How long?” I said. “I thought that was clear. I’m staying.”

An odd, abrupt pause. “You mean . . . for good?”

“Shelley. I’m *staying*.”

“You’ve brought all your stuff?”

“It’s in storage. I’ll have it sent later. Or go back and get it. I don’t know.”

I could practically hear her biting her lip, shaking her head. “This is not wise, Philip. I still need room. I’m not ready for you to *stay*. Not in that way.”

“Wait. Honey, can’t you see? I *have* to. If I—”

“I’m sorry, Philip,” she broke in. “I’m not comfortable with ‘honey.’ Not yet.”

I paused, set back by this. “I can’t call you ‘honey?’”

“Or sweetie or baby or any of that.”

Drake said, loudly enough, “*Jesus*.”

“Who’s that?” she asked.

I looked over at Drake and caught his eye. “Oh that’s the uh . . . the radio.”

“You gotta get straight with her, jack!” he said.

“Who *is* that?”

“The radio. Talk radio. Listen, I’ll call you when I’m near Quebec.”

“Are you *okay*? Is someone there with you?”

“I’m losing the connection honey.”

“Please. I’m just not comfortable with ‘honey’ yet.”

“Okay okay!” I said. “You’re not honey!”

“Tell her she’s your associate,” said Drake.

“You’re my associate!”

“Philip who’s there?”

“Tell her you’re like partners in a law firm and she’ll have to buy her way out.”

“I’m losing you honey!” I said. “I mean—my associate!”

“Philip!” [click] I closed the phone and dropped it in the beverage holder.

Winching, surprised at myself, I stiffened at the wheel. “Now I’m in trouble. And . . . on top of the trouble I was in *already*.”

He laughed, shrugging. “She’ll come around.” He picked up my cell and pressed off. The theme music jingled goodbye. “But let’s give her a rest why don’t we?” and dropped the phone back in its resting place.

We drove on then in a new kind of silence. Somehow lighter, airier. Though soon enough we saw signs for the border. Drake leaned up and gripped the dashboard. He said, “It’s coming.”

“I see that.”

But after we’d gone another mile or two and the border was almost upon us, Drake said, sort of under his breath, “Pull over a second.”

“What’s that now?”

“Just *stop*. I need to reflect.”

We haggled a little while over why, then, not feeling especially threatened—for he promised he didn't mean to hurt me or steal the car or be weird in any way—finally, I pulled over.

The engine idled. Random cars passed us toward the crossing. You could see the lights for the border station way way up ahead. No flags yet visible, but I sensed them there. On both sides. Giant flags. Huge, significant statements.

He said, "I'm gonna have to leave you now. I want to thank you many times for the kindness you've shown."

"You're *leaving*? What do you—?"

"I got no passport."

"Oh." I looked ahead. The border'd grown serious in this way only recently. I remember Shelley and me going up years before, passing in no problem. Less trouble than ordering burgers at a drive-through. But now? "I guess that *is* a problem," I said.

He clucked his tongue, resigned to it. "The closest thing I got to a passport is this." He unzipped the ragged black knapsack. He held out a flier to me. It was bright fuschia and gold and green. Parsons Junior High Theater presents: *Alice in Wonderland*. Had the date, time; images of Alice, the Queen, the Mad Hatter.

"Your daughter's play?"

He nodded, looking ahead through the windshield. "Alison plays the crazy angry Queen. I will not miss it. I *refuse*."

He took back the flier, zipped up the knapsack and held out his hand for shaking.

"Thanks a thousand times," he said. Our grips met. "You've been my savior today. A rival to Jesus." He opened his door. He looked out into the dark black woods,

then smiled broadly, his signature smile, baring that winning gap between teeth. “It’s a challenge but I’ve met worse before.” He shook his head. “No one can say I didn’t try, right?”

He stood at the lip of the highway, holding the handle to the open door.

He leaned back down for some last words.

“Life is sad, brother,” he said, smiling. “Life is a bust”—quoting our song. He nodded, committed. I nodded back. “All you can do is do what you must!”

He closed the door and stepped away, hunching a little—commando or SWAT team style—off on a secret run for the border. He scurried off swiftly, patting twice at his sportscaster hair, where still it would not be moved. I watched him go, swelling with feeling, a flood of it. He *did* have a daughter, who really *was* in a play; this stranger who may or may not have done time. He was hunching, going for it, a commando in a suitjacket. Sincerely attempting to *sneak into Canada*.

I laughed and laughed and nearly teared up. *Do it, Drake! You get there!*

After crossing the border, I went in and out of that glorious feeling, like a radio signal or wave I’d pass through, then just as soon leave behind. I’d look to my right, at the trees the houses the signs the darkness, and imagine I saw Drake, hunching over, running alongside the car, clutching his knapsack like a football. I liked to think of him hoofing it, going the distance, all the way up to Port Hope. Crossing the finish line, breaking the tape, into the arms of his crazy Queen.

I sang to myself for who knows how long. Dylan songs, The Clash, Elvis Costello. I had CDs, a radio, a CD player, but preferred at the moment singing to myself.

When I saw signs for Port Hope, I thought about stopping there, just to have a look. But soon enough, I decided against it. That was Drake's town. Mine was in another province entirely, the city where I planned to stay. If she allowed it; if my so-to-speak passport was renewed.

After passing Port Hope, I rolled down the window and let in some air, the damp Canadian April evening gone brisker, bolder, more of a challenge. Quebec was coming, my test was near, and the air was giving me notice. Soon I'd turn the phone back on and call Shelley and try to get straight with her. No one can say I didn't try, right?

Well I had no Dylan with me there in the car but chose the cd that seemed most appropriate. Why hadn't I done as much before? Nothing like music in a moving car. It is intimate and practically in you.

I know / this world is

killing you-oo . . . oh-ohoh

Aaaaaaa

I sang along, the window down, in love with the briskness, with the song and the singer, heading north on the open road.

VITA

EDUCATION

Ph.D. Candidate in English, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2005-present, degree expected summer 2011.

Dissertation: *Unwarranted*, a novel in stories

Dissertation Committee: Gene Wildman (director), Christopher Grimes, Chris Messenger, Luis Urrea, Chris Fink.

Examination Areas: 20th Century American Literature (1920s – 1960s), 19th Century American Literature, “Stages of Seeing” in European and American Literature (Realism/Naturalism – Modernism – Postmodernism), the “Otherworldly” as thematic in World Literature

M.A. in English, University of Illinois at Chicago, May 2005.

Thesis Project: *Nearly Dead Friends & The Art Party*, Novellas as Beginnings.

B.A. in English Literature. Goshen College, 1990. Journalism (minor) and TESOL (minor).

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

2009-2010	Visiting Instructor, College of Medical Education, University of Illinois at Chicago.
2005-2011	Teaching Assistant, Department of English, University of Illinois at Chicago.
2007-2011	Adjunct Lecturer, English Language Program, University of Purdue Calumet.
2004-2006	Visiting Instructor (English), Department of Human Nutrition, University of Illinois at Chicago.
1999-2003	Adjunct Lecturer, Tutorium in Intensive English, University of Illinois at Chicago.
1995-1998	Teacher/Administrator, ABE, ESL, Alternative High School, Howard Area Community Center, Chicago, Illinois.

AWARDS, HONORS

Writer in Residence, College of Medical Education, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2009-10.

Charles F. Goodnow Prize for Prose, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2007.

Finalist, *Flint Hills Review* Nonfiction Prize, 2007

Runner-up, Charles F. Goodnow Prize for Prose, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2006.

PUBLICATIONS

“Unwarranted.” *Southern Indiana Review*, Volume 17, Number 2 (Fall 2010).

“The Summer of Ken.” *The Southeast Review*, Volume 27, Number 2 (Fall 2009).

“Domesticated Kin.” *The Main Street Rag*, Volume 14, Number 2 (Spring 2009).

“Highway to Versailles.” *Beloit Fiction Journal*, Volume 21 (Spring 2008).

“The Boos.” *Other Voices*. Volume 21, Number 47 (Fall/Winter 2007).

A Pacifist Rumble. chapbook via Pinchpenny Press Publications, 1991.

REVIEWS

The Girl with Two Left Breasts by D.V. Glenn, *American Book Review*, forthcoming.

Pictures of Houses with Water Damage by Michael Hemingson, *American Book Review*, forthcoming.

PAPERS PRESENTED

“Operation Boyarin: Philip Roth and his ‘Real World’ Pipiks,” presented at the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference, St. Louis, MO. Spring 2010.

COURSES DESIGNED AND TAUGHT

University of Illinois at Chicago

CREATIVE WRITING

English 212: Introduction to Fiction Writing (Summer 2008, Spring 2008, Fall 2007)

English 201: Introduction to Nonfiction Writing (Spring 2010, Fall 2009)

Gross Anatomy Writing Workshop, UIC Medical School (2009-2010)

Special Topics, UIC Medical School (2009-2010)

LITERATURE

English 101: Understanding Literature (Summer 2009, Fall 2010)

English 105: American and English Literature (Fall 2008, Spring 2009)

COMPOSITION

English 160: Composition I (Fall 2010, Fall 2008, Fall 2007, Spring 2007)

English 161: Composition II A research and writing course focusing on underground or shadow economies in America and elsewhere. (Fall 2009, Fall 2006, Spring 2006)

ACADEMIC ESL

Business English (Spring 2007 – English for Professionals, TIE)

English & Dissertation Design for Graduate Students in Applied Health (2004-2006)

Reading/Writing (1999-2003 Tutorium in Intensive English)

Listening/Speaking (1999-2003 Tutorium in Intensive English)

University of Purdue Calumet

ACADEMIC ESL

Study Skills & Academic Preparation (Fall 2010)

Listening/Speaking, Intermediate and Advanced (2007-present, with some variation)

Reading/Writing, Intermediate and Advanced (2007-present, same)

CREATIVE WRITING

Reading and Writing the Short Story (Spring 2008, Fall 2008)

TEACHING AND RESEARCH INTERESTS

Introductory and advanced creative writing: fiction, nonfiction, and drama.

20th Century American and English Literature, 1920s-1960s

Postmodern Theory and Literature

19th Century American and English Literature, 1840 – turn of century

World Literature with the “Otherworldly” as thematic

20th Century Film, American and European

Diaspora Theory and Literature

TEACHING, RESEARCH INTERESTS, cont.

History of the novel and accompanying artistic movements
Rhetoric of Politics, Culture and Religion
Medicine in Literature (literature about medicine or literature by or about doctors)

EDITORIAL EXPERIENCE

Editorial staff, Prose editor, *Packintown Review*
Editorial staff, Prose editor, *The Body Electric*
Editor, *The Howard Line* (student-based publication, Howard Area Community Center)
Editorial staff, *Washington Memo: Peace Section*
Associate Editor, *The Record* (student newspaper)

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Research Assistant, STRATUM Study: “Regional Adiposity and Syndrome X in Spinal Cord Injury”
Departments of Nutrition and Epidemiology, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2003-2005.
Assistant Director/Manager, Intensive English Institute at IIT, 1999.
Assistant Director of Adult Education, Howard Area Community Center, 1996-1998.
Legislative Intern and Reporter, *Washington Memo, Peace Section* (Capitol Hill), 1988-1989.

ACADEMIC SERVICE

UIC Program for Writers Reading Series Organizational Committee, 2007-2008
UIC Second Year Colloquium Search and Organizational Committee, 2006-2007

OTHER EFFORTS (JOURNALISM, MUSIC, ETC.)

Pitchfork Festival Podcasts, interviews with De La Soul, The Sea and Cake and others, Spring-Summer, 2007.
Appearances on Vocalo.org public radio broadcasts (with Tom Herman), Spring-Summer 2010.
Comic improviser and sketch actor, ImprovOlympic (1991-1993) and Tabletop Theater (1997-2000).
Articles in *American Skating World* and *The Main Event* 1990-93.
Multiple articles and legislative reports in *Washington Memo: Peace Section*, 1988-1990.
Singer songwriter, Canoe Speed (2005-2011) and Meet the Head (1994-2002).
Albums produced: *Crabwards Debut*, Canoe Speed, forthcoming, Fall 2011, Lost in America Music.
El Kindergarten Nino, Meet the Head, 2002, Lost in America Music.
Meet the Head, Meet the Head, 1997, self-produced.

REFERENCES

Madhu Dubey, Professor, 312 413-2248, madhud@uic.edu, University of Illinois at Chicago
Chris Messenger, Professor, 312 413-2227, chrism1@uic.edu, University of Illinois at Chicago
Luis Urrea, Professor, 312 413-2221, lurrea@uic.edu, University of Illinois at Chicago
Gene Wildman, Associate Professor, 312 413-2229, gwild@uic.edu, University of Illinois at Chicago