

# Fifty Great Short Stories

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# The Lottery - Shirley Jackson

(1948)

The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green. The people of the village began to gather in the square, between the post office and the bank, around ten o'clock; in some towns there were so many people that the lottery took two days and had to be started on June 26th, but in this village, where there were only about three hundred people, the whole lottery took only about two hours, so it could begin at ten o'clock in the morning and still be through in time to allow the villagers to get home for noon dinner.

The children assembled first, of course. School was recently over for the summer, and the feeling of liberty sat uneasily on most of them; they tended to gather together quietly for a while before they broke into boisterous play, and their talk was still of the classroom and the teacher, of books and reprimands. Bobby Martin had already stuffed his pockets full of stones, and the other boys soon followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones; Bobby and Harry Jones and Dickie Delacroix — the villagers pronounced this name "Dellacroy" — eventually made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it against the raids of the other boys. The girls stood aside, talking among themselves, looking over their shoulders at the boys, and the very small children rolled in the dust or clung to the hands of their older brothers or sisters.

Soon the men began to gather, surveying their own children, speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes. They stood together, away from the pile of stones in the corner, and their jokes were quiet and they smiled rather than laughed. The women, wearing faded house dresses and sweaters, came shortly after their menfolk. They greeted one another and exchanged bits of gossip as they went to join their husbands. Soon the women, standing by their husbands, began to call to their children, and the children came reluctantly, having to be called four or five times. Bobby Martin ducked under his mother's grasping hand and ran, laughing, back to the pile of stones. His father spoke up sharply, and Bobby came quickly and took his place between his father and his oldest brother.

The lottery was conducted — as were the square dances, the teen-age club, the Halloween program — by Mr. Summers, who had time and energy to devote to civic activities. He was a round-faced, jovial man and he ran the coal business, and people were sorry for him, because he had no children and his wife was a scold. When he arrived in the square, carrying the black wooden box, there was a murmur of conversation among the villagers, and he waved and called, "Little late today, folks." The postmaster, Mr. Graves, followed him, carrying a three-legged stool, and the stool was put in the center of the square and Mr. Summers set the black box down on it. The villagers kept their distance, leaving a space between themselves and the stool, and when Mr. Summers said, "Some of you fellows want to give me a hand?," there was a hesitation before two men, Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, came forward to hold the box steady on the stool while Mr. Summers stirred up the papers inside it.

The original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago, and the black box now resting on the stool had been put into use even before Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, was born. Mr. Summers spoke frequently to the villagers about making a new box, but no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box. There was a story that the present box had been made with some pieces of the box that had preceded it, the one that had been constructed when the first people settled down to make a village here. Every year, after the lottery, Mr. Summers began talking again about a new box, but every year the subject was allowed to fade off without anything's being done. The black box grew shabbier each year; by

now it was no longer completely black but splintered badly along one side to show the original wood color, and in some places faded or stained.

Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, held the black box securely on the stool until Mr. Summers had stirred the papers thoroughly with his hand. Because so much of the ritual had been forgotten or discarded, Mr. Summers had been successful in having slips of paper substituted for the chips of wood that had been used for generations. Chips of wood, Mr. Summers had argued, had been all very well when the village was tiny, but now that the population was more than three hundred and likely to keep on growing, it was necessary to use something that would fit more easily into the black box. The night before the lottery, Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves made up the slips of paper and put them into the box, and it was then taken to the safe of Mr. Summers' coal company and locked up until Mr. Summers was ready to take it to the square next morning. The rest of the year, the box was put away, sometimes one place, sometimes another; it had spent one year in Mr. Graves' barn and another year underfoot in the post office, and sometimes it was set on a shelf in the Martin grocery and left there.

There was a great deal of fussing to be done before Mr. Summers declared the lottery open. There were the lists to make up — of heads of families, heads of households in each family, members of each household in each family. There was the proper swearing-in of Mr. Summers by the postmaster, as the official of the lottery; at one time, some people remembered, there had been a recital of some sort, performed by the official of the lottery, a perfunctory, tuneless chant that had been rattled off duly each year; some people believed that the official of the lottery used to stand just so when he said or sang it, others believed that he was supposed to walk among the people, but years and years ago this part of the ritual had been allowed to lapse. There had been, also, a ritual salute, which the official of the lottery had had to use in addressing each person who came up to draw from the box, but this also had changed with time, until now it was felt necessary only for the official to speak to each person approaching. Mr. Summers was very good at all this; in his clean white shirt and blue jeans, with one hand resting carelessly on the black box, he seemed very proper and important as he talked interminably to Mr. Graves and the Martins.

Just as Mr. Summers finally left off talking and turned to the assembled villagers, Mrs. Hutchinson came hurriedly along the path to the square, her sweater thrown over her shoulders, and slid into place in the back of the crowd. "Clean forgot what day it was," she said to Mrs. Delacroix, who stood next to her, and they both laughed softly. "Thought my old man was out back stacking wood," Mrs. Hutchinson went on, "and then I looked out the window and the kids was gone, and then I remembered it was the twenty-seventh and came a-running." She dried her hands on her apron, and Mrs. Delacroix said, "You're in time, though. They're still talking away up there."

Mrs. Hutchinson craned her neck to see through the crowd and found her husband and children standing near the front. She tapped Mrs. Delacroix on the arm as a farewell and began to make her way through the crowd. The people separated good-humoredly to let her through; two or three people said, in voices just loud enough to be heard across the crowd, "Here comes your Mrs., Hutchinson," and "Bill, she made it after all." Mrs. Hutchinson reached her husband, and Mr. Summers, who had been waiting, said cheerfully, "Thought we were going to have to get on without you, Tessie." Mrs. Hutchinson said, grinning, "Wouldn't have me leave m'dishes in the sink, now, would you, Joe?," and soft laughter ran through the crowd as the people stirred back into position after Mrs. Hutchinson's arrival.

"Well, now," Mr. Summers said soberly, "guess we better get started, get this over with, so's we can go back to work. Anybody ain't here?"

"Dunbar," several people said. "Dunbar, Dunbar."

Mr. Summers consulted his list. "Clyde Dunbar," he said. "That's right. He's broke his leg, hasn't he? Who's drawing for him?"

"Me, I guess," a woman said, and Mr. Summers turned to look at her. "Wife draws for her husband," Mr. Summers said. "Don't you have a grown boy to do it for you, Janey?" Although Mr. Summers and everyone else in the village knew the answer perfectly well, it was the business of the official of the lottery to ask such questions formally. Mr. Summers waited with an expression of polite interest while Mrs. Dunbar answered.

"Horace's not but sixteen yet," Mrs. Dunbar said regretfully. "Guess I gotta fill in for the old man this year."

"Right," Mr. Summers said. He made a note on the list he was holding. Then he asked, "Watson boy drawing this year?"

A tall boy in the crowd raised his hand. "Here," he said. "I'm drawing for m'mother and me." He blinked his eyes nervously and ducked his head as several voices in the crowd said things like "Good fellow, Jack," and "Glad to see your mother's got a man to do it."

"Well," Mr. Summers said, "guess that's everyone. Old Man Warner make it?"

"Here," a voice said, and Mr. Summers nodded.

A sudden hush fell on the crowd as Mr. Summers cleared his throat and looked at the list. "All ready?" he called. "Now, I'll read the names — heads of families first — and the men come up and take a paper out of the box. Keep the paper folded in your hand without looking at it until everyone has had a turn. Everything clear?"

The people had done it so many times that they only half listened to the directions; most of them were quiet, wetting their lips, not looking around. Then Mr. Summers raised one hand high and said, "Adams." A man disengaged himself from the crowd and came forward. "Hi, Steve," Mr. Summers said, and Mr. Adams said, "Hi, Joe." They grinned at one another humorlessly and nervously. Then Mr. Adams reached into the black box and took out a folded paper. He held it firmly by one corner as he turned and went hastily back to his place in the crowd, where he stood a little apart from his family, not looking down at his hand.

"Allen," Mr. Summers said. "Anderson ... Bentham."

"Seems like there's no time at all between lotteries any more," Mrs. Delacroix said to Mrs. Graves in the back row. "Seems like we got through with the last one only last week."

"Time sure goes fast," Mrs. Graves said.

"Clark ... Delacroix."

"There goes my old man," Mrs. Delacroix said. She held her breath while her husband went forward.

"Dunbar," Mr. Summers said, and Mrs. Dunbar went steadily to the box while one of the women said, "Go on, Janey," and another said, "There she goes."

"We're next," Mrs. Graves said. She watched while Mr. Graves came around from the side of the box, greeted Mr. Summers gravely, and selected a slip of paper from the box. By now, all through the crowd there were men holding the small folded papers in their large hands, turning them over and over nervously. Mrs. Dunbar and her two sons stood together, Mrs. Dunbar holding the slip of paper.

"Harburt ... Hutchinson."

"Get up there, Bill," Mrs. Hutchinson said, and the people near her laughed.

"Jones."

"They do say," Mr. Adams said to Old Man Warner, who stood next to him, "that over in the north village they're talking of giving up the lottery."

Old Man Warner snorted. "Pack of crazy fools," he said. "Listening to the young folks, nothing's good enough for *them*. Next thing you know, they'll be wanting to go back to living in caves, nobody work any more, live *that* way for a while. Used to be a saying about 'Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.' First thing you know, we'd all be eating stewed chickweed and acorns. There's *always* been a lottery," he added petulantly. "Bad enough to see young Joe Summers up there joking with everybody."

"Some places have already quit lotteries," Mrs. Adams said.

"Nothing but trouble in *that*," Old Man Warner said stoutly. "Pack of young fools."

"Martin." And Bobby Martin watched his father go forward. "Overdyke ... Percy."

"I wish they'd hurry," Mrs. Dunbar said to her older son. "I wish they'd hurry."

"They're almost through," her son said.

"You get ready to run tell Dad," Mrs. Dunbar said.

Mr. Summers called his own name and then stepped forward precisely and selected a slip from the box. Then he called, "Warner."

"Seventy-seventh year I been in the lottery," Old Man Warner said as he went through the crowd. "Seventy-seventh time."

"Watson." The tall boy came awkwardly through the crowd. Someone said, "Don't be nervous, Jack," and Mr. Summers said, "Take your time, son."

"Zanini."

After that, there was a long pause, a breathless pause, until Mr. Summers, holding his slip of paper in the air, said, "All right, fellows." For a minute, no one moved, and then all the slips of paper were opened. Suddenly, all the women began to speak at once, saying, "Who is it?," "Who's got it?," "Is it the Dunbars?," "Is it the Watsons?" Then the voices began to say, "It's Hutchinson. It's Bill," "Bill Hutchinson's got it."

"Go tell your father," Mrs. Dunbar said to her older son.

People began to look around to see the Hutchinsons. Bill Hutchinson was standing quiet, staring down at the paper in his hand. Suddenly, Tessie Hutchinson shouted to Mr. Summers, "You didn't give him time enough to take any paper he wanted. I saw you. It wasn't fair!"

"Be a good sport, Tessie," Mrs. Delacroix called, and Mrs. Graves said, "All of us took the same chance."

"Shut up, Tessie," Bill Hutchinson said.

"Well, everyone," Mr. Summers said, "that was done pretty fast, and now we've got to be hurrying a little more to get done in time." He consulted his next list. "Bill," he said, "you draw for the Hutchinson family. You got any other households in the Hutchinsons?"

"There's Don and Eva," Mrs. Hutchinson yelled. "Make *them* take their chance!"

"Daughters draw with their husbands' families, Tessie," Mr. Summers said gently. "You know that as well as anyone else."

"It wasn't *fair*," Tessie said.

"I guess not, Joe," Bill Hutchinson said regretfully. "My daughter draws with her husband's family, that's only fair. And I've got no other family except the kids."

"Then, as far as drawing for families is concerned, it's you," Mr. Summers said in explanation, "and as far as drawing for households is concerned, that's you, too. Right?"

"Right," Bill Hutchinson said.

"How many kids, Bill?" Mr. Summers asked formally.

"Three," Bill Hutchinson said. "There's Bill, Jr., and Nancy, and little Dave. And Tessie and me."

"All right, then," Mr. Summers said. "Harry, you got their tickets back?"

Mr. Graves nodded and held up the slips of paper. "Put them in the box, then," Mr. Summers directed. "Take Bill's and put it in."

"I think we ought to start over," Mrs. Hutchinson said, as quietly as she could. "I tell you it wasn't *fair*. You didn't give him time enough to choose. Everybody saw that."

Mr. Graves had selected the five slips and put them in the box, and he dropped all the papers but those onto the ground, where the breeze caught them and lifted them off.

"Listen, everybody," Mrs. Hutchinson was saying to the people around her.

"Ready, Bill?" Mr. Summers asked, and Bill Hutchinson, with one quick glance around at his wife and children, nodded.

"Remember," Mr. Summers said, "take the slips and keep them folded until each person has taken one. Harry, you help little Dave." Mr. Graves took the hand of the little boy, who came willingly with him up to the box. "Take a paper out of the box, Davy," Mr. Summers said. Davy put his hand into the box and laughed. "Take just *one* paper," Mr. Summers said. "Harry, you hold it for him." Mr. Graves took the child's hand and removed the folded paper from the tight fist and held it while little Dave stood next to him and looked up at him wonderingly.

"Nancy next," Mr. Summers said. Nancy was twelve, and her school friends breathed heavily as she went forward, switching her skirt, and took a slip daintily from the box. "Bill, Jr.," Mr. Summers said, and Billy, his face red and his feet overlarge, nearly knocked the box over as he got a paper out. "Tessie," Mr. Summers said. She hesitated for a minute, looking around defiantly, and then set her lips and went up to the box. She snatched a paper out and held it behind her.

"Bill," Mr. Summers said, and Bill Hutchinson reached into the box and felt around, bringing his hand out at last with the slip of paper in it.

The crowd was quiet. A girl whispered, "I hope it's not Nancy," and the sound of the whisper reached the edges of the crowd.

"It's not the way it used to be," Old Man Warner said clearly. "People ain't the way they used to be."

"All right," Mr. Summers said. "Open the papers. Harry, you open little Dave's."

Mr. Graves opened the slip of paper and there was a general sigh through the crowd as he held it up and everyone could see that it was blank. Nancy and Bill, Jr., opened theirs at the same time, and both beamed and laughed, turning around to the crowd and holding their slips of paper above their heads.

"Tessie," Mr. Summers said. There was a pause, and then Mr. Summers looked at Bill Hutchinson, and Bill unfolded his paper and showed it. It was blank.

"It's Tessie," Mr. Summers said, and his voice was hushed. "Show us her paper, Bill."

Bill Hutchinson went over to his wife and forced the slip of paper out of her hand. It had a black spot on it, the black spot Mr. Summers had made the night before with the heavy pencil in the coal-company office. Bill Hutchinson held it up, and there was a stir in the crowd.

"All right, folks," Mr. Summers said. "Let's finish quickly."

Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones. The pile of stones the boys had made earlier was ready; there were stones on the ground with the blowing scraps of paper that had come out of the box. Mrs. Delacroix selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands and turned to Mrs. Dunbar. "Come on," she said. "Hurry up."

Mrs. Dunbar had small stones in both hands, and she said, gasping for breath. "I can't run at all. You'll have to go ahead and I'll catch up with you."

The children had stones already, and someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles.

Tessie Hutchinson was in the center of a cleared space by now, and she held her hands out desperately as the villagers moved in on her. "It isn't fair," she said. A stone hit her on the side of the head.

Old Man Warner was saying, "Come on, come on, everyone." Steve Adams was in the front of the crowd of villagers, with Mrs. Graves beside him.

"It isn't fair, it isn't right," Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her.

## Previous Condition - James Baldwin

(1948)

I woke up shaking, alone in my room. I was clammy cold with sweat; under me the sheet and the mattress were soaked. The sheet was gray and twisted like a rope. I breathed like I had been running.

I couldn't move for the longest while. I just lay on my back, spread-eagled, looking up at the ceiling, listening to the sounds of people getting up in other parts of the house, alarm clocks ringing and water splashing and doors opening and shutting and feet on the stairs. I could tell when people left for work: the hall doorway downstairs whined and shuffled as it opened and gave a funny kind of double slam as it closed. One thud and then a louder thud and then a little final click. While the door was open I could hear the street sounds too, horses' hoofs and delivery wagons and people in the streets and big trucks and motor cars screaming on the asphalt.

I had been dreaming. At night I dreamt and woke up in the morning trembling, but not remembering the dream, except that in the dream I had been running. I could not remember when the dream — or dreams — had started; it had been long ago. For long periods maybe, I would have no dreams at all. And then they would come back, every night, I would try not to go to bed, I would go to sleep frightened and wake up frightened and have another day to get through with the nightmare at my shoulder. Now I was back from Chicago, busted, living off my friends in a dirty furnished room downtown. The show I had been with had folded in Chicago. It hadn't been much of a part — or much of a show either, to tell the truth. I played a kind of intellectual Uncle Tom, a young college student working for his race. The playwright had wanted to prove he was a liberal, I guess. But, as I say, the show had folded and here I was, back in New York and hating it. I knew that I should be getting another job, making the rounds, pounding the pavement. But I didn't. I couldn't face it. It was summer. I seemed to be fagged out. And every day I hated myself more. Acting's a rough life, even if you're white. I'm not tall and I'm not good looking and I can't sing or dance and I'm not white; so even at the best of times I wasn't in much demand.

The room I lived in was heavy ceilinged, perfectly square, with walls the color of chipped dry blood. Jules Weissman, a Jewboy, had got the room for me. It's a room to sleep in, he said, or maybe to die in but God knows it wasn't meant to live in. Perhaps because the room was so hideous it had a fantastic array of light fixtures: one on the ceiling, one on the left wall, two on the right wall, and a lamp on the table beside my bed. My bed was in front of the window through which nothing ever blew but dust. It was a furnished room and they'd thrown enough stuff in it to furnish three rooms its size. Two easy chairs and a desk, the bed, the table, a straight-backed chair, a bookcase, a cardboard wardrobe; and my books and my suitcase, both unpacked; and my dirty clothes flung in a corner. It was the kind of room that defeated you. It had a fireplace, too, and a heavy marble mantelpiece and a great gray mirror above the mantelpiece. It was hard to see anything in the mirror very clearly — which was perhaps just as well — and it would have been worth your life to have started a fire in the fireplace.

"Well, you won't have to stay here long," Jules told me the night I came. Jules smuggled me in, sort of, after dark, when everyone had gone to bed.

"Christ, I hope not."

"I'll be moving to a big place soon," Jules said. "You can move in with me." He turned all the lights on. "Think it'll be all right for a while?" He sounded apologetic, as though he had designed the room himself.

"Oh, sure. D'you think I'll have any trouble?"

"I don't think so. The rent's paid. She can't put you out."

I didn't say anything to that.



"Sort of stay undercover," Jules said. "You know."

"Roger," I said.

I had been living there for three days, timing it so I left after everyone else had gone, coming back late at night when everyone else was asleep. But I knew it wouldn't work. A couple of the tenants had seen me on the stairs, a woman had surprised me coming out of the john. Every morning I waited for the landlady to come banging on the door. I didn't know what would happen. It might be all right. It might not be. But the waiting was getting me.

The sweat on my body was turning cold. Downstairs a radio was tuned in to the Breakfast Symphony. They were playing Beethoven. I sat up and lit a cigarette. "Peter," I said, "don't let them scare you to death. You're a man, too." I listened to Ludwig and I watched the smoke rise to the dirty ceiling. Under Ludwig's drums and horns I listened to hear footsteps on the stairs.

I'd done a lot of traveling in my time. I'd knocked about through St. Louis, Frisco, Seattle, Detroit, New Orleans, worked at just about everything. I'd run away from my old lady when I was about sixteen. She'd never been able to handle me. You'll never be nothin' *but* a bum, she'd say. We lived in an old shack in a town in New Jersey in the nigger part of town, the kind of houses colored people live in all over the U.S. I hated my mother for living there. I hated all the people in my neighborhood. They went to church and they got drunk. They were nice to the white people. When the landlord came around they paid him and took his crap.

The first time I was ever called nigger I was seven years old. It was a little white girl with long black curls. I used to leave the front of my house and go wandering by myself through town. This little girl was playing ball alone and as I passed her the ball rolled out of her hands into the gutter.

I threw it back to her.

"Let's play catch," I said.

But she held the ball and made a face at me.

"My mother don't let me play with niggers," she told me.

I did not know what the word meant. But my skin grew warm. I stuck my tongue out at her.

"I don't care. Keep your old ball." I started down the street.

She screamed after me: "Nigger, nigger, nigger!"

I screamed back: "Your mother was a nigger!"

I asked my mother what a nigger was.

"Who called you that?"

"I heard somebody say it."

"Who?"

"Just somebody."

"Go wash your face," she said. "You dirty as sin. Your supper's on the table."

I went to the bathroom and splashed water on my face and wiped my face and hands on the towel.

"You call that clean?" my mother cried. "Come here, boy!"

She dragged me back to the bathroom and began to soap my face and neck.

"You run around dirty like you do all the time, everybody'll call you a little nigger, you hear?" She rinsed my face and looked at my hands and dried me. "Now, go on and eat your supper."

I didn't say anything. I went to the kitchen and sat down at the table. I remember I wanted to cry. My mother sat down across from me.

"Mama," I said. She looked at me. I started to cry.

She came around to my side of the table and took me in her arms.

"Baby, don't fret. Next time somebody calls you nigger you tell them you'd rather be your color than be lowdown and nasty like some white folks is."

We formed gangs when I was older, my friends and I. We met white boys and their friends on the opposite sides of fences and we threw rocks and tin cans at each other.

I'd come home bleeding. My mother would slap me and scold me and cry.

"Boy, you wanna get killed? You wanna end up like your father?"

My father was a bum and I had never seen him. I was named for him: Peter.

I was always in trouble: truant officers, welfare workers, everybody else in town.

"You ain't never gonna be nothin' but a bum," my mother said.

By and by older kids I knew finished school and got jobs and got married and settled down. They were going to settle down and bring more black babies into the world and pay the same rents for the same old shacks and it would go on —

When I was sixteen I ran away. I left a note and told Mama not to worry, I'd come back one day and I'd be all right. But when I was twenty-two she died. I came back and put my mother in the ground. Everything was like it had been. Our house had not been painted and the porch floor sagged and there was somebody's raincoat stuff in the broken window. Another family was moving in.

Their furniture was stacked along the walls and their children were running through the house and laughing and somebody was frying pork chops in the kitchen. The oldest boy was tacking up a mirror.

Last year Ida took me driving in her big car and we passed through a couple of towns upstate. We passed some crumbling houses on the left. The clothes on the line were flying in the wind.

"Are people living there?" asked Ida.

"Just darkies," I said.

Ida passed the car ahead, banging angrily on the horn. "D'you know you're becoming paranoiac, Peter?"

"All right. All right. I know a lot of white people are starving too."

"You're damn right they are. I know a little about poverty myself."

Ida had come from the kind of family called shanty Irish. She was raised in Boston. She's a very beautiful woman who married young and married for money — so now I can afford to support attractive young men, she'd giggle. Her husband was a ballet dancer who was forever on the road. Ida suspected that he went with boys. Not that I give a damn, she said, as long as he leaves me alone. When we met last year she was thirty and I was twenty-five. We had a pretty stormy relationship but we stuck. Whenever I got to town I called her; whenever I was stranded out of town I'd let her know. We never let it get too serious. She went her way and I went mine.

In all this running around I'd learned a few things. Like a prizefighter learns to take a blow or a dancer learns to fall, I'd learned how to get by. I'd learned never to be belligerent with policemen, for instance. No matter who was right, I was certain to be wrong. What might be accepted as just good old American independence in someone else would be insufferable arrogance in me. After the first few times I realized that I had to play smart, to act out the role I was expected to play. I only had one head and it was too easy to get it broken. When I faced a policeman I acted like I didn't know a thing. I let my jaw drop and I let my eyes get big. I didn't give him any smart answers, none of the crap about my rights. I figured out what answers he wanted and I gave them to him. I never let him think he wasn't king. If it was more than routine, if I was picked up on suspicion of robbery or murder in the neighborhood, I looked as humble as I could and kept my mouth shut and prayed. I took a couple of beatings but I stayed out of prison and I stayed off chain gangs. That was also due to luck, Ida pointed out once. "Maybe it would've been better for you if you'd been a little less lucky. Worse things have happened than chain gangs. Some of them have happened to you."

There was something in her voice. "What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Don't lose your temper. I said maybe."

"You mean you think I'm a coward?"

"I didn't say that, Peter."

"But you meant that. Didn't you?"

"No. I didn't mean that. I didn't mean anything. Let's not fight."

There are times and places when a Negro can use his color like a shield. He can trade on the subterranean Anglo-Saxon guilt and get what he wants that way; or some of what he wants. He can trade on his nuisance value, his value as forbidden fruit; he can use it like a knife, he can twist it and get his vengeance that way. I knew these things long before I realized that I knew them and in the beginning I used them, not knowing what I was doing. Then when I began to see it, I felt betrayed. I felt beaten as a person. I had no honest place to stand.

This was the year before I met Ida. I'd been acting in stock companies and little theaters; sometimes fairly good parts. People were nice to me. They told me I had talent. They said it sadly, as though they were thinking, What a pity, he'll never get anywhere. I had got to the point where I resented praise and I resented pity and I wondered what people were thinking when they shook my hand. In New York I met some pretty fine people; easygoing, hard-drinking, flotsam and jetsam; and they liked me; and I wondered if I trusted them; if I was able any longer to trust anybody. Not on top, where all the world could see, but underneath where everybody lives.

Soon I would have to get up. I listened to Ludwig. He shook the little room like the footsteps of a giant marching miles away. On summer evenings (and maybe we would go this summer) Jules and Ida and I would go up to the Stadium and sit beneath the pillars on the cold stone steps. There it seemed to me the sky was far away; and I was not myself, I was high and lifted up. We never talked, the three of us. We sat and watched the blue smoke curl in the air and watched the orange tips of cigarettes. Every once in a while the boys who sold popcorn and soda pop and ice cream climbed the steep steps chattering; and Ida shifted slightly and touched her blue-black hair; and Jules scowled. I sat with my knee up, watching the lighted half-moon below, the black-coated, straining conductor, the faceless men beneath him moving together in a rhythm like the sea. There were pauses in the music for the rushing, calling, halting piano. Everything would stop except the climbing of the soloist; he would reach a height and everything would join him, the violins first and then the horns; and then the deep blue bass and the flute and the bitter trampling drums; beating, beating and mounting together and stopping with a crash like daybreak. When I first heard the *Messiah* I was alone; my blood bubbled like fire and wine; I cried; like an infant crying for its mother's milk; or a sinner running to meet Jesus.

Now below the music I heard footsteps on the stairs. I put out my cigarette. My heart was beating so hard I thought it would tear my chest apart. Someone knocked on the door.

I thought: Don't answer. Maybe she'll go away.

But the knocking came again, harder this time.

Just a minute, I said. I sat on the edge of the bed and put on my bathrobe. I was trembling like a fool. For Christ's sake, Peter, you've been through this before. What's the worst thing that can happen? You won't have a room. The world's full of rooms.

When I opened the door the landlady stood there, red-and-whitefaced and hysterical.

"Who are you? I didn't rent this room to you."

My mouth was dry. I started to say something.

"I can't have no colored people here," she said. "All my tenants are complainin'. Women afraid to come home nights."

"They ain't gotta be afraid of me," I said. I couldn't get my voice up; it rasped and rattled in my throat; and I began to be angry. I wanted to kill her. "My friend rented this room for me," I said.

"Well, I'm sorry, he didn't have no right to do that, I don't have nothin' against you, but you gotta get out."

Her glasses blinked, opaque in the light on the landing. She was frightened to death. She was afraid of me but she was more afraid of losing her tenants. Her face was mottled with rage and fear, her breath came rushed and little bits of spittle gathered at the edges of her mouth; her breath smelled bad, like rotting hamburger on a July day.

"You can't put me out," I said. "This room was rented in my name." I started to close the door as though the matter was finished: "I live here, see, this is my room, you can't put me out."

"You get outa my house!" she screamed. "I got the right to know who's in my house! This is a white neighborhood, I don't rent to colored people. Why don't you go on uptown, like you belong?"

"I can't stand niggers," I told her. I started to close the door again but she moved and stuck her foot in the way. I wanted to kill her, I watched her stupid, wrinkled frightened white face and I wanted to take a club, a hatchet, and bring it down with all my weight, splitting her skull down the middle where she parted her iron-gray hair.

"Get out of the door," I said. "I want to get dressed."

But I knew that she had won, that I was already on my way. We stared at each other. Neither of us moved. From her came an emanation of fear and fury and something else. You maggot-eaten bitch, I thought. I said evilly, "You wanna come in and watch me?" Her face didn't change, she didn't take her foot away. My skin prickled, tiny hot needles punctured my flesh. I was aware of my body under the bathrobe; and it was as though I had done something wrong, something monstrous, years ago, which no one had forgotten and for which I would be killed.

"If you don't get out," she said, "I'll get a policeman to put you out."

I grabbed the door to keep from touching her. "All right. All right. You can have the goddamn room. Now get out and let me dress."

She turned away. I slammed the door. I heard her going down the stairs. I threw stuff into my suitcase. I tried to take as long as possible but I cut myself while shaving because I was afraid she would come back upstairs with a policeman.

Jules was making coffee when I walked in.

"Good morning, good morning! What happened to you?"

"No room at the inn," I said. "Pour a cup of coffee for the notorious son of man." I sat down and dropped my suitcase on the floor.

Jules looked at me. "Oh. Well. Coffee coming up."

He got out the coffee cups. I lit a cigarette and sat there. I couldn't think of anything to say. I knew that Jules felt bad and I wanted to tell him that it wasn't his fault.

He pushed coffee in front of me and sugar and cream.

"Cheer up, baby. The world's wide and life — life, she is very long."

"Shut up. I don't want to hear any of your bad philosophy."

"Sorry."

"I mean, let's not talk about the good, the true, and the beautiful."

"All right. But don't sit there holding onto your table manners. Scream if you want to."

"Screaming won't do any good. Besides I'm a big boy now."

I stirred my coffee. "Did you give her a fight?" Jules asked.

I shook my head. "No."

"Why the hell not?"

I shrugged; a little ashamed now. I couldn't have won it. What the hell.

"You might have won it. You might have given her a couple of bad moments."

"Goddamit to hell, I'm sick of it. Can't I get a place to sleep without dragging it through the courts? I'm goddamn tired of battling every Tom, Dick, and Harry for what everybody else takes for granted. I'm tired, man, tired! Have you ever been sick to death of something? Well, I'm sick to death. And I'm scared. I've been fighting so goddamn long I'm not a person any more. I'm not Booker T. Washington. I've got no vision of emancipating anybody. I want to emancipate myself. If this goes on much longer, they'll send me to Bellevue, I'll blow my top, I'll break somebody's head. I'm not worried about that miserable little room. I'm worried about what's happening to me, to me, inside. I don't walk the streets, I crawl. I've never been like this before. Now when I go to a strange place I wonder what will happen, will I be accepted, if I'm accepted,

can I accept? — "

"Take it easy," Jules said.

"Jules, I'm beaten."

"I don't think you are. Drink your coffee."

"Oh," I cried. "I know you think I'm making it dramatic, that I'm paranoiac and just inventing trouble! Maybe I think so sometimes, how can I tell? You get so used to being hit you find you're always waiting for it. Oh, I know, you're Jewish, you get kicked around, too, but you can walk into a bar and nobody knows you're Jewish and if you go looking for a job you'll get a better job than mine! How can I say what it feels like? I don't know. I know everybody's in trouble and nothing is easy, but how can I explain to you what it feels like to be black when I don't understand it and don't want to and spend all my time trying to forget it? I don't want to hate anybody — but now maybe, I can't love anybody either — are we friends? Can we be really friends?"

"We're friends," Jules said, "don't worry about it." He scowled. "If I wasn't Jewish I'd ask you why you don't live in Harlem." I looked at him. He raised his hand and smiled — "But I'm Jewish, so I didn't ask you. Ah Peter," he said, "I can't help you — take a walk, get drunk, we're all in this together."

I stood up. "I'll be around later. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I'll leave my door open. Bunk here for a while."

"Thanks," I said.

I felt that I was drowning; that hatred had corrupted me like cancer in the bone.

I saw Ida for dinner. We met in a restaurant in the village, an Italian place in a gloomy cellar with candles on the tables.

It was not a busy night, for which I was grateful. When I came in there were only two other couples on the other side of the room. No one looked at me. I sat down in a corner booth and ordered a Scotch old-fashioned. Ida was late and I had three of them before she came.

She was very fine in black, a high-necked dress with a pearl choker; and her hair was combed page-boy style, falling just below her ears.

"You look real sweet, baby."

"Thank you. It took fifteen extra minutes but I hoped it would be worth it."

"It was worth it. What're you drinking?"

"Oh — what're you drinking?"

"Old-fashioneds."

She sniffed and looked at me. "How many?"

I laughed. "Three."

"Well," she said, "I suppose you had to do something." The waiter came over. We decided on one Manhattan and one lasagna and one spaghetti with clam sauce and another old-fashioned for me.

"Did you have a constructive day, sweetheart? Find a job?"

"Not today," I said. I lit her cigarette. "Metro offered me a fortune to come to the coast and do the lead in *Native Son* but I turned it down. Type casting, you know. It's so difficult to find a decent part."

"Well, if they don't come up with a decent offer soon tell them you'll go back to Selznick. He'll find you a part with guts — the very idea of offering you *Native Son*! I wouldn't stand for it."

"You ain't gotta tell me. I told them if they didn't find me a decent script in two weeks I was through, that's all."

"Now that's talking, Peter my lad."

The drinks came and we sat in silence for a minute or two. I finished half of my drink at a swallow and played with the toothpicks on the table. I felt Ida watching me.

"Peter, you're going to be awfully drunk."

"Honeychile, the first thing a southern gentleman learns is how to hold his liquor."

"That myth is older than the rock of ages. And anyway you come from Jersey."

I finished my drink and snarled at her: "That's just as good as the South."

Across the table from me I could see that she was readying herself for trouble: her mouth tightened slightly, setting her chin so that the faint cleft showed: "What happened to you today?"

I resented her concern; I resented my need. "Nothing worth talking about," I muttered, "just a mood."

And I tried to smile at her, to wipe away the bitterness.

"Now I know something's the matter. Please tell me."

It sounded trivial as hell: "You know the room Jules found for me? Well, the landlady kicked me out of it today."

"God save the American republic," Ida said. "D'you want to waste some of my husband's money? We can sue her."

"Forget it. I'll end up with lawsuits in every state in the union."

"Still, as a gesture — "

"The devil with the gesture. I'll get by."

The food came. I didn't want to eat. The first mouthful hit my belly like a gong. Ida began cutting up lasagna.

"Peter," she said, "try not to feel so badly. We're all in this together the whole world. Don't let it throw you. What can't be helped you have to learn to live with."

"That's easy for you to say," I told her.

She looked at me quickly and looked away. "I'm not pretending that it's easy to do," she said.

I didn't believe that she could really understand it; and there was nothing I could say. I sat like a child being scolded, looking down at my plate, not eating, not saying anything. I wanted her to stop talking, to stop being intelligent about it, to stop being calm and grown-up about it; good Lord, none of us has ever grown up, we never will.

"It's no better anywhere else," she was saying. "In all of Europe there's famine and disease, in France and England they hate the Jews — nothing's going to change, baby, people are too empty-headed, too empty-hearted — it's always been like that, people always try to destroy what they don't understand — and they hate almost everything because they understand so little — "

I began to sweat in my side of the booth. I wanted to stop her voice. I wanted her to eat and be quiet and leave me alone. I looked around for the waiter so I could order another drink. But he was on the far side of the restaurant, waiting on some people who had just come in; a lot of people had come in since we had been sitting there.

"Peter," Ida said, "Peter please don't look like that."

I grinned: the painted grin of the professional clown. "Don't worry, baby, I'm all right. I know what I'm going to do. I'm gonna go back to my people where I belong and find me a nice, black nigger wench and raise me a flock of babies."

Ida had an old maternal trick; the grin tricked her into using it now. She raised her fork and rapped me with it across the knuckles. "Now, stop that. You're too old for that."

I screamed and stood up screaming and knocked the candle over: "Don't do that, you bitch, don't ever do that!"

She grabbed the candle and set it up and glared at me. Her face had turned perfectly white: "Sit down! Sit down!"

I fell back into my seat. My stomach felt like water. Everyone was looking at us. I turned cold, seeing what they were seeing: a black boy and a white woman, alone together. I knew it would take nothing to have them at my throat.

"I'm sorry," I muttered, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

The waiter was at my elbow. "Is everything all right, miss?"

"Yes, quite, thank you." She sounded like a princess dismissing a slave. I didn't look up. The shadow of the waiter moved away from me.

"Baby," Ida said, "forgive me, please forgive me."

I stared at the tablecloth. She put her hand on mine, brightness and blackness.

"Let's go," I said, "I'm terribly sorry."

She motioned for the check. When it came she handed the waiter a ten dollar bill without looking. She picked up her bag.

"Shall we go to a nightclub or a movie or something?"

"No, honey, not tonight." I looked at her. "I'm tired, I think I'll go on over to Jules's place. I'm gonna sleep on his floor for a while. Don't worry about me. I'm all right."

She looked at me steadily. She said: "I'll come see you tomorrow?"

"Yes, baby, please."

The waiter brought the change and she tipped him. We stood up; as we passed the tables (not looking at the people) the ground under me seemed falling, the doorway seemed impossibly far away. All my muscles tensed; I seemed ready to spring; I was waiting for the blow.

I put my hands in my pockets and we walked to the end of the block. The lights were green and red, the lights from the theater across the street exploded blue and yellow, off and on.

"Peter?"

"Yes?"

"I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Come by Jules's. I'll wait for you."

"Goodnight, darling."

"Goodnight."

I started to walk away. I felt her eyes on my back. I kicked a bottle-top on the sidewalk.

God save the American republic.

I dropped into the subway and got on an uptown train, not knowing where it was going and not caring. Anonymous, islanded people surrounded me, behind newspapers, behind make-up, fat, fleshy masks and flat eyes. I watched the empty faces. (No one looked at me.) I looked at the ads, unreal women and pink-cheeked men selling cigarettes, candy, shaving cream, nightgowns, chewing gum, movies, sex; sex without organs, drier than sand and more secret than death. The train stopped. A white boy and a white girl got on. She was nice, short, svelte. Nice legs. She was hanging on his arm. He was the football type, blond, ruddy. They were dressed in summer clothes. The wind from the doors blew her print dress. She squealed, holding the dress at the knees and giggled and looked at him. He said something I didn't catch and she looked at me and the smile died. She stood so that she faced him and had her back to me. I looked back at the ads. Then I hated them. I wanted to do something to make them hurt, something that would crack the pink-cheeked mask. The white boy and I did not look at each other again. They got off at the next stop.

I wanted to keep on drinking. I got off in Harlem and went to a rundown bar on Seventh Avenue. My people, my people. Sharpies stood on the corner, waiting. Women in summer dresses pranced by on wavering heels. Click clack. Click clack. There were white mounted policemen in the streets. On every block there was another policeman on foot. I saw a black cop.

God save the American republic.

The juke box was letting loose with "Hamps' Boogie." The place was jumping, I walked over to the man.

"Rye," I said.

I was standing next to somebody's grandmother. "Hello, papa. What you puttin' down?"

"Baby, you can't pick it up," I told her. My rye came and I drank.

"Nigger," she said, "you must think you's somebody."

I didn't answer. She turned away, back to her beer, keeping time to the juke box, her face

sullen and heavy and aggrieved. I watched her out of the side of my eye. She had been good looking once, pretty even, before she hit the bottle and started crawling into too many beds. She was flabby now, flesh heaved all over in her thin dress. I wondered what she'd be like in bed; then I realized that I was a little excited by her; I laughed and set my glass down.

"The same," I said. "And a beer chaser."

The juke box was playing something else now, something brassy and commercial which I didn't like. I kept on drinking, listening to the voices of my people, watching the faces of my people. (God pity us, the terrified republic.) Now I was sorry to have angered the woman who still sat next to me, now deep in conversation with another, younger woman. I longed for some opening, some sign, something to make me part of the life around me. But there was nothing except my color. A white outsider coming in would have seen a young Negro drinking in a Negro bar, perfectly in his element, in his place, as the saying goes. But the people here knew differently, as I did. I didn't seem to have a place.

So I kept on drinking by myself, saying to myself after each drink, Now I'll go. But I was afraid; I didn't want to sleep on Jules's floor; I didn't want to go to sleep. I kept on drinking and listening to the juke box. They were playing Ella Fitzgerald, "Cow-Cow Boogie."

"Let me buy you a drink," I said to the woman.

She looked at me, startled, suspicious, ready to blow her top.

"On the level," I said. I tried to smile. "Both of you."

"I'll take a beer," the young one said.

I was shaking like a baby. I finished my drink.

"Fine," I said. I turned to the bar.

"Baby," said the old one, "what's your story?"

The man put three beers on the counter.

"I got no story, Ma," I said.



# The Evening and the Morning and the Night - Octavia E. Butler

(1987)

When I was fifteen and trying to show my independence by getting careless with my diet, my parents took me to a Duryea-Gode disease ward. They wanted me to see, they said, where I was headed if I wasn't careful. In fact, it was where I was headed no matter what. It was only a matter of when: now or later. My parents were putting in their vote for later.

I won't describe the ward. It's enough to say that when they brought me home, I cut my wrists. I did a thorough job of it, old Roman style in a bathtub of warm water. Almost made it. My father dislocated his shoulder breaking down the bathroom door. He and I never forgave each other for that day.

The disease got him almost three years later — just before I went off to college. It was sudden. It doesn't happen that way often. Most people notice themselves beginning to drift — or their relatives notice — and they make arrangements with their chosen institution. People who are noticed and who resist going in can be locked up for a week's observation. I don't doubt that that observation period breaks up a few families. Sending someone away for what turns out to be a false alarm ... Well, it isn't the sort of thing the victim is likely to forgive or forget. On the other hand, not sending someone away in time — missing the signs or having a person go off suddenly without signs — is inevitably dangerous for the victim. I've never heard of it going as badly, though, as it did in my family. People normally injure only themselves when their time comes — unless someone is stupid enough to try to handle them without the necessary drugs or restraints.

My father ... killed my mother, then killed himself. I wasn't home when it happened. I had stayed at school later than usual rehearsing graduation exercises. By the time I got home, there were cops everywhere. There was an ambulance, and two attendants were wheeling someone out on a stretcher — someone covered. More than covered. Almost ... bagged.

The cops wouldn't let me in. I didn't find out until later exactly what had happened. I wish I'd never found out. Dad had killed Mom then skinned her completely. At least, that's how I hope it happened. I mean I hope he killed her first. He broke some of her ribs, damaged her heart. Digging.

Then he began tearing at himself, through skin and bone, digging. He had managed to reach his own heart before he died. It was an especially bad example of the kind of thing that makes people afraid of us. It gets some of us into trouble for picking at a pimple or even for daydreaming. It has inspired restrictive laws, created problems with jobs, housing, schools. The Duryea-Code Disease Foundation has spent millions telling the world that people like my father don't exist.

A long time later, when I had gotten myself together as best I could, I went to college — to the University of Southern California — on a Dilg scholarship. Dilg is the retreat you try to send your out-of-control DGD relatives to. It's run by controlled DGDs like me, like my parents while they lived. God knows how any controlled DGD stands it. Anyway, the place has a waiting list miles long. My parents put me on it after my suicide attempt, but chances were, I'd be dead by the time my name came up.

I can't say why I went to college — except that I had been going to school all my life and I didn't know what else to do. I didn't go with any particular hope. Hell, I knew what I was in for eventually. I was just marking time. Whatever I did was just marking time. If people were willing to pay me to go to school and mark time, why not do it?

The weird part was, I worked hard, got top grades. If you work hard enough at something that

doesn't matter, you can forget for a while about the things that do.

Sometimes I thought about trying suicide again. How was it I'd had the courage when I was fifteen but didn't have it now? Two DGD parents — both religious, both as opposed to abortion as they were to suicide. So they had trusted God and the promises of modern medicine and had a child. But how could I look at what had happened to them and trust anything?

I majored in biology. Non-DGDs say something about our disease makes us good at the sciences—genetics, molecular biology, biochemistry ... That something was terror. Terror and a kind of driving hopelessness. Some of us went bad and became destructive before we had to — yes, we did produce more than our share of criminals. And some of us went good — spectacularly — and made scientific and medical history. These last kept the doors at least partly open for the rest of us. They made discoveries in genetics, found cures for a couple of rare diseases, made advances in the fight against other diseases that weren't so rare — including, ironically, some forms of cancer. But they'd found nothing to help themselves. There had been nothing since the latest improvements in the diet, and those came just before I was born. They, like the original diet, gave more DGDs the courage to have children. They were supposed to do for DGDs what insulin had done for diabetics — give us a normal or nearly normal life span. Maybe they had worked for someone somewhere. They hadn't worked for anyone I knew.

Biology School was a pain in the usual ways. I didn't eat in public anymore, didn't like the way people stared at my biscuits — cleverly dubbed "dog biscuits" in every school I'd ever attended. You'd think university students would be more creative. I didn't like the way people edged away from me when they caught sight of my emblem. I'd begun wearing it on a chain around my neck and putting it down inside my blouse, but people managed to notice it anyway. People who don't eat in public, who drink nothing more interesting than water, who smoke nothing at all — people like that are suspicious. Or rather, they make others suspicious. Sooner or later, one of those others, finding my fingers and wrists bare, would take an interest in my chain. That would be that. I couldn't hide the emblem in my purse. If anything happened to me, medical people had to see it in time to avoid giving me the medications they might use on a normal person. It isn't just ordinary food we have to avoid, but about a quarter of a *Physicians' Desk Reference* of widely used drugs. Every now and then there are news stories about people who stopped carrying their emblems — probably trying to pass as normal. Then they have an accident. By the time anyone realizes there is anything wrong, it's too late. So I wore my emblem. And one way or another, people got a look at it or got the word from someone who had. "She *is!*" Yeah.

At the beginning of my third year, four other DGDs and I decided to rent a house together. We'd all had enough of being lepers twenty-four hours a day. There was an English major. He wanted to be a writer and tell our story from the inside — which had only been done thirty or forty times before. There was a special-education major who hoped the handicapped would accept her more readily than the able-bodied, a premed who planned to go into research, and a chemistry major who didn't really know what she wanted to do.

Two men and three women. All we had in common was our disease, plus a weird combination of stubborn intensity about whatever we happened to be doing and hopeless cynicism about everything else. Healthy people say no one can concentrate like a DGD. Healthy people have all the time in the world for stupid generalizations and short attention spans.

We did our work, came up for air now and then, ate our biscuits, and attended classes. Our only problem was housecleaning. We worked out a schedule of who would clean what when, who would deal with the yard, whatever. We all agreed on it; then, except for me, everyone seemed to forget about it. I found myself going around reminding people to vacuum, clean the bathroom, mow the lawn ... I figured they'd all hate me in no time, but I wasn't going to be their maid, and I wasn't going to live in filth. Nobody complained. Nobody even seemed annoyed. They just came up out of their academic daze, cleaned, mopped, mowed, and went back to it. I

got into the habit of running around in the evening reminding people. It didn't bother me if it didn't bother them.

"How'd you get to be housemother?" a visiting DGD asked.

I shrugged. "Who cares? The house works." It did. It worked so well that this new guy wanted to move in. He was a friend of one of the others, and another premed. Not bad looking.

"So do I get in or don't I?" he asked.

"As far as I'm concerned, you do," I said. I did what his friend should have done — introduced him around, then, after he left, talked to the others to make sure nobody had any real objections. He seemed to fit right in. He forgot to clean the toilet or mow the lawn, just like the others. His name was Alan Chi. I thought Chi was a Chinese name, and I wondered. But he told me his father was Nigerian and that in Ibo, the word meant a kind of guardian angel or personal god. He said his own personal god hadn't been looking out for him very well to let him be born to two DGD parents. Him too.

I don't think it was much more than that similarity that drew us together at first. Sure, I liked the way he looked, but I was used to liking someone's looks and having him run like hell when he found out what I was. It took me a while to get used to the fact that Alan wasn't going anywhere.

I told him about my visit to the DGD ward when I was fifteen — and my suicide attempt afterward. I had never told anyone else. I was surprised at how relieved it made me feel to tell him. And somehow his reaction didn't surprise me.

"Why didn't you try again?" he asked. We were alone in the living room.

"At first, because of my parents," I said. "My father in particular. I couldn't do that to him again."

"And after him?"

"Fear. Inertia."

He nodded. "When I do it, there'll be no half measures. No being rescued, no waking up in a hospital later."

"You mean to do it?"

"The day I realize I've started to drift. Thank God we get some warning."

"Not necessarily."

"Yes, we do. I've done a lot of reading. Even talked to a couple of doctors. Don't believe the rumors non-DGDs invent."

I looked away, stared into the scarred, empty fireplace. I told him exactly how my father had died — something else I'd never voluntarily told anyone.

He sighed. "Jesus!"

We looked at each other.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I don't know."

He extended a dark, square hand, and I took it and moved closer to him. He was a dark, square man — my height, half again my weight, and none of it fat. He was so bitter sometimes, he scared me.

"My mother started to drift when I was three," he said. "My father only lasted a few months longer. I heard he died a couple of years after he went into the hospital. If the two of them had had any sense, they would have had me aborted the minute my mother realized she was pregnant. But she wanted a kid no matter what. And she was Catholic." He shook his head. "Hell, they should pass a law to sterilize the lot of us."

"They?" I said.

"You want kids?"

"No, but —"

"More like us to wind up chewing their fingers off in some DGD ward."

"I don't want kids, but I don't want someone else telling me I can't have any."

He stared at me until I began to feel stupid and defensive. I moved away from him.

"Do you want someone else telling you what to do with your body?" I asked.

"No need," he said. "I had that taken care of as soon as I was old enough."

This left me staring. I'd thought about sterilization. What DGD hasn't? But I didn't know anyone else our age who had actually gone through with it. That would be like killing part of yourself — even though it wasn't a part you intended to use. Killing part of yourself when so much of you was already dead.

"The damned disease could be wiped out in one generation," he said, "but people are still animals when it comes to breeding. Still following mindless urges, like dogs and cats."

My impulse was to get up and go away, leave him to wallow in his bitterness and depression alone. But I stayed. He seemed to want to live even less than I did. I wondered how he'd made it this far.

"Are you looking forward to doing research?" I probed. "Do you believe you'll be able to —"

"No."

I blinked. The word was as cold and dead a sound as I'd ever heard.

"I don't believe in anything," he said.

I took him to bed. He was the only other double DGD I had ever met, and if nobody did anything for him, he wouldn't last much longer. I couldn't just let him slip away. For a while, maybe we could be each other's reasons for staying alive.

He was a good student — for the same reason I was. And he seemed to shed some of his bitterness as time passed. Being around him helped me understand why, against all sanity, two DGDs would lock in on each other and start talking about marriage. Who else would have us?

We probably wouldn't last very long, anyway. These days, most DGDs make it to forty, at least. But then, most of them don't have two DGD parents. As bright as Alan was, he might not get into medical school because of his double inheritance. No one would tell him his bad genes were keeping him out, of course, but we both knew what his chances were. Better to train doctors who were likely to live long enough to put their training to use.

Alan's mother had been sent to Dilg. He hadn't seen her or been able to get any information about her from his grandparents while he was at home. By the time he left for college, he'd stopped asking questions. Maybe it was hearing about my parents that made him start again. I was with him when he called Dilg. Until that moment, he hadn't even known whether his mother was still alive. Surprisingly, she was.

"Dilg must be good," I said when he hung up. "People don't usually ... I mean ..."

"Yeah, I know," he said. "People don't usually live long once they're out of control. Dilg is different." We had gone to my room, where he turned a chair backward and sat down. "Dilg is what the others ought to be, if you can believe the literature."

"Dilg is a giant DGD ward," I said. "It's richer — probably better at sucking in the donations — and it's run by people who can expect to become patients eventually. Apart from that, what's different?"

"I've read about it," he said. "So should you. They've got some new treatment. They don't just shut people away to die the way the others do."

"What else is there to do with them?" With us.

"I don't know. It sounded like they have some kind of ... sheltered workshop. They've got patients doing things."

"A new drug to control the self-destructiveness?"

"I don't think so. We would have heard about that."

"What else could it be?"

"I'm going up to find out. Will you come with me?"

"You're going up to see your mother."

He took a ragged breath. "Yeah. Will you come with me?"

I went to one of my windows and stared out at the weeds. We let them thrive in the backyard. In the front we mowed them, along with the few patches of grass.

"I told you my DGD-ward experience."

"You're not fifteen now. And Dilg isn't some zoo of a ward."

"It's got to be, no matter what they tell the public. And I'm not sure I can stand it."

He got up, came to stand next to me. "Will you try?"

I didn't say anything. I focused on our reflections in the window glass — the two of us together. It looked right, felt right. He put his arm around me, and I leaned back against him. Our being together had been as good for me as it seemed to have been for him. It had given me something to go on besides inertia and fear. I knew I would go with him. It felt like the right thing to do.

"I can't say how I'll act when we get there," I said.

"I can't say how I'll act, either," he admitted. "Especially ... when I see her."

He made the appointment for the next Saturday afternoon. You make appointments to go to Dilg unless you're a government inspector of some kind. That is the custom, and Dilg gets away with it.

We left L.A. in the rain early Saturday morning. Rain followed us off and on up the coast as far as Santa Barbara. Dilg was hidden away in the hills not far from San Jose. We could have reached it faster by driving up I-5, but neither of us were in the mood for all that bleakness. As it was, we arrived at one PM to be met by two armed gate guards. One of these phoned the main building and verified our appointment. Then the other took the wheel from Alan.

"Sorry," he said. "But no one is permitted inside without an escort. We'll meet your guide at the garage."

None of this surprised me. Dilg is a place where not only the patients but much of the staff has DGD. A maximum security prison wouldn't have been as potentially dangerous. On the other hand, I'd never heard of anyone getting chewed up here. Hospitals and rest homes had accidents. Dilg didn't. It was beautiful — an old estate. One that didn't make sense in these days of high taxes. It had been owned by the Dilg family. Oil, chemicals, pharmaceuticals. Ironically, they had even owned part of the late, unlamented Hedeon Laboratories. They'd had a briefly profitable interest in Hedeonco: the magic bullet, the cure for a large percentage of the world's cancer and a number of serious viral diseases — and the cause of Duryea-Gode disease. If one of your parents was treated with Hedeonco and you were conceived after the treatments, you had DGD. If you had kids, you passed it on to them. Not everyone was equally affected. They didn't all commit suicide or murder, but they all mutilated themselves to some degree if they could. And they all drifted — went off into a world of their own and stopped responding to their surroundings.

Anyway, the only Dilg son of his generation had had his life saved by Hedeonco. Then he had watched four of his children die before Doctors Kenneth Duryea and Jan Gode came up with a decent understanding of the problem and a partial solution: the diet. They gave Richard Dilg a way of keeping his next two children alive. He gave the big, cumbersome estate over to the care of DGD patients.

So the main building was an elaborate old mansion. There were other, newer buildings, more like guesthouses than institutional buildings. And there were wooded hills all around. Nice country. Green. The ocean wasn't far away. There was an old garage and a small parking lot. Waiting in the lot was a tall old woman. Our guard pulled up near her, let us out, then parked the car in the half-empty garage.

"Hello," the woman said, extending her hand. "I'm Beatrice Alcantara." The hand was cool and dry and startlingly strong. I thought the woman was DGD, but her age threw me. She appeared to be about sixty, and I had never seen a DGD that old. I wasn't sure why I thought she

was DGD. If she was, she must have been an experimental model — one of the first to survive.

"Is it Doctor or Ms.?" Alan asked.

"It's Beatrice," she said. "I am a doctor, but we don't use titles much here."

I glanced at Alan, was surprised to see him smiling at her. He tended to go a long time between smiles. I looked at Beatrice and couldn't see anything to smile about. As we introduced ourselves, I realized I didn't like her. I couldn't see any reason for that either, but my feelings were my feelings. I didn't like her.

"I assume neither of you have been here before," she said, smiling down at us. She was at least six feet tall, and straight.

We shook our heads. "Let's go in the front way, then. I want to prepare you for what we do here. I don't want you to believe you've come to a hospital."

I frowned at her, wondering what else there was to believe. Dilg was called a retreat, but what difference did names make?

The house close up looked like one of the old-style public buildings — massive, baroque front with a single, domed tower reaching three stories above the three-story house. Wings of the house stretched for some distance to the right and left of the tower, then cornered and stretched back twice as far. The front doors were huge — one set of wrought iron and one of heavy wood. Neither appeared to be locked. Beatrice pulled open the iron door, pushed the wooden one, and gestured us in.

Inside, the house was an art museum — huge, high-ceilinged, tile-floored. There were marble columns and niches in which sculpture stood or paintings hung. There were other sculptures displayed around the rooms. At one end of the rooms there was a broad staircase leading up to a gallery that went around the rooms. There more art was displayed. "All that was made here," Beatrice said. "Some of it is even sold from here. Most goes to galleries in the Bay Area or down around L.A. Our only problem is turning out too much of it."

"You mean the patients do this?" I asked.

The old woman nodded. "This and much more. Our people work instead of tearing at themselves or staring into space. One of them invented the p.v. locks that protect this place. Though I almost wish he hadn't. It's gotten us more government attention than we like."

"What kind of locks?" I asked.

"Sorry. Palmprint-voiceprint. The first and the best. We have the patent." She looked at Alan. "Would you like to see what your mother does?"

"Wait a minute," he said. "You're telling us out-of-control DGDs create art and invent things?"

"And that lock," I said. "I've never heard of anything like that. I didn't even see a lock."

"The lock is new," she said. "There have been a few news stories about it. It's not the kind of thing most people would buy for their homes. Too expensive. So it's of limited interest. People tend to look at what's doing at Dilg in the way they look at the efforts of idiots savants. Interesting, incomprehensible, but not really important. Those likely to be interested in the lock and able to afford it know about it." She took a deep breath, faced Alan again. "Oh, yes, DGDs create things. At least they do here."

"Out-of-control DGDs."

"Yes."

"I expected to find them weaving baskets or something — at best. I know what DGD wards are like."

"So do I," she said. "I know what they're like in hospitals, and I know what it's like here." She waved a hand toward an abstract painting that looked like a photo I had once seen of the Orion Nebula. Darkness broken by a great cloud of light and color. "Here we can help them channel their energies. They can create something beautiful, useful, even something worthless. But they create. They don't destroy."

"Why?" Alan demanded. "It can't be some drug. We would have heard."

"It's no drug."

"Then what is it? Why haven't other hospitals — ?"

"Alan," she said. "Wait."

He stood frowning at her.

"Do you want to see your mother?"

"Of course I want to see her!"

"Good. Come with me. Things will sort themselves out."

She led us to a corridor past offices where people talked to one another, waved to Beatrice, worked with computers ... They could have been anywhere. I wondered how many of them were controlled DGDs. I also wondered what kind of game the old woman was playing with her secrets. We passed through rooms so beautiful and perfectly kept it was obvious they were rarely used. Then at a broad, heavy door, she stopped us.

"Look at anything you like as we go on," she said. "But don't touch anything or anyone. And remember that some of the people you'll see injured themselves before they came to us. They still bear the scars of those injuries. Some of those scars may be difficult to look at, but you'll be in no danger. Keep that in mind. No one here will harm you." She pushed the door open and gestured us in.

Scars didn't bother me much. Disability didn't bother me. It was the act of self-mutilation that scared me. It was someone attacking her own arm as though it were a wild animal. It was someone who had torn at himself and been restrained or drugged off and on for so long that he barely had a recognizable human feature left, but he was still trying with what he did have to dig into his own flesh. Those are a couple of the things I saw at the DGD ward when I was fifteen. Even then I could have stood it better if I hadn't felt I was looking into a kind of temporal mirror.

I wasn't aware of walking through that doorway. I wouldn't have thought I could do it. The old woman said something, though, and I found myself on the other side of the door with the door closing behind me. I turned to stare at her.

She put her hand on my arm. "It's all right," she said quietly. "That door looks like a wall to a great many people."

I backed away from her, out of her reach, repelled by her touch. Shaking hands had been enough, for God's sake.

Something in her seemed to come to attention as she watched me. It made her even straighter. Deliberately, but for no apparent reason, she stepped toward Alan, touched him the way people do sometimes when they brush past — a kind of tactile "Excuse me." In that wide, empty corridor, it was totally unnecessary. For some reason, she wanted to touch him and wanted me to see. What did she think she was doing? Flirting at her age? I glared at her, found myself suppressing an irrational urge to shove her away from him. The violence of the urge amazed me.

Beatrice smiled and turned away. "This way," she said. Alan put his arm around me and tried to lead me after her.

"Wait a minute," I said, not moving.

Beatrice glanced around.

"What just happened?" I asked. I was ready for her to lie — to say nothing happened, pretend not to know what I was talking about.

"Are you planning to study medicine?" she asked.

"What? What does that have to do — ?"

"Study medicine. You may be able to do a great deal of good." She strode away, taking long steps so that we had to hurry to keep up. She led us through a room in which some people worked at computer terminals and others with pencils and paper. It would have been an ordinary scene except that some people had half their faces ruined or had only one hand or leg or had other obvious scars. But they were all in control now. They were working. They were intent but

not intent on self-destruction. Not one was digging into or tearing away flesh. When we had passed through this room and into a small, ornate sitting room, Alan grasped Beatrice's arm.

"What is it?" he demanded. "What do you do for them?"

She patted his hand, setting my teeth on edge. "I will tell you," she said. "I want you to know. But I want you to see your mother first." To my surprise, he nodded, let it go at that.

"Sit a moment," she said to us.

We sat in comfortable, matching upholstered chairs, Alan looking reasonably relaxed. What was it about the old lady that relaxed him but put me on edge? Maybe she reminded him of his grandmother or something. She didn't remind me of anyone. And what was that nonsense about studying medicine?

"I wanted you to pass through at least one workroom before we talked about your mother — and about the two of you." She turned to face me. "You've had a bad experience at a hospital or a rest home?"

I looked away from her, not wanting to think about it. Hadn't the people in that mock office been enough of a reminder? Horror film office. Nightmare office.

"It's all right," she said. "You don't have to go into detail. Just outline it for me."

I obeyed slowly, against my will, all the while wondering why I was doing it.

She nodded, unsurprised. "Harsh, loving people, your parents. Are they alive?"

"No."

"Were they both DGD?"

"Yes, but ... yes."

"Of course. Aside from the obvious ugliness of your hospital experience and its implications for the future, what impressed you about the people in the ward?"

I didn't know what to answer. What did she want? Why did she want anything from me? She should have been concerned with Alan and his mother.

"Did you see people unrestrained?"

"Yes," I whispered. "One woman. I don't know how it happened that she was free. She ran up to us and slammed into my father without moving him. He was a big man. She bounced off, fell, and ... began tearing at herself. She bit her own arm and ... swallowed the flesh she'd bitten away. She tore at the wound she'd made with the nails of her other hand. She ... I screamed at her to stop." I hugged myself, remembering the young woman, bloody, cannibalizing herself as she lay at our feet, digging into her own flesh. Digging. "They try so hard, fight so hard to get out."

"Out of what?" Alan demanded.

I looked at him, hardly seeing him.

"Lynn," he said gently. "Out of what?"

I shook my head. "Their restraints, their disease, the ward, their bodies ... "

He glanced at Beatrice, then spoke to me again. "Did the girl talk?"

"No. She screamed."

He turned away from me uncomfortably. "Is this important?" he asked Beatrice.

"Very," she said.

"Well ... can we talk about it after I see my mother?"

"Then and now." She spoke to me. "Did the girl stop what she was doing when you told her to?"

"The nurses had her a moment later. It didn't matter."

"It mattered. Did she stop?"

"Yes."

"According to the literature, they rarely respond to anyone," Alan said.

"True." Beatrice gave him a sad smile. "Your mother will probably respond to you, though."

"Is she? ... " He glanced back at the nightmare office. "Is she as controlled as those people?"



"Yes, though she hasn't always been. Your mother works with clay now. She loves shapes and textures and —"

"She's blind," Alan said, voicing the suspicion as though it were fact. Beatrice's words had sent my thoughts in the same direction. Beatrice hesitated. "Yes," she said finally. "And for ... the usual reason. I had intended to prepare you slowly."

"I've done a lot of reading."

I hadn't done much reading, but I knew what the usual reason was. The woman had gouged, ripped, or otherwise destroyed her eyes. She would be badly scarred. I got up, went over to sit on the arm of Alan's chair. I rested my hand on his shoulder, and he reached up and held it there.

"Can we see her now?" he asked.

Beatrice got up. "This way," she said.

We passed through more workrooms. People painted; assembled machinery; sculpted in wood, stone; even composed and played music. Almost no one noticed us. The patients were true to their disease in that respect. They weren't ignoring us. They clearly didn't know we existed. Only the few controlled-DGD guards gave themselves away by waving or speaking to Beatrice. I watched a woman work quickly, knowledgeably, with a power saw. She obviously understood the perimeters of her body, was not so dissociated as to perceive herself as trapped in something she needed to dig her way out of. What had Dilg done for these people that other hospitals did not do? And how could Dilg withhold its treatment from the others?

"Over there we make our own diet foods," Beatrice said, pointing through a window toward one of the guesthouses. "We permit more variety and make fewer mistakes than the commercial preparers. No ordinary person can concentrate on work the way our people can."

I turned to face her. "What are you saying? That the bigots are right? That we have some special gift?"

"Yes," she said. "It's hardly a bad characteristic, is it?"

"It's what people say whenever one of us does well at something. It's their way of denying us credit for our work."

"Yes. But people occasionally come to the right conclusions for the wrong reasons." I shrugged, not interested in arguing with her about it.

"Alan?" she said. He looked at her.

"Your mother is in the next room."

He swallowed, nodded. We both followed her into the room.

Naomi Chi was a small woman, hair still dark, fingers long and thin, graceful as they shaped the clay. Her face was a ruin. Not only her eyes but most of her nose and one ear were gone. What was left was badly scarred. "Her parents were poor," Beatrice said. "I don't know how much they told you, Alan, but they went through all the money they had, trying to keep her at a decent place. Her mother felt so guilty, you know. She was the one who had cancer and took the drug ... Eventually, they had to put Naomi in one of those state-approved, custodial-care places. You know the kind. For a while, it was all the government would pay for. Places like that ... well, sometimes if patients were really troublesome — especially the ones who kept breaking free — they'd put them in a bare room and let them finish themselves. The only things those places took good care of were the maggots, the cockroaches, and the rats."

I shuddered. "I've heard there are still places like that."

"There are," Beatrice said, "kept open by greed and indifference." She looked at Alan. "Your mother survived for three months in one of those places. I took her from it myself. Later I was instrumental in having that particular place closed."

"You took her?" I asked.

"Dilg didn't exist then, but I was working with a group of controlled DGDs in L.A. Naomi's parents heard about us and asked us to take her. A lot of people didn't trust us then. Only a few of us were medically trained. All of us were young, idealistic, and ignorant. We began in an old

frame house with a leaky roof. Naomi's parents were grabbing at straws. So were we. And by pure luck, we grabbed a good one. We were able to prove ourselves to the Dilg family and take over these quarters."

"Prove what?" I asked.

She turned to look at Alan and his mother. Alan was staring at Naomi's ruined face, at the ropy, discolored scar tissue. Naomi was shaping the image of an old woman and two children. The gaunt, lined face of the old woman was remarkably vivid — detailed in a way that seemed impossible for a blind sculptress.

Naomi seemed unaware of us. Her total attention remained on her work. Alan forgot about what Beatrice had told us and reached out to touch the scarred face.

Beatrice let it happen. Naomi did not seem to notice. "If I get her attention for you," Beatrice said, "we'll be breaking her routine. We'll have to stay with her until she gets back into it without hurting herself. About half an hour."

"You can get her attention?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Can she? ... " Alan swallowed. "I've never heard of anything like this. Can she talk?"

"Yes. She may not choose to, though. And if she does, she'll do it very slowly."

"Do it. Get her attention."

"She'll want to touch you."

"That all right. Do it."

Beatrice took Naomi's hands and held them still, away from the wet clay. For several seconds Naomi tugged at her captive hands, as though unable to understand why they did not move as she wished.

Beatrice stepped closer and spoke quietly. "Stop, Naomi." And Naomi was still, blind face turned toward Beatrice in an attitude of attentive waiting. Totally focused waiting.

"Company, Naomi."

After a few seconds, Naomi made a wordless sound.

Beatrice gestured Alan to her side, gave Naomi one of his hands. It didn't bother me this time when she touched him. I was too interested in what was happening. Naomi examined Alan's hand minutely, then followed the arm up to the shoulder, the neck, the face. Holding his face between her hands, she made a sound. It may have been a word, but I couldn't understand it. All I could think of was the danger of those hands. I thought of my father's hands.

"His name is Alan Chi, Naomi. He's your son." Several seconds passed.

"Son?" she said. This time the word was quite distinct, though her lips had split in many places and had healed badly. "Son?" she repeated anxiously. "Here?"

"He's all right, Naomi. He's come to visit."

"Mother?" he said.

She reexamined his face. He had been three when she started to drift. It didn't seem possible that she could find anything in his face that she would remember. I wondered whether she remembered she had a son.

"Alan?" she said. She found his tears and paused at them. She touched her own face where there should have been an eye, then she reached back toward his eyes. An instant before I would have grabbed her hand, Beatrice did it.

"No!" Beatrice said firmly.

The hand fell limply to Naomi's side. Her face turned toward Beatrice like an antique weather vane swinging around. Beatrice stroked her hair, and Naomi said something I almost understood. Beatrice looked at Alan, who was frowning and wiping away tears.

"Hug your son," Beatrice said softly.

Naomi turned, groping, and Alan seized her in a tight, long hug. Her arms went around him slowly. She spoke words blurred by her ruined mouth but just understandable.

"Parents?" she said. "Did my parents ... care for you?" Alan looked at her, clearly not understanding.

"She wants to know whether her parents took care of you," I said.

He glanced at me doubtfully, then looked at Beatrice.

"Yes," Beatrice said. "She just wants to know that they cared for you."

"They did," he said. "They kept their promise to you, Mother."

Several seconds passed. Naomi made sounds that even Alan took to be weeping, and he tried to comfort her.

"Who else is here?" she said finally.

This time Alan looked at me. I repeated what she had said.

"Her name is Lynn Mortimer," he said. "I'm ... " He paused awkwardly. "She and I are going to be married."

After a time, she moved back from him and said my name. My first impulse was to go to her. I wasn't afraid or repelled by her now, but for no reason I could explain, I looked at Beatrice.

"Go," she said. "But you and I will have to talk later."

I went to Naomi, took her hand.

"Bea?" she said.

"I'm Lynn," I said softly.

She drew a quick breath. "No," she said. "No, you're ... "

"I'm Lynn. Do you want Bea? She's here."

She said nothing. She put her hand to my face, explored it slowly. I let her do it, confident that I could stop her if she turned violent. But first one hand, then both, went over me very gently.

"You'll marry my son?" she said finally.

"Yes."

"Good. You'll keep him safe."

As much as possible, we'll keep each other safe. "Yes," I said.

"Good. No one will close him away from himself. No one will tie him or cage him." Her hand wandered to her own face again, nails biting in slightly.

"No," I said softly, catching her hand. "I want you to be safe, too."

The mouth moved. I think it smiled. "Son?" she said.

He understood her, took her hand.

"Clay," she said. Lynn and Alan in clay. "Bea?"

"Of course," Beatrice said. "Do you have an impression?"

"No!" It was the fastest that Naomi had answered anything. Then, almost childlike, she whispered, "Yes."

Beatrice laughed. "Touch them again if you like, Naomi. They don't mind."

We didn't. Alan closed his eyes, trusting her gentleness in a way I could not. I had no trouble accepting her touch, even so near my eyes, but I did not delude myself about her. Her gentleness could turn in an instant. Naomi's fingers twitched near Alan's eyes, and I spoke up at once, out of fear for him.

"Just touch him, Naomi. Only touch."

She froze, made an interrogative sound.

"She's all right," Alan said.

"I know," I said, not believing it. He would be all right, though, as long as someone watched her very carefully, nipped any dangerous impulses in the bud.

"Son!" she said, happily possessive. When she let him go, she demanded clay, wouldn't touch her old-woman sculpture again. Beatrice got new clay for her, leaving us to soothe her and ease her impatience. Alan began to recognize signs of impending destructive behavior. Twice he caught her hands and said no. She struggled against him until I spoke to her. As Beatrice returned, it happened again, and Beatrice said,

"No, Naomi." Obediently Naomi let her hands fall to her sides.

"What is it?" Alan demanded later when we had left Naomi safely, totally focused on her new work — clay sculptures of us. "Does she only listen to women or something?"

Beatrice took us back to the sitting room, sat us both down, but did not sit down herself. She went to a window and stared out. "Naomi only obeys certain women," she said. "And she's sometimes slow to obey. She's worse than most — probably because of the damage she managed to do to herself before I got her." Beatrice faced us, stood biting her lip and frowning. "I haven't had to give this particular speech for a while," she said. "Most DGDs have the sense not to marry each other and produce children. I hope you two aren't planning to have any — in spite of our need." She took a deep breath. "It's a pheromone. A scent. And it's sex-linked. Men who inherit the disease from their fathers have no trace of the scent. They also tend to have an easier time with the disease. But they're useless to us as staff here. Men who inherit from their mothers have as much of the scent as men get. They can be useful here because the DGDs can at least be made to notice them. The same for women who inherit from their mothers but not their fathers. It's only when two irresponsible DGDs get together and produce girl children like me or Lynn that you get someone who can really do some good in a place like this." She looked at me. "We are very rare commodities, you and I. When you finish school you'll have a very well paid job waiting for you."

"Here?" I asked.

"For training, perhaps. Beyond that, I don't know. You'll probably help start a retreat in some other part of the country. Others are badly needed." She smiled humorlessly. "People like us don't get along well together. You must realize that I don't like you any more than you like me."

I swallowed, saw her through a kind of haze for a moment. Hated her mindlessly just for a moment.

"Sit back," she said. "Relax your body. It helps."

I obeyed, not really wanting to obey her but unable to think of anything else to do. Unable to think at all.

"We seem," she said, "to be very territorial. Dilg is a haven for me when I'm the only one of my kind here. When I'm not, it's a prison."

"All it looks like to me is an unbelievable amount of work," Alan said.

She nodded. "Almost too much." She smiled to herself. "I was one of the first double DGDs to be born. When I was old enough to understand, I thought I didn't have much time. First I tried to kill myself. Failing that, I tried to cram all the living I could into the small amount of time I assumed I had. When I got into this project, I worked as hard as I could to get it into shape before I started to drift. By now I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I weren't working."

"Why haven't you ... drifted?" I asked.

"I don't know. There aren't enough of our kind to know what's normal for us."

"Drifting is normal for every DGD sooner or later."

"Later, then."

"Why hasn't the scent been synthesized?" Alan asked. "Why are there still concentration-camp rest homes and hospital wards?"

"There have been people trying to synthesize it since I proved what I could do with it. No one has succeeded so far. All we've been able to do is keep our eyes open for people like Lynn." She looked at me. "Dilg scholarship, right?"

"Yeah. Offered out of the blue."

"My people do a good job keeping track. You would have been contacted just before you graduated or if you dropped out."

"Is it possible," Alan said, staring at me, "that she's already doing it? Already using the scent to ... influence people?"

"You?" Beatrice asked.

"All of us. A group of DGDs. We all live together. We're all controlled, of course, but ... " Beatrice smiled. "It's probably the quietest house full of kids that anyone's ever seen."

I looked at Alan, and he looked away, "I'm not doing anything to them," I said. "I remind them of work they've already promised to do. That's all."

"You put them at ease," Beatrice said. "You're there. You ... well, you leave your scent around the house. You speak to them individually. Without knowing why, they no doubt find that very comforting. Don't you, Alan?"

"I don't know," he said. "I suppose I must have. From my first visit to the house, I knew I wanted to move in. And when I first saw Lynn, I ... " He shook his head. "Funny I thought all that was my idea."

"Will you work with us, Alan?"

"Me? You want Lynn."

"I want you both. You have no idea how many people take one look at one workroom here and turn and run. You may be the kind of young people who ought to eventually take charge of a place like Dilg."

"Whether we want it or not, eh?" he said.

Frightened, I tried to take his hand, but he moved it away. "Alan, this works," I said. "It's only a stopgap, I know. Genetic engineering will probably give us the final answers, but for God's sake, this is something we can do now!"

"It's something you can do. Play queen bee in a retreat full of workers. I've never had any ambition to be a drone."

"A physician isn't likely to be a drone," Beatrice said.

"Would you marry one of your patients?" he demanded. "That's what Lynn would be doing if she married me — whether I become a doctor or not."

She looked away from him, stared across the room. "My husband is here," she said softly. "He's been a patient here for almost a decade. What better place for him ... when his time came?"

"Shit!" Alan muttered. He glanced at me. "Let's get out of here!" He got up and strode across the room to the door, pulled at it, then realized it was locked. He turned to face Beatrice, his body language demanding she let him out. She went to him, took him by the shoulder, and turned him to face the door. "Try it once more," she said quietly. "You can't break it. Try."

Surprisingly, some of the hostility seemed to go out of him. "This is one of those p.v. locks?" he said.

"Yes."

I set my teeth and looked away. Let her work. She knew how to use this thing she and I both had. And for the moment, she was on my side.

I heard him make some effort with the door. The door didn't even rattle. Beatrice took his hand from it, and with her own hand flat against what appeared to be a large brass knob, she pushed the door open.

"The man who created that lock is nobody in particular," she said. "He doesn't have an unusually high I. Q., didn't even finish college. But sometime in his life he read a science-fiction story in which palmprint locks were a given. He went that story one better by creating one that responded to voice or palm. It took him years, but we were able to give him those years. The people of Dilg are problem solvers, Alan. Think of the problems you could solve!"

He looked as though he were beginning to think, beginning to understand. "I don't see how biological research can be done that way," he said. "Not with everyone acting on his own, not even aware of other researchers and their work."

"It *is* being done," she said, "and not in isolation. Our retreat in Colorado specializes in it and has — just barely — enough trained, controlled DGDs to see that no one really works in isolation. Our patients can still read and write — those who haven't damaged themselves too

badly. They can take each other's work into account if reports are made available to them. And they can read material that comes in from the outside. They're working, Alan. The disease hasn't stopped them, won't stop them." He stared at her, seemed to be caught by her intensity — or her scent. He spoke as though his words were a strain, as though they hurt his throat. "I won't be a puppet. I won't be controlled ... by a goddamn smell!"

"Alan — "

"I won't be what my mother is. I'd rather be dead!"

"There's no reason for you to become what your mother is."

He drew back in obvious disbelief.

"Your mother is brain damaged — thanks to the three months she spent in that custodial-care toilet. She had no speech at all when I met her. She's improved more than you can imagine. None of that has to happen to you. Work with us, and we'll see that none of it happens to you."

He hesitated, seemed less sure of himself. Even that much flexibility in him was surprising. "I'll be under your control or Lynn's," he said.

She shook her head. "Not even your mother is under my control. She's aware of me. She's able to take direction from me. She trusts me the way any blind person would trust her guide."

"There's more to it than that."

"Not here. Not at any of our retreats."

"I don't believe you."

"Then you don't understand how much individuality our people retain. They know they need help, but they have minds of their own. If you want to see the abuse of power you're worried about, go to a DGD ward."

"You're better than that, I admit. Hell is probably better than that. But ... "

"But you don't trust us."

He shrugged.

"You do, you know." She smiled. "You don't want to, but you do. That's what worries you, and it leaves you with work to do. Look into what I've said. See for yourself. We offer DGDs a chance to live and do whatever they decide is important to them. What do you have, what can you realistically hope for that's better than that?"

Silence. "I don't know what to think," he said finally.

"Go home," she said. "Decide what to think. It's the most important decision you'll ever make."

He looked at me. I went to him, not sure how he'd react, not sure he'd want me no matter what he decided.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

The question startled me. "You have a choice," I said. "I don't. If she's right ... how could I not wind up running a retreat?"

"Do you want to?"

I swallowed. I hadn't really faced that question yet. Did I want to spend my life in something that was basically a refined DGD ward? "No!"

"But you will."

"... Yes." I thought for a moment, hunted for the right words. "You'd do it."

"What?"

"If the pheromone were something only men had, you would do it."

That silence again. After a time he took my hand, and we followed Beatrice out to the car. Before I could get in with him and our guard-escort, she caught my arm. I jerked away reflexively. By the time I caught myself, I had swung around as though I meant to hit her. Hell, I did mean to hit her, but I stopped myself in time. "Sorry," I said with no attempt at sincerity.

She held out a card until I took it. "My private number," she said. "Before seven or after nine, usually. You and I will communicate best by phone."

I resisted the impulse to throw the card away. God, she brought out the child in me.

Inside the car, Alan said something to the guard. I couldn't hear what it was, but the sound of his voice reminded me of him arguing with her — her logic and her scent. She had all but won him for me, and I couldn't manage even token gratitude. I spoke to her, low-voiced.

"He never really had a chance, did he?"

She looked surprised. "That's up to you. You can keep him or drive him away. I assure you, you *can* drive him away."

"How?"

"By imagining that he doesn't have a chance." She smiled faintly. "Phone me from your territory. We have a great deal to say to each other, and I'd rather we didn't say it as enemies."

She had lived with meeting people like me for decades. She had good control. I, on the other hand, was at the end of my control. All I could do was scramble into the car and floor my own phantom accelerator as the guard drove us to the gate. I couldn't look back at her. Until we were well away from the house, until we'd left the guard at the gate and gone off the property, I couldn't make myself look back. For long, irrational minutes, I was convinced that somehow if I turned, I would see myself standing there, gray and old, growing small in the distance, vanishing.

## Three Girls - Joyce Carol Oates

(2003)

In Strand Used Books on Broadway and Twelfth one snowy March early evening in 1956 when the streetlights on Broadway glimmered with a strange sepia glow, we were two NYU girl-poets drifting through the warehouse of treasures as through an enchanted forest. Just past 6:00 p.m. Above light-riddled Manhattan, opaque night. Snowing, and sidewalks encrusted with ice so there were fewer customers in the Strand than usual at this hour but *there we were*. Among other cranky brooding regulars. In our army-surplus jackets, baggy khaki pants, and zip-up rubber boots. In our matching wool caps (knitted by your restless fingers) pulled down low over our pale-girl foreheads. Enchanted by books. Enchanted by the Strand.

No bookstore of merely "new" books with elegant show window displays drew us like the drafty Strand, bins of books untidy and thumbed through as merchants' sidewalk bins on Fourteenth Street, NEW THIS WEEK, BEST BARGAINS, WORLD CLASSICS, ART BOOKS 50% OFF, REVIEWERS' COPIES, HIGHEST PRICE \$1.98, REMAINDERS 25¢ — \$1.00. Hard-cover/paperback. Spotless/battered. Beautiful books/cheaply printed pulp paper. And at the rear and sides in that vast echoing space massive shelves of books books books rising to a ceiling of hammered tin fifteen feet above! Stacked shelves so high they required ladders to negotiate and a monkey nimbleness (like yours) to climb.

We were enchanted with the Strand and with each other in the Strand. Overseen by surly young clerks who were poets like us, or playwrights/actors/artists. In an agony of unspoken young love I watched you. As always on these romantic evenings at the Strand, prowling the aisles sneering at those luckless books, so many of them, unworthy of your attention. Bestsellers, how-tos, arts and crafts, too-simple *histories of*. Women's romances, sentimental love poems. Patriotic books, middlebrow books, books lacking esoteric covers. We were girl-poets passionately enamored of T. S. Eliot but scornful of Robert Frost whom we'd been made to memorize in high school — slyly we communicated in code phrases from Eliot in the presence of obtuse others in our dining hall and residence. We were admiring of though confused by the poetry of Yeats, we were yet more confused by the lauded worth of Pound, enthusiastically drawn to the bold metaphors of Kafka (that cockroach!) and Dostoevsky (sexy murderer Raskolnikov and the Underground Man were our rebel heroes) and Sartre ("Hell is other people" — we knew this), and had reason to believe that we were their lineage though admittedly we were American middle class, and Caucasian, and female. (Yet we were not "conventional" females. In fact, we shared male contempt for the merely "conventional" female.)

Brooding above a tumble of books that quickened the pulse, almost shyly touching Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Crane Brinton's *The Age of Reason*, Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*, D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Mann's *Death in Venice* — there suddenly you glided up behind me to touch my wrist (as never you'd done before, had you?) and whispered, "Come here," in a way that thrilled me for its meaning *I have something wonderful/unexpected/startling to show you*. Like poems these discoveries in the Strand were, to us, found poems to be cherished. And eagerly I turned to follow you though disguising my eagerness, "Yes, what?" as if you'd interrupted me, for possibly we'd had a quarrel earlier that day, a flaring up of tense girl-temper. Yes, you were childish and self absorbed and given to sulky silences and mercurial moods in the presence of showy superficial people, and I adored and feared you knowing you'd break my heart, my heart that had never before been broken because never before so exposed.

So eagerly yet with my customary guardedness I followed you through a maze of book bins and shelves and stacks to the ceiling ANTHROPOLOGY, ART/ANCIENT,



ART/RENAISSANCE, ART/MODERN, ART/ASIAN, ART/WESTERN, TRAVEL, PHILOSOPHY, COOKERY, POETRY/MODERN where the way was treacherously lighted only by bare sixty-watt bulbs, and where customers as cranky as we two stood in the aisles reading books, or sat hunched on footstools glancing up annoyed at our passage, and unquestioning I followed you until at POETRY/ MODERN you halted, and pushed me ahead and around a corner, and I stood puzzled staring, not knowing what I was supposed to be seeing until impatiently you poked me in the ribs and pointed, and now I perceived an individual in the aisle pulling down books from shelves, peering at them, clearly absorbed by what she read, a woman nearly my height (I was tall for a girl, in 1956) in a man's navy coat to her ankles and with sleeves past her wrists, a man's beige fedora hat on her head, scrunched low as we wore our knitted caps, and most of her hair hidden by the hat except for a six-inch blond plait at the nape of her neck; and she wore black trousers tucked into what appeared to be salt-stained cowboy boots. Someone we knew? An older, good-looking student from one of our classes? *A girl-poet like ourselves?* I was about to nudge you in the ribs in bafflement when the blond woman turned, taking down another book from the shelf (e. e. cummings' *Tulips and Chimneys* — always I would remember that title!), and I saw that she was Marilyn Monroe.

Marilyn Monroe. In the Strand. Just like us. And she seemed to be alone.

*Marilyn Monroe, alone!*

Wholly absorbed in browsing amid books, oblivious of her surroundings and of us. No one seemed to have recognized her (yet) except you.

Here was the surprise: this woman was/was not Marilyn Monroe. For this woman was an individual wholly absorbed in selecting, leafing through, pausing to read books. You could see that this individual was a *reader*. One of those who *reads*. With concentration, with passion. With her very soul. And it was poetry she was reading, her lips pursed, silently shaping words. Absent-mindedly she wiped her nose on the edge of her hand, so intent was she on what she was reading. For when you truly read poetry, poetry reads *you*.

Still, this woman was — Marilyn Monroe. And despite our common sense, our scorn for the silly clichés of Hollywood romance, still we halfway expected a Leading Man to join her: Clark Gable, Robert Taylor, Marlon Brando.

Halfway we expected the syrupy surge of movie music, to glide us into the scene.

But no man joined Marilyn Monroe in her disguise as one of us in the Strand. No Leading Man, no dark prince.

Like us (we began to see) this Marilyn Monroe required no man.

For what seemed like a long time but was probably no more than half an hour, Marilyn Monroe browsed in the POETRY/MODERN shelves, as from a distance of approximately ten feet two girl-poets watched covertly, clutching each other's hands. We were stunned to see that this woman looked very little like the glamorous "Marilyn Monroe." That figure was a garish blond showgirl, a Hollywood "sexpot" of no interest to intellectuals (*we* thought, *we* who knew nothing of the secret romance between Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller); this figure more resembled us (almost) than she resembled her Hollywood image. We were dying of curiosity to see whose poetry books Marilyn Monroe was examining: Elizabeth Bishop, H.D., Robert Lowell, Muriel Rukeyser, Harry Crosby, Denise Levertov ... Five or six of these Marilyn Monroe decided to purchase, then moved on, leather bag slung over her shoulder and fedora tilted down on her head.

We couldn't resist, we had to follow! Cautious not to whisper together like excited schoolgirls, still less to giggle wildly as we were tempted; you nudged me in the ribs to sober me, gave me a glare signaling *Don't be rude, don't ruin this for all of us*. I conceded: I was the more pushy of the two of us, a tall gawky Rima the Bird Girl with springy carrot-red hair like an exotic bird's crest, while you were petite and dark haired and attractive with long-lashed Semitic sloe eyes, you the wily gymnast and I the aggressive basketball player, you the "experimental"

poet and I drawn to "forms," our contrary talents bred in our bones. Which of us would marry, have babies, disappear into "real" life, and which of us would persevere into her thirties before starting to be published and becoming, in time, a "real" poet — could anyone have predicted, this snowy March evening in 1956?

Marilyn Monroe drifted through the maze of books and we followed in her wake as through a maze of dreams, past sports, past MILITARY, past WAR, past HISTORY/ANCIENT, past the familiar figures of Strand regulars frowning into books, past surly yawning bearded clerks who took no more heed of the blond actress than they ever did of us, and so to natural history where she paused, and there again for unhurried minutes (the Strand was open until 9:00 p.m.) Marilyn Monroe in her mannish disguise browsed and brooded, pulling down books, seeking what? at last crouched leafing through an oversized illustrated book (curiosity overcame me! I shoved away your restraining hand; politely I eased past Marilyn Monroe murmuring "excuse me" without so much as brushing against her and without being noticed), Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in a deluxe edition. Darwin! *Origin of Species!* We were poet-despisers-of-science, or believed we were, or must be, to be true poets in the exalted mode of T. S. Eliot and William Butler Yeats; such a choice, for Marilyn Monroe, seemed perverse to us. But this book was one Marilyn quickly decided to purchase, hoisting it into her arms and moving on.

That rakish fedora we'd come to covet, and that single chunky blond braid. (Afterward we would wonder: Marilyn Monroe's hair in a braid? Never had we seen Marilyn Monroe with her hair braided in any movie or photo. What did this mean? Did it mean anything? *Had she quit films, and embarked on a new, anonymous life in our midst?*)

Suddenly Marilyn Monroe glanced back at us, frowning as a child might frown (had we spoken aloud? had she heard our thoughts?), and there came into her face a look of puzzlement, not alarm or annoyance but a childlike puzzlement: *Who are you? You two? Are you watching me?* Quickly we looked away. We were engaged in a whispering dispute over a book one of us had fumbled from a shelf, *A History of Botanical Gardens in England*. So we were undetected. We hoped!

But wary now, and sobered. For what if Marilyn Monroe had caught us, and knew that we knew She might have abandoned her books and fled the Strand. What a loss for her, and for the books For us, too.

Oh, we worried at Marilyn Monroe's recklessness! We dreaded her being recognized by a (male) customer or (male) clerk. A girl or woman would have kept her secret (so we thought) but no man could resist staring openly at her, following her, and at last speaking to her. Of course, the blond actress in Strand Used Books wasn't herself, not at all glamorous, or "sexy," or especially blond, in her inconspicuous man's clothing and those salt-stained boots; she might have been anyone, female or male, hardly a Hollywood celebrity, a movie goddess. Yet if you stared, you'd recognize her. If you tried, with any imagination you'd see "Marilyn Monroe." It was like a child's game in which you stare at foliage, grass, clouds in the sky, and suddenly you see a face or a figure, and after that recognition you can't not see the hidden shape, it's staring you in the face. So too with Marilyn Monroe. Once we saw her, it seemed to us she must be seen — and recognized — by anyone who happened to glance at her. If any man saw! We were fearful her privacy would be destroyed. Quickly the blond actress would become surrounded, mobbed. It was risky and reckless of her to have come to Strand Used Books by herself, we thought. Sure, she could shop at Tiffany's, maybe; she could stroll through the lobby of the Plaza, or the Waldorf-Astoria; she'd be safe from fans and unwanted admirers in privileged settings on the Upper East Side, but — here? In the egalitarian Strand, on Broadway and Twelfth?

We were perplexed. Almost, I was annoyed with her. Taking such chances! But you, gripping my wrist, had another, more subtle thought.

"She thinks she's like *us*. "

You meant: a human being, anonymous. Female, like us. Amid the ordinary unspectacular customers (predominantly male) of the Strand.

And that was the sadness in it, Marilyn Monroe's wish. To be *like us*. For it was impossible, of course. For anyone could have told Marilyn Monroe, even two young girl-poets, that it was too late for her in history. Already, at age thirty (we could calculate afterward that this was her age) "Marilyn Monroe" had entered history, and there was no escape from it. Her films, her photos. Her face, her figure, her name. To enter history is to be abducted spiritually, with no way back. As if lightning were to strike the building that housed the Strand, as if an actual current of electricity were to touch and transform only one individual in the great cavernous space and that lone individual, by pure chance it might seem, the caprice of fate, would be the young woman with the blond braid and the fedora slanted across her face. Why? Why her, and not another? You could argue that such a destiny is absurd, and undeserved, for one individual among many, and logically you would be correct. And yet: "Marilyn Monroe" has entered history, and you have not. She will endure, though the young woman with the blond braid will die. *And even should she wish to die, "Marilyn Monroe" cannot.*

this time she — the young woman with the blond braid — was carrying an armload of books. We were hoping she'd almost finished and would be leaving soon, before strangers' rude eyes lighted upon her and exposed her, but no: she surprised us by heading for a section called JUDAICA. In that forbidding aisle, which we'd never before entered, there were books in numerous languages: Hebrew, Yiddish, German, Russian, French. Some of these books looked ancient! Complete sets of the Talmud. Cryptically printed tomes on the cabala. Luckily for us, the titles Marilyn Monroe pulled out were all in English: *Jews of Eastern Europe; The Chosen People: A Complete History of the Jews; Jews of the New World*. Quickly Marilyn Monroe placed her bag and books on the floor, sat on a footstool, and leafed through pages with the frowning intensity of a young girl, as if searching for something urgent, something she knew — knew! — must be there; in this uncomfortable posture she remained for at least fifteen minutes, wetting her fingers to turn pages that stuck together, pages that had not been turned, still less read, for decades. She was frowning, yet smiling too; faint vertical lines appeared between her eyebrows, in the intensity of her concentration; her eyes moved rapidly along lines of print, then returned, and moved more slowly. By this time we were close enough to observe the blond actress's feverish cheeks and slightly parted moist lips that seemed to move silently. *What is she reading in that ancient book, what can possibly mean so much to her? A secret, revealed? A secret, to save her life?*

"Hey you!" a clerk called out in a nasal, insinuating voice.

The three of us looked up, startled. But the clerk wasn't speaking to us. Not to the blond actress frowning over *The Chosen People*, and not to us who were hovering close by. The clerk had caught someone slipping a book into an overcoat pocket, not an unusual sight at the Strand.

After this mild upset, Marilyn Monroe became uneasy. She turned to look frankly at us, and though we tried clumsily to retreat, her eyes met ours. *She knows!* But after a moment, she simply turned back to her book, stubborn and determined to finish what she was reading, while we continued to hover close by, exposed now, and blushing, yet feeling protective of her. *She has seen us, she knows. She trusts us.* We saw that Marilyn Monroe was beautiful in her anonymity as she had never seemed, to us, to be beautiful as "Marilyn Monroe." All that was makeup, fakery, cartoon sexiness subtle as a kick in the groin. All that was vulgar and infantile. But this young woman was beautiful without makeup, without even lipstick; in her mannish clothes, her hair in a stubby braid. Beautiful: her skin luminous and pale and her eyes a startling clear blue. Almost shyly she glanced back at us, to note that we were still there, and she smiled. *Yes, I see you two. Thank you for not speaking my name.*

Always you and I would remember: that smile of gratitude, and sweetness.

Always you and I would remember: that she trusted us, as perhaps we would not have trusted

ourselves.

So many years later, I'm proud of us. We were so young.

Young, headstrong, arrogant, insecure though "brilliant" — or so we'd been led to believe. Not that we thought of ourselves as young: you were nineteen, I was twenty. We were mature for our ages, and we were immature. We were intellectually sophisticated, and emotionally unpredictable. We revered something we called *art*, we were disdainful of something we called *life*. We were overly conscious of ourselves. And yet: how patient, how protective, watching over Marilyn Monroe squatting on a footstool in the JUDAICA stacks as stray customers pushed past muttering "excuse me!" or not even seeming to notice her, or the two of us standing guard. And at last — a relief — Marilyn Monroe shut the unwieldy book, having decided to buy it, and rose from the footstool gathering up her many things. And — this was a temptation! — we held back, not offering to help her carry her things as we so badly wanted to, but only just following at a discreet distance as Marilyn Monroe made her way through the labyrinth of the bookstore to the front counter. (Did she glance back at us? Did she understand you and I were her protectors?) If anyone dared to approach her, we intended to intervene. We would push between Marilyn Monroe and whomever it was. Yet how strange the scene was: none of the other Strand customers, lost in books, took any special notice of her, any more than they took notice of us. Book lovers, especially used-book lovers, are not ones to stare curiously at others, but only at books. At the front of the store — it was a long hike — the cashiers would be more alert, we thought. One of them seemed to be watching Marilyn Monroe approach. Did he know? Could he guess? Was he waiting for her?

Nearing the front counter and the bright fluorescent lights overhead, Marilyn Monroe seemed for the first time to falter. She fumbled to extract out of her shoulder bag a pair of dark glasses and managed to put them on. She turned up the collar of her navy coat. She lowered her hat brim.

Still she was hesitant, and it was then that I stepped forward and said quietly, "Excuse me. Why don't I buy your books for you? That way you won't have to talk to anyone."

The blond actress stared at me through her oversized dark glasses. Her eyes were only just visible behind the lenses. A shy-girl's eyes, startled and grateful.

And so I did. With you helping me. Two girl-poets, side by side, all brisk and businesslike, making Marilyn Monroe's purchases for her: a total of sixteen books! — hardcover and paperback, relatively new books, old battered thumbed-through books — at a cost of \$55.85. A staggering sum! Never in my two years of coming into the Strand had I handed over more than a few dollars to the cashier, and this time my hand might have trembled as I pushed twenty-dollar bills at him, half expecting the bristly bearded man to interrogate me: "Where'd you get so much money?" But as usual the cashier hardly gave me a second glance. And Marilyn Monroe, burdened with no books, had already slipped through the turnstile and was awaiting us at the front door.

There, when we handed over her purchases in two sturdy bags, she leaned forward. For a breathless moment we thought she might kiss our cheeks. Instead she pressed into our surprised hands a slender volume she lifted from one of the bags: *Selected Poems of Marianne Moore*. We stammered thanks, but already the blond actress had pulled the fedora down more tightly over her head and had stepped out into the lightly falling snow, headed south on Broadway. We trailed behind her, unable to resist, waiting for her to hail a taxi, but she did not. We knew we must not follow her. By this time we were giddy with the strain of the past hour, gripping each other's hands in childlike elation. So happy!

"Oh. Oh God. Marilyn Monroe. She gave us a book. Was any of it real?"

It was real: we had *Selected Poems of Marianne Moore* to prove it.

That snowy early evening in March at Strand Used Books. That magical evening of Marilyn Monroe, when I kissed you for the first time.

# In Dreams Begin Responsibilities - Delmore Schwartz

(1937)

I think it is the year 1909. I feel as if I were in a motion picture theatre, the long arm of light crossing the darkness and spinning, my eyes fixed on the screen. This is a silent picture as if an old Biograph one, in which the actors are dressed in ridiculously old-fashioned clothes, and one flash succeeds another with sudden jumps. The actors too seem to jump about and walk too fast. The shots themselves are full of dots and rays, as if it were raining when the picture was photographed. The light is bad.

It is Sunday afternoon, June 12th, 1909, and my father is walking down the quiet streets of Brooklyn on his way to visit my mother. His clothes are newly pressed and his tie is too tight in his high collar. He jingles the coins in his pockets, thinking of the witty things he will say. I feel as if I had by now relaxed entirely in the soft darkness of the theatre; the organist peals out the obvious and approximate emotions on which the audience rocks unknowingly. I am anonymous, and I have forgotten myself. It is always so when one goes to the movies, it is, as they say, a drug.

My father walks from street to street of trees, lawns and houses, once in a while coming to an avenue on which a street-car skates and gnaws, slowly progressing. The conductor, who has a handle-bar mustache helps a young lady wearing a hat like a bowl with feathers on to the car. She lifts her long skirts slightly as she mounts the steps. He leisurely makes change and rings his bell. It is obviously Sunday, for everyone is wearing Sunday clothes, and the street-car's noises emphasize the quiet of the holiday. Is not Brooklyn the City of Churches? The shops are closed and their shades drawn, but for an occasional stationery store or drug-store with great green balls in the window.

My father has chosen to take this long walk because he likes to walk and think. He thinks about himself in the future and so arrives at the place he is to visit in a state of mild exaltation. He pays no attention to the houses he is passing, in which the Sunday dinner is being eaten, nor to the many trees which patrol each street, now coming to their full leafage and the time when they will room the whole street in cool shadow. An occasional carriage passes, the horse's hooves falling like stones in the quiet afternoon, and once in a while an automobile, looking like an enormous upholstered sofa, puffs and passes.

My father thinks of my mother, of how nice it will be to introduce her to his family. But he is not yet sure that he wants to marry her, and once in a while he becomes panicky about the bond already established. He reassures himself by thinking of the big men he admires who are married: William Randolph Hearst, and William Howard Taft, who has just become President of the United States.

My father arrives at my mother's house. He has come too early and so is suddenly embarrassed. My aunt, my mother's sister, answers the loud bell with her napkin in her hand, for the family is still at dinner. As my father enters, my grandfather rises from the table and shakes hands with him. My mother has run upstairs to tidy herself. My grandmother asks my father if he has had dinner, and tells him that Rose will be downstairs soon. My grandfather opens the conversation by remarking on the mild June weather. My father sits uncomfortably near the table, holding his hat in his hand. My grandmother tells my aunt to take my father's hat. My uncle, twelve years old, runs into the house, his hair tousled. He shouts a greeting to my father, who has often given him a nickel, and then runs upstairs. It is evident that the respect in which my father is held in this household is tempered by a good deal of mirth. He is impressive, yet he is very awkward.

Finally my mother comes downstairs, all dressed up, and my father being engaged in

conversation with my grandfather becomes uneasy, not knowing whether to greet my mother or continue the conversation. He get[s] up from the chair clumsily and says "hello" gruffly. My grandfather watches, examining their congruence, such as it is, with a critical eye, and meanwhile rubbing his bearded cheek roughly, as he always does when he reflects. He is worried; he is afraid that my father will not make a good husband for his oldest daughter. At this point something happens to the film, just as my father is saying something funny to my mother; I am awakened to myself and my unhappiness just as my interest was rising. The audience begins to clap impatiently. Then the trouble is cared for but the film has been returned to a portion just shown, and once more I see my grandfather rubbing his bearded cheek and pondering my father's character. It is difficult to get back into the picture once more and forget myself, but as my mother giggles at my father's words, the darkness drowns me.

My father and mother depart from the house, my father shaking hands with my mother once more, out of some unknown uneasiness. I stir uneasily also, slouched in the hard chair of the theatre. Where is the older uncle, my mother's older brother? He is studying in his bedroom upstairs, studying for his final examination at the College of the City of New York, having been dead of rapid pneumonia for the last twenty-one years. My mother and father walk down the same quiet streets once more. My mother is holding my father's arm and telling him of the novel which she has been reading; and my father utters judgments of the characters as the plot is made clear to him. This is a habit which he very much enjoys, for he feels the utmost superiority and confidence when he approves and condemns the behavior of other people. At times he feels moved to utter a brief "Ugh" — whenever the story becomes what he would call sugary. This tribute is paid to his manliness. My mother feels satisfied by the interest which she has awakened; she is showing my father how intelligent she is, and how interesting.

They reach the avenue, and the street-car leisurely arrives. They are going to Coney Island this afternoon, although my mother considers that such pleasures are inferior. She has made up her mind to indulge only in a walk on the boardwalk and a pleasant dinner, avoiding the riotous amusements as being beneath the dignity of so dignified a couple.

My father tells my mother how much money he has made in the past week, exaggerating an amount which need not have been exaggerated. But my father has always felt that actualities somehow fall short. Suddenly I begin to weep. The determined old lady who sits next to me in the theatre is annoyed and looks at me with an angry face, and being intimidated, I stop. I drag out my handkerchief and dry my face, licking the drop which has fallen near my lips. Meanwhile I have missed something, for here are my mother and father alighting at the last stop, Coney Island.

They walk toward the boardwalk, and my father commands my mother to inhale the pungent air from the sea. They both breathe in deeply, both of them laughing as they do so. They have in common a great interest in health, although my father is strong and husky, my mother frail. Their minds are full of theories of what is good to eat and not good to eat, and sometimes they engage in heated discussions of the subject, the whole matter ending in my father's announcement, made with a scornful bluster, that you have to die sooner or later anyway. On the boardwalk's flagpole, the American flag is pulsing in an intermittent wind from the sea.

My father and mother go to the rail of the boardwalk and look down on the beach where a good many bathers are casually walking about. A few are in the surf. A peanut whistle pierces the air with its pleasant and active whine, and my father goes to buy peanuts. My mother remains at the rail and stares at the ocean. The ocean seems merry to her; it pointedly sparkles and again and again the pony waves are released. She notices the children digging in the wet sand, and the bathing costumes of the girls who are her own age. My father returns with the peanuts. Overhead the sun's lightning strikes and strikes, but neither of them are at all aware of it. The boardwalk is full of people dressed in their Sunday clothes and idly strolling. The tide does not reach as far as the boardwalk, and the strollers would feel no danger if it did. My mother and father lean on the

rail of the boardwalk and absently stare at the ocean. The ocean is becoming rough; the waves come in slowly, tugging strength from far back. The moment before they somersault, the moment when they arch their backs so beautifully, showing green and white veins amid the black, that moment is intolerable. They finally crack, dashing fiercely upon the sand, actually driving, full force downward, against the sand, bouncing upward and forward, and at last petering out into a small stream which races up the beach and then is recalled. My parents gaze absentmindedly at the ocean, scarcely interested in its harshness. The sun overhead does not disturb them. But I stare at the terrible sun which breaks up sight, and the fatal, merciless, passionate ocean, I forget my parents. I stare fascinated and finally, shocked by the indifference of my father and mother, I burst out weeping once more. The old lady next to me pats me on the shoulder and says, "There, there, all of this is only a movie, young man, only a movie," but I look up once more at the terrifying sun and the terrifying ocean, and being unable to control my tears, I get up and go to the men's room, stumbling over the feet of the other people seated in my row.

When I return, feeling as if I had awakened in the morning sick for lack of sleep, several hours have apparently passed and my parents are riding on the merry-go-round. My father is on a black horse, my mother on a white one, and they seem to be making an eternal circuit for the single purpose of snatching the nickel rings which are attached to the arm of one of the posts. A hand-organ is playing; it is one with the ceaseless circling of the merry-go-round.

For a moment it seems that they will never get off the merry-go-round because it will never stop. I feel like one who looks down on the avenue from the 50th story of a building. But at length they do get off; even the music of the hand-organ has ceased for a moment. My father has acquired ten rings, my mother only two, although it was my mother who really wanted them.

They walk on along the boardwalk as the afternoon descends by imperceptible degrees into the incredible violet of dusk. Everything fades into a relaxed glow, even the ceaseless murmuring from the beach, and the revolutions of the merry-go-round. They look for a place to have dinner. My father suggests the best one on the boardwalk and my mother demurs, in accordance with her principles.

However they do go to the best place, asking for a table near the window, so that they can look out on the boardwalk and the mobile ocean. My father feels omnipotent as he places a quarter in the waiter's hand as he asks for a table. The place is crowded and here too there is music, this time from a kind of string trio. My father orders dinner with a fine confidence.

As the dinner is eaten, my father tells of his plans for the future, and my mother shows with expressive face how interested she is, and how impressed. My father becomes exultant. He is lifted up by the waltz that is being played, and his own future begins to intoxicate him. My father tells my mother that he is going to expand his business, for there is a great deal of money to be made. He wants to settle down. After all, he is twenty-nine, he has lived by himself since he was thirteen, he is making more and more money, and he is envious of his married friends when he visits them in the cozy security of their homes, surrounded, it seems, by the calm domestic pleasures, and by delightful children, and then, as the waltz reaches the moment when all the dancers swing madly, then, then with awful daring, then he asks my mother to marry him, although awkwardly enough and puzzled, even in his excitement, at how he had arrived at the proposal, and she, to make the whole business worse, begins to cry, and my father looks nervously about, not knowing at all what to do now, and my mother says: "It's all I've wanted from the moment I saw you," sobbing, and he finds all of this very difficult, scarcely to his taste, scarcely as he had thought it would be, on his long walks over Brooklyn Bridge in the reverie of a fine cigar, and it was then that I stood up in the theatre and shouted: "Don't do it. It's not too late to change your minds, both of you. Nothing good will come of it, only remorse, hatred, scandal, and two children whose characters are monstrous." The whole audience turned to look at me, annoyed, the usher came hurrying down the aisle flashing his searchlight, and the old lady next

to me tugged me down into my seat, saying: "Be quiet. You'll be put out, and you paid thirty-five cents to come in." And so I shut my eyes because I could not bear to see what was happening. I sat there quietly.

But after awhile I begin to take brief glimpses, and at length I watch again with thirsty interest, like a child who wants to maintain his sulk although offered the bribe of candy. My parents are now having their picture taken in a photographer's booth along the boardwalk. The place is shadowed in the mauve light which is apparently necessary. The camera is set to the side on its tripod and looks like a Martian man. The photographer is instructing my parents in how to pose. My father has his arm over my mother's shoulder, and both of them smile emphatically. The photographer brings my mother a bouquet of flowers to hold in her hand but she holds it at the wrong angle. Then the photographer covers himself with the black cloth which drapes the camera and all that one sees of him is one protruding arm and his hand which clutches the rubber ball which he will squeeze when the picture is finally taken. But he is not satisfied with their appearance. He feels with certainty that somehow there is something wrong in their pose. Again and again he issues from his hidden place with new directions. Each suggestion merely makes matters worse. My father is becoming impatient. They try a seated pose. The photographer explains that he has pride, he is not interested in all of this for the money, he wants to make beautiful pictures. My father says: "Hurry up, will you? We haven't got all night." But the photographer only scurries about apologetically, and issues new directions. The photographer charms me. I approve of him with all my heart, for I know just how he feels, and as he criticizes each revised pose according to some unknown idea of rightness, I become quite hopeful. But then my father says angrily: "Come on, you've had enough time, we're not going to wait any longer." And the photographer, sighing unhappily, goes back under his black covering, holds out his hand, says: "One, two, three, Now!", and the picture is taken, with my father's smile turned into a grimace and my mother's bright and false. It takes a few minutes for the picture to be developed and as my parents sit in the curious light they become quite depressed.

They have passed a fortune-teller's booth, and my mother wishes to go in, but my father does not. They begin to argue about it. My mother becomes stubborn, my father once more impatient, and then they begin to quarrel, and what my father would like to do is walk off and leave my mother there, but he knows that that would never do. My mother refuses to budge. She is near to tears, but she feels an uncontrollable desire to hear what the palm-reader will say. My father consents angrily, and they both go into a booth which is in a way like the photographer's, since it is draped in black cloth and its light is shadowed. The place is too warm, and my father keeps saying this is all nonsense, pointing to the crystal ball on the table. The fortune-teller, a fat, short woman, garbed in what is supposed to be Oriental robes, comes into the room from the back and greets them, speaking with an accent. But suddenly my father feels that the whole thing is intolerable; he tugs at my mother's arm, but my mother refuses to budge. And then, in terrible anger, my father lets go of my mother's arm and strides out, leaving my mother stunned. She moves to go after my father, but the fortune-teller holds her arm tightly and begs her not to do so, and I in my seat am shocked more than can ever be said, for I feel as if I were walking a tight-rope a hundred feet over a circus-audience and suddenly the rope is showing signs of breaking, and I get up from my seat and begin to shout once more the first words I can think of to communicate my terrible fear and once more the usher comes hurrying down the aisle flashing his search-light, and the old lady pleads with me, and the shocked audience has turned to stare at me, and I keep shouting: "What are they doing? Don't they know what they are doing? Why doesn't my mother go after my father? If she does not do that, what will she do? Doesn't my father know what he is doing?" — But the usher has seized my arm and is dragging me away, and as he does so, he says: "What are you doing? Don't you know that you can't do whatever you want to do? Why should a young man like you, with your whole life before you, get hysterical like this? Why don't you think of what you're doing? You can't act like this even if other people



aren't around! You will be sorry if you do not do what you should do, you can't carry on like this, it is not right, you will find that out soon enough, everything you do matters too much," and he said that dragging me through the lobby of the theatre into the cold light, and I woke up into the bleak winter morning of my 21st birthday, the windowsill shining with its lip of snow, and the morning already begun.

# A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings - Gabriel Garcia Marquez

(1968)

Translated by Gregory Rabassa

On the third day of rain they had killed so many crabs inside the house that Pelayo had to cross his drenched courtyard and throw them into the sea, because the newborn child had a temperature all night and they thought it was due to the stench. The world had been sad since Tuesday. Sea and sky were a single ash-gray thing and the sands of the beach, which on March nights glimmered like powdered light, had become a stew of mud and rotten shellfish. The light was so weak at noon that when Pelayo was coming back to the house after throwing away the crabs, it was hard for him to see what it was that was moving and groaning in the rear of the courtyard. He had to go very close to see that it was an old man, a very old man, lying face down in the mud, who, in spite of his tremendous efforts, couldn't get up, impeded by his enormous wings.

Frightened by that nightmare, Pelayo ran to get Elisenda, his wife, who was putting compresses on the sick child, and he took her to the rear of the courtyard. They both looked at the fallen body with a mute stupor. He was dressed like a ragpicker. There were only a few faded hairs left on his bald skull and very few teeth in his mouth, and his pitiful condition of a drenched great-grandfather took away any sense of grandeur he might have had. His huge buzzard wings, dirty and half-plucked, were forever entangled in the mud. They looked at him so long and so closely that Pelayo and Elisenda very soon overcame their surprise and in the end found him familiar. Then they dared speak to him, and he answered in an incomprehensible dialect with a strong sailor's voice. That was how they skipped over the inconvenience of the wings and quite intelligently concluded that he was a lonely castaway from some foreign ship wrecked by the storm. And yet, they called in a neighbor woman who knew everything about life and death to see him, and all she needed was one look to show them their mistake.

"He's an angel," she told them. "He must have been coming for the child, but the poor fellow is so old that the rain knocked him down."

On the following day everyone knew that a flesh-and-blood angel was held captive in Pelayo's house. Against the judgment of the wise neighbor woman, for whom angels in those times were the fugitive survivors of a celestial conspiracy, they did not have the heart to club him to death. Pelayo watched over him all afternoon from the kitchen, armed with his bailiff's club, and before going to bed he dragged him out of the mud and locked him up with the hens in the wire chicken coop. In the middle of the night, when the rain stopped, Pelayo and Elisenda were still killing crabs. A short time afterward the child woke up without a fever and with a desire to eat. Then they felt magnanimous and decided to put the angel on a raft with fresh water and provisions for three days and leave him to his fate on the high seas. But when they went out into the courtyard with the first light of dawn, they found the whole neighborhood in front of the chicken coop having fun with the angel, without the slightest reverence, tossing him things to eat through the openings in the wire as if he weren't a supernatural creature but a circus animal.

Father Gonzaga arrived before seven o'clock, alarmed at the strange news. By that time onlookers less frivolous than those at dawn had already arrived and they were making all kinds of conjectures concerning the captive's future. The simplest among them thought that he should be named mayor of the world. Others of sterner mind felt that he should be promoted to the rank of five-star general in order to win all wars. Some visionaries hoped that he could be put to stud in order to implant on earth a race of winged wise men who could take charge of the universe.

But Father Gonzaga, before becoming a priest, had been a robust woodcutter. Standing by the wire, he reviewed his catechism in an instant and asked them to open the door so that he could take a close look at that pitiful man who looked more like a huge decrepit hen among the fascinated chickens. He was lying in the corner drying his open wings in the sunlight among the fruit peels and breakfast leftovers that the early risers had thrown him. Alien to the impertinences of the world, he only lifted his antiquarian eyes and murmured something in his dialect when Father Gonzaga went into the chicken coop and said good morning to him in Latin. The parish priest had his first suspicion of an imposter when he saw that he did not understand the language of God or know how to greet His ministers. Then he noticed that seen close up he was much too human: he had an unbearable smell of the outdoors, the back side of his wings was strewn with parasites and his main feathers had been mistreated by terrestrial winds, and nothing about him measured up to the proud dignity of angels. Then he came out of the chicken coop and in a brief sermon warned the curious against the risks of being ingenuous. He reminded them that the devil had the bad habit of making use of carnival tricks in order to confuse the unwary. He argued that if wings were not the essential element in determining the difference between a hawk and an airplane, they were even less so in the recognition of angels. Nevertheless, he promised to write a letter to his bishop so that the latter would write his primate so that the latter would write to the Supreme Pontiff in order to get the final verdict from the highest courts.

His prudence fell on sterile hearts. The news of the captive angel spread with such rapidity that after a few hours the courtyard had the bustle of a marketplace and they had to call in troops with fixed bayonets to disperse the mob that was about to knock the house down. Elisenda, her spine all twisted from sweeping up so much marketplace trash, then got the idea of fencing in the yard and charging five cents admission to see the angel.

The curious came from far away. A traveling carnival arrived with a flying acrobat who buzzed over the crowd several times, but no one paid any attention to him because his wings were not those of an angel but, rather, those of a sidereal bat. The most unfortunate invalids on earth came in search of health: a poor woman who since childhood had been counting her heartbeats and had run out of numbers; a Portuguese man who couldn't sleep because the noise of the stars disturbed him; a sleepwalker who got up at night to undo the things he had done while awake; and many others with less serious ailments. In the midst of that shipwreck disorder that made the earth tremble, Pelayo and Elisenda were happy with fatigue, for in less than a week they had crammed their rooms with money and the line of pilgrims waiting their turn to enter still reached beyond the horizon.

The angel was the only one who took no part in his own act. He spent his time trying to get comfortable in his borrowed nest, befuddled by the hellish heat of the oil lamps and sacramental candles that had been placed along the wire. At first they tried to make him eat some mothballs, which, according to the wisdom of the wise neighbor woman, were the food prescribed for angels. But he turned them down, just as he turned down the papal lunches that the penitents brought him, and they never found out whether it was because he was an angel or because he was an old man that in the end ate nothing but eggplant mush. His only supernatural virtue seemed to be patience. Especially during the first days, when the hens pecked at him, searching for the stellar parasites that proliferated in his wings, and the cripples pulled out feathers to touch their defective parts with, and even the most merciful threw stones at him, trying to get him to rise so they could see him standing. The only time they succeeded in arousing him was when they burned his side with an iron for branding steers, for he had been motionless for so many hours that they thought he was dead. He awoke with a start, ranting in his hermetic language and with tears in his eyes, and he flapped his wings a couple of times, which brought on a whirlwind of chicken dung and lunar dust and a gale of panic that did not seem to be of this world. Although many thought that his reaction had not been one of rage but of pain, from then on they were careful not to annoy him, because the majority understood that his passivity was not that of

a hero taking his ease but that of a cataclysm in repose.

Father Gonzaga held back the crowd's frivolity with formulas of maidservant inspiration while awaiting the arrival of a final judgment on the nature of the captive. But the mail from Rome showed no sense of urgency. They spent their time finding out if the prisoner had a navel, if his dialect had any connection with Aramaic, how many times he could fit on the head of a pin, or whether he wasn't just a Norwegian with wings. Those meager letters might have come and gone until the end of time if a providential event had not put an end to the priest's tribulations.

It so happened that during those days, among so many other carnival attractions, there arrived in the town the traveling show of the woman who had been changed into a spider for having disobeyed her parents. The admission to see her was not only less than the admission to see the angel, but people were permitted to ask her all manner of questions about her absurd state and to examine her up and down so that no one would ever doubt the truth of her horror. She was a frightful tarantula the size of a ram and with the head of a sad maiden. What was most heartrending, however, was not her outlandish shape but the sincere affliction with which she recounted the details of her misfortune. While still practically a child she had sneaked out of her parents' house to go to a dance, and while she was coming back through the woods after having danced all night without permission, a fearful thunderclap rent the sky in two and through the crack came the lightning bolt of brimstone that changed her into a spider. Her only nourishment came from the meatballs that charitable souls chose to toss into her mouth. A spectacle like that, full of so much human truth and with such a fearful lesson, was bound to defeat without even trying that of a haughty angel who scarcely deigned to look at mortals. Besides, the few miracles attributed to the angel showed a certain mental disorder, like the blind man who didn't recover his sight but grew three new teeth, or the paralytic who didn't get to walk but almost won the lottery, and the leper whose sores sprouted sunflowers. Those consolation miracles, which were more like mocking fun, had already ruined the angel's reputation when the woman who had been changed into a spider finally crushed him completely. That was how Father Gonzaga was cured forever of his insomnia and Pelayo's courtyard went back to being as empty as during the time it had rained for three days and crabs walked through the bedrooms.

The owners of the house had no reason to lament. With the money they saved they built a two-story mansion with balconies and gardens and high netting so that crabs wouldn't get in during the winter, and with iron bars on the windows so that angels wouldn't get in. Pelayo also set up a rabbit warren close to town and gave up his job as a bailiff for good, and Elisenda bought some satin pumps with high heels and many dresses of iridescent silk, the kind worn on Sunday by the most desirable women in those times. The chicken coop was the only thing that didn't receive any attention. If they washed it down with creolin and burned tears of myrrh inside it every so often, it was not in homage to the angel but to drive away the dung heap stench that still hung everywhere like a ghost and was turning the new house into an old one. At first, when the child learned to walk, they were careful that he not get too close to the chicken coop. But then they began to lose their fears and got used to the smell, and before the child got his second teeth he'd gone inside the chicken coop to play, where the wires were falling apart. The angel was no less standoffish with him than with the other mortals, but he tolerated the most ingenious infamies with the patience of a dog who had no illusions. They both came down with the chicken pox at the same time. The doctor who took care of the child couldn't resist the temptation to listen to the angel's heart, and he found so much whistling in the heart and so many sounds in his kidneys that it seemed impossible for him to be alive. What surprised him most, however, was the logic of his wings. They seemed so natural on that completely human organism that he couldn't understand why other men didn't have them too.

When the child began school it had been some time since the sun and rain had caused the collapse of the chicken coop. The angel went dragging himself about here and there like a stray

dying man. They would drive him out of the bedroom with a broom and a moment later find him in the kitchen. He seemed to be in so many places at the same time that they grew to think that he'd been duplicated, that he was reproducing himself all through the house, and the exasperated and unhinged Elisenda shouted that it was awful living in that hell full of angels. He could scarcely eat and his antiquarian eyes had also become so foggy that he went about bumping into posts. All he had left were the bare cannulae of his last feathers. Pelayo threw a blanket over him and extended him the charity of letting him sleep in the shed, and only then did they notice that he had a temperature at night, and was delirious with the tongue twisters of an old Norwegian. That was one of the few times they became alarmed, for they thought he was going to die and not even the wise neighbor woman had been able to tell them what to do with dead angels.

And yet he not only survived his worst winter, but seemed improved with the first sunny days. He remained motionless for several days in the farthest corner of the courtyard, where no one would see him, and at the beginning of December some large, stiff feathers began to grow on his wings, the feathers of a scarecrow, which looked more like another misfortune of decrepitude. But he must have known the reason for those changes, for he was quite careful that no one should notice them, that no one should hear the sea chanteys that he sometimes sang under the stars. One morning Elisenda was cutting some bunches of onions for lunch when a wind that seemed to come from the high seas blew into the kitchen. Then she went to the window and caught the angel in his first attempts at flight. They were so clumsy that his fingernails opened a furrow in the vegetable patch and he was on the point of knocking the shed down with the ungainly flapping that slipped on the light and couldn't get a grip on the air. But he did manage to gain altitude. Elisenda let out a sigh of relief, for herself and for him, when she watched him pass over the last houses, holding himself up in some way with the risky flapping of a senile vulture. She kept watching him even when she was through cutting the onions and she kept on watching until it was no longer possible for her to see him, because then he was no longer an annoyance in her life but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea.

# The Wind Cave - Haruki Murakami

(2018)

Translated by Philip Gabriel

When I was fifteen, my younger sister died. It happened very suddenly. She was twelve then, in her first year of junior high. She had been born with a congenital heart problem, but since her last surgeries, in the upper grades of elementary school, she hadn't shown any more symptoms, and our family had felt reassured, holding on to the faint hope that her life would go on without incident. But, in May of that year, her heartbeat became more irregular. It was especially bad when she lay down, and she suffered many sleepless nights. She underwent tests at the university hospital, but no matter how detailed the tests the doctors couldn't pinpoint any changes in her physical condition. The basic issue had ostensibly been resolved by the operations, and they were baffled.

"Avoid strenuous exercise and follow a regular routine, and things should settle down soon," her doctor said. That was probably all he could say. And he wrote out a few prescriptions for her.

But her arrhythmia didn't settle down. As I sat across from her at the dining table I often looked at her chest and imagined the heart inside it. Her breasts were beginning to develop noticeably. Yet, within that chest, my sister's heart was defective. And even a specialist couldn't locate the defect. That fact alone had my brain in constant turmoil. I spent my adolescence in a state of anxiety, fearful that, at any moment, I might lose my little sister.

My parents told me to watch over her, since her body was so delicate. While we were attending the same elementary school, I always kept my eye on her. If need be, I was willing to risk my life to protect her and her tiny heart. But the opportunity never presented itself.

She was on her way home from school one day when she collapsed. She lost consciousness while climbing the stairs at Seibu Shinjuku Station and was rushed by ambulance to the nearest emergency room. When I heard, I raced to the hospital, but by the time I got there her heart had already stopped. It all happened in the blink of an eye. That morning we'd eaten breakfast together, said goodbye to each other at the front door, me going off to high school, she to junior high. The next time I saw her, she'd stopped breathing. Her large eyes were closed forever, her mouth slightly open, as if she were about to say something.

And the next time I saw her she was in a coffin. She was wearing her favorite black velvet dress, with a touch of makeup and her hair neatly combed; she had on black patent-leather shoes and lay face up in the modestly sized coffin. The dress had a white lace collar, so white it looked unnatural.

Lying there, she appeared to be peacefully sleeping. Shake her lightly and she'd wake up, it seemed. But that was an illusion. Shake her all you want — she would never awaken again.

I didn't want my sister's delicate little body to be stuffed into that cramped, confining box. I felt that her body should be laid to rest in a much more spacious place. In the middle of a meadow, for instance. We would wordlessly go to visit her, pushing our way through the lush green grass as we went. The wind would slowly rustle the grass, and birds and insects would call out all around her. The raw smell of wildflowers would fill the air, pollen swirling. When night fell, the sky above her would be dotted with countless silvery stars. In the morning, a new sun would make the dew on the blades of grass sparkle like jewels. But, in reality, she was packed away in some ridiculous coffin. The only decorations around her coffin were ominous white flowers that had been snipped and stuck in vases. The narrow room had fluorescent lighting and was drained of color. From a small speaker set into the ceiling came the artificial strains of organ music.

I couldn't stand to see her be cremated. When the coffin lid was shut and locked, I left the room. I didn't help when my family ritually placed her bones inside an urn. I went out into the crematorium courtyard and cried soundlessly by myself. During her all too short life, I'd never once helped my little sister, a thought that hurt me deeply.

After my sister's death, our family changed. My father became even more taciturn, my mother even more nervous and jumpy. Basically, I kept on with the same life as always. I joined the mountaineering club at school, which kept me busy, and when I wasn't doing that I started oil painting. My art teacher recommended that I find a good instructor and really study painting. And when I finally did start attending art classes my interest became serious. I think I was trying to keep myself busy so I wouldn't think about my dead sister.

For a long time — I'm not sure how many years — my parents kept her room exactly as it was. Textbooks and study guides, pens, erasers, and paper clips piled on her desk, sheets, blankets, and pillows on her bed, her laundered and folded pajamas, her junior-high-school uniform hanging in the closet — all untouched. The calendar on the wall still had her schedule noted in her minute writing. It was left at the month she died, as if time had frozen solid at that point. It felt as if the door could open at any moment and she'd come in. When no one else was at home, I'd sometimes go into her room, sit down gently on the neatly made bed, and gaze around me. But I never touched anything. I didn't want to disturb, even a little, any of the silent objects left behind, signs that my sister had once been among the living.

I often tried to imagine what sort of life my sister would have had if she hadn't died at twelve. Though there was no way I could know. I couldn't even picture how my own life would turn out, so I had no idea what her future would have held. But I knew that if only she hadn't had a problem with one of her heart valves she would have grown up to be a capable, attractive adult. I'm sure many men would have loved her, and held her in their arms. But I couldn't picture any of that in detail. For me, she was forever my little sister, three years younger, who needed my protection.

For a time, after she died, I drew sketches of her over and over. Reproducing in my sketchbook, from all different angles, my memory of her face, so I wouldn't forget it. Not that I was about to forget her face. It will remain etched in my mind until the day I die. What I sought was not to forget the face I remembered at that point in time. In order to do that, I had to give form to it by drawing. I was only fifteen then, and there was so much I didn't know about memory, drawing, and the flow of time. But one thing I did know was that I needed to do something in order to hold on to an accurate record of my memory. Leave it alone, and it would disappear somewhere. No matter how vivid the memory, the power of time was stronger. I knew this instinctively.

I would sit alone in her room on her bed, drawing her. I tried to reproduce on the blank paper how she looked in my mind's eye. I lacked experience then, and the requisite technical skill, so it wasn't an easy process. I'd draw, rip up my effort, draw and rip up, endlessly. But now when I look at the drawings I did keep (I still treasure my sketchbook from back then), I can see that they are filled with a genuine sense of grief. They may be technically immature, but they were the result of a sincere effort, my soul trying to awaken my sister's. When I looked at those sketches, I couldn't help crying. I've done countless drawings since, but never again has anything I've drawn brought me to tears.

My sister's death had one other effect on me: it triggered a very severe case of claustrophobia. Since I saw her placed in that cramped little coffin, the lid shut and locked tight, and taken away to the crematorium, I haven't been able to go into tight, enclosed places. For a long time, I couldn't take elevators. I'd stand in front of an elevator and all I could think about was it automatically shutting down in an earthquake, with me trapped inside that confined space. Just the thought of it was enough to induce a choking sense of panic.

These symptoms didn't appear right after my sister's death. It took nearly three years for them

to surface. The first time I had a panic attack was soon after I'd started art school, when I had a part-time job with a moving company. I was the driver's assistant in a box truck, loading boxes and taking them out, and one time I got mistakenly locked inside the empty cargo compartment. Work was done for the day and the driver forgot to check if anyone was still in the truck. He locked the rear door from the outside.

About two and half hours passed before the door was opened and I was able to crawl out. That whole time I was locked inside a sealed, totally dark place. It wasn't a refrigerated truck or anything, so there were gaps where air could get in. If I'd thought about it calmly, I would have known that I wouldn't suffocate.

But, still, a terrible panic had me in its grip. There was plenty of oxygen, yet no matter how deeply I breathed I wasn't able to absorb it. My breathing got more and more ragged and I started to hyperventilate. I felt dizzy. "It's O.K., calm down," I told myself. "You'll be able to get out soon. It's impossible to suffocate here." But logic didn't work. The only thing in my mind was my little sister, crammed into a tiny coffin and hauled off to the crematorium. Terrified, I pounded on the walls of the truck.

The truck was in the company parking lot, and all the employees, their workday done, had gone home. Nobody noticed that I was missing. I pounded like crazy, but no one seemed to hear. I knew that, if I was unlucky, I could be shut inside there until morning. At the thought of that, I felt as if all my muscles were about to disintegrate.

It was the night security guard, making his rounds in the parking lot, who finally heard the noise I was making and unlocked the door. When he saw how agitated and exhausted I was, he had me lie down on the bed in the company break room and gave me a cup of hot tea. I don't know how long I lay there. But finally my breathing became normal again. Dawn was coming, so I thanked the guard and took the first train of the day back home. I slipped into my own bed and lay there, shaking like crazy for the longest time.

Ever since then, riding in elevators has triggered the same panic. The incident must have awoken a fear that had been lurking within me. I have little doubt that it was set off by memories of my dead sister. And it wasn't only elevators but any enclosed space. I couldn't even watch movies with scenes in submarines or tanks. Just imagining myself shut inside such confined spaces — *merely* imagining it — made me unable to breathe. Often I had to get up and leave the theatre. That was why I seldom went to movies with anyone else.

When I was thirteen and my little sister was ten, the two of us travelled by ourselves to Yamanashi Prefecture during summer vacation. Our mother's brother worked in a research lab at a university in Yamanashi and we went to stay with him. This was the first trip we kids had taken by ourselves. My sister was feeling relatively good then, so our parents gave us permission to travel alone.

Our uncle was single (and still is single, even now), and had just turned thirty, I think. He was doing gene research (and still is), was very quiet and kind of unworldly, though an open, straightforward person. He loved reading and knew everything about nature. He enjoyed taking walks in the mountains more than anything, which, he said, was why he had taken a university job in rural, mountainous Yamanashi. My sister and I liked our uncle a lot.

Backpacks on our backs, we boarded an express train at Shinjuku Station bound for Matsumoto, and got off at Kofu. Our uncle came to pick us up at Kofu Station. He was spectacularly tall, and even in the crowded station we spotted him right away. He was renting a small house in Kofu along with a friend of his, but his roommate was abroad so we were given our own room to sleep in. We stayed in that house for a week. And almost every day we took walks with our uncle in the nearby mountains. He taught us the names of all kinds of flowers and insects. We cherished our memories of that summer.

One day we hiked a bit farther than usual and visited a wind cave near Mt. Fuji. Among the numerous wind caves around Mt. Fuji this one was the largest. Our uncle told us about how these



caves were formed. They were made of basalt, so inside them you heard hardly any echoes at all, he said. Even in the summer the temperature remained low; in the past people stored ice they'd cut in the winter inside the caves. He explained the distinction between the two types of caves: *fuketsu*, the larger ones that were big enough for people to go into, and *kaza-ana*, the smaller ones that people couldn't enter. Both terms were alternate readings of the same Chinese characters meaning "wind" and "hole." Our uncle seemed to know everything.

At the large wind cave, you paid an entrance fee and went inside. Our uncle didn't go with us. He'd been there numerous times, plus he was so tall and the ceiling of the cave so low he'd end up with a backache. "It's not dangerous," he said, "so you two go on ahead. I'll stay by the entrance and read a book." At the entrance the person in charge handed us each a flashlight and put yellow plastic helmets on us. There were lights on the ceiling of the cave, but it was still pretty dark inside. The deeper into the cave we went, the lower the ceiling got. No wonder our lanky uncle had stayed behind.

My kid sister and I shone the flashlights at our feet as we went. It was midsummer outside — ninety degrees Fahrenheit — but inside the cave it was chilly, below fifty. Following our uncle's advice, we were both wearing thick windbreakers we'd brought along. My sister held my hand tightly, either wanting me to protect her or else hoping to protect me (or maybe she just didn't want to get separated). The whole time we were inside the cave that small, warm hand was in mine. The only other visitors were a middle-aged couple. But they soon left, and it was just the two of us.

My little sister's name was Komichi, but everyone in the family called her Komi. Her friends called her Micchi or Micchan. As far as I know, no one called her by her full name, Komichi. She was a small, slim girl. She had straight black hair, neatly cut just above her shoulders. Her eyes were big for the size of her face (with large pupils), which made her resemble a fairy. That day she was wearing a white T-shirt, faded jeans, and pink sneakers.

After we'd made our way deeper into the cave, my sister discovered a small side cave a little way off the prescribed path. Its mouth was hidden in the shadows of the rocks. She was very interested in that little cave. "Don't you think it looks like Alice's rabbit hole?" she asked me.

My sister was a big fan of Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland." I don't know how many times she had me read the book to her. Must have been at least a hundred. She had been able to read since she was little, but she liked me to read that book aloud to her. She'd memorized the story, yet, still, each time I read it she got excited. Her favorite part was the Lobster Quadrille. Even now I remember that part, word for word.

"No rabbit, though," I said.

"I'm going to peek inside," she said.

"Be careful," I said.

It really was a narrow hole (close to a *kaza-ana*, in my uncle's definition), but my little sister was able to slip through it with no trouble. Most of her was inside, just the bottom half of her legs sticking out. She seemed to be shining her flashlight inside the hole. Then she slowly edged out backward.

"It gets really deep in back," she reported. "The floor drops off sharply. Just like Alice's rabbit hole. I'm going to check out the far end."

"No, don't do it. It's too dangerous," I said.

"It's O.K. I'm small and I can get out O.K."

She took off her windbreaker, so that she was wearing just her T-shirt, and handed the jacket to me along with her helmet. Before I could get in a word of protest, she'd wriggled into the cave, flashlight in hand. In an instant she'd vanished.

A long time passed, but she didn't come out. I couldn't hear a sound.

"Komi," I called into the hole. "Komi! Are you O.K.?"

There was no answer. With no echo, my voice was sucked right up into the darkness. I was

starting to get concerned. She might be stuck inside the hole, unable to move forward or back. Or maybe she had had a convulsion in there and lost consciousness. If that had happened I wouldn't be able to help her. All kinds of terrible scenarios ran through my head, and I felt choked by the darkness surrounding me.

If my little sister really did disappear in the hole, never to return to this world, how would I ever explain that to my parents? Should I run and tell my uncle, waiting outside the entrance? Or should I sit tight and wait for her to emerge? I crouched down and peered into the hole. But the beam from my flashlight didn't reach far. It was a tiny hole, and the darkness was overwhelming.

"Komi," I called out again. No response. "*Komi*," I called more loudly. Still no answer. A wave of cold air chilled me to the core. I might lose my sister forever. Perhaps she had been sucked into Alice's hole, into the world of the Mock Turtle, the Cheshire Cat, and the Queen of Hearts. A place where logic did not apply. We never should have come here, I thought.

But finally my sister did return. She didn't back out like before but crawled out head first. Her black hair emerged from the hole first, then her shoulders and arms, and finally her pink sneakers. She stood in front of me, without a word, stretched, took a slow, deep breath, and brushed the dirt off her jeans.

My heart was still pounding. I reached out and tidied her dishevelled hair. I couldn't quite make it out in the weak light inside the cave, but there seemed to be dirt and dust and other debris clinging to her white T-shirt. I put the windbreaker on her and handed her the yellow helmet.

"I didn't think you were coming back," I said, hugging her to me.

"Were you worried?"

"A lot."

She grabbed my hand tightly. And, in an excited voice, she said, "I managed to squeeze through the narrow part, and then, deeper in, it suddenly got lower, and down from there it was like a small room. A round room, like a ball. The ceiling was round, the walls were round, and the floor, too. And it was so, so silent there, like you could search the whole world and never find any place that silent. Like I was at the bottom of an ocean, in a crater that went even deeper. I turned off the flashlight and it was pitch dark, but I didn't feel scared or lonely. That room was a special place that only I'm allowed into. A room *just for me*. No one else can get there. You can't go in, either."

" 'Cause I'm too big."

My little sister bobbed her head. "Right. You've gotten too big to get in. And what's really amazing about that place is that it's darker than anything could ever be. So dark that when you turn off the flashlight it feels like you can grab the darkness with your hands. Like your body is gradually coming apart and disappearing. But since it's dark you can't see it happen. You don't know if you still have a body or not. But even if, say, my body completely disappeared, I'd still be there. Like the Cheshire Cat's grin staying on after he vanished. Pretty weird, huh? But when I was there I didn't think it was weird at all. I wanted to stay there forever, but I thought you'd be worried, so I came out."

"Let's get out of here," I said. She was so worked up it seemed as if she were going to go on talking forever, and I had to put a stop to that. "I can't breathe well in here."

"Are you O.K.?" my sister asked, concerned.

"I'm O.K. I just want to go outside."

Holding hands, we headed for the exit.

"Do you know?" my sister said in a small voice as we walked, so no one else would hear (though there wasn't anyone else around). "Alice really existed. It wasn't made up. It was real. The March Hare, the Mad Hatter, the Cheshire Cat, the Playing Card soldiers — they all really exist."

"Maybe so," I said.

We emerged from the wind cave, back into the bright real world. There was a thin layer of clouds in the sky that afternoon, but I remember how terribly glaring the sunlight seemed. The screech of the cicadas was overpowering, like a violent squall drowning everything out. My uncle was seated on a bench near the entrance, absorbed in his book. When he saw us, he grinned and stood up.

Two years later, my sister died. And was put in a tiny coffin and cremated. I was fifteen, and she was twelve. While she was being cremated I went off, apart from the rest of the family, sat on a bench in the courtyard of the crematorium, and remembered what had happened in that wind cave: the weight of time as I waited for my little sister to come out, the thickness of the darkness enveloping me, the profound chill I felt. Her black hair emerging from the hole, then her shoulders. All the random dirt and dust stuck to her white T-shirt.

At that time, a thought struck me: that maybe, even before the doctor at the hospital officially pronounced her dead two years later, her life had already been snatched from her while she was deep inside that cave. I was actually convinced of it. She'd already been lost inside that hole, and left this world, but I, mistakenly thinking she was still alive, had put her on the train with me and taken her back to Tokyo. Holding her hand tightly. And we'd lived as brother and sister for two more years. But that was nothing more than a fleeting grace period. Two years later, death had crawled out of that cave to grab hold of my sister's soul. As if her time were up, it was necessary to pay for what had been lent to us, and the owner had come to take back what was his.

Years later, as an adult, I realized that what my little sister had confided to me in a quiet voice in that wind cave was indeed true. Alice really does exist in the world. The March Hare, the Mad Hatter, the Cheshire Cat — they all really exist.

# The God of Dark Laughter - Michael Chabon

(2001)

Thirteen days after the Entwhistle-Ealing Bros. circus left Ashtown, beating a long retreat toward its winter headquarters in Peru, Indiana, two boys out hunting squirrels in the woods along Portwine Road stumbled on a body that was dressed in a mad suit of purple and orange velour. They found it at the end of a muddy strip of gravel that began, five miles to the west, as Yuggogheny County Road 22A. Another half mile farther to the east and it would have been left to my colleagues over in Fayette County to puzzle out the question of who had shot the man and skinned his head from chin to crown and clavicle to clavicle, taking ears, eyelids, lips, and scalp in a single grisly flap, like the cupped husk of a peeled orange. My name is Edward D. Satterlee, and for the last twelve years I have faithfully served Yuggogheny County as its district attorney, in cases that have all too often run to the outrageous and bizarre. I make the following report in no confidence that it, or I, will be believed, and beg the reader to consider this, at least in part, my letter of resignation.

The boys who found the body were themselves fresh from several hours' worth of bloody amusement with long knives and dead squirrels, and at first the investigating officers took them for the perpetrators of the crime. There was blood on the boys' cuffs, their shirttails, and the bills of their gray twill caps. But the county detectives and I quickly moved beyond Joey Matuszak and Frankie Corro. For all their familiarity with gristle and sinew and the bright-purple discovered interior of a body, the boys had come into the station looking pale and bewildered, and we found ample evidence at the crime scene of their having lost the contents of their stomachs when confronted with the corpse.

Now, I have every intention of setting down the facts of this case as I understand and experienced them, without fear of the reader's doubting them (or my own sanity), but I see no point in mentioning any further anatomical details of the crime, except to say that our coroner, Dr. Sauer, though he labored at the problem with a sad fervor, was hard put to establish conclusively that the victim had been dead before his killer went to work on him with a very long, very sharp knife.

The dead man, as I have already mentioned, was attired in a curious suit — the trousers and jacket of threadbare purple velour, the waistcoat bright orange, the whole thing patched with outsized squares of fabric cut from a variety of loudly clashing plaids. It was on account of the patches, along with the victim's cracked and split-soled shoes and a certain undeniable shabbiness in the stuff of the suit, that the primary detective — a man not apt to see deeper than the outermost wrapper of the world (we do not attract, I must confess, the finest police talent in this doleful little corner of western Pennsylvania) — had already figured the victim for a vagrant, albeit one with extraordinarily big feet.

"Those cannot possibly be his real shoes, Ganz, you idiot," I gently suggested. The call, patched through to my boarding house from that gruesome clearing in the woods, had interrupted my supper, which by a grim coincidence had been a Brunswick stew (the specialty of my Virginia-born landlady) of pork and *squirrel*. "They're supposed to make you laugh."

"They *are* pretty funny," said Ganz. "Come to think of it." Detective John Ganz was a large-boned fellow, up-holstered in a layer of ruddy flesh. He breathed through his mouth, and walked with a tall man's defeated stoop, and five times a day he took out his comb and ritually plastered his thinning blond hair to the top of his head with a dime-size dab of Tres Flores.

When I arrived at the clearing, having abandoned my solitary dinner, I found the corpse lying just as the young hunters had come upon it, supine, arms thrown up and to either side of the flayed face in a startled attitude that fuelled the hopes of poor Dr. Sauer that the victim's death by

gunshot had preceded his mutilation. Ganz or one of the other investigators had kindly thrown a chamois cloth over the vandalized head. I took enough of a peek beneath it to provide me with everything that I or the reader could possibly need to know about the condition of the head — I will never forget the sight of that monstrous, fleshless grin — and to remark the dead man's unusual choice of cravat. It was a giant, floppy bow tie, white with orange and purple polka dots.

"Damn you, Ganz," I said, though I was not in truth addressing the poor fellow, who, I knew, would not be able to answer my question anytime soon. "What's a dead clown doing in my woods?"

We found no wallet on the corpse, nor any kind of identifying objects. My men, along with the better part of the Ashtown Police Department, went over and over the woods east of town, hourly widening the radius of their search. That day, when not attending to my other duties (I was then in the process of breaking up the Dushnyk cigarette-smuggling ring), I managed to work my way back along a chain of inferences to the Entwhistle-Ealing Bros. Circus, which, as I eventually recalled, had recently stayed on the eastern outskirts of Ashtown, at the fringe of the woods where the body was found.

The following day, I succeeded in reaching the circus's general manager, a man named Onheuser, at their winter headquarters in Peru. He informed me over the phone that the company had left Pennsylvania and was now en route to Peru, and I asked him if he had received any reports from the road manager of a clown's having suddenly gone missing.

"Missing?" he said. I wished that I could see his face, for I thought I heard the flatted note of something false in his tone. Perhaps he was merely nervous about talking to a county district attorney. The Entwhistle-Ealing Bros. Circus was a mangy affair, by all accounts, and probably no stranger to pursuit by officers of the court. "Why, I don't believe so, no."

I explained to him that a man who gave every indication of having once been a circus clown had turned up dead in a pinewood outside Ashtown, Pennsylvania.

"Oh, no," Onheuser said. "I truly hope he wasn't one of mine, Mr. Satterlee."

"Is it possible you might have left one of your clowns behind, Mr. Onheuser?"

"Clowns are special people," Onheuser replied, sounding a touch on the defensive. "They love their work, but sometimes it can get to be a little, well, too much for them." It developed that Mr. Onheuser had, in his younger days, performed as a clown, under the name of Mr. Wingo, in the circus of which he was now the general manager. "It's not unusual for a clown to drop out for a little while, cool his heels, you know, in some town where he can get a few months of well-earned rest. It isn't *common*, I wouldn't say, but it's not unusual. I will wire my road manager — they're in Canton, Ohio — and see what I can find out."

I gathered, reading between the lines, that clowns were high-strung types, and not above going off on the occasional bender. This poor fellow had probably jumped ship here two weeks ago, holing up somewhere with a case of rye, only to run afoul of a very nasty person, possibly one who harbored no great love of clowns. In fact, I had an odd feeling, nothing more than a hunch, really, that the ordinary citizens of Ashtown and its environs were safe, even though the killer was still at large. Once more, I picked up a slip of paper that I had tucked into my desk blotter that morning. It was something that Dr. Sauer had clipped from his files and passed along to me. *Coulrophobia: morbid, irrational fear of or aversion to clowns.*

"Er, listen, Mr. Satterlee," Onheuser went on. "I hope you won't mind my asking. That is, I hope it's not a, well, a confidential police matter, or something of the sort. But I know that when I do get through to them, out in Canton, they're going to want to know."

I guessed, somehow, what he was about to ask me. I could hear the prickling fear behind his curiosity, the note of dread in his voice. I waited him out.

"Did they — was there any — how did he die?"

"He was shot," I said, for the moment supplying only the least interesting part of the answer, tugging on that loose thread of fear. "In the head."

"And there was ... forgive me. No ... no harm done? To the body? Other than the gunshot wound, I mean to say."

"Well, yes, his head *was* rather savagely mutilated," I said brightly. "Is that what you mean to say?"

"Ah! No, no, I don't — "

"The killer or killers removed all the skin from the cranium. It was very skillfully done. Now, suppose you tell me what you know about it."

There was another pause, and a stream of agitated electrons burbled along between us.

"I don't know anything, Mr. District Attorney. I'm sorry. I really must go now. I'll wire you when I have some — "

The line went dead. He was so keen to hang up on me that he could not even wait to finish his sentence. I got up and went to the shelf where, in recent months, I had taken to keeping a bottle of whiskey tucked behind my bust of Daniel Webster. Carrying the bottle and a dusty glass back to my desk, I sat down and tried to reconcile myself to the thought that I was confronted — not, alas, for the first time in my tenure as chief law-enforcement officer of Yuggogheny County — with a crime whose explanation was going to involve not the usual amalgam of stupidity, meanness, and singularly poor judgment but the incalculable intentions of a being who was genuinely evil. What disheartened me was not that I viewed a crime committed out of the promptings of an evil nature as inherently less liable to solution than the misdeeds of the foolish, the unlucky, or the habitually cruel. On the contrary, evil often expresses itself through refreshingly discernible patterns, through schedules and syllogisms. But the presence of evil, once scented, tends to bring out all that is most irrational and uncontrollable in the public imagination. It is a catalyst for pea-brained theories, gimcrack scholarship, and the credulous cosmologies of hysteria.

At that moment, there was a knock on the door to my office, and Detective Ganz came in. At one time I would have tried to hide the glass of whiskey, behind the typewriter or the photo of my wife and son, but now it did not seem to be worth the effort. I was not fooling anyone. Ganz took note of the glass in my hand with a raised eyebrow and a schoolmarmish pursing of his lips.

"Well?" I said. There had been a brief period, following my son's death and the subsequent suicide of my dear wife, Mary, when I had indulged the pitying regard of my staff. I now found that I regretted having shown such weakness. "What is it, then? Has something turned up?"

"A cave," Ganz said. "The poor bastard was living in a cave."

The range of low hills and hollows separating lower Yuggogheny from Fayette County is rotten with caves. For many years, when I was a boy, a man named Colonel Earnshawe operated penny tours of the iridescent organ pipes and jagged stone teeth of Neighborsburg Caverns, before they collapsed in the mysterious earthquake of 1919, killing the Colonel and his sister Irene, and putting to rest many strange rumors about that eccentric old pair. My childhood friends and I, ranging in the woods, would from time to time come upon the root-choked mouth of a cave exhaling its cool plutonic breath, and dare one another to leave the sunshine and enter that world of shadow — that entrance, as it always seemed to me, to the legendary past itself, where the bones of Indians and Frenchmen might lie moldering. It was in one of these anterooms of buried history that the beam of a flashlight, wielded by a deputy sheriff from Plunkettsburg, had struck the silvery lip of a can of pork and beans. Calling to his companions, the deputy plunged through a curtain of spiderweb and found himself in the parlor, bedroom, and kitchen of the dead man. There were some cans of chili and hash, a Primus stove, a lantern, a bedroll, a mess kit, and an old Colt revolver, Army issue, loaded and apparently not fired for some time. And there were also books — a Scout guide to roughing it, a collected Blake, and a couple of odd texts, elderly and tattered: one in German called "Über das Finstere Lachen," by a man named Friedrich von Junzt, which appeared to be religious or philosophical in nature, and one a small volume bound in black leather and printed in no alphabet known to me, the letters sinuous

and furred with wild diacritical marks.

"Pretty heavy reading for a clown," Ganz said.

"It's not all rubber chickens and hosing each other down with seltzer bottles, Jack."

"Oh, no?"

"No, sir. Clowns have unsuspected depths."

"I'm starting to get that impression, sir."

Propped against the straightest wall of the cave, just beside the lantern, there was a large mirror, still bearing the bent clasps and sheared bolts that had once, I inferred, held it to the wall of a filling-station men's room. At its foot was the item that had earlier confirmed to Detective Ganz — and now confirmed to me as I went to inspect it — the recent habitation of the cave by a painted circus clown: a large, padlocked wooden makeup kit, of heavy and rather elaborate construction. I directed Ganz to send for a Pittsburgh criminalist who had served us with discretion in the horrific Primm case, reminding him that nothing must be touched until this Mr. Espy and his black bag of dusts and luminous powders arrived.

The air in the cave had a sharp, briny tinge; beneath it there was a stale animal musk that reminded me, absurdly, of the smell inside a circus tent.

"Why was he living in a cave?" I said to Ganz. "We have a perfectly nice hotel in town."

"Maybe he was broke."

"Or maybe he thought that a hotel was the first place they would look for him."

Ganz looked confused, and a little annoyed, as if he thought I were being deliberately mysterious.

"*Who* was looking for him?"

"I don't know, Detective. Maybe no one. I'm just thinking out loud."

Impatience marred Ganz's fair, bland features. He could tell that I was in the grip of a hunch, and hunches were always among the first considerations ruled out by the procedural practices of Detective John Ganz. My hunches had, admittedly, an uneven record. In the Primm business, one had very nearly got both Ganz and me killed. As for the wayward hunch about my mother's old crony Thaddeus Craven and the strength of his will to quit drinking — I suppose I shall regret indulging that one for the rest of my life.

"If you'll excuse me, Jack ... " I said. "I'm having a bit of a hard time with the stench in here."

"I was thinking he might have been keeping a pig." Ganz inclined his head to one side and gave an empirical sniff. "It smells like pig to me."

I covered my mouth and hurried outside into the cool, dank pinewood. I gathered in great lungfuls of air. The nausea passed, and I filled my pipe, walking up and down outside the mouth of the cave and trying to connect this new discovery to my talk with the circus man, Onheuser. Clearly, he had suspected that this clown might have met with a grisly end. Not only that, he had known that his fellow circus people would fear the very same thing — as if there were some coulrophobic madman with a knife who was as much a part of circus lore as the prohibition on whistling in the dressing room or on looking over your shoulder when you marched in the circus parade.

I got my pipe lit, and wandered down into the woods, toward the clearing where the boys had stumbled over the dead man, following a rough trail that the police had found. Really, it was not a trail so much as an impromptu alley of broken saplings and trampled ground that wound a convoluted course down the hill from the cave to the clearing. It appeared to have been blazed a few days before by the victim and his pursuer; near the bottom, where the trees gave way to open sky, there were grooves of plowed earth that corresponded neatly with encrustations on the heels of the clown's giant brogues. The killer must have caught the clown at the edge of the clearing, and then dragged him along by the hair, or by the collar of his shirt, for the last twenty-five yards, leaving this furrowed record of the panicked, slipping flight of the clown. The presumed killer's footprints were everywhere in evidence, and appeared to have been made by a pair of

long and pointed boots. But the really puzzling thing was a third set of prints, which Ganz had noticed and mentioned to me, scattered here and there along the cold black mud of the path. They seemed to have been made by a barefoot child of eight or nine years. And damned, as Ganz had concluded his report to me, if that barefoot child did not appear to have been dancing!

I came into the clearing, a little short of breath, and stood listening to the wind in the pines and the distant rumble of the state highway, until my pipe went out. It was a cool afternoon, but the sky had been blue all day and the woods were peaceful and fragrant. Nevertheless, I was conscious of a mounting sense of disquiet as I stood over the bed of sodden leaves where the body had been found. I did not then, nor do I now, believe in ghosts, but as the sun dipped down behind the tops of the trees, lengthening the long shadows encompassing me, I became aware of an irresistible feeling that somebody was watching me. After a moment, the feeling intensified, and localized, as it were, so I was certain that to see who it was I need only turn around. Bravely — meaning not that I am a brave man but that I behaved as if I were — I took my matches from my jacket pocket and relit my pipe. Then I turned. I knew that when I glanced behind me I would not see Jack Ganz or one of the other policemen standing there; any of them would have said something to me by now. No, it was either going to be nothing at all or something that I could not even allow myself to imagine.

It was, in fact, a baboon, crouching on its hind legs in the middle of the trail, regarding me with close-set orange eyes, one hand cupped at its side. It had great puffed whiskers and a long canine snout. There was something in the barrel chest and the muttonchop sideburns that led me to conclude, correctly, as it turned out, that the specimen was male. For all his majestic bulk, the old fellow presented a rather sad spectacle. His fur was matted and caked with mud, and a sticky coating of pine needles clung to his feet. The expression in his eyes was unsettlingly forlorn, almost pleading, I would have said, and in his mute gaze I imagined I detected a hint of outraged dignity. This might, of course, have been due to the hat he was wearing. It was conical, particolored with orange and purple lozenges, and ornamented at the tip with a bright-orange pompom. Tied under his chin with a length of black ribbon, it hung from the side of his head at a humorous angle. I myself might have been tempted to kill the man who had tied it to my head.

"Was it you?" I said, thinking of Poe's story of the rampaging orang swinging a razor in a Parisian apartment. Had that story had any basis in fact? Could the dead clown have been killed by the pet or sidekick with whom, as the mystery of the animal smell in the cave now resolved itself, he had shared his fugitive existence?

The baboon declined to answer my question. After a moment, though, he raised his long crooked left arm and gestured vaguely toward his belly. The import of this message was unmistakable, and thus I had the answer to my question — if he could not open a can of franks and beans, he would not have been able to perform that awful surgery on his owner or partner.

"All right, old boy," I said. "Let's get you something to eat." I took a step toward him, watching for signs that he might bolt or, worse, throw himself at me. But he sat, looking miserable, clenching something in his right paw. I crossed the distance between us. His rancid-hair smell was unbearable. "You need a bath, don't you?" I spoke, by reflex, as if I were talking to somebody's tired old dog. "Were you and your friend in the habit of bathing together? Were you there when it happened, old boy? Any idea who did it?"

The animal gazed up at me, its eyes kindled with that luminous and sagacious sorrow that lends to the faces of apes and mandrills an air of cousinly reproach, as if we humans have betrayed the principles of our kind. Tentatively, I reached out to him with one hand. He grasped my fingers in his dry leather paw, and then the next instant he had leapt bodily into my arms, like a child seeking solace. The garbage-and-skunk stench of him burned my nose. I gagged and stumbled backward as the baboon scrambled to wrap his arms and legs around me. I must have cried out; a moment later a pair of iron lids seemed to slam against my skull, and the animal went slack, sliding, with a horrible, human sigh of disappointment, to the ground at my feet.



Ganz and two Ashtown policemen came running over and dragged the dead baboon away from me.

"He wasn't — he was just — " I was too outraged to form a coherent expression of my anger. "You could have hit *me!*"

Ganz closed the animal's eyes, and laid its arms out at its sides. The right paw was still clenched in a shaggy fist. Ganz, not without some difficulty, managed to pry it open. He uttered an unprintable oath.

In the baboon's palm lay a human finger. Ganz and I looked at each other, wordlessly confirming that the dead clown had been in possession of a full complement of digits.

"See that Espy gets that finger," I said. "Maybe we can find out whose it was."

"It's a woman's," Ganz said. "Look at that nail."

I took it from him, holding it by the chewed and bloody end so as not to dislodge any evidence that might be trapped under the long nail. Though rigid, it was strangely warm, perhaps from having spent a few days in the vengeful grip of the animal who had claimed it from his master's murderer. It appeared to be an index finger, with a manicured, pointed nail nearly three-quarters of an inch long. I shook my head.

"It isn't painted," I said. "Not even varnished. How many women wear their nails like that?"

"Maybe the paint rubbed off," one of the policemen suggested.

"Maybe," I said. I knelt on the ground beside the body of the baboon. There was, I noted, a wound on the back of his neck, long and deep and crusted over with dirt and dried blood. I now saw him in my mind's eye, dancing like a barefoot child around the murderer and the victim as they struggled down the path to the clearing. It would take a powerful man to fight such an animal off. "I can't believe you killed our only witness, Detective Ganz. The poor bastard was just giving me a hug."

This information seemed to amuse Ganz nearly as much as it puzzled him.

"He was a monkey, sir," Ganz said. "I doubt he — "

"He could make signs, you fool! He told me he was *hungry*."

Ganz blinked, trying, I supposed, to append to his personal operations manual this evidence of the potential usefulness of circus apes to police inquiries.

"If I had a dozen baboons like that one on my staff," I said, "I would never have to leave the office."

That evening, before going home, I stopped by the evidence room in the High Street annex and signed out the two books that had been found in the cave that morning. As I walked back into the corridor, I thought I detected an odd odor — odd, at any rate, for that dull expanse of linoleum and buzzing fluorescent tubes — of the sea: a sharp, salty, briny smell. I decided that it must be some new disinfectant being used by the custodian, but it reminded me of the smell of blood from the specimen bags and sealed containers in the evidence room. I turned the lock on the room's door and slipped the books, in their waxy protective envelopes, into my briefcase, and walked down High Street to Dennistoun Road, where the public library was. It stayed open late on Wednesday nights, and I would need a German-English dictionary if my college German and I were going to get anywhere with Herr von Junzt.

The librarian, Lucy Brand, returned my greeting with the circumspect air of one who hopes to be rewarded for her forbearance with a wealth of juicy tidbits. Word of the murder, denuded of most of the relevant details, had made the Ashtown *Ambler* yesterday morning, and though I had cautioned the unlucky young squirrel hunters against talking about the case, already conjectures, misprisions, and outright lies had begun wildly to coalesce; I knew the temper of my home town well enough to realize that if I did not close this case soon things might get out of hand. Ashtown, as the events surrounding the appearance of the so-called Green Man, in 1932, amply demonstrated, has a lamentable tendency toward municipal panic.

Having secured a copy of Köhler's Dictionary of the English and German Languages, I went,

on an impulse, to the card catalogue and looked up von Junzt, Friedrich. There was no card for any work by this author — hardly surprising, perhaps, in a small-town library like ours. I returned to the reference shelf, and consulted an encyclopedia of philosophical biography and comparable volumes of philologic reference, but found no entry for any von Junzt — a diplomat, by the testimony of his title page, of the University of Tübingen and of the Sorbonne. It seemed that von Junzt had been dismissed, or expunged, from the dusty memory of his discipline.

It was as I was closing the Encyclopedia of Archaeo-Anthropological Research that a name suddenly leapt out at me, catching my eye just before the pages slammed together. It was a word that I had noticed in von Junzt's book: "Urartu." I barely managed to slip the edge of my thumb into the encyclopedia to mark the place; half a second later and the reference might have been lost to me. As it turned out, the name of von Junzt itself was also contained — sealed up — in the sarcophagus of this entry, a long and tedious one devoted to the work of an Oxford man by the name of St. Dennis T. R. Gladfellow, "a noted scholar," as the entry had it, "in the field of inquiry into the beliefs of the ancient, largely unknown peoples referred to conjecturally today as proto-Urartians." The reference lay buried in a column dense with comparisons among various bits of obsidian and broken bronze:

G.'s analysis of the meaning of such ceremonial blades admittedly was aided by the earlier discoveries of Friedrich von Junzt, at the site of the former Temple of Yrrh, in north central Armenia, among them certain sacrificial artifacts pertaining to the worship of the proto-Urartian deity Yê-Heh, rather grandly (though regrettably without credible evidence) styled "the god of dark or mocking laughter" by the German, a notorious adventurer and fake whose work, nevertheless, in this instance, has managed to prove useful to science.

The prospect of spending the evening in the company of Herr von Junzt began to seem even less appealing. One of the most tedious human beings I have ever known was my own mother, who, early in my childhood, fell under the spell of Madame Blavatsky and her followers and proceeded to weary my youth and deplete my patrimony with her devotion to that indigestible caseation of balderdash and lies. Mother drew a number of local simpletons into her orbit, among them poor old drunken Thaddeus Craven, and burnt them up as thoroughly as the earth's atmosphere consumes asteroids. The most satisfying episodes of my career have been those which afforded me the opportunity to prosecute charlatans and frauds and those who preyed on the credulous; I did not now relish the thought of sitting at home with such a man all evening, in particular one who spoke only German.

Nevertheless, I could not ignore the undeniable novelty of a murdered circus clown who was familiar with scholarship — however spurious or misguided — concerning the religious beliefs of proto-Urartians. I carried the Köhler's over to the counter, where Lucy Brand waited eagerly for me to spill some small ration of beans. When I offered nothing for her delectation, she finally spoke.

"Was he a German?" she said, showing unaccustomed boldness, it seemed to me.

"Was *who* a German, my dear Miss Brand?"

"The victim." She lowered her voice to a textbook librarian's whisper, though there was no one in the building but old Bob Spherakis, asleep and snoring in the periodicals room over a copy of *Grit*.

"I — I don't know," I said, taken aback by the simplicity of her inference, or rather by its having escaped me. "I suppose he may have been, yes."

She slid the book across the counter toward me.

"There was another one of them in here this afternoon," she said. "At least, I think he was a German. A Jew, come to think of it. Somehow he managed to find the only book in Hebrew we have in our collection. It's one of the books old Mr. Vorzeichen donated when he died. A prayer book, I think it is. Tiny little thing. Black leather."

This information ought to have struck a chord in my memory, of course, but it did not. I settled my hat on my head, bid Miss Brand good night, and walked slowly home, with the dictionary under my arm, and, in my briefcase, von Junzt's stout tome and the little black-leather volume filled with sinuous mysterious script.

I will not tax the reader with an account of my struggles with Köhler's dictionary and the thorny bramble of von Junzt's overheated German prose. Suffice to say that it took me the better part of the evening to make my way through the introduction. It was well past midnight by the time I arrived at the first chapter, and nearing two o'clock before I had amassed the information that I will now pass along to the reader, with no endorsement beyond the testimony of these pages, nor any hope of its being believed.

It was a blustery night; I sat in the study on the top floor of my old house's round tower, listening to the windows rattle in their casements, as if a gang of intruders were seeking a way in. In this high room, in 1885, it was said, Howard Ash, the last living descendant of our town's founder, General Hannaniah Ash, had sealed the blank note of his life and dispatched himself, with postage due, to his Creator. A fugitive draft blew from time to time across my desk and stirred the pages of the dictionary by my left hand. I felt, as I read, as if the whole world were asleep — benighted, ignorant, and dreaming — while I had been left to man the crow's nest, standing lonely vigil in the teeth of a storm that was blowing in from a tropic of dread.

According to the scholar or charlatan Friedrich von Junzt, the regions around what is now northern Armenia had spawned, along with an entire cosmology, two competing cults of incalculable antiquity, which survived to the present day: that of Yê-Heh, the God of Dark Laughter, and that of Ai, the God of Unbearable and Ubiquitous Sorrow. The Yê-Hehists viewed the universe as a cosmic hoax, perpetrated by the father-god Yrrh for unknowable purposes: a place of calamity and cruel irony so overwhelming that the only possible response was a malevolent laughter like that, presumably, of Yrrh himself. The laughing followers of baboon-headed Yê-Heh created a sacred burlesque, mentioned by Pausanias and by one of the travellers in Plutarch's dialogue "On the Passing of the Oracles," to express their mockery of life, death, and all human aspirations. The rite involved the flaying of a human head, severed from the shoulders of one who had died in battle or in the course of some other supposedly exalted endeavor. The clown-priest would don the bloodless mask and then dance, making a public travesty of the noble dead. Through generations of inbreeding, the worshippers of Yê-Heh had evolved into a virtual subspecies of humanity, characterized by distended grins and skin as white as chalk. Von Junzt even claimed that the tradition of painted circus clowns derived from the clumsy imitation, by noninitiates, of these ancient kooks.

The "immemorial foes" of the baboon boys, as the reader may have surmised, were the followers of Ai, the God Who Mourns. These gloomy fanatics saw the world as no less horrifying and cruel than did their archenemies, but their response to the whole mess was a more or less permanent wailing. Over the long millennia since the heyday of ancient Urartu, the Aiites had developed a complicated physical discipline, a sort of jujitsu or calisthenics of murder, which they chiefly employed in a ruthless hunt of followers of Yê-Heh. For they believed that Yrrh, the Absent One, the Silent Devisor who, an eternity ago, tossed the cosmos over his shoulder like a sheet of fish wrap and wandered away leaving not a clue as to his intentions, would not return to explain the meaning of his inexplicable and tragic creation until the progeny of Yê-Heh, along with all copies of the Yê-Hehist sacred book, "Khndzut Dzul," or "The Unfathomable Ruse," had been expunged from the face of the earth. Only then would Yrrh return from his primeval hiatus — "bringing what new horror or redemption," as the German intoned, "none can say."

All this struck me as a gamier variety of the same loony, Zoroastrian plonk that my mother had spent her life decanting, and I might have been inclined to set the whole business aside and leave the case to be swept under the administrative rug by Jack Ganz had it not been for the

words with which Herr von Junzt concluded the second chapter of his tedious work:

While the Yê-Hehist gospel of cynicism and ridicule has, quite obviously, spread around the world, the cult itself has largely died out, in part through the predations of foes and in part through chronic health problems brought about by inbreeding. Today [von Junzt's book carried a date of 1849] it is reported that there may be fewer than 150 of the Yê-Hehists left in the world. They have survived, for the most part, by taking on work in travelling circuses. While their existence is known to ordinary members of the circus world, their secret has, by and large, been kept. And in the sideshows they have gone to ground, awaiting the tread outside the wagon, the shadow on the tent-flap, the cruel knife that will, in a mockery of their own long-abandoned ritual of mockery, deprive them of the lily-white flesh of their skulls.

Here I put down the book, my hands trembling from fatigue, and took up the other one, printed in an unknown tongue. "The Unfathomable Ruse"? I hardly thought so; I was inclined to give as little credit as I reasonably could to Herr von Junzt's account. More than likely the small black volume was some inspirational text in the mother tongue of the dead man, a translation of the Gospels, perhaps. And yet I must confess that there were a few tangential points in von Junzt's account that caused me some misgiving.

There was a scrape then just outside my window, as if a finger with a very long nail were being drawn almost lovingly along the glass. But the finger turned out to be one of the branches of a fine old horse-chestnut tree that stood outside the tower, scratching at the window in the wind. I was relieved and humiliated. Time to go to bed, I said to myself. Before I turned in, I went to the shelf and moved to one side the bust of Galen that I had inherited from my father, a country doctor. I took a quick snort of good Tennessee whiskey, a taste for which I had also inherited from the old man. Thus emboldened, I went over to the desk and picked up the books. To be frank, I would have preferred to leave them there — I would have preferred to burn them, to be really frank — but I felt that it was my duty to keep them about me while they were under my watch. So I slept with the books beneath my pillow, in their wax envelopes, and I had the worst dream of my life.

It was one of those dreams where you are a fly on the wall, a phantom bystander, disembodied, unable to speak or intervene. In it, I was treated to the spectacle of a man whose young son was going to die. The man lived in a corner of the world where, from time to time, evil seemed to bubble up from the rusty red earth like a black combustible compound of ancient things long dead. And yet, year after year, this man met each new outburst of horror, true to his code, with nothing but law books, statutes, and county ordinances, as if sheltering with only a sheet of newspaper those he had sworn to protect, insisting that the steaming black geyser pouring down on them was nothing but a light spring rain. That vision started me laughing, but the cream of the jest came when, seized by a spasm of forgiveness toward his late, mad mother, the man decided not to prosecute one of her old paramours, a rummy by the name of Craven, for driving under the influence. Shortly thereafter, Craven steered his old Hudson Terraplane the wrong way down a one-way street, where it encountered, with appropriate cartoon sound effects, an oncoming bicycle ridden by the man's heedless, darling, wildly pedalling son. That was the funniest thing of all, funnier than the amusing ironies of the man's profession, than his furtive drinking and his wordless, solitary suppers, funnier even than his having been widowed by suicide: the joke of a father's outliving his boy. It was so funny that, watching this ridiculous man in my dream, I could not catch my breath for laughing. I laughed so hard that my eyes popped from their sockets, and my smile stretched until it broke my aching jaw. I laughed until the husk of my head burst like a pod and fell away, and my skull and brains went floating off into the sky, white dandelion fluff, a cloud of fairy parasols.

Around four o'clock in the morning, I woke and was conscious of someone in the room with me. There was an unmistakable tang of the sea in the air. My eyesight is poor and it took me a while to make him out in the darkness, though he was standing just beside my bed, with his long

thin arm snaked under my pillow, creeping around. I lay perfectly still, aware of the tips of this slender shadow's fingernails and the scrape of his scaly knuckles, as he rifled the contents of my head and absconded with them through the bedroom window, which was somehow also the mouth of the Neighborsburg Caverns, with tiny old Colonel Earnshaw taking tickets in the booth.

I awakened now in truth, and reached immediately under the pillow. The books were still there. I returned them to the evidence room at eight o'clock this morning. At nine, there was a call from Dolores and Victor Abbott, at their motor lodge out on the Plunkettsburg Pike. A guest had made an abrupt departure, leaving a mess. I got into a car with Ganz and we drove out to get a look. The Ashtown police were already there, going over the buildings and grounds of the Vista Dolores Lodge. The bathroom wastebasket of Room 201 was overflowing with blood-soaked bandages. There was evidence that the guest had been keeping some kind of live bird in the room; one of the neighboring guests reported that it had sounded like a crow. And over the whole room there hung a salt smell that I recognized immediately, a smell that some compared to the smell of the ocean, and others to that of blood. When the pillow, wringing wet, was sent up to Pittsburgh for analysis by Mr. Espy, it was found to have been saturated with human tears.

When I returned from court, late this afternoon, there was a message from Dr. Sauer. He had completed his postmortem and wondered if I would drop by. I took the bottle from behind Daniel Webster and headed on down to the county morgue.

"He was already dead, the poor son of a biscuit eater," Dr. Sauer said, looking less morose than he had the last time we spoke. Sauer was a gaunt old Methodist who avoided strong language but never, so long as I had known him, strong drink. I poured us each a tumbler, and then a second. "It took me a while to establish it because there was something about the fellow that I was missing."

"What was that?"

"Well, I'm reasonably sure that he was a hemophiliac. So my reckoning time of death by coagulation of the blood was all thrown off."

"Hemophilia," I said.

"Yes," Dr. Sauer said. "It is associated sometimes with inbreeding, as in the case of royal families of Europe."

*Inbreeding.* We stood there for a while, looking at the sad bulk of the dead man under the sheet.

"I also found a tattoo," Dr. Sauer added. "The head of a grinning baboon. On his left forearm. Oh, and one other thing. He suffered from some kind of vitiligo. There are white patches on his nape and throat."

Let the record show that the contents of the victim's makeup kit, when it was inventoried, included cold cream, rouge, red greasepaint, a powder puff, some brushes, cotton swabs, and five cans of foundation in a tint the label described as "Olive Male." There was no trace, however, of the white greasepaint with which clowns daub their grinning faces.

Here I conclude my report, and with it my tenure as district attorney for this blighted and unfortunate county. I have staked my career — my life itself — on the things I could see, on the stories I could credit, and on the eventual vindication, when the book was closed, of the reasonable and skeptical approach. In the face of twenty-five years of bloodshed, mayhem, criminality, and the universal human pastime of ruination, I have clung fiercely to Occam's razor, seeking always to keep my solutions unadorned and free of conjecture, and never to resort to conspiracy or any kind of prosecutorial woolgathering. My mother, whenever she was confronted by calamity or personal sorrow, invoked cosmic emanations, invisible empires, ancient prophecies, and intrigues; it has been the business of my life to reject such folderol and seek the simpler explanation. But we were fools, she and I, arrant blockheads, each of us blind to or heedless of the readiest explanation: that the world is an ungettable joke, and our human need to explain its wonders and horrors, our appalling genius for devising such explanations, is

nothing more than the rim shot that accompanies the punch line.

I do not know if that nameless clown was the last, but in any case, with such pursuers, there can be few of his kind left. And if there is any truth in the grim doctrine of those hunters, then the return of our father Yrrh, with his inscrutable intentions, cannot be far off. But I fear that, in spite of their efforts over the last ten thousand years, the followers of Ai are going to be gravely disappointed when, at the end of all we know and everything we have ever lost or imagined, the rafters of the world are shaken by a single, a terrible guffaw.

# Dimensions - Alice Munro

(2006)

Doree had to take three buses — one to Kincardine, where she waited for one to London, where she waited again, for the city bus out to the facility. She started the trip on a Sunday at nine in the morning. Because of the waiting times between buses, it took her until about two in the afternoon to travel the hundred-odd miles. All that sitting, either on buses or in the depots, was not a thing she should have minded. Her daily work was not of the sitting-down kind.

She was a chambermaid at the Comfort Inn. She scrubbed bathrooms and stripped and made beds and vacuumed rugs and wiped mirrors. She liked the work — it occupied her thoughts to a certain extent and tired her out so that she could sleep at night. She was seldom faced with a really bad mess, though some of the women she worked with could tell stories to make your hair curl. These women were older than her, and they all thought that she should try to work her way up. They told her that she should get trained for a job behind the desk, while she was still young and decent-looking. But she was content to do what she did. She didn't want to have to talk to people.

None of the people she worked with knew what had happened. Or, if they did, they didn't let on. Her picture had been in the paper — they'd used the photo he took of her with all three kids, the new baby, Dimitri, in her arms, and Barbara Ann and Sasha on either side, looking on. Her hair had been long and wavy and brown then, natural in curl and color, as he liked it, and her face bashful and soft — a reflection less of the way she was than of the way he wanted to see her.

Since then, she had cut her hair short and bleached and spiked it, and she had lost a lot of weight. And she went by her second name now: Fleur. Also, the job they had found for her was in a town a good distance away from where she used to live.

This was the third time she had made the trip. The first two times he had refused to see her. If he did that again she would just quit trying. Even if he did see her, she might not come again for a while. She was not going to go overboard. She didn't really know what she was going to do.

On the first bus she was not too troubled. Just riding along and looking at the scenery. She had grown up on the coast, where there was such a thing as spring, but here winter jumped almost directly into summer. A month ago there had been snow, and now it was hot enough to go bare-armed. Dazzling patches of water lay in the fields, and the sunlight was pouring down through naked branches.

On the second bus she began to feel jittery, and she couldn't help trying to guess which of the women around her might be going to the same place. They were women alone, usually dressed with some care, maybe to make themselves look as if they were going to church. The older ones looked as if they were going to strict old-fashioned churches where you had to wear a skirt and stockings and some sort of hat, while the younger ones might have belonged to a livelier congregation, which accepted pants suits, bright scarves, earrings, and puffy hairdos. When you took a second look, you saw that some of the pants-suit women were quite as old as the others.

Doree didn't fit into either category. In the whole year and a half that she had been working she had not bought herself a single new piece of clothing. She wore her uniform at work and her jeans everywhere else. She had got out of the way of wearing makeup because he hadn't allowed it, and now, though she could have, she didn't. Her spikes of corn-colored hair didn't suit her bony bare face, but it didn't matter.

On the third bus she got a seat by the window, and tried to keep herself calm by reading the signs — both the advertising and the street signs. There was a certain trick she had picked up, to keep her mind occupied. She took the letters of whatever word her eyes lit on, and she tried to

see how many new words she could make out of them. "Coffee," for instance, would give you "fee," and then "foe," and "off" and "of," and "shop" would provide "hop" and "sop" and "so" and — wait a minute — "posh." Words were more than plentiful on the way out of the city, as they passed billboards, monster stores, car lots, even balloons moored on roofs to advertise sales.

Doree had not told Mrs. Sands about her last two attempts, and probably wouldn't tell her about this one, either. Mrs. Sands, whom she saw on Monday afternoons, spoke of moving on, though she always said that it would take time, that things could not be hurried. She told Doree that she was doing fine, that she was gradually discovering her own strength.

"I know those words have been done to death," she said. "But they're still true."

She blushed at what she heard herself say — *death* — but did not make it worse by apologizing.

When Doree was sixteen — that was seven years ago — she'd gone to visit her mother in the hospital every day after school. Her mother was recovering from an operation on her back, which was said to have been serious but not dangerous. Lloyd was an orderly. He and Doree's mother had in common the fact that they were both old hippies — though Lloyd was actually a few years the younger — and whenever he had time he'd come in and chat with her about the concerts and protest marches they'd both attended, the outrageous people they'd known, drug trips that had knocked them out, that sort of thing.

Lloyd was popular with the patients, because of his jokes and his sure, strong touch. He was stocky and broad-shouldered and authoritative enough to be sometimes taken for a doctor. (Not that he was pleased by that — he held the opinion that a lot of medicine was a fraud and a lot of doctors were jerks.) He had sensitive reddish skin and light hair and bold eyes.

He kissed Doree in the elevator and told her that she was a flower in the desert. Then he laughed at himself, and said, "How original can you get?"

"You're a poet and don't know it," she said, to be kind.

One night her mother died suddenly, of an embolism. Doree's mother had a lot of women friends who would have taken Doree in — and she stayed with one of them for a time — but the new friend Lloyd was the one Doree preferred. By her next birthday she was pregnant, then married. Lloyd had never been married before, though he had at least two children whose whereabouts he was not certain of. They would have been grown up by then, anyway. His philosophy of life had changed as he got older — he believed now in marriage, constancy, and no birth control. And he found the Sechelt Peninsula, where he and Doree lived, too full of people these days — old friends, old ways of life, old lovers. Soon he and Doree moved across the country to a town they picked from a name on the map: Mildmay. They didn't live in town; they rented a place in the country. Lloyd got a job in an ice-cream factory. They planted a garden. Lloyd knew a lot about gardening, just as he did about house carpentry, managing a woodstove, and keeping an old car running.

Sasha was born.

"Perfectly natural," Mrs. Sands said.

Doree said, "Is it?"

Doree always sat on a straight-backed chair in front of the desk, not on the sofa, which had a flowery pattern and cushions. Mrs. Sands moved her own chair to the side of the desk, so that they could talk without any kind of barrier between them.

"I've sort've been expecting you would," she said. "I think it's what I might have done, in your place."

Mrs. Sands would not have said that in the beginning. A year ago, even, she'd have been more cautious, knowing how Doree would have revolted, then, at the idea that anybody, any living soul, could be in her place. Now she knew that Doree would just take it as a way, even a humble way, of trying to understand.

Mrs. Sands was not like some of them. She was not brisk, not thin, not pretty. Not too old,



either. She was about the age that Doree's mother would have been, though she did not look as if she'd ever been a hippie. Her graying hair was cut short and she had a mole riding on one cheekbone. She wore flat shoes and loose pants and flowered tops. Even when they were of a raspberry or turquoise color these tops did not make her look as if she really cared what she put on — it was more as if somebody had told her she needed to smarten herself up and she had obediently gone shopping for something she thought might do that. Her large, kind, impersonal sobriety drained all assaulting cheerfulness, all insult, out of those clothes.

"Well, the first two times I never saw him," Doree said. "He wouldn't come out."

"But this time he did? He did come out?"

"Yes, he did. But I wouldn't hardly have known him."

"He'd aged?"

"I guess so. I guess he's lost some weight. And those clothes. Uniforms. I never saw him in anything like that."

"Wasn't he once an orderly?"

"It wasn't the same."

"He looked to you like a different person?"

"No." Doree caught at her upper lip, trying to think what the difference was. He'd been so still. She had never seen him so still. He hadn't even seemed to know that he should sit down opposite her. Her first words to him had been "Aren't you going to sit down?" And he had said, "Is it all right?"

"He looked sort of vacant," she said. "I wondered if they had him on drugs?"

"Maybe something to keep him on an even keel. Mind you, I don't know. Did you have a conversation?"

Doree wondered if it could be called that. She had asked him some stupid ordinary questions. How was he feeling? (O.K.) Did he get enough to eat? (He thought so.) Was there any place where he could walk if he wanted to? (Under supervision, yes. He guessed you could call it a place. He guessed you could call it walking.)

She'd said, "You have to get fresh air."

He'd said, "That's true."

She'd nearly asked him if he had made any friends. The way you ask your kid about school. The way, if your kids went to school, you would ask them.

"Yes. Yes," Mrs. Sands said, nudging the ready box of Kleenex forward. Doree didn't need it; her eyes were dry. The trouble was in the bottom of her stomach. The heaves.

Mrs. Sands just waited, knowing enough to keep her hands off.

And, as if he'd detected what she was on the verge of saying, Lloyd had told her that there was a psychiatrist who came and talked to him every so often.

"I tell him he's wasting his time," Lloyd said. "I know as much as he does."

That was the only time that he had sounded to Doree anything like himself.

All through the visit her heart had kept thumping. She'd thought she might faint or die. It cost her such an effort to look at him, to get him into her vision as this thin and gray, diffident yet cold, mechanically moving yet uncoördinated man.

She had not said any of this to Mrs. Sands. Mrs. Sands might have asked — tactfully — whom she was afraid of. Herself or him? But she wasn't *afraid*.

When Sasha was one and a half, Barbara Ann was born, and, when Barbara Ann was two, they had Dimitri. They had named Sasha together, and then they made a pact that he would name the boys and she would name the girls.

Dimitri was the first one to be colicky. Doree thought that he was maybe not getting enough milk, or that her milk was not rich enough. Or too rich? Not right, anyway. Lloyd had a lady from the La Leche League come and talk to her. Whatever you do, the lady said, you must not put him on a supplementary bottle. That would be the thin edge of the wedge, she said, and

pretty soon you would have him rejecting the breast altogether. She spoke as if that would be a major tragedy.

Little did she know that Doree had been giving him a supplement already. And it seemed to be true that he preferred that — he fussed more and more at the breast. By three months he was entirely bottle-fed, and then there was no way to keep it from Lloyd. She told him that her milk had dried up, and she'd had to start supplementing. Lloyd squeezed one breast after the other with frantic determination and succeeded in getting a couple of drops of miserable-looking milk out. He called her a liar. They fought. He said that she was a whore like her mother.

All those hippies were whores, he said.

Soon they made up. But whenever Dimitri was fretful, whenever he had a cold, or was afraid of the older children's pet rabbit, or still hung on to chairs at the age when his brother and sister had been walking unsupported, the failure to breast-feed was recalled.

The first time Doree had gone to Mrs. Sands's office, one of the other women there had given her a pamphlet. On the front of it was a gold cross and words made up of gold and purple letters: "When Your Loss Seems Unbearable ... " Inside, there was a softly colored picture of Jesus and some finer print that Doree did not read.

In her chair in front of the desk, still clutching the pamphlet, Doree began to shake. Mrs. Sands had to pry it out of her hand.

"Did somebody give you this?" Mrs. Sands said.

Doree said, "Her," and jerked her head at the closed door.

"You don't want it?"

"When you're down is when they'll try and get at you," Doree said, and then realized that this was something her mother had said, when some ladies with a similar message came to visit her in the hospital. "They think you'll fall on your knees and then it'll be all right."

Mrs. Sands sighed.

"Well," she said. "It's certainly not that simple."

"Not even possible," Doree said.

"Maybe not."

They never spoke of Lloyd, in those days. Doree never thought of him if she could help it, and then only as if he were some terrible accident of nature.

"Even if I believed in that stuff," she said — meaning what was in the pamphlet — "it would only be so that ... " She meant to say that such a belief would be convenient because she could then think of Lloyd burning in Hell, or something of that sort, but she was unable to go on, because it was just too stupid to talk about. And because of a familiar impediment, that was like a hammer hitting her in the belly.

Lloyd thought that their children should be educated at home. This was not for religious reasons — going against dinosaurs and cavemen and monkeys and all that — but because he wanted them to be close to their parents and to be introduced to the world carefully and gradually, rather than thrown into it all at once. "I just happen to think they are my kids," he said. "I mean they are our kids, not the Department of Education's kids."

Doree wasn't sure that she could handle this, but it turned out that the Department of Education had guidelines, and lesson plans that you could get from your local school. Sasha was a bright boy who practically taught himself to read, and the other two were still too little to learn much yet. In the evenings and on weekends Lloyd taught Sasha about geography and the solar system and the hibernation of animals and how a car runs, covering each subject as the questions came up. Pretty soon Sasha was ahead of the school plans, but Doree picked them up anyway and put him through the exercises right on time so that the law would be satisfied.

There was another mother in the district doing homeschooling. Her name was Maggie and she had a minivan. Lloyd needed his car to get to work, and Doree had not learned to drive, so she was glad when Maggie offered her a ride to the school once a week to turn in the finished

exercises and pick up the new ones. Of course they took all the children along. Maggie had two boys. The older one had so many allergies that she had to keep a strict eye on everything he ate — that was why she taught him at home. And then it seemed that she might as well keep the younger one there as well. He wanted to stay with his brother and he had a problem with asthma, anyway.

How grateful Doree was then, comparing her healthy three. Lloyd said that it was because she'd had her children when she was still young, while Maggie had waited until she was on the verge of menopause. He was exaggerating how old Maggie was, but it was true that she had waited. She was an optometrist. She and her husband had been partners, and they hadn't started their family until she could leave the practice and they had a house in the country.

Maggie's hair was pepper-and-salt, cropped close to her head. She was tall, flat-chested, cheerful, and opinionated. Lloyd called her the Lezzie. Only behind her back, of course. He kidded with her on the phone but mouthed at Doree, "It's the Lezzie." That didn't really bother Doree — he called lots of women Lezzies. But she was afraid that the kidding would seem overly friendly to Maggie, an intrusion, or at least a waste of time.

"You want to speak to the ole lady. Yeah, I got her right here. She's rubbing my work pants up and down the scrub board. See, I only got the one pair of pants. Anyway, I believe in keeping her busy."

Doree and Maggie got into the habit of shopping for groceries together, after they'd picked up the papers at the school. Then sometimes they got take-out coffees at Tim Horton's and took the children to Riverside Park. They sat on a bench while Sasha and Maggie's boys raced around or hung from the climbing contraptions, and Barbara Ann pumped on the swing and Dimitri played in the sandbox. Or they sat in the mini, if it was cold. They talked mostly about the children, and things they cooked, but somehow Doree found out about how Maggie had trekked around Europe before training as an optometrist and Maggie found out how young Doree had been when she got married. Also about how easily she had become pregnant at first, and how she didn't so easily anymore, and how that made Lloyd suspicious, so that he went through her dresser drawers looking for birth-control pills — thinking she must be taking them on the sly.

"And are you?" Maggie asked.

Doree was shocked. She said she wouldn't dare.

"I mean, I'd think that was awful to do, without telling him. It's just kind of a joke when he goes looking for them."

"Oh," Maggie said.

And one time Maggie said, "Is everything all right with you? I mean in your marriage? You're happy?"

Doree said yes, without hesitation. After that she was more careful about what she said. She saw that there were things that she was used to that another person might not understand. Lloyd had a certain way of looking at things; that was just how he was. Even when she'd first met him, in the hospital, he'd been like that. The head nurse was a starchy sort of person, so he'd called her Mrs. Bitch-out-of-hell, instead of her name, which was Mrs. Mitchell. He said it so fast that you could barely catch on. He'd thought that she picked favorites, and he wasn't one of them. Now there was somebody he detested at the ice-cream factory, somebody he called Suck-stick Louie. Doree didn't know the man's real name. But at least that proved that it wasn't only women who provoked him.

Doree was pretty sure that these people weren't as bad as Lloyd thought, but it was no use contradicting him. Perhaps men just had to have enemies, the way they had to have their jokes. And sometimes Lloyd did make the enemies into jokes, just as if he were laughing at himself. She was even allowed to laugh with him, as long as she wasn't the one who started the laughing.

She hoped that he wouldn't get that way about Maggie. At times she was afraid she saw something of the sort coming. If he prevented her from riding to the school and the grocery store

with Maggie it would be a big inconvenience. But worse would be the shame. She would have to make up some stupid lie, to explain things. But Maggie would know — at least she would know that Doree was lying, and she would interpret that, probably, as meaning that Doree was in a worse situation than she really was. Maggie had her own sharp no-nonsense way of looking at things.

Then Doree asked herself why she should care, anyway, what Maggie might think. Maggie was an outsider, not even somebody Doree felt particularly comfortable with. It was Lloyd and Doree and their family that mattered. Lloyd said that, and he was right. The truth of things between them, the bond, was not something that anybody else could understand and it was not anybody else's business. If Doree could watch her own loyalty it would be all right.

It got worse, gradually. No direct forbidding, but more criticism. Lloyd coming up with the theory that Maggie's boys' allergies and asthma might be Maggie's fault. The reason was often the mother, he said. He used to see it at the hospital all the time. The overcontrolling, usually overeducated mother.

"Some of the time kids are just born with something," Doree said, unwisely. "You can't say it's the mother every time."

"Oh. Why can't I?"

"I didn't mean *you*. I didn't mean you can't. I meant couldn't they be born — "

"Since when are you such a medical authority?"

"I didn't say I was."

"No. And you're not."

Bad to worse. He wanted to know what they talked about, she and Maggie.

"I don't know. Nothing, really."

"That's funny. Two women riding in a car. First I heard of it. Two women talking about nothing. She is out to break us up."

"Who is? *Maggie*?"

"I've got experience of her kind of woman."

"What kind?"

"Her kind."

"Don't be silly."

"Careful. Don't call me silly."

"What would she want to do that for?"

"How am I supposed to know? She just wants to do it. You wait. You'll see. She'll get you over there bawling and whining about what a bastard I am."

And in fact it turned out as he had said. At least it would certainly have looked that way, to Lloyd. She did find herself at around ten o'clock one night in Maggie's kitchen, sniffing back her tears and drinking herbal tea. Maggie's husband had said, "What the hell?" when she knocked — she heard him through the door. He hadn't known who she was. She'd said, "I'm really sorry to bother you — " while he stared at her with lifted eyebrows and a tight mouth. And then Maggie had come.

Doree had walked all the way there in the dark, first along the gravel road that she and Lloyd lived on, then on the highway. She headed for the ditch every time a car came, and that slowed her down considerably. She did take a look at the cars that passed, thinking that one of them might be Lloyd. She didn't want him to find her, not yet, not till he was scared out of his craziness. Other times she had been able to scare him out of it herself, by weeping and howling and even banging her head on the floor, chanting, "It's not true, it's not true, it's not true," over and over. Finally he would back down. He would say, "O.K., O.K. I'll believe you. Honey, be quiet. Think of the kids. I'll believe you, honest. Just stop."

But tonight she had pulled herself together just as she was about to start that performance. She had put on her coat and walked out the door, with him calling after her, "Don't do this. I warn

you!"

Maggie's husband had gone to bed, not looking any better pleased about things, while Doree kept saying, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, barging in on you at this time of the night."

"Oh, shut up," Maggie said, kind and businesslike. "Do you want a glass of wine?"

"I don't drink."

"Then you'd better not start now. I'll get you some tea. It's very soothing. Raspberry-chamomile. It's not the kids, is it?"

"No."

Maggie took her coat and handed her a wad of Kleenex for her eyes and nose. "Don't try to tell me yet. We'll soon get you settled down."

Even when she was partway settled down Doree didn't want to blurt out the whole truth, and let Maggie know that she herself was at the heart of the problem. More than that, she didn't want to have to explain Lloyd. No matter how worn out she got with him, he was still the closest person in the world to her, and she felt that everything would collapse if she were to bring herself to tell someone exactly how he was, if she were to be entirely disloyal.

She said that she and Lloyd had got into an old argument and she was so sick and tired of it that all she'd wanted was to get out. But she would get over it, she said. They would.

"Happens to every couple sometime," Maggie said.

The phone rang then, and Maggie answered.

"Yes. She's O.K. She just needed to walk something out of her system. Fine. O.K. then, I'll deliver her home in the morning. No trouble. O.K. Good night.

"That was him," she said. "I guess you heard."

"How did he sound? Did he sound normal?"

Maggie laughed. "Well, I don't know how he sounds when he's normal, do I? He didn't sound drunk."

"He doesn't drink, either. We don't even have coffee in the house."

"Want some toast?"

In the morning, early, Maggie drove her home. Maggie's husband hadn't left for work yet, and he stayed with the boys.

Maggie was in a hurry to get back, so she just said, "Bye-bye. Phone me if you need to talk," as she turned the minivan around in the yard.

It was a cold morning in early spring, snow still on the ground, but there was Lloyd sitting on the steps without a jacket on.

"Good morning," he said, in a loud, sarcastically polite voice. And she said good morning, in a voice that pretended not to notice his.

He did not move aside to let her up the steps.

"You can't go in there," he said.

She decided to take this lightly.

"Not even if I say please? Please."

He looked at her but did not answer. He smiled with his lips held together.

"Lloyd?" she said. "Lloyd?"

"You better not go in."

"I didn't tell her anything, Lloyd. I'm sorry I walked out. I just needed a breathing space, I guess."

"Better not go in."

"What's the matter with you? Where are the kids?"

He shook his head, as he did when she said something he didn't like to hear. Something mildly rude, like "holy shit."

"Lloyd. Where are the kids?"

He shifted just a little, so that she could pass if she liked.

Dimitri still in his crib, lying sideways. Barbara Ann on the floor beside her bed, as if she'd got out or been pulled out. Sasha by the kitchen door — he had tried to get away. He was the only one with bruises on his throat. The pillow had done for the others.

"When I phoned last night?" Lloyd said. "When I phoned, it had already happened.

"You brought it all on yourself," he said.

The verdict was that he was insane, he couldn't be tried. He was criminally insane — he had to be put in a secure institution.

Doree had run out of the house and was stumbling around the yard, holding her arms tight across her stomach as if she had been sliced open and was trying to keep herself together. This was the scene that Maggie saw, when she came back. She had had a premonition, and had turned the minivan around in the road. Her first thought was that Doree had been hit or kicked in the stomach by her husband. She could make nothing out of the noises Doree was making. But Lloyd, who was still sitting on the steps, moved aside courteously for her, without a word, and she went into the house and found what she was now expecting to find. She phoned the police.

For some time Doree kept stuffing whatever she could grab into her mouth. After the dirt and grass it was sheets or towels or her own clothing. As if she were trying to stifle not just the howls that rose up but the scene in her head. She was given a shot of something, regularly, to quiet her down, and this worked. In fact she became very quiet, though not catatonic. She was said to be stabilized. When she got out of the hospital and the social worker brought her to this new place, Mrs. Sands took over, found her somewhere to live, found her a job, established the routine of talking with her once a week. Maggie would have come to see her, but she was the one person Doree could not stand to see. Mrs. Sands said that that feeling was natural — it was the association. She said that Maggie would understand.

Mrs. Sands said that whether or not Doree continued to visit Lloyd was up to her. "I'm not here to approve or disapprove, you know. Did it make you feel good to see him? Or bad?"

"I don't know."

Doree could not explain that it had not really seemed to be him she was seeing. It was almost like seeing a ghost. So pale. Pale loose clothes on him, shoes that didn't make any noise — probably slippers — on his feet. She had the impression that some of his hair had fallen out. His thick and wavy, honey-colored hair. There seemed to be no breadth to his shoulders, no hollow in his collarbone where she used to rest her head.

What he had said, afterward, to the police — and it was quoted in the newspapers — was "I did it to save them the misery."

What misery?

"The misery of knowing that their mother had walked out on them," he said.

That was burned into Doree's brain and maybe when she decided to try to see him it had been with the idea of making him take it back. Making him see, and admit, how things had really gone.

"You told me to stop contradicting you or get out of the house. So I got out of the house."

"I only went to Maggie's for one night. I fully intended to come back. I wasn't walking out on anybody."

She remembered perfectly how the argument had started. She had bought a tin of spaghetti that had a very slight dent in it. Because of that it had been on sale and she had been pleased with her thriftiness. She had thought that she was doing something smart. But she didn't tell him that, once he had begun questioning her about it. For some reason she'd thought it better to pretend that she hadn't noticed.

Anybody would notice, he said. We could have all been poisoned. What was the matter with her? Or was that what she had in mind? Was she planning to try it out on the kids or on him?

She had told him not to be crazy.

He had said that it wasn't him who was crazy. Who but a crazy woman would buy poison for

her family?

The children had been watching from the doorway of the front room. That was the last time she'd seen them alive.

So was that what she had been thinking — that she could make him see, finally, who it was that was crazy?

When she realized what was in her head, she should have got off the bus. She could have got off even at the gates, with the few other women who plodded up the drive. She could have crossed the road and waited for the bus back to the city. Probably some people did that. They were going to make a visit and then decided not to. People probably did that all the time.

But maybe it was better that she had gone on, and seen him so strange and wasted. Not a person worth blaming for anything. Not a person. He was like a character in a dream.

She had dreams. In one dream she had run out of the house after finding them, and Lloyd had started to laugh in his old easy way, and then she had heard Sasha laughing behind her and it had dawned on her, wonderfully, that they were all playing a joke.

"You asked me if it made me feel good or bad when I saw him? Last time, you asked me?"

"Yes, I did," Mrs. Sands said.

"I had to think about it."

"Yes."

"I decided it made me feel bad. So I haven't gone again."

It was hard to tell with Mrs. Sands, but the nod she gave seemed to show some satisfaction or approval.

So when Doree decided that she would go again, after all, she thought that it was better not to mention it. And since it was hard not to mention whatever happened to her — there being so little, most of the time — she phoned and cancelled her appointment. She said that she was going on a holiday. They were getting into summer, when holidays were the usual thing. With a friend, she said.

"You aren't wearing the jacket you had on last week."

"That wasn't last week."

"Wasn't it?"

"It was three weeks ago. The weather's hot now. This is lighter but I don't really need it. You don't need a jacket at all."

He asked about her trip, what buses she'd had to take from Mildmay.

She told him that she wasn't living there anymore. She told him where she lived, and about the three buses.

"That's quite a trek for you. Do you like living in a bigger place?"

"It's easier to get work there."

"So you work?"

She had told him last time about where she lived, the buses, where she worked.

"I clean rooms in a motel," she said. "I told you."

"Yes. Yes. I forgot. I'm sorry. Do you ever think about going back to school? Night school?"

She said that she did think about it but never seriously enough to do anything. She said that she didn't mind the work she was doing.

Then it seemed as if they could not think of anything more to say.

He sighed. He said, "Sorry. Sorry. I guess I'm not so used to conversation."

"So what do you do all the time?"

"I guess I read quite a bit. Kind of meditate. Informally."

"Oh."

"I appreciate you coming here. It means a lot to me. But don't think you have to keep it up. I mean, just when you want to. Just come when you want to. If something comes up, or if you don't feel like it — What I'm trying to say is, just the fact that you could come at all, that you

even came once, that's a bonus for me. Do you get what I mean?"

She said yes, she thought so.

He said that he didn't want to interfere with her life.

"You're not," she said.

"Was that what you were going to say? I thought you were going to say something else."

In fact, she had almost said, What life?

No, she said, not really, nothing else.

"Good."

Three more weeks and she got a phone call. It was Mrs. Sands herself on the line, not one of the women in the office.

"Oh, Doree. I thought you might not be back yet. From your holiday. So you are back?"

"Yes," Doree said, trying to think where she could say she had been.

"But you hadn't got around to arranging another appointment?"

"No. Not yet."

"That's O.K. I was just checking. You are all right?"

"I'm all right."

"Fine. Fine. You know where I am if you ever need me. Ever just want to have a talk."

"Yes."

"So take care."

She hadn't mentioned Lloyd, hadn't asked if the visits had continued. Well, of course, Doree had said that they weren't going to. But Mrs. Sands was pretty good, usually, about sensing what was going on. Pretty good at holding off, too, when she understood that a question might not get her anywhere. Doree didn't know what she would have said, if asked — whether she would have backtracked and told a lie or come out with the truth. She had gone back, in fact, the very next Sunday after he more or less told her that it didn't matter whether she came or not.

He had a cold. He didn't know how he'd got it.

Maybe he had been coming down with it, he said, the last time he saw her, and that was why he'd been morose.

*Morose*. She seldom had anything to do, nowadays, with anyone who used a word like that, and it sounded strange to her. But he had always had a habit of using such words, and of course at one time they hadn't struck her as they did now.

"Do I seem like a different person to you?" he asked.

"Well, you look different," she said cautiously. "Don't I?"

"You look beautiful," he said sadly.

Something softened in her. But she fought against it.

"Do you feel different?" he asked. "Do you feel like a different person?"

She said she didn't know. "Do you?"

He said, "Altogether."

Later in the week a large envelope was given to her at work. It had been addressed to her care of the motel. It contained several sheets of paper, with writing on both sides. She didn't think at first of its being from him — she somehow had the idea that people in prison were not allowed to write letters. But, of course, he was a different sort of prisoner. He was not a criminal. He was only criminally insane.

There was no date on the document and not even a "Dear Doree." It just started talking to her in such a way that she thought it had to be some sort of religious invitation:

People are looking all over for the solution. Their minds are sore (from looking). So many things jostling around and hurting them. You can see in their faces all their bruises and pains. They are troubled. They rush around. They have to shop and go to the laundromat and get their hair cut and earn a living or pick up their welfare checks. The poor ones have to do that and the rich ones have to look hard for the best ways to spend their money. That is work too. They have



to build the best houses with gold faucets for their hot and cold water. And their Audis and magical toothbrushes and all possible contraptions and then burglar alarms to protect against slaughter and all neigh neither rich nor poor have any peace in their souls. I was going to write "neighbor" instead of "neither," why was that? I have not got any neighbor here. Where I am at least people have got beyond a lot of confusion. They know what their possessions are and always will be and they don't even have to buy or cook their own food. Or choose it. Choices are eliminated.

All we that are here can get is what we can get out of our own minds.

At the beginning all in my head was perturbation (Sp?). There was everlasting storm, and I would knock my head against cement in the hope of getting rid of it. Stopping my agony and my life. So punishments were meted. I got hosed down and tied up and drugs introduced in my bloodstream. I am not complaining either, because I had to learn there is no profit in that. Nor is it any different from the so-called real world, in which people drink and carry on and commit crimes to eliminate their thoughts which are painful. And often they get hauled off and incarcerated but it is not long enough for them to come out on the other side. And what is that? It is either total insanity or peace.

Peace. I arrived at peace and am still sane. I imagine reading this now you are thinking I am going to say something about God Jesus or at any rate Buddha as if I had arrived at a religious conversion. No. I do not close my eyes and get lifted up by any specific Higher Power. I do not really know what is meant by any of that. What I do is Know Myself. Know Thyself is some kind of Commandment from somewhere, probably the Bible so at least in that I may have followed Christianity. Also, To Thy Own Self Be True — I have attempted that if it is in the Bible also. It does not say which parts — the bad or the good — to be true to so it is not intended as a guide to morality. Also Know Thyself does not relate either to morality as we know it in Behavior. But Behavior is not really my concern because I have been judged quite correctly as a person who cannot be trusted to judge how he should behave and that is the reason I am here.

Back to the Know part in Know Thyself. I can say perfectly soberly that I know myself and I know the worst I am capable of and I know that I have done it. I am judged by the World as a Monster and I have no quarrel with that, even though I might say in passing that people who rain down bombs or burn cities or starve and murder hundreds of thousands of people are not generally considered Monsters but are showered with medals and honors, only acts against small numbers being considered shocking and evil. This being not meant as an excuse but just observation.

What I Know in Myself is my own Evil. That is the secret of my comfort. I mean I know my Worst. It may be worse than other people's worst but in fact I do not have to think or worry about that. No excuses. I am at peace. Am I a Monster? The World says so and if it is said so then I agree. But then I say, the World does not have any real meaning for me. I am My Self and have no chance to be any other Self. I could say that I was crazy then but what does that mean? Crazy. Sane. I am I. I could not change my I then and I cannot change it now.

Doree, if you have read this far, there is one special thing I want to tell you about but cannot write it down. If you ever think of coming back here then maybe I can tell you. Do not think I am heartless. It isn't that I wouldn't change things if I could but I can't.

I am sending this to your place of work which I remember and the name of the town so my brain is working fine in some respects.

She thought that they would have to discuss this piece of writing at their next meeting and she read it over several times, but she could not think of anything to say. What she really wanted to talk about was whatever he had said was impossible to put in writing. But when she saw him again he behaved as if he had never written to her at all. She searched for a topic and told him about a once famous folksinger who had stayed at the motel that week. To her surprise he knew more than she did about the singer's career. It turned out that he had a television, or at least

access to one, and watched some shows and, of course, the news, regularly. That gave them a bit more to talk about, until she could not help herself.

"What was the thing you couldn't tell me except in person?"

He said that he wished she hadn't asked him. He didn't know if they were ready to discuss it.

Then she was afraid that it would be something she really could not handle, something unbearable, such as that he still loved her. "Love" was a word she could not stand to hear.

"O.K.," she said. "Maybe we're not."

Then she said, "Still, you better tell me. If I walked out of here and was struck down by a car then I would never know, and you would never have the chance to tell me again."

"True," he said.

"So what is it?"

"Next time. Next time. Sometimes I can't talk anymore. I want to but I just dry up, talking."

I have been thinking of you Doree ever since you left and regret I disappointed you. When you are sitting opposite me I tend to get more emotional than perhaps I show. It is not my right to go emotional in front of you, since you certainly have the right more than me and you are always very controlled. So I am going to reverse what I said before because I have come to the conclusion I can write to you after all better than I can talk.

Now where do I start?

Heaven exists.

That is one way but not right because I never believed in Heaven and Hell, etc. As far as I was concerned that was always a pile of crap. So it must sound pretty weird of me to bring up the subject now.

I will just say then: I have seen the children.

I have seen them and talked to them.

There. What are you thinking at the moment? You are thinking well, now he is really round the bend. Or, it's a dream and he can't distinguish a dream, he doesn't know the difference between a dream and awake. But I want to tell you I do know the difference and what I know is, they exist. I say they exist, not they are alive, because alive means in our particular Dimension, and I am not saying that is where they are. In fact I think they are not. But they do exist and it must be that there is another Dimension or maybe innumerable Dimensions, but what I know is that I have got access to whatever one they are in. Possibly I got hold of this from being so much on my own and having to think and think and with such as I have to think about. So after such suffering and solitude there is a Grace that has seen the way to giving me this reward. Me the very one that deserves it the least to the world's way of thinking.

Well if you have kept reading this far and not torn this to pieces you must want to know something. Such as how they are. They are fine. Really happy and smart. They don't seem to have any memory of anything bad. They are maybe a little older than they were but that is hard to say. They seem to understand at different levels. Yes. You can notice with Dimitri that he has learned to talk which he was not able to do. They are in a room I can partly recognize. It's like our house but more spacious and nicer. I asked them how they were being looked after and they just laughed at me and said something like they were able to look after themselves. I think Sasha was the one who said that. Sometimes they don't talk separately or at least I can't separate their voices but their identities are quite clear and I must say, joyful.

Please don't conclude that I am crazy. That is the fear that made me not want to tell you about this. I was crazy at one time but believe me I have shed all my old craziness like the bear sheds his coat. Or maybe I should say the snake sheds his skin. I know that if I had not done that I would never have been given this ability to reconnect with Sasha and Barbara Ann and Dimitri. Now I wish that you could be granted this chance as well because if it is a matter of deserving then you are way ahead of me. It may be harder for you to do because you live in the world so much more than I do but at least I can give you this information — the Truth — and in telling

you I have seen them hope that it will make your heart lighter.

Doree wondered what Mrs. Sands would say or think, if she read this letter. Mrs. Sands would be careful, of course. She would be careful not to pass any outright verdict of craziness but she would carefully, kindly, steer Doree around in that direction. Or you might say she wouldn't steer — she would just pull the confusion away so that Doree would have to face what would then seem to have been her own conclusion all along. She would have to put the whole dangerous nonsense — this was Mrs. Sands speaking — out of her mind.

That was why Doree was not going anywhere near her.

Doree did think that he was crazy. And in what he had written there seemed to be some trace of the old bragging. She didn't write back. Days went by. Weeks. She didn't alter her opinion but she still held on to what he'd written, like a secret. And from time to time, when she was in the middle of spraying a bathroom mirror or tightening a sheet, a feeling came over her. For almost two years she had not taken any notice of the things that generally made people happy, such as nice weather or flowers in bloom or the smell of a bakery. She still did not have that spontaneous sense of happiness, exactly, but she had a reminder of what it was like. It had nothing to do with the weather or flowers. It was the idea of the children in what he had called their Dimension that came sneaking up on her in this way, and for the first time brought a light feeling to her, not pain.

In all the time since what had happened had happened, any thought of the children had been something she had to get rid of, pull out immediately like a knife in her throat. She could not think their names, and if she heard a name that sounded like one of theirs she had to pull that out, too. Even children's voices, their shrieks and slapping feet as they ran to and from the motel swimming pool, had to be banished by a sort of gate that she could slam down behind her ears. What was different now was that she had a refuge she could go to as soon as such dangers rose anywhere around her.

And who had given it to her? Not Mrs. Sands — that was for sure. Not in all those hours sitting by the desk with the Kleenex discreetly handy.

Lloyd had given it to her. Lloyd, that terrible person, that isolated and insane person.

Insane if you wanted to call it that. But wasn't it possible that what he said was true — that he had come out on the other side? And who was to say that the visions of a person who had done such a thing and made such a journey might not mean something?

This notion wormed its way into her head and stayed there.

Along with the thought that Lloyd, of all people, might be the person she should be with now. What other use could she be in the world — she seemed to be saying this to somebody, probably to Mrs. Sands — what was she here for if not at least to listen to him?

I didn't say "forgive," she said to Mrs. Sands in her head. I would never say that. I would never do it.

But think. Aren't I just as cut off by what happened as he is? Nobody who knew about it would want me around. All I can do is remind people of what nobody can stand to be reminded of.

Disguise wasn't possible, not really. That crown of yellow spikes was pathetic.

So she found herself travelling on the bus again, heading down the highway. She remembered those nights right after her mother had died, when she would sneak out to meet Lloyd, lying to her mother's friend, the woman she was staying with, about where she was going. She remembered the friend's name, her mother's friend's name. Laurie.

Who but Lloyd would remember the children's names now, or the color of their eyes? Mrs. Sands, when she had to mention them, did not even call them children, but "your family," putting them in one clump together.

Going to meet Lloyd in those days, lying to Laurie, she had felt no guilt, only a sense of destiny, submission. She had felt that she was put on earth for no reason other than to be with

him and try to understand him.

Well, it wasn't like that now. It was not the same.

She was sitting on the front seat across from the driver. She had a clear view through the windshield. And that was why she was the only passenger on the bus, the only person other than the driver, to see a pickup truck pull out from a side road without even slowing down, to see it rock across the empty Sunday-morning highway in front of them and plunge into the ditch. And to see something even stranger: the driver of the truck flying through the air in a manner that seemed both swift and slow, absurd and graceful. He landed in the gravel at the edge of the pavement, on the opposite side of the highway.

The other passengers didn't know why the driver had put on the brakes and brought them to a sudden uncomfortable stop. And at first all that Doree thought was, How did he get out? That young man or boy, who must have fallen asleep at the wheel. How did he fly out of the truck and launch himself so elegantly into the air?

"Fellow right in front of us," the driver said to his passengers. He was trying to speak loudly and calmly, but there was a tremor of amazement, something like awe, in his voice. "Just plowed across the road and into the ditch. We'll be on our way again as soon as we can and in the meantime please don't get out of the bus."

As if she had not heard that, or had some special right to be useful, Doree got out behind him. He did not reprimand her.

"Goddam asshole," he said as they crossed the road and there was nothing in his voice now but anger and exasperation. "Goddam asshole kid, can you believe it?"

The boy was lying on his back, arms and legs flung out, like somebody making an angel in the snow. Only there was gravel around him, not snow. His eyes were not quite closed. He was so young, a boy who had shot up tall before he even needed to shave. Possibly without a driver's license.

The driver was talking on his phone.

"Mile or so south of Bayfield, on 21, east side of the road."

A trickle of pink foam came out from under the boy's head, near the ear. It did not look like blood at all, but like the stuff you skim off the strawberries when you're making jam.

Doree crouched down beside him. She laid a hand on his chest. It was still. She bent her ear close. Somebody had ironed his shirt recently — it had that smell.

No breathing.

But her fingers on his smooth neck found a pulse.

She remembered something she'd been told. It was Lloyd who had told her, in case one of the children had an accident and he wasn't there. The tongue. The tongue can block the breathing, if it has fallen into the back of the throat. She laid the fingers of one hand on the boy's forehead and two fingers of the other hand under his chin. Press down on the forehead, press up on the chin, to clear the airway. A slight firm tilt.

If he still didn't breathe she would have to breathe into him.

She pinches the nostrils, takes a deep breath, seals his mouth with her lips, and breathes. Two breaths and check. Two breaths and check.

Another male voice, not the driver's. A motorist must have stopped. "You want this blanket under his head?" She shook her head tightly. She had remembered something else, about not moving the victim, so that you would not injure the spinal cord. She enveloped his mouth. She pressed his warm fresh skin. She breathed and waited. She breathed and waited again. And a faint moisture seemed to rise against her face.

The driver said something but she could not look up. Then she felt it for sure. A breath out of the boy's mouth. She spread her hand on the skin of his chest and at first she could not tell if it was rising and falling, because of her own trembling.

Yes. Yes.

It was a true breath. The airway was open. He was breathing on his own. He was breathing.

"Just lay it over him," she said to the man with the blanket. "To keep him warm."

"Is he alive?" the driver said, bending over her.

She nodded. Her fingers found the pulse again. The horrible pink stuff had not continued to flow. Maybe it was nothing important. Not from his brain.

"I can't hold the bus for you," the driver said. "We're behind schedule as it is."

The motorist said, "That's O.K. I can take over."

Be quiet, be quiet, she wanted to tell them. It seemed to her that silence was necessary, that everything in the world outside the boy's body had to concentrate, help it not to lose track of its duty to breathe.

Shy but steady whiffs now, a sweet obedience in the chest. Keep on, keep on.

"You hear that? This guy says he'll stay and watch out for him," the driver said. "Ambulance is coming as fast as they can."

"Go on," Doree said. "I'll hitch a ride to town with them and catch you on your way back tonight."

He had to bend to hear her. She spoke dismissively, without raising her head, as if she were the one whose breath was precious.

"You sure?" he said.

Sure.

"You don't have to get to London?"

No.

# The Mark of Cain - Roxane Gay

(2017)

My husband is not a kind man and with him, I am not a good person.

Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and he, Caleb, is kneeling over me, his fingers tracing my neck. I place my hands over his, the rough skin, the swollen knuckles. I squeeze.

I wear heavy eyeliner and dark lipstick because my husband once said that he always wants me to look the way I did the night we met in a bar, drunk and numb, looking for trouble before it found us. He can't stand to see me any other way, he said. He wasn't being nostalgic.

I worry about the day when he leaves me, torn apart on our bed, waiting for him to put me back together again.

My husband has an identical twin, Jacob. Sometimes they switch places for days at a time. They think I don't know. I am the kind of woman who doesn't mind indulging the deception.

My husbands have a father who was neither a good father nor a kind man. When he died, shot in the head by a woman he had beaten one time too many, Jacob and Caleb, then fifteen, immediately forgave their father his trespasses — the drinking, his meaty fists against their young bodies, the way he rid them of their mother. With each passing year, the brothers rewrote their past until they had beatified their father's memory. They each have a tattoo of their father's likeness on their back. The ink, Caleb told me on our first date, was mixed with their father's ashes so he would always be with them.

It is nearly impossible to tell Caleb and Jacob apart. They have the same physique, the same haircut, the same mannerisms. Neither of them snores. They are both left-handed. They have dark hair, blue eyes, long, sharp faces, high cheekbones. My husbands work together at the architecture firm they started, so whether it is Caleb or Jacob who comes home, they have the same story to tell me about their day. I married Caleb but I prefer Jacob's company. When Jacob and I make love, there is a sorrowful kindness to his touch. I never worry about being left asunder.

Jacob has a girlfriend, Cassie, who is really Caleb's girlfriend. She is unaware of the distinction. The four of us are at dinner. Jacob, pretending to be Caleb, and I are holding hands. Caleb, pretending to be Jacob, and Cassie are holding hands. There is a light in his eyes that isn't there when he looks at me. My husbands are finishing each other's sentences, regaling Cassie and me with stories about a particularly difficult client. Jacob orders another bottle of wine, and we continue to drink and talk and practice being normal. His arm is heavy across my shoulders and every once in a while, he leans in and brushes his wet lips against the spot on my neck that makes my back arch sharply. Then he smiles at his brother and his brother smiles back. This is when they are at their best — when they are together, sharing the same moment. There is safety, for them, in the number two.

Cassie is a graduate student in museum studies. Caleb told me this in bed after she and Jacob first started dating. He told me about how Cassie plans to curate modern art exhibits, how she has a unique aesthetic, how he thinks she may be the one for Jacob, but what he's really telling me is that she's the one for him. I lay next to Caleb, let him talk, traced his father's image with my fingernails. I told him I was happy for Jacob but I was really happy for him.

When it's time to settle the check, Cassie and I go to the bathroom and we eye each other in the mirror as we freshen our lipstick. "It must be hard being married to a twin," she says. I start to think that she may be smarter than I thought. I say, "It's like being married to two men."

Jacob takes me home while Caleb takes Cassie to Jacob's house, five houses down from ours. In the middle of the night, they will switch places and I will know because Caleb will smell like another woman. Cassie won't notice because she is the kind of woman who doesn't pay attention

to details or who chooses not to pay attention to details. On the drive home, I trace Jacob's knuckles and the tiny scars on his fingers, all from architecture school, making miniature models of grand ideas with sharp knives. I tell him how I wish every night could be like this night. He nods and says, "Let's go for a drive." I lean back in my seat, kick off my heels. Jacob takes me to the site of a project he's working on, and we take the construction elevator to the top floor, his arms wrapped tightly around me as the hoist slowly creaks upward. There's no ceiling yet on the top floor, so when we get out of the elevator, it is disorienting, seeing the city sprawling around us and nothing keeping us from falling into it.

I hold on to Jacob to steady myself and then I laugh and pull him into a slow waltz, staring up into the night sky. When we stop, the world keeps spinning, so we drop to the concrete floor and sit with our knees pulled against our chests. What I want to say is that I know who he is and that I would choose him, I would always forever choose him, but I also know his first love is his brother, so I say nothing. I pull my shirt over my head and slide out of my skirt and I lie back on the cold floor, gritty with dirt and sawdust. I reach for Jacob and sigh when he lies on top of me. We kiss, softly, and he closes his eyes, blowing air along my neck, across my shoulders. Then I'm tearing off his shirt, pulling him against me, opening myself to him the way he wants me to. I tell him the only true thing I can. I say, "I love you."

When Caleb drinks too much, where too much is anything more than one drink, he forgets the new history he and his brother have cobbled from their memories of their father. After he and Jacob have switched places, Caleb climbs into bed reeking of wine and cigarette smoke. He barks at me to wake up. I pull the sheets over my head because I am thinking about Jacob and the freedom of tall buildings, and falling into stars while the husband I love most is moving over and in me. Caleb pulls the sheets away, turns on the lights. I sit up, shivering, alone with the husband I do not love most.

He starts telling me a story about himself and his brother sitting in the backseat of their father's Cadillac while the old man got a blowjob from a woman who was not their mother, and how their father had that woman give his sons blowjobs as well. As he tells me this story, his voice grows coarser. His features become less recognizable. Caleb grabs me by my waist, straddles me, and slaps my face. "Don't ever do something like that," he says. "Don't be a fucking whore." Then he's flipping me onto my stomach, his unkind hand planted against my skull, holding me to the bed, treating me like the whore he doesn't want me to be. I think about Caleb's cock, slick with Jacob's seed. I think about how much I hate and therefore love the husband I'm with because I pity him and maybe I pity myself. I come immoderately. Caleb falls asleep lying on top of me. His body is heavy and damp, his smell unfamiliar.

In the morning, Caleb and I avoid making eye contact. He showers, pretends he's going to work, goes to his brother's house, sends Jacob back to me. I am at my dressing table, trying to mask the angry purpling bruise spreading across my face. Jacob stands in the doorway and smiles so kindly that I become nauseated. "What are you doing?" he asks. Then he notices the arc of broken blood vessels beneath my eye. His hands clench into tight fists as he approaches me. When he places soft kisses along the edges of the hurt, my face starts to ache more deeply than it ever did beneath Caleb's fist. "I'm so sorry," Jacob says, shouldering the burden of his brother's sins.

When I miss my period twice in a row, it is Jacob who finds me in the bathroom, sitting on the edge of the bathtub, wrapped in a bath towel, holding the pregnancy test in one hand. He falls to his knees, folds his hands over my thighs. He smiles, pulls my towel open, leaving me naked, and rests his face against my breasts. I run my fingers through his hair, gently massaging his scalp. I imagine the two of us packing a small suitcase, buying a cheap car, driving west on I-80 until we reach something better. I say, "Do you think your brother will be happy?" He says, "I don't give a damn what my brother thinks." For a while, I allow myself to believe him.

I am six months pregnant when Caleb goes to a doctor's appointment with me. He is moody,

almost indifferent, there only because Jacob had a meeting he had to attend. These days, I mostly see Caleb late at night, when he steals back to his own home, when he is angry and needs something only I can give. He sits in the chair with the hard plastic arms next to the exam table, arms crossed tightly across his chest. As the doctor glides the sonogram wand across the lower round of my belly, she turns a knob on the machine. "Do you hear that?" she asks. The room is silent but for the identical flutters of two heartbeats.



# Sister Godzilla - Louise Erdrich

(2001)

The door banged shut, and then the children were alone with their sixth-grade teacher. It was the first day of school, in the fall of 1963. The habits of Franciscan nuns still shrouded all but their faces, so each of the new nun's features was emphasized, read forty times over in astonishment. Outlined in a stiff white frame of starched linen, Sister's eyes, nose, and mouth leaped out, a mask from a dream, a great rawboned jackal's muzzle.

"Oh, Christ," Toddy Crieder said, just loud enough for Dot to hear.

Dot Adare, a troublemaker, knew Toddy was in love with her and usually ignored him, but the nun's extreme ugliness was irresistible.

"Godzilla," she whispered.

The teacher's name was Sister Mary Anita Groff. She was young, in her twenties or thirties, and so swift of movement, for all her hulking size, that walking from the back of the room to the front, she surprised her students, made them picture an athlete's legs and muscles concealed in the flow of black wool. When she swept the air in a gesture meant to include them all in her opening remarks, her hands fixed their gazes. They were the opposite of her face. Her hands were beautiful, as white as milk glass, the fingers straight and tapered. They were the hands in the hallway print of Mary underneath the cross. They were the hands of the Apostles, cast in plastic and lit at night on the tops of television sets. Praying hands.

Ballplayer's hands. She surprised them further by walking onto the graveled yard at recess, her neckpiece cutting hard into the flesh beneath her heavy jaw. When, with a matter-of-fact grace, she pulled from the sleeve of her gown a mitt of dark mustard-colored leather and raised it, a thrown softball dropped in. Her skill was obvious. Good players rarely stretch or change their expressions. They simply tip their hands toward the ball like magnets, and there it is. As a pitcher, Mary Anita was a swirl of wool, as graceful as the windblown cape of Zorro, an emotional figure that stirred Dot so thoroughly that as she pounded home plate — a rubber dish mat — and beat the air twice in practice swings, choked up on the handle, tried to concentrate, Dot knew she would have no choice but to slam a home run.

She did not. In fact, she whiffed, in three strikes, never ticking the ball or fouling. Purely disgusted with herself, she sat on the edge of the bike rack and watched as Sister gave a few balls away and pitched easy hits to the rest of the team. It was as if the two had sensed from the beginning what was to come. Or, then again, perhaps Mary Anita's information came from Dot's former teachers, living in the red-brick convent across the road. Hard to handle. A smart-off. Watch out when you turn your back. They were right. After recess, her pride burned, Dot sat at her desk and drew a dinosaur draped in a nun's robe, its mouth open in a roar. The teeth, long and jagged, grayish-white, held her attention. She worked so hard on the picture that she barely noticed as the room hushed around her. She felt the presence, though, the shadow of attention that dropped over her as Mary Anita stood watching. As a mark of her arrogance, Dot kept drawing.

She shaded in the last tooth and leaned back to frown at her work. The page was plucked into the air before she could pretend to cover it. No one made a sound. Dot's heart beat with excitement.

"You will remain after school," the nun pronounced.

The last half hour passed. The others filed out the door. And then the desk in front of Dot filled suddenly. There was the paper, the carefully rendered dinosaur caught in mid-roar. Dot stared at it furiously, her mind a blur of anticipation. She was not afraid.

"Look at me," Mary Anita said.

Dot found that she didn't want to, that she couldn't. Then her throat filled. Her face was on fire. Her lids hung across her eyeballs like lead shades. She traced the initials carved into her desktop.

"Look at me," Mary Anita said to her again, and Dot's gaze was drawn upward, upward on a string, until she met the eyes of her teacher, deep brown, electrically sad. Their very stillness shook Dot.

"I'm sorry," she said.

When those two unprecedented words dropped from her lips, Dot knew, beyond reason and past bearing, that something terrible had occurred. She felt dizzy. The blood rushed to her head so fast that her ears ached, yet the tips of her fingers fell asleep. Her eyelids prickled and her nose wept, but at the same time her mouth went dry. Her body was a thing of extremes, contradicting itself.

"When I was young," Sister Mary Anita said, "as young as you are, I felt a great deal of pain when I was teased about my looks. I've long since accepted my ... deformity. A prognathic jaw runs in our family, and I share it with an uncle. But I must admit, the occasional insult, or a drawing such as yours, still hurts."

Dot began to mumble and then stopped, desperate. Sister Mary Anita waited, and then handed her her own handkerchief.

"I'm sorry," Dot said again. She wiped her nose. The square of white material was cool and fresh. "Can I go now?"

"Of course not," Mary Anita said.

Dot was confounded. The magical two words, an apology, had dropped from her lips. Yet more was expected. What?

"I want you to understand something," the nun said. "I've told you how I feel. And I expect that you will never hurt me again."

The nun waited, and waited, until their eyes met. Then Dot's mouth fell wide. Her eyes spilled over. She knew that the strange feelings that had come upon her were the same feelings that Mary Anita had felt. Dot had never felt another person's feelings, never in her life.

"I won't do anything to hurt you," she blubbered passionately. "I'll kill myself first."

"I'm sure that will not be necessary," Sister Mary Anita said.

Dot tried to rescue her pride then, by turning away very quickly. Without permission, she ran out the schoolroom door, down the steps, and on into the street, where at last the magnetic force of the encounter weakened, and suddenly she could breathe. Even that was different, though. As she walked, she began to realize that her body was still fighting itself. Her lungs filled with air like two bags, but every time they did so, a place underneath them squeezed so painfully that the truth suddenly came clear.

"I love her now," she blurted out. She stopped on a crack, stepping on it, sickened. "Oh, God, I am *in love*."

Toddy Crieder was a hollow-chested, envious boy whose reputation had never recovered from the time he was sent home for eating tree bark. In the third grade he had put two crayons up his nose, pretend tusks. The pink one got stuck, and Toddy had to visit the clinic. This year, already, his stomach had been pumped in the emergency room. Dot despised him, but that only seemed to fuel his adoration of her.

Coming into the schoolyard the second day, a bright, cool morning, Toddy ran up to Dot, his thin legs knocking.

"Yeah," he cried. "Godzilla! Not bad, Adare."

He wheeled off, the laces of his tennis shoes dragging. Dot looked after him and felt the buzz inside her head begin. How she wanted to stuff that name back into her mouth, or at least Toddy's mouth.

"I hope you trip and murder yourself!" Dot screamed.

But Toddy did not trip. For all of his clumsiness, he managed to stay upright, and as Dot stood rooted in the center of the walk, she saw him whiz from clump to clump of children, laughing and gesturing, filling the air with small and derisive sounds. Sister Mary Anita swept out the door, a wooden-handled brass bell in her hand, and when she shook it up and down, the children, who played together in twos and threes, swung toward her and narrowed or widened their eyes and turned eagerly to one another. Some began to laugh. It seemed to Dot that all of them did, in fact, and that the sound, jerked from their lips, was large, uncanny, totally and horribly delicious.

"Godzilla, Godzilla," they called under their breath. "Sister Godzilla."

Before them on the steps, the nun continued to smile into their faces. She did not hear them — yet. But Dot knew she would. Over the bell her eyes were brilliantly dark and alive. Her horrid jagged teeth showed in a smile when she saw Dot, and Dot ran to her, thrusting a hand into her lunch bag and grabbing the cookies that her mother had made from whatever she could find around the house — raisins, congealed Malt-O-Meal, the whites of eggs.

"Here!" Dot shoved a sweet, lumpy cookie into the nun's hand. It fell apart, distracting Sister as the children pushed past.

The students seemed to forget the name off and on all week. Some days they would move on to new triumphs or disasters — other teachers occupied them, or some small event occurred in the classroom. But then Toddy Crieder would lope and careen among them at recess, would pump his arms and pretend to roar behind Sister Mary Anita's back as she stepped up to the plate. As she swung and connected with the ball and gathered herself to run, her veil lifting, the muscles in her shoulders like the curved hump of a raptor's wings, Toddy would move along behind her, rolling his legs the way Godzilla did in the movie. In her excitement, dashing base to base, her feet long and limber in black laced shoes, Mary Anita did not notice. But Dot looked on, the taste of a penny caught in her throat.

"Snakes live in holes. Snakes are reptiles. These are Science Facts." Dot read aloud to the class from her Discovery science book. "Snakes are not wet. Some snakes lay eggs. Some have live young."

"Very good," Sister said. "Can you name other reptiles?"

Dot's tongue fused to the back of her throat.

"No," she croaked.

"Anyone else?" Sister asked.

Toddy Crieder raised his hand. Sister recognized him.

"How about Godzilla?"

Gasps. Small noises of excitement. Mouths agape. Admiration for Toddy's nerve rippled through the rows of children like a wind across a field. Sister Mary Anita's great jaw opened, opened, and then snapped shut. Her shoulders shook. No one knew what to do at first. Then she laughed. It was a high-pitched, almost birdlike sound, a thin laugh like the highest notes on the piano. The children all hesitated, and then they laughed with her, even Toddy Crieder. Eyes darting from one child to the next, to Dot, Toddy laughed.

Dot's eyes crossed with urgency. When Sister Mary Anita turned to new work, Dot crooked her arm beside her like a piston and leaned across Toddy's desk.

"I'm going to give you one right in the breadbasket," she said.

With a precise boxer's jab she knocked the wind out of Toddy, left him gasping, and turned to the front, face clear, as Sister began to speak.

Furious sunlight. Black cloth. Dot sat on the iron trapeze, the bar pushing a sore line into the backs of her legs. As she swung, she watched Sister Mary Anita. The wind was harsh, and the nun wore a pair of wonderful gloves, black, the fingers cut off of them so that her hands could better grip the bat. The ball arced toward her sinuously and dropped. Her bat caught it with a thick, clean sound, and off it soared. Mary Anita's habit swirled open behind her. The cold bit her

cheeks red. She swung to third, glanced, panting, over her shoulder, and then sped home. She touched down lightly and bounded off.

Dot's arms felt heavy, weak, and she dropped from the trapeze and went to lean against the brick wall of the school building. Her heart thumped in her ears. She saw what she would do when she grew up: declare her vocation, enter the convent. She and Sister Mary Anita would live in the nuns' house together, side by side. They would eat, work, eat, cook. To relax, Sister Mary Anita would hit pop flies and Dot would catch them.

Someday, one day, Dot and Mary Anita would be walking, their hands in their sleeves, long habits flowing behind.

"Dear Sister," Dot would say, "remember that old nickname you had the year you taught the sixth grade?"

"Why, no," Sister Mary Anita would say, smiling at her. "Why, no."

And Dot would know that she had protected her, kept her from harm.

It got worse. Dot wrote some letters, tore them up. Her hand shook when Sister passed her in the aisle, and her eyes closed, automatically, as she breathed in the air that closed behind the nun. Soap — a harsh soap. Faint carbolic mothballs. That's what she smelled like. Dizzying. Dot's fists clenched. She pressed her knuckles to her eyes and very loudly excused herself. She went to the girls' bathroom and stood in a stall. Her life was terrible. The thing was, she didn't want to be a nun.

"I don't want to!" she whispered, desperate, to the whitewashed tin walls that shuddered if a girl bumped them. "There must be another way."

She would have to persuade Mary Anita to forsake her vows, to come and live with Dot and her mother in the house just past the edge of town. How would she start, how would she persuade her teacher?

Someone was standing outside the stall. Dot opened the door a bit and stared into the great craggy face.

"Are you feeling all right? Do you need to go home?" Sister Mary Anita was concerned.

Fire shot through Dot's limbs. The girls' bathroom, a place of secrets, of frosted glass, its light mute and yet brilliant, paralyzed her. But she gathered herself. Here was her chance, as if God had given it to her.

"Please," Dot said, "let's run away together!"

Sister paused. "Are you having troubles at home?"

"No," Dot said.

Sister's milk-white hand came through the doorway and covered Dot's forehead. Dot's anxious thoughts throbbed against the lean palm. Staring into the eyes of the nun, Dot gripped the small metal knob on the inside of the door and pushed. Then she felt herself falling forward, slowly turning like a leaf in the wind, upheld and buoyant in the peaceful roar. It was as though she would never reach Sister's arms, but when she did, she came back with a jolt.

"You *are* ill," Sister said. "Come to the office, and we'll call your mother."

As Dot had known it would, perhaps from that moment in the girls' bathroom, the day came. The day of her reckoning.

Outside, in the morning schoolyard, after mass and before first bell, everyone crowded around Toddy Crieder. In his arms he held a wind-up tin Godzilla, a big toy, almost knee-high, a green-and-gold replica painted with a fierce eye for detail. The scales were perfect overlapping crescents, and the eyes were large and manic, pitch-black, oddly human. Toddy had pinned a sort of cloak on the thing, a black scarf. Dot's arms thrust through the packed shoulders, but the bell rang, and Toddy stowed the toy under his coat. His eyes picked Dot from the rest.

"I had to send for this!" he cried. The punch hadn't turned him against Dot, only hardened his resolve to please her. He vanished through the heavy wine-red doors of the school. Dot stared at the ground. The world went stark, the colors harsh in her eyes. The small brown pebbles of the

playground leaped off the tarred and sealed earth. She took a step. The stones seemed to crack and whistle under her feet.

"Last bell!" Sister Mary Anita called. "You'll be late!"

Morning prayer. The pledge. Toddy drew out the suspense of his audience, enjoying the glances and whispers. The toy was in his desk. Every so often he lifted the lid and then looked around to see how many children were watching him duck inside to make adjustments. By the time Sister started the daily reading lesson, the tension in the room was so acute that not even Toddy could bear it any longer.

The room was large, high-ceilinged, floored with slats of polished wood. Round lights hung on thick chains, and the great rectangular windows let through enormous sheaves of radiance. This large class had been in the room for more than two years. Dot had spent most of every day in the room. She knew its creaks, the muted clunk of desks rocking out of floor bolts, the mad thumping in the radiators like the sound of a thousand imprisoned elves, and so she heard and immediately registered the click and grind of Toddy's wind-up key. Sister Mary Anita did not. The teacher turned to the chalkboard, her book open on the desk, and began to write instructions for the children to copy.

She was absorbed, calling out the instructions as she wrote. Her arm swept up and down, it seemed to Dot, in a frighteningly innocent joy. She was inventing a lesson, some way of doing things, not a word of which was being taken in. All eyes were on the third row, where Toddy Crieder sat. All eyes were on his hand as he wound the toy up to its limit and bent over and set it on the floor. Then the eyes were on the toy itself, as Toddy lifted his hand away and the thing moved forward on its own.

The scarf it wore did not hamper the beast's progress, the regular thrash of its legs. The tiny claw hands beat forward like pistons and the thick metal tail whipped from side to side as the toy moved down the center of the aisle toward the front of the room, toward Sister Mary Anita, who stood, back turned, immersed in her work at the board.

Dot had gotten herself placed in the first row, to be closer to her teacher, and so she saw the creature up close just before it headed into the polished open space of floor at the front of the room. Its powerful jaws thrust from the black scarf; its great teeth were frozen, exhibited in a terrible smile. Its painted eyes had an eager and purposeful look.

Its movement faltered as it neared Mary Anita. The children caught their breath, but the thing inched forward, made slow and fascinating progress, directly toward the hem of her garment. She did not seem to notice. She continued to talk, to write, circling numbers and emphasizing certain words with careful underlines. And as she did so, as the moment neared, Dot's brain finally rang. She jumped as though it were the last bell of the day. She vaulted from her desk. Two steps took her across that gleaming space of wood at the front of the room. But just as she bent down to scoop the toy to her chest, a neat black boot slashed, inches from her nose. Sister Mary Anita had whirled, the chalk fixed in her hand. Daintily, casually, she had lifted her habit and kicked the toy dinosaur into the air. The thing ascended, pedaling its clawed feet, the scarf blown back like a sprung umbrella. The trajectory was straight and true. The toy knocked headfirst into the ceiling and came back down in pieces. The children ducked beneath the rain of scattered tin. Only Dot and Mary Anita stood poised, unmoving, focused on the moment between them.

Dot could look nowhere but at her teacher. But when she lifted her eyes this time, Sister Mary Anita was not looking at her. She had turned her face away, the rough cheek blotched as if it had borne a slap, the gaze hooded and set low. Sister walked to the window, her back again to Dot, to the class, and as the laughter started, uncomfortable and groaning at first, then shriller, fuller, becoming its own animal, Dot felt an unrecoverable tenderness boil up in her. Inwardly she begged the nun to turn and stop the noise. But Sister did not. She let it wash across them both without mercy. Dot lost sight of her unspeakable profile as Mary Anita looked out into the yard.

Bathed in brilliant light, the nun's face went as blank as a sheet of paper, as the sky, as featureless as all things that enter heaven.

# The Crime of the Mathematics Teacher - Clarice Lispector

(1945)

Translated from the Portuguese by Katrina Dodson

When the man reached the highest hill, the bells were ringing in the city below. Only the uneven rooftops were in sight. Nearby was the lone tree on the plateau. The man was standing there holding a heavy sack.

He looked down below with nearsighted eyes. The Catholics were entering the church slow and tiny, and he strained to hear the scattered voices of the children dispersed throughout the square. But despite the morning's clearness the sounds barely reached the high plain. He also saw the river that appeared motionless from above, and thought: it's Sunday. In the distance he saw the highest mountain with its dry slopes. It wasn't cold but he drew his sport coat around him more snugly. At last he carefully laid the sack on the ground. He took off his glasses maybe to breathe better since, while holding his glasses, he breathed very deeply. Sunlight hit his lenses, which sent out piercing signals. Without his glasses, his eyes blinked brightly, almost youthful, unfamiliar. He put his glasses back on, became a middle-aged man and picked up the sack again: it was heavy as if made of stone, he thought. He squinted trying to make out the river's current, tilting his head to catch any noises: the river was at a standstill and only the hardier sound of a single voice reached those heights for an instant — yes, he was quite alone. The cool air was inhospitable, since he'd been living in a warmer city. The branches of the lone tree on the plateau swayed. He looked at it. He was biding his time. Until he decided there was no reason to wait any longer.

And nevertheless he waited. His glasses must have been bothering him because he took them off again, breathed deeply and tucked them into his pocket.

He then opened the sack, peered partway into it. Next he put his bony hand inside and started pulling out the dead dog. His whole being was focused solely on that important hand and he kept his eyes deeply shut as he pulled. When he opened them, the air was even brighter and the joyful bells pealed once more summoning the faithful to the solace of punishment.

The unknown dog was out in the open.

Then he set to work methodically. He picked up the stiff, black dog, laid it in a depression in the ground. But, as if he'd already done too much, he put on his glasses, sat beside the dog and started surveying the landscape.

He saw very clearly, and with a certain futility the deserted plateau. But he noted precisely that when seated he could no longer glimpse the town below. He breathed again. He reached back into the sack and pulled out the shovel. And considered which site to choose. Maybe under the tree. He caught himself musing that he'd bury this dog under the tree. But if it were the other one, the real dog, he'd actually bury it where he himself would like to be buried if he were dead: at the very center of the plateau, facing the sun with empty eyes. So, since the unknown dog was standing in for the "other" one, he wanted it, for the greater perfection of the act, to get exactly what the other would. There was no confusion whatsoever in the man's head. He coldly understood himself, no loose ends.

Soon, being excessively scrupulous, he became highly absorbed in rigorously trying to determine the middle of the plateau. It wasn't easy because the lone tree stood on one side and, marking a false center, divided the plain asymmetrically. Faced with this obstacle the man admitted: "I didn't need to bury him at the center, I'd have also buried the other one, let's say, right where I'm standing this very second." Because it was a question of granting the event the fatefulness of chance, the sign of an external and obvious occurrence — similar to the children in

the square and the Catholics entering the church — it was a question of rendering the fact as visible as possible on the surface of the world beneath the heavens. It was a question of exposing himself and exposing a fact, and not allowing the intimate and unpunished form of a thought.

At the idea of burying the dog where he was standing that very moment — the man recoiled with an agility that his small and singularly heavy body wouldn't allow. Because it seemed to him that beneath his feet the outline of the dog's grave had been drawn.

So he began digging right there, his shovel rhythmic. Sometimes he'd pause to take his glasses off and put them back on. He was sweating grievously. He didn't dig very deep but not because he wanted to save his energy. He didn't dig very deep because he thought lucidly: "if it were for the real dog, I'd dig a shallow hole, I'd bury him close to the surface." He thought that near the surface of the earth the dog wouldn't be deprived of its senses.

Finally he dropped the shovel, gently lifted the unknown dog and placed it in the grave.

What a strange face that dog had. When, with a start he'd come upon the dead dog on a street corner, the idea of burying it had made his heart so heavy and surprised, that he hadn't even noticed that stiff muzzle and crusted drool. It was a strange and objective dog.

The dog came up slightly higher than the hole he had dug and after being covered with dirt it would be a barely discernible mound on the plateau. That was exactly how he wanted it. He covered the dog with dirt and smoothed it over with his hands, feeling its shape under his palms intently and with pleasure as if he were petting it several times. The dog was now merely a feature of the terrain.

Then the man stood, brushed the dirt off his hands, and didn't give the grave another look. He thought with a certain pleasure: I think I've done everything. He gave a deep sigh, and an innocent smile of liberation. Yes, he'd done everything. His crime had been punished and he was free.

And now he could think freely about the real dog. He immediately started thinking about the real dog, which he'd avoided doing up till now. The real dog that even now must be wandering bewilderedly through the streets of the other town, sniffing all over that city where he no longer had a master.

He then started to think with some difficulty about the real dog as if he were trying to think with some difficulty about his real life. The fact that the dog was far away in that other city made the task difficult, though longing brought him closer to its memory.

"While I was making you in my image, you were making me in yours," he thought then with the aid of longing. "I gave you the name José to give you a name that would also serve as your soul. And you — how can I ever know what name you gave me? How much more you loved me than I loved you," he reflected curiously.

"We understood each other too well, you with the human name I gave you, I with the name you gave me that you never spoke except with your insistent gaze," thought the man smiling tenderly, now free to reminisce as he pleased.

"I remember you when you were little," he thought amused, "so small, cute and weak, wagging your tail, looking at me, and I unexpectedly finding in you a new form of having my soul. But, from then on, every day you were already starting to be a dog one could abandon. Meanwhile, our games were getting dangerous from so much understanding," the man recalled in satisfaction, "you ended up biting me and growling, I ended up hurling a book at you and laughing. But who knows what that fake laugh of mine meant. Every day you were a dog one could abandon."

"And how you sniffed at the streets!" thought the man laughing a little, "you really didn't leave a single stone unsniffed ... That was your childish side. Or was it your true calling as a dog? and the rest was just playing at being mine? Because you were indomitable. And, calmly wagging your tail, you seemed to reject silently the name I'd given you. Ah, yes, you were indomitable: I didn't want you to eat meat so you wouldn't get ferocious, but one day you leaped



onto the table and, as the children happily shouted, snatched the meat and, with a ferocity that doesn't come from what you eat, you stared at me mute and indomitable with the meat in your mouth. Because, though you were mine, you never yielded to me even a little of your past or your nature. And, worried, I started to understand that you didn't demand that I give up anything of mine to love you, and this started to bother me. It was at the endpoint of the stubborn reality of our two natures that you expected us to understand each other. My ferocity and yours shouldn't be exchanged out of sweetness: that was what you taught me little by little, and that too was starting to weigh on me. By not asking anything of me, you asked too much. From yourself, you demanded that you be a dog. From me, you demanded that I be a man. And I, I pretended as best I could. Sometimes, sitting back on your paws in front of me, how you'd stare at me! So I'd look at the ceiling, cough, pretend not to notice, examine my nails. But nothing affected you: you went on staring at me. Who were you going to tell? Pretend — I'd tell myself — quick pretend you're someone else, give a false interview, pet him, throw him a bone — but nothing distracted you: you went on staring at me. What a fool I was. I shuddered in horror, when you were the innocent one: if I turned around and suddenly showed you my true face, and, bristling, hurt, you'd drag yourself over to the door forever wounded. Oh, every day you were a dog one could abandon. One could choose to. But you, trusting, wagged your tail.

"Sometimes, touched by your perceptiveness, I'd manage to see your particular anguish in you. Not the anguish of being a dog which was your only possible form. But the anguish of existing so perfectly that it was becoming an unbearable joy: then you'd leap and lick my face with a freely given love and a certain threat of hatred as if I were the one who, through friendship, had exposed you. I'm pretty sure now I wasn't the one who had a dog. You were the one who had a person.

"But you possessed a person so powerful that he could choose: and so he abandoned you. With relief he abandoned you. With relief, yes, since you demanded — with the serene and simple incomprehension of one who is a heroic dog — that I be a man. He abandoned you with an excuse the whole household approved of: since how could I move house with all that baggage and family, and on top of that a dog, while adjusting to a new high school and a new city, and on top of that a dog? 'Who there's no room for,' said Marta being practical. 'Who'll bother the other passengers,' reasoned my mother-in-law without knowing that I'd already thought of excuses, and the children cried, and I looked neither at them nor at you, José. But you and I alone know that I abandoned you because you were the constant possibility of the crime never committed. The possibility that I would sin which, in the concealment of my eyes, was already a sin. So I sinned right away to be guilty right away. And this crime stands in for the greater crime that I wouldn't have the nerve to commit," thought the man ever more lucidly.

"There are so many ways to be guilty and lose yourself forever and betray yourself and not face yourself. I chose to hurt a dog," thought the man. "Because I knew that would be a lesser crime and that no one goes to Hell for abandoning a dog that trusted a man. Because I knew that crime wasn't punishable."

As he sat on the plateau, his mathematical head was cool and intelligent. Only now did he seem to comprehend, in all his icy plenitude, that what he'd done to the dog was truly unpunished and everlasting. For they hadn't yet invented a punishment for the great concealed crimes and for the profound betrayals.

A man might yet outsmart the Last Judgment. No one condemned him for this crime. Not even the Church. "They're all my accomplices, José. I'd have to go door to door and beg them to accuse me and punish me: they'd all slam the door on me with suddenly hardened faces. No one condemns me for this crime. Not even you, José, would condemn me. For all I'd have to do, powerful as I am, is decide to call you — and, emerging from your abandonment in the streets, in one leap you'd lick my cheek with joy and forgiveness. I'd turn the other cheek for you to kiss."

The man took off his glasses, sighed, put them back on.

He looked at the covered grave. Where he had buried an unknown dog in tribute to the abandoned dog, attempting at last to repay the debt that distressingly no one was demanding. Attempting to punish himself with an act of kindness and be freed of his crime. The way someone gives alms in order at last to eat the cake for which another went without bread.

But as if José, the abandoned dog, demanded much more from him than this lie; as if he were demanding that he, in a final push, be a man — and as a man take responsibility for his crime — he looked at the grave where he had buried his weakness and his condition.

And now, more mathematically still, he sought a way not to have punished himself. He shouldn't be consoled. He coolly sought a way to destroy the false burial of the unknown dog. He crouched then, and, solemn, calm, with simple movements — unburied the dog. The dark dog at last appeared whole, unfamiliar with dirt in its eyelashes, its eyes open and glazed over. And thus the mathematics teacher renewed his crime forever. The man then looked around and to the heavens beseeching a witness to what he had done. And as if that still weren't enough, he started descending the slopes toward the bosom of his family.

# Désirée's Baby - Kate Chopin

(1893)

As the day was pleasant, Madame Valmondé drove over to L'Abri to see Désirée and the baby.

It made her laugh to think of Désirée with a baby. Why, it seemed but yesterday that Désirée was little more than a baby herself; when Monsieur in riding through the gateway of Valmondé had found her lying asleep in the shadow of the big stone pillar.

The little one awoke in his arms and began to cry for "Dada." That was as much as she could do or say. Some people thought she might have strayed there of her own accord, for she was of the toddling age. The prevailing belief was that she had been purposely left by a party of Texans, whose canvas-covered wagon, late in the day, had crossed the ferry that Coton Maïs kept, just below the plantation. In time Madame Valmondé abandoned every speculation but the one that Désirée had been sent to her by a beneficent Providence to be the child of her affection, seeing that she was without child of the flesh. For the girl grew to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere, — the idol of Valmondé.

It was no wonder, when she stood one day against the stone pillar in whose shadow she had lain asleep, eighteen years before, that Armand Aubigny riding by and seeing her there, had fallen in love with her. That was the way all the Aubignys fell in love, as if struck by a pistol shot. The wonder was that he had not loved her before; for he had known her since his father brought him home from Paris, a boy of eight, after his mother died there. The passion that awoke in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles.

Monsieur Valmondé grew practical and wanted things well considered: that is, the girl's obscure origin. Armand looked into her eyes and did not care. He was reminded that she was nameless. What did it matter about a name when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana? He ordered the corbeille from Paris, and contained himself with what patience he could until it arrived; then they were married.

Madame Valmondé had not seen Désirée and the baby for four weeks. When she reached L'Abri she shuddered at the first sight of it, as she always did. It was a sad looking place, which for many years had not known the gentle presence of a mistress, old Monsieur Aubigny having married and buried his wife in France, and she having loved her own land too well ever to leave it. The roof came down steep and black like a cowl, reaching out beyond the wide galleries that encircled the yellow stuccoed house. Big, solemn oaks grew close to it, and their thick-leaved, far-reaching branches shadowed it like a pall. Young Aubigny's rule was a strict one, too, and under it his negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old master's easy-going and indulgent lifetime.

The young mother was recovering slowly, and lay full length, in her soft white muslins and laces, upon a couch. The baby was beside her, upon her arm, where he had fallen asleep, at her breast. The yellow nurse woman sat beside a window fanning herself.

Madame Valmondé bent her portly figure over Désirée and kissed her, holding her an instant tenderly in her arms. Then she turned to the child.

"This is not the baby!" she exclaimed, in startled tones. French was the language spoken at Valmondé in those days.

"I knew you would be astonished," laughed Désirée, "at the way he has grown. The little cochon de lait! Look at his legs, mamma, and his hands and finger-nails, — real finger-nails. Zandrine had to cut them this morning. Isn't it true, Zandrine?"

The woman bowed her turbaned head majestically, "Mais si, Madame."

"And the way he cries," went on Désirée, "is deafening. Armand heard him the other day as far away as La Blanche's cabin."

Madame Valmondé had never removed her eyes from the child. She lifted it and walked with it over to the window that was lightest. She scanned the baby narrowly, then looked as searchingly at Zandrine, whose face was turned to gaze across the fields.

"Yes, the child has grown, has changed;" said Madame Valmondé, slowly, as she replaced it beside its mother. "What does Armand say?"

Désirée's face became suffused with a glow that was happiness itself.

"Oh, Armand is the proudest father in the parish, I believe, chiefly because it is a boy, to bear his name; though he says not, — that he would have loved a girl as well. But I know it isn't true I know he says that to please me. And mamma," she added, drawing Madame Valmondé's head down to her, and speaking in a whisper, "he hasn't punished one of them — not one of them — since baby is born. Even Négrillon, who pretended to have burnt his leg that he might rest from work — he only laughed, and said Négrillon was a great scamp. Oh, mamma, I'm so happy; it frightens me."

What Désirée said was true. Marriage, and later the birth of his son had softened Armand Aubigny's imperious and exacting nature greatly. This was what made the gentle Désirée so happy, for she loved him desperately. When he frowned she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God. But Armand's dark, handsome face had not often been disfigured by frowns since the day he fell in love with her.

When the baby was about three months old, Désirée awoke one day to the conviction that there was something in the air menacing her peace. It was at first too subtle to grasp. It had only been a disquieting suggestion; an air of mystery among the blacks; unexpected visits from far-off neighbors who could hardly account for their coming. Then a strange, an awful change in her husband's manner, which she dared not ask him to explain. When he spoke to her, it was with averted eyes, from which the old love-light seemed to have gone out. He absented himself from home; and when there, avoided her presence and that of her child, without excuse. And the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves. Désirée was miserable enough to die.

She sat in her room, one hot afternoon, in her peignoir, listlessly drawing through her fingers the strands of her long, silky brown hair that hung about her shoulders. The baby, half naked, lay asleep upon her own great mahogany bed, that was like a sumptuous throne, with its satin-lined half-canopy. One of La Blanche's little quadroon boys — half naked too — stood fanning the child slowly with a fan of peacock feathers. Désirée's eyes had been fixed absently and sadly upon the baby, while she was striving to penetrate the threatening mist that she felt closing about her. She looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over. "Ah!" It was a cry that she could not help; which she was not conscious of having uttered. The blood turned like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face.

She tried to speak to the little quadroon boy; but no sound would come, at first. When he heard his name uttered, he looked up, and his mistress was pointing to the door. He laid aside the great, soft fan, and obediently stole away, over the polished floor, on his bare tiptoes.

She stayed motionless, with gaze riveted upon her child, and her face the picture of fright. Presently her husband entered the room, and without noticing her, went to a table and began to search among some papers which covered it.

"Armand," she called to him, in a voice which must have stabbed him, if he was human. But he did not notice. "Armand," she said again. Then she rose and tottered towards him. "Armand," she panted once more, clutching his arm, "look at our child. What does it mean? tell me."

He coldly but gently loosened her fingers from about his arm and thrust the hand away from him. "Tell me what it means!" she cried despairingly.

"It means," he answered lightly, "that the child is not white; it means that you are not white."

A quick conception of all that this accusation meant for her nerved her with unwonted courage to deny it. "It is a lie; it is not true, I am white! Look at my hair, it is brown; and my eyes are gray, Armand, you know they are gray. And my skin is fair," seizing his wrist. "Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand," she laughed hysterically.

"As white as La Blanche's," he returned cruelly; and went away leaving her alone with their child.

When she could hold a pen in her hand, she sent a despairing letter to Madame Valmondé.

"My mother, they tell me I am not white. Armand has told me I am not white. For God's sake tell them it is not true. You must know it is not true. I shall die. I must die. I cannot be so unhappy, and live."

The answer that came was as brief:

"My own Désirée: Come home to Valmondé; back to your mother who loves you. Come with your child."

When the letter reached Désirée she went with it to her husband's study, and laid it open upon the desk before which he sat. She was like a stone image: silent, white, motionless after she placed it there.

In silence he ran his cold eyes over the written words. He said nothing. "Shall I go, Armand?" she asked in tones sharp with agonized suspense.

"Yes, go."

"Do you want me to go?"

"Yes, I want you to go."

He thought Almighty God had dealt cruelly and unjustly with him; and felt, somehow, that he was paying Him back in kind when he stabbed thus into his wife's soul. Moreover he no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name.

She turned away like one stunned by a blow, and walked slowly towards the door, hoping he would call her back.

"Good-by, Armand," she moaned.

He did not answer her. That was his last blow at fate.

Désirée went in search of her child. Zandrine was pacing the sombre gallery with it.

She took the little one from the nurse's arms with no word of explanation, and descending the steps, walked away, under the live-oak branches.

It was an October afternoon; the sun was just sinking. Out in the still fields the negroes were picking cotton.

Désirée had not changed the thin white garment nor the slippers which she wore. Her hair was uncovered and the sun's rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes. She did not take the broad, beaten road which led to the far-off plantation of Valmondé. She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds.

She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again.

Some weeks later there was a curious scene enacted at L'Abri. In the centre of the smoothly swept back yard was a great bonfire. Armand Aubigny sat in the wide hallway that commanded a view of the spectacle; and it was he who dealt out to a half dozen negroes the material which kept this fire ablaze.

A graceful cradle of willow, with all its dainty furbishings, was laid upon the pyre, which had already been fed with the richness of a priceless layette. Then there were silk gowns, and velvet and satin ones added to these; laces, too, and embroideries; bonnets and gloves; for the corbeille had been of rare quality.

The last thing to go was a tiny bundle of letters; innocent little scribblings that Désirée had sent to him during the days of their espousal. There was the remnant of one back in the drawer

from which he took them. But it was not Désirée's; it was part of an old letter from his mother to his father. He read it. She was thanking God for the blessing of her husband's love: —

"But, above all," she wrote, "night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery."

# Gogol - Jhumpa Lahiri

(2003)

In a hospital waiting room in Cambridge, Ashoke Ganguli hunches over a Boston *Globe* from a month ago, abandoned on a neighboring chair. He reads about the riots that took place during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago and about Dr. Benjamin Spock, the baby doctor, being sentenced to two years in jail for threatening to counsel draft evaders. The Favre Leuba strapped to his wrist is running six minutes ahead of the large gray-faced clock on the wall. It is four-thirty in the morning.

He desperately needs a cup of tea, not having managed to make one before leaving the house. But the machine in the corridor dispenses only coffee, tepid at best, in paper cups. He takes off his thick-rimmed glasses, fitted by a Calcutta optometrist, and polishes the lenses with the cotton handkerchief he always keeps in his pocket, "A" for Ashoke embroidered by his mother in light-blue thread. His black hair, normally combed back neatly from his forehead, is dishevelled, sections of it on end. He stands and begins pacing, as the other expectant fathers do. The men wait with cigars, flowers, address books, bottles of champagne. They smoke cigarettes, ashing onto the floor. Ashoke, a doctoral candidate in electrical engineering at M.I.T., is indifferent to such indulgences. He neither smokes nor drinks alcohol of any kind. Ashima is the one who keeps all their addresses, in a small notebook she carries in her purse. It has never occurred to him to buy his wife flowers.

He returns to the *Globe*, still pacing as he reads. A slight limp causes Ashoke's right foot to drag almost imperceptibly with each step. Since childhood he has had the habit and the ability to read while walking, holding a book in one hand on his way to school, from room to room in his parents' three-story house in Alipore, and up and down the red clay stairs. Nothing roused him. Nothing distracted him. Nothing caused him to stumble. As a teen-ager he had gone through all of Dickens. He read newer authors as well, Graham Greene and Somerset Maugham, all purchased from his favorite stall on College Street with *pujo* money. But most of all he loved the Russians. His paternal grandfather, a former professor of European literature at Calcutta University, had read from them aloud in English translation when Ashoke was a boy. Each day at teatime, as his brothers and sisters played *kabadi* and cricket outside, Ashoke would go to his grandfather's room, and for an hour his grandfather would read supine on the bed, his ankles crossed and the book propped open on his chest, Ashoke curled at his side. For that hour Ashoke was deaf and blind to the world around him. He did not hear his brothers and sisters laughing on the rooftop, or see the tiny, dusty, cluttered room in which his grandfather read. "Read all the Russians, and then reread them," his grandfather had said. "They will never fail you." When Ashoke's English was good enough, he began to read the books himself. It was while walking on some of the world's noisiest, busiest streets, on Chowringhee and Gariahat Road, that he had read pages of "The Brothers Karamazov," and "Anna Karenina," and "Fathers and Sons." Ashoke's mother was always convinced that her eldest son would be hit by a bus or a tram, his nose deep into "War and Peace" — that he would be reading a book the moment he died.

One day, in the earliest hours of October 20, 1961, this nearly happened. Ashoke was twenty-two, a student at Bengal Engineering College. He was travelling on the No. 83 Up Howrah-Ranchi Express to visit his grandparents in Jamshedpur, where they had moved upon his grandfather's retirement from the university. Ashoke had never spent the Durga *pujo* holidays away from his family. But his grandfather had recently gone blind, and he had requested Ashoke's company specifically, to read him *The Statesman* in the morning, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy in the afternoon. Ashoke accepted the invitation eagerly. He carried two suitcases, the first one containing clothes and gifts, the second empty. For it would be on this visit, his

grandfather had said, that the books in his glass-fronted case, collected over a lifetime and preserved under lock and key, would be given to Ashoke. He had already received a few in recent years, given to him on birthdays and other special occasions. But now that the day had come to inherit the rest, the day his grandfather could no longer read the books himself, Ashoke was saddened, and as he placed the empty suitcase under his seat he was disconcerted by its weightlessness, regretful of the circumstances that would cause it, upon his return, to be full.

He carried a single volume for the journey, a hardbound collection of short stories by Nikolai Gogol, which his grandfather had given him when he'd graduated from class twelve. On the title page, beneath his grandfather's signature, Ashoke had written his own. Because of his passion for this particular book, the spine had recently split, threatening to divide the pages into two sections. His favorite story in the book was the last, "The Overcoat," and that was the one Ashoke had begun to reread as the train, late in the evening, pulled out of Howrah Station with a prolonged and deafening shriek, away from his parents and his six younger brothers and sisters, all of whom had come to see him off, and had huddled until the last moment by the window, waving to him from the long, dusky platform.

Outside the view turned quickly black, the scattered lights of Howrah giving way to nothing at all. He had a second-class sleeper, in the seventh bogie behind the air-conditioned coach. Because of the season, the train was especially crowded, filled with families on holiday. Small children were wearing their best clothing, the girls with brightly colored ribbons in their hair. He shared his compartment with three others. There was a middle-aged Bihari couple who, he gathered from overhearing their conversation, had just married off their eldest daughter, and a friendly, potbellied, middle-aged Bengali businessman wearing a suit and tie, by the name of Ghosh. Ghosh told Ashoke that he had recently spent two years in England on a job voucher, but that he had come back home because his wife was inconsolably miserable abroad. Ghosh spoke reverently of England. The sparkling, empty streets, the polished black cars, the rows of gleaming white houses, he said, were like a dream. Trains departed and arrived according to schedule, Ghosh said. No one spat on the sidewalks. It was in a British hospital that his son had been born.

"Seen much of this world?" Ghosh asked Ashoke, untying his shoes and settling himself cross-legged on the berth. He pulled a packet of Dunhill cigarettes from his jacket pocket, offering them around the compartment before lighting one for himself. "You are still young. Free," he said, spreading his hands apart for emphasis. "Do yourself a favor. Before it's too late, without thinking too much about it first, pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will not regret it. One day it will be too late."

"My grandfather always says that's what books are for," Ashoke said, using the opportunity to open the volume in his hands. "To travel without moving an inch."

"To each his own," Ghosh said. He tipped his head politely to one side, letting the last of the cigarette drop from his fingertips. He reached into a bag by his feet and took out his diary, turning to the twentieth of October. The page was blank, and on it, with a fountain pen whose cap he ceremoniously unscrewed, he wrote his name and address. He ripped out the page and handed it to Ashoke. "If you ever change your mind and need contacts, let me know. I live in Tollygunge, just behind the tram depot."

"Thank you," Ashoke said, folding up the information and putting it at the back of his book.

"How about a game of cards?" Ghosh suggested. He pulled out a well-worn deck from his suit pocket, with an image of Big Ben on the back. But Ashoke politely declined. One by one the passengers brushed their teeth in the vestibule, changed into their pajamas, fastened the curtain around their compartments, and went to sleep. Ghosh offered to take the upper berth, climbing barefoot up the ladder, his suit carefully folded away, so that Ashoke had the window to himself. The Bihari couple shared some sweets from a box and drank water from the same cup without either of them putting their lips to the rim, then settled into their berths as well, switching off the



lights and turning their heads to the wall.

Only Ashoke continued to read, still seated, still dressed. A single small bulb glowed dimly over his head. From time to time he looked through the open window at the inky Bengal night, at the vague shapes of palm trees and the simplest of homes. Carefully he turned the soft yellow pages of his book, a few delicately tunnelled by worms. The steam engine puffed reassuringly, powerfully. Deep in his chest he felt the rough jostle of the wheels. Sparks from the smokestack passed by his window. A fine layer of sticky soot dotted one side of his face, his eyelid, his arm, his neck; his grandmother would insist that he scrub himself with a cake of Margo soap as soon as he arrived. Immersed in the sartorial plight of Akaky Akakievich, lost in the wide, snow-white, windy avenues of St. Petersburg, unaware that one day he was to dwell in a snowy place himself, Ashoke was still reading at two-thirty in the morning, one of the few passengers on the train who was awake, when the locomotive engine and seven bogies derailed from the broad-gauge line. The sound was like a bomb exploding. The first four bogies capsized into a depression alongside the track. The fifth and sixth, containing the first-class and air-conditioned passengers, telescoped into each other, killing the passengers in their sleep. The seventh, where Ashoke was sitting, capsized as well, flung by the speed of the crash farther into the field. The accident occurred two hundred and nine kilometres from Calcutta, between the Ghatshila and Dhalbumgarh stations. More than an hour passed before the rescuers arrived, bearing lanterns and shovels and axes to pry bodies from the cars.

Ashoke can still remember their shouts, asking if anyone was alive. He remembers trying to shout back, unsuccessfully, his mouth emitting nothing but the faintest rasp. He remembers the sound of people half-dead around him, moaning and tapping on the walls of the train, whispering hoarsely for help, words that only those who were also trapped and injured could possibly hear. Blood drenched his chest and the left arm of his shirt. He had been thrust partway out the window. He remembers being unable to see anything at all; for the first hours he thought that perhaps, like his grandfather, he'd gone blind. He remembers the acrid odor of flames, the buzzing of flies, children crying, the taste of dust and blood on his tongue. They were nowhere, somewhere in a field. Milling about them were villagers, police inspectors, a few doctors. He remembers believing that he was dying, that perhaps he was already dead. He could not feel the lower half of his body, and so was unaware that the mangled limbs of Ghosh were draped over his legs. Eventually he saw the cold, unfriendly blue of earliest morning, the moon and a few stars still lingering in the sky. The pages of his book, which had been tossed from his hand, fluttered in two sections a few feet away from the train. The glare from a search lantern briefly caught the pages, momentarily distracting one of the rescuers. "Nothing here," Ashoke heard someone say. "Let's keep going."

But the lantern's light lingered, just long enough for Ashoke to raise his hand, a gesture that he believed would consume the small fragment of life left in him. He was still clutching a single page of "The Overcoat," crumpled tightly in his fist, and when he raised his hand the wad of paper dropped from his fingers. "Wait!" he heard a voice cry out. "The fellow by that book. I saw him move."

He was pulled from the wreckage, placed on a stretcher, transported on another train to a hospital in Tatanagar. He had broken his pelvis, his right femur, and three of his ribs on the right side. For the next year of his life he lay flat on his back, ordered to keep as still as possible while the bones of his body healed. There was a risk that his right leg might be permanently paralyzed. He was transferred to Calcutta Medical College, where two screws were put into his hips. By December he had returned to his parents' house in Alipore, carried through the courtyard and up the red clay stairs like a corpse, hoisted on the shoulders of his four brothers. Three times a day he was spoon-fed. He urinated and defecated into a tin pan. Doctors and visitors came and went. Even his blind grandfather from Jamshedpur paid a visit. His family had saved the newspaper accounts. In a photograph, Ashoke observed the train smashed to shards, piled jaggedly against

the sky, security guards sitting on the unclaimed belongings. He learned that fishplates and bolts had been found several feet from the main track, giving rise to the suspicion, never subsequently confirmed, of sabotage. "*holiday-makers' tryst with death*," the *Times of India* had written.

During the day he was groggy from painkillers. At night he dreamed either that he was still trapped inside the train or, worse, that the accident had never happened, that he was walking down a street, taking a bath, sitting cross-legged on the floor and eating a plate of food. And then he would wake up, coated in sweat, tears streaming down his face, convinced that he would never live to do such things again. Eventually, in an attempt to avoid his nightmares, he began to read, late at night, which was when his motionless body felt most restless, his mind agile and clear. Yet he refused to read the Russians his grandfather had brought to his bedside, or any novels, for that matter. Those books, set in countries he had never seen, reminded him only of his confinement. Instead he read his engineering books, trying his best to keep up with his courses, solving equations by flashlight. In those silent hours, he thought often of Ghosh. "Pack a pillow and a blanket," he heard Ghosh say. He remembered the address Ghosh had written, somewhere behind the tram depot in Tollygunge. Now it was the home of a widow, a fatherless son. Each day, to bolster his spirits, his family reminded him of the future, the day he would stand unassisted, walk across the room. It was for this, each day, that his father and mother prayed. But, as the months passed, Ashoke began to envision another sort of future. He imagined not only walking, but walking away, as far as he could, from the place where he was born and where he had nearly died. The following year, walking with a cane, he returned to college and graduated, and without telling his parents he applied to continue his engineering studies abroad. Only after he'd been accepted with a full fellowship, a newly issued passport in hand, did he inform them of his plans. "But we already nearly lost you once," his bewildered father had protested. His siblings had pleaded and wept. His mother, speechless, had refused food for three days. In spite of all that, he'd gone.

Seven years later, there are still certain images that wipe him flat. They lurk around a corner as he rushes through the engineering department at M.I.T. They hover by his shoulder as he leans over a plate of rice at dinnertime, or nestles against Ashima's limbs at night. At every turning point in his life — at his wedding, in Calcutta, when he stood behind Ashima, encircling her waist and peering over her shoulder as they poured puffed rice into a fire, or during his first hours in America, seeing a small gray city caked with snow — he has tried but failed to push these images away: the twisted, battered, capsized bogies of the train, his body twisted below it, the terrible crunching sound he had heard but not comprehended, his bones crushed as fine as flour. It is not the memory of pain that haunts him; he has no memory of that. It is the memory of waiting before he was rescued, and the persistent fear, rising up in his throat, that he might not have been rescued at all. At times he still presses his ribs to make sure they are solid.

He presses them now, in the hospital, shaking his head in relief, disbelief. Although it is Ashima who carries the child, he, too, feels heavy, with the thought of life, of his life and the life about to come from it. He was raised without running water, nearly killed at twenty-two. He was born twice in India, and then a third time, in America. Three lives by thirty. For this he thanks his parents, and their parents, and the parents of their parents. He does not thank God; he openly reveres Marx and quietly refuses religion. Instead of thanking God he thanks Gogol, the Russian writer who had saved his life, when the nurse enters the waiting room.

The baby, a boy, is born at half past five in the morning. He measures twenty inches long, weighs seven pounds nine ounces. When Ashoke arrives, the nurse is taking Ashima's blood pressure, and Ashima is reclining against a pile of pillows, the child wrapped like an oblong white parcel in her arms. Beside the bed is a bassinet, labelled with a card that says "Baby Boy Ganguli."

"He's here," she says quietly, looking up at Ashoke with a weak smile. Her skin is faintly yellow, the color missing from her lips. She has circles beneath her eyes, and her hair, spilling

from its braid, looks as though it had not been combed for days. Her voice is hoarse, as if she'd caught a cold. He pulls up a chair by the side of the bed and the nurse helps to transfer the child from mother's to father's arms. In the process, the child pierces the silence in the room with a short-lived cry. His parents react with mutual alarm, but the nurse laughs approvingly. "You see," she says to Ashima, "he's already getting to know you."

At first Ashoke is more perplexed than moved, by the pointiness of the head, the puffiness of the lids, the small white spots on the cheeks, the fleshy upper lip that droops prominently over the lower one. The skin is paler than either Ashima's or his own, translucent enough to show slim green veins at the temples. The scalp is covered by a mass of wispy black hair. He attempts to count the eyelashes. He feels gently through the flannel for the hands and feet.

"It's all there," Ashima says, watching her husband. "I already checked."

"What are the eyes like? Why won't he open them? Has he opened them?"

She nods.

"What can he see? Can he see us?"

"I think so. But not very clearly. And not in full color. Not yet."

They sit in silence, the three of them as still as stones. "How are you feeling? Was it all right?" he asks Ashima after a while.

But there is no answer, and when Ashoke lifts his gaze from his son's face he sees that she, too, is sleeping.

When he looks back to the child, the eyes are open, staring up at him, unblinking, as dark as the hair on its head. The face is transformed; Ashoke has never seen a more perfect thing. He imagines himself as a dark, grainy, blurry presence. As a father to his son. Being rescued from that shattered train had been the first miracle of his life. But here, now, reposing in his arms, weighing next to nothing but changing everything, is the second.

Because neither set of grandparents has a working telephone, the couple's only link to home is by telegram, which Ashoke has sent to both sides in Calcutta: "With your blessings, boy and mother fine." As for a name, they have decided to let Ashima's grandmother, who is past eighty now, who has named each of her six other great-grandchildren in the world, do the honors. Ashima's grandmother has mailed the letter herself, walking with her cane to the post office, her first trip out of the house in a decade. The letter contains one name for a girl, one for a boy. Ashima's grandmother has revealed them to no one.

Though the letter was sent a month ago, in July, it has yet to arrive. Ashima and Ashoke are not terribly concerned. After all, they both know, an infant doesn't really need a name. He needs to be fed and blessed, to be given some gold and silver, to be patted on the back after feedings and held carefully behind the neck. Names can wait. In India parents take their time. It wasn't unusual for years to pass before the right name, the best possible name, was determined. Ashima and Ashoke can both cite examples of cousins who were not officially named until they were registered, at six or seven, in school. Besides, there are always pet names to tide one over: a practice of Bengali nomenclature grants, to every single person, two names. In Bengali the word for "pet name" is *daknam*, meaning literally the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments. Pet names are a persistent remnant of childhood, a reminder that life is not always so serious, so formal, so complicated. They are a reminder, too, that one is not all things to all people. Every pet name is paired with a "good name," a *bhalonam*, for identification in the outside world. Consequently, good names appear on envelopes, on diplomas, in telephone directories, and in all other public places. Good names tend to represent dignified and enlightened qualities. Ashima means "she who is limitless, without borders." Ashoke, the name of an emperor, means "he who transcends grief." Pet names have no such aspirations. They are never recorded officially, only uttered and remembered.

Three days come and go. Ashima is shown by the nursing staff how to change diapers and how to clean the umbilical stub. She is given hot saltwater baths to soothe her bruises and

stitches. She is given a list of pediatricians, and countless brochures on breast-feeding and bonding and immunizing, and samples of baby shampoos and Q-Tips and creams. The fourth day there is good news and bad news. The good news is that Ashima and the baby are to be discharged the following morning. The bad news is that they are told by Mr. Wilcox, compiler of hospital birth certificates, that they must choose a name for their son. For they learn that in America a baby cannot be released from the hospital without a birth certificate. And that a birth certificate needs a name.

"But, sir," Ashima protests, "we can't possibly name him ourselves."

Mr. Wilcox, slight, bald, unamused, glances at the couple, both visibly distressed, then glances at the nameless child. "I see," he says. "The reason being?"

"We are waiting for a letter," Ashoke says, explaining the situation in detail.

"I see," Mr. Wilcox says again. "That is unfortunate. I'm afraid your only alternative is to have the certificate read 'Baby Boy Ganguli.' You will, of course, be required to amend the permanent record when a name is decided upon."

Ashima looks at Ashoke expectantly. "Is that what we should do?"

"I don't recommend it," Mr. Wilcox says. "You will have to appear before a judge, pay a fee. The red tape is endless."

"Oh dear," Ashoke says.

Mr. Wilcox nods, and silence ensues. "Don't you have any backups?" he asks. "Something in reserve, in case you didn't like what your grandmother has chosen."

Ashima and Ashoke shake their heads. It has never occurred to either of them to question Ashima's grandmother's selection, to disregard an elder's wishes in such a way.

"You can always name him after yourself, or one of your ancestors," Mr. Wilcox suggests, admitting that he is actually Howard Wilcox III. "It's a fine tradition. The kings of France and England did it," he adds.

But this isn't possible. This tradition doesn't exist for Bengalis, naming a son after father or grandfather, a daughter after mother or grandmother. This sign of respect in America and Europe, this symbol of heritage and lineage, would be ridiculed in India. Within Bengali families, individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are not meant to be inherited or shared.

"Then what about naming him after another person? Someone you greatly admire?" Mr. Wilcox says, his eyebrows raised hopefully. He sighs. "Think about it. I'll be back in a few hours," he tells them, exiting the room.

The door shuts, which is when, with a slight quiver of recognition, as if he'd known it all along, the perfect pet name for his son occurs to Ashoke.

"Hello, Gogol," he whispers, leaning over his son's haughty face, his tightly bundled body. "Gogol," he repeats, satisfied. The baby turns his head with an expression of extreme consternation and yawns.

Ashima approves, aware that the name stands not only for her son's life but for her husband's. She'd first heard the story of the accident soon after their marriage was arranged, when Ashoke was still a stranger to her. But the thought of it now makes her blood go cold. There are nights when she has been woken by her husband's muffled screams, times they have ridden the subway together and the rhythm of the wheels on the tracks makes him suddenly pensive, aloof. She has never read any Gogol herself, but she is willing to place him on a shelf in her mind, along with Tennyson and Wordsworth. When Mr. Wilcox returns with his typewriter, Ashoke spells out the name. Thus Gogol Ganguli is registered in the hospital's files. A first photograph, somewhat overexposed, is taken that broiling-hot, late summer's day: Gogol, an indistinct blanketed mass, reposing in his weary mother's arms. She stands on the steps of the hospital, staring at the camera, her eyes squinting into the sun. Her husband looks on from one side, his wife's suitcase in his hand, smiling with his head lowered. "Gogol enters the world," his father will eventually write on the back in Bengali letters.

Letters arrive from Ashima's parents, from Ashoke's parents, from aunts and uncles and cousins and friends, from everyone, it seems, but Ashima's grandmother. The letters are filled with every possible blessing and good wish, composed in an alphabet they have seen all around them for most of their lives, on billboards and newspapers and awnings, but which they see now only in these precious, pale-blue missives.

In November, when Gogol is three months old, he develops a mild ear infection. When Ashima and Ashoke see their son's pet name typed on the label of a prescription for antibiotics, when they see it at the top of his immunization record, it doesn't look right; pet names aren't meant to be made public in this way. But there is still no letter from Ashima's grandmother, and they are forced to conclude that it is lost in the mail. The very next day a letter arrives in Cambridge. The letter is dated three weeks ago, and from it they learn that Ashima's grandmother has had a stroke, that her right side is permanently paralyzed, her mind dim. She can no longer chew, barely swallows, remembers and recognizes little of her eighty-odd years. "She is with us still, but to be honest we have already lost her," Ashima's father has written. "Prepare yourself, Ashima. Perhaps you may not see her again."

It is their first piece of bad news from home. Ashoke barely knows Ashima's grandmother, only vaguely recalls touching her feet at his wedding, but Ashima is inconsolable for days. She sits at home with Gogol as the leaves turn brown and drop from the trees, as the days begin to grow quickly, mercilessly dark. Unlike Ashima's parents, and her other relatives, her grandmother, her dida, had not admonished Ashima not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair or forget her family the moment she landed in Boston. Her grandmother had not been fearful of such signs of betrayal; she was the only person to predict, rightly, that Ashima would never change. A few days before leaving Calcutta, Ashima had stood, her head lowered, under her late grandfather's portrait, asking him to bless her journey. Then she bent down to touch the dust of her dida's feet to her head.

"Dida, I'm coming," Ashima had said. For this was the phrase Bengalis always used in place of goodbye.

"Enjoy it," her grandmother had bellowed in her thundering voice, helping Ashima to straighten. With trembling hands, her grandmother had pressed her thumbs to the tears streaming down Ashima's face, wiping them away. "Do what I will never do. It will all be for the best. Remember that. Now go."

By 1971, the Gangulis have moved to a university town outside Boston, where Ashoke has been hired as an assistant professor of electrical engineering at the university. In exchange for teaching five classes, he earns sixteen thousand dollars a year. He is given his own office, with his name etched onto a strip of black plastic by the door. The job is everything Ashoke has ever dreamed of. He had always hoped to teach in a university rather than work for a corporation. What a thrill, he thinks, to stand lecturing before a roomful of American students. What a sense of accomplishment it gives him to see his name printed under "Faculty" in the university directory. From his fourth-floor office he has a sweeping view of the quadrangle, surrounded by vine-covered brick buildings. On Fridays, after he has taught his last class, he visits the library, to read international newspapers on long wooden poles. He reads about American planes bombing Vietcong supply routes in Cambodia, Naxalites being murdered on the streets of Calcutta, India and Pakistan going to war. At times he wanders up to the library's sun-filled, unpopulated top floor, where all the literature is shelved. He browses in the aisles, gravitating most often toward his beloved Russians, where he is particularly comforted, each time, by his son's name stamped in golden letters on the spines of a row of red and green and blue hardbound books.

Ashoke and Ashima purchase a shingled two-story colonial in a recently built development, a house previously occupied by no one, erected on a quarter acre of land. This is the small patch of America to which they lay claim. Gogol accompanies his parents to banks, sits waiting as they

sign the endless papers. Ashoke and Ashima are amazed, when moving by U-Haul to the new house, to discover how much they possess; each of them had come to America with a single suitcase, a few weeks' worth of clothes. The walls of the new house are painted, the driveway sealed with pitch, the shingles and sundeck weatherproofed and stained. Ashoke takes photographs of every room, Gogol standing somewhere in the frame, to send to relatives in India. He is a sturdily built child, with full cheeks but already pensive features. When he poses for the camera he has to be coaxed into a smile.

In the beginning, in the evenings, his family goes for drives, exploring their new environs bit by bit: the neglected dirt lanes, the shaded back roads. The back seat of the car is sheathed with plastic, the ashtrays on the doors still sealed. Sometimes they drive out of the town altogether, to one of the beaches along the North Shore. Even in summer, they never go to swim or to turn brown beneath the sun. Instead they go dressed in their ordinary clothes. By the time they arrive, the ticket collector's booth is empty, the crowds gone; there are only a handful of cars in the parking lot. Together, as the Gangulis drive, they anticipate the moment the thin blue line of ocean will come into view. On the beach Gogol collects rocks, digs tunnels in the sand. He and his father wander barefoot, their pant legs rolled halfway up their calves. He watches his father raise a kite within minutes into the wind, so high that Gogol must tip his head back in order to see, a rippling speck against the sky.

The August that Gogol turns five, Ashima discovers she is pregnant again. In the mornings she forces herself to eat a slice of toast, only because Ashoke makes it for her and watches her while she chews it in bed. Her head constantly spins. She spends her days lying down, a pink plastic wastepaper basket by her side, the shades drawn, her mouth and teeth coated with the taste of metal. Sometimes Gogol lies beside her in his parents' bedroom, reading a picture book, or coloring with crayons. "You're going to be an older brother," she tells him one day. "There'll be someone to call you Dada. Won't that be exciting?"

In the evenings, Gogol and his father eat together, alone, a week's worth of chicken curry and rice, which his father cooks in two battered Dutch ovens every Sunday. As the food reheats, his father tells Gogol to shut the bedroom door because his mother cannot tolerate the smell. It is odd to see his father presiding in the kitchen, standing in his mother's place at the stove. When they sit down at the table, the sound of his parents' conversation is missing.

Because his mother tends to vomit the moment she finds herself in a moving car, she is unable to accompany Ashoke to take Gogol, in September of 1973, to his first day of kindergarten at the town's public elementary school. By the time Gogol starts, it is already the second week of the school year. For the past week, Gogol has been in bed, just like his mother, listless, without appetite, claiming to have a stomach ache, even vomiting one day into his mother's pink wastepaper basket. He doesn't want to go to kindergarten. He doesn't want to wear the new clothes his mother has bought him from Sears, hanging on a knob of his dresser, or carry his Charlie Brown lunchbox, or board the yellow school bus that stops at the end of Pemberton Road.

There is a reason Gogol doesn't want to go to kindergarten. His parents have told him that at school, instead of being called Gogol, he will be called by a new name, a good name, which his parents have finally decided on, just in time for him to begin his formal education. The name, Nikhil, is artfully connected to the old. Not only is it a perfectly respectable Bengali good name, meaning "he who is entire, encompassing all," but it also bears a satisfying resemblance to Nikolai, the first name of the Russian Gogol's. Ashoke thought of it recently, staring mindlessly at the Gogol spines in the library, and he rushed back to the house to ask Ashima her opinion. He pointed out that it was relatively easy to pronounce, though there was the danger that Americans, obsessed with abbreviation, would truncate it to Nick. She told him she liked it well enough, though later, alone, she'd wept, thinking of her grandmother, who had died earlier in the year, and of the letter, forever hovering somewhere between India and America.

But Gogol can't understand why he has to answer to anything else. "Why do I have to have a new name?" he asks his parents, tears springing to his eyes. It would be one thing if his parents were to call him Nikhil, too. But they tell him that the new name will be used only by the teachers and children at school. He is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn't know. Who doesn't know him. His parents tell him that they each have two names, too, as do all their Bengali friends in America, and all their relatives in Calcutta. It's a part of growing up, they tell him, part of being a Bengali. They write it for him on a sheet of paper, ask him to copy it over ten times. "Don't worry," his father says. "To me and your mother, you will never be anyone but Gogol."

At school, Ashoke and Gogol are greeted by the secretary, who asks Ashoke to fill out a registration form. He provides a copy of Gogol's birth certificate and immunization records, which are put in a folder along with the registration. "This way," the secretary says, leading them to the principal's office. Candace Lapidus, the name on the door says. Mrs. Lapidus assures Ashoke that missing the first week of kindergarten is not a problem, that things have yet to settle down. Mrs. Lapidus is a tall, slender woman with short white-blond hair. She wears frosted blue eye shadow and a lemon-yellow suit. She shakes Ashoke's hand and tells him that there are two other Indian children at the school, Jayadev Modi, in the third grade, and Rekha Saxena, in fifth. Perhaps the Gangulis know them? Ashoke tells Mrs. Lapidus that they do not. She looks at the registration form and smiles kindly at the boy, who is clutching his father's hand. Gogol is dressed in powder-blue pants, red-and-white canvas sneakers, a striped turtleneck top.

"Welcome to elementary school, Nikhil. I am your principal, Mrs. Lapidus."

Gogol looks down at his sneakers. The way the principal pronounces his new name is different from the way his parents say it, the second part of it longer, sounding like "heel."

She bends down so that her face is level with his, and extends a hand to his shoulder. "Can you tell me how old you are, Nikhil?"

When the question is repeated and there is still no response, Mrs. Lapidus asks, "Mr. Ganguli, does Nikhil follow English?"

"Of course he follows," Ashoke says. "My son is perfectly bilingual."

In order to prove that Gogol knows English, Ashoke does something he has never done before, and addresses his son in careful, accented English. "Go on, Gogol," he says, patting him on the head. "Tell Mrs. Lapidus how old you are."

"What was that?" Mrs. Lapidus says.

"I beg your pardon, Madam?"

"That name you called him. Something with a 'G.'"

"Oh that, that is what we call him at home only. But his good name should be — is" — he nods his head firmly — "Nikhil."

Mrs. Lapidus frowns. "I'm afraid I don't understand. 'Good name'?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Lapidus studies the registration form. She has not had to go through this confusion with the two other Indian children.

"I'm not sure I follow you, Mr. Ganguli. Do you mean that Nikhil is a middle name? Or a nickname? Many of the children go by nicknames here. On this form there is a space — "

"No, no, it's not a middle name," Ashoke says. He is beginning to lose patience. "He has no middle name. No nickname. The boy's good name, his school name, is Nikhil."

Mrs. Lapidus presses her lips together and smiles. "But clearly he doesn't respond."

"Please, Mrs. Lapidus," Ashoke says. "It is very common for a child to be confused at first. Please give it some time. I assure you he will grow accustomed."

He bends down, and this time in Bengali, calmly and quietly, asks Gogol to please answer when Mrs. Lapidus asks a question. "Don't be scared, Gogol," he says, raising his son's chin with his finger. "You're a big boy now. No tears."

Though Mrs. Lapidus does not understand a word, she listens carefully, hears that name

again. Gogol. Lightly, in pencil, she writes it down on the registration form.

Ashoke hands over the lunchbox, a windbreaker in case it gets cold. He thanks Mrs. Lapidus. "Be good, Nikhil," he says in English. And then, after a moment's hesitation, Gogol's father is gone.

At the end of his first day he is sent home with a letter to his parents from Mrs. Lapidus, folded and stapled to a string around his neck, explaining that owing to their son's preference he will be known as Gogol at school. What about the parents' preference? Ashima and Ashoke wonder, shaking their heads.

And so Gogol's formal education begins. At the top of sheets of scratchy pale-yellow paper he writes out his pet name again and again, and the alphabet in capital and lowercase. He learns to add and subtract, and to spell his first words. In the front covers of the textbooks from which he is taught to read he leaves his legacy, writing his name in No. 2 pencil below a series of others. In art class, his favorite hour of the week, he carves his name with paper clips into the bottoms of clay cups and bowls. He pastes uncooked pasta to cardboard, and leaves his signature in fat brushstrokes below paintings. Day after day he brings his creations home to Ashima, who hangs them proudly on the refrigerator door. "Gogol G.," he signs his work in the lower right-hand corner, as if there were a need to distinguish him from any other Gogol in the school.

In May his sister is born. This time, Ashoke and Ashima are ready. They have the names lined up, for a boy or a girl. The only way to avoid confusion, they have concluded, is to do away with the pet name altogether, as many of their Bengali friends have already done. For their daughter, good name and pet name are one and the same: Sonali, meaning "she who is golden." Though Sonali is the name on her birth certificate, the name she will carry officially through life, at home they begin to call her Sonu, then Sona, and, finally, Sonia. Sonia makes her a citizen of the world. It's a Russian link to her brother, it's European, South American. Eventually it will be the name of the Indian Prime Minister's Italian wife.

As a young boy Gogol doesn't mind his name. He recognizes pieces of himself in road signs: "Go Left," "Go Right," "Go Slow." For birthdays his mother orders a cake on which his name is piped across the white frosted surface in a bright-blue sugary script. It all seems perfectly normal. It doesn't bother him that his name is never an option on key chains or refrigerator magnets. He has been told that he was named after a famous Russian author, born in a previous century. That the author's name, and therefore his, is known throughout the world and will live on forever. One day his father takes him to the university library, and shows him, on a shelf well beyond his reach, a row of Gogol spines. When his father opens up one of the books to a random page, the print is far smaller than in the Hardy Boys series Gogol has begun recently to enjoy. "In a few years," his father tells him, "you'll be ready to read them." Though substitute teachers at school always pause, looking apologetically when they arrive at his name on the roster, forcing Gogol to call out, before even being summoned, "That's me," his regular teachers know not to give it a second thought. After a year or two, the students no longer tease and say "Giggle" or "Gargle." In the programs of the school Christmas plays, the parents are accustomed to seeing his name among the cast. "Gogol is an outstanding student, curious and coöperative," his teachers write year after year on report cards. "Go, Gogol!" his classmates shout on golden autumn days as he runs the bases or sprints in a dash.

As for his last name, Ganguli, by the time he is ten he has been to Calcutta three times, twice in summer and once during Durga *pūjo*, and from the most recent trip he still remembers the sight of the name etched respectably into the pink stone façade of his paternal grandparents' house. He remembers the astonishment of seeing six pages full of Gangulis, three columns to a page, in the Calcutta telephone directory. He'd wanted to rip out the page as a souvenir, but, when he'd told this to one of his cousins, the cousin had laughed. On taxi rides through the city, going to visit the various homes of his relatives, his father had pointed out the name elsewhere, on the awnings of confectioners, and stationers, and opticians. He had told Gogol that Ganguli



was a legacy of the British, an anglicized way of pronouncing his real surname, Gangopadhyay.

Back home on Pemberton Road, he helps his father paste individual golden letters bought from a rack in the hardware store, spelling out Ganguli on one side of their mailbox. One morning, the day after Halloween, Gogol discovers, on his way to the bus stop, that it has been shortened to "Gang," with the word "green" scrawled in pencil following it. He runs back into the house, sickened, certain of the insult his father will feel. Though it is his last name, too, something tells Gogol that the desecration is intended for his parents more than for Sonia and him. For by now he is aware, in stores, of cashiers smirking at his parents' accents, and of salesmen who prefer to direct their conversation to Gogol, as though his parents were either incompetent or deaf. But his father is unaffected at such moments, just as he is unaffected by the mailbox. "It's only boys having fun," he tells Gogol, flicking the matter away with the back of a hand, and that evening they drive to the hardware store, to buy the missing letters again.

Gogol's fourteenth birthday. Like most events in his life, it is another excuse for his parents to throw a party for their Bengali friends. His own friends from school were invited the previous day, for pizzas that his father picked up on his way home from work, a basketball game watched together on television, some Ping-Pong in the den. His mother cooks for days beforehand, cramming the refrigerator with stacks of foil-covered trays. She makes sure to prepare his favorite things: lamb curry with lots of potatoes, luchis, thick *channa* dal with swollen brown raisins, pineapple chutney, sandeshes molded out of saffron-tinted ricotta cheese. All this is less stressful to her than the task of feeding a handful of American children, half of whom always claim they are allergic to milk, all of whom refuse to eat the crusts of their bread.

Close to forty guests come, from three different states. Women are dressed in saris far more dazzling than the pants and polo shirts their husbands wear. A group of men sit in a circle on the floor and immediately start a game of poker. These are all his *mashis* and *meshos*, his honorary aunts and uncles. Presents are opened when the guests are gone. Gogol receives several dictionaries, several calculators, several Cross pen-and-pencil sets, several ugly sweaters. His parents give him an Instamatic camera, a new sketchbook, colored pencils and the mechanical pen he'd asked for, and twenty dollars to spend as he wishes. Sonia has made him a card with Magic Markers, on paper she's ripped out of one of his own sketchbooks, which says "Happy Birthday Goggles," the name she insists on calling him instead of Dada. His mother sets aside the things he doesn't like, which is almost everything, to give to his cousins the next time they go to India. Later that night he is alone in his room, listening to side three of the White Album on his parents' cast-off RCA turntable. The album is a present from his American birthday party. Born when the band was near death, Gogol is a passionate devotee of John, Paul, George, and Ringo. He sits cross-legged on the bed, hunched over the lyrics, when he hears a knock on the door.

"Come in!" he hollers, expecting it to be Sonia in her pajamas, asking if she can borrow his Rubik's Cube. He is surprised to see his father, standing there in stocking feet, a small potbelly visible beneath his oat-colored sweater vest, his mustache turning gray. Gogol is especially surprised to see a gift in his father's hands. His father has never given him birthday presents apart from whatever his mother buys, but this year, his father says, walking across the room to where Gogol is sitting, he has something special. The gift is covered in red-and-green-and-gold-striped paper left over from Christmas the year before, taped awkwardly at the seams. It is obviously a book, thick, hardcover, wrapped by his father's own hands. Gogol lifts the paper slowly, but in spite of this the tape leaves a scab. "The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol," the jacket says. Inside, the price has been snipped away on the diagonal.

"I ordered it from the bookstore, just for you," his father says, his voice raised in order to be heard over the music. "It's difficult to find in hardcover these days. It's a British publication, a very small press. It took four months to arrive. I hope you like it."

Gogol leans over toward the stereo to turn the volume down a bit. He would have preferred

"The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," or even another copy of "The Hobbit" to replace the one he lost last summer in Calcutta, left on the rooftop of his father's house in Alipore and snatched away by crows. In spite of his father's occasional suggestions, he has never been inspired to read a word of Gogol, or of any Russian writer, for that matter. He has never been told why he was really named Gogol. He thinks his father's limp is the consequence of an injury playing soccer in his teens.

"Thanks, Baba," Gogol says, eager to return to his lyrics. Lately he's been lazy, addressing his parents in English, though they continue to speak to him in Bengali. Occasionally he wanders through the house with his running sneakers on. At dinner he sometimes uses a fork.

His father is still standing there in his room, watching expectantly, his hands clasped together behind his back, so Gogol flips through the book. A single picture at the front, on smoother paper than the rest of the pages, shows a pencil drawing of the author, sporting a velvet jacket, a billowy white shirt, and a cravat. The face is foxlike, with small, dark eyes, a thin, neat mustache, an extremely large pointy nose. Dark hair slants steeply across his forehead and is plastered to either side of his head, and there is a disturbing, vaguely supercilious smile set into long, narrow lips. Gogol Ganguli is relieved to see no resemblance.

For by now he's come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain. He hates having to tell people that it doesn't mean anything "in Indian." He hates having to wear a nametag on his sweater at Model United Nations Day at school. He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but, of all things, Russian. He hates having to live with it, with a pet name turned good name, day after day, second after second. He hates seeing it on the brown-paper sleeve of the *National Geographic* subscription his parents got him for his birthday the year before, and seeing it perpetually listed in the high honor roll printed in the town's newspaper. At times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, manages nevertheless to distress him physically, like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear. At times he wishes he could disguise it, shorten it somehow, the way the other Indian boy in his school, Jayadev, had got people to call him Jay. But Gogol, already short and catchy, resists mutation. Other boys his age have begun to court girls already, asking them to go to the movies or the pizza parlor, but he cannot imagine saying, "Hi, it's Gogol" under potentially romantic circumstances. He cannot imagine this at all.

From the little he knows about Russian writers, it dismays him that his parents chose the weirdest namesake. Leo or Anton, he could have lived with. Alexander, shortened to Alex, he would have greatly preferred. But Gogol sounds ludicrous to his ears, lacking dignity or gravity. What dismays him most is the irrelevance of it all. Gogol, he's been tempted to tell his father on more than one occasion, was his father's favorite author, not his. Then again, it's his own fault. He could have been known, at school at least, as Nikhil. That one day, his first day of kindergarten, which he no longer remembers, could have changed everything.

"Thanks again," Gogol tells his father now. He shuts the cover and swings his legs over the edge of the bed, to put the book away on his shelves. But his father takes the opportunity to sit beside him on the bed. For a moment he rests a hand on Gogol's shoulder. The boy's body, in recent months, has grown tall, nearly as tall as Ashoke's. The childhood pudginess has vanished from his face. The voice has begun to deepen, is slightly husky now. It occurs to Ashoke that he and his son probably wear the same size shoe. In the glow of the bedside lamp, Ashoke notices a scattered down emerging on his son's upper lip. An Adam's apple is prominent on his neck. The pale hands, like Ashima's, are long and thin. He wonders how closely Gogol resembles him at this age. But there are no photographs to document Ashoke's childhood; not until his passport, not until his life in America, does visual documentation exist. On the night table Ashoke sees a can of deodorant, a tube of Clearasil. He lifts the book from where it lies on the bed between them, running a hand protectively over the cover. "I took the liberty of reading it first. It has been

many years since I have read these stories. I hope you don't mind."

"No problem," Gogol says.

"I feel a special kinship with Gogol," Ashoke says, "more than with any other writer. Do you know why?"

"You like his stories."

"Apart from that. He spent most of his adult life outside his homeland. Like me."

Gogol nods. "Right."

"And there is another reason." The music ends and there is silence. But then Gogol flips the record, turning the volume up on "Revolution 1."

"What's that?" Gogol says, a bit impatiently.

Ashoke looks around the room. He notices the Lennon obituary pinned to the bulletin board, and then a cassette of classical Indian music he'd bought for Gogol months ago, after a concert at Kresge, still sealed in its wrapper. He sees the pile of birthday cards scattered on the carpet, and remembers a hot August day fourteen years ago in Cambridge when he held his son for the first time. Ever since that day, the day he became a father, the memory of his accident has receded, diminishing over the years. Though he will never forget that night, it no longer lurks persistently in his mind, stalking him in the same way. Instead, it is affixed firmly to a distant time, to a place far from Pemberton Road. Today, his son's birthday, is a day to honor life, not brushes with death. And so, for now, Ashoke decides to keep the explanation of his son's name to himself.

"No other reason. Good night," he says to Gogol, getting up from the bed. At the door he pauses, turns around. "Do you know what Dostoyevsky once said?"

Gogol shakes his head.

"We all came out of Gogol's overcoat."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It will make sense to you one day. Many happy returns of the day."

Gogol gets up and shuts the door behind his father, who has the annoying habit of always leaving it partly open. He turns the lock on the knob for good measure, then wedges the book on a high shelf between two volumes of the Hardy Boys. He settles down again with his lyrics on the bed when something occurs to him. This writer he is named after — Gogol isn't his first name. His first name is Nikolai. Not only does Gogol Ganguli have a pet name turned good name but a last name turned first name. And so it occurs to him that no one he knows in the world, in Russia or India or America or anywhere, shares his name. Not even the source of his namesake.

Plenty of people changed their names: actors, writers, revolutionaries, transvestites. In history class, Gogol has learned that European immigrants had their names changed at Ellis Island, that slaves renamed themselves once they were emancipated. Though Gogol doesn't know it, even Nikolai Gogol renamed himself, simplifying his surname at the age of twenty-two, from Gogol-Yanovsky to Gogol, upon publishing in the *Literary Gazette*.

One day in the summer of 1986, in the frantic weeks before moving away from his family, before his freshman year at Yale is about to begin, Gogol Ganguli does the same. He rides the commuter rail into Boston, switching to the Green Line at North Station, getting out at Lechmere, the closest stop to the Middlesex Probate and Family Court. He wears a blue oxford shirt, khakis, a camel-colored corduroy blazer bought for his college interviews that is too warm for the sultry day. Knotted around his neck is his only tie, maroon with yellow stripes on the diagonal. By now Gogol is just shy of six feet tall, his body slender, his thick brown-black hair slightly in need of a cut. His face is lean, intelligent, suddenly handsome, the bones more prominent, the pale-gold skin clean-shaven and clear. He has inherited Ashima's eyes — large, penetrating, with bold, elegant brows — and shares with Ashoke the slight bump at the very top of his nose.

The courthouse is an imposing, pillared brick building occupying a full city block, but the

entrance is off to the side, down a set of steps. Inside, Gogol empties his pockets and steps through a metal detector, as if he were at an airport, about to embark on a journey. He is soothed by the chill of the air-conditioning, by the beautifully carved plaster ceiling, by the voices that echo pleasantly in the marbled interior. A man at the information booth tells him to wait upstairs, in an area filled with round tables, where people sit eating their lunch. Gogol sits impatiently, one long leg jiggling up and down.

The idea to change his name had first occurred to him a few months ago. He was sitting in the waiting room of his dentist, flipping through an issue of *Reader's Digest*. He'd been turning the pages at random until he came to an article that caused him to stop. The article was called "Second Baptisms." "Can you identify the following famous people?" was written beneath the headline. The only one he guessed correctly was Robert Zimmerman, Bob Dylan's real name. He had no idea that Leon Trotsky was born Lev Davidovich Bronstein. That Gerald Ford's name was Leslie Lynch King, Jr., and that Engelbert Humperdinck's was Arnold George Dorsey. They had all renamed themselves, the article said, adding that it was a right belonging to every American citizen. He read that tens of thousands of Americans, on average, had their names changed each year. All it took was a legal petition.

That night at the dinner table, he brought it up with his parents. It was one thing for Gogol to be the name penned in calligraphy on his high-school diploma, and printed below his picture in the yearbook, he'd begun. But engraved, four years from now, on a bachelor-of-arts degree? Written at the top of a résumé? Centered on a business card? It would be the name his parents picked out for him, he assured them, the good name they'd chosen for him when he was five.

"What's done is done," his father had said. "It will be a hassle. Gogol has, in effect, become your good name."

"It's too complicated now," his mother said, agreeing. "You're too old."

"I'm not," he persisted. "I don't get it. Why did you have to give me a pet name in the first place? What's the point?"

"It's our way, Gogol," his mother maintained. "It's what Bengalis do."

"But it's not even a Bengali name. How could you guys name me after someone so strange? No one takes me seriously."

"Who? Who does not take you seriously?" his father wanted to know, lifting his fingers from his plate, looking up at him. "People," he said, lying to his parents. For his father had a point; the only person who didn't take Gogol seriously, the only person who tormented him, the only person chronically aware of and afflicted by the embarrassment of his name, the only person who constantly questioned it and wished it were otherwise, was Gogol.

"I don't know, Gogol," his mother had said, shaking her head. "I really don't know." She got up to clear the dishes. Sonia slinked away, up to her room. Gogol remained at the table with his father. They sat there together, listening to his mother scraping the plates, the water running in the sink.

"Then change it," his father said simply, quietly, after a while.

"Really?"

"In America anything is possible. Do as you wish."

With relief, he types his name at the top of his freshman papers. He reads the telephone messages his roommates leave for Nikhil on assorted scraps of paper. He opens up a checking account, writes his new name into his course books. "*Me llamo Nikhil*," he says in his Spanish class. It is as Nikhil, that first semester, that he grows a goatee, starts smoking Camel Lights at parties and, while writing papers and before exams, discovers Brian Eno and Elvis Costello and Charlie Parker. It is as Nikhil that he takes Metro-North into Manhattan one weekend and gets himself a fake I.D. that allows him to be served liquor in New Haven bars. It is as Nikhil that he loses his virginity at a party at Ezra Stiles, with a girl wearing a plaid woollen skirt and combat boots and mustard tights. By the time he wakes up, hung over, at three in the morning, she has

vanished from the room, and he is unable to recall her name.

There is only one complication: he doesn't feel like Nikhil. Not yet. Part of the problem is that the people who now know him as Nikhil have no idea that he used to be Gogol. They know him only in the present, not at all in the past. But, after eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feel scant, inconsequential. At times he feels as if he'd cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different. At times he still feels his old name, painfully and without warning, the way his front tooth had unbearably throbbed in recent weeks after a filling, threatening for an instant to sever from his gums when he drank coffee, or ice water.

Even more startling is when those who normally call him Gogol refer to him as Nikhil. Though he has asked his parents to do precisely this, the fact of it troubles him, making him feel in that instant that he is not related to them, not their child. "Please come visit us with Nikhil one weekend," Ashima says to his roommates when she and Ashoke visit campus during parents' weekend in October, the suite hastily cleared of liquor bottles and ashtrays for the occasion. The substitution sounds wrong to Gogol, correct but off key, the way it sounds when his parents speak English to him instead of Bengali.

At Thanksgiving, he takes the train up to Boston. He feels distracted for some reason, impatient to be off the train; he does not bother to remove his coat, does not bother to go to the café car for something to drink even though he is thirsty. His mother and Sonia have gone to India for three weeks, to attend a cousin's wedding, and this year Gogol and his father will spend Thanksgiving at the home of friends.

He angles his head against the window and watches the autumnal landscape pass: the spewing pink and purple waters of a dye mill, electrical power stations, a big ball-shaped water tank covered with rust. Abandoned factories, with rows of small square windows partly bashed in, ravaged as if by moths. On the trees the topmost branches are bare, the remaining leaves yellow, paper-thin. The train moves more slowly than usual, and when he looks at his watch he sees that they are running well behind schedule. And then, somewhere outside Providence, in an abandoned field, the train stops moving. For more than an hour they stand there while a solid, scarlet disk of sun sinks into the tree-lined horizon. The lights turn off, and the air inside the train turns uncomfortably warm. The conductors rush anxiously through the compartments. "Probably a broken wire," the gentleman sitting beside Gogol remarks. Across the aisle a gray-haired woman reads, a coat clutched like a blanket to her chest. Without the sound of the engine Gogol can hear an opera playing faintly on someone's Walkman. Through the window he admires the darkening sapphire sky. He sees spare lengths of rusted rails heaped in piles. It isn't until they start moving again that an announcement is made on the loudspeaker about a medical emergency. But the truth, overheard by one of the passengers from a conductor, quickly circulates: a suicide has been committed, a person has jumped in front of the train.

He is shocked and discomforted by the news, feeling bad about his irritation and impatience, wondering if the victim had been a man or a woman, young or old. He imagines the person consulting the same schedule that's in his backpack, determining exactly when the train would be passing through. As a result of the delay he misses his commuter-rail connection in Boston, waits another forty minutes for the next one. He puts a call through to his parents' house, but no one answers. He tries his father's department at the university, but there, too, the phone rings and rings. At the station he sees his father waiting on the darkened platform, wearing sneakers and corduroys, anxiousness in his face. A trench coat is belted around his waist, a scarf knitted by Ashima wrapped at his throat, a tweed cap on his head.

"Sorry I'm late," Gogol says. "How long have you been waiting?"

"Since quarter to six," his father says. Gogol looks at his watch. It is nearly eight.

"There was an accident."

"I know. I called. What happened? Were you hurt?"

Gogol shakes his head. "Someone jumped onto the tracks. Somewhere in Rhode Island. I tried to call you. They had to wait for the police, I think."

"I was worried."

"I hope you haven't been standing out in the cold all this time," Gogol says, and from his father's lack of response he knows that this is exactly what he has done.

The night is windy, so much so that the car jostles slightly from time to time. Normally on these rides back from the station his father asks questions, about his classes, about his finances, about his plans for the future. But tonight they are silent, Ashoke concentrating on driving. Gogol fidgets with the radio.

"I want to tell you something," his father says, once they have already turned onto their road.

"What?" Gogol asks.

"It's about your name."

Gogol looks at his father, puzzled. "My name?"

His father shuts off the radio. "Gogol. There is a reason for it, you know."

"Right, Baba. Gogol's your favorite author. I know."

"No," his father says. He pulls in to the driveway and switches off the engine, then the headlights. He undoes his seat belt, guiding it with his hand as it retracts, back behind his left shoulder. "Another reason."

And, as they sit together in the car, his father revisits a field two hundred and nine kilometres from Howrah. With his fingers lightly grasping the bottom of the steering wheel, his gaze directed through the windshield at the garage door, he tells Gogol the story of the train he'd ridden twenty-five years ago, in October, 1961. He tells him about the night that had nearly taken his life, and the book that had saved him, and about the year afterward, when he'd been unable to move.

Gogol listens, stunned, his eyes fixed on his father's profile. Though there are only inches between them, for an instant his father is a stranger, a man who has kept a secret, has survived a tragedy, a man whose past he does not fully know. A man who is vulnerable, who has suffered in an inconceivable way. He imagines his father, a college student as Gogol is now, sitting on a train as Gogol had just been, reading a story, and then suddenly nearly killed. He struggles to picture the West Bengal countryside he has seen on only a few occasions, his father's mangled body, among hundreds of dead ones, being carried on a stretcher, past a twisted length of maroon compartments. Against instinct he tries to imagine life without his father, a world in which his father does not exist.

"Why don't I know this about you?" Gogol says. His voice sounds harsh, accusing, but his eyes well with tears. "Why haven't you told me this until now?"

"It never felt like the right time," his father says.

"But it's like you've lied to me all these years." When his father doesn't respond, he adds, "That's why you have that limp, isn't it?"

"It happened so long ago. I didn't want to upset you."

"It doesn't matter. You should have told me."

"Perhaps," his father concedes, glancing briefly in Gogol's direction. He removes the keys from the ignition. "Come, you must be hungry. The car is getting cold."

But Gogol doesn't move. He sits there, still struggling to absorb the information, feeling awkward, oddly ashamed, at fault. "I'm sorry, Baba."

His father laughs softly. "You had nothing to do with it, Gogol."

And suddenly the sound of his pet name, uttered by his father as he has been accustomed to hearing it all his life, means something completely new, bound up with a catastrophe he has unwittingly embodied for years. "Is that what you think of when you think of me?" Gogol asks him. "Do I remind you of that night?"

"Not at all," his father says eventually, one hand going to his ribs, a habitual gesture that has

baffled Gogol until now. "You remind me of everything that followed."

# A Good Man Is Hard to Find - Flannery O'Connor

(1953)

The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind. Bailey was the son she lived with, her only boy. He was sitting on the edge of his chair at the table, bent over the orange sports section of the Journal. "Now look here, Bailey," she said, "see here, read this," and she stood with one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald head. "Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is a loose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that loose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did."

Bailey didn't look up from his reading so she wheeled around then and faced the children's mother, a young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like rabbit's ears. She was sitting on the sofa, feeding the baby his apricots out of a jar. "The children have been to Florida before," the old lady said. "You all ought to take them somewhere else for a change so they would see different parts of the world and be broad. They never have been to east Tennessee."

The children's mother didn't seem to hear her but the eight-year-old boy, John Wesley, a stocky child with glasses, said, "If you don't want to go to Florida, why don'tcha stay at home?" He and the little girl, June Star, were reading the funny papers on the floor.

"She wouldn't stay at home to be queen for a day," June Star said without raising her yellow head.

"Yes and what would you do if this fellow, The Misfit, caught you?" the grandmother asked.

"I'd smack his face," John Wesley said.

"She wouldn't stay at home for a million bucks," June Star said. "Afraid she'd miss something. She has to go everywhere we go."

"All right, Miss," the grandmother said. "Just remember that the next time you want me to curl your hair."

June Star said her hair was naturally curly.

The next morning the grandmother was the first one in the car, ready to go. She had her big black valise that looked like the head of a hippopotamus in one corner, and underneath it she was hiding a basket with Pitty Sing, the cat, in it. She didn't intend for the cat to be left alone in the house for three days because he would miss her too much and she was afraid he might brush against one of the gas burners and accidentally asphyxiate himself. Her son, Bailey, didn't like to arrive at a motel with a cat.

She sat in the middle of the back seat with John Wesley and June Star on either side of her. Bailey and the children's mother and the baby sat in front and they left Atlanta at eight forty-five with the mileage on the car at 55890. The grandmother wrote this down because she thought it would be interesting to say how many miles they had been when they got back. It took them twenty minutes to reach the outskirts of the city.

The old lady settled herself comfortably, removing her white cotton gloves and putting them up with her purse on the shelf in front of the back window. The children's mother still had on slacks and still had her head tied up in a green kerchief, but the grandmother had on a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print. Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady.



She said she thought it was going to be a good day for driving, neither too hot nor too cold, and she cautioned Bailey that the speed limit was fifty-five miles an hour and that the patrolmen hid themselves behind billboards and small clumps of trees and sped out after you before you had a chance to slow down. She pointed out interesting details of the scenery: Stone Mountain; the blue granite that in some places came up to both sides of the highway; the brilliant red clay banks slightly streaked with purple; and the various crops that made rows of green lace-work on the ground. The trees were full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled. The children were reading comic magazines and their mother had gone back to sleep.

"Let's go through Georgia fast so we won't have to look at it much," John Wesley said.

"If I were a little boy," said the grandmother, "I wouldn't talk about my native state that way. Tennessee has the mountains and Georgia has the hills."

"Tennessee is just a hillbilly dumping ground," John Wesley said, "and Georgia is a lousy state too."

"You said it," June Star said.

"In my time," said the grandmother, folding her thin veined fingers, "children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then. Oh look at the cute little pickaninny!" she said and pointed to a Negro child standing in the door of a shack. "Wouldn't that make a picture, now?" she asked and they all turned and looked at the little Negro out of the back window. He waved.

"He didn't have any britches on," June Star said.

"He probably didn't have any," the grandmother explained. "Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do. If I could paint, I'd paint that picture," she said.

The children exchanged comic books.

The grandmother offered to hold the baby and the children's mother passed him over the front seat to her. She set him on her knee and bounced him and told him about the things they were passing. She rolled her eyes and screwed up her mouth and stuck her leathery thin face into his smooth bland one. Occasionally he gave her a faraway smile. They passed a large cotton field with five or six graves fenced in the middle of it, like a small island. "Look at the graveyard!" the grandmother said, pointing it out. "That was the old family burying ground. That belonged to the plantation."

"Where's the plantation?" John Wesley asked.

"Gone With the Wind," said the grandmother. "Ha. Ha."

When the children finished all the comic books they had brought, they opened the lunch and ate it. The grandmother ate a peanut butter sandwich and an olive and would not let the children throw the box and the paper napkins out the window. When there was nothing else to do they played a game by choosing a cloud and making the other two guess what shape it suggested. John Wesley took one the shape of a cow and June Star guessed a cow and John Wesley said, no, an automobile, and June Star said he didn't play fair, and they began to slap each other over the grandmother.

The grandmother said she would tell them a story if they would keep quiet. When she told a story, she rolled her eyes and waved her head and was very dramatic. She said once when she was a maiden lady she had been courted by a Mr. Edgar Atkins Teagarden from Jasper, Georgia. She said he was a very good-looking man and a gentleman and that he brought her a watermelon every Saturday afternoon with his initials cut in it, E. A. T. Well, one Saturday, she said, Mr. Teagarden brought the watermelon and there was nobody at home and he left it on the front porch and returned in his buggy to Jasper, but she never got the watermelon, she said, because a nigger boy ate it when he saw the initials, E. A. T.! This story tickled John Wesley's funny bone and he giggled and giggled but June Star didn't think it was any good. She said she wouldn't marry a man that just brought her a watermelon on Saturday. The grandmother said she would have done well to marry Mr. Teagarden because he was a gentleman and had bought Coca-Cola

stock when it first came out and that he had died only a few years ago, a very wealthy man.

They stopped at The Tower for barbecued sandwiches. The Tower was a part stucco and part wood filling station and dance hall set in a clearing outside of Timothy. A fat man named Red Sammy Butts ran it and there were signs stuck here and there on the building and for miles up and down the highway saying, TRY RED SAMMY'S FAMOUS BARBECUE. NONE LIKE FAMOUS RED SAMMY'S! RED SAM! THE FAT BOY WITH THE HAPPY LAUGH. A VETERAN! RED SAMMY'S YOUR MAN!

Red Sammy was lying on the bare ground outside The Tower with his head under a truck while a gray monkey about a foot high, chained to a small chinaberry tree, chattered nearby. The monkey sprang back into the tree and got on the highest limb as soon as he saw the children jump out of the car and run toward him.

Inside, The Tower was a long dark room with a counter at one end and tables at the other and dancing space in the middle. They all sat down at a board table next to the nickelodeon and Red Sam's wife, a tall burnt-brown woman with hair and eyes lighter than her skin, came and took their order. The children's mother put a dime in the machine and played "The Tennessee Waltz," and the grandmother said that tune always made her want to dance. She asked Bailey if he would like to dance but he only glared at her. He didn't have a naturally sunny disposition like she did and trips made him nervous. The grandmother's brown eyes were very bright. She swayed her head from side to side and pretended she was dancing in her chair. June Star said play something she could tap to so the children's mother put in another dime and played a fast number and June Star stepped out onto the dance floor and did her tap routine.

"Ain't she cute?" Red Sam's wife said, leaning over the counter. "Would you like to come be my little girl?"

"No I certainly wouldn't," June Star said. "I wouldn't live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks!" and she ran back to the table.

"Ain't she cute?" the woman repeated, stretching her mouth politely.

"Aren't you ashamed?" hissed the grandmother.

Red Sam came in and told his wife to quit lounging on the counter and hurry up with these people's order. His khaki trousers reached just to his hip bones and his stomach hung over them like a sack of meal swaying under his shirt. He came over and sat down at a table nearby and let out a combination sigh and yodel. "You can't win," he said. "You can't win," and he wiped his sweating red face off with a gray handkerchief. "These days you don't know who to trust," he said. "Ain't that the truth?"

"People are certainly not nice like they used to be," said the grandmother.

"Two fellers come in here last week," Red Sammy said, "driving a Chrysler. It was a old beat-up car but it was a good one and these boys looked all right to me. Said they worked at the mill and you know I let them fellers charge the gas they bought? Now why did I do that?"

"Because you're a good man!" the grandmother said at once.

"Yes'm, I suppose so," Red Sam said as if he were struck with this answer.

His wife brought the orders, carrying the five plates all at once without a tray, two in each hand and one balanced on her arm. "It isn't a soul in this green world of God's that you can trust," she said. "And I don't count nobody out of that, not nobody," she repeated, looking at Red Sammy.

"Did you read about that criminal, The Misfit, that's escaped?" asked the grandmother.

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he didn't attack this place right here," said the woman. "If he hears about it being here, I wouldn't be none surprised to see him. If he hears it's two cent in the cash register, I wouldn't be a tall surprised if he ... "

"That'll do," Red Sam said. "Go bring these people their Co'-Colas," and the woman went off to get the rest of the order.

"A good man is hard to find," Red Sammy said. "Everything is getting terrible. I remember

the day you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched. Not no more."

He and the grandmother discussed better times. The old lady said that in her opinion Europe was entirely to blame for the way things were now. She said the way Europe acted you would think we were made of money and Red Sam said it was no use talking about it, she was exactly right. The children ran outside into the white sunlight and looked at the monkey in the lacy chinaberry tree. He was busy catching fleas on himself and biting each one carefully between his teeth as if it were a delicacy.

They drove off again into the hot afternoon. The grandmother took cat naps and woke up every few minutes with her own snoring. Outside of Toombsboro she woke up and recalled an old plantation that she had visited in this neighborhood once when she was a young lady. She said the house had six white columns across the front and that there was an avenue of oaks leading up to it and two little wooden trellis arbors on either side in front where you sat down with your suitor after a stroll in the garden. She recalled exactly which road to turn off to get to it. She knew that Bailey would not be willing to lose any time looking at an old house, but the more she talked about it, the more she wanted to see it once again and find out if the little twin arbors were still standing. "There was a secret panel in this house," she said craftily, not telling the truth but wishing that she were, "and the story went that all the family silver was hidden in it when Sherman came through but it was never found ... "

"Hey!" John Wesley said. "Let's go see it! We'll find it! We'll poke all the woodwork and find it! Who lives there? Where do you turn off at? Hey Pop, can't we turn off there?"

"We never have seen a house with a secret panel!" June Star shrieked. "Let's go to the house with the secret panel! Hey Pop, can't we go see the house with the secret panel!"

"It's not far from here, I know," the grandmother said. "It wouldn't take over twenty minutes."

Bailey was looking straight ahead. His jaw was as rigid as a horseshoe. "No," he said.

The children began to yell and scream that they wanted to see the house with the secret panel. John Wesley kicked the back of the front seat and June Star hung over her mother's shoulder and whined desperately into her ear that they never had any fun even on their vacation, that they could never do what THEY wanted to do. The baby began to scream and John Wesley kicked the back of the seat so hard that his father could feel the blows in his kidney.

"All right!" he shouted and drew the car to a stop at the side of the road. "Will you all shut up? Will you all just shut up for one second? If you don't shut up, we won't go anywhere.

"It would be very educational for them," the grandmother murmured.

"All right," Bailey said, "but get this: this is the only time we're going to stop for anything like this. This is the one and only time."

"The dirt road that you have to turn down is about a mile back," the grandmother directed. "I marked it when we passed."

"A dirt road," Bailey groaned.

After they had turned around and were headed toward the dirt road, the grandmother recalled other points about the house, the beautiful glass over the front doorway and the candle-lamp in the hall. John Wesley said that the secret panel was probably in the fireplace.

"You can't go inside this house," Bailey said. "You don't know who lives there."

"While you all talk to the people in front, I'll run around behind and get in a window," John Wesley suggested.

"We'll all stay in the car," his mother said. They turned onto the dirt road and the car raced roughly along in a swirl of pink dust. The grandmother recalled the times when there were no paved roads and thirty miles was a day's journey. The dirt road was hilly and there were sudden washes in it and sharp curves on dangerous embankments. All at once they would be on a hill, looking down over the blue tops of trees for miles around, then the next minute, they would be in a red depression with the dust-coated trees looking down on them.

"This place had better turn up in a minute," Bailey said, "or I'm going to turn around."

The road looked as if no one had traveled on it in months.

"It's not much farther," the grandmother said and just as she said it, a horrible thought came to her. The thought was so embarrassing that she turned red in the face and her eyes dilated and her feet jumped up, upsetting her valise in the corner. The instant the valise moved, the newspaper top she had over the basket under it rose with a snarl and Pitty Sing, the cat, sprang onto Bailey's shoulder.

The children were thrown to the floor and their mother, clutching the baby, was thrown out the door onto the ground; the old lady was thrown into the front seat. The car turned over once and landed right-side-up in a gulch off the side of the road. Bailey remained in the driver's seat with the cat — gray-striped with a broad white face and an orange nose — clinging to his neck like a caterpillar.

As soon as the children saw they could move their arms and legs, they scrambled out of the car, shouting, "We've had an ACCIDENT!" The grandmother was curled up under the dashboard, hoping she was injured so that Bailey's wrath would not come down on her all at once. The horrible thought she had had before the accident was that the house she had remembered so vividly was not in Georgia but in Tennessee.

Bailey removed the cat from his neck with both hands and flung it out the window against the side of a pine tree. Then he got out of the car and started looking for the children's mother. She was sitting against the side of the red gutted ditch, holding the screaming baby, but she only had a cut down her face and a broken shoulder. "We've had an ACCIDENT!" the children screamed in a frenzy of delight.

"But nobody's killed," June Star said with disappointment as the grandmother limped out of the car, her hat still pinned to her head but the broken front brim standing up at a jaunty angle and the violet spray hanging off the side. They all sat down in the ditch, except the children, to recover from the shock. They were all shaking.

"Maybe a car will come along," said the children's mother hoarsely.

"I believe I have injured an organ," said the grandmother, pressing her side, but no one answered her. Bailey's teeth were clattering. He had on a yellow sport shirt with bright blue parrots designed in it and his face was as yellow as the shirt. The grandmother decided that she would not mention that the house was in Tennessee.

The road was about ten feet above and they could see only the tops of the trees on the other side of it. Behind the ditch they were sitting in there were more woods, tall and dark and deep. In a few minutes they saw a car some distance away on top of a hill, coming slowly as if the occupants were watching them. The grandmother stood up and waved both arms dramatically to attract their attention. The car continued to come on slowly, disappeared around a bend and appeared again, moving even slower, on top of the hill they had gone over. It was a big black battered hearse-like automobile. There were three men in it.

It came to a stop just over them and for some minutes, the driver looked down with a steady expressionless gaze to where they were sitting, and didn't speak. Then he turned his head and muttered something to the other two and they got out. One was a fat boy in black trousers and a red sweat shirt with a silver stallion embossed on the front of it. He moved around on the right side of them and stood staring, his mouth partly open in a kind of loose grin. The other had on khaki pants and a blue striped coat and a gray hat pulled down very low, hiding most of his face. He came around slowly on the left side. Neither spoke.

The driver got out of the car and stood by the side of it, looking down at them. He was an older man than the other two. His hair was just beginning to gray and he wore silver-rimmed spectacles that gave him a scholarly look. He had a long creased face and didn't have on any shirt or undershirt. He had on blue jeans that were too tight for him and was holding a black hat and a gun. The two boys also had guns.

"We've had an ACCIDENT!" the children screamed.

The grandmother had the peculiar feeling that the bespectacled man was someone she knew. His face was as familiar to her as if she had known him all her life but she could not recall who he was. He moved away from the car and began to come down the embankment, placing his feet carefully so that he wouldn't slip. He had on tan and white shoes and no socks, and his ankles were red and thin. "Good afternoon," he said. "I see you all had you a little spill."

"We turned over twice!" said the grandmother.

"Once," he corrected. "We seen it happen. Try their car and see will it run, Hiram," he said quietly to the boy with the gray hat.

"What you got that gun for?" John Wesley asked. "Whatcha gonna do with that gun?"

"Lady," the man said to the children's mother, "would you mind calling them children to sit down by you? Children make me nervous. I want all you all to sit down right together there where you're at."

"What are you telling US what to do for?" June Star asked.

Behind them the line of woods gaped like a dark open mouth. "Come here," said their mother.

"Look here now," Bailey began suddenly, "we're in a predicament! We're in ... "

The grandmother shrieked. She scrambled to her feet and stood staring. "You're The Misfit!" she said. "I recognized you at once!"

"Yes'm," the man said, smiling slightly as if he were pleased in spite of himself to be known, "but it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn't of reckernized me."

Bailey turned his head sharply and said something to his mother that shocked even the children. The old lady began to cry and The Misfit reddened.

"Lady," he said, "don't you get upset. Sometimes a man says things he don't mean. I don't reckon he meant to talk to you thataway."

"You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?" the grandmother said and removed a clean handkerchief from her cuff and began to slap at her eyes with it.

The Misfit pointed the toe of his shoe into the ground and made a little hole and then covered it up again. "I would hate to have to," he said.

"Listen," the grandmother almost screamed, "I know you're a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people!"

"Yes mam," he said, "finest people in the world." When he smiled he showed a row of strong white teeth. "God never made a finer woman than my mother and my daddy's heart was pure gold," he said. The boy with the red sweat shirt had come around behind them and was standing with his gun at his hip. The Misfit squatted down on the ground. "Watch them children, Bobby Lee," he said. "You know they make me nervous." He looked at the six of them huddled together in front of him and he seemed to be embarrassed as if he couldn't think of anything to say. "Ain't a cloud in the sky," he remarked, looking up at it. "Don't see no sun but don't see no cloud neither."

"Yes, it's a beautiful day," said the grandmother. "Listen," she said, "you shouldn't call yourself The Misfit because I know you're a good man at heart. I can just look at you and tell "

"Hush!" Bailey yelled. "Hush! Everybody shut up and let me handle this!" He was squatting in the position of a runner about to sprint forward but he didn't move.

"I prechate that, lady," The Misfit said and drew a little circle in the ground with the butt of his gun.

"It'll take a half a hour to fix this here car," Hiram called, looking over the raised hood of it.

"Well, first you and Bobby Lee get him and that little boy to step over yonder with you," The Misfit said, pointing to Bailey and John Wesley. "The boys want to ask you something," he said to Bailey. "Would you mind stepping back in them woods there with them?"

"Listen," Bailey began, "we're in a terrible predicament! Nobody realizes what this is," and his voice cracked. His eyes were as blue and intense as the parrots in his shirt and he remained perfectly still.

The grandmother reached up to adjust her hat brim as if she were going to the woods with him but it came off in her hand. She stood staring at it and after a second she let it fall on the ground. Hiram pulled Bailey up by the arm as if he were assisting an old man. John Wesley caught hold of his father's hand and Bobby Lee followed. They went off toward the woods and just as they reached the dark edge, Bailey turned and supporting himself against a gray naked pine trunk, he shouted, "I'll be back in a minute, Mamma, wait on me!"

"Come back this instant!" his mother shrilled but they all disappeared into the woods.

"Bailey Boy!" the grandmother called in a tragic voice but she found she was looking at The Misfit squatting on the ground in front of her. "I just know you're a good man," she said desperately. "You're not a bit common!"

"Nome, I ain't a good man," The Misfit said after a second as if he had considered her statement carefully, "but I ain't the worst in the world neither. My daddy said I was a different breed of dog from my brothers and sisters. 'You know,' Daddy said, 'it's some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and it's others has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters. He's going to be into everything!'" He put on his black hat and looked up suddenly and then away deep into the woods as if he were embarrassed again. "I'm sorry I don't have on a shirt before you ladies," he said, hunching his shoulders slightly. "We buried our clothes that we had on when we escaped and we're just making do until we can get better. We borrowed these from some folks we met," he explained.

"That's perfectly all right," the grandmother said. "Maybe Bailey has an extra shirt in his suitcase."

"I'll look and see directly," The Misfit said.

"Where are they taking him?" the children's mother screamed.

"Daddy was a card himself," The Misfit said. "You couldn't put anything over on him. He never got in trouble with the Authorities though. Just had the knack of handling them."

"You could be honest too if you'd only try," said the grandmother. "Think how wonderful it would be to settle down and live a comfortable life and not have to think about somebody chasing you all the time."

The Misfit kept scratching in the ground with the butt of his gun as if he were thinking about it. "Yes'm, somebody is always after you," he murmured.

The grandmother noticed how thin his shoulder blades were just behind his hat because she was standing up looking down on him. "Do you ever pray?" she asked.

He shook his head. All she saw was the black hat wiggle between his shoulder blades. "Nome," he said.

There was a pistol shot from the woods, followed closely by another. Then silence. The old lady's head jerked around. She could hear the wind move through the tree tops like a long satisfied insuck of breath. "Bailey Boy!" she called.

"I was a gospel singer for a while," The Misfit said. "I been most everything. Been in the arm service, both land and sea, at home and abroad, been twict married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive oncet," and he looked up at the children's mother and the little girl who were sitting close together, their faces white and their eyes glassy; "I even seen a woman flogged," he said.

"Pray, pray," the grandmother began, "pray, pray ... "

"I never was a bad boy that I remember of," The Misfit said in an almost dreamy voice, "but somewheres along the line I done something wrong and got sent to the penitentiary. I was buried alive," and he looked up and held her attention to him by a steady stare.

"That's when you should have started to pray," she said "What did you do to get sent to the penitentiary that first time?"

"Turn to the right, it was a wall," The Misfit said, looking up again at the cloudless sky. "Turn to the left, it was a wall. Look up it was a ceiling, look down it was a floor. I forget what I done,

lady. I set there and set there, trying to remember what it was I done and I ain't recalled it to this day. Oncet in a while, I would think it was coming to me, but it never come."

"Maybe they put you in by mistake," the old lady said vaguely.

"Nome," he said. "It wasn't no mistake. They had the papers on me."

"You must have stolen something," she said.

The Misfit sneered slightly. "Nobody had nothing I wanted," he said. "It was a head-doctor at the penitentiary said what I had done was kill my daddy but I known that for a lie. My daddy died in nineteen ought nineteen of the epidemic flu and I never had a thing to do with it. He was buried in the Mount Hopewell Baptist churchyard and you can go there and see for yourself."

"If you would pray," the old lady said, "Jesus would help you."

"That's right," The Misfit said.

"Well then, why don't you pray?" she asked trembling with delight suddenly.

"I don't want no hep," he said. "I'm doing all right by myself."

Bobby Lee and Hiram came ambling back from the woods. Bobby Lee was dragging a yellow shirt with bright blue parrots in it.

"Thow me that shirt, Bobby Lee," The Misfit said. The shirt came flying at him and landed on his shoulder and he put it on. The grandmother couldn't name what the shirt reminded her of.

"No, lady," The Misfit said while he was buttoning it up, "I found out the crime don't matter. You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a tire off his car, because sooner or later you're going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it."

The children's mother had begun to make heaving noises as if she couldn't get her breath. "Lady," he asked, "would you and that little girl like to step off yonder with Bobby Lee and Hiram and join your husband?"

"Yes, thank you," the mother said faintly. Her left arm dangled helplessly and she was holding the baby, who had gone to sleep, in the other. "Hep that lady up, Hiram," The Misfit said as she struggled to climb out of the ditch, "and Bobby Lee, you hold onto that little girl's hand."

"I don't want to hold hands with him," June Star said. "He reminds me of a pig."

The fat boy blushed and laughed and caught her by the arm and pulled her off into the woods after Hiram and her mother.

Alone with The Misfit, the grandmother found that she had lost her voice. There was not a cloud in the sky nor any sun. There was nothing around her but woods. She wanted to tell him that he must pray. She opened and closed her mouth several times before anything came out. Finally she found herself saying, "Jesus. Jesus," meaning, Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing.

"Yes'm," The Misfit said as if he agreed. "Jesus thown everything off balance. It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn't committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one because they had the papers on me. Of course," he said, "they never shown me my papers. That's why I sign myself now. I said long ago, you get you a signature and sign everything you do and keep a copy of it. Then you'll know what you done and you can hold up the crime to the punishment and see do they match and in the end you'll have something to prove you ain't been treated right. I call myself The Misfit," he said, "because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment."

There was a piercing scream from the woods, followed closely by a pistol report. "Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain't punished at all?"

"Jesus!" the old lady cried. "You've got good blood! I know you wouldn't shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I'll give you all the money I've got!"

"Lady," The Misfit said, looking beyond her far into the woods, "there never was a body that give the undertaker a tip."

There were two more pistol reports and the grandmother raised her head like a parched old

turkey hen crying for water and called, "Bailey Boy, Bailey Boy!" as if her heart would break.

"Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead," The Misfit continued, "and He shouldn't have done it. He shown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can — by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness," he said and his voice had become almost a snarl.

"Maybe He didn't raise the dead," the old lady mumbled, not knowing what she was saying and feeling so dizzy that she sank down in the ditch with her legs twisted under her.

"I wasn't there so I can't say He didn't," The Misfit said. "I wisht I had of been there," he said, hitting the ground with his fist. "It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known. Listen lady," he said in a high voice, "if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now." His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother's head cleared for an instant. She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them.

Hiram and Bobby Lee returned from the woods and stood over the ditch, looking down at the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.

Without his glasses, The Misfit's eyes were red-rimmed and pale and defenseless-looking. "Take her off and throw her where you shown the others," he said, picking up the cat that was rubbing itself against his leg.

"She was a talker, wasn't she?" Bobby Lee said, sliding down the ditch with a yodel.

"She would of been a good woman," The Misfit said, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

"Some fun!" Bobby Lee said.

"Shut up, Bobby Lee" The Misfit said. "It's no real pleasure in life."



# Rwanda - John Edgar Wideman

(2020)

More a game than a question, he thinks. Then thinks maybe not much difference between games and questions. He decides to call it a thought experiment when he tries it out on a friend. If he can find a friend willing to play. Friend he wants to play with. He's old. Few friends left. A stranger might do. Start the experiment by asking: If you were one of those in charge of running the world and you learned in secret from unimpeachable sources that life on earth is going to terminate abruptly, very soon, within weeks, months, six months at most, if such incontrovertible information existed and you had the power to reveal it or keep it hidden, would you inform the public.

Thought experiment goes on from there as one question leads to another. If, for instance, politicians in power were now certain that the deadly plague we are experiencing these days means that all life will soon, very soon cease, no exceptions, no reprieves, no second acts, no escape, would they announce or withhold the news. Why. Who would benefit or suffer. Would those leaders you imagine, or would you, yourself, be governed by a moral, ethical imperative that outweighs all other considerations: to tell the truth. Do you trust anyone in authority. How would people react if such awful news were made public. Would chaos erupt. Total anarchy, panic. A violent, uncontrollable, global orgy of immediate self-gratification. Everybody determined to snatch whatever they can before it's too late. Constrained only by the fear of other people's strength and violence. Law of the jungle prevailing — eat or be eaten. Or would some of us stay on the job, attempt to maintain a semblance, at least, of order.

He would argue that everybody, whether conscious of it or not, engages in a version of the thought experiment daily. Because, of course, deep down, we all are aware life is temporary, and that anybody is liable to die the next instant. Which means each morning as we awaken and open our eyes and begin sleepwalking into our usual routines, we choose either to confront or to suppress the dirty secret of mortality. For obvious reasons, most of us choose not to start the day by reminding ourselves of our utter vulnerability.

But issues raised by his thought experiment — death, time, truth, responsibility — impossible to ignore or resolve, he's sure. Sure that his responses to those issues are unsatisfactory and incriminating. And just as sure that his evil habit of taking advantage of others won't be cured by nattering away in so-called *thought experiments*. As the ultimate authority in the only world he can even pretend to run, he must admit, he reminds himself, that he exploits rather than shares his knowledge of the end. In this fragile place with everybody passing through faster than the speed of light, with the end never more than a heartbeat (or lack of one) away, what rules apply. None. Isn't that what he has convinced himself of. No rule except pleasing himself. His actions speaking louder than any thought experiment's words. Acting as if the certainty of everybody's imminent disappearance exempts him from responsibility.

Time. Less of it the older he gets. Very little, next to nothing left now, so why does he worry so much more now about time. Why does time frighten him. More time or less time equally unsettling. Though it feels as if it unfolds endlessly, time always relative, unquantifiable. Always limited. Not guaranteed no matter how precisely people attempt to measure, ignore, worship, save, anticipate, or prolong it. Time not something he can count or count on. Time mysterious and brief as any next instant that he imagines will follow the briefly present instant already lost. He doesn't possess time. Time possesses him. Locks him up like his brother serving a life sentence in prison.

*Ahh ... all these deaths. Ahhhhh ... all these deadly days. He can't help it. What's inside him sneaks out loud as a pitiful groan. Are these dire days (didn't his mother warn him they were near*

at hand) the Biblical Last Days. He's positive lately, his feeling sharp and unambiguous as a nail through the bottom of a bare foot, that the Last Days have been entered upon, but, to spite the vanity of the virulent, all-conquering virus ravaging the city, he keeps his feeling secret.

Careful, Uncle. Careful you don't get hit by a car, walking around up there in the big city having one those deep conversations like you do with your own self, she hollers at him. His smart pretty niece, a gift by way of a smart pretty niece, her mother. He missed them. Mother and daughter. Missed all his people. Only phone calls. Couple a month or so. His people far away. Too many gone for good now. Dead and gone. Seldom sees the ones left. Too bad. He likes his pretty niece. She likes him back, no doubt. She'd be a perfect partner for the thought experiment. Next time he sees her he'll try to get her attention. She's the sort of person who might understand what enormous power anybody holds in their hands when they consider seriously the issues his thought experiment examines.

But an irony lurks within the thought experiment, always threatening to emerge and spoil the fun. With the end just around the corner, why bother to share thoughts with anyone. Why pretend anybody's responses are worth discussing. Or mean much. Or matter at all. Knowing the end on its way, and not knowing how to change it, what's the point of making up more stories, writing them or reading them.

He instructs himself to ignore the irony and try to draw out his favorite niece anyway. Woo her to talk about what she might do if she knew the world about to end. Should he remind her of Rwanda. Warn her about the terrible old man. Colored man he followed home and watched undress.

Why Rwanda. Because the horrors, sweet girl, unleashed in Rwanda, expose the stakes, the power and chaos, that the thought experiment confronts. Rwanda a country whose authorities announced the end of the world coming immediately. In days or weeks at most, life on earth would be finished unless certain Rwandans, designated by Rwandan officials as the cause, as agents responsible for the dreadful obliteration of all existence, are removed immediately. Hurry, hurry, the government said. Not a moment to spare.

An old, colored American man was summoned by Rwandan officials to do work in Rwanda, he would tell her. A man who is our ancient enemy but poses as a friend. For centuries, that man has been convinced of colored people's worthlessness. It shames him and he is ashamed of us. A traitor. Fattens himself consuming the flesh of others. He can never be trusted. His treachery unforgivable.

When the man returned home from his mission in Rwanda, I crouched one night outside his window. Watched the old fucker undress. Dim light. No naked glare of a single, lynched bulb like burns in the cell of my brother, your uncle. Near darkness O.K. with me. Kept me invisible to him, and I sure didn't want to see too much of a deteriorating old man. His movements encumbered by age. Yet he also resembled an obedient child as he went about his business as kids do, attentively, earnestly, endeavoring to imitate their elders. To earn their praise, obtain their permission, the bounties they grant. Doomed forever to spy on others, spy on himself. To report progress or lack thereof to his superiors in their language he'd been taught to mimic.

In Rwanda, the old man had been first passenger off the plane. Got weeks of work in before the other commissioners disembarked and passed streamlined through customs. He was expected. No. He had been on the ground waiting. Been there before. Always. Never departed. His presence necessary. To authorize, facilitate slaughter. Argue justness. Righteousness. God's will. Proclaim the urgent necessity to eliminate fellow-citizens. Not a visitor. Home. Home boy. Home again. Honorary *Interahamwe*. *Impuzamugambi*. Machete ready in hand. Government-sponsored radio voices in the run-up to the executions had borrowed his gravity. His long-dead, once youthful spirit pranced onstage at rallies. Cheerleading killings. His expensive shoes splashed through blood, splintered bones.

Weary and decrepit, back home long enough to forget he had ever left, the man hangs up a

grayish suit, embalmed stiff by dry-cleaning fluids. Submits each gesture for scrutiny, approval. Brown man, colored like him. Sufferer. Suffered. He listens to him breathe, to sounds of him farting. Spares himself the smell. A coon-aged coon honored by being appointed to a delegation invited to investigate, twenty-five years after the fact, Rwanda's genocide. Crimes of, by, for its people. Rewarded for his decades of labor in America's gulags — hard work, impeccably high standards, a guard many years, then assistant warden, a warden twice, chair of board of pardons and parole, expert witness, judge, jury, executioner — you name it — old man had been there, done that. Loyal. Steady. Unflinching. Why wouldn't Rwandans be happy to host him, toast him, solicit his advice and benefit from his lifetime of service, experience, knowledge, etc. ... of incarceration, the incarcerated ... etc. Him singled out, rewarded for achievement, for persevering in his chosen trade just as your uncle has been rewarded in the writing trade he practices, even granted permission to publish an occasional book. Lucky and colored ... etc. Despite or because of color ... etc. What's the difference.

Should he tell his niece how sorely he was tempted to throttle the man that afternoon when he conjured up just the two of them alone in the men's room of a Rwandan courthouse. Disappointed himself, when he didn't finish him off then and there. When the hateful old man's time up, wouldn't his moans for morphine or death be music to my ears, he thinks. *Mehr Licht* the last words attributed to a dying Goethe. German words, niece, meaning "more light," and still sounding a bit like *Mehr Licht* when translated into English. *More dark*, that old darkie will gasp. Darkness to hide him, to cover up his fears, his rage, his betrayals, his shame.

But no point, he had decided that day in a faraway courthouse, no point in killing a nasty old man. Tutsi corpses don't return to life no matter how high the piles of Hutu corpses. Or vice versa.

At home in his bedroom, old-man eyes stare into emptiness between remembered/forgotten steps of untying his tie, loosening laces, removing shoes, rolling down crusty-toed, silk socks. Why commit a crime, he had asked himself. Risk his freedom killing the bastard when surely disease will rot his old body and perform a more impeccable, patient, subtle, sustained, excruciating assassination than he could ever hope to achieve.

Story of any country's citizens massacring fellow-citizens is many stories coming true, he will say to his niece. Also many stories becoming untrue. Yours. Ours. Thought experiments. Many stories redone. Stories crucified. Halal. Kosher. Bled white. Sanctified. Eaten. Goodness born inside each person along with evil, my dear, but goodness doesn't prosper like evil prospers. The woes an old, naked man — warden, keeper of the flame, keeper of coloreds, fellow-colored, colored fellow — has inflicted upon others defy words. Best revenge not to take his life, but to wish more years on him. Life everlasting interrupted daily, every hour on the hour, by death of one thousand self-inflicted cuts.

Maybe more mercy than he deserves, his niece or someone else might suggest. Too much mercy for a person who remains, until their dying day, willing to abuse others. How many times to please himself had he, like the old man, violated another person's trust. Acted as if he knew the world going to end in a quick minute and no consequences that matter would follow his actions. As if whatever comes next could never matter more than the sweet pleasure of pretending no tomorrow for him or his victim to fret about. No questions asked. No hesitation. Just a game, after all.

Of course, more than contempt had motivated him to spy through a window on an evil old colored man fumbling around in a dark room. Whose story was he attempting to tell anyway. To whom. He already understood more than enough about the man. Knows him much too well. Bitter, bitter knowledge. Studies him because he fears him. And you should fear him, too, girl, he will say. Always, he will say. Beware. Beware. Sorry as I am to admit it, dear heart, yours truly is very much like him. Both of us men who should know better. No excuse. Way, way, way too greedy. Too busy. Way too selfish. Too accomplished at getting what we want. Everything.

Nothing. No matter who or how many we destroy.

A few days ago on his early-morning walk — no risk of getting hit by a car, sweet niece — dawn and streets more quiet and deserted than usual, even at dawn, even during the unnatural calm of lockdown and sequestering the city has imposed upon its residents to slow the spread of an epidemic sickening and killing thousands. He'd encountered almost no people, no traffic. Nearly absolute silence on streets leading to the walkway along the East River.

Close to the water's edge, he turned left, headed uptown, in the direction of Harlem, not on the paved, guardrailed, concrete walkway, but on a path through growing things — grass, bushes, shrubs, moss, flowers, weeds, trees — life someone had the good sense to preserve or plant and create park-like stretches paralleling the river. On his side of tall, black cyclone fences that protected tennis courts, running tracks and ball fields, he saw the same discarded paperback book he had been noticing for a couple days, a pale, bulky lump still lying there atop late-May grass, near the mud-colored path scuffed into brown earth by many, many footsteps, the skittering trail he was negotiating, only a bit wider than a shoe length, mile of path, improvised about a yard away from fifteen-foot-high black wire fences. Curiosity he had managed to resist on previous sightings won this time. He stopped, used a foot to turn it over, and discovered the book's title, "Snow," on its torn cover, a novel by coincidence he happened to have read, its author a famous Turkish writer, and he was trying hard to remember the writer's name, remember more about the book, unable to take another step until he forced himself to remember more, embarrassed, ashamed when he couldn't. Silence of the morning, stillness of the streets on his way to the East River all he could recall.

Then snow. Instantly the green grass, the brown earth, the book are buried under whiteness. Huge snowflakes filling the air around him. If it had been a scene he read in the novel's pages, he might have dismissed it as "magical realism." But no, it was not words. No. Snow present. Snow a deluge of giant flakes slowly descending, snow dropping into the East River, turning edges of water into icy sheets, snow beginning to obscure tall towers — most completed, some under construction, crowned by skeletal arms of cranes — looming a half mile away on the river's opposite bank, snow falling until it buries that distant cityscape and all the buildings disappear.

Will he ever be able to express to her (or maybe she already understands — smart pretty niece by way of smart pretty niece — and maybe she will help him understand better) the painful complicity of inhabiting a world that holds his imprisoned brother, and holds another who *is* a prison.

Not exactly reparations, I say to my brother during the second phone call to me he's been permitted after a hearing that denied parole, an old colored man (is he a soul brother of the *bête noire* my dreams spy on) presiding. My brother turned down for the fifth straight year since he became eligible, after twenty-five years, to apply once a year for parole. Not exactly reparations, I smile and wag my head, though my brother can't see me do it nor do I quite hear his little laugh nor see that smart-aleck smirk that wrinkles up my brother's face since he was twelve. Silence on the other end of the phone line connecting us, him trapped inside, me trapped outside stone walls, but I keep talking, carefully of course, since our conversations are monitored and my words can be used against him. Say the story I saw on the NBC Nightly News not exactly reparations after four hundred years of damage, but maybe a step in the right direction. Whadda you think, man. Story the feel-good bit in these godawful times Lester always tacks on at the end of each broadcast. A project in a laundromat to teach preschool ghetto kids to read. Good idea, huh, though maybe a better idea, the best idea, just to stop pretending altogether they give a fuck. Excuse me. Give a damn. Probably my own bad mood as much as anything else, bro, but that piece made me so mad, so ashamed, I wanted to scream. Cry. Enslavement a terrible crime — just about everybody concedes that fact today — but all the victims and perpetrators dead, we're told, if we ask. Not spoken about if no one asks. America's gaping, cosmic black hole and here they come with another Band-Aid to patch it. Cringed when I saw those video clips of kids

listening to grownups read, kids spozed to be learning to read inside some ugly fuck ... damn laundromat in a raggedy-ass neighborhood. Let it bleed, I thought. Better to let it bleed. All of us falling one day, sucked into a black hole, but some of us encumbered with all the shit they've stolen will fall through faster, and the rest of us left behind, separated a blessed minute from those ruthless, greedy, toxic thieves at last, and maybe then at the end we might get a little smidgen of peace then.

Laundromat. Yeah. Yeah. Huge, barn-ass, noisy room and preschoolers stuck there anyway on wash day with mamas or grandmamas or aunts or big sis or whoever washes everybody's clothes so why not. It's available, cheap, plenty clients on hand regularly. Just bring in a couple volunteers and organize the locals, encourage them to read to the little burr-heads instead of just sitting around half the day smoking dope or doing nothing while all those machines rumbling, tumbling. Why not get the women involved who spawn too many colored kids. Teach them to sit their babies down and read to them instead of letting them run wild inside a filthy laundromat. And if mama missed that alphabet class in school, teach mama the alphabet, too. Makes perfect sense in a way. You know. Like, yes, please give our children a little extra head-start push. So niggers don't fail because they start out — first day in kindergarten — far behind other kids. Except everybody knows ain't no rule says niggers got to catch up. Four hundred years and we ain't caught up yet.

Makes sense and no sense. Teaching ghetto kids to read a couple hours a week in some loud, crowded, funky laundromat, bro. As if it's the best school the richest country on earth can afford for them. What kind of fucking catch-up is that. Four hundred years and counting of starting out unequal. That amounts to some serious left-behind. Four hundred years' worth. And we spozed to catch up while our clothes getting clean. Why not slam up every single colored one of us into laundromats and lock the doors. Only let out a few, now and then. Ones who read well.

She sticks the check from her uncle back in its envelope, envelope in her bag to deposit next day in the bank after work. Money her uncle sent for her other uncle, the one she's seen only a few times in life, and never outside prison, where he's been since before she was born, money her uncle had asked her to begin taking charge of this year, money in a lump sum he sends for her to dispense to his brother, her uncle said, both to connect her more closely with her imprisoned uncle and to encourage more visits to the prison, his hope. Requesting that she dole out to his brother in small, regular amounts the money he sends her, either when she visits and can put cash directly into a prison account or JPay it through Internet, the second option equally available to her college-educated uncle wherever he is, she's tempted to remind him, though he always claims the Internet "befuddles him." Smallish portions, he schools her. Best not to forward too much money at one time because my younger sibling has a fondness for gambling and we don't want to tempt him, do we, dear heart, my uncle said. Little bro's fondness for risk and his boundless optimism insure he'll keep chasing after other folks' bad money until he loses all the little taste of good money in his hand, my uncle says, talking over the phone in that odd, elaborate way of his she thinks he must be as fond of as he claims his younger brother fond of gambling.

Her uncle had asked her once, Do you truly believe you're colored. Hey. Don't be looking at me all cross-eyed, young lady. A serious question. Do you, we, all of us still believe we are colored just because they keep telling us we are. Colored. Different. A damned shame.

Her odd uncle, book writer, wanderer, seldom in town. Her dead mom's uncle, really, Grandma's older brother. Her dead mom her grandma's eldest daughter, the man's actual niece, and that makes her what — great-niece, niece-in-law, second niece — whatever to this man she's standing next to on her grandmother's porch and always called Uncle since she was a baby, the wannabe front porch not much larger than a final step up to Grandma's house. Her house, too. For many years, she and her mom, after her beautiful mom got divorced, got sick, living there with Granddaddy and Grandma, her grandma who still misses a lost daughter seven years gone,

mourns her lost daughter as fiercely, unconsolably, it seems and does not seem possible, as she does, daughter of that lost daughter who misses and mourns her mom, yes she does, still does very much, especially now, on this narrow, crooked front porch where she stands in the dark after family had gathered to talk and eat and drink themselves holiday-silly and each one finally at this late hour has had more than enough and begins peeling away into smaller family groups. Or a few, like her, alone, though her uncle beside her now, middle of the night, isn't it, and dangerous out there in the streets, and Uncle makes it his habit, whenever he's around, to escort each solitary family female outdoors, a sentinel on the porch until she's locked in her car, motor running, lights on and car rolls off, up or down the dark, steep hillside upon which his sister's house perches. Uncle there, bodies lightly touching when his arm goes round her shoulders and he leans down, kisses her cheek, and if her cheek just a wee bit higher or he leaned lower, his lips might have brushed hers, but didn't, no lip brushing because she's tough like her mom, though also unafraid like her, and believes, like her mom did, neither in sin, nor in everlasting romance of any mouth, uncle or anybody else on her mouth, knows better, raised better by her dead mom who nods gently, whispers best not, of course not, girl, best go on and get your behind down those treacherous slabs of broken concrete that serve as steps up and down from the sidewalk to your grandma's red front door. Glad now she chose sneakers and jeans not heels and dress for the family party. Don't break your butt, girl, careful, careful now, get yourself down step by step till your feet on solid street and your car door locked, and you got yourself sitting behind the wheel, girl.

Her uncle tall. Not as tall as tall, gorgeous Riley. Thirty smiling foot of Riley in skimpy running shorts, T-shirt, fanciest of training shoes posterized for months up on a wall next to Kmart entrance to the mall. Liked Riley lots. Maybe still with him. Maybe if he shared fewer of those dumb notions guys his age, especially fine ones like finest Riley, share. *Gimme some. Get me some. Cop me a piece of pussy.* What in the world did they think we carry around down there between our legs, her mom asked once, think we can break off and wrap it up and send it home with them or they can grab and show off to their friends.

Her uncle had asked her, If you found out, a secret, no doubt about it, world going to end very, very soon, would you tell other people. With that knowledge buzzing around in your brain, my dear, what would you do. Then her uncle had stopped talking. Stopped explaining experiments or games, stopped asking questions. Looked at her. Waited. Waited. As if he expected an answer. Since she had no idea what to reply, she asked him, What would you do, Uncle. He smiled at her, then closed his eyes and whispered, If I knew sure enough the world about to end, think I'd probably kidnap you, girl, and run far away with you, and my, my, wouldn't that be a trip, and wouldn't people talk.

And she had smiled back, smile deep as his smile because she believed her old uncle just talking, just teasing. Long, long way for both of them to go.

# The Diamond as Big as the Ritz - F. Scott Fitzgerald

(1922)

John T. Unger came from a family that had been well known in Hades — a small town on the Mississippi River — for several generations. John's father had held the amateur golf championship through many a heated contest; Mrs. Unger was known "from hot-box to hot-bed," as the local phrase went, for her political addresses; and young John T. Unger, who had just turned sixteen, had danced all the latest dances from New York before he put on long trousers. And now, for a certain time, he was to be away from home. That respect for a New England education which is the bane of all provincial places, which drains them yearly of their most promising young men, had seized upon his parents. Nothing would suit them but that he should go to St. Midas's School near Boston — Hades was too small to hold their darling and gifted son.

Now in Hades — as you know if you ever have been there — the names of the more fashionable preparatory schools and colleges mean very little. The inhabitants have been so long out of the world that, though they make a show of keeping up-to-date in dress and manners and literature, they depend to a great extent on hearsay, and a function that in Hades would be considered elaborate would doubtless be hailed by a Chicago beef-princess as "perhaps a little tacky."

John T. Unger was on the eve of departure. Mrs. Unger, with maternal fatuity, packed his trunks full of linen suits and electric fans, and Mr. Unger presented his son with an asbestos pocket-book stuffed with money.

"Remember, you are always welcome here," he said. "You can be sure, boy, that we'll keep the home fires burning."

"I know," answered John huskily.

"Don't forget who you are and where you come from," continued his father proudly, "and you can do nothing to harm you. You are an Unger — from Hades."

So the old man and the young shook hands, and John walked away with tears streaming from his eyes. Ten minutes later he had passed outside the city limits and he stopped to glance back for the last time. Over the gates the old-fashioned Victorian motto seemed strangely attractive to him. His father had tried time and time again to have it changed to something with a little more push and verve about it, such as "Hades — Your Opportunity," or else a plain "Welcome" sign set over a hearty handshake pricked out in electric lights. The old motto was a little depressing, Mr. Unger had thought — but now ...

So John took his look and then set his face resolutely toward his destination. And, as he turned away, the lights of Hades against the sky seemed full of a warm and passionate beauty.

St. Midas's School is half an hour from Boston in a Rolls-Pierce motor-car. The actual distance will never be known, for no one, except John T. Unger, had ever arrived there save in a Rolls-Pierce and probably no one ever will again. St. Midas's is the most expensive and the most exclusive boys' preparatory school in the world.

John's first two years there passed pleasantly. The fathers of all the boys were money-kings, and John spent his summer visiting at fashionable resorts. While he was very fond of all the boys he visited, their fathers struck him as being much of a piece, and in his boyish way he often wondered at their exceeding sameness. When he told them where his home was they would ask jovially, "Pretty hot down there?" and John would muster a faint smile and answer, "It certainly is." His response would have been heartier had they not all made this joke — at best varying it with, "Is it hot enough for you down there?" which he hated just as much.

In the middle of his second year at school, a quiet, handsome boy named Percy Washington had been put in John's form. The new-comer was pleasant in his manner and exceedingly well

dressed even for St. Midas's, but for some reason he kept aloof from the other boys. The only person with whom he was intimate was John T. Unger, but even to John he was entirely uncommunicative concerning his home or his family. That he was wealthy went without saying, but beyond a few such deductions John knew little of his friend, so it promised rich confectionery for his curiosity when Percy invited him to spend the summer at his home "in the West." He accepted, without hesitation.

It was only when they were in the train that Percy became, for the first time, rather communicative. One day while they were eating lunch in the dining-car and discussing the imperfect characters of several of the boys at school, Percy suddenly changed his tone and made an abrupt remark.

"My father," he said, "is by far the richest man in the world."

"Oh," said John politely. He could think of no answer to make to this confidence. He considered "That's very nice," but it sounded hollow and was on the point of saying, "Really?" but refrained since it would seem to question Percy's statement. And such an astounding statement could scarcely be questioned.

"By far the richest," repeated Percy.

"I was reading in the *World Almanac*," began John, "that there was one man in America with an income of over five million a year and four men with incomes of over three million a year, and —"

"Oh, they're nothing," Percy's mouth was a half-moon of scorn. "Catch-penny capitalists, financial small-fry, petty merchants and money-lenders. My father could buy them out and not know he'd done it."

"But how does he —"

"Why haven't they put down his income-tax? Because he doesn't pay any. At least he pays a little one — but he doesn't pay any on his *real* income."

"He must be very rich," said John simply. "I'm glad. I like very rich people."

"The richer a fella is, the better I like him." There was a look of passionate frankness upon his dark face. "I visited the Schnlitzer-Murphys last Easter. Vivian Schnlitzer-Murphy had rubies as big as hen's eggs, and sapphires that were like globes with lights inside them —"

"I love jewels," agreed Percy enthusiastically. "Of course I wouldn't want any one at school to know about it, but I've got quite a collection myself. I used to collect them instead of stamps."

"And diamonds," continued John eagerly. "The Schnlitzer-Murphys had diamonds as big as walnuts —"

"That's nothing." Percy had leaned forward and dropped his voice to a low whisper. "That's nothing at all. My father has a diamond bigger than the Ritz-Carlton Hotel."

The Montana sunset lay between two mountains like a gigantic bruise from which dark arteries spread themselves over a poisoned sky. An immense distance under the sky crouched the village of Fish, minute, dismal, and forgotten. There were twelve men, so it was said, in the village of Fish, twelve sombre and inexplicable souls who sucked a lean milk from the almost literally bare rock upon which a mysterious populatory force had begotten them. They had become a race apart, these twelve men of Fish, like some species developed by an early whim of nature, which on second thought had abandoned them to struggle and extermination.

Out of the blue-black bruise in the distance crept a long line of moving lights upon the desolation of the land, and the twelve men of Fish gathered like ghosts at the shanty depot to watch the passing of the seven o'clock train, the Transcontinental Express from Chicago. Six times or so a year the Transcontinental Express, through some inconceivable jurisdiction, stopped at the village of Fish, and when this occurred a figure or so would disembark, mount into a buggy that always appeared from out of the dusk, and drive off toward the bruised sunset. The observation of this pointless and preposterous phenomenon had become a sort of cult among the men of Fish. To observe, that was all; there remained in them none of the vital quality of illusion



which would make them wonder or speculate, else a religion might have grown up around these mysterious visitations. But the men of Fish were beyond all religion — the barest and most savage tenets of even Christianity could gain no foothold on that barren rock — so there was no altar, no priest, no sacrifice; only each night at seven the silent concourse by the shanty depot, a congregation who lifted up a prayer of dim, anaemic wonder.

On this June night, the Great Brakeman, whom, had they deified any one, they might well have chosen as their celestial protagonist, had ordained that the seven o'clock train should leave its human (or inhuman) deposit at Fish. At two minutes after seven Percy Washington and John T. Unger disembarked, hurried past the spellbound, the agape, the fearsome eyes of the twelve men of Fish, mounted into a buggy which had obviously appeared from nowhere, and drove away.

After half an hour, when the twilight had coagulated into dark, the silent negro who was driving the buggy hailed an opaque body somewhere ahead of them in the gloom. In response to his cry, it turned upon them a luminous disc which regarded them like a malignant eye out of the unfathomable night. As they came closer, John saw that it was the tail-light of an immense automobile, larger and more magnificent than any he had ever seen. Its body was of gleaming metal richer than nickel and lighter than silver, and the hubs of the wheels were studded with iridescent geometric figures of green and yellow — John did not dare to guess whether they were glass or jewel.

Two negroes, dressed in glittering livery such as one sees in pictures of royal processions in London, were standing at attention beside the car and, as the two young men dismounted from the buggy, they were greeted in some language which the guest could not understand, but which seemed to be an extreme form of the Southern negro's dialect.

"Get in," said Percy to his friend, as their trunks were tossed to the ebony roof of the limousine. "Sorry we had to bring you this far in that buggy, but of course it wouldn't do for the people on the train or those God-forsaken fellas in Fish to see this automobile."

"Gosh! What a car!" This ejaculation was provoked by its interior. John saw that the upholstery consisted of a thousand minute and exquisite tapestries of silk, woven with jewels and embroideries, and set upon a background of cloth of gold. The two armchair seats in which the boys luxuriated were covered with stuff that resembled duvetyn, but seemed woven in numberless colours of the ends of ostrich feathers.

"What a car!" cried John again, in amazement.

"This thing?" Percy laughed. "Why, it's just an old junk we use for a station wagon."

this time they were gliding along through the darkness toward the break between the two mountains.

"We'll be there in an hour and a half," said Percy, looking at the clock. "I may as well tell you it's not going to be like anything you ever saw before."

If the car was any indication of what John would see, he was prepared to be astonished indeed. The simple piety prevalent in Hades has the earnest worship of and respect for riches as the first article of its creed — had John felt otherwise than radiantly humble before them, his parents would have turned away in horror at the blasphemy.

They had now reached and were entering the break between the two mountains and almost immediately the way became much rougher.

"If the moon shone down here, you'd see that we're in a big gulch," said Percy, trying to peer out of the window. He spoke a few words into the mouthpiece and immediately the footman turned on a searchlight and swept the hillsides with an immense beam.

"Rocky, you see. An ordinary car would be knocked to pieces in half an hour. In fact, it'd take a tank to navigate it unless you knew the way. You notice we're going uphill now."

They were obviously ascending, and within a few minutes the car was crossing a high rise, where they caught a glimpse of a pale moon newly risen in the distance. The car stopped

suddenly and several figures took shape out of the dark beside it — these were negroes also. Again the two young men were saluted in the same dimly recognisable dialect; then the negroes set to work and four immense cables dangling from overhead were attached with hooks to the hubs of the great jewelled wheels. At a resounding "Hey-yah!" John felt the car being lifted slowly from the ground — up and up — clear of the tallest rocks on both sides — then higher, until he could see a wavy, moonlit valley stretched out before him in sharp contrast to the quagmire of rocks that they had just left. Only on one side was there still rock — and then suddenly there was no rock beside them or anywhere around.

It was apparent that they had surmounted some immense knife-blade of stone, projecting perpendicularly into the air. In a moment they were going down again, and finally with a soft bump they were landed upon the smooth earth.

"The worst is over," said Percy, squinting out the window. "It's only five miles from here, and our own road — tapestry brick — all the way. This belongs to us. This is where the United States ends, father says."

"Are we in Canada?"

"We are not. We're in the middle of the Montana Rockies. But you are now on the only five square miles of land in the country that's never been surveyed."

"Why hasn't it? Did they forget it?"

"No," said Percy, grinning, "they tried to do it three times. The first time my grandfather corrupted a whole department of the State survey; the second time he had the official maps of the United States tinkered with — that held them for fifteen years. The last time was harder. My father fixed it so that their compasses were in the strongest magnetic field ever artificially set up. He had a whole set of surveying instruments made with a slight defection that would allow for this territory not to appear, and he substituted them for the ones that were to be used. Then he had a river deflected and he had what looked like a village up on its banks — so that they'd see it, and think it was a town ten miles farther up the valley. There's only one thing my father's afraid of," he concluded, "only one thing in the world that could be used to find us out."

"What's that?"

Percy sank his voice to a whisper.

"Aeroplanes," he breathed. "We've got half a dozen anti-aircraft guns and we've arranged it so far — but there've been a few deaths and a great many prisoners. Not that we mind that, you know, father and I, but it upsets mother and the girls, and there's always the chance that some time we won't be able to arrange it."

Shreds and tatters of chinchilla, courtesy clouds in the green moon's heaven, were passing the green moon like precious Eastern stuffs paraded for the inspection of some Tartar Khan. It seemed to John that it was day, and that he was looking at some lads sailing above him in the air, showering down tracts and patent medicine circulars, with their messages of hope for despairing, rock-bound hamlets. It seemed to him that he could see them look down out of the clouds and stare — and stare at whatever there was to stare at in this place whither he was bound — What then? Were they induced to land by some insidious device to be immured far from patent medicines and from tracts until the judgment day — or, should they fail to fall into the trap, did a quick puff of smoke and the sharp round of a splitting shell bring them drooping to earth — and "upset" Percy's mother and sisters. John shook his head and the wraith of a hollow laugh issued silently from his parted lips. What desperate transaction lay hidden here? What a moral expedient of a bizarre Croesus? What terrible and golden mystery? ...

The chinchilla clouds had drifted past now and outside the Montana night was bright as day. The tapestry brick of the road was smooth to the tread of the great tires as they rounded a still, moonlit lake; they passed into darkness for a moment, a pine grove, pungent and cool, then they came out into a broad avenue of lawn, and John's exclamation of pleasure was simultaneous with Percy's taciturn "We're home."

Full in the light of the stars, an exquisite château rose from the borders of the lake, climbed in marble radiance half the height of an adjoining mountain, then melted in grace, in perfect symmetry, in translucent feminine languor, into the massed darkness of a forest of pine. The many towers, the slender tracery of the sloping parapets, the chiselled wonder of a thousand yellow windows with their oblongs and hexagons and triangles of golden light, the shattered softness of the intersecting planes of star-shine and blue shade, all trembled on John's spirit like a chord of music. On one of the towers, the tallest, the blackest at its base, an arrangement of exterior lights at the top made a sort of floating fairyland — and as John gazed up in warm enchantment the faint acciaccare sound of violins drifted down in a rococo harmony that was like nothing he had ever heard before. Then in a moment the car stopped before wide, high marble steps around which the night air was fragrant with a host of flowers. At the top of the steps two great doors swung silently open and amber light flooded out upon the darkness, silhouetting the figure of an exquisite lady with black, high-piled hair, who held out her arms toward them.

"Mother," Percy was saying, "this is my friend, John Unger, from Hades."

Afterward John remembered that first night as a daze of many colours, of quick sensory impressions, of music soft as a voice in love, and of the beauty of things, lights and shadows, and motions and faces. There was a white-haired man who stood drinking a many-hued cordial from a crystal thimble set on a golden stem. There was a girl with a flowery face, dressed like Titania with braided sapphires in her hair. There was a room where the solid, soft gold of the walls yielded to the pressure of his hand, and a room that was like a platonic conception of the ultimate prison — ceiling, floor, and all, it was lined with an unbroken mass of diamonds, diamonds of every size and shape, until, lit with tall violet lamps in the corners, it dazzled the eyes with a whiteness that could be compared only with itself, beyond human wish, or dream.

Through a maze of these rooms the two boys wandered. Sometimes the floor under their feet would flame in brilliant patterns from lighting below, patterns of barbaric clashing colours, of pastel delicacy, of sheer whiteness, or of subtle and intricate mosaic, surely from some mosque on the Adriatic Sea. Sometimes beneath layers of thick crystal he would see blue or green water swirling, inhabited by vivid fish and growths of rainbow foliage. Then they would be treading on furs of every texture and colour or along corridors of palest ivory, unbroken as though carved complete from the gigantic tusks of dinosaurs extinct before the age of man ...

Then a hazily remembered transition, and they were at dinner — where each plate was of two almost imperceptible layers of solid diamond between which was curiously worked a filigree of emerald design, a shaving sliced from green air. Music, plangent and unobtrusive, drifted down through far corridors — his chair, feathered and curved insidiously to his back, seemed to engulf and overpower him as he drank his first glass of port. He tried drowsily to answer a question that had been asked him, but the honeyed luxury that clasped his body added to the illusion of sleep — jewels, fabrics, wines, and metals blurred before his eyes into a sweet mist ...

"Yes," he replied with a polite effort, "it certainly is hot enough for me down there."

He managed to add a ghostly laugh; then, without movement, without resistance, he seemed to float off and away, leaving an iced dessert that was pink as a dream ... He fell asleep.

When he awoke he knew that several hours had passed. He was in a great quiet room with ebony walls and a dull illumination that was too faint, too subtle, to be called a light. His young host was standing over him.

"You fell asleep at dinner," Percy was saying. "I nearly did, too — it was such a treat to be comfortable again after this year of school. Servants undressed and bathed you while you were sleeping."

"Is this a bed or a cloud?" sighed John. "Percy, Percy — before you go, I want to apologise."

"For what?"

"For doubting you when you said you had a diamond as big as the Ritz-Carlton Hotel."

Percy smiled.

"I thought you didn't believe me. It's that mountain, you know."

"What mountain?"

"The mountain the chateau rests on. It's not very big, for a mountain. But except about fifty feet of sod and gravel on top it's solid diamond. One diamond, one cubic mile without a flaw. Aren't you listening? Say — "

But John T. Unger had again fallen asleep.

Morning. As he awoke he perceived drowsily that the room had at the same moment become dense with sunlight. The ebony panels of one wall had slid aside on a sort of track, leaving his chamber half open to the day. A large negro in a white uniform stood beside his bed.

"Good-evening," muttered John, summoning his brains from the wild places.

"Good-morning, sir. Are you ready for your bath, sir? Oh, don't get up — I'll put you in, if you'll just unbutton your pajamas — there. Thank you, sir."

John lay quietly as his pajamas were removed — he was amused and delighted; he expected to be lifted like a child by this black Gargantua who was tending him, but nothing of the sort happened; instead he felt the bed tilt up slowly on its side — he began to roll, startled at first, in the direction of the wall, but when he reached the wall its drapery gave way, and sliding two yards farther down a fleecy incline he plumped gently into water the same temperature as his body.

He looked about him. The runway or rollway on which he had arrived had folded gently back into place. He had been projected into another chamber and was sitting in a sunken bath with his head just above the level of the floor. All about him, lining the walls of the room and the sides and bottom of the bath itself, was a blue aquarium, and gazing through the crystal surface on which he sat, he could see fish swimming among amber lights and even gliding without curiosity past his outstretched toes, which were separated from them only by the thickness of the crystal. From overhead, sunlight came down through sea-green glass.

"I suppose, sir, that you'd like hot rosewater and soapsuds this morning, sir — and perhaps cold salt water to finish."

The negro was standing beside him.

"Yes," agreed John, smiling inanely, "as you please." Any idea of ordering this bath according to his own meagre standards of living would have been priggish and not a little wicked.

The negro pressed a button and a warm rain began to fall, apparently from overhead, but really, so John discovered after a moment, from a fountain arrangement near by. The water turned to a pale rose colour and jets of liquid soap spurted into it from four miniature walrus heads at the corners of the bath. In a moment a dozen little paddle-wheels, fixed to the sides, had churned the mixture into a radiant rainbow of pink foam which enveloped him softly with its delicious lightness, and burst in shining, rosy bubbles here and there about him.

"Shall I turn on the moving-picture machine, sir?" suggested the negro deferentially. "There's a good one-reel comedy in this machine to-day, or I can put in a serious piece in a moment, if you prefer it."

"No, thanks," answered John, politely but firmly. He was enjoying his bath too much to desire any distraction. But distraction came. In a moment he was listening intently to the sound of flutes from just outside, flutes dripping a melody that was like a waterfall, cool and green as the room itself, accompanying a frothy piccolo, in play more fragile than the lace of suds that covered and charmed him.

After a cold salt-water bracer and a cold fresh finish, he stepped out and into a fleecy robe, and upon a couch covered with the same material he was rubbed with oil, alcohol, and spice. Later he sat in a voluptuous chair while he was shaved and his hair was trimmed.

"Mr. Percy is waiting in your sitting-room," said the negro, when these operations were finished. "My name is Gygsun, Mr. Unger, sir. I am to see to Mr. Unger every morning."

John walked out into the brisk sunshine of his living-room, where he found breakfast waiting

for him and Percy, gorgeous in white kid knickerbockers, smoking in an easy chair.

This is a story of the Washington family as Percy sketched it for John during breakfast.

The father of the present Mr. Washington had been a Virginian, a direct descendant of George Washington, and Lord Baltimore. At the close of the Civil War he was a twenty-five-year-old Colonel with a played-out plantation and about a thousand dollars in gold.

Fitz-Norman Culpepper Washington, for that was the young Colonel's name, decided to present the Virginia estate to his younger brother and go West. He selected two dozen of the most faithful blacks, who, of course, worshipped him, and bought twenty-five tickets to the West, where he intended to take out land in their names and start a sheep and cattle ranch.

When he had been in Montana for less than a month and things were going very poorly indeed, he stumbled on his great discovery. He had lost his way when riding in the hills, and after a day without food he began to grow hungry. As he was without his rifle, he was forced to pursue a squirrel, and, in the course of the pursuit, he noticed that it was carrying something shiny in its mouth. Just before it vanished into its hole — for Providence did not intend that this squirrel should alleviate his hunger — it dropped its burden. Sitting down to consider the situation Fitz-Norman's eye was caught by a gleam in the grass beside him. In ten seconds he had completely lost his appetite and gained one hundred thousand dollars. The squirrel, which had refused with annoying persistence to become food, had made him a present of a large and perfect diamond.

Late that night he found his way to camp and twelve hours later all the males among his darkies were back by the squirrel hole digging furiously at the side of the mountain. He told them he had discovered a rhinestone mine, and, as only one or two of them had ever seen even a small diamond before, they believed him, without question. When the magnitude of his discovery became apparent to him, he found himself in a quandary. The mountain was *a* diamond — it was literally nothing else but solid diamond. He filled four saddle bags full of glittering samples and started on horseback for St. Paul. There he managed to dispose of half a dozen small stones — when he tried a larger one a storekeeper fainted and Fitz-Norman was arrested as a public disturber. He escaped from jail and caught the train for New York, where he sold a few medium-sized diamonds and received in exchange about two hundred thousand dollars in gold. But he did not dare to produce any exceptional gems — in fact, he left New York just in time. Tremendous excitement had been created in jewelry circles, not so much by the size of his diamonds as by their appearance in the city from mysterious sources. Wild rumours became current that a diamond mine had been discovered in the Catskills, on the Jersey coast, on Long Island, beneath Washington Square. Excursion trains, packed with men carrying picks and shovels, began to leave New York hourly, bound for various neighbouring El Dorados. But by that time young Fitz-Norman was on his way back to Montana.

the end of a fortnight he had estimated that the diamond in the mountain was approximately equal in quantity to all the rest of the diamonds known to exist in the world. There was no valuing it by any regular computation, however, for it was one solid diamond — and if it were offered for sale not only would the bottom fall out of the market, but also, if the value should vary with its size in the usual arithmetical progression, there would not be enough gold in the world to buy a tenth part of it. And what could any one do with a diamond that size?

It was an amazing predicament. He was, in one sense, the richest man that ever lived — and yet was he worth anything at all? If his secret should transpire there was no telling to what measures the Government might resort in order to prevent a panic, in gold as well as in jewels. They might take over the claim immediately and institute a monopoly.

There was no alternative — he must market his mountain in secret. He sent South for his younger brother and put him in charge of his coloured following, darkies who had never realised that slavery was abolished. To make sure of this, he read them a proclamation that he had composed, which announced that General Forrest had reorganised the shattered Southern armies

and defeated the North in one pitched battle. The negroes believed him implicitly. They passed a vote declaring it a good thing and held revival services immediately.

Fitz-Norman himself set out for foreign parts with one hundred thousand dollars and two trunks filled with rough diamonds of all sizes. He sailed for Russia in a Chinese junk, and six months after his departure from Montana he was in St. Petersburg. He took obscure lodgings and called immediately upon the court jeweller, announcing that he had a diamond for the Czar. He remained in St. Petersburg for two weeks, in constant danger of being murdered, living from lodging to lodging, and afraid to visit his trunks more than three or four times during the whole fortnight.

On his promise to return in a year with larger and finer stones, he was allowed to leave for India. Before he left, however, the Court Treasurers had deposited to his credit, in American banks, the sum of fifteen million dollars — under four different aliases.

He returned to America in 1868, having been gone a little over two years. He had visited the capitals of twenty-two countries and talked with five emperors, eleven kings, three princes, a shah, a khan, and a sultan. At that time Fitz-Norman estimated his own wealth at one billion dollars. One fact worked consistently against the disclosure of his secret. No one of his larger diamonds remained in the public eye for a week before being invested with a history of enough fatalities, amours, revolutions, and wars to have occupied it from the days of the first Babylonian Empire.

From 1870 until his death in 1900, the history of Fitz-Norman Washington was a long epic in gold. There were side issues, of course — he evaded the surveys, he married a Virginia lady, by whom he had a single son, and he was compelled, due to a series of unfortunate complications, to murder his brother, whose unfortunate habit of drinking himself into an indiscreet stupor had several times endangered their safety. But very few other murders stained these happy years of progress and expansion.

Just before he died he changed his policy, and with all but a few million dollars of his outside wealth bought up rare minerals in bulk, which he deposited in the safety vaults of banks all over the world, marked as bric-a-brac. His son, Braddock Tarleton Washington, followed this policy on an even more tensive scale. The minerals were converted into the rarest of all elements — radium — so that the equivalent of a billion dollars in gold could be placed in a receptacle no bigger than a cigar box.

When Fitz-Norman had been dead three years his son, Braddock, decided that the business had gone far enough. The amount of wealth that he and his father had taken out of the mountain was beyond all exact computation. He kept a note-book in cipher in which he set down the approximate quantity of radium in each of the thousand banks he patronised, and recorded the alias under which it was held. Then he did a very simple thing — he sealed up the mine.

He sealed up the mine. What had been taken out of it would support all the Washingtons yet to be born in unparalleled luxury for generations. His one care must be the protection of his secret, lest in the possible panic attendant on its discovery he should be reduced with all the property-holders in the world to utter poverty.

This was the family among whom John T. Unger was staying. This was the story he heard in his silver-walled living-room the morning after his arrival.

After breakfast, John found his way out the great marble entrance, and looked curiously at the scene before him. The whole valley, from the diamond mountain to the steep granite cliff five miles away, still gave off a breath of golden haze which hovered idly above the fine sweep of lawns and lakes and gardens. Here and there clusters of elms made delicate groves of shade, contrasting strangely with the tough masses of pine forest that held the hills in a grip of dark-blue green. Even as John looked he saw three fawns in single file patter out from one clump about a half-mile away and disappear with awkward gaiety into the black-ribbed half-light of another. John would not have been surprised to see a goat-foot piping his way among the trees or to catch

a glimpse of pink nymph-skin and flying yellow hair between the greenest of the green leaves.

In some such cool hope he descended the marble steps, disturbing faintly the sleep of two silky Russian wolfhounds at the bottom, and set off along a walk of white and blue brick that seemed to lead in no particular direction.

He was enjoying himself as much as he was able. It is youth's felicity as well as its insufficiency that it can never live in the present, but must always be measuring up the day against its own radiantly imagined future — flowers and gold, girls and stars, they are only prefigurations and prophecies of that incomparable, unattainable young dream.

John rounded a soft corner where the massed rosebushes filled the air with heavy scent, and struck off across a park toward a patch of moss under some trees. He had never lain upon moss, and he wanted to see whether it was really soft enough to justify the use of its name as an adjective. Then he saw a girl coming toward him over the grass. She was the most beautiful person he had ever seen.

She was dressed in a white little gown that came just below her knees, and a wreath of mignonettes clasped with blue slices of sapphire bound up her hair. Her pink bare feet scattered the dew before them as she came. She was younger than John — not more than sixteen.

"Hallo," she cried softly, "I'm Kismine."

She was much more than that to John already. He advanced toward her, scarcely moving as he drew near lest he should tread on her bare toes.

"You haven't met me," said her soft voice. Her blue eyes added, "Oh, but you've missed a great deal!" ... "You met my sister, Jasmine, last night. I was sick with lettuce poisoning," went on her soft voice, and her eye continued, "and when I'm sick I'm sweet — and when I'm well."

"You have made an enormous impression on me," said John's eyes, "and I'm not so slow myself" — "How do you do?" said his voice. "I hope you're better this morning." — "You darling," added his eyes tremulously.

John observed that they had been walking along the path. On her suggestion they sat down together upon the moss, the softness of which he failed to determine.

He was critical about women. A single defect — a thick ankle, a hoarse voice, a glass eye — was enough to make him utterly indifferent. And here for the first time in his life he was beside a girl who seemed to him the incarnation of physical perfection.

"Are you from the East?" asked Kismine with charming interest.

"No," answered John simply. "I'm from Hades."

Either she had never heard of Hades, or she could think of no pleasant comment to make upon it, for she did not discuss it further.

"I'm going East to school this fall," she said. "D'you think I'll like it? I'm going to New York to Miss Bulge's. It's very strict, but you see over the weekends I'm going to live at home with the family in our New York house, because father heard that the girls had to go walking two by two."

"Your father wants you to be proud," observed John.

"We are," she answered, her eyes shining with dignity. "None of us has ever been punished. Father said we never should be. Once when my sister Jasmine was a little girl she pushed him downstairs and he just got up and limped away."

"Mother was — well, a little startled," continued Kismine, "when she heard that you were from — from where you *are* from, you know. She said that when she was a young girl — but then, you see, she's a Spaniard and old-fashioned."

"Do you spend much time out here?" asked John, to conceal the fact that he was somewhat hurt by this remark. It seemed an unkind allusion to his provincialism.

"Percy and Jasmine and I are here every summer, but next summer Jasmine is going to Newport. She's coming out in London a year from this fall. She'll be presented at court."

"Do you know," began John hesitantly, "you're much more sophisticated than I thought you

were when I first saw you?"

"Oh, no, I'm not," she exclaimed hurriedly. "Oh, I wouldn't think of being. I think that sophisticated young people are *terribly* common, don't you? I'm not at all, really. If you say I am, I'm going to cry."

She was so distressed that her lip was trembling. John was impelled to protest:

"I didn't mean that; I only said it to tease you."

"Because I wouldn't mind if I were," she persisted, "but I'm not. I'm very innocent and girlish. I never smoke, or drink, or read anything except poetry. I know scarcely any mathematics or chemistry. I dress very simply — in fact, I scarcely dress at all. I think sophisticated is the last thing you can say about me. I believe that girls ought to enjoy their youths in a wholesome way."

"I do, too," said John, heartily,

Kismine was cheerful again. She smiled at him, and a still-born tear dripped from the corner of one blue eye.

"I like you," she whispered intimately. "Are you going to spend all your time with Percy while you're here, or will you be nice to me? Just think — I'm absolutely fresh ground. I've never had a boy in love with me in all my life. I've never been allowed even to see boys alone — except Percy. I came all the way out here into this grove hoping to run into you, where the family wouldn't be around."

Deeply flattered, John bowed from the hips as he had been taught at dancing school in Hades.

"We'd better go now," said Kismine sweetly. "I have to be with mother at eleven. You haven't asked me to kiss you once. I thought boys always did that nowadays"

John drew himself up proudly.

"Some of them do," he answered, "but not me. Girls don't do that sort of thing — in Hades."

Side by side they walked back toward the house.

John stood facing Mr. Braddock Washington in the full sunlight. The elder man was about forty, with a proud, vacuous face, intelligent eyes, and a robust figure. In the mornings he smelt of horses — the best horses. He carried a plain walking-stick of gray birch with a single large opal for a grip. He and Percy were showing John around.

"The slaves' quarters are there." His walking-stick indicated a cloister of marble on their left that ran in graceful Gothic along the side of the mountain. "In my youth I was distracted for a while from the business of life by a period of absurd idealism. During that time they lived in luxury. For instance, I equipped every one of their rooms with a tile bath."

"I suppose," ventured John, with an ingratiating laugh, "that they used the bathtubs to keep coal in. Mr. Schnlitzer-Murphy told me that once he —"

"The opinions of Mr. Schnlitzer-Murphy are of little importance, I should imagine," interrupted Braddock Washington coldly. "My slaves did not keep coal in their bathtubs. They had orders to bathe every day, and they did. If they hadn't I might have ordered a sulphuric acid shampoo. I discontinued the baths for quite another reason. Several of them caught cold and died. Water is not good for certain races — except as a beverage."

John laughed, and then decided to nod his head in sober agreement. Braddock Washington made him uncomfortable.

"All these negroes are descendants of the ones my father brought North with him. There are about two hundred and fifty now. You notice that they've lived so long apart from the world that their original dialect has become an almost indistinguishable patois. We bring a few of them up to speak English — my secretary and two or three of the house servants.

"This is the golf course," he continued, as they strolled along the velvet winter grass. "It's all a green, you see — no fairway, no rough, no hazards."

He smiled pleasantly at John.

"Many men in the cage, father?" asked Percy suddenly.

Braddock Washington stumbled, and let forth an involuntary curse.



"One less than there should be," he ejaculated darkly — and then added after a moment, "We've had difficulties."

"Mother was telling me," exclaimed Percy, "that Italian teacher — "

"A ghastly error," said Braddock Washington angrily. "But of course there's a good chance that we may have got him. Perhaps he fell somewhere in the woods or stumbled over a cliff. And then there's always the probability that if he did get away his story wouldn't be believed. Nevertheless, I've had two dozen men looking for him in different towns around here."

"And no luck?"

"Some. Fourteen of them reported to my agent they'd each killed a man answering to that description, but of course it was probably only the reward they were after — "

He broke off. They had come to a large cavity in the earth about the circumference of a merry-go-round, and covered by a strong iron grating. Braddock Washington beckoned to John, and pointed his cane down through the grating. John stepped to the edge and gazed. Immediately his ears were assailed by a wild clamor from below.

"Come on down to Hell!"

"Hallo, kiddo, how's the air up there?"

"Hey! Throw us a rope!"

"Got an old doughnut, Buddy, or a couple of second-hand sandwiches?"

"Say, fella, if you'll push down that guy you're with, we'll show you a quick disappearance scene."

"Paste him one for me, will you?"

It was too dark to see clearly into the pit below, but John could tell from the coarse optimism and rugged vitality of the remarks and voices that they proceeded from middle-class Americans of the more spirited type. Then Mr. Washington put out his cane and touched a button in the grass, and the scene below sprang into light.

"These are some adventurous mariners who had the misfortune to discover El Dorado," he remarked.

Below them there had appeared a large hollow in the earth shaped like the interior of a bowl. The sides were steep and apparently of polished glass, and on its slightly concave surface stood about two dozen men clad in the half costume, half uniform, of aviators. Their upturned faces, lit with wrath, with malice, with despair, with cynical humour, were covered by long growths of beard, but with the exception of a few who had pined perceptibly away, they seemed to be a well-fed, healthy lot.

Braddock Washington drew a garden chair to the edge of the pit and sat down.

"Well, how are you, boys?" he inquired genially.

A chorus of execration, in which all joined except a few too dispirited to cry out, rose up into the sunny air, but Braddock Washington heard it with unruffled composure. When its last echo had died away he spoke again.

"Have you thought up a way out of your difficulty?"

From here and there among them a remark floated up.

"We decided to stay here for love!"

"Bring us up there and we'll find us a way!"

Braddock Washington waited until they were again quiet. Then he said:

"I've told you the situation. I don't want you here. I wish to heaven I'd never seen you. Your own curiosity got you here, and any time that you can think of a way out which protects me and my interests I'll be glad to consider it. But so long as you confine your efforts to digging tunnels — yes, I know about the new one you've started — you won't get very far. This isn't as hard on you as you make it out, with all your howling for the loved ones at home. If you were the type who worried much about the loved ones at home, you'd never have taken up aviation."

A tall man moved apart from the others, and held up his hand to call his captor's attention to

what he was about to say.

"Let me ask you a few questions!" he cried. "You pretend to be a fair-minded man."

"How absurd. How could a man of my position be fair-minded toward you? You might as well speak of a Spaniard being fair-minded toward a piece of steak."

At this harsh observation the faces of the two dozen fell, but the tall man continued:

"All right!" he cried. "We've argued this out before. You're not a humanitarian and you're not fair-minded, but you're human — at least you say you are — and you ought to be able to put yourself in our place for long enough to think how — how — how — "

"How what?" demanded Washington, coldly.

" — how unnecessary — "

"Not to me."

"Well — how cruel — "

"We've covered that. Cruelty doesn't exist where self-preservation is involved. You've been soldiers; you know that. Try another."

"Well, then, how stupid."

"There," admitted Washington, "I grant you that. But try to think of an alternative. I've offered to have all or any of you painlessly executed if you wish. I've offered to have your wives, sweethearts, children, and mothers kidnapped and brought out here. I'll enlarge your place down there and feed and clothe you the rest of your lives. If there was some method of producing permanent amnesia I'd have all of you operated on and released immediately, somewhere outside of my preserves. But that's as far as my ideas go."

"How about trusting us not to peach on you?" cried some one.

"You don't proffer that suggestion seriously," said Washington, with an expression of scorn.

"I did take out one man to teach my daughter Italian. Last week he got away."

A wild yell of jubilation went up suddenly from two dozen throats and a pandemonium of joy ensued. The prisoners clog-danced and cheered and yodeled and wrestled with one another in a sudden uprush of animal spirits. They even ran up the glass sides of the bowl as far as they could, and slid back to the bottom upon the natural cushions of their bodies. The tall man started a song in which they all joined —

"Oh, we'll hang the Kaiser

On a sour apple-tree — "

Braddock Washington sat in inscrutable silence until the song was over.

"You see," he remarked, when he could gain a modicum of attention. "I bear you no ill-will. I like to see you enjoying yourselves. That's why I didn't tell you the whole story at once. The man — what was his name? Critchtichiello? — was shot by some of my agents in fourteen different places."

Not guessing that the places referred to were cities, the tumult of rejoicing subsided immediately.

"Nevertheless," cried Washington with a touch of anger, "he tried to run away. Do you expect me to take chances with any of you after an experience like that?"

Again a series of ejaculations went up.

"Sure!"

"Would your daughter like to learn Chinese?"

"Hey, I can speak Italian! My mother was a wop."

"Maybe she'd like t'learna speak N'Yawk!"

"If she's the little one with the big blue eyes I can teach her a lot of things better than Italian."

"I know some Irish songs — and I could hammer brass once't."

Mr. Washington reached forward suddenly with his cane and pushed the button in the grass so that the picture below went out instantly, and there remained only that great dark mouth covered dismally with the black teeth of the grating.

"Hey!" called a single voice from below, "you ain't goin' away without givin' us your blessing?"

But Mr. Washington, followed by the two boys, was already strolling on toward the ninth hole of the golf course, as though the pit and its contents were no more than a hazard over which his facile iron had triumphed with ease.

July under the lee of the diamond mountain was a month of blanket nights and of warm, glowing days. John and Kismine were in love. He did not know that the little gold football (inscribed with the legend *Pro deo et patria et St. Mida*) which he had given her rested on a platinum chain next to her bosom. But it did. And she for her part was not aware that a large sapphire which had dropped one day from her simple coiffure was stowed away tenderly in John's jewel box.

Late one afternoon when the ruby and ermine music room was quiet, they spent an hour there together. He held her hand and she gave him such a look that he whispered her name aloud. She bent toward him — then hesitated.

"Did you say 'Kismine'?" she asked softly, "or — "

She had wanted to be sure. She thought she might have misunderstood.

Neither of them had ever kissed before, but in the course of an hour it seemed to make little difference.

The afternoon drifted away. That night, when a last breath of music drifted down from the highest tower, they each lay awake, happily dreaming over the separate minutes of the day. They had decided to be married as soon as possible.

Every day Mr. Washington and the two young men went hunting or fishing in the deep forests or played golf around the somnolent course — games which John diplomatically allowed his host to win — or swam in the mountain coolness of the lake. John found Mr. Washington a somewhat exacting personality — utterly uninterested in any ideas or opinions except his own. Mrs. Washington was aloof and reserved at all times. She was apparently indifferent to her two daughters, and entirely absorbed in her son Percy, with whom she held interminable conversations in rapid Spanish at dinner.

Jasmine, the elder daughter, resembled Kismine in appearance — except that she was somewhat bow-legged, and terminated in large hands and feet — but was utterly unlike her in temperament. Her favourite books had to do with poor girls who kept house for widowed fathers. John learned from Kismine that Jasmine had never recovered from the shock and disappointment caused her by the termination of the World War, just as she was about to start for Europe as a canteen expert. She had even pined away for a time, and Braddock Washington had taken steps to promote a new war in the Balkans — but she had seen a photograph of some wounded Serbian soldiers and lost interest in the whole proceedings. But Percy and Kismine seemed to have inherited the arrogant attitude in all its harsh magnificence from their father. A chaste and consistent selfishness ran like a pattern through their every idea.

John was enchanted by the wonders of the château and the valley. Braddock Washington, so Percy told him, had caused to be kidnapped a landscape gardener, an architect, a designer of state settings, and a French decadent poet left over from the last century. He had put his entire force of negroes at their disposal, guaranteed to supply them with any materials that the world could offer, and left them to work out some ideas of their own. But one by one they had shown their uselessness. The decadent poet had at once begun bewailing his separation from the boulevards in spring — he made some vague remarks about spices, apes, and ivories, but said nothing that was of any practical value. The stage designer on his part wanted to make the whole valley a series of tricks and sensational effects — a state of things that the Washingtons would soon have grown tired of. And as for the architect and the landscape gardener, they thought only in terms of convention. They must make this like this and that like that.

But they had, at least, solved the problem of what was to be done with them — they all went

mad early one morning after spending the night in a single room trying to agree upon the location of a fountain, and were now confined comfortably in an insane asylum at Westport, Connecticut.

"But," inquired John curiously, "who did plan all your wonderful reception rooms and halls, and approaches and bathrooms — ?"

"Well," answered Percy, "I blush to tell you, but it was a moving-picture fella. He was the only man we found who was used to playing with an unlimited amount of money, though he did tuck his napkin in his collar and couldn't read or write."

As August drew to a close John began to regret that he must soon go back to school. He and Kismine had decided to elope the following June.

"It would be nicer to be married here," Kismine confessed, "but of course I could never get father's permission to marry you at all. Next to that I'd rather elope. It's terrible for wealthy people to be married in America at present — they always have to send out bulletins to the press saying that they're going to be married in remnants, when what they mean is just a peck of old second-hand pearls and some used lace worn once by the Empress Eugenie."

"I know," agreed John fervently. "When I was visiting the Schnlitzer-Murphys, the eldest daughter, Gwendolyn, married a man whose father owns half of West Virginia. She wrote home saying what a tough struggle she was carrying on on his salary as a bank clerk — and then she ended up by saying that "Thank God, I have four good maids anyhow, and that helps a little."

"It's absurd," commented Kismine — "Think of the millions and millions of people in the world, labourers and all, who get along with only two maids."

One afternoon late in August a chance remark of Kismine's changed the face of the entire situation, and threw John into a state of terror.

They were in their favourite grove, and between kisses John was indulging in some romantic forebodings which he fancied added poignancy to their relations.

"Sometimes I think we'll never marry," he said sadly. "You're too wealthy, too magnificent. No one as rich as you are can be like other girls. I should marry the daughter of some well-to-do wholesale hardware man from Omaha or Sioux City, and be content with her half-million."

"I knew the daughter of a wholesale hardware man once," remarked Kismine. "I don't think you'd have been contented with her. She was a friend of my sister's. She visited here."

"Oh, then you've had other guests?" exclaimed John in surprise.

Kismine seemed to regret her words.

"Oh, yes," she said hurriedly, "we've had a few."

"But aren't you — wasn't your father afraid they'd talk outside?"

"Oh, to some extent, to some extent," she answered. "Let's talk about something pleasanter."

But John's curiosity was aroused.

"Something pleasanter!" he demanded. "What's unpleasant about that? Weren't they nice girls?"

To his great surprise Kismine began to weep.

"Yes — th — that's the — the whole t-trouble. I grew qu-uite attached to some of them. So did Jasmine, but she kept inv-viting them anyway. I couldn't *understand* it."

A dark suspicion was born in John's heart.

"Do you mean that they *told*, and your father had them — removed?"

"Worse than that," she muttered brokenly. "Father took no chances — and Jasmine kept writing them to come, and they had *such* a good time!"

She was overcome by a paroxysm of grief.

Stunned with the horror of this revelation, John sat there open-mouthed, feeling the nerves of his body twitter like so many sparrows perched upon his spinal column.

"Now, I've told you, and I shouldn't have," she said, calming suddenly and drying her dark blue eyes.

"Do you mean to say that your father had them *murdered* before they left?"

She nodded.

"In August usually — or early in September. It's only natural for us to get all the pleasure out of them that we can first."

"How abominable! How — why, I must be going crazy! Did you really admit that — "

"I did," interrupted Kismine, shrugging her shoulders. "We can't very well imprison them like those aviators, where they'd be a continual reproach to us every day. And it's always been made easier for Jasmine and me, because father had it done sooner than we expected. In that way we avoided any farewell scene — "

"So you murdered them! Uh!" cried John.

"It was done very nicely. They were drugged while they were asleep — and their families were always told that they died of scarlet fever in Butte."

"But — I fail to understand why you kept on inviting them!"

"I didn't," burst out Kismine. "I never invited one. Jasmine did. And they always had a very good time. She'd give them the nicest presents toward the last. I shall probably have visitors too — I'll harden up to it. We can't let such an inevitable thing as death stand in the way of enjoying life while we have it. Think of how lonesome it'd be out here if we never had any one. Why, father and mother have sacrificed some of their best friends just as we have."

"And so," cried John accusingly, "and so you were letting me make love to you and pretending to return it, and talking about marriage, all the time knowing perfectly well that I'd never get out of here alive — "

"No," she protested passionately. "Not any more. I did at first. You were here. I couldn't help that, and I thought your last days might as well be pleasant for both of us. But then I fell in love with you, and — and I'm honestly sorry you're going to — going to be put away — though I'd rather you'd be put away than ever kiss another girl."

"Oh, you would, would you?" cried John ferociously.

"Much rather. Besides, I've always heard that a girl can have more fun with a man whom she knows she can never marry. Oh, why did I tell you? I've probably spoiled your whole good time now, and we were really enjoying things when you didn't know it. I knew it would make things sort of depressing for you."

"Oh, you did, did you?" John's voice trembled with anger. "I've heard about enough of this. If you haven't any more pride and decency than to have an affair with a fellow that you know isn't much better than a corpse, I don't want to have any more to do with you!"

"You're not a corpse!" she protested in horror. "You're not a corpse! I won't have you saying that I kissed a corpse!"

"I said nothing of the sort!"

"You did! You said I kissed a corpse!"

"I didn't!"

Their voices had risen, but upon a sudden interruption they both subsided into immediate silence. Footsteps were coming along the path in their direction, and a moment later the rose bushes were parted displaying Braddock Washington, whose intelligent eyes set in his good-looking vacuous face were peering in at them.

"Who kissed a corpse?" he demanded in obvious disapproval.

"Nobody," answered Kismine quickly. "We were just joking."

"What are you two doing here, anyhow?" he demanded gruffly. "Kismine, you ought to be — to be reading or playing golf with your sister. Go read! Go play golf! Don't let me find you here when I come back!"

Then he bowed at John and went up the path.

"See?" said Kismine crossly, when he was out of hearing. "You've spoiled it all. We can never meet any more. He won't let me meet you. He'd have you poisoned if he thought we were in

love."

"We're not, any more!" cried John fiercely, "so he can set his mind at rest upon that. Moreover, don't fool yourself that I'm going to stay around here. Inside of six hours I'll be over those mountains, if I have to gnaw a passage through them, and on my way East." They had both got to their feet, and at this remark Kismine came close and put her arm through his.

"I'm going, too."

"You must be crazy — "

"Of course I'm going," she interrupted impatiently.

"You most certainly are not. You — "

"Very well," she said quietly, "we'll catch up with father and talk it over with him."

Defeated, John mustered a sickly smile.

"Very well, dearest," he agreed, with pale and unconvincing affection, "we'll go together."

His love for her returned and settled placidly on his heart. She was his — she would go with him to share his dangers. He put his arms about her and kissed her fervently. After all she loved him; she had saved him, in fact.

Discussing the matter, they walked slowly back toward the château. They decided that since Braddock Washington had seen them together they had best depart the next night. Nevertheless, John's lips were unusually dry at dinner, and he nervously emptied a great spoonful of peacock soup into his left lung. He had to be carried into the turquoise and sable card-room and pounded on the back by one of the under-butlers, which Percy considered a great joke.

Long after midnight John's body gave a nervous jerk, he sat suddenly upright, staring into the veils of somnolence that draped the room. Through the squares of blue darkness that were his open windows, he had heard a faint far-away sound that died upon a bed of wind before identifying itself on his memory, clouded with uneasy dreams. But the sharp noise that had succeeded it was nearer, was just outside the room — the click of a turned knob, a footstep, a whisper, he could not tell; a hard lump gathered in the pit of his stomach, and his whole body ached in the moment that he strained agonisingly to hear. Then one of the veils seemed to dissolve, and he saw a vague figure standing by the door, a figure only faintly limned and blocked in upon the darkness, mingled so with the folds of the drapery as to seem distorted, like a reflection seen in a dirty pane of glass.

With a sudden movement of fright or resolution John pressed the button by his bedside, and the next moment he was sitting in the green sunken bath of the adjoining room, waked into alertness by the shock of the cold water which half filled it.

He sprang out, and, his wet pajamas scattering a heavy trickle of water behind him, ran for the aquamarine door which he knew led out onto the ivory landing of the second floor. The door opened noiselessly. A single crimson lamp burning in a great dome above lit the magnificent sweep of the carved stairways with a poignant beauty. For a moment John hesitated, appalled by the silent splendour massed about him, seeming to envelop in its gigantic folds and contours the solitary drenched little figure shivering upon the ivory landing. Then simultaneously two things happened. The door of his own sitting-room swung open, precipitating three naked negroes into the hall — and, as John swayed in wild terror toward the stairway, another door slid back in the wall on the other side of the corridor, and John saw Braddock Washington standing in the lighted lift, wearing a fur coat and a pair of riding boots which reached to his knees and displayed, above, the glow of his rose-colored pajamas.

On the instant the three negroes — John had never seen any of them before, and it flashed through his mind that they must be the professional executioners — paused in their movement toward John, and turned expectantly to the man in the lift, who burst out with an imperious command:

"Get in here! All three of you! Quick as hell!"

Then, within the instant, the three negroes darted into the cage, the oblong of light was blotted

out as the lift door slid shut, and John was again alone in the hall. He slumped weakly down against an ivory stair.

It was apparent that something portentous had occurred, something which, for the moment at least, had postponed his own petty disaster. What was it? Had the negroes risen in revolt? Had the aviators forced aside the iron bars of the grating? Or had the men of Fish stumbled blindly through the hills and gazed with bleak, joyless eyes upon the gaudy valley? John did not know. He heard a faint whir of air as the lift whizzed up again, and then, a moment later, as it descended. It was probable that Percy was hurrying to his father's assistance, and it occurred to John that this was his opportunity to join Kismine and plan an immediate escape. He waited until the lift had been silent for several minutes; shivering a little with the night cool that whipped in through his wet pajamas, he returned to his room and dressed himself quickly. Then he mounted a long flight of stairs and turned down the corridor carpeted with Russian sable which led to Kismine's suite.

The door of her sitting-room was open and the lamps were lighted. Kismine, in an angora kimono, stood near the window of the room in a listening attitude, and as John entered noiselessly she turned toward him.

"Oh, it's you!" she whispered, crossing the room to him. "Did you hear them?"

I heard your father's slaves in my — "

"No," she interrupted excitedly. "Aeroplanes!"

"Aeroplanes? Perhaps that was the sound that woke me."

"There're at least a dozen. I saw one a few moments ago dead against the moon. The guard back by the cliff fired his rifle and that's what roused father. We're going to open on them right away."

"Are they here on purpose?"

"Yes — it's that Italian who got away — "

Simultaneously with her last word, a succession of sharp cracks tumbled in through the open window. Kismine uttered a little cry, took a penny with fumbling fingers from a box on her dresser, and ran to one of the electric lights. In an instant the entire chateau was in darkness — she had blown out the fuse.

"Come on!" she cried to him. "We'll go up to the roof garden, and watch it from there!"

Drawing a cape about her, she took his hand, and they found their way out the door. It was only a step to the tower lift, and as she pressed the button that shot them upward he put his arms around her in the darkness and kissed her mouth. Romance had come to John Unger at last. A minute later they had stepped out upon the star-white platform. Above, under the misty moon, sliding in and out of the patches of cloud that eddied below it, floated a dozen dark-winged bodies in a constant circling course. From here and there in the valley flashes of fire leaped toward them, followed by sharp detonations. Kismine clapped her hands with pleasure, which, a moment later, turned to dismay as the aeroplanes, at some prearranged signal, began to release their bombs and the whole of the valley became a panorama of deep reverberate sound and lurid light.

Before long the aim of the attackers became concentrated upon the points where the anti-aircraft guns were situated, and one of them was almost immediately reduced to a giant cinder to lie smouldering in a park of rose bushes.

"Kismine," begged John, "you'll be glad when I tell you that this attack came on the eve of my murder. If I hadn't heard that guard shoot off his gun back by the pass I should now be stone dead — "

"I can't hear you!" cried Kismine, intent on the scene before her. "You'll have to talk louder!"

"I simply said," shouted John, "that we'd better get out before they begin to shell the chateau!"

Suddenly the whole portico of the negro quarters cracked asunder, a geyser of flame shot up from under the colonnades, and great fragments of jagged marble were hurled as far as the

borders of the lake.

"There go fifty thousand dollars' worth of slaves," cried Kismine, "at pre-war prices. So few Americans have any respect for property."

John renewed his efforts to compel her to leave. The aim of the aeroplanes was becoming more precise minute by minute, and only two of the anti-aircraft guns were still retaliating. It was obvious that the garrison, encircled with fire, could not hold out much longer.

"Come on!" cried John, pulling Kismine's arm, "we've got to go. Do you realise that those aviators will kill you without question if they find you?"

She consented reluctantly.

"We'll have to wake Jasmine!" she said, as they hurried toward the lift. Then she added in a sort of childish delight: "We'll be poor, won't we? Like people in books. And I'll be an orphan and utterly free. Free and poor! What fun!" She stopped and raised her lips to him in a delighted kiss.

"It's impossible to be both together," said John grimly. "People have found that out. And I should choose to be free as preferable of the two. As an extra caution you'd better dump the contents of your jewel box into your pockets."

Ten minutes later the two girls met John in the dark corridor and they descended to the main floor of the chateau. Passing for the last time through the magnificence of the splendid halls, they stood for a moment out on the terrace, watching the burning negro quarters and the flaming embers of two planes which had fallen on the other side of the lake. A solitary gun was still keeping up a sturdy popping, and the attackers seemed timorous about descending lower, but sent their thunderous fireworks in a circle around it, until any chance shot might annihilate its Ethiopian crew.

John and the two sisters passed down the marble steps, turned sharply to the left, and began to ascend a narrow path that wound like a garter about the diamond mountain. Kismine knew a heavily wooded spot half-way up where they could lie concealed and yet be able to observe the wild night in the valley — finally to make an escape, when it should be necessary, along a secret path laid in a rocky gully.

It was three o'clock when they attained their destination. The obliging and phlegmatic Jasmine fell off to sleep immediately, leaning against the trunk of a large tree, while John and Kismine sat, his arm around her, and watched the desperate ebb and flow of the dying battle among the ruins of a vista that had been a garden spot that morning. Shortly after four o'clock the last remaining gun gave out a clanging sound, and went out of action in a swift tongue of red smoke. Though the moon was down, they saw that the flying bodies were circling closer to the earth. When the planes had made certain that the beleaguered possessed no further resources they would land and the dark and glittering reign of the Washingtons would be over.

With the cessation of the firing the valley grew quiet. The embers of the two aeroplanes glowed like the eyes of some monster crouching in the grass. The chateau stood dark and silent, beautiful without light as it had been beautiful in the sun, while the woody rattles of Nemesis filled the air above with a growing and receding complaint. Then John perceived that Kismine, like her sister, had fallen sound asleep.

It was long after four when he became aware of footsteps along the path they had lately followed, and he waited in breathless silence until the persons to whom they belonged had passed the vantage-point he occupied. There was a faint stir in the air now that was not of human origin, and the dew was cold; he knew that the dawn would break soon. John waited until the steps had gone a safe distance up the mountain and were inaudible. Then he followed. About half-way to the steep summit the trees fell away and a hard saddle of rock spread itself over the diamond beneath. Just before he reached this point he slowed down his pace warned by an animal sense that there was life just ahead of him. Coming to a high boulder, he lifted his head gradually above its edge. His curiosity was rewarded; this is what he saw:



Braddock Washington was standing there motionless, silhouetted against the gray sky without sound or sign of life. As the dawn came up out of the east, lending a cold green colour to the earth, it brought the solitary figure into insignificant contrast with the new day.

While John watched, his host remained for a few moments absorbed in some inscrutable contemplation; then he signalled to the two negroes who crouched at his feet to lift the burden which lay between them. As they struggled upright, the first yellow beam of the sun struck through the innumerable prisms of an immense and exquisitely chiselled diamond — and a white radiance was kindled that glowed upon the air like a fragment of the morning star. The bearers staggered beneath its weight for a moment — then their rippling muscles caught and hardened under the wet shine of the skins and the three figures were again motionless in their defiant impotency before the heavens.

After a while the white man lifted his head and slowly raised his arms in a gesture of attention, as one who would call a great crowd to hear — but there was no crowd, only the vast silence of the mountain and the sky, broken by faint bird voices down among the trees. The figure on the saddle of rock began to speak ponderously and with an inextinguishable pride.

"You — out there — !" he cried in a trembling voice.

"You — there — !" He paused, his arms still uplifted, his head held attentively as though he were expecting an answer. John strained his eyes to see whether there might be men coming down the mountain, but the mountain was bare of human life. There was only sky and a mocking flute of wind along the treetops. Could Washington be praying? For a moment John wondered. Then the illusion passed — there was something in the man's whole attitude antithetical to prayer.

"Oh, you above there!"

The voice was become strong and confident. This was no forlorn supplication. If anything, there was in it a quality of monstrous condescension.

"You there — " Words, too quickly uttered to be understood, flowing one into the other ... John listened breathlessly, catching a phrase here and there, while the voice broke off, resumed, broke off again — now strong and argumentative, now coloured with a slow, puzzled impatience. Then a conviction commenced to dawn on the single listener, and as realisation crept over him a spray of quick blood rushed through his arteries. Braddock Washington was offering a bribe to God!

That was it — there was no doubt. The diamond in the arms of his slaves was some advance sample, a promise of more to follow.

That, John perceived after a time, was the thread running through his sentences. Prometheus Enriched was calling to witness forgotten sacrifices, forgotten rituals, prayers obsolete before the birth of Christ. For a while his discourse took the form of reminding God of this gift or that which Divinity had deigned to accept from men — great churches if he would rescue cities from the plague, gifts of myrrh and gold, of human lives and beautiful women and captive armies, of children and queens, of beasts of the forest and field, sheep and goats, harvests and cities, whole conquered lands that had been offered up in lust or blood for His appeal, buying a meed's worth of alleviation from the Divine wrath — and now he, Braddock Washington, Emperor of Diamonds, king and priest of the age of gold, arbiter of splendour and luxury, would offer up a treasure such as princes before him had never dreamed of, offer it up not in suppliance, but in pride.

He would give to God, he continued, getting down to specifications, the greatest diamond in the world. This diamond would be cut with many more thousand facets than there were leaves on a tree, and yet the whole diamond would be shaped with the perfection of a stone no bigger than a fly. Many men would work upon it for many years. It would be set in a great dome of beaten gold, wonderfully carved and equipped with gates of opal and crusted sapphire. In the middle would be hollowed out a chapel presided over by an altar of iridescent, decomposing, ever-

changing radium which would burn out the eyes of any worshipper who lifted up his head from prayer — and on this altar there would be slain for the amusement of the Divine Benefactor any victim He should choose, even though it should be the greatest and most powerful man alive.

In return he asked only a simple thing, a thing that for God would be absurdly easy — only that matters should be as they were yesterday at this hour and that they should so remain. So very simple! Let but the heavens open, swallowing these men and their aeroplanes — and then close again. Let him have his slaves once more, restored to life and well.

There was no one else with whom he had ever needed to treat or bargain.

He doubted only whether he had made his bribe big enough. God had His price, of course. God was made in man's image, so it had been said: He must have His price. And the price would be rare — no cathedral whose building consumed many years, no pyramid constructed by ten thousand workmen, would be like this cathedral, this pyramid.

He paused here. That was his proposition. Everything would be up to specifications, and there was nothing vulgar in his assertion that it would be cheap at the price. He implied that Providence could take it or leave it.

As he approached the end his sentences became broken, became short and uncertain, and his body seemed tense, seemed strained to catch the slightest pressure or whisper of life in the spaces around him. His hair had turned gradually white as he talked, and now he lifted his head high to the heavens like a prophet of old — magnificently mad.

Then, as John stared in giddy fascination, it seemed to him that a curious phenomenon took place somewhere around him. It was as though the sky had darkened for an instant, as though there had been a sudden murmur in a gust of wind, a sound of far-away trumpets, a sighing like the rustle of a great silken robe — for a time the whole of nature round about partook of this darkness; the birds' song ceased; the trees were still, and far over the mountain there was a mutter of dull, menacing thunder.

That was all. The wind died along the tall grasses of the valley. The dawn and the day resumed their place in a time, and the risen sun sent hot waves of yellow mist that made its path bright before it. The leaves laughed in the sun, and their laughter shook until each bough was like a girl's school in fairyland. God had refused to accept the bribe.

For another moment John watched the triumph of the day. Then, turning, he saw a flutter of brown down by the lake, then another flutter, then another, like the dance of golden angels alighting from the clouds. The aeroplanes had come to earth.

John slid off the boulder and ran down the side of the mountain to the clump of trees, where the two girls were awake and waiting for him. Kismine sprang to her feet, the jewels in her pockets jingling, a question on her parted lips, but instinct told John that there was no time for words. They must get off the mountain without losing a moment. He seized a hand of each, and in silence they threaded the tree-trunks, washed with light now and with the rising mist. Behind them from the valley came no sound at all, except the complaint of the peacocks far away and the pleasant undertone of morning.

When they had gone about half a mile, they avoided the park land and entered a narrow path that led over the next rise of ground. At the highest point of this they paused and turned around. Their eyes rested upon the mountainside they had just left — oppressed by some dark sense of tragic impendency.

Clear against the sky a broken, white-haired man was slowly descending the steep slope, followed by two gigantic and emotionless negroes, who carried a burden between them which still flashed and glittered in the sun. Half-way down two other figures joined them — John could see that they were Mrs. Washington and her son, upon whose arm she leaned. The aviators had clambered from their machines to the sweeping lawn in front of the chateau, and with rifles in hand were starting up the diamond mountain in skirmishing formation.

But the little group of five which had formed farther up and was engrossing all the watchers'

attention had stopped upon a ledge of rock. The negroes stooped and pulled up what appeared to be a trap-door in the side of the mountain. Into this they all disappeared, the white-haired man first, then his wife and son, finally the two negroes, the glittering tips of whose jewelled head-dresses caught the sun for a moment before the trap-door descended and engulfed them all.

Kismine clutched John's arm.

"Oh," she cried wildly, "where are they going? What are they going to do?"

"It must be some underground way of escape — "

A little scream from the two girls interrupted his sentence.

"Don't you see?" sobbed Kismine hysterically. "The mountain is wired!"

Even as she spoke John put up his hands to shield his sight. Before their eyes the whole surface of the mountain had changed suddenly to a dazzling burning yellow, which showed up through the jacket of turf as light shows through a human hand. For a moment the intolerable glow continued, and then like an extinguished filament it disappeared, revealing a black waste from which blue smoke arose slowly, carrying off with it what remained of vegetation and of human flesh. Of the aviators there was left neither blood nor bone — they were consumed as completely as the five souls who had gone inside.

Simultaneously, and with an immense concussion, the château literally threw itself into the air, bursting into flaming fragments as it rose, and then tumbling back upon itself in a smoking pile that lay projecting half into the water of the lake. There was no fire — what smoke there was drifted off mingling with the sunshine, and for a few minutes longer a powdery dust of marble drifted from the great featureless pile that had once been the house of jewels. There was no more sound and the three people were alone in the valley.

At sunset John and his two companions reached the huge cliff which had marked the boundaries of the Washington's dominion, and looking back found the valley tranquil and lovely in the dusk. They sat down to finish the food which Jasmine had brought with her in a basket.

"There!" she said, as she spread the table-cloth and put the sandwiches in a neat pile upon it. "Don't they look tempting? I always think that food tastes better outdoors."

"With that remark," remarked Kismine, "Jasmine enters the middle class."

"Now," said John eagerly, "turn out your pocket and let's see what jewels you brought along. If you made a good selection we three ought to live comfortably all the rest of our lives."

Obediently Kismine put her hand in her pocket and tossed two handfuls of glittering stones before him. "Not so bad," cried John enthusiastically. "They aren't very big, but-Hallo!" His expression changed as he held one of them up to the declining sun. "Why, these aren't diamonds! There's something the matter!

"By golly!" exclaimed Kismine, with a startled look. "What an idiot I am!"

"Why, these are rhinestones!" cried John.

"I know." She broke into a laugh. "I opened the wrong drawer. They belonged on the dress of a girl who visited Jasmine. I got her to give them to me in exchange for diamonds. I'd never seen anything but precious stones before."

"And this is what you brought?"

"I'm afraid so." She fingered the brilliants wistfully. "I think I like these better. I'm a little tired of diamonds."

"Very well," said John gloomily. "We'll have to live in Hades. And you will grow old telling incredulous women that you got the wrong drawer. Unfortunately, your father's bank-books were consumed with him."

"Well, what's the matter with Hades?"

"If I come home with a wife at my age my father is just as liable as not to cut me off with a hot coal, as they say down there."

Jasmine spoke up.

"I love washing," she said quietly. "I have always washed my own handkerchiefs. I'll take in

laundry and support you both."

"Do they have washwomen in Hades?" asked Kismine innocently.

"Of course," answered John. "It's just like anywhere else."

"I thought — perhaps it was too hot to wear any clothes."

John laughed.

"Just try it!" he suggested. "They'll run you out before you're half started."

"Will father be there?" she asked.

John turned to her in astonishment.

"Your father is dead," he replied sombrely. "Why should he go to Hades? You have it confused with another place that was abolished long ago."

After supper they folded up the table-cloth and spread their blankets for the night.

"What a dream it was," Kismine sighed, gazing up at the stars. "How strange it seems to be here with one dress and a penniless fiancée!"

"Under the stars," she repeated. "I never noticed the stars before. I always thought of them as great big diamonds that belonged to some one. Now they frighten me. They make me feel that it was all a dream, all my youth."

"It was a dream," said John quietly. "Everybody's youth is a dream, a form of chemical madness."

"How pleasant then to be insane!"

"So I'm told," said John gloomily. "I don't know any longer. At any rate, let us love for a while, for a year or so, you and me. That's a form of divine drunkenness that we can all try. There are only diamonds in the whole world, diamonds and perhaps the shabby gift of disillusion. Well, I have that last and I will make the usual nothing of it." He shivered. "Turn up your coat collar, little girl, the night's full of chill and you'll get pneumonia. His was a great sin who first invented consciousness. Let us lose it for a few hours."

So wrapping himself in his blanket he fell off to sleep.

# Soldier's Home - Ernest Hemingway

(1925)

Krebs went to the war from a Methodist college in Kansas. There is a picture which shows him among his fraternity brothers, all of them wearing exactly the same height and style collar. He enlisted in the Marines in 1917 and did not return to the United States until the second division returned from the Rhine in the summer of 1919.

There is a picture which shows him on the Rhine with two German girls and another corporal. Krebs and the corporal look too big for their uniforms. The German girls are not beautiful. The Rhine does not show in the picture.

By the time Krebs returned to his home town in Oklahoma the greeting of heroes was over. He came back much too late. The men from the town who had been drafted had all been welcomed elaborately on their return. There had been a great deal of hysteria. Now the reaction had set in. People seemed to think it was rather ridiculous for Krebs to be getting back so late, years after the war was over.

At first Krebs, who had been at Belleau Wood, Soissons, the Champagne, St. Mihiel and in the Argonne did not want to talk about the war at all. Later he felt the need to talk but no one wanted to hear about it. His town had heard too many atrocity stories to be thrilled by actualities. Krebs found that to be listened to at all he had to lie and after he had done this twice he, too, had a reaction against the war and against talking about it. A distaste for everything that had happened to him in the war set in because of the lies he had told. All of the times that had been able to make him feel cool and clear inside himself when he thought of them; the times so long back when he had done the one thing, the only thing for a man to do, easily and naturally, when he might have done something else, now lost their cool, valuable quality and then were lost themselves.

His lies were quite unimportant lies and consisted in attributing to himself things other men had seen, done or heard of, and stating as facts certain apocryphal incidents familiar to all soldiers. Even his lies were not sensational at the pool room. His acquaintances, who had heard detailed accounts of German women found chained to machine guns in the Argonne and who could not comprehend, or were barred by their patriotism from interest in, any German machine gunners who were not chained, were not thrilled by his stories.

Krebs acquired the nausea in regard to experience that is the result of untruth or exaggeration, and when he occasionally met another man who had really been a soldier and the talked a few minutes in the dressing room at a dance he fell into the easy pose of the old soldier among other soldiers: that he had been badly, sickeningly frightened all the time. In this way he lost everything.

During this time, it was late summer, he was sleeping late in bed, getting up to walk down town to the library to get a book, eating lunch at home, reading on the front porch until he became bored and then walking down through the town to spend the hottest hours of the day in the cool dark of the pool room. He loved to play pool.

In the evening he practiced on his clarinet, strolled down town, read and went to bed. He was still a hero to his two young sisters. His mother would have given him breakfast in bed if he had wanted it. She often came in when he was in bed and asked him to tell her about the war, but her attention always wandered. His father was non-committal.

Before Krebs went away to the war he had never been allowed to drive the family motor car. His father was in the real estate business and always wanted the car to be at his command when he required it to take clients out into the country to show them a piece of farm property. The car

always stood outside the First National Bank building where his father had an office on the second floor. Now, after the war, it was still the same car.

Nothing was changed in the town except that the young girls had grown up. But they lived in such a complicated world of already defined alliances and shifting feuds that Krebs did not feel the energy or the courage to break into it. He liked to look at them, though. There were so many good-looking young girls. Most of them had their hair cut short. When he went away only little girls wore their hair like that or girls that were fast. They all wore sweaters and shirt waists with round Dutch collars. It was a pattern. He liked to look at them from the front porch as they walked on the other side of the street. He liked to watch them walking under the shade of the trees. He liked the round Dutch collars above their sweaters. He liked their silk stockings and flat shoes. He liked their bobbed hair and the way they walked.

When he was in town their appeal to him was not very strong. He did not like them when he saw them in the Greek's ice cream parlor. He did not want them themselves really. They were too complicated. There was something else. Vaguely he wanted a girl but he did not want to have to work to get her. He would have liked to have a girl but he did not want to have to spend a long time getting her. He did not want to get into the intrigue and the politics. He did not want to have to do any courting. He did not want to tell any more lies. It wasn't worth it.

He did not want any consequences. He did not want any consequences ever again. He wanted to live along without consequences. Besides he did not really need a girl. The army had taught him that. It was all right to pose as though you had to have a girl. Nearly everybody did that. But it wasn't true. You did not need a girl. That was the funny thing. First a fellow boasted how girls mean nothing to him, that he never thought of them, that they could not touch him. Then a fellow boasted that he could not get along without girls, that he had to have them all the time, that he could not go to sleep without them.

That was all a lie. It was all a lie both ways. You did not need a girl unless you thought about them. He learned that in the army. Then sooner or later you always got one. When you were really ripe for a girl you always got one. You did not have to think about it. Sooner or later it could come. He had learned that in the army.

Now he would have liked a girl if she had come to him and not wanted to talk. But here at home it was all too complicated. He knew he could never get through it all again. It was not worth the trouble. That was the thing about French girls and German girls. There was not all this talking. You couldn't talk much and you did not need to talk. It was simple and you were friends. He thought about France and then he began to think about Germany. On the whole he had liked Germany better. He did not want to leave Germany. He did not want to come home. Still, he had come home. He sat on the front porch.

He liked the girls that were walking along the other side of the street. He liked the look of them much better than the French girls or the German girls. But the world they were in was not the world he was in. He would like to have one of them. But it was not worth it. They were such a nice pattern. He liked the pattern. It was exciting. But he would not go through all the talking. He did not want one badly enough. He liked to look at them all, though. It was not worth it. Not now when things were getting good again.

He sat there on the porch reading a book on the war. It was a history and he was reading about all the engagements he had been in. It was the most interesting reading he had ever done. He wished there were more maps. He looked forward with a good feeling to reading all the really good histories when they would come out with good detail maps. Now he was really learning about the war. He had been a good soldier. That made a difference.

One morning after he had been home about a month his mother came into his bedroom and sat on the bed. She smoothed her apron.

"I had a talk with your father last night, Harold," she said, "and he is willing for you to take the car out in the evenings."

"Yeah?" said Krebs, who was not fully awake. "Take the car out? Yeah?"

"Yes. Your father has felt for some time that you should be able to take the car out in the evenings whenever you wished but we only talked it over last night."

"I'll bet you made him," Krebs said.

"No. It was your father's suggestion that we talk the matter over."

"Yeah. I'll bet you made him," Krebs sat up in bed.

"Will you come down to breakfast, Harold?" his mother said.

"As soon as I get my clothes on," Krebs said.

His mother went out of the room and he could hear her frying something downstairs while he washed, shaved and dressed to go down into the dining-room for breakfast. While he was eating breakfast, his sister brought in the mail.

"Well, Hare," she said. "You old sleepy-head. What do you ever get up for?"

Krebs looked at her. He liked her. She was his best sister.

"Have you got the paper?" he asked.

She handed him The Kansas City Star and he shucked off its brown wrapper and opened it to the sporting page. He folded The Star open and propped it against the water pitcher with his cereal dish to steady it, so he could read while he ate.

"Harold," his mother stood in the kitchen doorway, "Harold, please don't muss up the paper. Your father can't read his Star if it's been mussed."

"I won't muss it," Krebs said.

His sister sat down at the table and watched him while he read.

"We're playing indoor over at school this afternoon," she said. "I'm going to pitch."

"Good," said Krebs. "How's the old wing?"

"I can pitch better than lots of the boys. I tell them all you taught me. The other girls aren't much good."

"Yeah?" said Krebs.

"I tell them all you're my beau. Aren't you my beau, Hare?"

"You bet."

"Couldn't your brother really be your beau just because he's your brother?"

"I don't know."

"Sure you know. Couldn't you be my beau, Hare, if I was old enough and if you wanted to?"

"Sure. You're my girl now."

"Am I really your girl?"

"Sure."

"Do you love me?"

"Uh, huh."

"Do you love me always?"

"Sure."

"Will you come over and watch me play indoor?"

"Maybe."

"Aw, Hare, you don't love me. If you loved me, you'd want to come over and watch me play indoor."

Krebs's mother came into the dining-room from the kitchen. She carried a plate with two fried eggs and some crisp bacon on it and a plate of buckwheat cakes.

"You run along, Helen," she said. "I want to talk to Harold."

She put the eggs and bacon down in front of him and brought in a jug of maple syrup for the buckwheat cakes. Then she sat down across the table from Krebs.

"I wish you'd put down the paper a minute, Harold," she said.

Krebs took down the paper and folded it.

"Have you decided what you are going to do yet, Harold?" his mother said, taking off her glasses.

"No," said Krebs.

"Don't you think it's about time?" His mother did not say this in a mean way. She seemed worried.

"I hadn't thought about it," Krebs said.

"God has some work for every one to do," his mother said. "There can be no idle hands in His Kingdom."

"I'm not in His Kingdom," Krebs said.

"We are all of us in His Kingdom."

Krebs felt embarrassed and resentful as always.

"I've worried about you too much, Harold," his mother went on. "I know the temptations you must have been exposed to. I know how weak men are. I know what your own dear grandfather, my own father, told us about the Civil War and I have prayed for you. I pray for you all day long, Harold."

Krebs looked at the bacon fat hardening on his plate.

"Your father is worried, too," his mother went on. "He thinks you have lost your ambition, that you haven't got a definite aim in life. Charley Simmons, who is just your age, has a good job and is going to be married. The boys are all settling down; they're all determined to get somewhere; you can see that boys like Charley Simmons are on their way to being really a credit to the community."

Krebs said nothing.

"Don't look that way, Harold," his mother said. "You know we love you and I want to tell you for your own good how matters stand. Your father does not want to hamper your freedom. He thinks you should be allowed to drive the car. If you want to take some of the nice girls out riding with you, we are only too pleased. We want you to enjoy yourself. But you are going to have to settle down to work, Harold. Your father doesn't care what you start in at. All work is honorable as he says. But you've got to make a start at something. He asked me to speak to you this morning and then you can stop in and see him at his office."

"Is that all?" Krebs said.

"Yes. Don't you love your mother, dear boy?"

"No," Krebs said.

His mother looked at him across the table. Her eyes were shiny. She started crying.

"I don't love anybody," Krebs said.

It wasn't any good. He couldn't tell her, he couldn't make her see it. It was silly to have said it. He had only hurt her. He went over and took hold of her arm. She was crying with her head in her hands.

"I didn't mean it," he said. "I was just angry at something. I didn't mean I didn't love you."

His mother went on crying. Krebs put his arm on her shoulder.

"Can't you believe me, mother?"

His mother shook her head.

"Please, please, mother. Please believe me."

"All right," his mother said chokily. She looked up at him. "I believe you, Harold."

Krebs kissed her hair. She put her face up to him.

"I'm your mother," she said. "I held you next to my heart when you were a tiny baby."

Krebs felt sick and vaguely nauseated.

"I know, Mummy," he said. "I'll try and be a good boy for you."

"Would you kneel and pray with me, Harold?" his mother asked.

They knelt down beside the dining-room table and Krebs's mother prayed.

"Now, you pray, Harold," she said.



"I can't," Krebs said.

"Try, Harold."

"I can't."

"Do you want me to pray for you?"

"Yes."

So his mother prayed for him and then they stood up and Krebs kissed his mother and went out of the house. He had tried so to keep his life from being complicated. Still, none of it had touched him. He had felt sorry for his mother and she had made him lie. He would go to Kansas City and get a job and she would feel all right about it. There would be one more scene maybe before he got away. He would not go down to his father's office. He would miss that one. He wanted his life to go smoothly. It had just gotten going that way. Well, that was all over now, anyway. He would go over to the schoolyard and watch Helen play indoor baseball.

# Bullet in the Brain - Tobias Wolff

(1995)

Anders couldn't get to the bank until just before it closed, so of course the line was endless and he got stuck behind two women whose loud, stupid conversation put him in a murderous temper. He was never in the best of tempers anyway, Anders — a book critic known for the weary, elegant savagery with which he dispatched almost everything he reviewed.

With the line still doubled around the rope, one of the tellers stuck a "POSITION CLOSED" sign in her window and walked to the back of the bank, where she leaned against a desk and began to pass the time with a man shuffling papers. The women in front of Anders broke off their conversation and watched the teller with hatred. "Oh, that's nice," one of them said. She turned to Anders and added, confident of his accord, "One of those little human touches that keep us coming back for more."

Anders had conceived his own towering hatred of the teller, but he immediately turned it on the presumptuous crybaby in front of him. "Damned unfair," he said. "Tragic, really. If they're not chopping off the wrong leg, or bombing your ancestral village, they're closing their positions."

She stood her ground. "I didn't say it was tragic," she said. "I just think it's a pretty lousy way to treat your customers."

"Unforgivable," Anders said. "Heaven will take note."

She sucked in her cheeks but stared past him and said nothing. Anders saw that the other woman, her friend, was looking in the same direction. And then the tellers stopped what they were doing, and the customers slowly turned, and silence came over the bank. Two men wearing black ski masks and blue business suits were standing to the side of the door. One of them had a pistol pressed against the guard's neck. The guard's eyes were closed, and his lips were moving. The other man had a sawed-off shotgun. "Keep your big mouth shut!" the man with the pistol said, though no one had spoken a word. "One of you tellers hits the alarm, you're all dead meat. Got it?"

The tellers nodded.

"Oh, bravo," Anders said. "Dead meat." He turned to the woman in front of him. "Great script, eh? The stern, brass-knuckled poetry of the dangerous classes."

She looked at him with drowning eyes.

The man with the shotgun pushed the guard to his knees. He handed up the shotgun to his partner and yanked the guard's wrists up behind his back and locked them together with a pair of handcuffs. He toppled him onto the floor with a kick between the shoulder blades. Then he took his shotgun back and went over to the security gate at the end of the counter. He was short and heavy and moved with peculiar slowness, even torpor. "Buzz him in," his partner said. The man with the shotgun opened the gate and sauntered along the line of tellers, handing each of them a Hefty bag. When he came to the empty position he looked over at the man with the pistol, who said, "Whose slot is that?"

Anders watched the teller. She put her hand to her throat and turned to the man she'd been talking to. He nodded. "Mine," she said.

"Then get your ugly ass in gear and fill that bag."

"There you go," Anders said to the woman in front of him. "Justice is done."

"Hey! Bright boy! Did I tell you talk?"

"No," Anders said.

"Then shut your trap."

"Did you hear that?" Anders said. "'Bright boy.' Right out of 'The Killers'."

"Please be quiet," the woman said.

"Hey, you deaf or what?" The man with the pistol walked over to Anders. He poked the weapon into Anders' gut. "You think I'm playing games?"

"No," Anders said, but the barrel tickled like a stiff finger and he had to fight back the titters. He did this by making himself stare into the man's eyes, which were clearly visible behind the holes in the mask: pale blue, and rawly red-rimmed. The man's left eyelid kept twitching. He breathed out a piercing, ammoniac smell that shocked Anders more than anything that had happened, and he was beginning to develop a sense of unease when the man prodded him again with the pistol.

"You like me, bright boy?" he said. "You want to suck my dick?"

"No," Anders said.

"Then stop looking at me."

Anders fixed his gaze on the man's shiny wing-top shoes.

"Not down there. Up there." He stuck the pistol under Anders' chin and pushed it upward until Anders was looking at the ceiling.

Anders had never paid much attention to that part of the bank, a pompous old building with marble floors and counters and pillars, and gilt scrollwork over the tellers' cages. The domed ceiling had been decorated with mythological figures whose fleshy, toga-draped ugliness Anders had taken in at a glance many years earlier and afterward declined to notice. Now he had no choice but to scrutinize the painter's work. It was even worse than he remembered, and all of it executed with the utmost gravity. The artist had a few tricks up his sleeve and used them again and again — a certain rosy blush on the underside of the clouds, a coy backward glance on the faces of the cupids and fauns. The ceiling was crowded with various dramas, but the one that caught Anders' eye was Zeus and Europa — portrayed, in this rendition, as a bull ogling a cow from behind a haystack. To make the cow sexy, the painter had canted her hips suggestively and given her long, droopy eyelashes through which she gazed back at the bull with sultry welcome. The bull wore a smirk and his eyebrows were arched. If there'd been a bubble coming out of his mouth, it would have said, "Hubba hubba."

"What's so funny, bright boy?"

"Nothing."

"You think I'm comical? You think I'm some kind of clown?"

"No."

"You think you can fuck with me?"

"No."

"Fuck with me again, you're history. Capiche?"

Anders burst out laughing. He covered his mouth with both hands and said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," then snorted helplessly through his fingers and said, "Capiche — oh, God, capiche," and at that the man with the pistol raised the pistol and shot Anders right in the head.

The bullet smashed Anders' skull and ploughed through his brain and exited behind his right ear, scattering shards of bone into the cerebral cortex, the corpus callosum, back toward the basal ganglia, and down into the thalamus. But before all this occurred, the first appearance of the bullet in the cerebrum set off a crackling chain of ion transports and neurotransmissions. Because of their peculiar origin these traced a peculiar patter, flukishly calling to life a summer afternoon some forty years past, and long since lost to memory. After striking the cranium the bullet was moving at 900 feet per second, a pathetically sluggish, glacial pace compared to the synaptic lighting that flashed around it. Once in the brain, that is, the bullet came under the mediation of brain time, which gave Anders plenty of leisure to contemplate the scene that, in a phrase he would have abhorred, "passed before his eyes."

It is worth noting what Anders did not remember, given what he did remember. He did not remember his first lover, Sherry, or what he had most madly loved about her, before it came to

irritate him — her unembarrassed carnality, and especially the cordial way she had with his unit, which she called Mr. Mole, as in, "Uh-oh, looks like Mr. Mole wants to play," and "Let's hide Mr. Mole!" Anders did not remember his wife, whom he had also loved before she exhausted him with her predictability, or his daughter, now a sullen professor of economics at Dartmouth. He did not remember standing just outside his daughter's door as she lectured her bear about his naughtiness and described the truly appalling punishments Paws would receive unless he changed his ways. He did not remember a single line of the hundreds of poems he had committed to memory in his youth so that he could give himself the shivers at will — not "Silent, upon a peak in Darien," or "My God, I heard this day," or "All my pretty ones? Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?" None of these did he remember; not one. Anders did not remember his dying mother saying of his father, "I should have stabbed him in his sleep."

He did not remember Professor Josephs telling his class how Athenian prisoners in Sicily had been released if they could recite Aeschylus, and then reciting Aeschylus himself, right there, in the Greek. Anders did not remember how his eyes had burned at those sounds. He did not remember the surprise of seeing a college classmate's name on the jacket of a novel not long after they graduated, or the respect he had felt after reading the book. He did not remember the pleasure of giving respect.

Nor did Anders remember seeing a woman leap to her death from the building opposite his own just days after his daughter was born. He did not remember shouting, "Lord have mercy!" He did not remember deliberately crashing his father's car in to a tree, or having his ribs kicked in by three policemen at an anti-war rally, or waking himself up with laughter. He did not remember when he began to regard the heap of books on his desk with boredom and dread, or when he grew angry at writers for writing them. He did not remember when everything began to remind him of something else.

This is what he remembered. Heat. A baseball field. Yellow grass, the whirr of insects, himself leaning against a tree as the boys of the neighborhood gather for a pickup game. He looks on as the others argue the relative genius of Mantle and Mays. They have been worrying this subject all summer, and it has become tedious to Anders: an oppression, like the heat.

Then the last two boys arrive, Coyle and a cousin of his from Mississippi. Anders has never met Coyle's cousin before and will never see him again. He says hi with the rest but takes no further notice of him until they've chosen sides and someone asks the cousin what position he wants to play. "Shortstop," the boy says. "Short's the best position they is." Anders turns and looks at him. He wants to hear Coyle's cousin repeat what he's just said, but he knows better than to ask. The others will think he's being a jerk, ragging the kid for his grammar. But that isn't it, not at all — it's that Anders is strangely roused, elated, by those final two words, their pure unexpectedness and their music. He takes the field in a trance, repeating them to himself.

The bullet is already in the brain; it won't be outrun forever, or charmed to a halt. In the end it will do its work and leave the troubled skull behind, dragging its comet's tail of memory and hope and talent and love into the marble hall of commerce. That can't be helped. But for now Anders can still make time. Time for the shadows to lengthen on the grass, time for the tethered dog to bark at the flying ball, time for the boy in right field to smack his sweat-blackened mitt and softly chant, They is, they is, they is.

# Tenth of December - George Saunders

(2011)

The pale boy with unfortunate Prince Valiant bangs and cublike mannerisms hulked to the mudroom closet and requisitioned Dad's white coat. Then requisitioned the boots he'd spray-painted white. Painting the pellet gun white had been a no. That was a gift from Aunt Chloe. Every time she came over he had to haul it out so she could make a big stink about the woodgrain.

Today's assignation: walk to pond, ascertain beaver dam. Likely he would be detained. By that species that lived amongst the old rock wall. They were small but, upon emerging, assumed certain proportions. And gave chase. This was just their methodology. His aplomb threw them loops. He knew that. And revelled it. He would turn, level the pellet gun, intone: Are you aware of the usage of this human implement?

*Blam!*

They were Netherworlders. Or Nethers. They had a strange bond with him. Sometimes for whole days he would just nurse their wounds. Occasionally, for a joke, he would shoot one in the butt as it fled. Who henceforth would limp for the rest of its days. Which could be as long as an additional nine million years.

Safe inside the rock wall, the shot one would go, Guys, look at my butt.

As a group, all would look at Gzeemon's butt, exchanging sullen glances of: Gzeemon shall indeed be limping for the next nine million years, poor bloke.

Because yes: Nethers tended to talk like that guy in "Mary Poppins."

Which naturally raised some mysteries as to their origin here on Earth.

Detaining him was problematic for the Nethers. He was wily. Plus could not fit through their rock-wall opening. When they tied him up and went inside to brew their special miniaturizing potion — *Wham!* — he would snap their antiquated rope with a move from his self-invented martial-arts system, Toi Foi, a.k.a. Deadly Forearms. And place at their doorway an implacable rock of suffocation, trapping them inside.

Later, imagining them in their death throes, taking pity on them, he would come back, move the rock.

Blimey, one of them might say from withal. Thanks, guv'nor. You are indeed a worthy adversary.

Sometimes there would be torture. They would make him lie on his back looking up at the racing clouds while they tortured him in ways he could actually take. They tended to leave his teeth alone. Which was lucky. He didn't even like to get a cleaning. They were dunderheads in that manner. They never messed with his peen and never messed with his fingernails. He'd just abide there, infuriating them with his snow angels. Sometimes, believing it their coup de grâce, not realizing he'd heard this since time in memorial from certain in-school cretins, they'd go, Wow, we didn't even know Robin could be a boy's name. And chortle their Nether laughs.

Today he had a feeling that the Nethers might kidnap Suzanne Bledsoe, the new girl in homeroom. She was from Montreal. He just loved the way she talked. So, apparently, did the Nethers, who planned to use her to repopulate their depleted numbers and bake various things they did not know how to bake.

All suited up now, *nasa*. Turning awkwardly to go out door.

*Affirmative. We have your coördinates. Be careful out there, Robin.*

Whoa, cold, dang.

Duck thermometer read ten. And that was without windchill. That made it fun. That made it real. A green Nissan was parked where Poole dead-ended into the soccer field. Hopefully the

owner was not some perv he would have to outwit.

Or a Nether in the human guise.

Bright, bright blue and cold. Crunch went the snow as he crossed the soccer field. Why did cold such as this give a running guy a headache? Likely it was due to Prominent Windspeed Velocity.

The path into the woods was as wide as one human. It seemed the Nether had indeed kidnapped Suzanne Bledsoe. Damn him! And his ilk. Judging by the single set of tracks, the Nether appeared to be carrying her. Foul cad. He'd better not be touching Suzanne inappropriately while carrying her. If so, Suzanne would no doubt be resisting with untamable fury.

This was concerning, this was very concerning.

When he caught up to them, he would say, Look, Suzanne, I know you don't know my name, having misaddressed me as Roger that time you asked me to scoot over, but nevertheless I must confess I feel there is something to us. Do you feel the same?

Suzanne had the most amazing brown eyes. They were wet now, with fear and sudden reality. Stop talking to her, mate, the Nether said.

I won't, he said. And, Suzanne? Even if you don't feel there is something to us, rest assured I will still slay this fellow and return you home. Where do you live again? Over in El Cirro? By the water tower? Those are some nice houses back there.

Yes, Suzanne said. We also have a pool. You should come over next summer. It's cool if you swim with your shirt on. And also, yes to there being something to us. You are by far the most insightful boy in our class. Even when I take into consideration the boys I knew in Montreal, I am just like: no one can compare.

Well, that's nice to hear, he said. Thank you for saying that. I know I'm not the thinnest.

The thing about girls? Suzanne said. Is we are more content-driven.

Will you two stop already? the Nether said. Because now is the time for your death. Deaths.

Well, now is certainly the time for somebody's death, Robin said.

The twerpy thing was you never really got to save anyone. Last summer there'd been a dying raccoon out here. He'd thought of lugging it home so Mom could call the vet. But up close it was too scary. Raccoons being actually bigger than they appear in cartoons. And this one looked like a potential biter. So he ran home to get it some water at least. Upon his return, he saw where the raccoon had done some apparent last-minute thrashing. That was sad. He didn't do well with sad. There had perchance been some pre-weeping, by him, in the woods.

That just means you have a big heart, Suzanne said.

Well, I don't know, he said modestly.

Here was the old truck tire. Where the high-school kids partied. Inside the tire, frosted with snow, were three beer cans and a wadded-up blanket.

You probably like to party, the Nether had cracked to Suzanne moments earlier as they passed this very spot.

No, I don't, Suzanne said. I like to play. And I like to hug.

Hoo boy, the Nether said. Sounds like Dullsville.

Somewhere there is a man who likes to play and hug, Suzanne said.

He came out of the woods now to the prettiest vista he knew. The pond was a pure frozen white. It struck him as somewhat Switzerlandish. Someday he would know for sure. When the Swiss threw him a parade or whatnot.

Here the Nether's tracks departed from the path, as if he had contemplatively taken a moment to gaze at the pond. Perhaps this Nether was not all bad. Perhaps he was having a debilitating conscience attack vis-à-vis the valiantly struggling Suzanne atop his back. At least he seemed to somewhat love nature.

Then the tracks returned to the path, wound around the pond, and headed up Lexow Hill.

What was this strange object? A coat? On the bench? The bench the Nethers used for their human sacrifices?

No accumulated snow on coat. Inside of coat still slightly warm.

Ergo: the recently discarded coat of the Nether.

This was some strange juju. This was an intriguing conundrum, if he had ever encountered one. Which he had. Once, he'd found a bra on the handlebars of a bike. Once, he'd found an entire untouched steak dinner on a plate behind Fresno's. And hadn't eaten it. Though it had looked pretty good.

Something was afoot.

Then he beheld, halfway up Lexow Hill, a man.

Coatless, bald-headed man. Super skinny. In what looked like pajamas. Climbing plodfully, with tortoise patience, bare white arms sticking out of his p.j. shirt like two bare white branches sticking out of a p.j. shirt. Or grave.

What kind of person leaves his coat behind on a day like this? The mental kind, that was who. This guy looked sort of mental. Like an Auschwitz dude or sad confused grandpa.

Dad had once said, Trust your mind, Rob. If it smells like shit but has writing across it that says Happy Birthday and a candle stuck down in it, what is it?

Is there icing on it? he'd said.

Dad had done that thing of squinting his eyes when an answer was not quite there yet.

What was his mind telling him now?

Something was wrong here. A person needed a coat. Even if the person was a grownup. The pond was frozen. The duck thermometer said ten. If the person was mental, all the more reason to come to his aid, as had not Jesus said, Blessed are those who help those who cannot help themselves, but are too mental, doddering, or have a disability?

He snagged the coat off the bench.

It was a rescue. A real rescue, at last, sort of.

Ten minutes earlier, Don Eber had paused at the pond to catch his breath.

He was so tired. What a thing. Holy moly. When he used to walk Sasquatch out here they'd do six times around the pond, jog up the hill, tag the boulder on top, sprint back down.

*Better get moving*, said one of two guys who'd been in discussion in his head all morning.

*That is, if you're still set on the boulder idea*, the other said.

*Which still strikes us as kind of fancy-pants*.

Seemed like one guy was Dad and the other Kip Flemish.

Stupid cheaters. They'd switched spouses, abandoned the switched spouses, fled together to California. Had they been gay? Or just swingers? Gay swingers? The Dad and Kip in his head had acknowledged their sins and the three of them had struck a deal: he would forgive them for being possible gay swingers and leaving him to do Soap Box Derby alone, with just Mom, and they would consent to giving him some solid manly advice.

*He wants it to be nice*.

This was Dad now. It seemed Dad was somewhat on his side.

*Nice?* Kip said. *That is not the word I would use.*

A cardinal zinged across the day.

It was amazing. Amazing, really. He was young. He was fifty-three. Now he'd never deliver his major national speech on compassion. What about going down the Mississippi in a canoe? What about living in an A-frame near a shady creek with the two hippie girls he'd met in 1968 in that souvenir shop in the Ozarks, when Allen, his stepfather, wearing those crazy aviators, had bought him a bag of fossil rocks? One of the hippie girls had said that he, Eber, would be a fox when he grew up, and would he please be sure to call her at that time? Then the hippie girls had put their tawny heads together and giggled at his prospective foxiness. And that had never —

That had somehow never —

Sister Val had said, Why not shoot for being the next J.F.K.? So he had run for class president. Allen had bought him a Styrofoam straw boater. They'd sat together, decorating the hatband with Magic Markers. *win with eber! on the back: groovy!* Allen had helped him record a tape. Of a little speech. Allen had taken that tape somewhere and come back with thirty copies, "to pass around."

"Your message is good," Allen had said. "And you are incredibly well spoken. You can do this thing."

And he'd done it. He'd won. Allen had thrown him a victory party. A pizza party. All the kids had come.

Oh, Allen.

Kindest man ever. Had taken him swimming. Had taken him to *découpage*. Had combed out his hair so patiently that time he came home with lice. Never a harsh, etc., etc.

Not so once the suffering began. Began. God damn it. More and more his words. Askew. More and more his words were not what he would hoped.

Hope.

Once the suffering began, Allen had raged. Said things no one should say. To Mom, to Eber, to the guy delivering water. Went from a shy man, always placing a reassuring hand on your back, to a diminished pale figure in a bed, shouting *cunt!*

Except with some weird New England accent, so it came out *kant!*

The first time Allen had shouted *kant!* there followed a funny moment during which he and Mom looked at each other to see which of them was being called *kant*. But then Allen amended, for clarity: *kants!*

So it was clear he meant both of them. What a relief.

They'd cracked up.

Jeez, how long had he been standing here? Daylight was waiting.

Wasting.

*I honestly didn't know what to do. But he made it so simple.*

*Took it all on himself.*

*So what else is new?*

*Exactly.*

This was Jodi and Tommy now.

Hi, kids.

Big day today.

*I mean, sure, it would have been nice to have a chance to say a proper goodbye.*

*But at what cost?*

*Exactly. And see — he knew that.*

*He was a father. That's what a father does.*

*Eases the burdens of those he loves.*

*Saves the ones he loves from painful last images that might endure for a lifetime.*

Soon Allen had become *that*. And no one was going to fault anybody for avoiding *that*. Sometimes he and Mom would huddle in the kitchen. Rather than risk incurring the wrath of *that*. Even *that* understood the deal. You'd trot in a glass of water, set it down, say, very politely, Anything else, Allen? And you'd see *that* thinking, All these years I was so good to you people and now I am merely *that*? Sometimes the gentle Allen would be inside there, too, indicating, with his eyes, Look, go away, please go away, I am trying so hard not to call you *kant!*

Rail-thin, ribs sticking out.

Catheter taped to dick.

Waft of shit smell.

*You are not Allen and Allen is not you.*

So Molly had said.



As for Dr. Spivey, he couldn't say. Wouldn't say. Was busy drawing a daisy on a Post-it. Then finally said, Well, honestly? As these things grow, they can tend to do weird things. But it doesn't necessarily have to be terrible. Had one guy? Just always craved him a Sprite.

And Eber had thought, Did you, dear doctor/savior/lifeline, just say *craved him a Sprite*?

That's how they got you. You thought, Maybe I'll just crave me a Sprite. Next thing you knew, you were *that*, shouting *kant!*, shitting your bed, swatting at the people who were scrambling to clean you.

No, sir.

No sirree bob.

Wednesday he'd fallen out of the med-bed again. There on the floor in the dark it had come to him: I could spare them.

*Spare us? Or spare you?*

Get thee behind me.

Get thee behind me, sweetie.

A breeze sent down a sequence of linear snow puffs from somewhere above. Beautiful. Why were we made just so, to find so many things that happened every day pretty?

He took off his coat.

Good Christ.

Took off his hat and gloves, stuffed the hat and gloves in a sleeve of the coat, left the coat on the bench.

This way they'd know. They'd find the car, walk up the path, find the coat.

It was a miracle. That he'd got this far. Well, he'd always been strong. Once, he'd run a half-marathon with a broken foot. After his vasectomy he'd cleaned the garage, no problem.

He'd waited in the med-bed for Molly to go off to the pharmacy. That was the toughest part. Just calling out a normal goodbye.

His mind veered toward her now, and he jerked it back with a prayer: Let me pull this off. Lord, let me not fuck it up. Let me bring no dishonor. Leg me do it cling.

Let. Let me do it cling.

Clean.

Cleanly.

Estimated time of overtaking the Nether, handing him his coat? Approximately nine minutes. Six minutes to follow the path around the pond, an additional three minutes to fly up the hillside like a delivering wraith or mercy-angel, bearing the simple gift of a coat.

That is just an estimate, *nasa*. I pretty much made that up.

*We know that, Robin. We know very well by now how irreverent you work.*

*Like that time you cut a fart on the moon.*

*Or the time you tricked Mel into saying, "Mr. President, what a delightful surprise it was to find an asteroid circling Uranus."*

That estimate was particularly iffy. This Nether being surprisingly brisk. Robin himself was not the fastest wicket in the stick. He had a certain girth. Which Dad prognosticated would soon triumphantly congeal into linebackerish solidity. He hoped so. For now he just had the slight man-boobs.

Robin, hurry, Suzanne said. I feel so sorry for that poor old guy.

He's a fool, Robin said, because Suzanne was young, and did not yet understand that when a man was a fool he made hardships for the other men, who were less foolish than he.

He doesn't have much time, Suzanne said, bordering on the hysterical.

There, there, he said, comforting her.

I'm just so frightened, she said.

And yet he is fortunate to have one such as I to hump his coat up that big-ass hill, which, due to its steepness, is not exactly my cup of tea, Robin said.

I guess that's the definition of "hero," Suzanne said.

I guess so, he said.

I don't mean to continue being insolent, she said. But he seems to be pulling away.

What would you suggest? he said.

With all due respect, she said, and because I know you consider us as equals but different, with me covering the brainy angle and special inventions and whatnot?

Yes, yes, go ahead, he said.

Well, just working through the math in terms of simple geometry —

He saw where she was going with this. And she was quite right. No wonder he loved her. He must cut across the pond, thereby decreasing the ambient angle, ergo trimming valuable seconds off his catchup time.

Wait, Suzanne said. Is that dangerous?

It is not, he said. I have done it numerous times.

Please be careful, Suzanne implored.

Well, once, he said.

You have such aplomb, Suzanne demurred.

Actually never, he said softly, not wishing to alarm her.

Your bravery is irascible, Suzanne said.

He started across the pond.

It was actually pretty cool walking on water. In summer, canoes floated here. If Mom could see him, she'd have a conniption. Mom treated him like a piece of glass. Due to his alleged infant surgeries. She went on full alert if he so much as used a stapler.

But Mom was a good egg. A reliable counsellor and steady hand of guidance. She had a munificent splay of long silver hair and a raspy voice, though she didn't smoke and was even a vegan. She'd never been a biker chick, although some of the in-school cretins claimed she resembled one.

He was actually quite fond of Mom.

He was now approximately three-quarters, or that would be sixty per cent, across.

Between him and the shore lay a grayish patch. Here in summer a stream ran in. Looked a tad iffy. At the edge of the grayish patch he gave the ice a bonk with the butt of his gun. Solid as anything.

Here he went. Ice rolled a bit underfoot. Probably it was shallow here. Anyways he hoped so. Yikes.

How's it going? Suzanne said, trepidly.

Could be better, he said.

Maybe you should turn back, Suzanne said.

But wasn't this feeling of fear the exact feeling all heroes had to confront early in life? Wasn't overcoming this feeling of fear what truly distinguished the brave?

There could be no turning back.

Or could there? Maybe there could. Actually there should.

The ice gave way and the boy fell through.

Nausea had not been mentioned in "The Humbling Steppe."

*A blissful feeling overtook me as I drifted off to sleep at the base of the crevasse. No fear, no discomfort, only a vague sadness at the thought of all that remained undone. This is death? I thought. It is but nothing.*

Author, whose name I cannot remember, I would like a word with you.

A-hole.

The shivering was insane. Like a tremor. His head was shaking on his neck. He paused to puke a bit in the snow, white-yellow against the white-blue.

This was scary. This was scary now.

Every step was a victory. He had to remember that. With every step he was fleeing father and father. Farther from father. Stepfather. What a victory he was wresting. From the jaws of the feet.

He felt a need at the back of his throat to say it right.

From the jaws of defeat. From the jaws of defeat.

Oh, Allen.

Even when you were *that* you were still Allen to me.

Please know that.

*Falling*, Dad said.

For some definite time he waited to see where he would land and how much it would hurt.

Then there was a tree in his gut. He found himself wrapped fetally around some tree.

Fucksake.

Ouch, ouch. This was too much. He hadn't cried after the surgeries or during the chemo, but he felt like crying now. It wasn't fair. It happened to everyone supposedly but now it was happening specifically to him. He'd kept waiting for some special dispensation. But no. Something/someone bigger than him kept refusing. You were told the big something/someone loved you especially but in the end you saw it was otherwise. The big something/someone was neutral. Unconcerned. When it innocently moved, it crushed people.

Years ago at "The Illuminated Body" he and Molly had seen this brain slice. Marring the brain slice had been a nickel-size brown spot. That brown spot was all it had taken to kill the guy. Guy must have had his hopes and dreams, closet full of pants, and so on, some treasured childhood memories: a mob of koi in the willow shade at Gage Park, say, Gram searching in her Wrigley's-smelling purse for a tissue — like that. If not for that brown spot, the guy might have been one of the people walking by on the way to lunch in the atrium. But no. He was defunct now, off rotting somewhere, no brain in his head.

Looking down at the brain slice Eber had felt a sense of superiority. Poor guy. It was pretty unlucky, what had happened to him.

He and Molly had fled to the atrium, had hot scones, watched a squirrel mess with a plastic cup.

Wrapped fetally around the tree Eber traced the scar on his head. Tried to sit. No dice. Tried to use the tree to sit up. His hand wouldn't close. Reaching around the tree with both hands, joining his hands at the wrists, he sat himself up, leaned back against the tree.

How was that?

Fine.

Good, actually.

Maybe this was it. Maybe this was as far as he got. He'd had it in mind to sit cross-legged against the boulder at the top of the hill, but really what difference did it make?

All he had to do now was stay put. Stay put by force-thinking the same thoughts he'd used to propel himself out of the med-bed and into the car and across the soccer field and through the woods: MollyTommyJodi huddling in the kitchen filled with pity/loathing, MollyTommyJodi recoiling at something cruel he'd said, Tommy hefting his thin torso up in his arms so that MollyJodi could get under there with a wash —

Then it would be done. He would have preëmpted all future debasement. All his fears about the coming months would be mute.

Moot.

This was it. Was it? Not yet. Soon, though. An hour? Forty minutes? Was he doing this? Really? He was. Was he? Would he be able to make it back to the car even if he changed his mind? He thought not. Here he was. He was here. This incredible opportunity to end things with dignity was right in his hands.

All he had to do was stay put.

*I will fight no more forever.*

Concentrate on the beauty of the pond, the beauty of the woods, the beauty you are returning to, the beauty that is everywhere as far as you can —

Oh, for shitsake.

Oh, for crying out loud.

Some kid was on the pond.

Chubby kid in white. With a gun. Carrying Eber's coat.

You little fart, put that coat down, get your ass home, mind your own —

Damn. Damn it.

Kid tapped the ice with the butt of his gun.

You wouldn't want some kid finding you. That could scar a kid. Although kids found freaky things all the time. Once, he'd found a naked photo of Dad and Mrs. Flemish. That had been freaky. Of course, not as freaky as a grimacing cross-legged —

Kid was swimming.

Swimming was not allowed. That was clearly posted. *No Swimming.*

Kid was a bad swimmer. Real thrashfest down there. Kid was creating with his thrashing a rapidly expanding black pool. With each thrash the kid incrementally expanded the boundary of the black —

He was on his way down before he knew he'd started. *Kid in the pond, kid in the pond*, ran repetitively through his head as he minced. Progress was tree-to-tree. Standing there panting, you got to know a tree well. This one had three knots: eye, eye, nose. This started out as one tree and became two.

Suddenly he was not purely the dying guy who woke nights in the med-bed thinking, Make this not true make this not true, but again, partly, the guy who used to put bananas in the freezer, then crack them on the counter and pour chocolate over the broken chunks, the guy who'd once stood outside a classroom window in a rainstorm to see how Jodi was faring with that little red-headed shit who wouldn't give her a chance at the book table, the guy who used to hand-paint bird feeders in college and sell them on weekends in Boulder, wearing a jester hat and doing a little juggling routine he'd —

He started to fall again, caught himself, froze in a hunched-over position, hurtled forward, fell flat on his face, chucked his chin on a root.

You had to laugh.

You almost had to laugh.

He got up. Got doggedly up. His right hand presented as a bloody glove. Tough nuts, too bad. Once, in football, a tooth had come out. Later in the half, Eddie Blandik had found it. He'd taken it from Eddie, flung it away. That had also been him.

Here was the switchbank. It wasn't far now. Switchback.

What to do? When he got there? Get kid out of pond. Get kid moving. Force-walk kid through woods, across soccer field, to one of the houses on Poole. If nobody home, pile kid into Nissan, crank up heater, drive to — Our Lady of Sorrows? UrgentCare? Fastest route to UrgentCare?

Fifty yards to the trailhead.

Twenty yards to the trailhead.

Thank you, God, for my strength.

In the pond, he was all animal-thought, no words, no self, blind panic. He resolved to really try. He grabbed for the edge. The edge broke away. Down he went. He hit mud and pushed up. He grabbed for the edge. The edge broke away. Down he went. It seemed like it should be easy, getting out. But he just couldn't do it. It was like at the carnival. It should be easy to knock three sawdust dogs off a ledge. And it was easy. It just wasn't easy with the number of balls they gave you.

He wanted the shore. He knew that was the right place for him. But the pond kept saying no.

Then it said maybe.

The ice edge broke again, but, breaking it, he pulled himself infinitesimally toward shore, so that, when he went down, his feet found mud sooner. The bank was sloped. Suddenly there was hope. He went nuts. He went total spaz. Then he was out, water streaming off him, a piece of ice like a tiny pane of glass in the cuff of his coat sleeve.

Trapezoidal, he thought.

In his mind, the pond was not finite, circular, and behind him but infinite and all around.

He felt he'd better lie still or whatever had just tried to kill him would try again. What had tried to kill him was not just in the pond but out here, too, in every natural thing, and there was no him, no Suzanne, no Mom, no nothing, just the sound of some kid crying like a terrified baby.

Eber jog-hobbled out of the woods and found: no kid. Just black water. And a green coat. His coat. His former coat, out there on the ice. The water was calming already.

Oh, shit.

*Your fault.*

*Kid was only out there because of—*

Down on the beach near an overturned boat was some ignoramus. Lying face down. On the job. Lying down on the job. Must have been lying there even as that poor kid —

Wait, rewind.

It was the kid. Oh, thank Christ. Face down like a corpse in a Brady photo. Legs still in the pond. Like he'd lost steam crawling out. Kid was soaked through, the white coat gone gray with wet.

Eber dragged the kid out. It took four distinct pulls. He didn't have the strength to flip him over, but, turning the head, at least got the mouth out of the snow.

Kid was in trouble.

Soaking wet, ten degrees.

Doom.

Eber went down on one knee and told the kid in a grave fatherly way that he had to get up, had to get moving or he could lose his legs, he could die.

The kid looked at Eber, blinked, stayed where he was.

He grabbed the kid by the coat, rolled him over, roughly sat him up. The kid's shivers made his shivers look like nothing. Kid seemed to be holding a jackhammer. He had to get the kid warmed up. How to do it? Hug him, lie on top of him? That would be like Popsicle-on-Popsicle.

Eber remembered his coat, out on the ice, at the edge of the black water.

Ugh.

Find a branch. No branches anywhere. Where the heck was a good fallen branch when you — All right, all right, he'd do it without a branch.

He walked fifty feet downshore, stepped onto the pond, walked a wide loop on the solid stuff, turned to shore, started toward the black water. His knees were shaking. Why? He was afraid he might fall in. Ha. Dope. Poser. The coat was fifteen feet away. His legs were in revolt. His legs were revolting.

*Doctor, my legs are revolting.*

*You're telling me.*

He tiny-stepped up. The coat was ten feet away. He went down on his knees, knee-walked slightly up. Went down on his belly. Stretched out an arm.

Slid forward on his belly.

Bit more.

Bit more.

Then had a tiny corner by two fingers. He hauled it in, slid himself back via something like a reverse breaststroke, got to his knees, stood, retreated a few steps, and was once again fifteen feet away and safe.

Then it was like the old days, getting Tommy or Jodi ready for bed when they were zonked. You said, "Arm," the kid lifted an arm. You said, "Other arm," the kid lifted the other arm. With the coat off, Eber could see that the boy's shirt was turning to ice. Eber peeled the shirt off. Poor little guy. A person was just some meat on a frame. Little guy wouldn't last long in this cold. Eber took off his pajama shirt, put it on the kid, slid the kid's arm into the arm of the coat. In the arm were Eber's hat and gloves. He put the hat and gloves on the kid, zipped the coat up.

The kid's pants were frozen solid. His boots were ice sculptures of boots.

You had to do things right. Eber sat on the boat, took off his boots and socks, peeled off his pajama pants, made the kid sit on the boat, knelt before the kid, got the kid's boots off. He loosened the pants up with little punches and soon had one leg partly out. He was stripping off a kid in ten-degree weather. Maybe this was exactly the wrong thing. Maybe he'd kill the kid. He didn't know. He just didn't know. Desperately, he gave the pants a few more punches. Then the kid was stepping out.

Eber put the pajama pants on him, then the socks, then the boots.

The kid was standing there in Eber's clothes, swaying, eyes closed.

We're going to walk now, O.K.? Eber said.

Nothing.

Eber gave the kid an encouraging pop in the shoulders. Like a football thing.

We're going to walk you home, he said. Do you live near here?

Nothing.

He gave a harder pop.

The kid gaped at him, baffled.

Pop.

Kid started walking.

Pop-pop.

Like fleeing.

Eber drove the kid out ahead of him. Like cowboy and cow. At first, fear of the popping seemed to be motivating the kid, but then good old panic kicked in and he started running. Soon Eber couldn't keep up.

Kid was at the bench. Kid was at the trailhead.

Good boy, get home.

Kid disappeared into the woods.

Eber came back to himself.

Oh, boy. Oh, wow.

He had never known cold. Had never known tired.

He was standing in the snow in his underwear near an overturned boat.

He hobbled to the boat and sat in the snow.

Robin ran.

Past the bench and the trailhead and into the woods on the old familiar path.

What the heck? What the heck had just happened? He'd fallen into the pond? His jeans had frozen solid? Had ceased being bluejeans. Were whitejeans. He looked down to see if his jeans were still whitejeans.

He had on pajama pants that, tucked into some tremendoid boots, looked like clown pants.

Had he been crying just now?

I think crying is healthy, Suzanne said. It means you're in touch with your feelings.

Ugh. That was done, that was stupid, talking in your head to some girl who in real life called you Roger.

Dang.

So tired.

Here was a stump.

He sat. It felt good to rest. He wasn't going to lose his legs. They didn't even hurt. He couldn't even feel them. He wasn't going to die. Dying was not something he had in mind at this early an age. To rest more efficiently, he lay down. The sky was blue. The pines swayed. Not all at the same rate. He raised one gloved hand and watched it tremor.

He might close his eyes for a bit. Sometimes in life one felt a feeling of wanting to quit. Then everyone would see. Everyone would see that teasing wasn't nice. Sometimes with all the teasing his days were subtenable. Sometimes he felt he couldn't take even one more lunchtime of meekly eating on that rolled-up wrestling mat in the cafeteria corner near the snapped parallel bars. He did not have to sit there. But preferred to. If he sat anywhere else, there was the chance of a comment or two. Upon which he would then have the rest of the day to reflect. Sometimes comments were made on the clutter of his home. Thanks to Bryce, who had once come over. Sometimes comments were made on his manner of speaking. Sometimes comments were made on the style faux pas of Mom. Who was, it must be said, a real eighties gal.

Mom.

He did not like it when they teased about Mom. Mom had no idea of his lowly school status. Mom seeing him more as the paragon or golden-boy type.

Once, he'd done a secret rendezvous of recording Mom's phone calls, just for the reconnaissance aspect. Mostly they were dull, mundane, not about him at all.

Except for this one with her friend Liz.

I never dreamed I could love someone so much, Mom had said. I just worry I might not be able to live up to him, you know? He's so *good*, so *grateful*. That kid deserves — that kid deserves it all. Better school, which we cannot afford, some trips, like abroad, but that is also, uh, out of our price range. I just don't want to *fail* him, you know? That's all I want from my life, you know? Liz? To feel, at the end, like I did right by that magnificent little dude.

At that point it seemed like Liz had maybe started vacuuming.

Magnificent little dude.

He should probably get going.

Magnificent Little Dude was like his Indian name.

He got to his feet and, gathering his massive amount of clothes up like some sort of encumbering royal train, started toward home.

Here was the truck tire, here the place where the trail briefly widened, here the place where the trees crossed overhead like reaching for one another. Weave-ceiling, Mom called it.

Here was the soccer field. Across the field, his house sat like a big sweet animal. It was amazing. He'd made it. He'd fallen into the pond and lived to tell the tale. He had somewhat cried, yes, but had then simply laughed off this moment of mortal weakness and made his way home, look of wry bemusement on his face, having, it must be acknowledged, benefitted from the much appreciated assistance of a certain aged —

With a shock he remembered the old guy. What the heck? An image flashed of the old guy standing bereft and blue-skinned in his tighty-whities like a P.O.W. abandoned at the barbed wire due to no room on the truck. Or a sad traumatized stork bidding farewell to its young.

He'd bolted. He'd bolted on the old guy. Hadn't even given him a thought.

Blimey.

What a chickenshittish thing to do.

He had to go back. Right now. Help the old guy hobble out. But he was so tired. He wasn't sure he could do it. Probably the old guy was fine. Probably he had some sort of old-guy plan.

But he'd bolted. He couldn't live with that. His mind was telling him that the only way to undo the bolting was to go back now, save the day. His body was saying something else: It's too far, you're just a kid, get Mom, Mom will know what to do.

He stood paralyzed at the edge of the soccer field like a scarecrow in huge flowing clothes. Eber sat slumped against the boat.

What a change in the weather. People were going around with parasols and so forth in the open part of the park. There was a merry-go-round and a band and a gazebo. People were frying food on the backs of certain merry-go-round horses. And yet, on others, kids were riding. How did they know? Which horses were hot? For now there was still snow, but snow couldn't last long in this bomb.

Balm.

*If you close your eyes, that's the end. You know that, right?*

Hilarious.

Allen.

His exact voice. After all these years.

Where was he? The duck pond. So many times he'd come out here with the kids. He should go now. Goodbye, duck pond. Although hang on. He couldn't seem to stand. Plus you couldn't leave a couple of little kids behind. Not this close to water. They were four and six. For God's sake. What had he been thinking? Leaving those two little dears by the pond. They were good kids, they'd wait, but wouldn't they get bored? And swim? Without life jackets? No, no, no. It made him sick. He had to stay. Poor kids. Poor abandoned —

Wait, rewind.

His kids were excellent swimmers.

His kids had never come close to being abandoned.

His kids were grown.

Tom was thirty. Tall drink of water. Tried so hard to know things. But even when he thought he knew a thing (fighting kites, breeding rabbits) Tom would soon be shown for what he was: the dearest, most agreeable young man ever, who knew no more about fighting kites/breeding rabbits than the average person could pick up from ten minutes on the Internet. Not that Tom wasn't smart. Tom was smart. Tom was a damn quick study. Oh, Tom, Tommy, Tommkins! The heart in that kid! He just worked and worked. For the love of his dad. Oh, kid, you had it, you have it, Tom, Tommy, even now I am thinking of you, you are very much on my mind.

And Jodi, Jodi was out there in Santa Fe. She'd said she'd take off work and fly home. As needed. But there was no need. He didn't like to impose. The kids had their own lives. Jodi-Jode. Little freckle-face. Pregnant now. Not married. Not even dating. Stupid Lars. What kind of man deserted a beautiful girl like that? A total dear. Just starting to make some progress in her job. You couldn't take that kind of time off when you'd only just started —

Reconstructing the kids in this way was having the effect of making them real to him again. Which — you didn't want to get that ball roiling. Jodi was having a baby. Rolling. He could have lasted long enough to see the baby. Hold the baby. It was sad, yes. That was a sacrifice he'd had to make. He'd explained it in the note. Hadn't he? No. Hadn't left a note. Couldn't. There'd been some reason he couldn't. Hadn't there? He was pretty sure there'd been some —

Insurance. It couldn't seem like he'd done it on purpose.

Little panic.

Little panic here.

He was offing himself. Offing himself, he'd involved a kid. Who was wandering the woods hypothermic. Offing himself two weeks before Christmas. Molly's favorite holiday. Molly had a valve thing, a panic thing, this business might —

This was not — this was not him. This was not something he would have done. Not something he would ever do. Except he — he'd done it. He was doing it. It was in progress. If he didn't get moving, it would — it would be accomplished. It would be done.

*This very day you will be with me in the kingdom of —*

He had to fight.

But couldn't seem to keep his eyes open.

He tried to send some last thoughts to Molly. Sweetie, forgive me. Biggest fuckup ever.



Forget this part. Forget I ended this thisly. You know me. You know I didn't mean this.

He was at his house. He wasn't at his house. He knew that. But could see every detail. Here was the empty med-bed, the studio portrait of HimMollyTommyJodi posed around that fake rodeo fence. Here was the little bedside table. His meds in the pillbox. The bell he rang to call Molly. What a thing. What a cruel thing. Suddenly he saw clearly how cruel it was. And selfish. Oh, God. Who was he? The front door swung open. Molly called his name. He'd hide in the sunroom. Jump out, surprise her. Somehow they'd remodelled. Their sunroom was now the sunroom of Mrs. Kendall, his childhood piano teacher. That would be fun for the kids, to take piano lessons in the same room where he'd —

Hello? Mrs. Kendall said.

What she meant was: Don't die yet. There are many of us who wish to judge you harshly in the sunroom.

Hello, hello! she shouted.

Coming around the pond was a silver-haired woman.

All he had to do was call out.

He called out.

To keep him alive she started piling on him various things from life, things smelling of a home — coats, sweaters, a rain of flowers, a hat, socks, sneakers — and with amazing strength had him on his feet and was maneuvering him into a maze of trees, a wonderland of trees, trees hung with ice. He was piled high with clothes. He was like the bed at a party on which they pile the coats. She had all the answers: where to step, when to rest. She was strong as a bull. He was on her hip now like a baby; she had both arms around his waist, lifting him over a root.

They walked for hours, seemed like. She sang. Cajoled. She hissed at him, reminding him, with pokes in the forehead (right in his forehead), that her freaking *kid* was at *home*, near-frozen, so they had to *book it*.

Good God, there was so much to do. If he made it. He'd make it. This gal wouldn't let him not make it. He'd have to try to get Molly to see — see why he'd done it. *I was scared, I was scared, Mol*. Maybe Molly would agree not to tell Tommy and Jodi. He didn't like the thought of them knowing he'd been scared. Didn't like the thought of them knowing what a fool he'd been. Oh, to hell with that! Tell everyone! He'd done it! He'd been driven to do it and he'd done it and that was it. That was him. That was part of who he was. No more lies, no more silence, it was going to be a new and different life, if only he —

They were crossing the soccer field.

Here was the Nissan.

His first thought was: Get in, drive it home.

Oh, no, you don't, she said with that smoky laugh and guided him into a house. A house on the park. He'd seen it a million times. And now was in it. It smelled of man-sweat and spaghetti sauce and old books. Like a library where sweaty men went to cook spaghetti. She sat him in front of a woodstove, brought him a brown blanket that smelled of medicine. Didn't talk but in directives: Drink this, let me take that, wrap up, what's your name, what's your number?

What a thing! To go from dying in your underwear in the snow to this! Warmth, colors, antlers on the walls, an old-time crank phone like you saw in silent movies. It was something. Every second was something. He hadn't died in his shorts by a pond in the snow. The kid wasn't dead. He'd killed no one. Ha! Somehow he'd got it all back. Everything was good now, everything was —

The woman reached down, touched his scar.

Oh, wow, ouch, she said. You didn't do that out there, did you?

At this he remembered that the brown spot was as much in his head as ever.

Oh, Lord, there was still all that to go through.

Did he still want it? Did he still want to live?

Yes, yes, oh, God, yes, please.

Because, O.K., the thing was — he saw it now, was starting to see it — if some guy, at the end, fell apart, and said or did bad things, or had to be helped, helped to quite a considerable extent? So what? What of it? Why should he not do or say weird things or look strange or disgusting? Why should the shit not run down his legs? Why should those he loved not lift and bend and feed and wipe him, when he would gladly do the same for them? He'd been afraid to be lessened by the lifting and bending and feeding and wiping, and was still afraid of that, and yet, at the same time, now saw that there could still be many — many drops of goodness, is how it came to him — many drops of happy — of good fellowship — ahead, and those drops of fellowship were not — had never been — his to withhold.

Withhold.

The kid came out of the kitchen, lost in Eber's big coat, pajama pants pooling around his feet with the boots now off. He took Eber's bloody hand gently. Said he was sorry. Sorry for being such a dope in the woods. Sorry for running off. He'd just been out of it. Kind of scared and all.

Listen, Eber said hoarsely. You did amazing. You did perfect. I'm here. Who did that?

There. That was something you could do. The kid maybe felt better now? He'd given the kid that? That was a reason. To stay around. Wasn't it? Can't console anyone if not around? Can't do squat if gone?

When Allen was close to the end, Eber had done a presentation at school on the manatee. Got an A from Sister Eustace. Who could be quite tough. She was missing two fingers on her right hand from a lawnmower incident and sometimes used that hand to scare a kid silent.

He hadn't thought of this in years.

She'd put that hand on his shoulder not to scare him but as a form of praise. *That was just terrific. Everyone should take their work as seriously as Donald here. Donald, I hope you'll go home and share this with your parents.* He'd gone home and shared it with Mom. Who suggested he share it with Allen. Who, on that day, had been more Allen than *that*. And Allen —

Ha, wow, Allen. There was a man.

Tears sprang into his eyes as he sat by the woodstove.

Allen had — Allen had said it was great. Asked a few questions. About the manatee. What did they eat again? Did he think they could effectively communicate with one another? What a trial that must have been! In his condition. Forty minutes on the manatee? Including a poem Eber had composed? A sonnet? On the manatee?

He'd felt so happy to have Allen back.

I'll be like him, he thought. I'll try to be like him.

The voice in his head was shaky, hollow, unconvinced.

Then: sirens.

Somehow: Molly.

He heard her in the entryway. Mol, Molly, oh, boy. When they were first married they used to fight. Say the most insane things. Afterward, sometimes there would be tears. Tears in bed? Somewhere. And then they would — Molly pressing her hot wet face against his hot wet face. They were sorry, they were saying with their bodies, they were accepting each other back, and that feeling, that feeling of being accepted back again and again, of someone's affection for you always expanding to encompass whatever new flawed thing had just manifested in you, that was the deepest, dearest thing he'd ever —

She came in flustered and apologetic, a touch of anger in her face. He'd embarrassed her. He saw that. He'd embarrassed her by doing something that showed she hadn't sufficiently noticed him needing her. She'd been too busy nursing him to notice how scared he was. She was angry at him for pulling this stunt and ashamed of herself for feeling angry at him in his hour of need, and was trying to put the shame and anger behind her now so she could do what might be needed.

All of this was in her face. He knew her so well.

Also concern.

Overriding everything else in that lovely face was concern.

She came to him now, stumbling a bit on a swell in the floor of this stranger's house.

# Paladin of the Lost Hour - Harlan Ellison

(1986)

This was an old man. Not an incredibly old man; obsolete, spavined; not as worn as the sway-backed stone steps ascending the Pyramid of the Sun to an ancient temple; not yet a relic. But even so, a very old man, this old man perched on an antique shooting stick, its handles open to form a seat, its spike thrust at an angle into the soft ground and trimmed grass of the cemetery. Gray, thin rain misted down at almost the same angle as that at which the spike pierced the ground. The winter-barren trees lay flat and black against an aluminum sky, unmoving in the chill wind. An old man sitting at the foot of a grave mound whose headstone had tilted slightly when the earth had settled; sitting in the rain and speaking to someone below.

"They tore it down, Minna.

"I tell you, they must have bought off a councilman.

"Came in with bulldozers at six o'clock in the morning, and you know that's not legal. There's a Municipal Code. Supposed to hold off till at least seven on weekdays, eight on the weekend; but there they were at six, even before six, barely light for godsakes. Thought they'd sneak in and do it before the neighborhood got wind of it and call the landmarks committee. Sneaks: they come on holidays, can you imagine!

"But I was out there waiting for them, and I told them, 'You can't do it, that's Code number 91.03002, subsection E,' and they lied and said they had special permission, so I said to the big muckymuck in charge, 'Let's see your waiver permit,' and he said the Code didn't apply in this case because it was supposed to be only for grading, and since they were demolishing and not grading, they could start whenever they felt like it. So I told him I'd call the police, then, because it came under the heading of Disturbing the Peace, and he said ... well, I know you hate that kind of language, old girl, so I won't tell you what he said, but you can imagine.

"So I called the police, and gave them my name, and of course they didn't get there till almost quarter after seven (which is what makes me think they bought off a councilman), and by then those 'dozers had leveled most of it. Doesn't take long, you know that.

"And I don't suppose it's as great a loss as, maybe, say, the Great Library of Alexandria, but it was the last of the authentic Deco design drive-ins, and the carhops still served you on roller skates, and it was a landmark, and just about the only place left in the city where you could still get a decent grilled cheese sandwich pressed very flat on the grill by one of those weights they used to use, made with real cheese and not that rancid plastic they cut into squares and call it 'cheese food.'

"Gone, old dear, gone and mourned. And I understand they plan to put up another one of those mini-malls on the site, just ten blocks away from one that's already there, and you know what's going to happen: this new one will drain off the traffic from the older one, and then that one will fall the way they all do when the next one gets built, you'd think they'd see some history in it; but no, they never learn, and you should have seen the crowd by seven-thirty. All ages, even some of those kids painted like aborigines, with torn leather clothing. Even they came to protest. Terrible language, but at least they were concerned. And nothing could stop it. They just whammed it, and down it went.

"I do so miss you today, Minna. No more good grilled cheese." Said the very old man to the ground. And now he was crying softly, and now the wind rose, and the mist rain stippled his overcoat.

Nearby, yet at a distance, Billy Kinetta stared down at another grave. He could see the old man over there off to his left, but he took no further notice. The wind whipped the vent of his trenchcoat. His collar was up but rain trickled down his neck. This was a younger man, not yet

thirty-five. Unlike the old man, Billy Kinetta neither cried nor spoke to memories of someone who had once listened. He might have been a geomancer, so silently did he stand, eyes toward the ground.

One of these men was black; the other was white.

Beyond the high, spiked-iron fence surrounding the cemetery two boys crouched, staring through the bars, through the rain; at the men absorbed by grave matters, by matters of graves. These were not really boys. They were legally young men. One was nineteen, the other two months beyond twenty. Both were legally old enough to vote, to drink alcoholic beverages, to drive a car. Neither would reach the age of Billy Kinetta.

One of them said, "Let's take the old man."

The other responded, "You think the guy in the trenchcoat'll get in the way?"

The first one smiled; and a mean little laugh. "I sure as shit hope so." He wore, on his right hand, a leather carnaby glove with the fingers cut off, small round metal studs in a pattern along the line of his knuckles. He made a fist, flexed, did it again.

They went under the spiked fence at a point where erosion had created a shallow gully. "Sonofabitch!" one of them said, as he slid through on his stomach. It was muddy. The front of his sateen roadie jacket was filthy. "Sonofabitch!" He was speaking in general of the fence, the sliding under, the muddy ground, the universe in total. And the old man, who would now really get the crap kicked out of him for making this fine sateen roadie jacket filthy.

They sneaked up on him from the left, as far from the young guy in the trenchcoat as they could. The first one kicked out the shooting stick with a short, sharp, downward movement he had learned in his tae kwon do class. It was called the yup-chagi. The old man went over backward.

Then they were on him, the one with the filthy sonofabitch sateen roadie jacket punching at the old man's neck and the side of his face as he dragged him around by the collar of the overcoat. The other one began ransacking the coat pockets, ripping the fabric to get his hand inside.

The old man commenced to scream. "Protect me! You've got to protect me ... it's necessary to protect me!"

The one pillaging pockets froze momentarily. What the hell kind of thing is that for this old fucker to be saying? Who the hell does he think'll protect him? Is he asking us to protect him? I'll protect you, scumbag! I'll kick in your fuckin' lung! "Shut'im up!" he whispered urgently to his friend. "Stick a fist in his mouth!" Then his hand, wedged in an inside jacket pocket, closed over something. He tried to get his hand loose, but the jacket and coat and the old man's body had wound around his wrist. "C'mon loose, motherfuckah!" he said to the very old man, who was still screaming for protection. The other young man was making huffing sounds, as dark as mud, as he slapped at the rain-soaked hair of his victim. "I can't ... he's all twisted 'round ... getcher hand outta there so's I can ... " Screaming, the old man had doubled under, locking their hands on his person.

And then the pillager's fist came loose, and he was clutching for an instant a gorgeous pocket watch.

What used to be called a turnip watch.

The dial face was cloisonné, exquisite beyond the telling.

The case was of silver, so bright it seemed blue.

The hands, cast as arrows of time, were gold. They formed a shallow V at precisely eleven o'clock. This was happening at 3:45 in the afternoon, with rain and wind.

The timepiece made no sound, no sound at all.

Then: there was space all around the watch, and in that space in the palm of the hand, there was heat. Intense heat for just a moment, just long enough for the hand to open.

The watch glided out of the boy's palm and levitated.

"Help me! You must protect me!"

Billy Kinetta heard the shrieking, but did not see the pocket watch floating in the air above the astonished young man. It was silver, and it was end-on toward him, and the rain was silver and slanting; and he did not see the watch hanging free in the air, even when the furious young man disentangled himself and leaped for it. Billy did not see the watch rise just so much, out of reach of the mugger.

Billy Kinetta saw two boys, two young men of ratpack age, beating someone much older; and he went for them. Pow, like that!

Thrashing his legs, the old man twisted around — over, under — as the boy holding him by the collar tried to land a punch to put him away. Who would have thought the old man to have had so much battle in him?

A flapping shape, screaming something unintelligible, hit the center of the group at full speed. The carnaby-gloved hand reaching for the watch grasped at empty air one moment, and the next was buried under its owner as the boy was struck a crackback block that threw him face first into the soggy ground. He tried to rise, but something stomped him at the base of his spine; something kicked him twice in the kidneys; something rolled over him like a flash flood.

Twisting, twisting, the very old man put his thumb in the right eye of the boy clutching his collar.

The great trenchcoated maelstrom that was Billy Kinetta whirled into the boy as he let loose of the old man on the ground and, howling, slapped a palm against his stinging eye. Billy locked his fingers and delivered a roundhouse wallop that sent the boy reeling backward to fall over Minna's tilted headstone.

Billy's back was to the old man. He did not see the miraculous pocket watch smoothly descend through rain that did not touch it, to hover in front of the old man. He did not see the old man reach up, did not see the timepiece snuggle into an arthritic hand, did not see the old man return the turnip to an inside jacket pocket.

Wind, rain and Billy Kinetta pummeled two young men of a legal age that made them accountable for their actions. There was no thought of the knife stuck down in one boot, no chance to reach it, no moment when the wild thing let them rise. So they crawled. They scrabbled across the muddy ground, the slippery grass, over graves and out of his reach. They ran; falling, rising, falling again; away, without looking back.

Billy Kinetta, breathing heavily, knees trembling, turned to help the old man to his feet; and found him standing, brushing dirt from his overcoat, snorting in anger and mumbling to himself.

"Are you all right?"

For a moment the old man's recitation of annoyance continued, then he snapped his chin down sharply as if marking end to the situation, and looked at his cavalry to the rescue. "That was very good, young fella. Considerable style you've got there."

Billy Kinetta stared at him wide-eyed. "Are you sure you're okay?" He reached over and flicked several blades of wet grass from the shoulder of the old man's overcoat.

"I'm fine. I'm fine but I'm wet and I'm cranky. Let's go somewhere and have a nice cup of Earl Grey."

There had been a look on Billy Kinetta's face as he stood with lowered eyes, staring at the grave he had come to visit. The emergency had removed that look. Now it returned.

"No, thanks. If you're okay, I've got to do some things."

The old man felt himself all over, meticulously, as he replied, "I'm only superficially bruised. Now if I were an old woman, instead of a spunky old man, same age though, I'd have lost considerable of the calcium in my bones, and those two would have done me some mischief. Did you know that women lose a considerable part of their calcium when they reach my age? I read a report." Then he paused, and said shyly, "Come on, why don't you and I sit and chew the fat over a nice cup of tea?"

Billy shook his head with bemusement, smiling despite himself. "You're something else, Dad. I don't even know you."

"I like that."

"What: that I don't know you?"

"No, that you called me 'Dad' and not 'Pop.' I hate 'Pop.' Always makes me think the wise-apple wants to snap off my cap with a bottle opener. Now Dad has a ring of respect to it. I like that right down to the ground. Yes, I believe we should find someplace warm and quiet to sit and get to know each other. After all, you saved my life. And you know what that means in the Orient."

Billy was smiling continuously now. "In the first place, I doubt very much I saved your life. Your wallet, maybe. And in the second place, I don't even know your name; what would we have to talk about?"

"Gaspar," he said, extending his hand. "That's a first name. Gaspar. Know what it means?"

Billy shook his head.

"See, already we have something to talk about."

So Billy, still smiling, began walking Gaspar out of the cemetery. "Where do you live? I'll take you home."

They were on the street, approaching Billy Kinetta's 1979 Cutlass. "Where I live is too far for now. I'm beginning to feel a bit peaky. I'd like to lie down for a minute. We can just go on over to your place, if that doesn't bother you. For a few minutes. A cup of tea. Is that all right?"

He was standing beside the Cutlass, looking at Billy with an old man's expectant smile, waiting for him to unlock the door and hold it for him till he'd placed his still-calcium-rich but nonetheless old bones in the passenger seat. Billy stared at him, trying to figure out what was at risk if he unlocked that door. Then he snorted a tiny laugh, unlocked the door, held it for Gaspar as he seated himself, slammed it and went around to unlock the other side and get in. Gaspar reached across and thumbed up the door lock knob. And they drove off together in the rain.

Through all of this the timepiece made no sound, no sound at all.

Like Gaspar, Billy Kinetta was alone in the world.

His three-room apartment was the vacuum in which he existed. It was furnished, but if one stepped out into the hallway and, for all the money in all the numbered accounts in all the banks in Switzerland, one was asked to describe those furnishings, one would come away no richer than before. The apartment was charisma poor. It was a place to come when all other possibilities had been expended. Nothing green, nothing alive, existed in those boxes. No eyes looked back from the walls. Neither warmth nor chill marked those spaces. It was a place to wait.

Gaspar leaned his closed shooting stick, now a walking stick with handles, against the bookcase. He studied the titles of the paperbacks stacked haphazardly on the shelves.

From the kitchenette came the sound of water running into a metal pan. Then tin on cast iron. Then the hiss of gas and the flaring of a match as it was struck; and the pop of the gas being lit.

"Many years ago," Gaspar said, taking out a copy of Moravia's *The Adolescents* and thumbing it as he spoke, "I had a library of books, oh, thousands of books — never could bear to toss one out, not even the bad ones — and when folks would come to the house to visit they'd look around at all the nooks and crannies stuffed with books; and if they were the sort of folks who don't snuggle with books, they'd always ask the same dumb question." He waited a moment for a response and when none was forthcoming (the sound of china cups on sink tile), he said, "Guess what the question was."

From the kitchen, without much interest: "No idea."

"They'd always ask it with the kind of voice people use in the presence of large sculptures in museums. They'd ask me, 'Have you read all these books?'" He waited again, but Billy Kinetta was not playing the game. "Well, young fella, after a while the same dumb question gets asked a million times, you get sorta snappish about it. And it came to annoy me more than a little bit. Till

I finally figured out the right answer.

"And you know what that answer was? Go ahead, take a guess." Billy appeared in the kitchenette doorway.

"I suppose you told them you'd read a lot of them but not all of them."

Gaspar waved the guess away with a flapping hand. "Now what good would that have done? They wouldn't know they'd asked a dumb question, but I didn't want to insult them, either. So when they'd ask if I'd read all those books, I'd say, 'Hell, no. Who wants a library full of books you've already read?'"

Billy laughed despite himself. He scratched at his hair with idle pleasure, and shook his head at the old man's verve. "Gaspar, you are a wild old man. You retired?" The old man walked carefully to the most comfortable chair in the room, an overstuffed Thirties-style lounge that had been reupholstered many times before Billy Kinetta had purchased it at the American Cancer Society Thrift Shop. He sank into it with a sigh. "No sir, I am not by any means retired. Still very active."

"Doing what, if I'm not prying?"

"Doing ombudsman."

"You mean, like a consumer advocate? Like Ralph Nader?"

"Exactly. I watch out for things. I listen, I pay some attention; and if I do it right, sometimes I can even make a little difference. Yes, like Mr. Nader. A very fine man."

"And you were at the cemetery to see a relative?"

Gaspar's face settled into an expression of loss. "My dear old girl. My wife, Minna. She's been gone, well, it was twenty years in January." He sat silently staring inward for a while, then: "She was everything to me. The nice part was that I knew how important we were to each other; we discussed, well, just everything. I miss that the most, telling her what's going on."

"I go to see her every other day."

"I used to go every day. But. It. Hurt. Too much."

They had tea. Gaspar sipped and said it was very nice, but had Billy ever tried Earl Grey? Billy said he didn't know what that was, and Gaspar said he would bring him a tin, that it was splendid. And they chatted. Finally, Gaspar asked, "And who were you visiting?"

Billy pressed his lips together. "Just a friend." And would say no more. Then he sighed and said, "Well, listen, I have to go to work."

"Oh? What do you do?"

The answer came slowly. As if Billy Kinetta wanted to be able to say that he was in computers, or owned his own business, or held a position of import. "I'm night manager at a 7-Eleven."

"I'll bet you meet some fascinating people coming in late for milk or one of those slushies," Gaspar said gently. He seemed to understand.

Billy smiled. He took the kindness as it was intended. "Yeah, the cream of high society, that is, when they're not threatening to shoot me through the head if I don't open the safe."

"Let me ask you a favor," Gaspar said. "I'd like a little sanctuary, if you think it's all right, just a little rest. I could lie down on the sofa for a bit. Would that be all right? You trust me to stay here while you're gone, young fella?"

Billy hesitated only a moment. The very old man seemed okay, not a crazy, certainly not a thief. And what was there to steal? Some tea that wasn't even Earl Grey?

"Sure. That'll be okay. But I won't be coming back till two A.M. So just close the door behind you when you go; it'll lock automatically. "

They shook hands, Billy shrugged into his still-wet trenchcoat, and he went to the door. He paused to look back at Gaspar sitting in the lengthening shadows as evening came on. "It was nice getting to know you, Gaspar."

"You can make that a mutual pleasure, Billy. You're a nice young fella."



And Billy went to work, alone as always.

When he came home at two, prepared to open a can of Hormel chili, he found the table set for dinner, with the scent of an elegant beef stew enriching the apartment. There were new potatoes and stirfried carrots and zucchini that had been lightly battered to delicate crispness. And cupcakes. White cake with chocolate frosting. From a bakery.

And in that way, as gently as that, Gaspar insinuated himself into Billy Kinetta's apartment and his life.

As they sat with tea and cupcakes, Billy said, "You don't have anyplace to go, do you?"

The old man smiled and made one of those deprecating movements of the head. "Well, I'm not the sort of fella who can bear to be homeless, but at the moment I'm what vaudevillians used to call 'at liberty.'"

"If you want to stay on a time, that would be okay," Billy said. "It's not very roomy here, but we seem to get on all right."

"That's strongly kind of you, Billy. Yes, I'd like to be your roommate for a while. Won't be too long, though. My doctor tells me I'm not long for this world." He paused, looked into the teacup, and said softly, "I have to confess ... I'm a little frightened. To go. Having someone to talk to would be a great comfort."

And Billy said, without preparation, "I was visiting the grave of a man who was in my rifle company in Vietnam. I go there sometimes." But there was such pain in his words that Gaspar did not press him for details.

So the hours passed, as they will with or without permission, and when Gaspar asked Billy if they could watch television, to catch an early newscast, and Billy tuned in the old set just in time to pick up dire reports of another aborted disarmament talk, and Billy shook his head and observed that it wasn't only Gaspar who was frightened of something like death, Gaspar chuckled, patted Billy on the knee and said, with unassailable assurance, "Take my word for it, Billy ... it isn't going to happen. No nuclear holocaust. Trust me, when I tell you this: it'll never happen. Never, never, not ever."

Billy smiled wanly. "And why not? What makes you so sure ... got some special inside information?"

And Gaspar pulled out the magnificent timepiece, which Billy was seeing for the first time, and he said, "It's not going to happen because it's only eleven o'clock."

Billy stared at the watch, which read 11:00 precisely. He consulted his wristwatch. "Hate to tell you this, but your watch has stopped. It's almost five-thirty."

Gaspar smiled his own certain smile. "No, it's eleven."

And they made up the sofa for the very old man, who placed his pocket change and his fountain pen and the sumptuous turnip watch on the now-silent television set, and they went to sleep.

One day Billy went off while Gaspar was washing the lunch dishes, and when he came back, he had a large paper bag from Toys "R" Us.

Gaspar came out of the kitchenette rubbing a plate with a souvenir dish towel from Niagara Falls, New York. He stared at Billy and the bag. "What's in the bag?" Billy inclined his head, and indicated the very old man should join him in the middle of the room. Then he sat down crosslegged on the floor, and dumped the contents of the bag. Gaspar stared with startlement, and sat down beside him.

So for two hours they played with tiny cars that turned into robots when the sections were unfolded.

Gaspar was excellent at figuring out all the permutations of the Transformers, Starriars and CoBots. He played well.

And they went for a walk. "I'll treat you to a matinee," Gaspar said. "But no films with Karen Black, Sandy Dennis or Meryl Streep. They're always crying. Their noses are always red. I can't

stand that."

They started to cross the avenue. Stopped at the light was this year's Cadillac Brougham, vanity license plates, ten coats of acrylic lacquer and two coats of clear (with a little retarder in the final "color coat" for a slow dry) of a magenta hue so rich that it approximated the shade of light shining through a decanter filled with Chateau Lafite Rothschild 1945.

The man driving the Cadillac had no neck. His head sat thumped down hard on the shoulders. He stared straight ahead, took one last deep pull on the cigar, and threw it out the window. The still-smoking butt landed directly in front of Gaspar as he passed the car. The old man stopped, stared down at this coprolitic metaphor, and then stared at the driver. The eyes behind the wheel, the eyes of a macaque, did not waver from the stoplight's red circle. Just outside the window, someone was looking in, but the eyes of the rhesus were on the red circle.

A line of cars stopped behind the Brougham.

Gaspar continued to stare at the man in the Cadillac for a moment, and then, with creaking difficulty, he bent and picked up the smoldering butt of stogie.

The old man walked the two steps to the car — as Billy watched in confusion — thrust his face forward till it was mere inches from the driver's profile, and said with extreme sweetness, "I think you dropped this in our living room."

And as the glazed simian eyes turned to stare directly into the pedestrian's face, nearly nose to nose, Gaspar casually flipped the butt with its red glowing tip, into the back seat of the Cadillac, where it began to burn a hole in the fine Corinthian leather.

Three things happened simultaneously:

The driver let out a howl, tried to see the butt in his rearview mirror, could not get the angle, tried to look over his shoulder into the back seat but without a neck could not perform that feat of agility, put the car into neutral, opened his door and stormed into the street trying to grab Gaspar. "You fuckin' bastid, whaddaya think you're doin' tuh my car you asshole bastid, I'll kill ya ... "

Billy's hair stood on end as he saw what Gaspar was doing; he rushed back the short distance in the crosswalk to grab the old man; Gaspar would not be dragged away, stood smiling with unconcealed pleasure at the mad bull rampaging and screaming of the hysterical driver. Billy yanked as hard as he could and Gaspar began to move away, around the front of the Cadillac, toward the far curb. Still grinning with octogeneric charm.

The light changed.

These three things happened in the space of five seconds, abetted by the impatient honking of the cars behind the Brougham; as the light turned green.

Screaming, dragging, honking, as the driver found he could not do three things at once: he could not go after Gaspar while the traffic was clanging at him; could not let go of the car door to crawl into the back seat from which now came the stench of charring leather that could not be rectified by an inexpensive Tijuana tuck-'n-roll; could not save his back seat and at the same time stave off the hostility of a dozen drivers cursing and honking. He trembled there, torn three ways, doing nothing.

Billy dragged Gaspar.

Out of the crosswalk. Out of the street. Onto the curb. Up the side street. Into the alley. Through a backyard. To the next street from the avenue.

Puffing with the exertion, Billy stopped at last, five houses up the street. Gaspar was still grinning, chuckling softly with unconcealed pleasure at his puckish ways. Billy turned on him with wild gesticulations and babble.

"You're nuts!"

"How about that?" the old man said, giving Billy an affectionate poke in the bicep.

"Nuts! Looney! That guy would've torn off your head! What the hell's wrong with you, old man? Are you out of your boots?"

"I'm not crazy. I'm responsible."

"Responsible!?! Responsible, fer chrissakes? For what? For all the butts every yotz throws into the street?"

The old man nodded. "For butts, and trash, and pollution, and toxic waste dumping in the dead of night; for bushes, and cactus, and the baobab tree; for pippin apples and even lima beans, which I despise. You show me someone who'll eat lima beans without being at gunpoint, I'll show you a pervert!"

Billy was screaming. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm also responsible for dogs and cats and guppies and cockroaches and the President of the United States and Jonas Salk and your mother and the entire chorus line at the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas. Also their choreographer."

"Who do you think you are? God?"

"Don't be sacrilegious. I'm too old to wash your mouth out with laundry soap. Of course I'm not God. I'm just an old man. But I'm responsible."

Gaspar started to walk away, toward the corner and the avenue and a resumption of their route. Billy stood where the old man's words had pinned him.

"Come on, young fella," Gaspar said, walking backward to speak to him, "we'll miss the beginning of the movie. I hate that."

Billy had finished eating, and they were sitting in the dimness of the apartment, only the lamp in the corner lit. The old man had gone to the County Art Museum and had bought inexpensive prints — Max Ernst, Gerome, Richard Dadd, a subtle Feininger — which he had mounted in Insta-Frames. They sat in silence for a time, relaxing; then murmuring trivialities in a pleasant undertone.

Finally, Gaspar said, "I've been thinking a lot about my dying. I like what Woody Allen said."

Billy slid to a more comfortable position in the lounge. "What was that?"

"He said: I don't mind dying, I just don't want to be there when it happens."

Billy snickered.

"I feel something like that, Billy. I'm not afraid to go, but I don't want to leave Minna entirely. The times I spend with her, talking to her, well, it gives me the feeling we're still in touch. When I go, that's the end of Minna. She'll be well and truly dead. We never had any children, almost everyone who knew us is gone, no relatives. And we never did anything important that anyone would put in a record book, so that's the end of us. For me, I don't mind; but I wish there was someone who knew about Minna ... she was a remarkable person."

So Billy said, "Tell me. I'll remember for you."

Memories in no particular order. Some as strong as ropes that could pull the ocean ashore. Some that shimmered and swayed in the faintest breeze like spiderwebs. The entire person, all the little movements, that dimple that appeared when she was amused at something foolish he had said. Their youth together, their love, the procession of their days toward middle age. The small cheers and the pain of dreams never realized. So much about him, as he spoke of her. His voice soft and warm and filled with a longing so deep and true that he had to stop frequently because the words broke and would not come out till he had thought away some of the passion. He thought of her and was glad. He had gathered her together, all her dowry of love and taking care of him, her clothes and the way she wore them, her favorite knickknacks, a few clever remarks: and he packed it all up and delivered it to a new repository.

The very old man gave Minna to Billy Kinetta for safekeeping.

Dawn had come. The light filtering in through the blinds was saffron. "Thank you, Dad," Billy said. He could not name the feeling that had taken him hours earlier. But he said this: "I've never had to be responsible for anything, or anyone, in my whole life. I never belonged to anybody ... I don't know why. It didn't bother me, because I didn't know any other way to be."

Then his position changed, there in the lounge. He sat up in a way that Gaspar thought was important. As if Billy were about to open the secret box buried at his center. And Billy spoke so

softly the old man had to strain to hear him.

"I didn't even know him.

"We were defending the airfield at Danang. Did I tell you we were 1st Battalion, 9th Marines? Charlie was massing for a big push out of Quang Ngai province, south of us. Looked as if they were going to try to take the provincial capital. My rifle company was assigned to protect the perimeter. They kept sending in patrols to bite us. Every day we'd lose some poor bastard who scratched his head when he shouldn't of. It was June, late in June, cold and a lot of rain. The foxholes were hip-deep in water.

"Flares first. Our howitzers started firing. Then the sky was full of tracers, and I started to turn toward the bushes when I heard something coming, and these two main-force regulars in dark blue uniforms came toward me. I could see them so clearly. Long black hair. All crouched over. And they started firing. And that goddam carbine seized up, wouldn't fire; and I pulled out the banana clip, tried to slap in another, but they saw me and just turned a couple of AK-47's on me ... God, I remember everything slowed down ... I looked at those things, seven-point-six-two-millimeter assault rifles they were ... I got crazy for a second, tried to figure out in my own mind if they were Russian-made, or Chinese, or Czech, or North Korean. And it was so bright from the flares I could see them starting to squeeze off the rounds, and then from out of nowhere this lance corporal jumped out at them and yelled somedamnthng like, 'Hey, you VC fucks, looka here!' except it wasn't that ... I never could recall what he said actually ... and they turned to brace him ... and they opened him up like a baggie full of blood ... and he was all over me, and the bushes, and oh god there was pieces of him floating on the water I was standing in ... "

Billy was heaving breath with impossible weight. His hands moved in the air before his face without pattern or goal. He kept looking into far corners of the dawn-lit room as if special facts might present themselves to fill out the reasons behind what he was saying.

"Aw, geezus, he was floating on the water ... aw, Christ, he got in my boots!" Then a wail of pain so loud it blotted out the sound of traffic beyond the apartment; and he began to moan, but not cry; and the moaning kept on; and Gaspar came from the sofa and held him and said such words as it's all right, but they might not have been those words, or any words.

And pressed against the old man's shoulder, Billy Kinetta ran on only half sane: "He wasn't my friend, I never knew him, I'd never talked to him, but I'd seen him, he was just this guy, and there wasn't any reason to do that, he didn't know whether I was a good guy or a shit or anything, so why did he do that? He didn't need to do that. They wouldn't of seen him. He was dead before I killed them. He was gone already. I never got to say thank you or thank you or ... anything!

"Now he's in that grave, so I came here to live, so I can go there, but I try and try to say thank you, and he's dead, and he can't hear me, he can't hear anything, he's just down there, down in the ground, and I can't say thank you ... oh, geezus, geezus, why don't he hear me, I just want to say thanks ... "

Billy Kinetta wanted to assume the responsibility for saying thanks, but that was possible only on a night that would never come again; and this was the day.

Gaspar took him to the bedroom and put him down to sleep in exactly the same way one would soothe an old, sick dog.

Then he went to his sofa, and because it was the only thing he could imagine saying, he murmured, "He'll be all right, Minna. Really he will."

When Billy left for the 7-Eleven the next evening, Gaspar was gone. It was an alternate day, and that meant he was out at the cemetery. Billy fretted that he shouldn't be there alone, but the old man had a way of taking care of himself. Billy was not smiling as he thought of his friend, and the word friend echoed as he realized that, yes, this was his friend, truly and really his friend. He wondered how old Gaspar was, and how soon Billy Kinetta would be once again what he had always been: alone.

When he returned to the apartment at two-thirty, Gaspar was asleep, cocooned in his blanket

on the sofa. Billy went in and tried to sleep, but hours later, when sleep would not come, when thoughts of murky water and calcium night light on dark foliage kept him staring at the bedroom ceiling, he came out of the room for a drink of water. He wandered around the living room, not wanting to be by himself even if the only companionship in this sleepless night was breathing heavily, himself in sleep.

He stared out the window. Clouds lay in chiffon strips across the sky. The squealing of tires from the street.

Sighing, idle in his movement around the room, he saw the old man's pocket watch lying on the coffee table beside the sofa. He walked to the table. If the watch was still stopped at eleven o'clock, perhaps he would borrow it and have it repaired. It would be a nice thing to do for Gaspar. He loved that beautiful timepiece.

Billy bent to pick it up.

The watch, stopped at the V of eleven precisely, levitated at an angle, floating away from him.

Billy Kinetta felt a shiver travel down his back to burrow in at the base of his spine. He reached for the watch hanging in air before him. It floated away just enough that his fingers massaged empty space. He tried to catch it. The watch eluded him, lazily turning away like an opponent who knows he is in no danger of being struck from behind.

Then Billy realized Gaspar was awake. Turned away from the sofa, nonetheless he knew the old man was observing him. And the blissful floating watch.

He looked at Gaspar.

They did not speak for a long time.

Then: "I'm going back to sleep," Billy said. Quietly.

"I think you have some questions," Gaspar replied.

"Questions? No, of course not, Dad. Why in the world would I have questions? I'm still asleep." But that was not the truth, because he had not been asleep that night.

"Do you know what 'Gaspar' means? Do you remember the three wise men of the Bible, the Magi?"

"I don't want any frankincense and myrrh. I'm going back to bed. I'm going now. You see, I'm going right now."

"'Gaspar' means master of the treasure, keeper of the secrets, paladin of the palace." Billy was staring at him, not walking into the bedroom; just staring at him. As the elegant timepiece floated to the old man, who extended his hand palm-up to receive it. The watch nestled in his hand, unmoving, and it made no sound, no sound at all.

"You go back to bed. But will you go out to the cemetery with me tomorrow? It's important."

"Why?"

"Because I believe I'll be dying tomorrow."

It was a nice day, cool and clear. Not at all a day for dying, but neither had been many such days in Southeast Asia, and death had not been deterred.

They stood at Minna's gravesite, and Gaspar opened his shooting stick to form a seat, and he thrust the spike into the ground, and he settled onto it, and sighed, and said to Billy Kinetta, "I'm growing cold as that stone."

"Do you want my jacket?"

"No. I'm cold inside." He looked around at the sky, at the grass, at the rows of markers. "I've been responsible, for all of this, and more."

"You've said that before."

"Young fella, are you by any chance familiar, in your reading, with an old novel by James Hilton called *Lost Horizon*? Perhaps you saw the movie. It was a wonderful movie, actually much better than the book. Mr. Capra's greatest achievement. A human testament. Ronald Colman was superb. Do you know the story?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember the High Lama, played by Sam Jaffe? His name was Father Perrault?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember how he passed on the caretakership of that magical hidden world, Shangri-La, to Ronald Colman?"

"Yes, I remember that." Billy paused. "Then he died. He was very old, and he died."

Gaspar smiled up at Billy. "Very good, Billy. I knew you were a good boy. So now, if you remember all that, may I tell you a story? It's not a very long story."

Billy nodded, smiling at his friend.

"In 1582 Pope Gregory XIII decreed that the civilized world would no longer observe the Julian calendar. October 4th, 1582 was followed, the next day, by October 15th. Eleven days vanished from the world. One hundred and seventy years later, the British Parliament followed suit, and September 2nd, 1752 was followed, the next day, by September 14th. Why did he do that, the Pope?"

Billy was bewildered by the conversation. "Because he was bringing it into synch with the real world. The solstices and equinoxes. When to plant, when to harvest."

Gaspar wagged a finger at him with pleasure. "Excellent, young fella. And you're correct when you say Gregory abolished the Julian calendar because its error of one day in every one hundred and twenty-eight years had moved the vernal equinox to March 11th. That's what the history books say. It's what every history book says. But what if?"

"What if what? I don't know what you're talking about."

"What if: Pope Gregory had the knowledge revealed to him that he must readjust time in the minds of men? What if: the excess time in 1582. was eleven days and one hour? What if: he accounted for those eleven days, vanished those eleven days, but that one hour slipped free, was left loose to bounce through eternity? A very special hour ... an hour that must never be used ... an hour that must never toll. What if?"

Billy spread his hands. "What if, what if, what if! It's all just philosophy. It doesn't mean anything. Hours aren't real, time isn't something that you can bottle up. So what if there is an hour out there somewhere that ... "

And he stopped.

He grew tense, and leaned down to the old man. "The watch. Your watch. It doesn't work. It's stopped."

Gaspar nodded. "At eleven o'clock. My watch works; it keeps very special time, for one very special hour."

Billy touched Gaspar's shoulder. Carefully he asked, "Who are you, Dad?"

The old man did not smile as he said, "Gaspar. Keeper. Paladin. Guardian."

"Father Perrault was hundreds of years old."

Gaspar shook his head with a wistful expression on his old face. "I'm eighty-six years old, Billy. You asked me if I thought I was God. Not God, not Father Perrault, not an immortal, just an old man who will die too soon. Are you Ronald Colman?"

Billy nervously touched his lower lip with a finger. He looked at Gaspar as long as he could, then turned away. He walked off a few paces, stared at the barren trees. It seemed suddenly much chillier here in this place of entombed remembrances. From a distance he said, "But it's only ... what? A chronological convenience. Like daylight saving time; Spring forward, Fall back. We don't actually lose an hour; we get it back."

Gaspar stared at Minna's grave. "At the end of April I lost an hour. If I die now, I'll die an hour short in my life. I'll have been cheated out of one hour I want, Billy." He swayed toward all he had left of Minna. "One last hour I could have with my old girl. That's what I'm afraid of, Billy. I have that hour in my possession. I'm afraid I'll use it, god help me, I want so much to use it."

Billy came to him. Tense, and chilled, he said, "Why must that hour never toll?"

Gaspar drew a deep breath and tore his eyes away from the grave. His gaze locked with Billy's. And he told him.

The years, all the days and hours, exist. As solid and as real as mountains and oceans and men and women and the baobab tree. Look, he said, at the lines in my face and deny that time is real. Consider these dead weeds that were once alive and try to believe it's all just vapor or the mutual agreement of Popes and Caesars and young men like you.

"The lost hour must never come, Billy, for in that hour it all ends. The light, the wind, the stars, this magnificent open place we call the universe. It all ends, and in its place — waiting, always waiting — is eternal darkness. No new beginnings, no world without end, just the infinite emptiness."

And he opened his hand, which had been lying in his lap, and there, in his palm, rested the watch, making no sound at all, and stopped dead at eleven o'clock. "Should it strike twelve, Billy, eternal night falls; from which there is no recall."

There he sat, this very old man, just a perfectly normal old man. The most recent in the endless chain of keepers of the lost hour, descended in possession from Caesar and Pope Gregory XIII, down through the centuries of men and women who had served as caretakers of the excellent timepiece. And now he was dying, and now he wanted to cling to life as every man and woman clings to life no matter how awful or painful or empty, even if it is for one more hour. The suicide, falling from the bridge, at the final instant, tries to fly, tries to climb back up the sky. This weary old man, who only wanted to stay one brief hour more with Minna. Who was afraid that his love would cost the universe.

He looked at Billy, and he extended his hand with the watch waiting for its next paladin. So softly Billy could barely hear him, knowing that he was denying himself what he most wanted at this last place in his life, he whispered, "If I die without passing it on ... it will begin to tick."

"Not me," Billy said. "Why did you pick me? I'm no one special. I'm not someone like you. I run an all-night service mart. There's nothing special about me the way there is about you! I'm not Ronald Colman! I don't want to be responsible, I've never been responsible!"

Gaspar smiled gently. "You've been responsible for me."

Billy's rage vanished. He looked wounded.

"Look at us, Billy. Look at what color you are; and look at what color I am. You took me in as a friend. I think of you as worthy, Billy. Worthy."

They remained there that way, in silence, as the wind rose. And finally, in a timeless time, Billy nodded.

Then the young man said, "You won't be losing Minna, Dad. Now you'll go to the place where she's been waiting for you, just as she was when you first met her. There's a place where we find everything we've ever lost through the years."

"That's good, Billy, that you tell me that. I'd like to believe it, too. But I'm a pragmatist. I believe what exists ... like rain and Minna's grave and the hours that pass that we can't see, but they are. I'm afraid, Billy. I'm afraid this will be the last time I can speak to her. So I ask a favor. As payment, in return for my life spent protecting the watch.

"I ask for one minute of the hour, Billy. One minute to call her back, so we can stand face-to-face and I can touch her and say goodbye. You'll be the new protector of this watch, Billy, so I ask you please, just let me steal one minute."

Billy could not speak. The look on Gaspar's face was without horizon, empty as tundra, bottomless. The child left alone in darkness; the pain of eternal waiting. He knew he could never deny this old man, no matter what he asked, and in the silence he heard a voice say: "No!" And it was his own.

He had spoken without conscious volition. Strong and determined, and without the slightest room for reversal. If a part of his heart had been swayed by compassion, that part had been instantly overridden. No. A final, unshakable no.

For an instant Gaspar looked crestfallen. His eyes clouded with tears; and Billy felt something twist and break within himself at the sight. He knew he had hurt the old man. Quickly, but softly, he said urgently, "You know that would be wrong, Dad. We mustn't ... "

Gaspar said nothing. Then he reached out with his free hand and took Billy's. It was an affectionate touch. "That was the last test, young fella. Oh, you know I've been testing you, don't you? This important item couldn't go to just anyone.

"And you passed the test, my friend: my last, best friend. When I said I could bring her back from where she's gone, here in this place we've both come to so often, to talk to someone lost to us, I knew you would understand that anyone could be brought back in that stolen minute. I knew you wouldn't use it for yourself, no matter how much you wanted it; but I wasn't sure that as much as you like me, it might not sway you. But you wouldn't even give it to me, Billy."

He smiled up at him, his eyes now clear and steady.

"I'm content, Billy. You needn't have worried. Minna and I don't need that minute. But if you're to carry on for me, I think you do need it. You're in pain, and that's no good for someone who carries this watch. You've got to heal, Billy.

"So I give you something you would never take for yourself. I give you a going-away present ... "

And he started the watch, whose ticking was as loud and as clear as a baby's first sound; and the sweep-second hand began to move away from eleven o'clock.

Then the wind rose, and the sky seemed to cloud over, and it grew colder, with a remarkable silver-blue mist that rolled across the cemetery; and though he did not see it emerge from that grave at a distance far to the right, Billy Kinetta saw a shape move toward him. A soldier in the uniform of a day past, and his rank was Lance Corporal. He came toward Billy Kinetta, and Billy went to meet him as Gaspar watched.

They stood together and Billy spoke to him. And the man whose name Billy had never known when he was alive, answered. And then he faded, as the seconds ticked away. Faded, and faded, and was gone. And the silver-blue mist rolled through them, and past them, and was gone; and the soldier was gone.

Billy stood alone.

When he turned back to look across the grounds to his friend, he saw that Gaspar had fallen from the shooting stick. He lay on the ground. Billy rushed to him, and fell to his knees and lifted him onto his lap. Gaspar was still.

"Oh, god, Dad, you should have heard what he said. Oh, geez, he let me go. He let me go so I didn't even have to say I was sorry. He told me he didn't even see me in that foxhole. He never knew he'd saved my life. I said thank you and he said no, thank you, that he hadn't died for nothing. Oh, please, Dad, please don't be dead yet. I want to tell you ... "

And, as it sometimes happens, rarely but wonderfully, sometimes they come back for a moment, for an instant before they go, the old man, the very old man, opened his eyes, just before going on his way, and he looked through the dimming light at his friend, and he said, "May I remember you to my old girl, Billy?"

And his eyes closed again, after only a moment; and his caretakership was at an end; as his hand opened and the most excellent timepiece, now stopped again at one minute past eleven, floated from his palm and waited till Billy Kinetta extended his hand; and then it floated down and lay there silently, making no sound, no sound at all. Safe. Protected.

There in the place where all lost things returned, the young man sat on the cold ground, rocking the body of his friend. And he was in no hurry to leave. There was time.

Like a wind crying endlessly through the universe, Time carries away the names and the deeds of conquerors and commoners alike. And all that we were, all that remains, is in the memories of those who cared we came this way for a brief moment.



# The Other Place - Mary Gaitskill

(2011)

My son, Douglas, loves to play with toy guns. He is thirteen. He loves video games in which people get killed. He loves violence on TV, especially if it's funny. How did this happen? The way everything does, of course. One thing follows another, naturally.

Naturally, he looks like me: shorter than average, with a fine build, hazel eyes, and light-brown hair. Like me, he has a speech impediment and a condition called "essential tremor" that causes involuntary hand movements, which make him look more fragile than he is. He hates reading, but he is bright. He is interested in crows because he heard on a nature show that they are one of the only species that are more intelligent than they need to be to survive. He does beautiful, precise drawings of crows.

Mostly, though, he draws pictures of men holding guns. Or men hanging from nooses. Or men cutting up other men with chainsaws — in these pictures there are no faces, just figures holding chainsaws and figures being cut in two, with blood spraying out.

My wife, Marla, says that this is fine, as long as we balance it out with other things — family dinners, discussions of current events, sports, exposure to art and nature. But I don't know. Douglas and I were sitting together in the living room last week, half watching the TV and checking e-mail, when an advertisement for a movie flashed across the screen: it was called "Captivity" and the ad showed a terrified blond girl in a cage, a tear running down her face. Doug didn't speak or move. But I could feel his fascination, the suddenly deepening quality of it. And I don't doubt that he could feel mine. We sat there and felt it together.

And then she was there, the woman in the car. In the room with my son, her black hair, her hard laugh, the wrinkled skin under her hard eyes, the sudden blood filling the white of her blue eye. There was excited music on the TV and then the ad ended. My son's attention went elsewhere; she lingered.

When I was a kid, I liked walking through neighborhoods alone, looking at houses, seeing what people did to make them homes: the gardens, the statuary, the potted plants, the wind chimes. Late at night, if I couldn't sleep, I would sometimes slip out my bedroom window and just spend an hour or so walking around. I loved it, especially in late spring, when it was starting to be warm and there were night sounds — crickets, birds, the whirring of bats, the occasional whooshing car, some lonely person's TV. I loved the mysterious darkness of the trees, the way they moved against the sky if there was wind — big and heavy movements, but delicate, too, in all the subtle, reactive leaves. In that soft, blurry weather, people slept with their windows open; it was a small town and they weren't afraid. Some houses — I'm thinking of two in particular, where the Legges and the Myers lived — had yards that I would actually hang around in at night. Once, when I was sitting on the Legges' front porch, thinking about stealing a piece of their garden statuary, their cat came and sat with me. I petted him and when I got up and went for the statuary he followed me with his tail up. The Legges' statues were elves, not corny, cute elves but sinister, wicked-looking elves, and I thought that one would look good in my room. But they were too heavy, so I just moved them around the yard.

I did things like that, dumb pranks that could only irritate those who noticed them: rearranging statuary, leaving weird stuff in mailboxes, looking into windows to see where people had dinner or left their personal things — or, in the case of the Legges, where their daughter, Jenna, slept. She was on the ground floor, her bed so close to the window that I could watch her chest rise and fall the way I watched the grass on their lawn stirring in the wind. The worst thing I did, probably, was put a giant marble in the Myers' gas tank, which could've really caused a problem if it had rolled over the gas hole while one of the Myers was driving on the highway, but

I guess it never did.

Mostly, though, I wasn't interested in causing that kind of problem. I just wanted to sit and watch, to touch other people's things, to drink in their lives. I suspect that it's some version of these impulses that makes me the most successful real-estate agent in the Hudson Valley now: the ability to know what physical objects and surroundings will most please a person's sense of identity and make him feel at home.

I wish that Doug had this sensitivity to the physical world, and the ability to drink from it. I've tried different things with him: I used to throw the ball with him out in the yard, but he got tired of that; he hates hiking and likes biking only if he has to get someplace. What's working now a little bit is fishing, fly-fishing hip deep in the Hudson. An ideal picture of normal childhood.

I believe I had a normal childhood. But you have to go pretty far afield to find something people would call abnormal these days. My parents were divorced, and then my mother had boyfriends — but this was true of about half the kids I knew. She and my father fought, in the house, when they were together, and they went on fighting, on the phone, after they separated — loud, screaming fights sometimes. I didn't love it, but I understood it; people fight. I was never afraid that my father was going to hurt her, or me. I had nightmares occasionally, in which he turned into a murderer and came after me, chasing me, getting closer, until I fell down, unable to make my legs move right. But I've read that this is one of those primitive fears which everybody secretly has; it bears little relation to what actually happens.

What actually happened: he forced me to play golf with him for hours when I visited on Saturdays, even though it seemed only to make him miserable. He'd curse himself if he missed a shot and then that would make him miss another one and he'd curse himself more. He'd whisper, "Oh, God," and wipe his face if anything went wrong, or even if it didn't, as if just being there were an ordeal, and then I had to feel sorry for him. He'd make these noises sometimes, painful grunts when he picked up the sack of clubs, and it put me on edge and even disgusted me.

Now, of course, I see it differently. I remembered those Saturdays when I was first teaching Doug how to cast, out in the back yard. I wasn't much good myself yet, and I got tangled up in the bushes a couple of times. I could feel the boy's flashing impatience; I felt my age, too. Then we went to work disentangling and he came closer to help me. We linked in concentration, and it occurred to me that the delicacy of the line and the fine movements needed to free it appealed to him the way drawing appealed to him, because of their beauty and precision.

Besides, he was a natural. When it was his turn to try, he kept his wrist stiff and gave the air a perfect little punch and *zip* — great cast. The next time, he got tangled up, but he was speedy about getting unstuck so that he could do it again. Even when the tremor acted up. Even when I lectured him on the laws of physics. It was a good day.

There is one not-normal thing you could point to in my childhood, which is that my mother, earlier in her life, before I was born, had occasionally worked as a prostitute. But I don't think that counts, because I didn't know about it as a child. I didn't learn about it until six years ago, when I was thirty-eight and my mother was sick with a strain of flu that had killed a lot of people, most of them around her age. She was in the hospital and she was feverish and thought she was dying. She held my hand as she told me, her eyes sad half-moons, her lips still full and provocative. She said that she wanted me to know because she thought it might help me to understand some of the terrible things I'd heard my father say to her — things I mostly hadn't even listened to. "It wasn't anything really bad," she said. "I just needed the money sometimes, between jobs. It's not like I was a drug addict — it was just hard to make it in Manhattan. I only worked for good escort places. I never had a pimp or went out on the street. I never did anything perverted — I didn't have to. I was beautiful. They'd pay just to be with me."

Later, when she didn't die, she was embarrassed that she'd told me. She laughed that raucous laugh of hers and said, "Way to go, Marcy! On your deathbed, tell your son you're a whore and then don't die!"

"It's O.K.," I said.

And it was. It frankly was not really even much of a surprise. It was her vanity that disgusted me, the way she undercut the confession with a preening, maudlin joke. I could not respect that even then.

I don't think that my mom's confession, or whatever it may have implied, had anything to do with what I think of as "it." When I was growing up, there was, after all, no evidence of her past, nothing that could have affected me. But suddenly, when I was about fourteen, I started getting excited by the thought of girls being hurt. Or killed. A horror movie would be on TV, a girl in shorts would be running and screaming with some guy chasing her, and to me it was like porn. Even a scene where a sexy girl was getting her legs torn off by a shark — bingo. It was like pushing a button. My mom would be in the kitchen making dinner and talking on the phone, stirring and striding around with the phone tucked between her shoulder and her chin. Outside, cars would go by, or a dog would run across the lawn. My homework would be slowly getting done in my lap while this sexy girl was screaming "God help me!" and having her legs torn off. And I would go invisibly into an invisible world that I called "the other place." Where I sometimes passively watched a killer and other times became one.

It's true that I started drinking and drugging right about then. All my friends did. My mom tried to lay down the law, but I found ways around her. We'd go into the woods, me and usually Chet Wotzak and Jim Bonham, and we'd smoke weed we'd got from Chet's brother, a local dealer named Dan, and drink cheap wine. We could sometimes get Chet's dad to lend us a gun — in my memory he had an AK-47, though I don't know how that's possible — and we'd go out to a local junk yard and take turns shooting up toilets, the long tubes of fluorescent lights, whatever was there. Then we'd go to Chet's house, up to his room, where we'd play loud music and tell dumb jokes and watch music videos in which disgusting things happened: snakes crawled over a little boy's sleeping face and he woke up being chased by a psychopath in a huge truck; a girl was turned into a pig and then a cake and then the lead singer bit off her head.

You might think that the videos and the guns were part of it, that they encouraged my violent thoughts. But Chet and Jim were watching and doing the same things and they were not like me. They said mean things about girls, and they were disrespectful sometimes, but they didn't want to hurt them, not really. They wanted to touch them and be touched by them; they wanted that more than anything. You could hear it in their voices and see it in their eyes, no matter what they said.

So I would sit with them and yet be completely apart from them, talking and laughing about normal things in a dark mash of music and snakes and children running from psychos and girls being eaten — images that took me someplace my friends couldn't see, although it was right there in the room with us.

It was the same at home. My mother made dinner, talked on the phone, fought with my dad, had guys over. Our cat licked itself and ate from its dish. Around us, people cared about one another. Jenna Legge slept peacefully. But in the other place sexy girls — and sometimes ugly girls or older women — ran and screamed for help as an unstoppable, all-powerful killer came closer and closer. There was no school or sports or mom or dad or caring, and it was great.

I've told my wife about most of this, the drinking, the drugs, the murder fantasies. She understands, because she has her past, too: extreme sex, vandalizing cars, talking vulnerable girls into getting more drunk than they should on behalf of some guy. There's a picture of her and another girl in bathing suits, the other girl chugging a beer that is being held by a guy so that it goes straight down her throat as her head is tipped way back. Another guy is watching, and my smiling wife is holding the girl's hand. It's a picture that foreshadows some kind of cruelty or misery, or maybe just a funny story to tell about throwing up in the bathroom later. Privately, I see no similarity between it and my death obsession. For my wife, the connection is drugs and alcohol; she believes that we were that way because we were both addicts expressing our pain and anger through violent fantasies and blind actions. The first time I took Doug out to fish, it

was me on the hot golf course all over again. As we walked to the lake in our heavy boots and clothes, I could feel his irritation at the bugs and the brightness, the squalor of nature in his fastidious eyes. I told him that fly-fishing was like driving a sports car, as opposed to the Subaru of rod and reel. I went on about how anything beautiful had to be conquered. He just turned down his mouth.

He got interested, though, in tying on the fly; the simple elegance of the knot (the "fish-killer") intrigued him. He laid it down the first time, too, placing the backcast perfectly in a space between trees. He gazed at the brown, light-wrinkled water with satisfaction. But when I put my hand on his shoulder I could feel him inwardly pull away.

As I got older, my night walks became rarer, with a different, sadder feeling to them. I would go out when I was not drunk or high but in a quiet mood, wanting to be somewhere that was neither the normal social world nor the other place. A world where I could sit and feel the power of nature come up through my feet, and be near other people without them being near me. Where I could believe in and for a moment possess the goodness of their lives. Jenna Legge still slept on the ground floor and sometimes I would look in her window and watch her breathe, and, if I was lucky, see one of her developing breasts swell out of her nightgown.

I never thought of killing Jenna. I didn't think about killing anyone I actually knew — not the girls I didn't like at school or the few I had sex with. The first times I had sex, I was so caught up in the feeling of it that I didn't even think about killing — I didn't think about anything at all. But I didn't have sex much. I was small, awkward, too quiet; I had that tremor. My expression must've been strange as I sat in class, feeling hidden in my other place, but outwardly visible to whoever looked — not that many did.

Then one day I was with Chet's brother, Dan, on a drug drop; he happened to be giving me a ride because his drop, at the local college, was on the way to wherever I was going. It was a guy buying, but, when we arrived, a girl opened the door. She was pretty and she knew it, but whatever confidence that knowledge gave her was superficial. We stayed for a while and smoked the product with her and her boyfriend. The girl sat very erect and talked too much, as if she were smart, but there was a question at the end of everything she said. When we left, Dan said, "That's the kind of lady I'd like to slap in the face." I asked, "Why?" But I knew. I don't remember what he said, because it didn't matter. I already knew. And later, instead of making up a girl, I thought of that one.

I forgot to mention: one night when I was outside Jenna's window, she opened her eyes and looked right at me. I was stunned, so stunned that I couldn't move. There was nothing between us but a screen with a hole in it. She looked at me and blinked. I said, "Hi." I held my breath; I had not spoken to her since third grade. But she just sighed, rolled over, and lay still. I stood there trembling for a long moment. And then, slowly and carefully, I walked through the yard and onto the sidewalk, back to my house.

I cut school the next day and the next, because I was scared that Jenna had told everybody and that I would be mocked. But eventually it became clear that nobody was saying anything, so I went back. In class, I looked at Jenna cautiously, then gratefully. But she did not return my look. At first, this moved me, made me consider her powerful. I tried insistently to catch her eye, to let her know what I felt. Finally our eyes met, and I realized that she didn't understand why I was looking at her. I realized that although her eyes had been open that night, she had still been asleep. She had looked right at me, but she had not seen me at all.

And so one night, or early morning, really, I got out of bed, into my mother's car, and drove to the campus to look for her — the college girl.

The campus was in a heavily wooded area bordering a nature preserve. The dorms were widely scattered, though some, resembling midsized family homes, were clustered together. The girl lived in one of those, but while I remembered the general location I couldn't be sure which one it was. I couldn't see into any of the windows, because even the open ones had blinds pulled

down. While I was standing indecisively on a paved path between dorms, I saw two guys coming toward me. Quickly, I walked off into a section of trees and underbrush. I moved carefully through the thicket, coming to a wide field that led toward the nature preserve. The darkness deepened as I got farther from the dorms. I could feel things coming up from the ground — teeth and claws, eyes, crawling legs, and brainless eating mouths. A song played in my head, an enormously popular, romantic song about love and death that had supposedly made a bunch of teen-agers kill themselves.

Kids still listen to that song. I once heard it coming from the computer in our family room. When I went in and looked over Doug's hunched shoulder, I realized that the song was being used as the soundtrack for a graphic video about a little boy in a mask murdering people. It was spellbinding, the yearning, eerie harmony of the song juxtaposed with terrified screaming; I told Doug to turn it off. He looked pissed, but he did it and went slumping out the door. I found it and watched it by myself later.

I went back to the campus many times. I went to avoid my mother as much as anything. Her new boyfriend was an asshole, and she whined when he was around. When he wasn't around, she whined about him on the phone. Sometimes she called two people in a row to whine about exactly the same things that he'd said or done. Even when I played music loud so I couldn't hear her, I could *feel* her. When that happened, I'd leave my music on so that she'd think I was still in my room and I'd go to the campus. I'd follow lone female students as closely as I could, and I'd feel the other place running against the membrane of the world, almost touching it. Why does it make sense to put romantic music together with a story about a little boy murdering people? Because it does make sense — only I don't know how. It seems dimly to have to do with justice, with some wrong being avenged, but what? The hurts of childhood? The stupidity of life? The kid doesn't seem to be having fun. Random murder just seems like a job he has to do. But why? Soon enough I realized that the college campus was the wrong place to think about making it real. It wasn't an environment I could control; there were too many variables. I needed to get the girl someplace private. I needed to have certain things there. I needed to have a gun. I could find a place; there were deserted places. I could get a gun from Chet's house; I knew where his father kept his. But the girl?

Then, while I was in the car with my mom one day, we saw a guy hitchhiking. He was middle-aged and fucked-up-looking, and my mom — we were stopped at a light — remarked that nobody in their right mind would pick him up. Two seconds later, somebody pulled over for him. My mom laughed.

I started hitchhiking. Most of the people who picked me up were men, but there were women, too. No one was scared of me. I was almost eighteen by then, but I was still small and quiet-looking. Women picked me up because they were concerned about me.

I didn't really plan to do it. I just wanted to feel the gun in my pocket and look at the woman and know that I *could* do it. There was this one — a thirtyish blonde with breasts that I could see through her open coat. But then she said that she was pregnant and I started thinking about what if I was killing the baby?

Doug had a lot of nightmares when he was a baby, by which I mean between the ages of two and four. When he cried out in his sleep, it was usually Marla who went to him. But one night she was sick and I told her to stay in bed while I went to comfort the boy. He was still crying "Mommy!" when I sat on the bed, and I felt his anxiety at seeing me instead of his mother, felt the moment of hesitation in his body before he came into my arms, vibrating rather than trembling, sweating and fragrant with emotion. He had dreamed that he was home alone and it was dark, and he was calling for his mother, but she wasn't there. "Daddy, Daddy," he wept, "there was a sick lady with red eyes and Mommy wouldn't come. Where is Mommy?"

That may've been the first time I truly remembered her, the woman in the car. It was so intense a moment that in a bizarre intersection of impossible feelings I got an erection with my

crying child in my arms. But it lasted only a moment. I picked Doug up and carried him into our bedroom so that he could see his mother and nestle against her. I stayed awake nearly all night watching them.

The day it happened was a bright day, but windy and cold, and my mom would not shut up. I just wanted to watch a movie, but even with the TV turned up loud — I guess that's why she kept talking; she didn't think I could hear her — I couldn't blot out the sound of her yakking about how ashamed this asshole made her feel. I whispered, "If you're so ashamed, why do you talk about it?" She said, "It all goes back to being fucking molested." She lowered her voice; the only words I caught were "fucking corny." I went out into the hallway to listen. "The worst of it was that he wouldn't look at me," she said. I could almost hear her pacing around, the phone tucked against her shoulder. "That's why I fall for these passive-aggressive types who turn me on and then make me feel ashamed." Whoever she was talking to must have said something funny then, because she laughed. I left the TV on and walked out. I took the gun, but more for protection against perverts than the other thing.

I gave my boy that dream as surely as if I'd handed it to him. But I've given him a lot of other things, too. The first time he caught a fish he responded to my encouraging words with a bright glance that I will never forget. We let that one go, but only after he had held it in his hands, cold and quick, muscle with eyes and a heart, scales specked with yellow and red, and one tiny orange fin. Then the next one, bigger, leaping to break the rippling murk — I said, "Don't point the rod at the fish. Keep the tip up, keep it up" — and he listened to me and he brought it in. There is a picture of it on the corkboard in his room, the fish in the net, the lure bristling in its crude mouth. I have another picture, too, of him smiling triumphantly, holding it in his hands, its shining, still living body fully extended.

She was older than I'd wanted, forty or so, but still good-looking. She had a voice that was strong and lifeless at the same time. She had black hair and she wore tight black pants. She did not have a wedding ring, which meant that maybe no one would miss her. She picked me up on a lightly travelled forty-five-mile-an-hour road. She was listening to a talk show on the radio and she asked if I wanted to hear music instead. I said no, I liked talk shows.

"Yeah?" she said. "Why?"

"Because I'm interested in current events."

"I'm not," she said. "I just listen to this shit because the voices relax me. I don't really care what they're talking about."

They were talking about a war somewhere. Bombs were exploding in markets where people bought vegetables; somebody's legs had been blown off. We turned onto a road with a few cars, but none close to us.

"You don't care?"

"No, why should I? Oh, about this?" She paused. There was something about a little boy being rushed to an overcrowded hospital. "Yeah, that's bad. But it's not like we can do anything about it." On the radio, foreign people cried.

I took the gun out of my pocket.

I said, "Do you have kids?"

"No," she said. "Why?"

"Take me to Old Post Road. I'm going to the abandoned house there."

"I'm not going by there, but I can get you pretty close. So why do you care about current events? I didn't give a shit at your age."

"Take me there or I'll kill you."

She cocked her head and wrinkled her brow, as if she were trying to be sure she'd heard right. Then she looked down at the gun, and cut her eyes up at me; quickly, she looked back at the road. The car picked up speed.

"Take the next right or you'll die." My voice at that moment came not from me but from the

other place. My whole body felt like an erection. She hit the right-turn signal. There was a long moment as we approached the crucial road. The voices on the radio roared ecstatically.

She pulled over to the shoulder.

"What are you doing?"

She put the car in park.

"Turn right or you die!"

She unbuckled her seat belt and turned to face me. "I'm ready," she said. She leaned back and gripped the steering wheel with one hand, as if to steady herself. With her free hand, she tapped herself between the eyes — bright, hot blue, rimmed with red. "Put it here," she said. "Go for it."

A car went by. Somebody in the passenger seat glanced at us blankly. "I don't want to do it here. There's witnesses. You need to take me to the place."

"What witnesses? That car's not stopping — nobody's going to stop unless the emergency lights are on and they're not, look."

"But if I shoot you in the head the blood will spray on the window and somebody could see." It was my own voice again: the power was gone. The people on the radio kept talking. Suddenly I felt my heart beating.

"O.K., then do it here." She opened her jacket to show me her chest. "Nobody'll hear. When you're done you can move me to the passenger seat and drive the car wherever."

"Get into the passenger seat now and I'll do it."

She laughed, hard. Her eyes were crazy. They were crazy the way an animal can be crazy in a tiny cage. "Hell, no. I'm not going to your place with you. You do it here, motherfucker."

I realized then that her hair was a wig, and a cheap one. For some reason, that made her seem even crazier. I held my gun hand against my body to hide the tremor.

"Come on, honey," she said. "Go for it."

Like a star, a red dot appeared in the white of her left eye. The normal place and the other place were turning into the same place, quick but slow, the way a car accident is quick but slow. I stared. The blood spread raggedly across her eye. She shifted her eyes from my face to a spot somewhere outside the car and fixed them there. I fought the urge to turn and see what she was looking at. She shifted her eyes again. She looked me deep in the face.

"Well?" she said. "Are you going to do it or not?"

Words appeared in my head, like a sign reading "I Don't Want To."

She leaned forward and turned on the emergency lights. "Get out of my car," she said quietly. "You're wasting my time."

As soon as I got out, she hit the gas and burned rubber. I walked into the field next to the road, without an idea of where I might go. I realized after she was gone that she might call the police, but I felt in my gut that she would not — in the other place there are no police, and she was from the other place.

Still, as I walked I took the bullets out of the gun and scattered them, kicking snow over them and stamping it down. I walked a long time, shivering horribly. I came across a drainage pipe and threw the empty gun into it. I thought, I should've gut-shot her — that's what I should've done. And then got her to the abandoned house. I should've gut-shot the bitch. But I knew why I hadn't. She'd been shot already, from the inside. If she had been somebody different I might actually have done it. But somehow the wig-haired woman had changed the channel and I don't even know if she'd meant to.

The fly bobbing on the brown, gentle water. The long grasses so green that they cast a fine, bright green on the brown water. The primitive fish mouth straining for water and finding it as my son releases it in the shallows. Its murky vanishing.

The blood bursting in her eye, poor woman, poor mother. My mother died of colon cancer just nine months ago. Shortly after that, it occurred to me that the woman had been wearing that awful wig because she was sick and undergoing chemo. Though of course I don't know.

The hurts of childhood that must be avenged: so small and so huge. Before I grew up and stopped thinking about her, I thought about that woman a lot. About what would've happened if I'd got her there, to the abandoned house. I don't remember anymore the details of these thoughts, only that they were distorted, swollen, blurred: broken face, broken voice, broken body left dying on the floor, watching me go with dimming, despairing eyes.

These pictures are faded now and far away. But they can still make me feel something.

The second time I put my hand on Doug's shoulder, he didn't move away inside; he was too busy tuning in to the line and the lure. Somewhere in him is the other place. It's quiet now, but I know it's there. I also know that he won't be alone with it. He won't know that I'm there with him, because we will never speak of it. But I will be there. He will not be alone with that.



## Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong - Tim O'Brien

(1989)

Vietnam was full of strange stories, some improbable, some well beyond that, but the stories that will last forever are those that swirl back and forth across the border between trivia and bedlam, the mad and the mundane. This one keeps returning to me. I heard it from Rat Kiley, who swore up and down to its truth, although in the end, I'll admit, that doesn't amount to much of a warranty. Among the men in Alpha Company, Rat had a reputation for exaggeration and overstatement, a compulsion to rev up the facts, and for most of us it was normal procedure to discount sixty or seventy percent of anything he had to say. If Rat told you, for example, that he'd slept with four girls one night, you could figure it was about a girl and a half. It wasn't a question of deceit. Just the opposite: he wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt. For Rat Kiley, I think, facts were formed by sensation, not the other way around, and when you listened to one of his stories, you'd find yourself performing rapid calculations in your head, subtracting superlatives, figuring the square root of an absolute and then multiplying by maybe.

Still, with this particular story, Rat never backed down. He claimed to have witnessed the incident with his own eyes, and I remember how upset he became one morning when Mitchell Sanders challenged him on its basic premise.

"It can't happen," Sanders said. "Nobody ships his honey over to Nam. It don't ring true. I mean, you just can't import your own personal poontang."

Rat shook his head. "I saw it, man. I was right there. This guy did it."

"His girlfriend?"

"Straight on. It's a fact." Rat's voice squeaked a little. He paused and looked at his hands. "Listen, the guy sends her the money. Flies her over. This cute blonde — just a kid, just barely out of high school — she shows up with a suitcase and one of those plastic cosmetic bags. Comes right out to the boonies. I swear to God, man, she's got on culottes. White culottes and this sexy pink sweater. There she is."

I remember Mitchell Sanders folding his arms. He looked over at me for a second, not quite grinning, not saying a word, but I could read the amusement in his eyes.

Rat saw it, too.

"No lie," he muttered. "Culottes."

When he first arrived in-country, before joining Alpha Company, Rat had been assigned to a small medical detachment up in the mountains west of Chu Lai, near the village of Tra Bong, where along with eight other enlisted men he ran an aid station that provided basic emergency and trauma care. Casualties were flown in by helicopter, stabilized, then shipped out to hospitals in Chu Lai or Danang. It was gory work, Rat said, but predictable. Amputations, mostly — legs and feet. The area was heavily mined, thick with Bouncing Betties and homemade booby traps. For a medic, though, it was ideal duty, and Rat counted himself lucky. There was plenty of cold beer, three hot meals a day, a tin roof over his head. No humping at all. No officers, either. You could let your hair grow, he said, and you didn't have to polish your boots or snap off salutes or put up with the usual rear-echelon nonsense. The highest ranking NCO was an E-6 named Eddie Diamond, whose pleasures ran from dope to Darvon, and except for a rare field inspection there was no such thing as military discipline.

As Rat described it, the compound was situated at the top of a flat-crested hill along the northern outskirts of Tra Bong. At one end was a small dirt helipad; at the other end, in a rough semicircle, the mess hall and medical hootches overlooked a river called the Song Tra Bong. Surrounding the place were tangled rolls of concertina wire, with bunkers and reinforced firing

positions at staggered intervals, and base security was provided by a mixed unit of RFs, PFs, and ARVN infantry. Which is to say virtually no security at all. As soldiers, the ARVNs were useless; the Ruff-and-Puffs were outright dangerous. And yet even with decent troops the place was clearly indefensible. To the north and west the country rose up in thick walls of wilderness, triple-canopied jungle, mountains unfolding into higher mountains, ravines and gorges and fast-moving rivers and waterfalls and exotic butterflies and steep cliffs and smoky little hamlets and great valleys of bamboo and elephant grass. Originally, in the early 1960s, the place had been set up as a Special Forces outpost, and when Rat Kiley arrived nearly a decade later, a squad of six Green Berets still used the compound as a base of operations. The Greenies were not social animals. Animals, Rat said, but far from social. They had their own hootch at the edge of the perimeter, fortified with sandbags and a metal fence, and except for the bare essentials they avoided contact with the medical detachment. Secretive and suspicious, loners by nature, the six Greenies would sometimes vanish for days at a time, or even weeks, then late in the night they would just as magically reappear, moving like shadows through the moonlight, filing in silently from the dense rain forest off to the west. Among the medics there were jokes about this, but no one asked questions.

While the outpost was isolated and vulnerable, Rat said, he always felt a curious sense of safety there. Nothing much ever happened. The place was never mortared, never taken under fire, and the war seemed to be somewhere far away. On occasion, when casualties came in, there were quick spurts of activity, but otherwise the days flowed by without incident, a smooth and peaceful time. Most mornings were spent on the volleyball court. In the heat of midday the men would head for the shade, lazing away the long afternoons, and after sundown there were movies and card games and sometimes all-night drinking sessions.

It was during one of those late nights that Eddie Diamond first brought up the tantalizing possibility. It was an offhand comment. A joke, really. What they should do, Eddie said, was pool some bucks and bring in a few mama-sans from Saigon, spice things up, and after a moment one of the men laughed and said, "Our own little EM club," and somebody else said, "Hey, yeah, we pay our fuckin' dues, don't we?" It was nothing serious. Just passing time, playing with the possibilities, and so for a while they tossed the idea around, how you could actually get away with it, no officers or anything, nobody to clamp down, then they dropped the subject and moved on to cars and baseball.

Later in the night, though, a young medic named Mark Fossie kept coming back to the subject.

"Look, if you think about it," he said, "it's not that crazy. You could actually do it."

"Do what?" Rat said.

"You know. Bring in a girl. I mean, what's the problem?"

Rat shrugged. "Nothing. A war."

"Well, see, that's the thing," Mark Fossie said. "No war *here*. You could really do it. A pair of solid brass balls, that's all you'd need."

There was some laughter, and Eddie Diamond told him he'd best strap down his dick, but Fossie just frowned and looked at the ceiling for a while and then went off to write a letter.

Six weeks later his girlfriend showed up.

The way Rat told it, she came in by helicopter along with the daily resupply shipment out of Chu Lai. A tall, big-boned blonde. At best, Rat said, she was seventeen years old, fresh out of Cleveland Heights Senior High. She had long white legs and blue eyes and a complexion like strawberry ice cream. Very friendly, too.

At the helipad that morning, Mark Fossie grinned and put his arm around her and said, "Guys, this is Mary Anne."

The girl seemed tired and somewhat lost, but she smiled.

There was a heavy silence. Eddie Diamond, the ranking NCO, made a small motion with his

hand, and some of the others murmured a word or two, then they watched Mark Fossie pick up her suitcase and lead her by the arm down to the hootches. For a long while the men were quiet.

"That fucker," somebody finally said.

At evening chow Mark Fossie explained how he'd set it up. It was expensive, he admitted, and the logistics were complicated, but it wasn't like going to the moon. Cleveland to Los Angeles, LA to Bangkok, Bangkok to Saigon. She'd hopped a C-130 up to Chu Lai and stayed overnight at the USO and the next morning hooked a ride west with the resupply chopper.

"A cinch," Fossie said, and gazed down at his pretty girlfriend. "Thing is, you just got to *want* it enough."

Mary Anne Bell and Mark Fossie had been sweethearts since grammar school. From the sixth grade on they had known for a fact that someday they would be married, and live in a fine gingerbread house near Lake Erie, and have three healthy yellow-haired children, and grow old together, and no doubt die in each other's arms and be buried in the same walnut casket. That was the plan. They were very much in love, full of dreams, and in the ordinary flow of their lives the whole scenario might well have come true.

On the first night they set up house in one of the bunkers along the perimeter, near the Special Forces hootch, and over the next two weeks they stuck together like a pair of high school steadies. It was almost disgusting, Rat said, the way they mooned over each other. Always holding hands, always laughing over some private joke. All they needed, he said, were a couple of matching sweaters. But among the medics there was some envy. It was Vietnam, after all, and Mary Anne Bell was an attractive girl. Too wide in the shoulders, maybe, but she had terrific legs, a bubbly personality, a happy smile. The men genuinely liked her. Out on the volleyball court she wore cut-off blue jeans and a black swimsuit top, which the guys appreciated, and in the evenings she liked to dance to music from Rat's portable tape deck. There was a novelty to it; she was good for morale. At times she gave off a kind of come-get-me energy, coy and flirtatious, but apparently it never bothered Mark Fossie. In fact he seemed to enjoy it, just grinning at her, because he was so much in love, and because it was the sort of show that a girl will sometimes put on for her boyfriend's entertainment and education.

Though she was young, Rat said, Mary Anne Bell was no timid child. She was curious about things. During her first days in-country she liked to roam around the compound asking questions: What exactly was a trip flare? How did a Claymore work? What was behind those scary green mountains to the west? Then she'd squint and listen quietly while somebody filled her in. She had a good quick mind. She paid attention. Often, especially during the hot afternoons, she would spend time with the ARVNs out along the perimeter, picking up little phrases of Vietnamese, learning how to cook rice over a can of Sterno, how to eat with her hands. The guys sometimes liked to kid her about it — our own little native, they'd say — but Mary Anne would just smile and stick out her tongue. "I'm here," she'd say, "I might as well learn something."

The war intrigued her. The land, too, and the mystery. At the beginning of her second week she began pestering Mark Fossie to take her down to the village at the foot of the hill. In a quiet voice, very patiently, he tried to tell her that it was a bad idea, way too dangerous, but Mary Anne kept after him. She wanted to get a feel for how people lived, what the smells and customs were. It did not impress her that the VC owned the place.

"Listen, it can't be that bad," she said. "They're human beings, aren't they? Like everybody else?"

Fossie nodded. He loved her.

And so in the morning Rat Kiley and two other medics tagged along as security while Mark and Mary Anne strolled through the ville like a pair of tourists. If the girl was nervous, she didn't show it. She seemed comfortable and entirely at home; the hostile atmosphere did not seem to register. All morning Mary Anne chattered away about how quaint the place was, how she loved the thatched roofs and naked children, the wonderful simplicity of village life. A strange thing to

watch, Rat said. This seventeen-year-old doll in her goddamn culottes, perky and fresh-faced, like a cheerleader visiting the opposing team's locker room. Her pretty blue eyes seemed to glow. She couldn't get enough of it. On their way back up to the compound she stopped for a swim in the Song Tra Bong, stripping down to her underwear, showing off her legs while Fossie tried to explain to her about things like ambushes and snipers and the stopping power of an AK-47.

The guys, though, were impressed.

"A real tiger," said Eddie Diamond. "D-cup guts, trainer-bra brains."

"She'll learn," somebody said.

Eddie Diamond gave a solemn nod. "There's the scary part. I promise you, this girl will most definitely learn."

In parts, at least, it was a funny story, and yet to hear Rat Kiley tell it you'd almost think it was intended as straight tragedy. He never smiled. Not even at the crazy stuff. There was always a dark, far-off look in his eyes, a kind of sadness, as if he were troubled by something sliding beneath the story's surface. Whenever we laughed, I remember, he'd sigh and wait it out, but the one thing he could not tolerate was disbelief. He'd get edgy if someone questioned one of the details. "She *wasn't* dumb," he'd snap. "I never said that. Young, that's all I said. Like you and me. A *girl*, that's the only difference, and I'll tell you something: it didn't amount to jack. I mean, when we first got here — all of us — we were real young and innocent, full of romantic bullshit, but we learned pretty damn quick. And so did Mary Anne."

Rat would peer down at his hands, silent and thoughtful. After a moment his voice would flatten out.

"You don't believe it?" he'd say. "Fine with me. But you don't know human nature. You don't know Nam."

Then he'd tell us to listen up.

A good sharp mind, Rat said. True, she could be silly sometimes, but she picked up on things fast. At the end of the second week, when four casualties came in, Mary Anne wasn't afraid to get her hands bloody. At times, in fact, she seemed fascinated by it. Not the gore so much, but the adrenaline buzz that went with the job, that quick hot rush in your veins when the choppers settled down and you had to do things fast and right. No time for sorting through options, no thinking at all; you just stuck your hands in and started plugging up holes. She was quiet and steady. She didn't back off from the ugly cases. Over the next day or two, as more casualties trickled in, she learned how to clip an artery and pump up a plastic splint and shoot in morphine. In times of action her face took on a sudden new composure, almost serene, the fuzzy blue eyes narrowing into a tight, intelligent focus. Mark Fossie would grin at this. He was proud, yes, but also amazed. A different person, it seemed, and he wasn't sure what to make of it.

Other things, too. The way she quickly fell into the habits of the bush. No cosmetics, no fingernail filing. She stopped wearing jewelry, cut her hair short and wrapped it in a dark green bandanna. Hygiene became a matter of small consequence. In her second week Eddie Diamond taught her how to disassemble an M-16, how the various parts worked, and from there it was a natural progression to learning how to use the weapon. For hours at a time she plunked away at C-ration cans, a bit unsure of herself, but as it turned out she had a real knack for it. There was a new confidence in her voice, a new authority in the way she carried herself. In many ways she remained naive and immature, still a kid, but Cleveland Heights now seemed very far away.

Once or twice, gently, Mark Fossie suggested that it might be time to think about heading home, but Mary Anne laughed and told him to forget it. "Everything I want," she said, "is right here."

She stroked his arm, and then kissed him.

On one level things remained the same between them. They slept together. They held hands and made plans for after the war. But now there was a new imprecision in the way Mary Anne expressed her thoughts on certain subjects. Not necessarily three kids, she'd say. Not necessarily

a house on Lake Erie. "Naturally we'll still get married," she'd tell him, "but it doesn't have to be right away. Maybe travel first. Maybe live together. Just test it out, you know?"

Mark Fossie would nod at this, even smile and agree, but it made him uncomfortable. He couldn't pin it down. Her body seemed foreign somehow — too stiff in places, too firm where the softness used to be. The bubbiness was gone. The nervous giggling, too. When she laughed now, which was rare, it was only when something struck her as truly funny. Her voice seemed to reorganize itself at a lower pitch. In the evenings, while the men played cards, she would sometimes fall into long elastic silences, her eyes fixed on the dark, her arms folded, her foot tapping out a coded message against the floor. When Fossie asked about it one evening, Mary Anne looked at him for a long moment and then shrugged. "It's nothing," she said. "Really nothing. To tell the truth, I've never been happier in my whole life. Never."

Twice, though, she came in late at night. Very late. And then finally she did not come in at all.

Rat Kiley heard about it from Fossie himself. Before dawn one morning, the kid shook him awake. He was in bad shape. His voice seemed hollow and stuffed up, nasal-sounding, as if he had a bad cold. He held a flashlight in his hand, clicking it on and off.

"Mary Anne," he whispered, "I can't *find* her."

Rat sat up and rubbed his face. Even in the dim light it was clear that the boy was in trouble. There were dark smudges under his eyes, the frayed edges of somebody who hadn't slept in a while.

"Gone," Fossie said. "Rat, listen, she's sleeping with somebody. Last night, she didn't even ... I don't know what to *do*."

Abruptly then, Fossie seemed to collapse. He squatted down, rocking on his heels, still clutching the flashlight. Just a boy — eighteen years old. Tall and blond. A gifted athlete. A nice kid, too, polite and good-hearted, although for the moment none of it seemed to be serving him well.

He kept clicking the flashlight on and off.

"All right, start at the start," Rat said. "Nice and slow. Sleeping with who?"

"I don't know who. Eddie Diamond."

"Eddie?"

"Has to be. The guy's always there, always hanging on her."

Rat shook his head. "Man, I don't know. Can't say it strikes a right note, not with Eddie."

"Yes, but he's — "

"Easy does it," Rat said. He reached out and tapped the boy's shoulder. "Why not just check some bunks? We got nine guys. You and me, that's two, so there's seven possibles. Do a quick body count."

Fossie hesitated. "But I can't ... If she's there, I mean, if she's with somebody — "

"Oh, Christ."

Rat pushed himself up. He took the flashlight, muttered something, and moved down to the far end of the hootch. For privacy, the men had rigged up curtained walls around their cots, small makeshift bedrooms, and in the dark Rat went quickly from room to room, using the flashlight to pluck out the faces. Eddie Diamond slept a hard deep sleep — the others, too. To be sure, though, Rat checked once more, very carefully, then he reported back to Fossie.

"All accounted for. No extras."

"Eddie?"

"Darvon dreams." Rat switched off the flashlight and tried to think it out. "Maybe she just — I don't know — maybe she camped out tonight. Under the stars or something. You search the compound?"

"Sure I did."

"Well, come on," Rat said. "One more time."

Outside, a soft violet light was spreading out across the eastern hillsides. Two or three ARVN

soldiers had built their breakfast fires, but the place was mostly quiet and unmoving. They tried the helipad first, then the mess hall and supply hootches, then they walked the entire six hundred meters of perimeter.

"Okay," Rat finally said. "We got a problem."

When he first told the story, Rat stopped there and looked at Mitchell Sanders for a time.

"So what's your vote? Where was she?"

"The Greenies," Sanders said.

"Yeah?"

Sanders smiled. "No other option. That stuff about the Special Forces — how they used the place as a base of operations, how they'd glide in and out — all that had to be there for a *reason*. That's how stories work, man."

Rat thought about it, then shrugged.

"All right, sure, the Greenies. But it's not what Fossie thought. She wasn't sleeping with any of them. At least not exactly. I mean, in a way she was sleeping with *all* of them, more or less, except it wasn't sex or anything. They was just lying together, so to speak, Mary Anne and these six grungy weirded-out Green Berets."

"Lying down?" Sanders said.

"You got it."

"Lying down how?"

Rat smiled. "Ambush. All night long, man, Mary Anne's out on fuckin' *ambush*."

Just after sunrise, Rat said, she came trooping in through the wire, tired-looking but cheerful as she dropped her gear and gave Mark Fossie a brisk hug. The six Green Berets did not speak. One of them nodded at her, and the others gave Fossie a long stare, then they filed off to their hootch at the edge of the compound.

"Please," she said. "Not a word."

Fossie took a half step forward and hesitated. It was as though he had trouble recognizing her. She wore a bush hat and filthy green fatigues; she carried the standard M-16 automatic assault rifle; her face was black with charcoal.

Mary Anne handed him the weapon. "I'm exhausted," she said. "We'll talk later."

She glanced over at the Special Forces area, then turned and walked quickly across the compound toward her own bunker. Fossie stood still for a few seconds. A little dazed, it seemed. After a moment, though, he set his jaw and whispered something and went after her with a hard, fast stride.

"Not later!" he yelled. "Now!"

What happened between them, Rat said, nobody ever knew for sure. But in the mess hall that evening it was clear that an accommodation had been reached. Or more likely, he said, it was a case of setting down some new rules. Mary Anne's hair was freshly shampooed. She wore a white blouse, a navy blue skirt, a pair of plain black flats. Over dinner she kept her eyes down, poking at her food, subdued to the point of silence. Eddie Diamond and some of the others tried to nudge her into talking about the ambush — What was the feeling out there? What exactly did she see and hear? — but the questions seemed to give her trouble. Nervously, she'd look across the table at Fossie. She'd wait a moment, as if to receive some sort of clearance, then she'd bow her head and mumble out a vague word or two. There were no real answers.

Mark Fossie, too, had little to say.

"Nobody's business," he told Rat that night. Then he offered a brief smile. "One thing for sure, though, there won't be any more ambushes. No more late nights."

"You laid down the law?"

"Compromise," Fossie said. "I'll put it this way — we're officially engaged."

Rat nodded cautiously.

"Well hey, she'll make a sweet bride," he said. "Combat ready."

Over the next several days there was a strained, tightly wound quality to the way they treated each other, a rigid correctness that was enforced by repetitive acts of willpower. To look at them from a distance, Rat said, you would think they were the happiest two people on the planet. They spent the long afternoons sunbathing together, stretched out side by side on top of their bunker, or playing backgammon in the shade of a giant palm tree, or just sitting quietly. A model of togetherness, it seemed. And yet at close range their faces showed the tension. Too polite, too thoughtful. Mark Fossie tried hard to keep up a self-assured pose, as if nothing had ever come between them, or ever could, but there was a fragility to it, something tentative and false. If Mary Anne happened to move a few steps away from him, even briefly, he'd tighten up and force himself not to watch her. But then a moment later he'd be watching.

In the presence of others, at least, they kept on their masks. Over meals they talked about plans for a huge wedding in Cleveland Heights — a two-day bash, lots of flowers. And yet even then their smiles seemed too intense. They were too quick with their banter; they held hands as if afraid to let go.

It had to end, and eventually it did.

Near the end of the third week Fossie began making arrangements to send her home. At first, Rat said, Mary Anne seemed to accept it, but then after a day or two she fell into a restless gloom, sitting off by herself at the edge of the perimeter. She would not speak. Shoulders hunched, her blue eyes opaque, she seemed to disappear inside herself. A couple of times Fossie approached her and tried to talk it out, but Mary Anne just stared out at the dark green mountains to the west. The wilderness seemed to draw her in. A haunted look, Rat said — partly terror, partly rapture. It was as if she had come up on the edge of something, as if she were caught in that no-man's-land between Cleveland Heights and deep jungle. Seventeen years old. Just a child, blond and innocent, but then weren't they all?

The next morning she was gone. The six Greenies were gone, too.

In a way, Rat said, poor Fossie expected it, or something like it, but that did not help much with the pain. The kid couldn't function. The grief took him by the throat and squeezed and would not let go.

"Lost," he kept whispering.

It was nearly three weeks before she returned. But in a sense she never returned. Not entirely, not all of her.

chance, Rat said, he was awake to see it. A damp misty night, he couldn't sleep, so he'd gone outside for a quick smoke. He was just standing there, he said, watching the moon, and then off to the west a column of silhouettes appeared as if by magic at the edge of the jungle. At first he didn't recognize her — a small, soft shadow among six other shadows. There was no sound. No real substance either. The seven silhouettes seemed to float across the surface of the earth, like spirits, vaporous and unreal. As he watched, Rat said, it made him think of some weird opium dream. The silhouettes moved without moving. Silently, one by one, they came up the hill, passed through the wire, and drifted in a loose file across the compound. It was then, Rat said, that he picked out Mary Anne's face. Her eyes seemed to shine in the dark — not blue, though, but a bright glowing jungle green. She did not pause at Fossie's bunker. She cradled her weapon and moved swiftly to the Special Forces hootch and followed the others inside.

Briefly, a light came on, and someone laughed, then the place went dark again.

Whenever he told the story, Rat had a tendency to stop now and then, interrupting the flow, inserting little clarifications or bits of analysis and personal opinion. It was a bad habit, Mitchell Sanders said, because all that matters is the raw material, the stuff itself, and you can't clutter it up with your own half-baked commentary. That just breaks the spell. It destroys the magic. What you have to do, Sanders said, is trust your own story. Get the hell out of the way and let it tell itself.

But Rat Kiley couldn't help it. He wanted to bracket the full range of meaning.

"I know it sounds far-out," he'd tell us, "but it's not like *impossible* or anything. We all heard plenty of wackier stories. Some guy comes back from the bush, tells you he saw the Virgin Mary out there, she was riding a goddamn goose or something. Everybody buys it. Everybody smiles and asks how fast was they going, did she have spurs on. Well, it's not like that. This Mary Anne wasn't no virgin but at least she was real. I saw it. When she came in through the wire that night, I was right there, I saw those eyes of hers, I saw how she wasn't even the same person no more. What's so impossible about that? She was a girl, that's all. I mean, if it was a guy, everybody'd say, Hey, no big deal, he got caught up in the Nam shit, he got seduced by the Greenies. See what I mean? You got these blinders on about women. How gentle and peaceful they are. All that crap about how if we had a pussy for president there wouldn't be no more wars. Pure garbage. You got to get rid of that sexist attitude."

Rat would go on like that until Mitchell Sanders couldn't tolerate it any longer. It offended his inner ear.

"The story," Sanders would say. "The whole tone, man, you're wrecking it."

"Tone?"

"The *sound*. You need to get a consistent sound, like slow or fast, funny or sad. All these digressions, they just screw up your story's *sound*. Stick to what happened."

Frowning, Rat would close his eyes.

"Tone?" he'd say. "I didn't know it was all that complicated. The girl joined the zoo. One more animal — end of story."

"Yeah, fine. But tell it right."

At daybreak the next morning, when Mark Fossie heard she was back, he stationed himself outside the fenced-off Special Forces area. All morning he waited for her, and all afternoon. Around dusk Rat brought him something to eat.

"She has to come out," Fossie said. "Sooner or later, she has to."

"Or else what?" Rat said.

"I go get her. I bring her out."

Rat shook his head. "Your decision. I was you, though, no way I'd mess around with any Greenie types, not for nothing."

"It's Mary Anne in there."

"Sure, I know that. All the same, I'd knock real extra super polite."

Even with the cooling night air Fossie's face was slick with sweat. He looked sick. His eyes were bloodshot; his skin had a whitish, almost colorless cast. For a few minutes Rat waited with him, quietly watching the hootch, then he patted the kid's shoulder and left him alone.

It was after midnight when Rat and Eddie Diamond went out to check on him. The night had gone cold and steamy, a low fog sliding down from the mountains, and somewhere out in the dark they heard music playing. Not loud but not soft either. It had a chaotic, almost unmusical sound, without rhythm or form or progression, like the noise of nature. A synthesizer, it seemed, or maybe an electric organ. In the background, just audible, a woman's voice was half singing, half chanting, but the lyrics seemed to be in a foreign tongue.

They found Fossie squatting near the gate in front of the Special Forces area. Head bowed, he was swaying to the music, his face wet and shiny. As Eddie bent down beside him, the kid looked up with dull eyes, ashen and powdery, not quite in register.

"Hear that?" he whispered. "You *hear*? It's Mary Anne."

Eddie Diamond took his arm. "Let's get you inside. Somebody's radio, that's all it is. Move it now."

"Mary Anne. Just listen."

"Sure, but — "

"Listen!"

Fossie suddenly pulled away, twisting sideways, and fell back against the gate. He lay there



with his eyes closed. The music — the noise, whatever it was — came from the hootch beyond the fence. The place was dark except for a small glowing window, which stood partly open, the panes dancing in bright reds and yellows as though the glass were on fire. The chanting seemed louder now. Fiercer, too, and higher pitched.

Fossie pushed himself up. He wavered for a moment then forced the gate open.

"That voice," he said. "Mary Anne."

Rat took a step forward, reaching out for him, but Fossie was already moving fast toward the hootch. He stumbled once, caught himself, and hit the door hard with both arms. There was a noise — a short screeching sound, like a cat — and the door swung in and Fossie was framed there for an instant, his arms stretched out, then he slipped inside. After a moment Rat and Eddie followed quietly. Just inside the door they found Fossie bent down on one knee. He wasn't moving.

Across the room a dozen candles were burning on the floor near the open window. The place seemed to echo with a weird deep-wilderness sound — tribal music — bamboo flutes and drums and chimes. But what hit you first, Rat said, was the smell. Two kinds of smells. There was a topmost scent of joss sticks and incense, like the fumes of some exotic smokehouse, but beneath the smoke lay a deeper and much more powerful stench. Impossible to describe, Rat said. It paralyzed your lungs. Thick and numbing, like an animal's den, a mix of blood and scorched hair and excrement and the sweet-sour odor of moldering flesh — the stink of the kill. But that wasn't all. On a post at the rear of the hootch was the decayed head of a large black leopard; strips of yellow-brown skin dangled from the overhead rafters. And bones. Stacks of bones — all kinds. To one side, propped up against a wall, stood a poster in neat black lettering: ASSEMBLE YOUR OWN GOOK!!. FREE SAMPLE KIT!!. The images came in a swirl, Rat said, and there was no way you could process it all. Off in the gloom a few dim figures lounged in hammocks, or on cots, but none of them moved or spoke. The background music came from a tape deck near the circle of candles, but the high voice was Mary Anne's.

After a second Mark Fossie made a soft moaning sound. He started to get up but then stiffened.

"Mary Anne?" he said.

Quietly then, she stepped out of the shadows. At least for a moment she seemed to be the same pretty young girl who had arrived a few weeks earlier. She was barefoot. She wore her pink sweater and a white blouse and a simple cotton skirt.

For a long while the girl gazed down at Fossie, almost blankly, and in the candlelight her face had the composure of someone perfectly at peace with herself. It took a few seconds, Rat said, to appreciate the full change. In part it was her eyes: utterly flat and indifferent. There was no emotion in her stare, no sense of the person behind it. But the grotesque part, he said, was her jewelry. At the girl's throat was a necklace of human tongues. Elongated and narrow, like pieces of blackened leather, the tongues were threaded along a length of copper wire, one overlapping the next, the tips curled upward as if caught in a final shrill syllable.

Briefly, it seemed, the girl smiled at Mark Fossie.

"There's no sense talking," she said. "I know what you think, but it's not ... it's not *bad*."

"Bad?" Fossie murmured.

"It's not."

In the shadows there was laughter.

One of the Greenies sat up and lighted a cigar. The others lay silent.

"You're in a place," Mary Anne said softly, "where you don't belong."

She moved her hand in a gesture that encompassed not just the hootch but everything around it, the entire war, the mountains, the mean little villages, the trails and trees and rivers and deep misted-over valleys.

"You just don't *know*," she said. "You hide in this little fortress, behind wire and sandbags,

and you don't know what it's all about. Sometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country — the dirt, the death — I just want to eat it and have it there inside me. That's how I feel. It's like ... this appetite. I get scared sometimes — lots of times — but it's not *bad*. You know? I feel close to myself. When I'm out there at night, I feel close to my own body, I can feel my blood moving, my skin and my fingernails, everything, it's like I'm full of electricity and I'm glowing in the dark — I'm on fire almost — I'm burning away into nothing — but it doesn't matter because I know exactly who I am. You can't feel like that anywhere else."

All this was said softly, as if to herself, her voice slow and impassive. She was not trying to persuade. For a few moments she looked at Mark Fossie, who seemed to shrink away, then she turned and moved back into the gloom.

There was nothing to be done.

Rat took Fossie's arm, helped him up, and led him outside. In the darkness there was that weird tribal music, which seemed to come from the earth itself, from the deep rain forest, and a woman's voice rising up in a language beyond translation.

Mark Fossie stood rigid.

"Do something," he whispered. "I can't just let her go like that."

Rat listened for a time, then shook his head.

"Man, you must be deaf. She's already gone."

Rat Kiley stopped there, almost in midsentence, which drove Mitchell Sanders crazy.

"What next?" he said.

"Next?"

"The girl. What happened to her?"

Rat made a small, tired motion with his shoulders. "Hard to tell for sure. Maybe three, four days later I got orders to report here to Alpha Company. Jumped the first chopper out, that's the last I ever seen of the place. Mary Anne, too."

Mitchell Sanders stared at him.

"You can't do that."

"Do what?"

"Jesus Christ, it's against the *rules*," Sanders said.

"Against human *nature*. This elaborate story, you can't say, Hey, by the way, I don't know the *ending*. I mean, you got certain obligations."

Rat gave a quick smile. "Patience, man. Up to now, everything I told you is from personal experience, the exact truth, but there's a few other things I heard secondhand. Thirdhand, actually. From here on it gets to be ... I don't know what the word is."

"Speculation."

"Yeah, right." Rat looked off to the west, scanning the mountains, as if expecting something to appear on one of the high ridgelines. After a second he shrugged. "Anyhow, maybe two months later I ran into Eddie Diamond over in Bangkok — I was on R&R, just this fluke thing — and he told me some stuff I can't vouch for with my own eyes. Even Eddie didn't really see it. He heard it from one of the Greenies, so you got to take this with a whole shakerful of salt."

Once more, Rat searched the mountains, then he sat back and closed his eyes.

"You know," he said abruptly, "I loved her."

"Say again?"

"A lot. We all did, I guess. The way she looked, Mary Anne made you think about those girls back home, how clean and innocent they all are, how they'll never understand any of this, not in a billion years. Try to tell them about it, they'll just stare at you with those big round candy eyes. They won't understand zip. It's like trying to tell somebody what chocolate tastes like."

Mitchell Sanders nodded. "Or shit."

"There it is, you got to taste it, and that's the thing with Mary Anne. She was *there*. She was up to her eyeballs in it. After the war, man, I promise you, you won't find nobody like her."

Suddenly, Rat pushed up to his feet, moved a few steps away from us, then stopped and stood with his back turned. He was an emotional guy.

"Got hooked, I guess," he said. "I loved her. So when I heard from Eddie about what happened, it almost made me ... Like you say, it's pure speculation."

"Go on," Mitchell Sanders said. "Finish up."

What happened to her, Rat said, was what happened to all of them. You come over clean and you get dirty and then afterward it's never the same. A question of degree. Some make it intact, some don't make it at all. For Mary Anne Bell, it seemed, Vietnam had the effect of a powerful drug: that mix of unnamed terror and unnamed pleasure that comes as the needle slips in and you know you're risking something. The endorphins start to flow, and the adrenaline, and you hold your breath and creep quietly through the moonlit nightscapes; you become intimate with danger; you're in touch with the far side of yourself, as though it's another hemisphere, and you want to string it out and go wherever the trip takes you and be host to all the possibilities inside yourself. Not *bad*, she'd said. Vietnam made her glow in the dark. She wanted more, she wanted to penetrate deeper into the mystery of herself, and after a time the wanting became needing, which turned then to craving.

According to Eddie Diamond, who heard it from one of the Greenies, she took a greedy pleasure in night patrols. She was good at it; she had the moves. All camouflaged up, her face smooth and vacant, she seemed to flow like water through the dark, like oil, without sound or center. She went barefoot. She stopped carrying a weapon. There were times, apparently, when she took crazy, death-wish chances — things that even the Greenies balked at. It was as if she were taunting some wild creature out in the bush, or in her head, inviting it to show itself, a curious game of hide-and-go-seek that was played out in the dense terrain of a nightmare. She was lost inside herself. On occasion, when they were taken under fire, Mary Anne would stand quietly and watch the tracer rounds snap by, a little smile at her lips, intent on some private transaction with the war. Other times she would simply vanish altogether — for hours, for days.

And then one morning, all alone, Mary Anne walked off into the mountains and did not come back.

No body was ever found. No equipment, no clothing. For all he knew, Rat said, the girl was still alive. Maybe up in one of the high mountain viles, maybe with the Montagnard tribes. But that was guesswork.

There was an inquiry, of course, and a week-long air search, and for a time the Tra Bong compound went crazy with MP and CID types. In the end, however, nothing came of it. It was a war and the war went on. Mark Fossie was busted to PFC, shipped back to a hospital in the States, and two months later received a medical discharge. Mary Anne Bell joined the missing.

But the story did not end there. If you believed the Greenies, Rat said, Mary Anne was still somewhere out there in the dark. Odd movements, odd shapes. Late at night, when the Greenies were out on ambush, the whole rain forest seemed to stare in at them — a watched feeling — and a couple of times they almost saw her sliding through the shadows. Not quite, but almost. She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill.

# Crazy They Call Me - Zadi Smith

(2017)

Well, you certainly don't go out anyplace less than dressed, not these days. Can't let anybody mistake you for that broken, misused little girl: Eleanora Fagan. No. Let there be no confusion. Not in the audience or in your old man, in the maître d' or the floor manager, the cops or the goddam agents of the goddam I.R.S. You always have your fur, present and correct, hanging off your shoulders just so. *Take back your mink, take back your pearls.* But you don't sing that song, it's not in your key. Let some other girl sing it. The type who gets a smile from a cop even if she's crossing Broadway in her oldest Terylene housedress. You don't have that luxury. Besides, you love that mink! Makes the state of things clear. In fact — though many aren't hip to this yet — not only is there no more Eleanora, there isn't any Billie, either. There is only Lady Day. Alligator bag, three rows of diamonds nice and thick on your wrist — never mind that it's three o'clock in the afternoon. You boil an egg in twinset and pearls.

They got you holed up in Newark for the length of this engagement, and one day the wife of the super says to you, *So you can't play New York no more, huh? Who cares? To me, you always look like lady.* She's Italian. She gets it. No judgment. She says, *I look after you. I be your mother.* God bless her, but your daughter days are done. And if a few sweet, clueless bobby-soxers, happy as Sunday, stop you on 110th to tell you how much they loved you at Carnegie Hall, how much they loved you on "The Tonight Show," try your best not to look too bored, take out your pearl-encrusted cigarette box and hand them a smoke. Girl, you must give away twenty smokes a day. You give it all away, it streams from you, like rivers rolling to the sea: love, music, money, smokes. What you got, everybody wants — and most days you let 'em have it. Sometimes it's as much as you can do to keep ahold of your mink.

It's not that you don't like other women, exactly, it's only that you're wary. And they're wary of you right back. No surprise, really. Most of these girls live in a completely different world. You've visited that world on occasion, but it's not home. You're soon back on the road. Meanwhile they look at you and see that you're unattached — even when you're hitched — they see you're floating, that no one tells you when to leave the club, and there's nobody crying in a cot waiting for you to pick them up and sing a lullaby. No, nobody tells you who to see or where to go, and if they do, you don't have to listen, even when you get a sock to the jaw. Now, the women you tend to meet? They don't know what to do with that. They don't know what to do with the God-blessed child, with the girl that's got her own, who can stay up drinking with the clarinet player till the newspaper boys hit the corners. And maybe one of these broads is *married* to that clarinet player. And maybe the two of them have a baby and a picket fence and all that jazz. So naturally she's wary. You can understand that. Sure.

And you've always been — well, what's the right term for it? A man's lady? Men are drawn to you, all kinds of men, and not just for the obvious. Even your best girlfriends are men, if you see what I mean, yes, you've got your little gang of dear boys who aren't so very different from you, despite appearances: they got nobody steady to go home to, either. So if some lover man breaks your heart, or your face, you can trust in your little gang to be there for you, more often than not, trust them to come round to wherever you're at, with cigarettes and alcohol, and quote Miss Crawford, and quote Miss Stanwyck, and make highballs, and tell you that you really oughta get a dog. Honey, you should get a *dog*. They never doubt you're Lady Day — matter of fact, they knew you were She before you did.

You get a dog.

Women are wary, lover men come and go and mostly leave you waiting, and, truth be told, even those dear boys who make the highballs have their own thing going on, more often than

not. But you're not afraid to look for love in all kinds of places. Once upon a time there was that wild girl Tallulah, plus a few other ladies, back in the day, but there was no way to be in the world like that, not back then — or no way you could see — and anyhow most of those ladies were crazier than a box of frogs. Nobody's perfect. Which is another way of saying there's no escape from this world. And so sometimes, on a Friday night, after the singing is over and the clapping dies down, there's simply no one and nothing to be done. You fall back on yourself. Backstage empties out, but they're still serving. You're not in the mood for conversation.

Later, you'll open your vanity case and take a trip on the light fantastic — but right at this moment you're grateful for your little dog. You did have a huge great dog, a while back, but she was always knocking glasses off the side tables, and then she went and died on you, so now you got this tiny little angel. Pepi. A dog don't cheat, a dog don't lie. Dogs remind you of you: they give everything they've got, they're wide open to the world. It's a big risk! There are people out there who'll kick a little half-pint dog like Pepi just for something to do. And you know how that feels. This little dog and you? Soul mates. Where you been all my life? He's like those dogs you read about, that sit on their master's grave for years and years and years. Recently, you had a preview of this. You were up in the stratosphere, with no body at all, floating, almost right there with God, you were hanging off the pearly gates, and nobody and nothing could make you come back. Some fool slapped you, some other fool sprayed seltzer in your face — nothing. Then this little angel of a dog licked you right in your eye socket and you came straight back to earth just to feel it, and three hours after that you were on a stage, getting paid. Dogs are too good for this world.

Maybe a lot of people wouldn't guess it but you can be the most wonderful aunt, godmother, nursemaid, when the mood takes you. You can spot a baby across a room and make it smile. That's a skill! Most people don't even try to develop it! People always telling these put-upon babies what to do, what to think, what to say, what to eat. But you don't ask anything at all from them — and that's your secret. You're one of the few who just like to make a baby smile. And they love you for it, make no mistake, they adore you, and all things being equal you'd stay longer if you could, you'd stay and play, but you've got bills to pay.

Matter of fact, downstairs right this moment there's five or six of these business-minded fellows, some of them you know pretty well, some you don't, some you never saw before in your life, but they're all involved in your bills one way or another, and they say if you don't mind too much they'd like to escort you to the club. It's only ten blocks, but they'd like to walk you there. I guess somebody thinks you're not going to get there at all without these — now, what would you call them? *Chaperons*. Guess somebody's worried. But with or without your chaperons you'll get there, you always get there, and you're always on time, except during those exceptions when exceptional things seem to happen which simply can't be helped. Anyway, once you open your mouth all is forgiven. You even forgive yourself. Because you are exceptional, and so exceptions must be made. And isn't the point that whenever a lady turns up onstage she's always right on time?

Hair takes a while, face takes longer. It's all work, it's all a kind of armor. You got skinny a while back and some guys don't like it, one even told you that you got a face like an Egyptian death mask now. Well, good! You wear it, it's yours. Big red lips and now this new high ponytail bouncing around — the gardenias are done, the gardenias belonged to Billie — and if somebody asks you where exactly this new long twist of hair comes from you'll cut your eyes at whoever's doing the asking and say, *Well, I wear it so I guess it's mine*. It's my hair on my goddam head. It's arranged just so around my beautiful mask — take a good look! Because you know they're all looking right at it as you sing, you place it deliberately in the spotlight, your death mask, because you know they can't help but seek your soul in the face, it's their instinct to look for it there. You paint the face as protection. You draw the eyebrows, define the lips. It's the border between them and you. Otherwise, everybody in the place would think they had permission to leap right down

your throat and eat your heart out.

People ask: What's it like standing up there? It's like eating your own heart out. It's like there's nobody out there in the dark at all. All the downtown collectors and the white ladies in their own fancy furs love to talk about your phrasing — it's the fashion to talk about your phrasing — but what sounds like a revolution to others is simple common sense to you. All respect to Ella, all respect to Sarah, but when those gals open their mouths to sing, well, to you it's like someone just opened a brand-new Frigidaire. A chill comes over you. And you just can't do it like that. Won't. It's obvious to you that a voice has the same work to do, musically speaking, as the sax or the trumpet or the piano. A voice has got to feel its way in. Who the hell doesn't know that? Yet somehow these people don't act like they know it, they always seem surprised. They sit in the dark, drinking Martinis, in their mink, in their tux. People are idiots. You wear pearls and you throw them before swine, more or less. Depends what pearls, though, and what swine. Not everybody, for example, is gonna get "Strange Fruit." Not every night. They've got to be deserving — a word that means a different thing depending on the night. You told somebody once, *I only do it for people who might understand and appreciate it. This is not a June-Moon-Croon-Tune. This song tells a story about pain and heartache.* Three hundred years of heartache! You got to turn each room you play into a kind of church in order to accommodate that much pain. Yet people shout their requests from their tables like you're a goddam jukebox. People are idiots. You never sing anything after "Strange Fruit," either. That's the last song no matter what and sometimes if you're high, and the front row look rich and stupid and dull, that's liable to be your only song. And they'll be thankful for it! Even though it's not easy for them to listen to and not easy for you to sing. When you sing it you have been described as punishing, you have been described as relentless. Well, you're not done with that song till you're done with it. You will never be done with it. It'll be done with you first.

In the end, people don't want to hear about dogs and babies and feeling your way into a phrase, or eating your heart out — people want to hear about you as you appear in these songs. They never want to know about the surprise you feel in yourself, the sense of being directed by God, when something in the modulation of your throat leaps up, like a kid reaching for a rising balloon, except most kids miss while you catch it — yes, you catch it almost without expecting to — landing on an incidental note, a perfect addition, one you never put in that phrase before, and never heard anyone else do, and yet you can hear at once that it is perfection. Perfection! It has the sound of something totally inevitable — it's better than Porter, it's better than Gershwin. In a moment you have written over their original versions finally and completely ...

No, they never ask you about that. They want the cold, hard facts. They ask dull questions about the songs, about which man goes with which song in your mind, and if they're a little more serious they might ask about Armstrong or Basie or Lester. If they're sneaky with no manners, they'll want to know if chasing the drink or the dragon made singing those songs harder or sweeter. They'll want to know about your run-ins with the federal government of these United States. They'll want to know if you hated or loved the people in your audience, the people who paid your wages, stole your wages, arrested you once for fraternizing with a white man, jailed you for hooking, jailed you for being, and raided your hospital room, right at the end, as you lay conversing with God. They are always very interested to hear that you don't read music. Once, you almost said — to a sneaky fellow from the *Daily News*, who was inquiring — you almost turned to him and said *Motherfucker I AM* music. But a lady does not speak like that, however, and so you did not.

# The Nose - Ryunosuke Akutagawa

(1916)

Translated by Jay Rubin

You just had to mention "Zenchi Naigu's nose," and everyone in Ike-no-o knew what you were talking about. Never mind that his name ascribed to him the "wisdom of Zen" (Zenchi) or that he was one of only ten priests honored to "minister within" (Naigu) the imperial palace in Kyoto: all that mattered was that nose of his. Uniform in thickness from base to tip, it hung a full six inches from above his upper lip to below his chin, like a sausage dangling down from the middle of his face.

The nose had been a constant source of torment for the Naigu from his earliest days as a young acolyte until now, past the age of fifty, when he had reached his present lofty post. On the surface, of course, he pretended it did not bother him — and not only because he felt it wrong for a priest to worry over his nose when he should be thirsting exclusively for the Pure Land to come. What he hated most of all was for other people to become aware of his concern over his nose. And what he feared most of all was that the word "nose" would come up in conversation.

There were two reasons why his nose was more than the Naigu could manage. One was that it actually got in his way much of the time. He could not eat by himself; whenever he tried to, the tip of his nose would touch the rice in his metal bowl. To deal with this problem, he had a disciple sit across from him at mealtime and hold his nose up with a long, narrow wooden slat, an inch wide and two feet long. This was not an easy thing to do — either for the slat-wielding disciple or for the Naigu himself. A temple page who stood in for the disciple at one meal sneezed and let the nose drop into the rice gruel. The story immediately spread across the river to Kyoto. Still, this was not the main reason the Naigu was troubled by his nose. He suffered most because of the harm it was doing to his self-esteem.

The people of Ike-no-o used to say that Zenchi Naigu was lucky to be a priest: no woman would ever want to marry a man with a nose like that. Some even claimed it was because of his nose that he had entered the priesthood to begin with. The Naigu himself, however, never felt that he suffered any less over his nose for being a priest. Indeed, his self-esteem was already far too fragile to be affected by such a secondary fact as whether or not he had a wife. And so, by means both active and passive, he sought to repair the damage to his self-esteem.

He tried first of all to find ways to make his nose look shorter. When there was no one around, he would hold up his mirror and, with feverish intensity, examine his reflection from every angle. Sometimes it took more than simply changing the position of his face to comfort him, and he would try one pose after another — resting his cheek on his hand or stroking his chin with his fingertips. Never once, though, was he satisfied that his nose looked any shorter. In fact, he sometimes felt that the harder he tried, the longer it looked. Then, heaving fresh sighs of despair, he would put the mirror away in its box and drag himself back to the scripture stand to resume chanting the Kannon Sutra.

The second way he dealt with his problem was to keep a vigilant eye out for other people's noses. Many public events took place at the Ike-no-o temple — banquets to benefit the priests, lectures on the sutras, and so forth. Row upon row of monks' cells filled the temple grounds, and each day the monks would heat up bath water for the temple's many residents and lay visitors, all of whom the Naigu would study closely. He hoped to gain peace from discovering even one face with a nose like his. And so his eyes took in neither blue robes nor white; orange caps, skirts of gray: the priestly garb he knew so well hardly existed for him. The Naigu saw not people but noses. While a great hooked beak might come into his view now and then, never did he discover

a nose like his own. And with each failure to find what he was looking for, the Naigu's resentment would increase. It was entirely due to this feeling that often, while speaking to a person, he would unconsciously grasp the dangling end of his nose and blush like a youngster.

And finally, the Naigu would comb the Buddhist scriptures and other classic texts, searching for a character with a nose like his own in the hope that it would provide him some measure of comfort. Nowhere, however, was it written that the nose of either Mokuren or Sharihotsu was long. And Ryūju and Memyō, of course, were Bodhisattvas with normal human noses. Listening to a Chinese story once, he heard that Liu Bei, the Shu Han emperor, had long ears. "Oh, if only it had been his nose," he thought, "how much better I would feel!"

We need hardly mention here that, even as he pursued these passive efforts, the Naigu also took more active steps to shorten his nose. He tried everything: he drank a decoction of boiled snake gourd; he rubbed his nose with rat urine. Nothing did any good, however: the nose continued to dangle six inches down over his lips.

One autumn, however, a disciple of his who had gone to Kyoto — in part on an errand for the Naigu himself — came back to Ike-no-o with a new method for shortening noses that he had learned from a doctor friend. This doctor was a man from China who had become a high-ranking priest at a major Kyoto temple, the Chōrakuji.

Pretending, as usual, that he was unconcerned about his nose, the Naigu would not at first agree to submit to the new treatment. Instead, at mealtimes he would offer a casual expression of regret that the disciple had gone to so much trouble. Inwardly, of course, he was hoping that the disciple would press him to try the treatment. And the disciple must have been aware of the Naigu's tactics. But his master's very willingness to employ such tactics seemed to rouse the aide to sympathy more than resentment. Just as the Naigu had hoped, the disciple used every argument he could think of to persuade his master to adopt the treatment. And, as he knew he would, the Naigu finally submitted to the disciple's fervent exhortations.

The treatment itself was actually quite simple: boil the nose and have someone tread on it.

Boiling water could be had any day at the temple bathhouse. The disciple immediately brought a bucket full of water that was too hot for him to touch. If the Naigu simply dipped his nose straight into the bucket, however, his face might be scalded by the rising steam. So they bored a hole in a tray, set the tray on the bucket, and lowered the nose through the hole into the boiling water. The nose itself felt no heat at all.

After the nose had been soaking for a short while, the disciple said, "I believe it has cooked long enough, Your Reverence."

The Naigu gave him a contorted smile. At least, he thought with some satisfaction, no one overhearing this one remark would imagine that the subject was a nose. The boiled nose itself, however, was itching now as if it had been bitten by fleas.

The Naigu withdrew his nose from the hole in the tray, and the disciple began to tread on the still-steaming thing with all his might. The Naigu lay with his nose stretched out on the floorboards, watching the disciple's feet moving up and down before his eyes. Every now and then, the disciple would cast a pitying glance down toward the Naigu's bald head and say, "Does it hurt, Your Reverence? The doctor told me to stamp on it as hard as I could, but ... does it hurt?"

The Naigu tried to shake his head to signal that it did not hurt, but with the disciple's feet pressing down on his nose, he was unable to do so. Instead, he turned his eyes upward until he could see the raw cracks in the disciple's chapped feet and gave an angry-sounding shout: "No, it doesn't hurt!"

Far from hurting, his itchy nose almost felt good to have the young man treading on it.

After this had been going on for some time, little bumps like millet grains began to form on the nose until it looked like a bird that had been plucked clean and roasted whole. When he saw this, the disciple stopped his treading and muttered as if to himself, "Now I'm supposed to pull



those out with tweezers."

The Naigu puffed out his cheeks in apparent exasperation as he silently watched the disciple proceed with the treatment. Not that he was ungrateful for the efforts. But as much as he appreciated the young man's kindness, he did not like having his nose handled like some kind of *thing*. The Naigu watched in apprehension, like a patient being operated on by a doctor he mistrusts, as the disciple plucked beads of fat from the pores of his nose with the tweezers. The beads protruded half an inch from each pore like stumps of feathers.

Once he was through, the disciple said with a look of relief, "Now we just have to cook it again."

Brows knit in apparent disapproval, the Naigu did as he was told.

After the second boiling, the nose looked far shorter than it ever had before. Indeed, it was not much different from an ordinary hooked nose. Stroking his newly shortened nose, the Naigu darted a few timid glances into the mirror the young man held out to him.

The nose — which once had dangled down below his chin — now had shrunk to such an unbelievable degree that it seemed only to be hanging on above his upper lip by a feeble last breath. The red blotches that marked it were probably left from the trampling. No one would laugh at *this* nose anymore! The face of the Naigu inside the mirror looked at the face of the Naigu outside the mirror, eyelids fluttering in satisfaction.

Still, he felt uneasy for the rest of that day lest his nose grow long again. Whether intoning scriptures or taking his meals, he would unobtrusively reach up at every opportunity and touch his nose. Each time, he would find it exactly where it belonged, above his upper lip, with no sign that it intended to let itself down any lower. Then came a night of sleep, and the first thing he did upon waking the next day was to feel his nose again. It was still short. Only then did the Naigu begin to enjoy the kind of relief he had experienced once before, years ago, when he had accumulated religious merit for having copied out the entire Lotus Sutra by hand.

Not three full days had passed, however, before the Naigu made a surprising discovery. First, a certain samurai with business at the Ike-no-o temple seemed even more amused than before when, barely speaking to the Naigu, he stared hard at the nose. Then the page who had dropped his nose into the gruel passed him outside the lecture hall; the boy first looked down as he tried to keep his laughter in check, but finally, unable to control himself, he let it burst out. And finally, on more than one occasion, a subordinate priest who remained perfectly respectful while taking orders from the Naigu face-to-face would start giggling as soon as the Naigu had turned away.

At first the Naigu ascribed this behavior to the change in his appearance. But that alone did not seem to explain it sufficiently. True, this may have been what caused the laughter of the page and the subordinate. But the way they were laughing now was somehow different from the way they had laughed before, when his nose was long. Perhaps it was simply that they found the unfamiliar short nose funnier than the familiar long one. But there seemed to be more to it than that.

*They never laughed so openly before.* Our dear Naigu would sometimes break off intoning the scriptures and mutter this sort of thing to himself, tilting his bald head to one side. His eyes would wander up to the portrait of the Bodhisattva Fugen hanging beside him. And he would sink into gloom, thinking about how it had been for him a few days earlier, when he still had his long nose, "just as he who can now sink no lower fondly recalls his days of glory." The Naigu, unfortunately, lacked the wisdom to find a solution to this problem.

The human heart harbors two conflicting sentiments. Everyone of course sympathizes with people who suffer misfortunes. Yet when those people manage to overcome their misfortunes, we feel a certain disappointment. We may even feel (to overstate the case somewhat) a desire to plunge them back into those misfortunes. And before we know it, we come (if only passively) to harbor some degree of hostility toward them. It was precisely because he sensed this kind of

spectator's egoism in both the lay and the priestly communities of Ike-no-o that the Naigu, while unaware of the reason, felt an indefinable malaise.

And so the Naigu's mood worsened with each passing day. He could hardly say a word to people without snapping at them — until finally, even the disciple who had performed the treatment on his nose began to whisper behind his back: "The Naigu will be punished for treating us so harshly instead of teaching us Buddha's Law." The one who made the Naigu especially angry was that mischievous page. One day the Naigu heard some loud barking, and without giving it much thought, he stepped outside to see what was going on. There, he found the page waving a long stick in pursuit of a scrawny long-haired dog. The boy was not simply chasing after the dog, however. He was also shouting as if for the dog, "Can't hit my nose! Ha ha! Can't hit my nose!" The Naigu ripped the stick from the boy's hand and smacked him in the face with it. Then he realized this "stick" was the slat they had used to hold his nose up at mealtimes.

His nose had been shortened all right, thought the Naigu, but he hated what it was doing to him.

And then one night something happened. The wind must have risen quite suddenly after the sun went down, to judge by the annoying jangle of the pagoda wind chimes that reached him at his pillow. The air was much colder as well, and the aging Naigu was finding it impossible to sleep. Eyes wide open in the darkness, he became aware of a new itching sensation in his nose. He reached up and found the nose slightly swollen to the touch. It (and only it) seemed to be feverish as well.

"We took such drastic steps to shorten it: maybe that gave me some kind of illness," the Naigu muttered to himself, cupping the nose in hands he held as if reverentially offering flowers or incense before the Buddha.

When he woke early as usual the next morning, the Naigu found that the temple's ginkgo and horse-chestnut trees had dropped their leaves overnight, spreading a bright, golden carpet over the temple grounds. And perhaps because of the frost on the roof of the pagoda, the nine-ring spire atop it flashed in the still-faint glimmer of the rising sun. Standing on the veranda where the latticed shutters had been raised, Zenchi Naigu took a deep breath of morning air.

It was at this moment that an all-but-forgotten sensation returned to him.

The Naigu shot his hand up to his nose, but what he felt there was not the short nose he had touched in the night. It was the same old long nose he had always had, dangling down a good six inches from above his upper lip to below his chin. In the space of a single night, his nose had grown as long as ever. When he realized this, the Naigu felt that same bright sense of relief he had experienced when his nose became short.

*Now no one will laugh at me anymore,* the Naigu whispered silently in his heart, letting his long nose sway in the dawn's autumn wind.

## Two Gallants - James Joyce

(1905)

The grey warm evening of August had descended upon the city and a mild warm air, a memory of summer, circulated in the streets. The streets, shuttered for the repose of Sunday, swarmed with a gaily coloured crowd. Like illumined pearls the lamps shone from the summits of their tall poles upon the living texture below which, changing shape and hue unceasingly, sent up into the warm grey evening air an unchanging unceasing murmur.

Two young men came down the hill of Rutland Square. One of them was just bringing a long monologue to a close. The other, who walked on the verge of the path and was at times obliged to step on to the road, owing to his companion's rudeness, wore an amused listening face. He was squat and ruddy. A yachting cap was shoved far back from his forehead and the narrative to which he listened made constant waves of expression break forth over his face from the corners of his nose and eyes and mouth. Little jets of wheezing laughter followed one another out of his convulsed body. His eyes, twinkling with cunning enjoyment, glanced at every moment towards his companion's face. Once or twice he rearranged the light waterproof which he had slung over one shoulder in toreador fashion. His breeches, his white rubber shoes and his jauntily slung waterproof expressed youth. But his figure fell into rotundity at the waist, his hair was scant and grey and his face, when the waves of expression had passed over it, had a ravaged look.

When he was quite sure that the narrative had ended he laughed noiselessly for fully half a minute. Then he said:

"Well! ... That takes the biscuit!"

His voice seemed winnowed of vigour; and to enforce his words he added with humour:

"That takes the solitary, unique, and, if I may so call it, *recherché* biscuit!"

He became serious and silent when he had said this. His tongue was tired for he had been talking all the afternoon in a public-house in Dorset Street. Most people considered Lenehan a leech but, in spite of this reputation, his adroitness and eloquence had always prevented his friends from forming any general policy against him. He had a brave manner of coming up to a party of them in a bar and of holding himself nimbly at the borders of the company until he was included in a round. He was a sporting vagrant armed with a vast stock of stories, limericks and riddles. He was insensitive to all kinds of discourtesy. No one knew how he achieved the stern task of living, but his name was vaguely associated with racing tissues.

"And where did you pick her up, Corley?" he asked.

Corley ran his tongue swiftly along his upper lip.

"One night, man," he said, "I was going along Dame Street and I spotted a fine tart under Waterhouse's clock and said good-night, you know. So we went for a walk round by the canal and she told me she was a slavey in a house in Baggot Street. I put my arm round her and squeezed her a bit that night. Then next Sunday, man, I met her by appointment. We went out to Donnybrook and I brought her into a field there. She told me she used to go with a dairyman ... It was fine, man. Cigarettes every night she'd bring me and paying the tram out and back. And one night she brought me two bloody fine cigars — O, the real cheese, you know, that the old fellow used to smoke ... I was afraid, man, she'd get in the family way. But she's up to the dodge."

"Maybe she thinks you'll marry her," said Lenehan.

"I told her I was out of a job," said Corley. "I told her I was in Pim's. She doesn't know my name. I was too hairy to tell her that. But she thinks I'm a bit of class, you know."

Lenehan laughed again, noiselessly.

"Of all the good ones ever I heard," he said, "that emphatically takes the biscuit."

Corley's stride acknowledged the compliment. The swing of his burly body made his friend execute a few light skips from the path to the roadway and back again. Corley was the son of an inspector of police and he had inherited his father's frame and gait. He walked with his hands by his sides, holding himself erect and swaying his head from side to side. His head was large, globular and oily; it sweated in all weathers; and his large round hat, set upon it sideways, looked like a bulb which had grown out of another. He always stared straight before him as if he were on parade and, when he wished to gaze after someone in the street, it was necessary for him to move his body from the hips. At present he was about town. Whenever any job was vacant a friend was always ready to give him the hard word. He was often to be seen walking with policemen in plain clothes, talking earnestly. He knew the inner side of all affairs and was fond of delivering final judgments. He spoke without listening to the speech of his companions. His conversation was mainly about himself: what he had said to such a person and what such a person had said to him and what he had said to settle the matter. When he reported these dialogues he aspirated the first letter of his name after the manner of Florentines.

Lenehan offered his friend a cigarette. As the two young men walked on through the crowd Corley occasionally turned to smile at some of the passing girls but Lenehan's gaze was fixed on the large faint moon circled with a double halo. He watched earnestly the passing of the grey web of twilight across its face. At length he said:

"Well ... tell me, Corley, I suppose you'll be able to pull it off all right, eh?"

Corley closed one eye expressively as an answer.

"Is she game for that?" asked Lenehan dubiously. "You can never know women."

"She's all right," said Corley. "I know the way to get around her, man. She's a bit gone on me."

"You're what I call a gay Lothario," said Lenehan. "And the proper kind of a Lothario, too!"

A shade of mockery relieved the servility of his manner. To save himself he had the habit of leaving his flattery open to the interpretation of raillery. But Corley had not a subtle mind.

"There's nothing to touch a good slavey," he affirmed. "Take my tip for it."

"By one who has tried them all," said Lenehan.

"First I used to go with girls, you know," said Corley, unbosoming; "girls off the South Circular. I used to take them out, man, on the tram somewhere and pay the tram or take them to a band or a play at the theatre or buy them chocolate and sweets or something that way. I used to spend money on them right enough," he added, in a convincing tone, as if he was conscious of being disbelieved.

But Lenehan could well believe it; he nodded gravely.

"I know that game," he said, "and it's a mug's game."

"And damn the thing I ever got out of it," said Corley.

"Ditto here," said Lenehan.

"Only off of one of them," said Corley.

He moistened his upper lip by running his tongue along it. The recollection brightened his eyes. He too gazed at the pale disc of the moon, now nearly veiled, and seemed to meditate.

"She was ... a bit of all right," he said regretfully.

He was silent again. Then he added:

"She's on the turf now. I saw her driving down Earl Street one night with two fellows with her on a car."

"I suppose that's your doing," said Lenehan.

"There was others at her before me," said Corley philosophically.

This time Lenehan was inclined to disbelieve. He shook his head to and fro and smiled.

"You know you can't kid me, Corley," he said.

"Honest to God!" said Corley. "Didn't she tell me herself?"

Lenehan made a tragic gesture.

"Base betrayer!" he said.

As they passed along the railings of Trinity College, Lenehan skipped out into the road and peered up at the clock.

"Twenty after," he said.

"Time enough," said Corley. "She'll be there all right. I always let her wait a bit."

Lenehan laughed quietly.

"Ecod! Corley, you know how to take them," he said.

"I'm up to all their little tricks," Corley confessed.

"But tell me," said Lenehan again, "are you sure you can bring it off all right? You know it's a ticklish job. They're damn close on that point. Eh? ... What?"

His bright, small eyes searched his companion's face for reassurance. Corley swung his head to and fro as if to toss aside an insistent insect, and his brows gathered.

"I'll pull it off," he said. "Leave it to me, can't you?"

Lenehan said no more. He did not wish to ruffle his friend's temper, to be sent to the devil and told that his advice was not wanted. A little tact was necessary. But Corley's brow was soon smooth again. His thoughts were running another way.

"She's a fine decent tart," he said, with appreciation; "that's what she is."

They walked along Nassau Street and then turned into Kildare Street. Not far from the porch of the club a harpist stood in the roadway, playing to a little ring of listeners. He plucked at the wires heedlessly, glancing quickly from time to time at the face of each new-comer and from time to time, wearily also, at the sky. His harp, too, heedless that her coverings had fallen about her knees, seemed weary alike of the eyes of strangers and of her master's hands. One hand played in the bass the melody of *Silent, O Moyle*, while the other hand careered in the treble after each group of notes. The notes of the air sounded deep and full.

The two young men walked up the street without speaking, the mournful music following them. When they reached Stephen's Green they crossed the road. Here the noise of trams, the lights and the crowd released them from their silence.

"There she is!" said Corley.

At the corner of Hume Street a young woman was standing. She wore a blue dress and a white sailor hat. She stood on the curbstone, swinging a sunshade in one hand. Lenehan grew lively.

"Let's have a look at her, Corley," he said.

Corley glanced sideways at his friend and an unpleasant grin appeared on his face.

"Are you trying to get inside me?" he asked.

"Damn it!" said Lenehan boldly, "I don't want an introduction. All I want is to have a look at her. I'm not going to eat her."

"O ... A look at her?" said Corley, more amiably. "Well ... I'll tell you what. I'll go over and talk to her and you can pass by."

"Right!" said Lenehan.

Corley had already thrown one leg over the chains when Lenehan called out:

"And after? Where will we meet?"

"Half ten," answered Corley, bringing over his other leg.

"Where?"

"Corner of Merrion Street. We'll be coming back."

"Work it all right now," said Lenehan in farewell.

Corley did not answer. He sauntered across the road swaying his head from side to side. His bulk, his easy pace, and the solid sound of his boots had something of the conqueror in them. He approached the young woman and, without saluting, began at once to converse with her. She swung her umbrella more quickly and executed half turns on her heels. Once or twice when he spoke to her at close quarters she laughed and bent her head.

Lenehan observed them for a few minutes. Then he walked rapidly along beside the chains at

some distance and crossed the road obliquely. As he approached Hume Street corner he found the air heavily scented and his eyes made a swift anxious scrutiny of the young woman's appearance. She had her Sunday finery on. Her blue serge skirt was held at the waist by a belt of black leather. The great silver buckle of her belt seemed to depress the centre of her body, catching the light stuff of her white blouse like a clip. She wore a short black jacket with mother-of-pearl buttons and a ragged black boa. The ends of her tulle collarette had been carefully disordered and a big bunch of red flowers was pinned in her bosom, stems upwards. Lenehan's eyes noted approvingly her stout short muscular body. Frank rude health glowed in her face, on her fat red cheeks and in her unabashed blue eyes. Her features were blunt. She had broad nostrils, a straggling mouth which lay open in a contented leer, and two projecting front teeth. As he passed Lenehan took off his cap and, after about ten seconds, Corley returned a salute to the air. This he did by raising his hand vaguely and pensively changing the angle of position of his hat.

Lenehan walked as far as the Shelbourne Hotel where he halted and waited. After waiting for a little time he saw them coming towards him and, when they turned to the right, he followed them, stepping lightly in his white shoes, down one side of Merrion Square. As he walked on slowly, timing his pace to theirs, he watched Corley's head which turned at every moment towards the young woman's face like a big ball revolving on a pivot. He kept the pair in view until he had seen them climbing the stairs of the Donnybrook tram; then he turned about and went back the way he had come.

Now that he was alone his face looked older. His gaiety seemed to forsake him and, as he came by the railings of the Duke's Lawn, he allowed his hand to run along them. The air which the harpist had played began to control his movements. His softly padded feet played the melody while his fingers swept a scale of variations idly along the railings after each group of notes.

He walked listlessly round Stephen's Green and then down Grafton Street. Though his eyes took note of many elements of the crowd through which he passed they did so morosely. He found trivial all that was meant to charm him and did not answer the glances which invited him to be bold. He knew that he would have to speak a great deal, to invent and to amuse, and his brain and throat were too dry for such a task. The problem of how he could pass the hours till he met Corley again troubled him a little. He could think of no way of passing them but to keep on walking. He turned to the left when he came to the corner of Rutland Square and felt more at ease in the dark quiet street, the sombre look of which suited his mood. He paused at last before the window of a poor-looking shop over which the words *Refreshment Bar* were printed in white letters. On the glass of the window were two flying inscriptions: *Ginger Beer* and *Ginger Ale*. A cut ham was exposed on a great blue dish while near it on a plate lay a segment of very light plum-pudding. He eyed this food earnestly for some time and then, after glancing warily up and down the street, went into the shop quickly.

He was hungry for, except some biscuits which he had asked two grudging curates to bring him, he had eaten nothing since breakfast-time. He sat down at an uncovered wooden table opposite two work-girls and a mechanic. A slatternly girl waited on him.

"How much is a plate of peas?" he asked.

"Three halfpence, sir," said the girl.

"Bring me a plate of peas," he said, "and a bottle of ginger beer."

He spoke roughly in order to belie his air of gentility for his entry had been followed by a pause of talk. His face was heated. To appear natural he pushed his cap back on his head and planted his elbows on the table. The mechanic and the two work-girls examined him point by point before resuming their conversation in a subdued voice. The girl brought him a plate of grocer's hot peas, seasoned with pepper and vinegar, a fork and his ginger beer. He ate his food greedily and found it so good that he made a note of the shop mentally. When he had eaten all the peas he sipped his ginger beer and sat for some time thinking of Corley's adventure. In his

imagination he beheld the pair of lovers walking along some dark road; he heard Corley's voice in deep energetic gallantries and saw again the leer of the young woman's mouth. This vision made him feel keenly his own poverty of purse and spirit. He was tired of knocking about, of pulling the devil by the tail, of shifts and intrigues. He would be thirty-one in November. Would he never get a good job? Would he never have a home of his own? He thought how pleasant it would be to have a warm fire to sit by and a good dinner to sit down to. He had walked the streets long enough with friends and with girls. He knew what those friends were worth: he knew the girls too. Experience had embittered his heart against the world. But all hope had not left him. He felt better after having eaten than he had felt before, less weary of his life, less vanquished in spirit. He might yet be able to settle down in some snug corner and live happily if he could only come across some good simple-minded girl with a little of the ready.

He paid twopence halfpenny to the slatternly girl and went out of the shop to begin his wandering again. He went into Capel Street and walked along towards the City Hall. Then he turned into Dame Street. At the corner of George's Street he met two friends of his and stopped to converse with them. He was glad that he could rest from all his walking. His friends asked him had he seen Corley and what was the latest. He replied that he had spent the day with Corley. His friends talked very little. They looked vacantly after some figures in the crowd and sometimes made a critical remark. One said that he had seen Mac an hour before in Westmoreland Street. At this Lenehan said that he had been with Mac the night before in Egan's. The young man who had seen Mac in Westmoreland Street asked was it true that Mac had won a bit over a billiard match. Lenehan did not know: he said that Holohan had stood them drinks in Egan's.

He left his friends at a quarter to ten and went up George's Street. He turned to the left at the City Markets and walked on into Grafton Street. The crowd of girls and young men had thinned and on his way up the street he heard many groups and couples bidding one another good-night. He went as far as the clock of the College of Surgeons: it was on the stroke of ten. He set off briskly along the northern side of the Green hurrying for fear Corley should return too soon. When he reached the corner of Merrion Street he took his stand in the shadow of a lamp and brought out one of the cigarettes which he had reserved and lit it. He leaned against the lamp-post and kept his gaze fixed on the part from which he expected to see Corley and the young woman return.

His mind became active again. He wondered had Corley managed it successfully. He wondered if he had asked her yet or if he would leave it to the last. He suffered all the pangs and thrills of his friend's situation as well as those of his own. But the memory of Corley's slowly revolving head calmed him somewhat: he was sure Corley would pull it off all right. All at once the idea struck him that perhaps Corley had seen her home by another way and given him the slip. His eyes searched the street: there was no sign of them. Yet it was surely half-an-hour since he had seen the clock of the College of Surgeons. Would Corley do a thing like that? He lit his last cigarette and began to smoke it nervously. He strained his eyes as each tram stopped at the far corner of the square. They must have gone home by another way. The paper of his cigarette broke and he flung it into the road with a curse.

Suddenly he saw them coming towards him. He started with delight and, keeping close to his lamp-post, tried to read the result in their walk. They were walking quickly, the young woman taking quick short steps, while Corley kept beside her with his long stride. They did not seem to be speaking. An intimation of the result pricked him like the point of a sharp instrument. He knew Corley would fail; he knew it was no go.

They turned down Baggot Street and he followed them at once, taking the other footpath. When they stopped he stopped too. They talked for a few moments and then the young woman went down the steps into the area of a house. Corley remained standing at the edge of the path, a little distance from the front steps. Some minutes passed. Then the hall-door was opened slowly and cautiously. A woman came running down the front steps and coughed. Corley turned and

went towards her. His broad figure hid hers from view for a few seconds and then she reappeared running up the steps. The door closed on her and Corley began to walk swiftly towards Stephen's Green.

Lenehan hurried on in the same direction. Some drops of light rain fell. He took them as a warning and, glancing back towards the house which the young woman had entered to see that he was not observed, he ran eagerly across the road. Anxiety and his swift run made him pant. He called out:

"Hallo, Corley!"

Corley turned his head to see who had called him, and then continued walking as before. Lenehan ran after him, settling the waterproof on his shoulders with one hand.

"Hallo, Corley!" he cried again.

He came level with his friend and looked keenly in his face. He could see nothing there.

"Well?" he said. "Did it come off?"

They had reached the corner of Ely Place. Still without answering, Corley swerved to the left and went up the side street. His features were composed in stern calm. Lenehan kept up with his friend, breathing uneasily. He was baffled and a note of menace pierced through his voice.

"Can't you tell us?" he said. "Did you try her?"

Corley halted at the first lamp and stared grimly before him. Then with a grave gesture he extended a hand towards the light and, smiling, opened it slowly to the gaze of his disciple. A small gold coin shone in the palm.



# The Madonna of the Future - Henry James

(1873)

We had been talking about the masters who had achieved but a single masterpiece — the artists and poets who but once in their lives had known the divine afflatus and touched the high level of perfection. Our host had been showing us a charming little cabinet picture by a painter whose name we had never heard, and who, after this single spasmodic bid for fame, had apparently relapsed into obscurity and mediocrity. There was some discussion as to the frequency of this phenomenon; during which, I observed, H\_\_ sat silent, finishing his cigar with a meditative air, and looking at the picture which was being handed round the table. "I don't know how common a case it is," he said at last, "but I have seen it. I have known a poor fellow who painted his one masterpiece, and" — he added with a smile — "he didn't even paint that. He made his bid for fame and missed it." We all knew H\_\_ for a clever man who had seen much of men and manners, and had a great stock of reminiscences. Some one immediately questioned him further, and while I was engrossed with the raptures of my neighbour over the little picture, he was induced to tell his tale. If I were to doubt whether it would bear repeating, I should only have to remember how that charming woman, our hostess, who had left the table, ventured back in rustling rose-colour to pronounce our lingering a want of gallantry, and, finding us a listening circle, sank into her chair in spite of our cigars, and heard the story out so graciously that, when the catastrophe was reached, she glanced across at me and showed me a tear in each of her beautiful eyes.

It relates to my youth, and to Italy: two fine things! (H\_\_ began). I had arrived late in the evening at Florence, and while I finished my bottle of wine at supper, had fancied that, tired traveller though I was, I might pay the city a finer compliment than by going vulgarly to bed. A narrow passage wandered darkly away out of the little square before my hotel, and looked as if it bored into the heart of Florence. I followed it, and at the end of ten minutes emerged upon a great piazza, filled only with the mild autumn moonlight. Opposite rose the Palazzo Vecchio, like some huge civic fortress, with the great bell-tower springing from its embattled verge as a mountain-pine from the edge of a cliff. At its base, in its projected shadow, gleamed certain dim sculptures which I wonderingly approached. One of the images, on the left of the palace door, was a magnificent colossus, shining through the dusky air like a sentinel who has taken the alarm. In a moment I recognised him as Michael Angelo's *David*. I turned with a certain relief from his sinister strength to a slender figure in bronze, stationed beneath the high light loggia, which opposes the free and elegant span of its arches to the dead masonry of the palace; a figure supremely shapely and graceful; gentle, almost, in spite of his holding out with his light nervous arm the snaky head of the slaughtered Gorgon. His name is Perseus, and you may read his story, not in the Greek mythology, but in the memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini. Glancing from one of these fine fellows to the other, I probably uttered some irrepressible commonplace of praise, for, as if provoked by my voice, a man rose from the steps of the loggia, where he had been sitting in the shadow, and addressed me in good English — a small, slim personage, clad in a sort of black velvet tunic (as it seemed), and with a mass of auburn hair, which gleamed in the moonlight, escaping from a little mediæval birretta. In a tone of the most insinuating deference he asked me for my "impressions." He seemed picturesque, fantastic, slightly unreal. Hovering there in this consecrated neighbourhood, he might have passed for the genius of æsthetic hospitality — if the genius of æsthetic hospitality were not commonly some shabby little custode, flourishing a calico pocket-handkerchief and openly resentful of the divided franc. This analogy was made none the less complete by the brilliant tirade with which he greeted my embarrassed silence.

"I have known Florence long, sir, but I have never known her so lovely as tonight. It's as if the

ghosts of her past were abroad in the empty streets. The present is sleeping; the past hovers about us like a dream made visible. Fancy the old Florentines strolling up in couples to pass judgment on the last performance of Michael, of Benvenuto! We should come in for a precious lesson if we might overhear what they say. The plainest burgher of them, in his cap and gown, had a taste in the matter! That was the prime of art, sir. The sun stood high in heaven, and his broad and equal blaze made the darkest places bright and the dullest eyes clear. We live in the evening of time! We grope in the gray dusk, carrying each our poor little taper of selfish and painful wisdom, holding it up to the great models and to the dim idea, and seeing nothing but overwhelming greatness and dimness. The days of illumination are gone! But do you know I fancy — I fancy" — and he grew suddenly almost familiar in this visionary fervour — "I fancy the light of that time rests upon us here for an hour! I have never seen the David so grand, the Perseus so fair! Even the inferior productions of John of Bologna and of Baccio Bandinelli seem to realise the artist's dream. I feel as if the moonlit air were charged with the secrets of the masters, and as if, standing here in religious attention, we might — we might witness a revelation!" Perceiving at this moment, I suppose, my halting comprehension reflected in my puzzled face, this interesting rhapsodist paused and blushed. Then with a melancholy smile, "You think me a moonstruck charlatan, I suppose. It's not my habit to bang about the piazza and pounce upon innocent tourists. But tonight, I confess, I am under the charm. And then, somehow, I fancied you too were an artist!"

"I am not an artist, I am sorry to say, as you must understand the term. But pray make no apologies. I am also under the charm; your eloquent remarks have only deepened it."

"If you are not an artist you are worthy to be one!" he rejoined, with an expressive smile. "A young man who arrives at Florence late in the evening, and, instead of going prosaically to bed, or hanging over the traveller's book at his hotel, walks forth without loss of time to pay his devoirs to the beautiful, is a young man after my own heart!"

The mystery was suddenly solved; my friend was an American! He must have been, to take the picturesque so prodigiously to heart. "None the less so, I trust," I answered, "if the young man is a sordid New Yorker."

"New Yorkers have been munificent patrons of art!" he answered, urbanely.

For a moment I was alarmed. Was this midnight reverie mere Yankee enterprise, and was he simply a desperate brother of the brush who had posted himself here to extort an "order" from a sauntering tourist? But I was not called to defend myself. A great brazen note broke suddenly from the far-off summit of the bell-tower above us, and sounded the first stroke of midnight. My companion started, apologised for detaining me, and prepared to retire. But he seemed to offer so lively a promise of further entertainment that I was indisposed to part with him, and suggested that we should stroll homeward together. He cordially assented; so we turned out of the Piazza, passed down before the statued arcade of the Uffizi, and came out upon the Arno. What course we took I hardly remember, but we roamed slowly about for an hour, my companion delivering by snatches a sort of moon-touched æsthetic lecture. I listened in puzzled fascination, and wondered who the deuce he was. He confessed with a melancholy but all-respectful head-shake to his American origin.

"We are the disinherited of Art!" he cried. "We are condemned to be superficial! We are excluded from the magic circle. The soil of American perception is a poor little barren artificial deposit. Yes! we are wedded to imperfection. An American, to excel, has just ten times as much to learn as a European. We lack the deeper sense. We have neither taste, nor tact, nor power. How should we have them? Our crude and garish climate, our silent past, our deafening present, the constant pressure about us of unlovely circumstance, are as void of all that nourishes and prompts and inspires the artist, as my sad heart is void of bitterness in saying so! We poor aspirants must live in perpetual exile."

"You seem fairly at home in exile," I answered, "and Florence seems to me a very pretty

Siberia. But do you know my own thought? Nothing is so idle as to talk about our want of a nutritive soil, of opportunity, of inspiration, and all the rest of it. The worthy part is to do something fine! There is no law in our glorious Constitution against that. Invent, create, achieve! No matter if you have to study fifty times as much as one of these! What else are you an artist for? Be you our Moses," I added, laughing, and laying my hand on his shoulder, "and lead us out of the house of bondage!"

"Golden words — golden words, young man!" he cried, with a tender smile. "Invent, create, achieve! Yes, that's our business; I know it well. Don't take me, in Heaven's name, for one of your barren complainers — impotent cynics who have neither talent nor faith! I am at work!" — and he glanced about him and lowered his voice as if this were a quite peculiar secret — "I'm at work night and day. I have undertaken a *creation*! I am no Moses; I am only a poor patient artist; but it would be a fine thing if I were to cause some slender stream of beauty to flow in our thirsty land! Don't think me a monster of conceit," he went on, as he saw me smile at the avidity with which he adopted my illustration; "I confess that I am in one of those moods when great things seem possible! This is one of my nervous nights — I dream waking! When the south wind blows over Florence at midnight it seems to coax the soul from all the fair things locked away in her churches and galleries; it comes into my own little studio with the moonlight, and sets my heart beating too deeply for rest. You see I am always adding a thought to my conception! This evening I felt that I couldn't sleep unless I had communed with the genius of Buonarrotti!"

He seemed deeply versed in local history and tradition, and he expatiated *con amore* on the charms of Florence. I gathered that he was an old resident, and that he had taken the lovely city into his heart. "I owe her everything," he declared. "It's only since I came here that I have really lived, intellectually. One by one, all profane desires, all mere worldly aims, have dropped away from me, and left me nothing but my pencil, my little note-book" (and he tapped his breast-pocket), "and the worship of the pure masters — those who were pure because they were innocent, and those who were pure because they were strong!"

"And have you been very productive all this time?" I asked sympathetically.

He was silent a while before replying. "Not in the vulgar sense!" he said at last. "I have chosen never to manifest myself by imperfection. The good in every performance I have re-absorbed into the generative force of new creations; the bad — there is always plenty of that — I have religiously destroyed. I may say, with some satisfaction, that I have not added a mite to the rubbish of the world. As a proof of my conscientiousness" — and he stopped short, and eyed me with extraordinary candour, as if the proof were to be overwhelming — "I have never sold a picture! 'At least no merchant traffics in my heart!' Do you remember that divine line in Browning? My little studio has never been profaned by superficial, feverish, mercenary work. It's a temple of labour, but of leisure! Art is long. If we work for ourselves, of course we must hurry. If we work for her, we must often pause. She can wait!"

This had brought us to my hotel door, somewhat to my relief, I confess, for I had begun to feel unequal to the society of a genius of this heroic strain. I left him, however, not without expressing a friendly hope that we should meet again. The next morning my curiosity had not abated; I was anxious to see him by common daylight. I counted upon meeting him in one of the many pictorial haunts of Florence, and I was gratified without delay. I found him in the course of the morning in the Tribune of the Uffizi — that little treasure-chamber of world-famous things. He had turned his back on the Venus de' Medici, and with his arms resting on the rail-mug which protects the pictures, and his head buried in his hands, he was lost in the contemplation of that superb triptych of Andrea Mantegna — a work which has neither the material splendour nor the commanding force of some of its neighbours, but which, glowing there — with the loveliness of patient labour, suits possibly a more constant need of the soul. I looked at the picture for some time over his shoulder; at last, with a heavy sigh, he turned away and our eyes met. As he recognised me a deep blush rose to his face; he fancied, perhaps, that he had made a fool of

himself overnight. But I offered him my hand with a friendliness which assured him I was not a scoffer. I knew him by his ardent *chevelure*; otherwise he was much altered. His midnight mood was over, and he looked as haggard as an actor by daylight. He was far older than I had supposed, and he had less bravery of costume and gesture. He seemed the quiet, poor, patient artist he had proclaimed himself, and the fact that he had never sold a picture was more obvious than glorious. His velvet coat was threadbare, and his short slouched hat, of an antique pattern, revealed a rustiness which marked it an "original," and not one of the picturesque reproductions which brethren of his craft affect. His eye was mild and heavy, and his expression singularly gentle and acquiescent; the more so for a certain pallid leanness of visage, which I hardly knew whether to refer to the consuming fire of genius or to a meagre diet. A very little talk, however, cleared his brow and brought back his eloquence.

"And this is your first visit to these enchanted halls?" he cried. "Happy, thrice happy youth!" And taking me by the arm, he prepared to lead me to each of the pre-eminent works in turn and show me the cream of the gallery. But before we left the Mantegna he pressed my arm and gave it a loving look. "*He* was not in a hurry," he murmured. "He knew nothing of 'raw Haste, half-sister to Delay!'" How sound a critic my friend was I am unable to say, but he was an extremely amusing one; overflowing with opinions, theories, and sympathies, with disquisition and gossip and anecdote. He was a shade too sentimental for my own sympathies, and I fancied he was rather too fond of superfine discriminations and of discovering subtle intentions in shallow places. At moments, too, he plunged into the sea of metaphysics, and floundered a while in waters too deep for intellectual security. But his abounding knowledge and happy judgment told a touching story of long attentive hours in this worshipful company; there was a reproach to my wasteful saunterings in so devoted a culture of opportunity. "There are two moods," I remember his saying, "in which we may walk through galleries — the critical and the ideal. They seize us at their pleasure, and we can never tell which is to take its turn. The critical mood, oddly, is the genial one, the friendly, the condescending. It relishes the pretty trivialities of art, its vulgar cleverness, its conscious graces. It has a kindly greeting for anything which looks as if, according to his light, the painter had enjoyed doing it — for the little Dutch cabbages and kettles, for the taper fingers and breezy mantles of late-coming Madonnas, for the little blue-hilled, pastoral, sceptical Italian landscapes. Then there are the days of fierce, fastidious longing — solemn church feasts of the intellect — when all vulgar effort and all petty success is a weariness, and everything but the best — the best of the best — disgusts. In these hours we are relentless aristocrats of taste. We will not take Michael Angelo for granted, we will not swallow Raphael whole!"

The gallery of the Uffizi is not only rich in its possessions, but peculiarly fortunate in that fine architectural accident, as one may call it, which unites it — with the breadth of river and city between them — to those princely chambers of the Pitti Palace. The Louvre and the Vatican hardly give you such a sense of sustained enclosure as those long passages projected over street and stream to establish a sort of inviolate transition between the two palaces of art. We passed along the gallery in which those precious drawings by eminent hands hang chaste and gray above the swirl and murmur of the yellow Arno, and reached the ducal saloons of the Pitti. Ducal as they are, it must be confessed that they are imperfect as show-rooms, and that, with their deep-set windows and their massive mouldings, it is rather a broken light that reaches the pictured walls. But here the masterpieces hang thick, and you seem to see them in a luminous atmosphere of their own. And the great saloons, with their superb dim ceilings, their outer wall in splendid shadow, and the sombre opposite glow of mellow canvas and dusky gilding, make, themselves, almost as fine a picture as the Titians and Raphaels they imperfectly reveal. We lingered briefly before many a Raphael and Titian; but I saw my friend was impatient, and I suffered him at last to lead me directly to the goal of our journey — the most tenderly fair of Raphael's virgins, the Madonna in the Chair. Of all the fine pictures of the world, it seemed to me this is the one with

which criticism has least to do. None betrays less effort, less of the mechanism of success and of the irrepressible discord between conception and result, which shows dimly in so many consummate works. Graceful, human, near to our sympathies as it is, it has nothing of manner, of method, nothing, almost, of style; it blooms there in rounded softness, as instinct with harmony as if it were an immediate exhalation of genius. The figure melts away the spectator's mind into a sort of passionate tenderness which he knows not whether he has given to heavenly purity or to earthly charm. He is intoxicated with the fragrance of the tenderest blossom of maternity that ever bloomed on earth.

"That's what I call a fine picture," said my companion, after we had gazed a while in silence. "I have a right to say so, for I have copied it so often and so carefully that I could repeat it now with my eyes shut. Other works are of Raphael: this *is* Raphael himself. Others you can praise, you can qualify, you can measure, explain, account for: this you can only love and admire. I don't know in what seeming he walked among men while this divine mood was upon him; but after it, surely, he could do nothing but die; this world had nothing more to teach him. Think of it a while, my friend, and you will admit that I am not raving. Think of his seeing that spotless image, not for a moment, for a day, in a happy dream, or a restless fever-fit; not as a poet in a five minutes' frenzy — time to snatch his phrase and scribble his immortal stanza; but for days together, while the slow labour of the brush went on, while the foul vapours of life interposed, and the fancy ached with tension, fixed, radiant, distinct, as we see it now! What a master, certainly! But ah! what a seer!"

"Don't you imagine," I answered, "that he had a model, and that some pretty young woman —"

"As pretty a young woman as you please! It doesn't diminish the miracle! He took his hint, of course, and the young woman, possibly, sat smiling before his canvas. But, meanwhile, the painter's idea had taken wings. No lovely human outline could charm it to vulgar fact. He saw the fair form made perfect; he rose to the vision without tremor, without effort of wing; he communed with it face to face, and resolved into finer and lovelier truth the purity which completes it as the fragrance completes the rose. That's what they call idealism; the word's vastly abused, but the thing is good. It's my own creed, at any rate. Lovely Madonna, model at once and muse, I call you to witness that I too am an idealist!"

"An idealist, then," I said, half jocosely, wishing to provoke him to further utterance, "is a gentleman who says to Nature in the person of a beautiful girl, 'Go to, you are all wrong! Your fine is coarse, your bright is dim, your grace is *gaucherie*. This is the way you should have done it!' Is not the chance against him?"

He turned upon me almost angrily, but perceiving the genial savour of my sarcasm, he smiled gravely. "Look at that picture," he said, "and cease your irreverent mockery! Idealism is *that*! There's no explaining it; one must feel the flame! It says nothing to Nature, or to any beautiful girl, that they will not both forgive! It says to the fair woman, 'Accept me as your artist friend, lend me your beautiful face, trust me, help me, and your eyes shall be half my masterpiece!' No one so loves and respects the rich realities of nature as the artist whose imagination caresses and flatters them. He knows what a fact may hold (whether Raphael knew, you may judge by his portrait, behind us there, of Tommaso Inghirami); bad his fancy hovers above it, as Ariel hovered above the sleeping prince. There is only one Raphael, bad an artist may still be an artist. As I said last night, the days of illumination are gone; visions are rare; we have to look long to see them. But in meditation we may still cultivate the ideal; round it, smooth it, perfect it. The result — the result," (here his voice faltered suddenly, and he fixed his eyes for a moment on the picture; when they met my own again they were full of tears) — "the result may be less than this; but still it may be good, it may be *great*!" he cried with vehemence. "It may hang somewhere, in after years, in goodly company, and keep the artist's memory warm. Think of being known to mankind after some such fashion as this! of hanging here through the slow centuries in the gaze

of an altered world; living on and on in the cunning of an eye and hand that are part of the dust of ages, a delight and a law to remote generations; making beauty a force and purity an example!"

"Heaven forbid," I said, smiling, "that I should take the wind out of your sails! But doesn't it occur to you that, besides being strong in his genius, Raphael was happy in a certain good faith of which we have lost the trick? There are people, I know, who deny that his spotless Madonnas are anything more than pretty blondes of that period enhanced by the Raphaellesque touch, which they declare is a profane touch. Be that as it may, people's religious and æsthetic needs went arm in arm, and there was, as I may say, a demand for the Blessed Virgin, visible and adorable, which must have given firmness to the artist's hand. I am afraid there is no demand now."

My companion seemed painfully puzzled; he shivered, as it were, in this chilling blast of scepticism. Then shaking his head with sublime confidence — "There is always a demand!" he cried; "that ineffable type is one of the eternal needs of man's heart; but pious souls long for it in silence, almost in shame. Let it appear, and their faith grows brave. How *should* it appear in this corrupt generation? It cannot be made to order. It could, indeed, when the order came, trumpet-toned, from the lips of the Church herself, and was addressed to genius panting with inspiration. But it can spring now only from the soil of passionate labour and culture. Do you really fancy that while, from time to time, a man of complete artistic vision is born into the world, that image can perish? The man who paints it has painted everything. The subject admits of every perfection — form, colour, expression, composition. It can be as simple as you please, and yet as rich; as broad and pure, and yet as full of delicate detail. Think of the chance for flesh in the little naked, nestling child, irradiating divinity; of the chance for drapery in the chaste and ample garment of the mother! think of the great story you compress into that simple theme! Think, above all, of the mother's face and its ineffable suggestiveness, of the mingled burden of joy and trouble, the tenderness turned to worship, and the worship turned to far-seeing pity! Then look at it all in perfect line and lovely colour, breathing truth and beauty and mastery!"

"Anch' io son pittore!" I cried. "Unless I am mistaken, you have a masterpiece on the stocks. If you put all that in, you will do more than Raphael himself did. Let me know when your picture is finished, and wherever in the wide world I may be, I will post back to Florence and pay my respects to — the *Madonna of the future!*"

He blushed vividly and gave a heavy sigh, half of protest, half of resignation. "I don't often mention my picture by name. I detest this modern custom of premature publicity. A great work needs silence, privacy, mystery even. And then, do you know, people are so cruel, so frivolous, so unable to imagine a man's wishing to paint a Madonna at this time of day, that I have been laughed at — laughed at, sir!" and his blush deepened to crimson. "I don't know what has prompted me to be so frank and trustful with you. You look as if you wouldn't laugh at me. My dear young man" — and he laid his hand on my arm — "I am worthy of respect. Whatever my talents may be, I am honest. There is nothing grotesque in a pure ambition, or in a life devoted to it."

There was something so sternly sincere in his look and tone that further questions seemed impertinent. I had repeated opportunity to ask them, however, for after this we spent much time together. Daily for a fortnight, we met by appointment, to see the sights. He knew the city so well, he had strolled and lounged so often through its streets and churches and galleries, he was so deeply versed in its greater and lesser memories, so imbued with the local genius, that he was an altogether ideal *valet de place*, and I was glad enough to leave my Murray at home, and gather facts and opinions alike from his gossiping commentary. He talked of Florence like a lover, and admitted that it was a very old affair; he had lost his heart to her at first sight. "It's the fashion to talk of all cities as feminine," he said, "but, as a rule, it's a monstrous mistake. Is Florence of the same sex as New York, as Chicago? She is the sole perfect lady of them all; one feels towards her as a lad in his teens feels to some beautiful older woman with a 'history.' She fills you with a sort of aspiring gallantry." This disinterested passion seemed to stand my friend in stead of the

common social ties; he led a lonely life, and cared for nothing but his work. I was duly flattered by his having taken my frivolous self into his favour, and by his generous sacrifice of precious hours to my society. We spent many of these hours among those early paintings in which Florence is so rich, returning ever and anon, with restless sympathies, to wonder whether these tender blossoms of art had not a vital fragrance and savour more precious than the full-fruited knowledge of the later works. We lingered often in the sepulchral chapel of San Lorenzo, and watched Michael Angelo's dim-visaged warrior sitting there like some awful Genius of Doubt and brooding behind his eternal mask upon the mysteries of life. We stood more than once in the little convent chambers where Fra Angelico wrought as if an angel indeed had held his hand, and gathered that sense of scattered dews and early bird-notes which makes an hour among his relics seem like a morning stroll in some monkish garden. We did all this and much more — wandered into dark chapels, damp courts, and dusty palace-rooms, in quest of lingering hints of fresco and lurking treasures of carving.

I was more and more impressed with my companion's remarkable singleness of purpose. Everything was a pretext for some wildly idealistic rhapsody or reverie. Nothing could be seen or said that did not lead him sooner or later to a glowing discourse on the true, the beautiful, and the good. If my friend was not a genius, he was certainly a monomaniac; and I found as great a fascination in watching the odd lights and shades of his character as if he had been a creature from another planet. He seemed, indeed, to know very little of this one, and lived and moved altogether in his own little province of art. A creature more unsullied by the world it is impossible to conceive, and I often thought it a flaw in his artistic character that he had not a harmless vice or two. It amused me greatly at times to think that he was of our shrewd Yankee race; but, after all, there could be no better token of his American origin than this high æsthetic fever. The very heat of his devotion was a sign of conversion; those born to European opportunity manage better to reconcile enthusiasm with comfort. He had, moreover, all our native mistrust for intellectual discretion, and our native relish for sonorous superlatives. As a critic he was very much more generous than just, and his mildest terms of approbation were "stupendous," "transcendent," and "incomparable." The small change of admiration seemed to him no coin for a gentleman to handle; and yet, frank as he was intellectually, he was personally altogether a mystery. His professions, somehow, were all half-professions, and his allusions to his work and circumstances left something dimly ambiguous in the background. He was modest and proud, and never spoke of his domestic matters. He was evidently poor; yet he must have had some slender independence, since he could afford to make so merry over the fact that his culture of ideal beauty had never brought him a penny. His poverty, I supposed, was his motive for neither inviting me to his lodging nor mentioning its whereabouts. We met either in some public place or at my hotel, where I entertained him as freely as I might without appearing to be prompted by charity. He seemed always hungry, and this was his nearest approach to human grossness. I made a point of asking no impertinent questions, but, each time we met, I ventured to make some respectful allusion to the *magnum opus*, to inquire, as it were, as to its health and progress. "We are getting on, with the Lord's help," he would say, with a grave smile. "We are doing well. You see, I have the grand advantage that I lose no time. These hours I spend with you are pure profit. They are *suggestive*! Just as the truly religious soul is always at worship, the genuine artist is always in labour. He takes his property wherever he finds it, and learns some precious secret from every object that stands up in the light. If you but knew the rapture of observation! I gather with every glance some hint for light, for colour, or relief! When I get home, I pour out my treasures into the lap of toy Madonna. Oh, I am not idle! *Nulla dies sine linea.*"

I was introduced in Florence to an American lady whose drawing-room had long formed an attractive place of reunion for the foreign residents. She lived on a fourth floor, and she was not rich; but she offered her visitors very good tea, little cakes at option, and conversation not quite

to match. Her conversation had mainly an æsthetic flavour, for Mrs. Coventry was famously "artistic." Her apartment was a sort of Pitti Palace *au petit pied*. She possessed "early masters" by the dozen — a cluster of Peruginos in her dining-room, a Giotto in her boudoir, an Andrea del Sarto over her drawing-room chimney-piece. Surrounded by these treasures, and by innumerable bronzes, mosaics, majolica dishes, and little worm-eaten diptychs covered with angular saints on gilded backgrounds, our hostess enjoyed the dignity of a sort of high-priestess of the arts. She always wore on her bosom a huge miniature copy of the Madonna della Seggiola. Gaining her ear quietly one evening, I asked her whether she knew that remarkable man, Mr. Theobald.

"Know him!" she exclaimed; "know poor Theobald! All Florence knows him, his flame-coloured locks, his black velvet coat, his interminable harangues on the beautiful, and his wondrous Madonna that mortal eye has never seen, and that mortal patience has quite given up expecting."

"Really," I cried, "you don't believe in his Madonna?"

"My dear ingenuous youth," rejoined my shrewd friend, "has he made a convert of you? Well, we all believed in him once; he came down upon Florence and took the town by storm. Another Raphael, at the very least, had been born among men, and the poor dear United States were to have the credit of him. Hadn't he the very hair of Raphael flowing down on his shoulders? The hair, alas, but not the head! We swallowed him whole, however; we hung upon his lips and proclaimed his genius on the house-tops. The women were all dying to sit to him for their portraits and be made immortal, like Leonardo's Joconde. We decided that his manner was a good deal like Leonardo's — mysterious, and inscrutable, and fascinating. Mysterious it certainly was; mystery was the beginning and the end of it. The months passed by, and the miracle hung fire; our master never produced his masterpiece. He passed hours in the galleries and churches, posturing, musing, and gazing; he talked more than ever about the beautiful, but he never put brush to canvas. We had all subscribed, as it were, to the great performance; but as it never came off people began to ask for their money again. I was one of the last of the faithful; I carried devotion so far as to sit to him for my head. If you could have seen the horrible creature he made of me, you would admit that even a woman with no more vanity than will tie her bonnet straight must have cooled off then. The man didn't know the very alphabet of drawing! His strong point, he intimated, was his sentiment; but is it a consolation, when one has been painted a fright, to know it has been done with peculiar gusto? One by one, I confess, we fell away from the faith, and Mr. Theobald didn't lift his little finger to preserve us. At the first hint that we were tired of waiting, and that we should like the show to begin, he was off in a huff. 'Great work requires time, contemplation, privacy, mystery! O ye of little faith!' We answered that we didn't insist on a great work; that the five-act tragedy might come at his convenience; that we merely asked for something to keep us from yawning, some inexpensive little *lever de rideau*. Hereupon the poor man took his stand as a genius misconceived and persecuted, an *âme méconnue*, and washed his hands of us from that hour! No, I believe he does me the honour to consider me the head and front of the conspiracy formed to nip his glory in the bud — a bud that has taken twenty years to blossom. Ask him if he knows me, and he will tell you I am a horribly ugly old woman, who has vowed his destruction because he won't paint her portrait as a pendant to Titian's Flora. I fancy that since then he has had none but chance followers, innocent strangers like yourself, who have taken him at his word. The mountain is still in labour; I have not heard that the mouse has been born. I pass him once in a while in the galleries, and he fixes his great dark eyes on me with a sublimity of indifference, as if I were a bad copy of a Sassoferrato! It is a long time ago now that I heard that he was making studies for a Madonna who was to be a *résumé* of all the other Madonnas of the Italian school — like that antique Venus who borrowed a nose from one great image and an ankle from another. It's certainly a masterly idea. The parts may be fine, but when I think of my unhappy portrait I tremble for the whole. He has communicated this striking idea under the pledge of solemn secrecy to fifty chosen spirits, to every one he has ever been able to



button-hole for five minutes. I suppose he wants to get an order for it, and he is not to blame; for Heaven knows how he lives. I see by your blush," my hostess frankly continued, "that you have been honoured with his confidence. You needn't be ashamed, my dear young man; a man of your age is none the worse for a certain generous credulity. Only allow me to give you a word of advice: keep your credulity out of your pockets! Don't pay for the picture till it's delivered. You have not been treated to a peep at it, I imagine! No more have your fifty predecessors in the faith. There are people who doubt whether there is any picture to be seen. I fancy, myself, that if one were to get into his studio, one would find something very like the picture in that tale of Balzac's — a mere mass of incoherent scratches and daubs, a jumble of dead paint!"

I listened to this pungent recital in silent wonder. It had a painfully plausible sound, and was not inconsistent with certain shy suspicions of my own. My hostess was not only a clever woman, but presumably a generous one. I determined to let my judgment wait upon events. Possibly she was right; but if she was wrong, she was cruelly wrong! Her version of my friend's eccentricities made me impatient to see him again and examine him in the light of public opinion. On our next meeting I immediately asked him if he knew Mrs. Coventry. He laid his hand on my arm and gave me a sad smile. "Has she taxed *your* gallantry at last?" he asked. "She's a foolish woman. She's frivolous and heartless, and she pretends to be serious and kind. She prattles about Giotto's second manner and Vittoria Colonna's liaison with 'Michael' — one would think that Michael lived across the way and was expected in to take a hand at whist — but she knows as little about art, and about the conditions of production, as I know about Buddhism. She profanes sacred words," he added more vehemently, after a pause. "She cares for you only as some one to band teacups in that horrible mendacious little parlour of hers, with its trumpery Peruginos! If you can't dash off a new picture every three days, and let her hand it round among her guests, she tells them in plain English that you are an impostor!"

This attempt of mine to test Mrs. Coventry's accuracy was made in the course of a late afternoon walk to the quiet old church of San Miniato, on one of the hill-tops which directly overlook the city, from whose gates you are guided to it by a stony and cypress-bordered walk, which seems a very fitting avenue to a shrine. No spot is more propitious to lingering repose than the broad terrace in front of the church, where, lounging against the parapet, you may glance in slow alternation from the black and yellow marbles of the church façade, seamed and cracked with time and wind-sown with a tender flora of its own, down to the full domes and slender towers of Florence and over to the blue sweep of the wide-mouthed cup of mountains into whose hollow the little treasure city has been dropped. I had proposed, as a diversion from the painful memories evoked by Mrs. Coventry's name, that Theobald should go with me the next evening to the opera, where some rarely-played work was to be given. He declined, as I half expected, for I observed that he regularly kept his evenings in reserve, and never alluded to his manner of passing them. "You have reminded me before," I said, smiling, "of that charming speech of the Florentine painter in Alfred de Musset's 'Lorenzaccio': 'I do no harm to anyone. I pass my days in my studio, On Sunday I go to the Annunziata or to Santa Mario; the monks think I have a voice; they dress me in a white gown and a red cap, and I take a share in the choruses; sometimes I do a little solo: these are the only times I go into public. In the evening, I visit my sweetheart; when the night is fine, we pass it on her balcony.' I don't know whether you have a sweetheart, or whether she has a balcony. But if you are so happy, it's certainly better than trying to find a charm in a third-rate prima donna."

He made no immediate response, but at last he turned to me solemnly. "Can you look upon a beautiful woman with reverent eyes?"

"Really," I said, "I don't pretend to be sheepish, but I should be sorry to think I was impudent." And I asked him what in the world he meant. When at last I had assured him that I could undertake to temper admiration with respect, he informed me, with an air of religious mystery, that it was in his power to introduce me to the most beautiful woman in Italy — "A

beauty with a soul!"

"Upon my word," I cried, "you are extremely fortunate, and that is a most attractive description."

"This woman's beauty," he went on, "is a lesson, a morality, a poem! It's my daily study."

Of course, after this, I lost no time in reminding him of what, before we parted, had taken the shape of a promise. "I feel somehow," he had said, "as if it were a sort of violation of that privacy in which I have always contemplated her beauty. This is friendship, my friend. No hint of her existence has ever fallen from my lips. But with too great a familiarity we are apt to lose a sense of the real value of things, and you perhaps will throw some new light upon it and offer a fresher interpretation."

We went accordingly by appointment to a certain ancient house in the heart of Florence — the precinct of the Mercato Vecchio — and climbed a dark, steep staircase, to the very summit of the edifice. Theobald's beauty seemed as loftily exalted above the line of common vision as his artistic ideal was lifted above the usual practice of men. He passed without knocking into the dark vestibule of a small apartment, and, flinging open an inner door, ushered me into a small saloon. The room seemed mean and sombre, though I caught a glimpse of white curtains swaying gently at an open window. At a table, near a lamp, sat a woman dressed in black, working at a piece of embroidery. As Theobald entered she looked up calmly, with a smile; but seeing me she made a movement of surprise, and rose with a kind of stately grace. Theobald stepped forward, took her hand and kissed it, with an indescribable air of immemorial usage. As he bent his head she looked at me askance, and I thought she blushed.

"Behold the Serafina!" said Theobald, frankly, waving me forward. "This is a friend, and a lover of the arts," he added, introducing me. I received a smile, a curtsy, and a request to be seated.

The most beautiful woman in Italy was a person of a generous Italian type and of a great simplicity of demeanour. Seated again at her lamp, with her embroidery, she seemed to have nothing whatever to say. Theobald, bending towards her in a sort of Platonic ecstasy, asked her a dozen paternally tender questions as to her health, her state of mind, her occupations, and the progress of her embroidery, which he examined minutely and summoned me to admire. It was some portion of an ecclesiastical vestment — yellow satin wrought with an elaborate design of silver and gold. She made answer in a full rich voice, but with a brevity which I hesitated whether to attribute to native reserve or to the profane constraint of my presence. She had been that morning to confession; she had also been to market, and had bought a chicken for dinner. She felt very happy; she had nothing to complain of except that the people for whom she was making her vestment, and who furnished her materials, should be willing to put such rotten silver thread into the garment, as one might say, of the Lord. From time to time, as she took her slow stitches, she raised her eyes and covered me with a glance which seemed at first to denote a placid curiosity, but in which, as I saw it repeated, I thought I perceived the dim glimmer of an attempt to establish an understanding with me at the expense of our companion. Meanwhile, as mindful as possible of Theobald's injunction of reverence, I considered the lady's personal claims to the fine compliment he had paid her.

That she was indeed a beautiful woman I perceived, after recovering from the surprise of finding her without the freshness of youth. Her beauty was of a sort which, in losing youth, loses little of its essential charm, expressed for the most part as it was in form and structure, and, as Theobald would have said, in "composition." She was broad and ample, low-browed and large-eyed, dark and pale. Her thick brown hair hung low beside her cheek and ear, and seemed to drape her head with a covering as chaste and formal as the veil of a nun. The poise and carriage of her head were admirably free and noble, and they were the more effective that their freedom was at moments discreetly corrected by a little sanctimonious droop, which harmonised admirably with the level gaze of her dark and quiet eye. A strong, serene, physical nature, and

the placid temper which comes of no nerves and no troubles, seemed this lady's comfortable portion. She was dressed in plain dull black, save for a sort of dark blue kerchief which was folded across her bosom and exposed a glimpse of her massive throat. Over this kerchief was suspended a little silver cross. I admired her greatly, and yet with a large reserve. A certain mild intellectual apathy belonged properly to her type of beauty, and had always seemed to round and enrich it; but this *bourgeoise* Egeria, if I viewed her right, betrayed a rather vulgar stagnation of mind. There might have been once a dim spiritual light in her face; but it had long since begun to wane. And furthermore, in plain prose, she was growing stout. My disappointment amounted very nearly to complete disenchantment when Theobald, as if to facilitate my covert inspection, declaring that the lamp was very dim, and that she would ruin her eyes without more light, rose and fetched a couple of candles from the mantelpiece, which he placed lighted on the table. In this brighter illumination I perceived that our hostess was decidedly an elderly woman. She was neither haggard, nor worn, nor gray; she was simply coarse. The "soul" which Theobald had promised seemed scarcely worth making such a point of; it was no deeper mystery than a sort of matronly mildness of lip and brow. I should have been ready even to declare that that sanctified bend of the head was nothing more than the trick of a person constantly working at embroidery. It occurred to me even that it was a trick of a less innocent sort; for, in spite of the mellow quietude of her wits, this stately needlewoman dropped a hint that she took the situation rather less seriously than her friend. When he rose to light the candles she looked across at me with a quick, intelligent smile, and tapped her forehead with her forefinger; then, as from a sudden feeling of compassionate loyalty to poor Theobald, I preserved a blank face, she gave a little shrug and resumed her work.

What was the relation of this singular couple? Was he the most ardent of friends or the most reverent of lovers? Did she regard him as an eccentric swain, whose benevolent admiration of her beauty she was not ill pleased to humour at this small cost of having him climb into her little parlour and gossip of summer nights? With her decent and sombre dress, her simple gravity, and that fine piece of priestly needlework, she looked like some pious lay-member of a sisterhood, living by special permission outside her convent walls. Or was she maintained here aloft by her friend in comfortable leisure, so that he might have before him the perfect, eternal type, uncorrupted and untarnished by the struggle for existence? Her shapely hands, I observed, wore very fair and white; they lacked the traces of what is called honest toil.

"And the pictures, how do they come on?" she asked of Theobald, after a long pause.

"Finely, finely! I have here a friend whose sympathy and encouragement give me new faith and ardour."

Our hostess turned to me, gazed at me a moment rather inscrutably, and then tapping her forehead with the gesture she had used a minute before, "He has a magnificent genius!" she said, with perfect gravity.

"I am inclined to think so," I answered, with a smile.

"Eh, why do you smile?" she cried. "If you doubt it, you must see the *bambino*!" And she took the lamp and conducted me to the other side of the room, where on the wall, in a plain black frame, hung a large drawing in red chalk. Beneath it was fastened a little howl for holy water. The drawing represented a very young child, entirely naked, half nestling back against his mother's gown, but with his two little arms outstretched, as if in the act of benediction. It was executed with singular freedom and power, and yet seemed vivid with the sacred bloom of infancy. A sort of dimpled elegance and grace, mingled with its boldness, recalled the touch of Correggio. "That's what he can do!" said my hostess. "It's the blessed little boy whom I lost. It's his very image, and the Signor Teobaldo gave it me as a gift. He has given me many things besides!"

I looked at the picture for some time and admired it immensely. Turning back to Theobald I assured him that if it were hung among the drawings in the Uffizi and labelled with a glorious

name it would hold its own. My praise seemed to give him extreme pleasure; he pressed my hands, and his eyes filled with tears. It moved him apparently with the desire to expatiate on the history of the drawing, for he rose and made his adieux to our companion, kissing her hand with the same mild ardour as before. It occurred to me that the offer of a similar piece of gallantry on my own part might help me to know what manner of woman she was. When she perceived my intention she withdrew her hand, dropped her eyes solemnly, and made me a severe curtsy. Theobald took my arm and led me rapidly into the street.

"And what do you think of the divine Serafina?" he cried with fervour.

"It is certainly an excellent style of good looks!" I answered.

He eyed me an instant askance, and then seemed hurried along by the current of remembrance. "You should have seen the mother and the child together, seen them as I first saw them — the mother with her head draped in a shawl, a divine trouble in her face, and the bambino pressed to her bosom. You would have said, I think, that Raphael had found his match in common chance. I was coming in, one summer night, from a long walk in the country, when I met this apparition at the city gate. The woman held out her hand. I hardly knew whether to say, 'What do you want?' or to fall down and worship. She asked for a little money. I saw that she was beautiful and pale; she might have stepped out of the stable of Bethlehem! I gave her money and helped her on her way into the town. I had guessed her story. She, too, was a maiden mother, and she had been turned out into the world in her shame. I felt in all my pulses that here was my subject marvellously realised. I felt like one of the old monkish artists who had had a vision. I rescued the poor creatures, cherished them, watched them as I would have done some precious work of art, some lovely fragment of fresco discovered in a mouldering cloister. In a month — as if to deepen and sanctify the sadness and sweetness of it all — the poor little child died. When she felt that he was going she held him up to me for ten minutes, and I made that sketch. You saw a feverish haste in it, I suppose; I wanted to spare the poor little mortal the pain of his position. After that I doubly valued the mother. She is the simplest, sweetest, most natural creature that ever bloomed in this brave old land of Italy. She lives in the memory of her child, in her gratitude for the scanty kindness I have been able to show her, and in her simple religion! She is not even conscious of her beauty; my admiration has never made her vain. Heaven knows that I have made no secret of it. You must have observed the singular transparency of her expression, the lovely modesty of her glance. And was there ever such a truly virginal brow, such a natural classic elegance in the wave of the hair and the arch of the forehead? I have studied her; I may say I know her. I have absorbed her little by little; my mind is stamped and imbued, and I have determined now to clinch the impression; I shall at last invite her to sit for me!"

"At last — at last?" I repeated, in much amazement. "Do you mean that she has never done so yet?"

"I have not really had — a — a sitting," said Theobald, speaking very slowly. "I have taken notes, you know; I have got my grand fundamental impression. That's the great thing! But I have not actually had her as a model, posed and draped and lighted, before my easel."

What had become for the moment of my perception and my tact I am at a loss to say; in their absence I was unable to repress a headlong exclamation. I was destined to regret it. We had stopped at a turning, beneath a lamp. "My poor friend," I exclaimed, laying my hand on his shoulder, "you have *dawdled*! She's an old, old woman — for a Madonna!"

It was as if I had brutally struck him; I shall never forget the long, slow, almost ghastly look of pain, with which he answered me.

"Dawdled? — old, old?" he stammered. "Are you joking?"

"Why, my dear fellow, I suppose you don't take her for a woman of twenty?"

He drew a long breath and leaned against a house, looking at me with questioning, protesting, reproachful eyes. At last, starting forward, and grasping my arm — "Answer me solemnly: does

she seem to you truly old? Is she wrinkled, is she faded, am I blind?"

Then at last I understood the immensity of his illusion how, one by one, the noiseless years had ebbed away and left him brooding in charmed inaction, for ever preparing for a work for ever deferred. It seemed to me almost a kindness now to tell him the plain truth. "I should be sorry to say you are blind," I answered, "but I think you are deceived. You have lost time in effortless contemplation. Your friend was once young and fresh and virginal; but, I protest, that was some years ago. Still, she has *de beaux restes*. By all means make her sit for you!" I broke down; his face was too horribly reproachful.

He took off his hat and stood passing his handkerchief mechanically over his forehead. "*De beaux restes*? I thank you for sparing me the plain English. I must make up my Madonna out of *de beaux restes*! What a masterpiece she will be! Old — old! Old — old!" he murmured.

"Never mind her age," I cried, revolted at what I had done, "never mind my impression of her! You have your memory, your notes, your genius. Finish your picture in a month. I pronounce it beforehand a masterpiece, and I hereby offer you for it any sum you may choose to ask."

He stared, but he seemed scarcely to understand me. "Old — old!" he kept stupidly repeating. "If she is old, what am I? If her beauty has faded, where — where is my strength? Has life been a dream? Have I worshipped too long — have I loved too well?" The charm, in truth, was broken. That the chord of illusion should have snapped at my light accidental touch showed how it had been weakened by excessive tension. The poor fellow's sense of wasted time, of vanished opportunity, seemed to roll in upon his soul in waves of darkness. He suddenly dropped his head and burst into tears.

I led him homeward with all possible tenderness, but I attempted neither to check his grief, to restore his equanimity, nor to unsay the hard truth. When we reached my hotel I tried to induce him to come so.

"We will drink a glass of wine," I said, smiling, "to the completion of the Madonna."

With a violent effort he held up his head, mused for a moment with a formidably sombre frown, and then giving me his hand, "I will finish it," he cried, "in a month! No, in a fortnight! After all, I have it *here*!" And he tapped his forehead. "Of course she's old! She can afford to have it said of her — a woman who has made twenty years pass like a twelvemonth! Old — old! Why, sir, she shall be eternal!"

I wished to see him safely to his own door, but he waved me back and walked away with an air of resolution, whistling and swinging his cane. I waited a moment, and then followed him at a distance, and saw him proceed to cross the Santa Trinità Bridge. When he reached the middle he suddenly paused, as if his strength had deserted him, and leaned upon the parapet gazing over into the river. I was careful to keep him in sight; I confess that I passed ten very nervous minutes. He recovered himself at last, and went his way, slowly and with hanging head.

That I had really startled poor Theobald into a bolder use of his long-garnered stores of knowledge and taste, into the vulgar effort and hazard of production, seemed at first reason enough for his continued silence and absence; but as day followed day without his either calling or sending me a line, and without my meeting him in his customary haunts, in the galleries, in the Chapel at San Lorenzo, or strolling between the Arno side and the great hedge-screen of verdure which, along the drive of the Cascine, throws the fair occupants of barouche and phaeton into such becoming relief — as for more than a week I got neither tidings nor sight of him, I began to fear that I had fatally offended him, and that, instead of giving a wholesome impetus to his talent, I had brutally paralysed it. I had a wretched suspicion that I had made him ill. My stay at Florence was drawing to a close, and it was important that, before resuming my journey, I should assure myself of the truth. Theobald, to the last, had kept his lodging a mystery, and I was altogether at a loss where to look for him. The simplest course was to make inquiry of the beauty of the Mercato Vecchio, and I confess that unsatisfied curiosity as to the lady herself counselled it as well. Perhaps I had done her injustice, and she was as immortally fresh and fair as be

conceived her. I was, at any rate, anxious to behold once more the ripe enchantress who had made twenty years pass as a twelvemonth. I repaired accordingly, one morning, to her abode, climbed the interminable staircase, and reached her door. It stood ajar, and as I hesitated whether to enter, a little serving-maid came clattering out with an empty kettle, as if she had just performed some savoury errand. The inner door, too, was open; so I crossed the little vestibule and entered the room in which I had formerly been received. It had not its evening aspect. The table, or one end of it, was spread for a late breakfast, and before it sat a gentleman — an individual, at least, of the male sex — doing execution upon a beefsteak and onions, and a bottle of wine. At his elbow, in friendly proximity, was placed the lady of the house. Her attitude, as I entered, was not that of an enchantress. With one hand she held in her lap a plate of smoking macaroni; with the other she had lifted high in air one of the pendulous filaments of this succulent compound, and was in the act of slipping it gently down her throat. On the uncovered end of the table, facing her companion, were ranged half a dozen small statuettes, of some snuff-coloured substance resembling terra-cotta. He, brandishing his knife with ardour, was apparently descanting on their merits.

Evidently I darkened the door. My hostess dropped liner macaroni — into her mouth, and rose hastily with a harsh exclamation and a flushed face. I immediately perceived that the Signora Serafina's secret was even better worth knowing than I had supposed, and that the way to learn it was to take it for granted. I summoned my best Italian, I smiled and bowed and apologised for my intrusion; and in a moment, whether or no I had dispelled the lady's irritation, I had at least stimulated her prudence. I was welcome, she said; I must take a seat. This was another friend of hers — also an artist, she declared with a smile which was almost amiable. Her companion wiped his moustache and bowed with great civility. I saw at a glance that he was equal to the situation. He was presumably the author of the statuettes on the table, and he knew a money-spending *forestière* when he saw one. He was a small wiry man, with a clever, impudent, tossed-up nose, a sharp little black eye, and waxed ends to his moustache. On the side of his head he wore jauntily a little crimson velvet smoking-cap, and I observed that his feet were encased in brilliant slippers. On Serafina's remarking with dignity that I was the friend of Mr. Theobald, he broke out into that fantastic French of which certain Italians are so insistently lavish, and declared with fervour that Mr. Theobald was a magnificent genius.

"I am sure I don't know," I answered with a shrug. "If you are in a position to affirm it, you have the advantage of me. I have seen nothing from his hand but the bambino yonder, which certainly is fine."

He declared that the bambino was a masterpiece, a pure Corregio. It was only a pity, he added with a knowing laugh, that the sketch had not been made on some good bit of honeycombed old panel. The stately Serafina hereupon protested that Mr. Theobald was the soul of honour, and that he would never lend himself to a deceit. "I am not a judge of genius," she said, "and I know nothing of pictures. I am but a poor simple widow; but I know that the Signor Teobaldo has the heart of an angel and the virtue of a saint. He is my benefactor," she added sententiously. The after-glow of the somewhat sinister flush with which she had greeted me still lingered in her cheek, and perhaps did not favour her beauty; I could not but fancy it a wise custom of Theobald's to visit her only by candle-light. She was coarse, and her pour adorer was a poet.

"I have the greatest esteem for him," I said; "it is for this reason that I have been uneasy at not seeing him for ten days. Have you seen him? Is he perhaps ill?"

"Ill! Heaven forbid!" cried Serafina, with genuine vehemence.

Her companion uttered a rapid expletive, and reproached her with not having been to see him. She hesitated a moment; then she simpered the least bit and bridled. "He comes to see me — without reproach! But it would not be the same for me to go to him, though, indeed, you may almost call him a man of holy life."

"He has the greatest admiration for you," I said. "He would have been honoured by your

visit."

She looked at me a moment sharply. "More admiration than you. Admit that!" Of course I protested with all the eloquence at my command, and my mysterious hostess then confessed that she had taken no fancy to me on my former visit, and that, Theobald not having returned, she believed I had poisoned his mind against her. "It would be no kindness to the poor gentleman, I can tell you that," she said. "He has come to see me every evening for years. It's a long friendship! No one knows him as well as I."

"I don't pretend to know him or to understand him," I said. "He's a mystery! Nevertheless, he seems to me a little — " And I touched my forehead and waved my hand in the air.

Serafina glanced at her companion a moment, as if for inspiration. He contented himself with shrugging his shoulders as he filled his glass again. The *padrona* hereupon gave me a more softly insinuating smile than would have seemed likely to bloom on so candid a brow. "It's for that that I love him!" she said. "The world has so little kindness for such persons. It laughs at them, and despises them, and cheats them. He is too good for this wicked life! It's his fancy that he finds a little Paradise up here in my poor apartment. If he thinks so, how can I help it? He has a strange belief — really, I ought to be ashamed to tell you — that I resemble the Blessed Virgin: Heaven forgive me! I let him think what he pleases, so long as it makes him happy. He was very kind to me once, and I am not one that forgets a favour. So I receive him every evening civilly, and ask after his health, and let him look at me on this side and that! For that matter, I may say it without vanity, I was worth looking at once! And he's not always amusing, poor man! He sits sometimes for an hour without speaking a word, or else he talks away, without stopping, on art and nature, and beauty and duty, and fifty fine things that are all so much Latin to me. I beg you to understand that he has never said a word to me that I mightn't decently listen to. He may be a little cracked, but he's one of the blessed saints."

"Eh!" cried the man, "the blessed saints were all a little cracked!"

Serafina, I fancied, left part of her story untold; but she told enough of it to make poor Theobald's own statement seem intensely pathetic in its exalted simplicity. "It's a strange fortune, certainly," she went on, "to have such a friend as this dear man — a friend who is less than a lover and more than a friend." I glanced at her companion, who preserved an impenetrable smile, twisted the end of his moustache, and disposed of a copious mouthful. Was *he* less than a lover? "But what will you have?" Serafina pursued. "In this hard world one must not ask too many questions; one must take what comes and keep what one gets. I have kept my good friend for twenty years, and I do hope that, at this time of day, signore, you have not come to turn him against me!"

I assured her that I had no such design, and that I should vastly regret disturbing Mr. Theobald's habits or convictions. On the contrary, I was alarmed about him, and I should immediately go in search of him. She gave me his address, and a florid account of her sufferings at his non-appearance. She had not been to him for various reasons; chiefly because she was afraid of displeasing him, as he had always made such a mystery of his home. "You might have sent this gentleman!" I ventured to suggest.

"Ah," cried the gentleman, "he admires the Signora Serafina, but he wouldn't admire me." And then, confidentially, with his finger on his nose, "He's a purist!"

I was about to withdraw, after having promised that I would inform the Signora Serafina of my friend's condition, when her companion, who had risen from table and girded his loins apparently for the onset, grasped me gently by the arm, and led me before the row of statuettes. "I perceive by your conversation, signore, that you are a patron of the arts. Allow me to request your honourable attention for these modest products of my own ingenuity. They are brand-new, fresh from my atelier, and have never been exhibited in public. I have brought them here to receive the verdict of this dear lady, who is a good critic, for all she may pretend to the contrary. I am the inventor of this peculiar style of statuette — of subject, manner, material, everything.

Touch them, I pray you; handle them freely — you needn't fear. Delicate as they look, it is impossible they should break! My various creations have met with great success. They are especially admired by Americans. I have sent them all over Europe — to London, Paris, Vienna! You may have observed some little specimens in Paris, on the Boulevard, in a shop of which they constitute the specialty. There is always a crowd about the window. They form a very pleasing ornament for the mantel-shelf of a gay young bachelor, for the boudoir of a pretty woman. You couldn't make a prettier present to a person with whom you wished to exchange a harmless joke. It is not classic art, signore, of course; but, between ourselves, isn't classic art sometimes rather a bore? Caricature, burlesque, *la charge*, as the French say, has hitherto been confined to paper, to the pen and pencil. Now, it has been my inspiration to introduce it into statuary. For this purpose I have invented a peculiar plastic compound which you will permit me not to divulge. That's my secret, signore! It's as light, you perceive, as cork, and yet as firm as alabaster! I frankly confess that I really pride myself as much on this little stroke of chemical ingenuity as upon the other element of novelty in my creations — my types. What do you say to my types, signore? The idea is bold; does it strike you as happy? Cats and monkeys — monkeys and cats — all human life is there! Human life, of course, I mean, viewed with the eye of the satirist! To combine sculpture and satire, signore, has been my unprecedented ambition. I flatter myself that I have not egregiously failed."

As this jaunty Juvenal of the chimney-piece delivered himself of his persuasive allocution, he took up his little groups successively from the table, held them aloft, turned them about, rapped them with his knuckles, and gazed at them lovingly, with his head on one side. They consisted each of a cat and a monkey, fantastically draped, in some preposterously sentimental conjunction. They exhibited a certain sameness of motive, and illustrated chiefly the different phases of what, in delicate terms, may be called gallantry and coquetry; but they were strikingly clever and expressive, and were at once very perfect cats and monkeys and very natural men and women. I confess, however, that they failed to amuse me. I was doubtless not in a mood to enjoy them, for they seemed to me peculiarly cynical and vulgar. Their imitative felicity was revolting. As I looked askance at the complacent little artist, brandishing them between finger and thumb and caressing them with an amorous eye, he seemed to me himself little more than an exceptionally intelligent ape. I mustered an admiring grin, however, and he blew another blast. "My figures are studied from life! I have a little menagerie of monkeys whose frolics I contemplate by the hour. As for the cats, one has only to look out of one's back window! Since I have begun to examine these expressive little brutes, I have made many profound observations. Speaking, signore, to a man of imagination, I may say that my little designs are not without a philosophy of their own. Truly, I don't know whether the cats and monkeys imitate us, or whether it's we who imitate them." I congratulated him on his philosophy, and he resumed: "You will do use the honour to admit that I have handled my subjects with delicacy. Eh, it was needed, signore! I have been free, but not too free — eh? Just a hint, you know! You may see as much or as little as you please. These little groups, however, are no measure of my invention. If you will favour me with a call at my studio, I think that you will admit that my combinations are really infinite. I likewise execute figures to command. You have perhaps some little motive — the fruit of your philosophy of life, signore — which you would like to have interpreted. I can promise to work it up to your satisfaction; it shall be as malicious as you please! Allow me to present you with my card, and to remind you that my prices are moderate. Only sixty francs for a little group like that. My statuettes are as durable as bronze — *ære perennius*, signore — and, between ourselves, I think they are more amusing!"

As I pocketed his card I glanced at Madonna Serafina, wondering whether she had an eye for contrasts. She had picked up one of the little couples and was tenderly dusting it with a feather broom.

What I had just seen and heard had so deepened my compassionate interest in my deluded



friend that I took a summary leave, making my way directly to the house designated by this remarkable woman. It was in an obscure corner of the opposite side of the town, and presented a sombre and squalid appearance. An old woman in the doorway, on my inquiring for Theobald, ushered me in with a mumbled blessing and an expression of relief at the poor gentleman having a friend. His lodging seemed to consist of a single room at the top of the house. On getting no answer to my knock, I opened the door, supposing that he was absent, so that it gave me a certain shock to find him sitting there helpless and dumb. He was seated near the single window, facing an easel which supported a large canvas. On my entering he looked up at me blankly, without changing his position, which was that of absolute lassitude and dejection, his arms loosely folded, his legs stretched before him, his head hanging on his breast. Advancing into the room I perceived that his face vividly corresponded with his attitude. He was pale, haggard, and unshaven, and his dull and sunken eye gazed at me without a spark of recognition. I had been afraid that he would greet me with fierce reproaches, as the cruelly officious patron who had turned his contentment to bitterness, and I was relieved to find that my appearance awakened no visible resentment. "Don't you know me?" I asked, as I put out my hand. "Have you already forgotten me?"

He made no response, kept his position stupidly, and left me staring about the room. It spoke most plaintively for itself. Shabby, sordid, naked, it contained, beyond the wretched bed, but the scantiest provision for personal comfort. It was bedroom at once and studio — a grim ghost of a studio. A few dusty casts and prints on the walls, three or four old canvases turned face inward, and a rusty-looking colour-box, formed, with the easel at the window, the sum of its appurtenances. The place savoured horribly of poverty. Its only wealth was the picture on the easel, presumably the famous Madonna. Averted as this was from the door, I was unable to see its face; but at last, sickened by the vacant misery of the spot, I passed behind Theobald, eagerly and tenderly. I can hardly say that I was surprised at what I found — a canvas that was a mere dead blank, cracked and discoloured by time. This was his immortal work! Though not surprised, I confess I was powerfully moved, and I think that for five minutes I could not have trusted myself to speak. At last my silent nearness affected him; he stirred and turned, and then rose and looked at me with a slowly kindling eye. I murmured some kind ineffective nothings about his being ill and needing advice and care, but he seemed absorbed in the effort to recall distinctly what had last passed between us. "You were right," he said, with a pitiful smile, "I am a dawdler! I am a failure! I shall do nothing more in this world. You opened my eyes; and, though the truth is bitter, I bear you no grudge. Amen! I have been sitting here for a week, face to face with the truth, with the past, with my weakness and poverty and nullity. I shall never touch a brush! I believe I have neither eaten nor slept. Look at that canvas!" he went on, as I relieved my emotion in an urgent request that he would come home with me and dine. "That was to have contained my masterpiece! Isn't it a promising foundation? The elements of it are all *here*." And he tapped his forehead with that mystic confidence which had marked the gesture before. "If I could only transpose them into some brain that has the hand, the will! Since I have been sitting here taking stock of my intellects, I have come to believe that I have the material for a hundred masterpieces. But my hand is paralysed now, and they will never be painted. I never began! I waited and waited to be worthier to begin, and wasted my life in preparation. While I fancied my creation was growing it was dying. I have taken it all too hard! Michael Angelo didn't, when he went at the Lorenzo! He did his best at a venture, and his venture is immortal. *That's* mine!" And he pointed with a gesture I shall never forget at the empty canvas. "I suppose we are a genus by ourselves in the providential scheme — we talents that can't act, that can't do nor dare! We take it out in talk, in plans and promises, in study, in visions! But our visions, let me tell you," he cried, with a toss of his head, "have a way of being brilliant, and a man has not lived in vain who has seen the things I have seen! Of course you will not believe in them when that bit of worm-eaten cloth is all I have to show for them; but to convince you, to enchant and astound the world, I

need only the hand of Raphael. His brain I already have. A pity, you will say, that I haven't his modesty! Ah, let me boast and babble now; it's all I have left! I am the half of a genius! Where in the wide world is my other half? Lodged perhaps in the vulgar soul, the cunning, ready fingers of some dull copyist or some trivial artisan, who turns out by the dozen his easy prodigies of touch! But it's not for me to sneer at him; he at least does something. He's not a dawdler! Well for me if I had been vulgar and clever and reckless, if I could have shut my eyes and taken my leap."

What to say to the poor fellow, what to do for him, seemed hard to determine; I chiefly felt that I must break the spell of his present inaction, and remove him from the haunted atmosphere of the little room it was such a cruel irony to call a studio. I cannot say I persuaded him to come out with me; he simply suffered himself to be led, and when we began to walk in the open air I was able to appreciate his pitifully weakened condition. Nevertheless, he seemed in a certain way to revive, and murmured at last that he should like to go to the Pitti Gallery. I shall never forget our melancholy stroll through those gorgeous halls, every picture on whose walls seemed, even to my own sympathetic vision, to glow with a sort of insolent renewal of strength and lustre. The eyes and lips of the great portraits appeared to smile in ineffable scorn of the dejected pretender who had dreamed of competing with their triumphant authors; the celestial candour, even, of the Madonna of the Chair, as we paused in perfect silence before her, was tinged with the sinister irony of the women of Leonardo. Perfect silence, indeed, marked our whole progress — the silence of a deep farewell; for I felt in all my pulses, as Theobald, leaning on my arm, dragged one heavy foot after the other, that he was looking his last. When we came out he was so exhausted that instead of taking him to my hotel to dine, I called a carriage and drove him straight to his own poor lodging. He had sunk into an extraordinary lethargy; he lay back in the carriage, with his eyes closed, as pale as death, his faint breathing interrupted at intervals by a sudden gasp, like a smothered sob or a vain attempt to speak. With the help of the old woman who had admitted me before, and who emerged from a dark back court, I contrived to lead him up the long steep staircase and lay him on his wretched bed. To her I gave him in charge, while I prepared in all haste to seek a physician. But she followed me out of the room with a pitiful clasping of her hands.

"Poor, dear, blessed gentleman," she murmured; "is he dying?"

"Possibly. How long has he been thus?"

"Since a certain night he passed ten days ago. I came up in the morning to make his poor bed, and found him sitting up in his clothes before that great canvas he keeps there. Poor, dear, strange man, he says his prayers to it! He had not been to bed, nor since then, properly! What has happened to him? Has he found out about the Serafina?" she whispered, with a glittering eye and a toothless grin.

"Prove at least that one old woman can be faithful," I said, "and watch him well till I come back." My return was delayed, through the absence of the English physician, who was away on a round of visits, and whom I vainly pursued from house to house before I overtook him. I brought him to Theobald's bedside none too soon. A violent fever had seized our patient, and the case was evidently grave. A couple of hours later I knew that he had brain fever. From this moment I was with him constantly; but I am far from wishing to describe his illness. Excessively painful to witness, it was happily brief. Life burned out in delirium. One night in particular that I passed at his pillow, listening to his wild snatches of regret, of aspiration, of rapture and awe at the phantasmal pictures with which his brain seemed to swarm, comes back to my memory now like some stray page from a lost masterpiece of tragedy. Before a week was over we had buried him in the little Protestant cemetery on the way to Fiesole. The Signora Serafina, whom I had caused to be informed of his illness, had come in person, I was told, to inquire about its progress; but she was absent from his funeral, which was attended by but a scanty concourse of mourners. Half a dozen old Florentine sojourners, in spite of the prolonged estrangement which had preceded his death, had felt the kindly impulse to honour his grave. Among them was my friend Mrs.

Coventry, whom I found, on my departure, waiting in her carriage at the gate of the cemetery.

"Well," she said, relieving at last with a significant smile the solemnity of our immediate greeting, "and the great Madonna? Have you seen her, after all?"

"I have seen her," I said; "she is mine — by bequest. But I shall never show her to you."

"And why not, pray?"

"My dear Mrs. Coventry, you would not understand her!"

"Upon my word, you are polite."

"Excuse me; I am sad and vexed and bitter." And with reprehensible rudeness I marched away. I was excessively impatient to leave Florence; my friend's dark spirit seemed diffused through all things. I had packed my trunk to start for Rome that night, and meanwhile, to beguile my unrest, I aimlessly paced the streets. Chance led me at last to the church of San Lorenzo. Remembering poor Theobald's phrase about Michael Angelo — "He did his best at a venture" — I went in and turned my steps to the chapel of the tombs. Viewing in sadness the sadness of its immortal treasures, I fancied, while I stood there, that they needed no ampler commentary than these simple words. As I passed through the church again to leave it, a woman, turning away from one of the side altars, met me face to face. The black shawl depending from her head draped picturesquely the handsome visage of Madonna Serafina. She stopped as she recognised me, and I saw that she wished to speak. Her eye was bright, and her ample bosom heaved in a way that seemed to portend a certain sharpness of reproach. But the expression of my own face, apparently, drew the sting from her resentment, and she addressed me in a tone in which bitterness was tempered by a sort of dogged resignation. "I know it was you, now, that separated us," she said. "It was a pity he ever brought you to see me! Of course, you couldn't think of me as he did. Well, the Lord gave him, the Lord has taken him. I have just paid for a nine days' mass for his soul. And I can tell you this, signore — I never deceived him. Who put it into his head that I was made to live on holy thoughts and fine phrases? It was his own fancy, and it pleased him to think so. — Did he suffer much?" she added more softly, after a pause.

"His sufferings were great, but they were short."

"And did he speak of me?" She had hesitated and dropped her eyes; she raised them with her question, and revealed in their sombre stillness a gleam of feminine confidence which, for the moment, revived and illumined her beauty. Poor Theobald! Whatever name he had given his passion, it was still her fine eyes that had charmed him.

"Be contented, madam," I answered, gravely.

She dropped her eyes again and was silent. Then exhaling a full rich sigh, as she gathered her shawl together — "He was a magnificent genius!"

I bowed, and we separated.

Passing through a narrow side street on my way back to my hotel, I perceived above a doorway a sign which it seemed to me I had read before. I suddenly remembered that it was identical with the superscription of a card that I had carried for an hour in my waistcoat pocket. On the threshold stood the ingenious artist whose claims to public favour were thus distinctly signalised, smoking a pipe in the evening air, and giving the finishing polish with a bit of rag to one of his inimitable "combinations." I caught the expressive curl of a couple of tails. He recognised me, removed his little red cap with a most obsequious bow, and motioned me to enter his studio. I returned his salute and passed on, vexed with the apparition. For a week afterwards, whenever I was seized among the ruins of triumphant Rome with some peculiarly poignant memory of Theobald's transcendent illusions and deplorable failure, I seemed to hear a fantastic, impertinent murmur, "Cats and monkeys, monkeys and cats; all human life there!"

# The Music of Erich Zann - H.P. Lovecraft

(1921)

I have examined maps of the city with the greatest care, yet have never again found the Rue d'Auseil. These maps have not been modern maps alone, for I know that names change. I have, on the contrary, delved deeply into all the antiquities of the place; and have personally explored every region, of whatever name, which could possibly answer to the street I knew as the Rue d'Auseil. But despite all I have done it remains an humiliating fact that I cannot find the house, the street, or even the locality, where, during the last months of my impoverished life as a student of metaphysics at the university, I heard the music of Erich Zann.

That my memory is broken, I do not wonder; for my health, physical and mental, was gravely disturbed throughout the period of my residence in the Rue d'Auseil, and I recall that I took none of my few acquaintances there. But that I cannot find the place again is both singular and perplexing; for it was within a half-hour's walk of the university and was distinguished by peculiarities which could hardly be forgotten by anyone who had been there. I have never met a person who has seen the Rue d'Auseil.

The Rue d'Auseil lay across a dark river bordered by precipitous brick blear-windowed warehouses and spanned by a ponderous bridge of dark stone. It was always shadowy along that river, as if the smoke of neighbouring factories shut out the sun perpetually. The river was also odorous with evil stench which I have never smelled elsewhere, and which may some day help me to find it, since I should recognise them at once. Beyond the bridge were narrow cobbled streets with rails; and then came the ascent, at first gradual, but incredibly steep as the Rue d'Auseil was reached.

I have never seen another street as narrow and steep as the Rue d'Auseil. It was almost a cliff, closed to all vehicles, consisting in several places of flights of steps, and ending at the top in a lofty ivied wall. Its paving was irregular, sometimes stone slabs, sometimes cobblestones, and sometimes bare earth with struggling greenish-grey vegetation. The houses were tall, peaked-roofed, incredibly old, and crazily leaning backward, forward, and sidewise. Occasionally an opposite pair, both leaning forward, almost met across the street like an arch; and certainly they kept most of the light from the ground below. There were a few overhead bridges from house to house across the street.

The inhabitants of that street impressed me peculiarly. At first I thought it was because they were all silent and reticent; but later decided it was because they were all very old. I do not know how I came to live on such a street, but I was not myself when I moved there. I had been living in many poor places, always evicted for want of money; until at last I came upon that tottering house in the Rue d'Auseil, kept by the paralytic Blandot. It was the third house from the top of the street, and by far the tallest of them all.

My room was on the fifth story; the only inhabited room there, since the house was almost empty. On the night I arrived I heard strange music from the peaked garret overhead, and the next day asked old Blandot about it. He told me it was an old German viol-player, a strange dumb man who signed his name as Erich Zann, and who played evenings in a cheap theatre orchestra; adding that Zann's desire to play in the night after his return from the theatre was the reason he had chosen this lofty and isolated garret room, whose single gable window was the only point on the street from which one could look over the terminating wall at the declivity and panorama beyond.

Thereafter I heard Zann every night, and although he kept me awake, I was haunted by the weirdness of his music. Knowing little of the art myself, I was yet certain that none of his harmonies had any relation to music I had heard before; and concluded that he was a composer

of highly original genius. The longer I listened, the more I was fascinated, until after a week I resolved to make the old man's acquaintance.

One night, as he was returning from his work, I intercepted Zann in the hallway and told him that I would like to know him and be with him when he played. He was a small, lean, bent person, with shabby clothes, blue eyes, grotesque, satyr-like face, and nearly bald head; and at my first words seemed both angered and frightened. My obvious friendliness, however, finally melted him; and he grudgingly motioned to me to follow him up the dark, creaking, and rickety attic stairs. His room, one of only two in the steeply pitched garret, was on the west side, toward the high wall that formed the upper end of the street. Its size was very great, and seemed the greater because of its extraordinary bareness and neglect. Of furniture there was only a narrow iron bedstead, a dingy washstand, a small table, a large bookcase, an iron music-rack, and three old-fashioned chairs. Sheets of music were piled in disorder about the floor. The walls were of bare boards, and had probably never known plaster; whilst the abundance of dust and cobwebs made the place seem more deserted than inhabited. Evidently Erich Zann's world of beauty lay in some far cosmos of the imagination.

Motioning me to sit down, the dumb man closed the door, turned the large wooden bolt, and lighted a candle to augment the one he had brought with him. He now removed his viol from its moth-eaten covering, and taking it, seated himself in the least uncomfortable of the chairs. He did not employ the music-rack, but offering no choice and playing from memory, enchanted me for over an hour with strains I had never heard before; strains which must have been of his own devising. To describe their exact nature is impossible for one unversed in music. They were a kind of fugue, with recurrent passages of the most captivating quality, but to me were notable for the absence of any of the weird notes I had overheard from my room below on other occasions.

Those haunting notes I had remembered, and had often hummed and whistled inaccurately to myself; so when the player at length laid down his bow I asked him if he would render some of them. As I began my request the wrinkled satyr-like face lost the bored placidity it had possessed during the playing, and seemed to shew the same curious mixture of anger and fright which I had noticed when first I accosted the old man. For a moment I was inclined to use persuasion, regarding rather lightly the whims of senility; and even tried to awaken my host's weirder mood by whistling a few of the strains to which I had listened the night before. But I did not pursue this course for more than a moment; for when the dumb musician recognised the whistled air his face grew suddenly distorted with an expression wholly beyond analysis, and his long, cold, bony right hand reached out to stop my mouth and silence the crude imitation. As he did this he further demonstrated his eccentricity by casting a startled glance toward the lone curtained window, as if fearful of some intruder — a glance doubly absurd, since the garret stood high and inaccessible above all the adjacent roofs, this window being the only point on the steep street, as the concierge had told me, from which one could see over the wall at the summit.

The old man's glance brought Blandot's remark to my mind, and with a certain capriciousness I felt a wish to look out over the wide and dizzying panorama of moonlit roofs and city lights beyond the hill-top, which of all the dwellers in the Rue d'Auseil only this crabbed musician could see. I moved toward the window and would have drawn aside the nondescript curtains, when with a frightened rage even greater than before the dumb lodger was upon me again; this time motioning with his head toward the door as he nervously strove to drag me thither with both hands. Now thoroughly disgusted with my host, I ordered him to release me, and told him I would go at once. His clutch relaxed, and as he saw my disgust and offence his own anger seemed to subside. He tightened his relaxing grip, but this time in a friendly manner; forcing me into a chair, then with an appearance of wistfulness crossing to the littered table, where he wrote many words with a pencil in the laboured French of a foreigner.

The note which he finally handed me was an appeal for tolerance and forgiveness. Zann said that he was old, lonely, and afflicted with strange fears and nervous disorders connected with his

music and with other things. He had enjoyed my listening to his music, and wished I would come again and not mind his eccentricities. But he could not play to another his weird harmonies, and could not bear hearing them from another; nor could he bear having anything in his room touched by another. He had not known until our hallway conversation that I could overhear his playing in my room, and now asked me if I would arrange with Blandot to take a lower room where I could not hear him in the night. He would, he wrote, defray the difference in rent.

As I sat deciphering the execrable French I felt more lenient toward the old man. He was a victim of physical and nervous suffering, as was I; and my metaphysical studies had taught me kindness. In the silence there came a slight sound from the window — the shutter must have rattled in the night-wind — and for some reason I started almost as violently as did Erich Zann. So when I had finished reading I shook my host by the hand, and departed as a friend. The next day Blandot gave me a more expensive room on the third floor, between the apartments of an aged money-lender and the room of a respectable upholsterer. There was no one on the fourth floor.

It was not long before I found that Zann's eagerness for my company was not as great as it had seemed while he was persuading me to move down from the fifth story. He did not ask me to call on him, and when I did call he appeared uneasy and played listlessly. This was always at night — in the day he slept and would admit no one. My liking for him did not grow, though the attic room and the weird music seemed to hold an odd fascination for me. I had a curious desire to look out of that window, over the wall and down the unseen slope at the glittering roofs and spires which must lie outspread there. Once I went up to the garret during theatre hours, when Zann was away, but the door was locked.

What I did succeed in doing was to overhear the nocturnal playing of the dumb old man. At first I would tiptoe up to my old fifth floor, then I grew bold enough to climb the last creaking staircase to the peaked garret. There in the narrow hall, outside the bolted door with the covered keyhole, I often heard sounds which filled me with an indefinable dread — the dread of vague wonder and brooding mystery. It was not that the sounds were hideous, for they were not; but that they held vibrations suggesting nothing on this globe of earth, and that at certain intervals they assumed a symphonic quality which I could hardly conceive as produced by one player. Certainly, Erich Zann was a genius of wild power. As the weeks passed, the playing grew wilder, whilst the old musician acquired an increasing haggardness and furtiveness pitiful to behold. He now refused to admit me at any time, and shunned me whenever we met on the stairs.

Then one night as I listened at the door I heard the shrieking viol swell into a chaotic babel of sound; a pandemonium which would have led me to doubt my own shaking sanity had there not come from behind that barred portal a piteous proof that the horror was real — the awful, inarticulate cry which only a mute can utter, and which rises only in moments of the most terrible fear or anguish. I knocked repeatedly at the door, but received no response. Afterward I waited in the black hallway, shivering with cold and fear, till I heard the poor musician's feeble effort to rise from the floor by the aid of a chair. Believing him just conscious after a fainting fit, I renewed my rapping, at the same time calling out my name reassuringly. I heard Zann stumble to the window and close both shutter and sash, then stumble to the door, which he falteringly unfastened to admit me. This time his delight at having me present was real; for his distorted face gleamed with relief while he clutched at my coat as a child clutches at its mother's skirts.

Shaking pathetically, the old man forced me into a chair whilst he sank into another, beside which his viol and bow lay carelessly on the floor. He sat for some time inactive, nodding oddly, but having a paradoxical suggestion of intense and frightened listening. Subsequently he seemed to be satisfied, and crossing to a chair by the table wrote a brief note, handed it to me, and returned to the table, where he began to write rapidly and incessantly. The note implored me in the name of mercy, and for the sake of my own curiosity, to wait where I was while he prepared a full account in German of all the marvels and terrors which beset him. I waited, and the dumb

man's pencil flew.

It was perhaps an hour later, while I still waited and while the old musician's feverishly written sheets still continued to pile up, that I saw Zann start as from the hint of a horrible shock. Unmistakably he was looking at the curtained window and listening shudderingly. Then I half fancied I heard a sound myself; though it was not a horrible sound, but rather an exquisitely low and infinitely distant musical note, suggesting a player in one of the neighbouring houses, or in some abode beyond the lofty wall over which I had never been able to look. Upon Zann the effect was terrible, for dropping his pencil suddenly he rose, seized his viol, and commenced to rend the night with the wildest playing I had ever heard from his bow save when listening at the barred door.

It would be useless to describe the playing of Erich Zann on that dreadful night. It was more horrible than anything I had ever overheard, because I could now see the expression of his face, and could realise that this time the motive was stark fear. He was trying to make a noise; to ward something off or drown something out — what, I could not imagine, awesome though I felt it must be. The playing grew fantastic, delirious, and hysterical, yet kept to the last the qualities of supreme genius which I knew this strange old man possessed. I recognised the air — it was a wild Hungarian dance popular in the theatres, and I reflected for a moment that this was the first time I had ever heard Zann play the work of another composer.

Louder and louder, wilder and wilder, mounted the shrieking and whining of that desperate viol. The player was dripping with an uncanny perspiration and twisted like a monkey, always looking frantically at the curtained window. In his frenzied strains I could almost see shadowy satyrs and Bacchanals dancing and whirling insanely through seething abysses of clouds and smoke and lightning. And then I thought I heard a shriller, steadier note that was not from the viol; a calm, deliberate, purposeful, mocking note from far away in the west.

At this juncture the shutter began to rattle in a howling night-wind which had sprung up outside as if in answer to the mad playing within. Zann's screaming viol now outdid itself, emitting sounds I had never thought a viol could emit. The shutter rattled more loudly, unfastened, and commenced slamming against the window. Then the glass broke shiveringly under the persistent impacts, and the chill wind rushed in, making the candles sputter and rustling the sheets of paper on the table where Zann had begun to write out his horrible secret. I looked at Zann, and saw that he was past conscious observation. His blue eyes were bulging, glassy, and sightless, and the frantic playing had become a blind, mechanical, unrecognisable orgy that no pen could even suggest.

A sudden gust, stronger than the others, caught up the manuscript and bore it toward the window. I followed the flying sheets in desperation, but they were gone before I reached the demolished panes. Then I remembered my old wish to gaze from this window, the only window in the Rue d'Auseil from which one might see the slope beyond the wall, and the city outspread beneath. It was very dark, but the city's lights always burned, and I expected to see them there amidst the rain and wind. Yet when I looked from that highest of all gable windows, looked while the candles sputtered and the insane viol howled with the night-wind, I saw no city spread below, and no friendly lights gleaming from remembered streets, but only the blackness of space illimitable; unimagined space alive with motion and music, and having no semblance to anything on earth. And as I stood there looking in terror, the wind blew out both the candles in that ancient peaked garret, leaving me in savage and impenetrable darkness with chaos and pandemonium before me, and the daemon madness of that night-baying viol behind me.

I staggered back in the dark, without the means of striking a light, crashing against the table, overturning a chair, and finally groping my way to the place where the blackness screamed with shocking music. To save myself and Erich Zann I could at least try, whatever the powers opposed to me. Once I thought some chill thing brushed me, and I screamed, but my scream could not be heard above that hideous viol. Suddenly out of the blackness the madly sawing bow

struck me, and I knew I was close to the player. I felt ahead, touched the back of Zann's chair, and then found and shook his shoulder in an effort to bring him to his senses.

He did not respond, and still the viol shrieked on without slackening. I moved my hand to his head, whose mechanical nodding I was able to stop, and shouted in his ear that we must both flee from the unknown things of the night. But he neither answered me nor abated the frenzy of his unutterable music, while all through the garret strange currents of wind seemed to dance in the darkness and babel. When my hand touched his ear I shuddered, though I knew not why — knew not why till I felt of the still face; the ice-cold, stiffened, unbreathing face whose glassy eyes bulged uselessly into the void. And then, by some miracle finding the door and the large wooden bolt, I plunged wildly away from that glassy-eyed thing in the dark, and from the ghoulish howling of that accursed viol whose fury increased even as I plunged.

Leaping, floating, flying down those endless stairs through the dark house; racing mindlessly out into the narrow, steep, and ancient street of steps and tottering houses; clattering down steps and over cobbles to the lower streets and the putrid canyon-walled river; panting across the great dark bridge to the broader, healthier streets and boulevards we know; all these are terrible impressions that linger with me. And I recall that there was no wind, and that the moon was out, and that all the lights of the city twinkled.

Despite my most careful searches and investigations, I have never since been able to find the Rue d'Auseil. But I am not wholly sorry; either for this or for the loss in undreamable abysses of the closely written sheets which alone could have explained the music of Erich Zann.



# Freedom - Nella Larsen

(1926)

He wondered, as he walked deftly through the impassioned traffic on the Avenue, how she would adjust her life if he were to withdraw from it ... How peaceful it would be to have no woman in one's life! These months away took on the appearance of a liberation, a temporary recess from a hateful existence in which he lived in intimacy with someone he did not know and would not now have chosen ... He began, again, to speculate on the pattern her life would take without him. Abruptly, it flashed upon him that the vague irritation of many weeks was a feeling of smoldering resentment against her. The displeasure that this realization caused him increased his ill humor and distaste. He began to dissect her with an acrimony that astonished himself. Her unanimated beauty seemed now only a thin disguise for an inert mind, and not for the serene beauty of soul which he had attributed to her. He suspected, too, a touch of depravity, perhaps only physical, but more likely mental as well. Reflection convinced him that her appeal for him was bounded by the senses, for witness his disgust and clarity of vision, now that they were separated. How could he have been so blinded? Why, for him she had been the universe; a universe personal and unheeding of outside persons or things. He had adored her in a slavish fashion. He groaned inwardly at his own mental caricature of himself, sitting dumb, staring at her in fatuous worship. What an ass he had been!

His work here was done, but what was there to prevent him from staying away for six months — a year — forever? ... Never to see her again! ... He stopped, irresolute. What would she do? He tried to construct a representation of her future without him. In his present new hatred, she became a creature irresistibly given to pleasure at no matter what cost. A sybarite! A parasite too!

He was prayerfully thankful that appreciation of his danger had come before she had sapped from him all physical and spiritual vitality. But her future troubled him even while he assured himself that he knew its road, and laughed ruefully at the picture of her flitting from mate to mate.

A feverish impatience gripped him. Somehow, he must contrive to get himself out of the slough into which his amorous folly had precipitated him ... Three years. Good God! At the moment, those three years seemed the most precious of his life. And he had foolishly thrown them away. He had drifted pleasantly, peacefully, without landmarks; would be drifting yet but for the death of a friend whose final affairs had brought him away ...

He started. Death! Perhaps she would die. How that would simplify matters for him. But no; she would not die. He laughed without amusement. She would not die; she would outlast him, damn her! ... An angry resentment, sharp and painful as a whiplash, struck him. Its passing left him calm and determined ...

He braced himself and continued to walk. He had decided; he would stay. With this decision, he seemed to be reborn. He felt cool, refreshed, as if he had stepped out from a warm, scented place into a cold, brisk breeze. He was happy. The world had turned to silver and gold, and life again became a magical adventure. Even the placards in the shops shone with the light of paradise upon them. One caught and held his eye. Travel ... Yes, he would travel; lose himself in India, China, the South Seas ... Radiance from the most battered vehicle and the meanest pedestrian. Gladness flooded him. He was free.

A year, thick with various adventures, had slid by since that spring day on which he had wrenched himself free. He had lived, been happy, and with no woman in his life. The break had been simple: a telegram hinting at prolonged business and indefinite return. There had been no reply. This had annoyed him, but he told himself it was what he had expected. He would not

admit that, perhaps, he had missed her letter in his wanderings. He had persuaded himself to believe what he wanted to believe — that she had not cared. Actually, there had been confusion in his mind, a complex of thoughts which made it difficult to know what he really had thought. He had imagined that he shuddered at the idea that she had accepted the most generous offer. He pitied her. There was, too, a touch of sadness, a sense of something lost, which he irritably explained on the score of her beauty. Beauty of any kind always stirred him ... Too bad a woman like that couldn't be decent. He was well rid of her.

But what had she done? How had he taken it? His contemptuous mood visualized her at times, laughing merrily at some jest made by his successor, or again sitting silent, staring into the fire. He would be conscious of every detail of her appearance: her hair simply arranged, her soft dark eyes, her delicate chin propped on hands rivaling the perfection of La Gioconda's. Sometimes there would be a reversion to the emotions which had ensnared him, when he ached with yearning, when he longed for her again. Such moments were rare.

Another year passed, during which his life had widened, risen, and then crashed ...

Dead? How could she be dead? Dead in childbirth, they had told him, both his mistress and the child she had borne him. She had been dead on that spring day when, resentful and angry at her influence in his life, he had reached out toward freedom — to find only a mirage; for he saw quite plainly that now he would never be free. It was she who had escaped him. Each time he had cursed and wondered, it had been a dead woman whom he had cursed and about whom he had wondered ... He shivered; he seemed always to be cold now.

Well rid of her! How well he had not known, nor how easily. She was dead. And he had cursed her. But one didn't curse the dead ... Didn't one? Damn her! Why couldn't she have lived, or why hadn't she died sooner? For long months he had wondered how she had arranged her life, and all the while she had done nothing but to complete it by dying.

The futility of all his speculations exasperated him. His old resentment returned. She had spoiled his life; first by living and then by dying. He hated the fact that she had finished with him, rather than he with her. He could not forgive her ... Forgive her? She was dead. He felt somehow that, after all, the dead did not care if you forgave them or not.

Gradually, his mind became puppet to a disturbing tension which drove it back and forth between two thoughts: he had left her; she was dead. These two facts became lodged in his mind like burrs pricking at his breaking faculties. As he recalled the manner of his leaving her, it seemed increasingly brutal. She had died loving him, bearing him a child, and he had left her. He tried to shake off the heavy mental dejection which weighed him down, but his former will and determination deserted him. The vitality of the past, forever dragging him down into black depression, frightened him. The mental fog, thick as soot, into which the news of her death had trapped him, appalled him. He must get himself out. A wild anger seized him. He began to think of his own death, self-inflicted, with feeling that defied analysis. His zest for life became swallowed up in the rising tide of sorrow and mental chaos which was engulfing him.

As autumn approached, with faint notice on his part, his anger and resentment retreated, leaving in their wake a gentle stir of regret and remorse. Imperceptibly, he grew physically weary; a strange sensation of loneliness and isolation enveloped him. A species of timidity came upon him; he felt an unhappy remoteness from people, and began to edge away from life.

His deepening sense of isolation drove him more and more back upon his memories. Sunk in his armchair before the fire, he passed the days and sometimes the nights, for he had lost count of these, merged as they were into one another.

His increasing mental haziness had rejected the fact of her death; often she was there with him, just beyond the firelight or the candlelight. She talked and laughed with him. Sometimes, at night, he woke to see her standing over him or sitting in his chair before the dying fire. By some mysterious process, the glory of first love flamed again in him. He forgot that they had ever parted. His twisted memories visioned her with him in places where she had never been. He had

forgotten all but the past, and that was brightly distorted.

He sat waiting for her. He seemed to remember that she had promised to come. Outside, the street was quiet. She was late. Why didn't she come? Childish tears fell over his cold cheeks. He sat weeping in front of the sinking fire.

A nameless dread seized him; she would not come! In the agony of his disappointment, he did not see that the fire had died and the candles had sputtered out. He sat wrapped in immeasurable sadness. He knew that she would not come.

Something in this thought fired his disintegrating brain. She would not come; then he must go to her.

He rose, shaking with cold, and groped toward the door. Yes, he would go to her.

The gleam of a streetlight through a French window caught his attention. He stumbled toward it. His cold fingers fumbled a moment with the catch, but he tore it open with a spark of his old determination and power, and stepped out — and down to the pavement a hundred feet below.

# Redeployment - Phil Klay

(2014)

We shot dogs. Not by accident. We did it on purpose, and we called it Operation Scooby. I'm a dog person, so I thought about that a lot.

First time was instinct. I hear O'Leary go, "Jesus," and there's a skinny brown dog lapping up blood the same way he'd lap up water from a bowl. It wasn't American blood, but still, there's that dog, lapping it up. And that's the last straw, I guess, and then it's open season on dogs.

At the time, you don't think about it. You're thinking about who's in that house, what's he armed with, how's he gonna kill you, your buddies. You're going block by block, fighting with rifles good to 550 meters, and you're killing people at five in a concrete box.

The thinking comes later, when they give you the time. See, it's not a straight shot back, from war to the Jacksonville mall. When our deployment was up, they put us on TQ, this logistics base out in the desert, let us decompress a bit. I'm not sure what they meant by that. Decompress. We took it to mean jerk off a lot in the showers. Smoke a lot of cigarettes and play a lot of cards. And then they took us to Kuwait and put us on a commercial airliner to go home.

So there you are. You've been in a no-shit war zone and then you're sitting in a plush chair, looking up at a little nozzle shooting air-conditioning, thinking, What the fuck? You've got a rifle between your knees, and so does everyone else. Some Marines got M9 pistols, but they take away your bayonets because you aren't allowed to have knives on an airplane. Even though you've showered, you all look grimy and lean. Everybody's hollow-eyed, and their cammies are beat to shit. And you sit there, and close your eyes, and think.

The problem is, your thoughts don't come out in any kind of straight order. You don't think, Oh, I did A, then B, then C, then D. You try to think about home, then you're in the torture house. You see the body parts in the locker and the retarded guy in the cage. He squawked like a chicken. His head was shrunk down to a coconut. It takes you a while to remember Doc saying they'd shot mercury into his skull, and then it still doesn't make any sense.

You see the things you saw the times you nearly died. The broken television and the hajji corpse. Eicholtz covered in blood. The lieutenant on the radio.

You see the little girl, the photographs Curtis found in a desk. First had a beautiful Iraqi kid, maybe seven or eight years old, in bare feet and a pretty white dress like it's First Communion. Next she's in a red dress, high heels, heavy makeup. Next photo, same dress, but her face is smudged and she's holding a gun to her head.

I tried to think of other things, like my wife, Cheryl. She's got pale skin and fine dark hairs on her arms. She's ashamed of them, but they're soft. Delicate.

But thinking of Cheryl made me feel guilty, and I'd think about Lance Corporal Hernandez, Corporal Smith, and Eicholtz. We were like brothers, Eicholtz and me. The two of us

So I'm thinking about that. And I'm seeing the retard, and the girl, and the wall Eicholtz died on. But here's the thing. I'm thinking a lot, and I mean a lot, about those fucking dogs. And I'm thinking about my dog. Vicar. About the shelter we'd got him from, where Cheryl said we had to get an older dog because nobody takes older dogs. How we could never teach him anything. How he'd throw up shit he shouldn't have eaten in the first place. How he'd slink away all guilty, tail down and head low and back legs crouched. How his fur started turning gray two years after we got him, and he had so many white hairs on his face that it looked like a mustache.

So there it was. Vicar and Operation Scooby, all the way home.

Maybe, I don't know, you're prepared to kill people. You practice on man-shaped targets so you're ready. Of course, we got targets they call "dog targets." Target shape Delta. But they don't look like fucking dogs.

And it's not easy to kill people, either. Out of boot camp, Marines act like they're gonna play Rambo, but it's fucking serious, it's professional. Usually. We found this one insurgent doing the death rattle, foaming and shaking, fucked up, you know? He's hit with a 7.62 in the chest and pelvic girdle; he'll be gone in a second, but the company XO walks up, pulls out his KA-BAR, and slits his throat. Says, "It's good to kill a man with a knife." All the Marines look at each other like, "What the fuck?" Didn't expect that from the XO. That's some PFC bullshit.

On the flight, I thought about that, too.

It's so funny. You're sitting there with your rifle in your hands but no ammo in sight. And then you touch down in Ireland to refuel. And it's so foggy you can't see shit, but, you know, this is Ireland, there's got to be beer. And the plane's captain, a fucking civilian, reads off some message about how general orders stay in effect until you reach the States, and you're still considered on duty. So no alcohol.

Well, our CO jumped up and said, "That makes about as much sense as a goddamn football bat. All right, Marines, you've got three hours. I hear they serve Guinness." Oo-fucking-rah. Corporal Weissert ordered five beers at once and had them laid out in front of him. He didn't even drink for a while, just sat there looking at 'em all, happy. O'Leary said, "Look at you, smiling like a faggot in a dick tree," which is a DI expression Curtis loves.

So Curtis laughs and says, "What a horrible fucking tree," and we all start cracking up, happy just knowing we can get fucked up, let our guard down.

We got crazy quick. Most of us had lost about twenty pounds and it'd been seven months since we'd had a drop of alcohol. MacManigan, second award PFC, was rolling around the bar with his nuts hanging out of his cammies, telling Marines, "Stop looking at my balls, faggot." Lance Corporal Slaughter was there all of a half hour before he puked in the bathroom, with Corporal Craig, the sober Mormon, helping him out, and Lance Corporal Greeley, the drunk Mormon, puking in the stall next to him. Even the Company Guns got wrecked. It was good. We got back on the plane and passed the fuck out. Woke up in America.

Except when we touched down in Cherry Point, there was nobody there. It was zero dark and cold, and half of us were rocking the first hangover we'd had in months, which at that point was a kind of shitty that felt pretty fucking good. And we got off the plane and there's a big empty landing strip, maybe a half dozen red patchers and a bunch of seven tons lined up. No families.

The Company Guns said that they were waiting for us at Lejeune. The sooner we get the gear loaded on the trucks, the sooner we see 'em.

Roger that. We set up working parties, tossed our rucks and seabags into the seven tons. Heavy work, and it got the blood flowing in the cold. Sweat a little of the alcohol out, too. Then they pulled up a bunch of buses and we all got on, packed in, M16s sticking everywhere, muzzle awareness gone to shit, but it didn't matter.

Cherry Point to Lejeune's an hour. First bit's through trees. You don't see much in the dark. Not much when you get on 24, either. Stores that haven't opened yet. Neon lights off at the gas stations and bars. Looking out, I sort of knew where I was, but I didn't feel home. I figured I'd be home when I kissed my wife and pet my dog.

We went in through Lejeune's side gate, which is about ten minutes away from our battalion area. Fifteen, I told myself, way this fucker is driving. When we got to McHugh, everybody got a little excited. And then the driver turned on A Street. Battalion area's on A, and I saw the barracks and I thought, There it is. And then they stopped about four hundred meters short. Right in front of the armory. I could've jogged down to where the families were. I could see there was an area behind one of the barracks where they'd set up lights. And there were cars parked everywhere. I could hear the crowd down the way. The families were there. But we all got in line, thinking about them just down the way. Me thinking about Cheryl and Vicar. And we waited.

When I got to the window and handed in my rifle, though, it brought me up short. That was

the first time I'd been separated from it in months. I didn't know where to rest my hands. First I put them in my pockets, then I took them out and crossed my arms, and then I just let them hang, useless, at my sides.

After all the rifles were turned in, First Sergeant had us get into a no-shit parade formation. We had a fucking guidon waving out front, and we marched down A Street. When we got to the edge of the first barracks, people started cheering. I couldn't see them until we turned the corner, and then there they were, a big wall of people holding signs under a bunch of outdoor lights, and the lights were bright and pointed straight at us, so it was hard to look into the crowd and tell who was who. Off to the side there were picnic tables and a Marine in woodlands grilling hot dogs. And there was a bouncy castle. A fucking bouncy castle.

We kept marching. A couple more Marines in woodlands were holding the crowd back in a line, and we marched until we were straight alongside the crowd, and then First Sergeant called us to a halt.

I saw some TV cameras. There were a lot of U.S. flags. The whole MacManigan clan was up front, right in the middle, holding a banner that read: OO-RAH PRIVATE FIRST CLASS BRADLEY MACMANIGAN. WE ARE SO PROUD.

I scanned the crowd back and forth. I'd talked to Cheryl on the phone in Kuwait, not for very long, just, "Hey, I'm good," and, "Yeah, within forty-eight hours. Talk to the FRO, he'll tell you when to be there." And she said she'd be there, but it was strange, on the phone. I hadn't heard her voice in a while.

Then I saw Eicholtz's dad. He had a sign, too. It said: WELCOME BACK HEROES OF BRAVO COMPANY. I looked right at him and remembered him from when we left, and I thought, That's Eicholtz's dad. And that's when they released us. And they released the crowd, too.

I was standing still, and the Marines around me, Curtis and O'Leary and MacManigan and Craig and Weissert, they were rushing out to the crowd. And the crowd was coming forward.

Eicholtz's dad was coming forward.

He was shaking the hand of every Marine he passed. I don't think a lot of guys recognized him, and I knew I should say something, but I didn't. I backed off. I looked around for my wife. And I saw my name on a sign: SGT PRICE, it said. But the rest was blocked by the crowd, and I couldn't see who was holding it. And then I was moving toward it, away from Eicholtz's dad, who was hugging Curtis, and I saw the rest of the sign. It said: SGT PRICE, NOW THAT YOU'RE HOME YOU CAN DO SOME CHORES. HERE'S YOUR TO-DO LIST. 1) ME. 2) REPEAT NUMBER 1. And there, holding the sign, was Cheryl.

She was wearing cammie shorts and a tank top, even though it was cold. She must have worn them for me. She was skinnier than I remembered. More makeup, too. I was nervous and tired and she looked a bit different. But it was her.

All around us were families and big smiles and worn-out Marines. I walked up to her and she saw me and her face lit. No woman had smiled at me like that in a long time. I moved in and kissed her. I figured that was what I was supposed to do. But it'd been too long and we were both too nervous and it felt like just lip on lip pushed together, I don't know. She pulled back and looked at me and put her hands on my shoulders and started to cry. She reached up and rubbed her eyes, and then she put her arms around me and pulled me into her.

Her body was soft and it fit into mine. All deployment, I'd slept on the ground or on canvas cots. I'd worn body armor and kept a rifle slung across my body. I hadn't felt anything like her in seven months. It was almost like I'd forgotten how she felt, or never really known it, and now here was this new feeling that made everything else black and white fading before color. Then she let me go and I took her by the hand and we got my gear and got out of there.

She asked me if I wanted to drive and hell yeah I did, so I got behind the wheel. A long time since I'd done that, too. I put the car in reverse, pulled out, and started driving home. I was

thinking I wanted to park somewhere dark and curl up with her in the backseat like high school. But I got the car out of the lot and down McHugh. And driving down McHugh it felt different from the bus. Like, This is Lejeune. This is the way I used to get to work. And it was so dark. And quiet.

Cheryl said, "How are you?" which meant, How was it? Are you crazy now?

I said, "Good. I'm fine."

And then it was quiet again and we turned down Holcomb. I was glad I was driving. It gave me something to focus on. Go down this street, turn the wheel, go down another. One step at a time. You can get through anything one step at a time.

She said, "I'm so happy you're home."

Then she said, "I love you so much."

Then she said, "I'm proud of you."

I said, "I love you, too."

When we got home, she opened the door for me. I didn't even know where my house keys were. Vicar wasn't at the door to greet me. I stepped in and scanned around, and there he was on the couch. When he saw me, he got up slow.

His fur was grayer than before, and there were weird clumps of fat on his legs, these little tumors that Labs get but that Vicar's got a lot of now. He wagged his tail. He stepped down off the couch real careful, like he was hurting. And Cheryl said, "He remembers you."

"Why's he so skinny?" I said, and I bent down and scratched him behind the ears.

"The vet said we had to keep him on weight control. And he doesn't keep a lot of food down these days."

Cheryl was pulling on my arm. Pulling me away from Vicar. And I let her.

She said, "Isn't it good to be home?"

Her voice was shaky, like she wasn't sure of the answer. And I said,

"Yeah, yeah, it is." And she kissed me hard. I grabbed her in my arms and lifted her up and carried her to the bedroom. I put a big grin on my face, but it didn't help. She looked a bit scared of me, then. I guess all the wives were probably a little bit scared.

And that was my homecoming. It was fine, I guess. Getting back feels like your first breath after nearly drowning. Even if it hurts, it's good.

I can't complain. Cheryl handled it well.

I saw Lance Corporal Curtis's wife back in Jacksonville. She spent all his combat pay before he got back, and she was five months pregnant, which, for a Marine coming back from a seven-month deployment, is not pregnant enough.

Corporal Weissert's wife wasn't there at all when we got back. He laughed, said she probably got the time wrong, and O'Leary gave him a ride to his house. They get there and it's empty. Not just of people, of everything: furniture, wall hangings, everything. Weissert looks at this shit and shakes his head, starts laughing. They went out, bought some whiskey, and got fucked up right there in his empty house.

Weissert drank himself to sleep, and when he woke up, MacManigan was right next to him, sitting on the floor. And MacManigan, of all people, was the one who cleaned him up and got him into base on time for the classes they make you take about, Don't kill yourself. Don't beat your wife. And Weissert was like, "I can't beat my wife. I don't know where the fuck she is."

That weekend they gave us a ninety-six, and I took on Weissert duty for Friday. He was in the middle of a three-day drunk, and hanging with him was a carnival freak show filled with whiskey and lap dances. Didn't get home until four, after I dropped him off at Slaughter's barracks room, and I woke Cheryl coming in. She didn't say a word. I figured she'd be mad, and she looked it, but when I got in bed she rolled over to me and gave me a little hug, even though I was stinking of booze.

Slaughter passed Weissert to Addis, Addis passed him to Greeley, and so on. We had

somebody with him the whole weekend until we were sure he was good. With him was a carnival freak show filled with whiskey and lap dances. Didn't get home until four, after I dropped him off at Slaughter's barracks room, and I woke Cheryl coming in. She didn't say a word. I figured she'd be mad, and she looked it, but when I got in bed she rolled over to me and gave me a little hug, even though I was stinking of booze.

When I wasn't with Weissert and the rest of the squad, I sat on the couch with Vicar, watching the baseball games Cheryl'd taped for me. Sometimes Cheryl and I talked about her seven months, about the wives left behind, about her family, her job, her boss. Sometimes she'd ask little questions. Sometimes I'd answer. And glad as I was to be in the States, and even though I hated the past seven months and the only thing that kept me going was the Marines I served with and the thought of coming home, I started feeling like I wanted to go back. Because fuck all this.

The next week at work was all half days and bullshit. Medical appointments to deal with injuries guys had been hiding or sucking up. Dental appointments. Admin. And every evening, me and Vicar watching TV on the couch, waiting for Cheryl to get back from her shift at Texas Roadhouse.

Vicar'd sleep with his head in my lap, waking up whenever I'd reach down to feed him bits of salami. The vet told Cheryl that's bad for him, but he deserved something good. Half the time when I pet him, I'd rub up against one of his tumors, and that had to hurt. It looked like it hurt him to do everything, wag his tail, eat his chow. Walk. Sit. And when he'd vomit, which was every other day, he'd hack like he was choking, revving up for a good twenty seconds before anything came out. It was the noise that bothered me. I didn't mind cleaning the carpet. And then Cheryl'd come home and look at us and shake her head and smile and say, "Well, you're a sorry bunch." I wanted Vicar around, but I couldn't bear to look at him. I guess that's why I let Cheryl drag me out of the house that weekend. We took my combat pay and did a lot of shopping. Which is how America fights back against the terrorists.

So here's an experience. Your wife takes you shopping in Wilmington. Last time you walked down a city street, your Marine on point went down the side of the road, checking ahead and scanning the roofs across from him. The Marine behind him checks the windows on the top levels of the buildings, the Marine behind him gets the windows a little lower, and so on down until your guys have the street level covered, and the Marine in back has the rear. In a city there's a million places they can kill you from. It freaks you out at first. But you go through like you were trained, and it works.

In Wilmington, you don't have a squad, you don't have a battle buddy, you don't even have a weapon. You startle ten times checking for it and it's not there. You're safe, so your alertness should be at white, but it's not.

Instead, you're stuck in an American Eagle Outfitters. Your wife gives you some clothes to try on and you walk into the tiny dressing room. You close the door, and you don't want to open it again.

Outside, there're people walking around by the windows like it's no big deal. People who have no idea where Fallujah is, where three members of your platoon died. People who've spent their whole lives at white.

They'll never get even close to orange. You can't, until the first time you're in a firefight, or the first time an IED goes off that you missed, and you realize that everybody's life, everybody's, depends on you not fucking up. And you depend on them.

Some guys go straight to red. They stay like that for a while and then they crash, go down past white, down to whatever is lower than "I don't fucking care if I die." Most everybody else stays orange, all the time.

Here's what orange is. You don't see or hear like you used to. Your brain chemistry changes. You take in every piece of the environment, everything. I could spot a dime in the street twenty yards away. I had antennae out that stretched down the block. It's hard to even remember exactly



what that felt like. I think you take in too much information to store so you just forget, free up brain space to take in everything about the next moment that might keep you alive. And then you forget that moment, too, and focus on the next. And the next. And the next. For seven months.

So that's orange. And then you go shopping in Wilmington, unarmed, and you think you can get back down to white? It'll be a long fucking time before you get down to white.

the end of it I was amped up. Cheryl didn't let me drive home. I would have gone a hundred miles per hour. And when we got back, we saw Vicar had thrown up again, right by the door. I looked for him and he was there on the couch, trying to stand on shaky legs. And I said, "Goddamn it, Cheryl. It's fucking time."

She said, "You think I don't know?"

I looked at Vicar.

She said, "I'll take him to the vet tomorrow."

I said, "No."

She shook her head. She said, "I'll take care of it."

I said, "You mean you'll pay some asshole a hundred bucks to kill my dog."

She didn't say anything.

I said, "That's not how you do it. It's on me."

She was looking at me in this way I couldn't deal with. Soft.

I looked out the window at nothing.

She said, "You want me to go with you?"

I said, "No. No."

"Okay," she said. "But it'd be better."

She walked over to Vicar, leaned down, and hugged him.

Her hair fell over her face and I couldn't see if she was crying. Then she stood up, walked to the bedroom, and gently closed the door.

I sat down on the couch and scratched Vicar behind the ears, and I came up with a plan. Not a good plan, but a plan. Sometimes that's enough.

There's a dirt road near where I live and a stream off the road where the light filters in around sunset. It's pretty. I used to go running there sometimes. I figured it'd be a good spot for it.

It's not a far drive. We got there right at sunset. I parked just off the road, got out, pulled my rifle out of the trunk, slung it over my shoulders, and moved to the passenger side. I opened the door and lifted Vicar up in my arms and carried him down to the stream. He was heavy and warm, and he licked my face as I carried him, slow, lazy licks from a dog that's been happy all his life. When I put him down and stepped back, he looked up at me. He wagged his tail. And I froze.

Only one other time I hesitated like that. Midway through Fallujah, an insurgent snuck through our perimeter. When we raised the alarm, he disappeared. We freaked, scanning everywhere, until Curtis looked down in this water cistern that'd been used as a cesspit, basically a big round container filled a quarter way with liquid shit.

The insurgent was floating in it, hiding beneath the liquid and only coming up for air. It was like a fish rising up to grab a fly sitting on the top of the water. His mouth would break the surface, open for a breath, and then snap shut, and he'd submerge. I couldn't imagine it. Just smelling it was bad enough. About four or five Marines aimed straight down, fired into the shit. Except me.

Staring at Vicar, it was the same thing. This feeling, like, something in me is going to break if I do this. And I thought of Cheryl bringing Vicar to the vet, of some stranger putting his hands on my dog, and I thought, I have to do this.

I didn't have a shotgun, I had an AR-15. Same, basically, as an M16, what I'd been trained on, and I'd been trained to do it right. Sight alignment, trigger control, breath control. Focus on the iron sights, not the target. The target should be blurry.

I focused on Vicar, then on the sights. Vicar disappeared into a gray blur. I switched off the safety. There had to be three shots. It's not just pull the trigger and you're done. Got to do it right. Hammer pair to the body. A final well-aimed shot to the head.

The first two have to be fired quick, that's important. Your body is mostly water, so a bullet striking through is like a stone thrown in a pond. It creates ripples. Throw in a second stone soon after the first, and in between where they hit, the water gets choppy. That happens in your body, especially when it's two 5.56 rounds traveling at supersonic speeds. Those ripples can tear organs apart.

If I were to shoot you on either side of your heart, one shot ... and then another, you'd have two punctured lungs, two sucking chest wounds. Now you're good and fucked. But you'll still be alive long enough to feel your lungs fill up with blood.

If I shoot you there with the shots coming fast, it's no problem. The ripples tear up your heart and lungs and you don't do the death rattle, you just die. There's shock, but no pain. I pulled the trigger, felt the recoil, and focused on the sights, not on Vicar, three times. Two bullets tore through his chest, one through his skull, and the bullets came fast, too fast to feel. That's how it should be done, each shot coming quick after the last so you can't even try to recover, which is when it hurts.

I stayed there staring at the sights for a while. Vicar was a blur of gray and black. The light was dimming. I couldn't remember what I was going to do with the body.

# Rules of the Game - Amy Tan

(1989) from *The Joy Luck Club*

I was six when my mother taught me the art of invisible strength. It was a strategy for winning arguments, respect from others, and eventually, though neither of us knew it at the time, chess games.

"Bite back your tongue," scolded my mother when I cried loudly, yanking her hand toward the store that sold bags of salted plums. At home, she said, "Wise guy, he not go against wind. In Chinese we say, Come from South, blow with wind — poom! — North will follow. Strongest wind cannot be seen."

The next week I bit back my tongue as we entered the store with the forbidden candies. When my mother finished her shopping, she quietly plucked a small bag of plums from the rack and put it on the counter with the rest of the items.

My mother imparted her daily truths so she could help my older brothers and me rise above our circumstances. We lived in San Francisco's Chinatown. Like most of the other Chinese children who played in the back alleys of restaurants and curio shops, I didn't think we were poor. My bowl was always full, three five-course meals every day, beginning with a soup of mysterious things I didn't want to know the names of.

We lived on Waverly Place, in a warm, clean, two-bedroom flat that sat above a small Chinese bakery specializing in steamed pastries and dim sum. In the early morning, when the alley was still quiet, I could smell fragrant red beans as they were cooked down to a pasty sweetness. By daybreak, our flat was heavy with the odor of fried sesame balls and sweet curried chicken crescents. From my bed, I would listen as my father got ready for work, then locked the door behind him, one-two-three clicks.

At the end of our two-block alley was a small sandlot playground with swings and slides well-shined down the middle with use. The play area was bordered by wood-slat benches where old-country people sat cracking roasted watermelon seeds with their golden teeth and scattering the husks to an impatient gathering of gurgling pigeons. The best playground, however, was the dark alley itself. It was crammed with daily mysteries and adventures. My brothers and I would peer into the medicinal herb shop, watching old Li dole out onto a stiff sheet of white paper the right amount of insect shells, saffron-colored seeds, and pungent leaves for his ailing customers. It was said that he once cured a woman dying of an ancestral curse that had eluded the best of American doctors. Next to the pharmacy was a printer who specialized in gold-embossed wedding invitations and festive red banners.

Farther down the street was Ping Yuen Fish Market. The front window displayed a tank crowded with doomed fish and turtles struggling to gain footing on the slimy green-tiled sides. A hand-written sign informed tourists, "Within this store, is all for food, not for pet." Inside, the butchers with their bloodstained white smocks deftly gutted the fish while customers cried out their orders and shouted, "Give me your freshest," to which the butchers always protested, "All are freshest." On less crowded market days, we would inspect the crates of live frogs and crabs which we were warned not to poke, boxes of dried cuttlefish, and row upon row of iced prawns, squid, and slippery fish. The sanddabs made me shiver each time; their eyes lay on one flattened side and reminded me of my mother's story of a careless girl who ran into a crowded street and was crushed by a cab. "Was smash flat," reported my mother.

At the corner of the alley was Hong Sing's, a four-table cafe with a recessed stairwell in front that led to a door marked "Tradesmen." My brothers and I believed the bad people emerged from this door at night. Tourists never went to Hong Sing's, since the menu was printed only in Chinese. A Caucasian man with a big camera once posed me and my playmates in front of the

restaurant. He had us move to the side of the picture window so the photo would capture the roasted duck with its head dangling from a juice-covered rope. After he took the picture, I told him he should go into Hong Sing's and eat dinner. When he smiled and asked me what they served, I shouted, "Guts and duck's feet and octopus gizzards!" Then I ran off with my friends, shrieking with laughter as we scampered across the alley and hid in the entryway grotto of the China Gem Company, my heart pounding with hope that he would chase us.

My mother named me after the street that we lived on: Waverly Place Jong, my official name for important American documents. But my family called me Meimei, "Little Sister." I was the youngest, the only daughter. Each morning before school, my mother would twist and yank on my thick black hair until she had formed two tightly wound pigtails. One day, as she struggled to weave a hard-toothed comb through my disobedient hair, I had a sly thought.

I asked her, "Ma, what is Chinese torture?" My mother shook her head. A bobby pin was wedged between her lips. She wetted her palm and smoothed the hair above my ear, then pushed the pin in so that it nicked sharply against my scalp.

"Who say this word?" she asked without a trace of knowing how wicked I was being. I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Some boy in my class said Chinese people do Chinese torture."

"Chinese people do many things," she said simply. "Chinese people do business, do medicine, do painting. Not lazy like American people. We do torture. Best torture."

My older brother Vincent was the one who actually got the chess set. We had gone to the annual Christmas party held at the First Chinese Baptist Church at the end of the alley. The missionary ladies had put together a Santa bag of gifts donated by members of another church. None of the gifts had names on them. There were separate sacks for boys and girls of different ages. One of the Chinese parishioners had donned a Santa Claus costume and a stiff paper beard with cotton balls glued to it. I think the only children who thought he was the real thing were too young to know that Santa Claus was not Chinese. When my turn came up, the Santa man asked me how old I was. I thought it was a trick question; I was seven according to the American formula and eight by the Chinese calendar. I said I was born on March 17, 1951. That seemed to satisfy him. He then solemnly asked if I had been a very, very good girl this year and did I believe in Jesus Christ and obey my parents. I knew the only answer to that. I nodded back with equal solemnity.

Having watched the older children opening their gifts, I already knew that the big gifts were not necessarily the nicest ones. One girl my age got a large coloring book of biblical characters, while a less greedy girl who selected a smaller box received a glass vial of lavender toilet water. The sound of the box was also important. A ten-year-old boy had chosen a box that jangled when he shook it. It was a tin globe of the world with a slit for inserting money. He must have thought it was full of dimes and nickels, because when he saw that it had just ten pennies, his face fell with such undisguised disappointment that his mother slapped the side of his head and led him out of the church hall, apologizing to the crowd for her son who had such bad manners he couldn't appreciate such a fine gift.

As I peered into the sack, I quickly fingered the remaining presents, testing their weight, imagining what they contained. I chose a heavy, compact one that was wrapped in shiny silver foil and a red satin ribbon. It was a twelve-pack of Life Savers and I spent the rest of the party arranging and rearranging the candy tubes in the order of my favorites. My bother Winston chose wisely as well. His present turned out to be a box of intricate plastic parts; the instructions on the box proclaimed that when they were properly assembled he would have an authentic miniature replica of a World War II submarine.

Vincent got the chess set, which would have been a very decent present to get at a church Christmas party, except it was obviously used and, as we discovered later, it was missing a black pawn and a white knight. My mother graciously thanked the unknown benefactor, saying, "Too

good. Cost too much." At which point, an old lady with fine white, wispy hair nodded toward our family and said with a whistling whisper, "Merry, merry Christmas."

When we got home, my mother told Vincent to throw the chess set away. "She not want it. We not want it." she said, tossing her head stiffly to the side with a tight, proud smile. My brothers had deaf ears. They were already lining up the chess pieces and reading from the dog-eared instruction book. I watched Vincent and Winston play during Christmas week. The chessboard seemed to hold elaborate secrets waiting to be untangled. The chessmen were more powerful than old Li's magic herbs that cured ancestral curses. And my brothers wore such serious faces that I was sure something was at stake that was greater than avoiding the tradesmen's door to Hong Sing's.

"Let me! Let me!" I begged between games when one brother or the other would sit back with a deep sigh of relief and victory, the other annoyed, unable to let go of the outcome. Vincent at first refused to let me play, but when I offered my Life Savers as replacements for the buttons that filled in for the missing pieces, he relented. He chose the flavors: wild cherry for the black pawn and peppermint for the white knight. Winner could eat both.

As our mother sprinkled flour and rolled out small doughy circles for the steamed dumplings that would be our dinner that night, Vincent explained the rules, pointing to each piece. "You have sixteen pieces and so do I. One king and queen, two bishops, two knights, two castles, and eight pawns. The pawns can only move forward one step, except on the first move. Then they can move two. But they can only take men by moving crossways like this, except in the beginning, when you can move ahead and take another pawn."

"Why?" I asked as I moved my pawn. "Why can't they move more steps?" "Because they're pawns," he said. "But why do they go crossways to take other men? Why aren't there any women and children?"

"Why is the sky blue? Why must you always ask stupid questions?" asked Vincent. "This is a game. These are the rules. I didn't make them up. See. Here in the book." He jabbed a page with a pawn in his hand. "Pawn. P-A-W-N. Pawn. Read it yourself."

My mother patted the flour off her hands. "Let me see book," she said quietly. She scanned the pages quickly, not reading the foreign English symbols, seeming to search deliberately for nothing in particular.

"This American rules," she concluded at last. "Every time people come out from foreign country, must know rules. You not know, judge say, Too bad, go back. They not telling you why so you can use their way go forward. They say, Don't know why, you find out yourself. But they knowing all the time. Better you take it, find out why yourself." She tossed her head back with a satisfied smile.

I found out about all the whys later. I read the rules and looked up all the big words in a dictionary. I borrowed books from the Chinatown library. I studied each chess piece, trying to absorb the power each contained.

I learned about opening moves and why it's important to control the center early on; the shortest distance between two points is straight down the middle. I learned about the middle game and why tactics between two adversaries are like clashing ideas; the one who plays better has the clearest plans for both attacking and getting out of traps. I learned why it is essential in the endgame to have foresight, a mathematical understanding of all possible moves, and patience; all weaknesses and advantages become evident to a strong adversary and are obscured to a tiring opponent. I discovered that for the whole game one must gather invisible strengths and see the endgame before the game begins.

I also found out why I should never reveal "why" to others. A little knowledge withheld is a great advantage one should store for future use. That is the power of chess. It is a game of secrets in which one must show and never tell.

I loved the secrets I found within the sixty-four black and white squares. I carefully drew a

handmade chessboard and pinned it to the wall next to my bed, where I would stare for hours at imaginary battles. Soon I no longer lost any games or Life Savers, but I lost my adversaries. Winston and Vincent decided they were more interested in roaming the streets after school in their Hopalong Cassidy cowboy hats.

On a cold spring afternoon, while walking home from school, I detoured through the playground at the end of our alley. I saw a group of old men, two seated across a folding table playing a game of chess, others smoking pipes, eating peanuts, and watching. I ran home and grabbed Vincent's chess set, which was bound in a cardboard box with rubber bands. I also carefully selected two prized rolls of Life Savers. I came back to the park and approached a man who was observing the game.

"Want to play?" I asked him. His face widened with surprise and he grinned as he looked at the box under my arm.

"Little sister, been a long time since I play with dolls," he said, smiling benevolently. I quickly put the box down next to him on the bench and displayed my retort.

Lau Po, as he allowed me to call him, turned out to be a much better player than my brothers. I lost many games and many Life Savers. But over the weeks, with each diminishing roll of candies, I added new secrets. Lau Po gave me the names. The Double Attack from the East and West Shores. Throwing Stones on the Drowning Man. The Sudden Meeting of the Clan. The Surprise from the Sleeping Guard. The Humble Servant Who Kills the King. Sand in the Eyes of Advancing Forces. A Double Killing Without Blood.

There were also the fine points of chess etiquette. Keep captured men in neat rows, as well-tended prisoners. Never announce "Check" with vanity, lest someone with an unseen sword slit your throat. Never hurl pieces into the sandbox after you have lost a game, because then you must find them again, by yourself, after apologizing to all around you. By the end of the summer, Lau Po had taught me all he knew, and I had become a better chess player.

A small weekend crowd of Chinese people and tourists would gather as I played and defeated my opponents one by one. My mother would join the crowds during these outdoor exhibition games. She sat proudly on the bench, telling my admirers with proper Chinese humility, "Is luck."

A man who watched me play in the park suggested that my mother allow me to play in local chess tournaments. My mother smiled graciously, an answer that meant nothing. I desperately wanted to go, but I bit back my tongue. I knew she would not let me play among strangers. So as we walked home I said in a small voice that I didn't want to play in the local tournament. They would have American rules. If I lost, I would bring shame on my family.

"Is shame you fall down nobody push you," said my mother.

During my first tournament, my mother sat with me in the front row as I waited for my turn. I frequently bounced my legs to unstick them from the cold metal seat of the folding chair. When my name was called, I leapt up. My mother unwrapped something in her lap. It was her chang, a small tablet of red jade which held the sun's fire. "Is luck," she whispered, and tucked it into my dress pocket. I turned to my opponent, a fifteen-year-old boy from Oakland. He looked at me, wrinkling his nose.

As I began to play, the boy disappeared, the color ran out of the room, and I saw only my white pieces and his black ones waiting on the other side. A light wind began blowing past my ears. It whispered secrets only I could hear.

"Blow from the South," it murmured. "The wind leaves no trail." I saw a clear path, the traps to avoid. The crowd rustled. "Shhh! Shhh!" said the corners of the room. The wind blew stronger. "Throw sand from the East to distract him." The knight came forward ready for the sacrifice. The wind hissed, louder and louder. "Blow, blow, blow. He cannot see. He is blind now. Make him lean away from the wind so he is easier to knock down."

"Check," I said, as the wind roared with laughter. The wind died down to little puffs, my own

breath.

My mother placed my first trophy next to a new plastic chess set that the neighborhood Tao society had given to me. As she wiped each piece with a soft cloth, she said, "Next time win more, lose less."

"Ma, it's not how many pieces you lose," I said. "Sometimes you need to lose pieces to get ahead."

"Better to lose less, see if you really need."

At the next tournament, I won again, but it was my mother who wore the triumphant grin.

"Lost eight piece this time. Last time was eleven. What I tell you? Better off lose less!" I was annoyed, but I couldn't say anything.

I attended more tournaments, each one farther away from home. I won all games, in all divisions. The Chinese bakery downstairs from our flat displayed my growing collection of trophies in its window, amidst the dust-covered cakes that were never picked up. The day after I won an important regional tournament, the window encased a fresh sheet cake with whipped-cream frosting and red script saying "Congratulations, Waverly Jong, Chinatown Chess Champion." Soon after that, a flower shop, headstone engraver, and funeral parlor offered to sponsor me in national tournaments. That's when my mother decided I no longer had to do the dishes. Winston and Vincent had to do my chores.

"Why does she get to play and we do all the work," complained Vincent. "Is new American rules," said my mother. "Meimei play, squeeze all her brains out for win chess. You play, worth squeeze towel."

By my ninth birthday, I was a national chess champion. I was still some 429 points away from grand-master status, but I was touted as the Great American Hope, a child prodigy and a girl to boot. They ran a photo of me in Life magazine next to a quote in which Bobby Fischer said, "There will never be a woman grand master." "Your move, Bobby," said the caption.

The day they took the magazine picture I wore neatly plaited braids clipped with plastic barrettes trimmed with rhinestones. I was playing in a large high school auditorium that echoed with phlegmy coughs and the squeaky rubber knobs of chair legs sliding across freshly waxed wooden floors. Seated across from me was an American man, about the same age as Lau Po, maybe fifty. I remember that his sweaty brow seemed to weep at my every move. He wore a dark, malodorous suit. One of his pockets was stuffed with a great white kerchief on which he wiped his palm before sweeping his hand over the chosen chess piece with great flourish.

In my crisp pink-and-white dress with scratchy lace at the neck, one of two my mother had sewn for these special occasions, I would clasp my hands under my chin, the delicate points of my elbows poised lightly on the table in the manner my mother had shown me for posing for the press. I would swing my patent leather shoes back and forth like an impatient child riding on a school bus. Then I would pause, suck in my lips, twirl my chosen piece in midair as if undecided, and then firmly plant it in its new threatening place, with a triumphant smile thrown back at my opponent for good measure.

I no longer played in the alley of Waverly Place. I never visited the playground where the pigeons and old men gathered. I went to school, then directly home to learn new chess secrets, cleverly concealed advantages, more escape routes.

But I found it difficult to concentrate at home. My mother had a habit of standing over me while I plotted out my games. I think she thought of herself as my protective ally. Her lips would be sealed tight, and after each move I made, a soft "Hmmpmph" would escape from her nose.

"Ma, I can't practice when you stand there like that," I said one day. She retreated to the kitchen and made loud noises with the pots and pans. When the crashing stopped, I could see out of the corner of my eye that she was standing in the doorway. "Hmmpmph!" Only this one came out of her tight throat.

My parents made many concessions to allow me to practice. One time I complained that the

bedroom I shared was so noisy that I couldn't think. Thereafter, my brothers slept in a bed in the living room facing the street. I said I couldn't finish my rice; my head didn't work right when my stomach was too full. I left the table with half-finished bowls and nobody complained. But there was one duty I couldn't avoid. I had to accompany my mother on Saturday market days when I had no tournament to play. My mother would proudly walk with me, visiting many shops, buying very little. "This my daughter Wave-ly Jong," she said to whoever looked her way.

One day after we left a shop I said under my breath, "I wish you wouldn't do that, telling everybody I'm your daughter." My mother stopped walking.

Crowds of people with heavy bags pushed past us on the sidewalk, bumping into first one shoulder, than another.

"Aii-ya. So shame be with mother?" She grasped my hand even tighter as she glared at me.

I looked down. "It's not that, it's just so obvious. It's just so embarrassing."

"Embarrass you be my daughter?" Her voice was cracking with anger.

"That's not what I meant. That's not what I said."

"What you say?"

I knew it was a mistake to say anything more, but I heard my voice speaking, "Why do you have to use me to show off? If you want to show off, then why don't you learn to play chess?"

My mother's eyes turned into dangerous black slits. She had no words for me, just sharp silence.

I felt the wind rushing around my hot ears. I jerked my hand out of my mother's tight grasp and spun around, knocking into an old woman. Her bag of groceries spilled to the ground.

"Aii-ya! Stupid girl!" my mother and the woman cried. Oranges and tin cans careened down the sidewalk. As my mother stooped to help the old woman pick up the escaping food, I took off.

I raced down the street, dashing between people, not looking back as my mother screamed shrilly, "Meimei! Meimei!" I fled down an alley, past dark, curtained shops and merchants washing the grime off their windows. I sped into the sunlight, into a large street crowded with tourists examining trinkets and souvenirs. I ducked into another dark alley, down another street, up another alley. I ran until it hurt and I realized I had nowhere to go, that I was not running from anything. The alleys contained no escape routes.

My breath came out like angry smoke. It was cold. I sat down on an upturned plastic pail next to a stack of empty boxes, cupping my chin with my hands, thinking hard. I imagined my mother, first walking briskly down one street or another looking for me, then giving up and returning home to await my arrival. After two hours, I stood up on creaking legs and slowly walked home. The alley was quiet and I could see the yellow lights shining from our flat like two tiger's eyes in the night. I climbed the sixteen steps to the door, advancing quietly up each so as not to make any warning sounds. I turned the knob; the door was locked. I heard a chair moving, quick steps, the locks turning — click! click! click! — and then the door opened.

"About time you got home," said Vincent. "Boy, are you in trouble."

He slid back to the dinner table. On a platter were the remains of a large fish, its fleshy head still connected to bones swimming upstream in vain escape. Standing there waiting for my punishment, I heard my mother speak in a dry voice.

"We not concerning this girl. This girl not have concerning for us." Nobody looked at me. Bone chopsticks clinked against the inside of bowls being emptied into hungry mouths.

I walked into my room, closed the door, and lay down on my bed. The room was dark, the ceiling filled with shadows from the dinnertime lights of neighboring flats.

In my head, I saw a chessboard with sixty-four black and white squares. Opposite me was my opponent, two angry black slits. She wore a triumphant smile. "Strongest wind cannot be seen," she said.

Her black men advanced across the plane, slowly marching to each successive level as a single unit. My white pieces screamed as they scurried and fell off the board one by one. As her



men drew closer to my edge, I felt myself growing light. I rose up into the air and flew out the window. Higher and higher, above the alley, over the tops of tiled roofs, where I was gathered up by the wind and pushed up toward the night sky until everything below me disappeared and I was alone.

I closed my eyes and pondered my next move.

# A Hunger Artist - Franz Kafka

(1922)

Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir

During these last decades the interest in professional fasting has markedly diminished. It used to pay very well to stage such great performances under one's own management, but today that is quite impossible. We live in a different world now. At one time the whole town took a lively interest in the hunger artist; from day to day of his fast the excitement mounted; everybody wanted to see him at least once a day; there were people who bought season tickets for the last few days and sat from morning till night in front of his small barred cage; even in the nighttime there were visiting hours, when the whole effect was heightened by torch flares; on fine days the cage was set out in the open air, and then it was the children's special treat to see the hunger artist; for their elders he was often just a joke that happened to be in fashion, but the children stood openmouthed, holding each other's hands for greater security, marveling at him as he sat there pallid in black tights, with his ribs sticking out so prominently, not even on a seat but down among straw on the ground, sometimes giving a courteous nod, answering questions with a constrained smile, or perhaps stretching an arm through the bars so that one might feel how thin it was, and then again withdrawing deep into himself, paying no attention to anyone or anything, not even to the all-important striking of the clock that was the only piece of furniture in his cage, but merely staring into vacancy with half-shut eyes, now and then taking a sip from a tiny glass of water to moisten his lips.

Besides casual onlookers there were also relays of permanent watchers selected by the public, usually butchers, strangely enough, and it was their task to watch the hunger artist day and night, three of them at a time, in case he should have some secret recourse to nourishment. This was nothing but a formality, instituted to reassure the masses, for the initiates knew well enough that during his fast the artist would never in any circumstances, not even under forcible compulsion, swallow the smallest morsel of food; the honor of his profession forbade it. Not every watcher, of course, was capable of understanding this, there were often groups of night watchers who were very lax in carrying out their duties and deliberately huddled together in a retired corner to play cards with great absorption, obviously intending to give the hunger artist the chance of a little refreshment, which they supposed he could draw from some private hoard. Nothing annoyed the artist more than such watchers; they made him miserable; they made his fast seem unendurable; sometimes he mastered his feebleness sufficiently to sing during their watch for as long as he could keep going, to show them how unjust their suspicions were. But that was of little use; they only wondered at his cleverness in being able to fill his mouth even while singing. Much more to his taste were the watchers who sat up close to the bars, who were not content with the dim night lighting of the hall but focused him in the full glare of the electric pocket torch given them by the impresario. The harsh light did not trouble him at all, in any case he could never sleep properly, and he could always drowse a little, even when the hall was thronged with noisy onlookers. He was quite happy at the prospect of spending a sleepless night with such watchers; he was ready to exchange jokes with them, to tell them stories out of his nomadic life, anything at all to keep them awake and demonstrate to them that he had no eatables in his cage and that he was fasting as not one of them could fast. But his happiest moment was when the morning came and an enormous breakfast was brought them, at his expense, on which they flung themselves with the keen appetite of healthy men after a weary night of wakefulness. Of course there were people who argued that this breakfast was an unfair attempt to bribe the watchers, but that was going rather too far, and when they were invited to take on a night's vigil without a

breakfast, merely for the sake of the cause, they made themselves scarce, although they stuck stubbornly to their suspicions.

Such suspicions, anyhow, were a necessary accompaniment to the profession of fasting. No one could possibly watch the hunger artist continuously, day and night, and so no one could produce first-hand evidence that the fast had really been rigorous and continuous; only the artist himself could know that, he was therefore bound to be the sole completely satisfied spectator of his own fast. Yet for other reasons he was never satisfied; it was not perhaps mere fasting that had brought him to such skeleton thinness that many people had regretfully to keep away from his exhibitions, because the sight of him was too much for them, perhaps it was dissatisfaction with himself that had worn him down. For he alone knew, what no other initiate knew, how easy it was to fast. It was the easiest thing in the world. He made no secret of this, yet people did not believe him. At the best they set him down as modest, most of them, however, thought he was out for publicity or else he was some kind of cheat who found it easy to fast because he had discovered a way of making it easy, and then had the impudence to admit the fact, more or less. He had to put up with all that, and in the course of time had got used to it, but his inner dissatisfaction always rankled, and never yet, after any term of fasting — this must be granted to his credit — had he left the cage of his own free will. The longest period of fasting was fixed by his impresario at forty days, beyond that term he was not allowed to go, not even in great cities, and there was good reason for it, too. Experience had proved that for about forty days the interest of the public could be stimulated by a steadily increasing pressure of advertisement, but after that the town began to lose interest, sympathetic support began notably to fall off, there were of course local variations as between one town and another, but as a general rule forty days marked the limit. So on the fortieth day the flower-bedecked cage was opened, enthusiastic spectators filled the hall, a military band played, two doctors entered the cage to measure the results of the fast, which were announced through a megaphone, and finally two young ladies appeared, blissful at having been selected for the honor, to help the hunger artist down the few steps leading to a small table on which was spread a carefully chosen invalid repast. And at this very moment the artist always turned stubborn. True, he would entrust his bony arms to the outstretched helping hands of the ladies bending over him, but stand up he would not. Why stop fasting at this particular moment, after forty days of it? He had held out for a long time, an illimitably long time; why stop now, when he was in his best fasting form, or rather, not yet quite in his best fasting form? Why should he be cheated of the fame he would get for fasting longer, for being not only the record hunger artist of all time, which presumably he was already, but for beating his own record by a performance beyond human imagination, since he felt that there were no limits to his capacity for fasting? His public pretended to admire him so much, why should it have so little patience with him; if he could endure fasting longer, why shouldn't the public endure it? Besides, he was tired, and now he was supposed to lift himself to his full height and go down to a meal the very thought of which gave him a nausea that only the presence of the ladies kept him from betraying, and even that with an effort. And he looked up into the eyes of the ladies who were apparently so friendly and in reality so cruel, and shook his head, which felt too heavy on its strengthless neck. But then there happened yet again what always happened. The impresario came forward, without a word — for the band made speech impossible — lifted his arms in the air above the artist, as if inviting Heaven to look down upon its creature here in the straw, this suffering martyr, which indeed he was, although in quite another sense; grasped him around the emaciated waist, with exaggerated caution, so that the frail condition he was in might be appreciated; and committed him to the care of the blenching ladies, not without secretly giving him a shaking so that his legs and body tottered and swayed. The artist now submitted completely; his head lolled on his breast as if it had landed there by chance; his body was hollowed out; his legs in a spasm of self-preservation clung to each other at the knees, yet scraped on the ground as if it were not really solid ground, as if they were only trying to find

solid ground; and the whole weight of his body, a featherweight after all, relapsed onto one of the ladies, who looking round for help and panting a little — this post of honor was not at all what she expected it to be — first stretched her neck as far as she could to keep her face at least free from contact with the artist, then finding this impossible, and her more fortunate companion not coming to her aid, but merely holding extended on her own trembling hand the little bunch of knucklebones that was the artist's, to the great delight of the spectators burst into tears and had to be replaced by an attendant who had long been stationed in readiness. Then came the food, a little of which the impresario managed to get between the artist's lips, while he sat in a kind of half-fainting trance, to the accompaniment of cheerful patter designed to distract the public's attention from the artist's condition; after that, a toast was drunk to the public, supposedly prompted by a whisper from the artist in the impresario's ear; the band confirmed it with a mighty flourish, the spectators melted away, and no one had any cause to be dissatisfied with the proceedings, no one except the hunger artist himself, he only, as always.

So he lived for many years, with small regular intervals of recuperation, in visible glory, honored by all the world, yet in spite of that troubled in spirit, and all the more troubled because no one would take his trouble seriously. What comfort could he possibly need? What more could he possibly wish for? And if some good-natured person, feeling sorry for him, tried to console him by pointing out that his melancholy was probably caused by fasting, it could happen, especially when he had been fasting for some time, that he reacted with an outburst of fury and to the general alarm began to shake the bars of the cage like a wild animal. Yet the impresario had a way of punishing these outbreaks which he rather enjoyed putting into operation. He would apologize publicly for the artist's behavior, which was only to be excused, he admitted, because of the irritability caused by fasting; a condition hardly to be understood by well-fed people; then by natural transition he went on to mention the artist's equally incomprehensible boast that he could fast for much longer than he was doing; he praised the high ambition, the good will, the great self-denial undoubtedly implicit in such a statement; and then quite simply countered it by bringing out photographs, which were also on sale to the public, showing the artist on the fortieth day of a fast lying in bed almost dead from exhaustion. This perversion of the truth, familiar to the artist though it was, always unnerved him afresh and proved too much for him. What was a consequence of the premature ending of his fast was here presented as the cause of it! To fight against this lack of understanding, against a whole world of non-understanding, was impossible. Time and time again in good faith he stood by the bars listening to the impresario, but as soon as the photographs appeared he always let go and sank with a groan back on to his straw, and the reassured public could once more come close and gaze at him.

A few years later when the witnesses of such scenes called them to mind, they often failed to understand themselves at all. For meanwhile the aforementioned chance in public interest had set in; it seemed to happen almost overnight; there may have been profound causes for it, but who was going to bother about that; at any rate the pampered hunger artist suddenly found himself deserted one fine day by the amusement seekers, who went streaming past him to other more favored attractions. For the last time the impresario hurried him over half Europe to discover whether the old interest might still survive here and there; all in vain; everywhere, as if by secret agreement, a positive revulsion from professional fasting was in evidence. Of course it could not really have sprung up so suddenly as all that, and many premonitory symptoms which had not been sufficiently remarked or suppressed during the rush and glitter of success now came retrospectively to mind, but it was now too late to take any countermeasures. Fasting would surely come into fashion again at some future date, yet that was no comfort for those living in the present. What, then, was the hunger artist to do? He had been applauded by thousands in his time and could hardly come down to showing himself in a street booth at village fairs, and as for adopting another profession, he was not only too old for that but too fanatically devoted to fasting. So he took leave of the impresario, his partner in an unparalleled career, and hired

himself to a large circus; in order to spare his own feelings he avoided reading the conditions of his contract.

A large circus with its enormous traffic in replacing and recruiting men, animals and apparatus can always find a use for people at any time, even for a hunger artist, provided of course that he does not ask too much., and in this particular case anyhow it was not only the artist who was taken on but his famous and long-known name as well, indeed considering the peculiar nature of his performance, which was not impaired by advancing age, it could not be objected that here was an artist past his prime, no longer at the height of his professional skill, seeking a refuge in some quiet corner of a circus, on the contrary, the hunger artist averred that he could fast as well as ever, which was entirely credible, he even alleged that if he were allowed to fast as he liked, and this was at once promised him without more ado, he could astound the world by establishing a record never yet achieved, a statement which certainly provoked a smile among the other professionals, since it was left out of account the change in public opinion, which the hunger artist in his zeal conveniently forgot.

He had not, however, actually lost his sense of the real situation and took it as a matter of course that he and his cage should be stationed, not in the middle of the ring as a main attraction, but outside, near the animal cages, on a site that was after all easily accessible. Large and gaily painted placards made a frame for the cage and announced what was to be seen inside it. When the public came thronging out in the intervals to see the animals, they could hardly avoid passing the hunger artist's cage and stopping there a moment, perhaps they might even have stayed longer had not those pressing behind them in the narrow gangway, who did not understand why they should be held up on their way towards the excitements of the menagerie, made it impossible for anyone to stand gazing quietly for any length of time. And that was the reason why the hunger artist, who had of course been looking forward to these visiting hours as the main achievement of his life, began instead to shrink from them. At first he could hardly wait for the intervals; it was exhilarating to watch the crowds come streaming his way, until only too soon — not even the most obstinate self-deception, clung to almost consciously, could hold out against the fact — the conviction was borne in upon him that these people, most of them, to judge from their actions, again and again, without exception, were all on their way to the menagerie. And the first sight of them from the distance remained the best. For when they reached his cage he was at once deafened by the storm of shouting and abuse that arose from the two contending factions, which renewed themselves continuously, of those who wanted to stop and stare at him — he soon began to dislike them more than the others — not out of real interest but only out of obstinate self-assertiveness, and those who wanted to go straight on to the animals. When the first great rush was past, the stragglers came along, and these, whom nothing could have prevented from stopping to look at him as long as they had breath, raced past with long strides, hardly even glancing at him, in their haste to get to the menagerie in time. And all too rarely did it happen that he had a stroke of luck, when some father of a family fetched up before him with his children, pointed a finger at the hunger artist and explained at length what the phenomenon meant, telling storied of earlier years when he himself had watched similar but much more thrilling performances, and the children, still rather uncomprehending, since neither inside nor outside school had they been sufficiently prepared for this lesson — what did they care about fasting? — yet showed by the brightness of their intent eyes that new and better times might be coming. Perhaps, said the hunger artist to himself many a time, things could be a little better if his cage were set not quite so near the menagerie. That made it too easy for people to make their choice, to say nothing of what he suffered from the stench of the menagerie, the animals' restlessness by night, the carrying past of raw lumps of flesh for the beasts of prey, the roaring at feeding times, which depressed him continuously. But he did not dare to lodge a complaint with the management; after all, he had the animals to thank for the troops of people who passed his cage, among whom there might always be one here and there to take an interest

in him, and who could tell where they might seclude him if he called attention to his existence and thereby to the fact that, strictly speaking, he was only an impediment on the way to the menagerie.

A small impediment, to be sure, one that grew steadily less. People grew familiar with the strange idea that they could be expected, in times like these, to take an interest in a hunger artist, and with this familiarity the verdict went out against him. He might fast as much as he could, and he did so; but nothing could save him now, people passed him by. Just try to explain to anyone the art of fasting! Anyone who has no feeling for it cannot be made to understand it. The fine placards grew dirty and illegible, they were torn down; the little notice board telling the number of fast days achieved, which at first was changed carefully every day, had long stayed at the same figure, for after the first few weeks even this small task seemed pointless to the staff; and so the artist simply fasted on and on, as he had once dreamed of doing, and it was no trouble to him, just as he had always foretold, but no one counted the days, not one, not even the artist himself, knew what records he was already breaking, and his heart grew heavy. And when once in a time some leisurely passer-by stopped, made merry over the old figure on the board and spoke of swindling, that was in its way the stupidest lie ever invented by indifference and inborn malice, since it was not the hunger artist who was cheating, he was working honestly, but the world who was cheating him of his reward.

Many more days went by, however, and that too came to an end. An overseer's eye fell on the cage one day and he asked the attendants why this perfectly good cage should be left standing there unused with dirty straw inside it; nobody knew, until one man, helped out by the notice board, remembered about the hunger artist. They poked into the straw with sticks and found him in it. "Are you still fasting?" asked the overseer, "when on earth do you mean to stop?" "Forgive me, everybody," whispered the hunger artist, only the overseer, who had his ear to the bars, understood him. "Of course," said the overseer, and tapped his forehead with a finger to let the attendants know what state the man was in, "we forgive you." "I always wanted you to admire my fasting," said the hunger artist. "We do admire it," said the overseer, affably. "But you shouldn't admire it," said the hunger artist. "Well then we don't admire it," said the overseer, "but why shouldn't we admire it?" "Because I have to fast, I can't help it," said the hunger artist. "What a fellow you are," said the overseer, "and why can't you help it?" "Because," said the hunger artist, lifting his head a little and speaking, with his lips pursed, as if for a kiss, right into the overseer's ear, so that no syllable might be lost, "because I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else." These were his last words, but in his dimming eyes remained the firm though no longer proud persuasion that he was continuing to fast.

"Well, clear this out now!" said the overseer, and they buried the hunger artist, straw and all. Into the cage they put a young panther. Even the most insensitive felt it refreshing to see this wild creature leaping around the cage that had so long been dreary. The panther was all right. The food he liked was brought him without hesitation by the attendants; he seemed not even to miss his freedom; his noble body, furnished almost to the bursting point with all that it needed, seemed to carry freedom around with it too; somewhere in his jaws it seemed to lurk; and the joy of life streamed with such ardent passion from his throat that for the onlookers it was not easy to stand the shock of it. But they braced themselves, crowded round the cage, and did not want ever to move away.

# The Yellow Wallpaper - Charlotte Perkins Gilman

(1892)

It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer.

A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity — but that would be asking too much of fate!

Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it.

Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted?

John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.

John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures.

John is a physician, and PERHAPS — (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind) — PERHAPS that is one reason I do not get well faster.

You see he does not believe I am sick!

And what can one do?

If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression — a slight hysterical tendency — what is one to do?

My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing.

So I take phosphates or phosphites — whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again.

Personally, I disagree with their ideas.

Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.

But what is one to do?

I did write for a while in spite of them; but it DOES exhaust me a good deal — having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition.

I sometimes fancy that my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus — but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad.

So I will let it alone and talk about the house.

The most beautiful place! It is quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village. It makes me think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people.

There is a DELICIOUS garden! I never saw such a garden — large and shady, full of box-bordered paths, and lined with long grape-covered arbors with seats under them.

There were greenhouses, too, but they are all broken now.

There was some legal trouble, I believe, something about the heirs and co-heirs; anyhow, the place has been empty for years.

That spoils my ghostliness, I am afraid, but I don't care — there is something strange about the house — I can feel it.

I even said so to John one moonlight evening, but he said what I felt was a DRAUGHT, and shut the window.

I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition.

But John says if I feel so, I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself

— before him, at least, and that makes me very tired.

I don't like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings! but John would not hear of it.

He said there was only one window and not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another.

He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction.

I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more.

He said we came here solely on my account, that I was to have perfect rest and all the air I could get. "Your exercise depends on your strength, my dear," said he, "and your food somewhat on your appetite; but air you can absorb all the time." So we took the nursery at the top of the house.

It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls.

The paint and paper look as if a boys' school had used it. It is stripped off — the paper — in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life.

One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin.

It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide — plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.

The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.

It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.

No wonder the children hated it! I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long.

There comes John, and I must put this away — he hates to have me write a word.

We have been here two weeks, and I haven't felt like writing before, since that first day.

I am sitting by the window now, up in this atrocious nursery, and there is nothing to hinder my writing as much as I please, save lack of strength.

John is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious.

I am glad my case is not serious!

But these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing.

John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no REASON to suffer, and that satisfies him.

Of course it is only nervousness. It does weigh on me so not to do my duty in any way!

I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!

Nobody would believe what an effort it is to do what little I am able — to dress and entertain, and other things.

It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby!

And yet I CANNOT be with him, it makes me so nervous.

I suppose John never was nervous in his life. He laughs at me so about this wallpaper!

At first he meant to repaper the room, but afterwards he said that I was letting it get the better of me, and that nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies.

He said that after the wallpaper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs, and so on.

"You know the place is doing you good," he said, "and really, dear, I don't care to renovate



the house just for a three months' rental."

"Then do let us go downstairs," I said, "there are such pretty rooms there."

Then he took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose, and said he would go down to the cellar, if I wished, and have it whitewashed into the bargain.

But he is right enough about the beds and windows and things.

It is an airy and comfortable room as any one need wish, and, of course, I would not be so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a whim.

I'm really getting quite fond of the big room, all but that horrid paper.

Out of one window I can see the garden, those mysterious deep-shaded arbors, the riotous old-fashioned flowers, and bushes and gnarly trees.

Out of another I get a lovely view of the bay and a little private wharf belonging to the estate. There is a beautiful shaded lane that runs down there from the house. I always fancy I see people walking in these numerous paths and arbors, but John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try.

I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me.

But I find I get pretty tired when I try.

It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work. When I get really well, John says we will ask Cousin Henry and Julia down for a long visit; but he says he would as soon put fireworks in my pillow-case as to let me have those stimulating people about now.

I wish I could get well faster.

But I must not think about that. This paper looks to me as if it KNEW what a vicious influence it had!

There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down.

I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place where two breadths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other.

I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have! I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy store.

I remember what a kindly wink the knobs of our big, old bureau used to have, and there was one chair that always seemed like a strong friend.

I used to feel that if any of the other things looked too fierce I could always hop into that chair and be safe.

The furniture in this room is no worse than inharmonious, however, for we had to bring it all from downstairs. I suppose when this was used as a playroom they had to take the nursery things out, and no wonder! I never saw such ravages as the children have made here.

The wallpaper, as I said before, is torn off in spots, and it sticketh closer than a brother — they must have had perseverance as well as hatred.

Then the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great heavy bed which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through the wars.

But I don't mind it a bit — only the paper.

There comes John's sister. Such a dear girl as she is, and so careful of me! I must not let her find me writing.

She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession. I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick!

But I can write when she is out, and see her a long way off from these windows.

There is one that commands the road, a lovely shaded winding road, and one that just looks off over the country. A lovely country, too, full of great elms and velvet meadows.

This wallpaper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then.

But in the places where it isn't faded and where the sun is just so — I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design.

There's sister on the stairs!

Well, the Fourth of July is over! The people are gone and I am tired out. John thought it might do me good to see a little company, so we just had mother and Nellie and the children down for a week.

Of course I didn't do a thing. Jennie sees to everything now.

But it tired me all the same.

John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall.

But I don't want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so!

Besides, it is such an undertaking to go so far.

I don't feel as if it was worth while to turn my hand over for anything, and I'm getting dreadfully fretful and querulous.

I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time.

Of course I don't when John is here, or anybody else, but when I am alone.

And I am alone a good deal just now. John is kept in town very often by serious cases, and Jennie is good and lets me alone when I want her to.

So I walk a little in the garden or down that lovely lane, sit on the porch under the roses, and lie down up here a good deal.

I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps BECAUSE of the wallpaper.

It dwells in my mind so!

I lie here on this great immovable bed — it is nailed down, I believe — and follow that pattern about by the hour. It is as good as gymnastics, I assure you. I start, we'll say, at the bottom, down in the corner over there where it has not been touched, and I determine for the thousandth time that I WILL follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion.

I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of.

It is repeated, of course, by the breadths, but not otherwise.

Looked at in one way each breadth stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes — a kind of "debased Romanesque" with delirium tremens — go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity.

But, on the other hand, they connect diagonally, and the sprawling outlines run off in great slanting waves of optic horror, like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase.

The whole thing goes horizontally, too, at least it seems so, and I exhaust myself in trying to distinguish the order of its going in that direction.

They have used a horizontal breadth for a frieze, and that adds wonderfully to the confusion.

There is one end of the room where it is almost intact, and there, when the crosslights fade and the low sun shines directly upon it, I can almost fancy radiation after all — the interminable grotesques seem to form around a common centre and rush off in headlong plunges of equal distraction.

It makes me tired to follow it. I will take a nap I guess.

I don't know why I should write this.

I don't want to.

I don't feel able.

And I know John would think it absurd. But I MUST say what I feel and think in some way — it is such a relief!

But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief.

Half the time now I am awfully lazy, and lie down ever so much.

John says I musn't lose my strength, and has me take cod liver oil and lots of tonics and things, to say nothing of ale and wine and rare meat.

Dear John! He loves me very dearly, and hates to have me sick. I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia.

But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there; and I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had finished.

It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight. Just this nervous weakness I suppose.

And dear John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed, and sat by me and read to me till it tired my head.

He said I was his darling and his comfort and all he had, and that I must take care of myself for his sake, and keep well.

He says no one but myself can help me out of it, that I must use my will and self-control and not let any silly fancies run away with me.

There's one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wallpaper.

If we had not used it, that blessed child would have! What a fortunate escape! Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds.

I never thought of it before, but it is lucky that John kept me here after all, I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see.

Of course I never mention it to them any more — I am too wise — but I keep watch of it all the same.

There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will.

Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day.

It is always the same shape, only very numerous.

And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern. I don't like it a bit. I wonder — I begin to think — I wish John would take me away from here!

It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so.

But I tried it last night.

It was moonlight. The moon shines in all around just as the sun does.

I hate to see it sometimes, it creeps so slowly, and always comes in by one window or another.

John was asleep and I hated to waken him, so I kept still and watched the moonlight on that undulating wallpaper till I felt creepy.

The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out.

I got up softly and went to feel and see if the paper DID move, and when I came back John was awake.

"What is it, little girl?" he said. "Don't go walking about like that — you'll get cold."

I thought it was a good time to talk, so I told him that I really was not gaining here, and that I wished he would take me away.

"Why darling!" said he, "our lease will be up in three weeks, and I can't see how to leave

before.

"The repairs are not done at home, and I cannot possibly leave town just now. Of course if you were in any danger, I could and would, but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better, I feel really much easier about you."

"I don't weigh a bit more," said I, "nor as much; and my appetite may be better in the evening when you are here, but it is worse in the morning when you are away!"

"Bless her little heart!" said he with a big hug, "she shall be as sick as she pleases! But now let's improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning!"

"And you won't go away?" I asked gloomily.

"Why, how can I, dear? It is only three weeks more and then we will take a nice little trip of a few days while Jennie is getting the house ready. Really dear you are better!"

"Better in body perhaps — " I began, and stopped short, for he sat up straight and looked at me with such a stern, reproachful look that I could not say another word.

"My darling," said he, "I beg of you, for my sake and for our child's sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind! There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?"

So of course I said no more on that score, and we went to sleep before long. He thought I was asleep first, but I wasn't, and lay there for hours trying to decide whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately.

On a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind.

The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing.

You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream.

The outside pattern is a florid arabesque, reminding one of a fungus. If you can imagine a toadstool in joints, an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions — why, that is something like it.

That is, sometimes!

There is one marked peculiarity about this paper, a thing nobody seems to notice but myself, and that is that it changes as the light changes.

When the sun shoots in through the east window — I always watch for that first long, straight ray — it changes so quickly that I never can quite believe it.

That is why I watch it always.

moonlight — the moon shines in all night when there is a moon — I wouldn't know it was the same paper.

At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candle light, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be.

I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, that dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman.

daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling. It keeps me quiet by the hour.

I lie down ever so much now. John says it is good for me, and to sleep all I can.

Indeed he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal.

It is a very bad habit I am convinced, for you see I don't sleep.

And that cultivates deceit, for I don't tell them I'm awake — O no!

The fact is I am getting a little afraid of John.

He seems very queer sometimes, and even Jennie has an inexplicable look.

It strikes me occasionally, just as a scientific hypothesis — that perhaps it is the paper!

I have watched John when he did not know I was looking, and come into the room suddenly on the most innocent excuses, and I've caught him several times LOOKING AT THE PAPER! And Jennie too. I caught Jennie with her hand on it once.

She didn't know I was in the room, and when I asked her in a quiet, a very quiet voice, with the most restrained manner possible, what she was doing with the paper — she turned around as if she had been caught stealing, and looked quite angry — asked me why I should frighten her so!

Then she said that the paper stained everything it touched, that she had found yellow smooches on all my clothes and John's, and she wished we would be more careful!

Did not that sound innocent? But I know she was studying that pattern, and I am determined that nobody shall find it out but myself!

Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was.

John is so pleased to see me improve! He laughed a little the other day, and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wallpaper.

I turned it off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it was BECAUSE of the wallpaper — he would make fun of me. He might even want to take me away.

I don't want to leave now until I have found it out. There is a week more, and I think that will be enough.

I'm feeling ever so much better! I don't sleep much at night, for it is so interesting to watch developments; but I sleep a good deal in the daytime.

In the daytime it is tiresome and perplexing.

There are always new shoots on the fungus, and new shades of yellow all over it. I cannot keep count of them, though I have tried conscientiously.

It is the strangest yellow, that wallpaper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw — not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things.

But there is something else about that paper — the smell! I noticed it the moment we came into the room, but with so much air and sun it was not bad. Now we have had a week of fog and rain, and whether the windows are open or not, the smell is here.

It creeps all over the house.

I find it hovering in the dining-room, skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs.

It gets into my hair.

Even when I go to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise it — there is that smell!

Such a peculiar odor, too! I have spent hours in trying to analyze it, to find what it smelled like.

It is not bad — at first, and very gentle, but quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met.

In this damp weather it is awful, I wake up in the night and find it hanging over me.

It used to disturb me at first. I thought seriously of burning the house — to reach the smell.

But now I am used to it. The only thing I can think of that it is like is the COLOR of the paper! A yellow smell.

There is a very funny mark on this wall, low down, near the mopboard. A streak that runs round the room. It goes behind every piece of furniture, except the bed, a long, straight, even SMOOCH, as if it had been rubbed over and over.

I wonder how it was done and who did it, and what they did it for. Round and round and round — round and round and round — it makes me dizzy!

I really have discovered something at last.

Through watching so much at night, when it changes so, I have finally found out.

The front pattern DOES move — and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!

Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.

Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard.

And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern — it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads.

They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white!

If those heads were covered or taken off it would not be half so bad.

I think that woman gets out in the daytime!

And I'll tell you why — privately — I've seen her!

I can see her out of every one of my windows!

It is the same woman, I know, for she is always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight.

I see her on that long road under the trees, creeping along, and when a carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines.

I don't blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight!

I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. I can't do it at night, for I know John would suspect something at once.

And John is so queer now, that I don't want to irritate him. I wish he would take another room! Besides, I don't want anybody to get that woman out at night but myself.

I often wonder if I could see her out of all the windows at once.

But, turn as fast as I can, I can only see out of one at a time.

And though I always see her, she MAY be able to creep faster than I can turn!

I have watched her sometimes away off in the open country, creeping as fast as a cloud shadow in a high wind.

If only that top pattern could be gotten off from the under one! I mean to try it, little by little.

I have found out another funny thing, but I shan't tell it this time! It does not do to trust people too much.

There are only two more days to get this paper off, and I believe John is beginning to notice. I don't like the look in his eyes.

And I heard him ask Jennie a lot of professional questions about me. She had a very good report to give.

She said I slept a good deal in the daytime.

John knows I don't sleep very well at night, for all I'm so quiet!

He asked me all sorts of questions, too, and pretended to be very loving and kind.

As if I couldn't see through him!

Still, I don't wonder he acts so, sleeping under this paper for three months.

It only interests me, but I feel sure John and Jennie are secretly affected by it.

Hurrah! This is the last day, but it is enough. John is to stay in town over night, and won't be out until this evening.

Jennie wanted to sleep with me — the sly thing! but I told her I should undoubtedly rest better for a night all alone.

That was clever, for really I wasn't alone a bit! As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her.

I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper.

A strip about as high as my head and half around the room.

And then when the sun came and that awful pattern began to laugh at me, I declared I would finish it today!

We go away tomorrow, and they are moving all my furniture down again to leave things as they were before.

Jennie looked at the wall in amazement, but I told her merrily that I did it out of pure spite at the vicious thing.

She laughed and said she wouldn't mind doing it herself, but I must not get tired.

How she betrayed herself that time!

But I am here, and no person touches this paper but me — not ALIVE!

She tried to get me out of the room — it was too patent! But I said it was so quiet and empty and clean now that I believed I would lie down again and sleep all I could; and not to wake me even for dinner — I would call when I woke.

So now she is gone, and the servants are gone, and the things are gone, and there is nothing left but that great bedstead nailed down, with the canvas mattress we found on it.

We shall sleep downstairs to-night, and take the boat home tomorrow.

I quite enjoy the room, now it is bare again.

How those children did tear about here!

This bedstead is fairly gnawed!

But I must get to work.

I have locked the door and thrown the key down into the front path.

I don't want to go out, and I don't want to have anybody come in, till John comes.

I want to astonish him.

I've got a rope up here that even Jennie did not find. If that woman does get out, and tries to get away, I can tie her!

But I forgot I could not reach far without anything to stand on!

This bed will NOT move!

I tried to lift and push it until I was lame, and then I got so angry I bit off a little piece at one corner — but it hurt my teeth.

Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!

I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try.

Besides I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued.

I don't like to LOOK out of the windows even — there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast.

I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?

But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope — you don't get ME out in the road there!

I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!

It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!

I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to.

For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow.

But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way.

Why there's John at the door!

It is no use, young man, you can't open it!

How he does call and pound!

Now he's crying for an axe.

It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door!

"John dear!" said I in the gentlest voice, "the key is down by the front steps, under a plantain leaf!"

That silenced him for a few moments.

Then he said — very quietly indeed, "Open the door, my darling!"

"I can't," said I. "The key is down by the front door under a plantain leaf!"

And then I said it again, several times, very gently and slowly, and said it so often that he had to go and see, and he got it of course, and came in. He stopped short by the door.

"What is the matter?" he cried. "For God's sake, what are you doing!"

I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.

"I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"

Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!



# The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton - Arthur Conan Doyle

(1904)

It is years since the incidents of which I speak took place, and yet it is with diffidence that I allude to them. For a long time, even with the utmost discretion and reticence, it would have been impossible to make the facts public; but now the principal person concerned is beyond the reach of human law, and with due suppression the story may be told in such fashion as to injure no one. It records an absolutely unique experience in the career both of Mr. Sherlock Holmes and of myself. The reader will excuse me if I conceal the date or any other fact by which he might trace the actual occurrence.

We had been out for one of our evening rambles, Holmes and I, and had returned about six o'clock on a cold, frosty winter's evening. As Holmes turned up the lamp the light fell upon a card on the table. He glanced at it, and then, with an ejaculation of disgust, threw it on the floor. I picked it up and read: —

Charles Augustus Milverton,  
Appledore Towers,  
Hampstead.  
Agent.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"The worst man in London," Holmes answered, as he sat down and stretched his legs before the fire. "Is anything on the back of the card?"

I turned it over.

"Will call at 6.30 — C.A.M.," I read.

"Hum! He's about due. Do you feel a creeping, shrinking sensation, Watson, when you stand before the serpents in the Zoo and see the slithery, gliding, venomous creatures, with their deadly eyes and wicked, flattened faces? Well, that's how Milverton impresses me. I've had to do with fifty murderers in my career, but the worst of them never gave me the repulsion which I have for this fellow. And yet I can't get out of doing business with him — indeed, he is here at my invitation."

"But who is he?"

"I'll tell you, Watson. He is the king of all the blackmailers. Heaven help the man, and still more the woman, whose secret and reputation come into the power of Milverton. With a smiling face and a heart of marble he will squeeze and squeeze until he has drained them dry. The fellow is a genius in his way, and would have made his mark in some more savoury trade. His method is as follows: He allows it to be known that he is prepared to pay very high sums for letters which compromise people of wealth or position. He receives these wares not only from treacherous valets or maids, but frequently from genteel ruffians who have gained the confidence and affection of trusting women. He deals with no niggard hand. I happen to know that he paid seven hundred pounds to a footman for a note two lines in length, and that the ruin of a noble family was the result. Everything which is in the market goes to Milverton, and there are hundreds in this great city who turn white at his name. No one knows where his grip may fall, for he is far too rich and far too cunning to work from hand to mouth. He will hold a card back for years in order to play it at the moment when the stake is best worth winning. I have said that he is the worst man in London, and I would ask you how could one compare the ruffian who in hot blood bludgeons his mate with this man, who methodically and at his leisure tortures the soul and

wrings the nerves in order to add to his already swollen money-bags?"

I had seldom heard my friend speak with such intensity of feeling.

"But surely," said I, "the fellow must be within the grasp of the law?"

"Technically, no doubt, but practically not. What would it profit a woman, for example, to get him a few months' imprisonment if her own ruin must immediately follow? His victims dare not hit back. If ever he blackmailed an innocent person, then, indeed, we should have him; but he is as cunning as the Evil One. No, no; we must find other ways to fight him."

"And why is he here?"

"Because an illustrious client has placed her piteous case in my hands. It is the Lady Eva Brackwell, the most beautiful *debutante* of last season. She is to be married in a fortnight to the Earl of Dovercourt. This fiend has several imprudent letters — imprudent, Watson, nothing worse — which were written to an impecunious young squire in the country. They would suffice to break off the match. Milverton will send the letters to the Earl unless a large sum of money is paid him. I have been commissioned to meet him, and — to make the best terms I can."

At that instant there was a clatter and a rattle in the street below. Looking down I saw a stately carriage and pair, the brilliant lamps gleaming on the glossy haunches of the noble chestnuts. A footman opened the door, and a small, stout man in a shaggy astrachan overcoat descended. A minute later he was in the room.

Charles Augustus Milverton was a man of fifty, with a large, intellectual head, a round, plump, hairless face, a perpetual frozen smile, and two keen grey eyes, which gleamed brightly from behind broad, golden-rimmed glasses. There was something of Mr. Pickwick's benevolence in his appearance, marred only by the insincerity of the fixed smile and by the hard glitter of those restless and penetrating eyes. His voice was as smooth and suave as his countenance, as he advanced with a plump little hand extended, murmuring his regret for having missed us at his first visit. Holmes disregarded the outstretched hand and looked at him with a face of granite. Milverton's smile broadened; he shrugged his shoulders, removed his overcoat, folded it with great deliberation over the back of a chair, and then took a seat.

"This gentleman?" said he, with a wave in my direction. "Is it discreet? Is it right?"

"Dr. Watson is my friend and partner."

"Very good, Mr. Holmes. It is only in your client's interests that I protested. The matter is so very delicate — "

"Dr. Watson has already heard of it."

"Then we can proceed to business. You say that you are acting for Lady Eva. Has she empowered you to accept my terms?"

"What are your terms?"

"Seven thousand pounds."

"And the alternative?"

"My dear sir, it is painful for me to discuss it; but if the money is not paid on the 14th there certainly will be no marriage on the 18th." His insufferable smile was more complacent than ever.

Holmes thought for a little.

"You appear to me," he said, at last, "to be taking matters too much for granted. I am, of course, familiar with the contents of these letters. My client will certainly do what I may advise. I shall counsel her to tell her future husband the whole story and to trust to his generosity."

Milverton chuckled.

"You evidently do not know the Earl," said he.

From the baffled look upon Holmes's face I could see clearly that he did.

"What harm is there in the letters?" he asked.

"They are sprightly — very sprightly," Milverton answered. "The lady was a charming correspondent. But I can assure you that the Earl of Dovercourt would fail to appreciate them."

However, since you think otherwise, we will let it rest at that. It is purely a matter of business. If you think that it is in the best interests of your client that these letters should be placed in the hands of the Earl, then you would indeed be foolish to pay so large a sum of money to regain them." He rose and seized his astrachan coat.

Holmes was grey with anger and mortification.

"Wait a little," he said. "You go too fast. We would certainly make every effort to avoid scandal in so delicate a matter."

Milverton relapsed into his chair.

"I was sure that you would see it in that light," he purred.

"At the same time," Holmes continued, "Lady Eva is not a wealthy woman. I assure you that two thousand pounds would be a drain upon her resources, and that the sum you name is utterly beyond her power. I beg, therefore, that you will moderate your demands, and that you will return the letters at the price I indicate, which is, I assure you, the highest that you can get."

Milverton's smile broadened and his eyes twinkled humorously.

"I am aware that what you say is true about the lady's resources," said he. "At the same time, you must admit that the occasion of a lady's marriage is a very suitable time for her friends and relatives to make some little effort upon her behalf. They may hesitate as to an acceptable wedding present. Let me assure them that this little bundle of letters would give more joy than all the candelabra and butter-dishes in London."

"It is impossible," said Holmes.

"Dear me, dear me, how unfortunate!" cried Milverton, taking out a bulky pocket-book. "I cannot help thinking that ladies are ill-advised in not making an effort. Look at this!" He held up a little note with a coat-of-arms upon the envelope. "That belongs to — well, perhaps it is hardly fair to tell the name until to-morrow morning. But at that time it will be in the hands of the lady's husband. And all because she will not find a beggarly sum which she could get by turning her diamonds into paste. It *is* such a pity. Now, you remember the sudden end of the engagement between the Honourable Miss Miles and Colonel Dorking? Only two days before the wedding there was a paragraph in the *Morning Post* to say that it was all off. And why? It is almost incredible, but the absurd sum of twelve hundred pounds would have settled the whole question. Is it not pitiful? And here I find you, a man of sense, boggling about terms when your client's future and honour are at stake. You surprise me, Mr. Holmes."

"What I say is true," Holmes answered. "The money cannot be found. Surely it is better for you to take the substantial sum which I offer than to ruin this woman's career, which can profit you in no way?"

"There you make a mistake, Mr. Holmes. An exposure would profit me indirectly to a considerable extent. I have eight or ten similar cases maturing. If it was circulated among them that I had made a severe example of the Lady Eva I should find all of them much more open to reason. You see my point?"

Holmes sprang from his chair.

"Get behind him, Watson! Don't let him out! Now, sir, let us see the contents of that note-book."

Milverton had glided as quick as a rat to the side of the room, and stood with his back against the wall.

"Mr. Holmes, Mr. Holmes," he said, turning the front of his coat and exhibiting the butt of a large revolver, which projected from the inside pocket. "I have been expecting you to do something original. This has been done so often, and what good has ever come from it? I assure you that I am armed to the teeth, and I am perfectly prepared to use my weapons, knowing that the law will support me. Besides, your supposition that I would bring the letters here in a note-book is entirely mistaken. I would do nothing so foolish. And now, gentlemen, I have one or two little interviews this evening, and it is a long drive to Hampstead." He stepped forward, took up

his coat, laid his hand on his revolver, and turned to the door. I picked up a chair, but Holmes shook his head and I laid it down again. With bow, a smile, and a twinkle Milverton was out of the room, and a few moments after we heard the slam of the carriage door and the rattle of the wheels as he drove away.

Holmes sat motionless by the fire, his hands buried deep in his trouser pockets, his chin sunk upon his breast, his eyes fixed upon the glowing embers. For half an hour he was silent and still. Then, with the gesture of a man who has taken his decision, he sprang to his feet and passed into his bedroom. A little later a rakish young workman with a goatee beard and a swagger lit his clay pipe at the lamp before descending into the street. "I'll be back some time, Watson," said he, and vanished into the night. I understood that he had opened his campaign against Charles Augustus Milverton; but I little dreamed the strange shape which that campaign was destined to take.

For some days Holmes came and went at all hours in this attire, but beyond a remark that his time was spent at Hampstead, and that it was not wasted, I knew nothing of what he was doing. At last, however, on a wild, tempestuous evening, when the wind screamed and rattled against the windows, he returned from his last expedition, and having removed his disguise he sat before the fire and laughed heartily in his silent inward fashion.

"You would not call me a marrying man, Watson?"

"No, indeed!"

"You'll be interested to hear that I am engaged."

"My dear fellow! I congrat — "

"To Milverton's housemaid."

"Good heavens, Holmes!"

"I wanted information, Watson."

"Surely you have gone too far?"

"It was a most necessary step. I am a plumber with a rising business, Escott by name. I have walked out with her each evening, and I have talked with her. Good heavens, those talks! However, I have got all I wanted. I know Milverton's house as I know the palm of my hand."

"But the girl, Holmes?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You can't help it, my dear Watson. You must play your cards as best you can when such a stake is on the table. However, I rejoice to say that I have a hated rival who will certainly cut me out the instant that my back is turned. What a splendid night it is!"

"You like this weather?"

"It suits my purpose. Watson, I mean to burgle Milverton's house to-night."

I had a catching of the breath, and my skin went cold at the words, which were slowly uttered in a tone of concentrated resolution. As a flash of lightning in the night shows up in an instant every detail of a wide landscape, so at one glance I seemed to see every possible result of such an action — the detection, the capture, the honoured career ending in irreparable failure and disgrace, my friend himself lying at the mercy of the odious Milverton.

"For Heaven's sake, Holmes, think what you are doing," I cried.

"My dear fellow, I have given it every consideration. I am never precipitate in my actions, nor would I adopt so energetic and indeed so dangerous a course if any other were possible. Let us look at the matter clearly and fairly. I suppose that you will admit that the action is morally justifiable, though technically criminal. To burgle his house is no more than to forcibly take his pocket-book — an action in which you were prepared to aid me."

I turned it over in my mind.

"Yes," I said; "it is morally justifiable so long as our object is to take no articles save those which are used for an illegal purpose."

"Exactly. Since it is morally justifiable I have only to consider the question of personal risk. Surely a gentleman should not lay much stress upon this when a lady is in most desperate need of

his help?"

"You will be in such a false position."

"Well, that is part of the risk. There is no other possible way of regaining these letters. The unfortunate lady has not the money, and there are none of her people in whom she could confide. To-morrow is the last day of grace, and unless we can get the letters to-night this villain will be as good as his word and will bring about her ruin. I must, therefore, abandon my client to her fate or I must play this last card. Between ourselves, Watson, it's a sporting duel between this fellow Milverton and me. He had, as you saw, the best of the first exchanges; but my self-respect and my reputation are concerned to fight it to a finish."

"Well, I don't like it; but I suppose it must be," said I. "When do we start?"

"You are not coming."

"Then you are not going," said I. "I give you my word of honour — and I never broke it in my life — that I will take a cab straight to the police-station and give you away unless you let me share this adventure with you."

"You can't help me."

"How do you know that? You can't tell what may happen. Anyway, my resolution is taken. Other people beside you have self-respect and even reputations."

Holmes had looked annoyed, but his brow cleared, and he clapped me on the shoulder.

"Well, well, my dear fellow, be it so. We have shared the same room for some years, and it would be amusing if we ended by sharing the same cell. You know, Watson, I don't mind confessing to you that I have always had an idea that I would have made a highly efficient criminal. This is the chance of my lifetime in that direction. See here!" He took a neat little leather case out of a drawer, and opening it he exhibited a number of shining instruments. "This is a first-class, up-to-date burgling kit, with nickel-plated jemmy, diamond-tipped glass-cutter, adaptable keys, and every modern improvement which the march of civilization demands. Here, too, is my dark lantern. Everything is in order. Have you a pair of silent shoes?"

"I have rubber-soled tennis shoes."

"Excellent. And a mask?"

"I can make a couple out of black silk."

"I can see that you have a strong natural turn for this sort of thing. Very good; do you make the masks. We shall have some cold supper before we start. It is now nine-thirty. At eleven we shall drive as far as Church Row. It is a quarter of an hour's walk from there to Appledore Towers. We shall be at work before midnight. Milverton is a heavy sleeper and retires punctually at ten-thirty. With any luck we should be back here by two, with the Lady Eva's letters in my pocket."

Holmes and I put on our dress-clothes, so that we might appear to be two theatre-goers homeward bound. In Oxford Street we picked up a hansom and drove to an address in Hampstead. Here we paid off our cab, and with our great-coats buttoned up, for it was bitterly cold and the wind seemed to blow through us, we walked along the edge of the Heath.

"It's a business that needs delicate treatment," said Holmes. "These documents are contained in a safe in the fellow's study, and the study is the ante-room of his bed-chamber. On the other hand, like all these stout, little men who do themselves well, he is a plethoric sleeper. Agatha — that's my *fiancée* — says it is a joke in the servants' hall that it's impossible to wake the master. He has a secretary who is devoted to his interests and never budes from the study all day. That's why we are going at night. Then he has a beast of a dog which roams the garden. I met Agatha late the last two evenings, and she locks the brute up so as to give me a clear run. This is the house, this big one in its own grounds. Through the gate — now to the right among the laurels. We might put on our masks here, I think. You see, there is not a glimmer of light in any of the windows, and everything is working splendidly."

With our black silk face-coverings, which turned us into two of the most truculent figures in

London, we stole up to the silent, gloomy house. A sort of tiled veranda extended along one side of it, lined by several windows and two doors.

"That's his bedroom," Holmes whispered. "This door opens straight into the study. It would suit us best, but it is bolted as well as locked, and we should make too much noise getting in. Come round here. There's a greenhouse which opens into the drawing-room."

The place was locked, but Holmes removed a circle of glass and turned the key from the inside. An instant afterwards he had closed the door behind us, and we had become felons in the eyes of the law. The thick, warm air of the conservatory and the rich, choking fragrance of exotic plants took us by the throat. He seized my hand in the darkness and led me swiftly past banks of shrubs which brushed against our faces. Holmes had remarkable powers, carefully cultivated, of seeing in the dark. Still holding my hand in one of his he opened a door, and I was vaguely conscious that we had entered a large room in which a cigar had been smoked not long before. He felt his way among the furniture, opened another door, and closed it behind us. Putting out my hand I felt several coats hanging from the wall, and I understood that I was in a passage. We passed along it, and Holmes very gently opened a door upon the right-hand side. Something rushed out at us and my heart sprang into my mouth, but I could have laughed when I realized that it was the cat. A fire was burning in this new room, and again the air was heavy with tobacco smoke. Holmes entered on tiptoe, waited for me to follow, and then very gently closed the door. We were in Milverton's study, and a *portiere* at the farther side showed the entrance to his bedroom.

It was a good fire, and the room was illuminated by it. Near the door I saw the gleam of an electric switch, but it was unnecessary, even if it had been safe, to turn it on. At one side of the fireplace was a heavy curtain, which covered the bay window we had seen from outside. On the other side was the door which communicated with the veranda. A desk stood in the centre, with a turning chair of shining red leather. Opposite was a large bookcase, with a marble bust of Athene on the top. In the corner between the bookcase and the wall there stood a tall green safe, the firelight flashing back from the polished brass knobs upon its face. Holmes stole across and looked at it. Then he crept to the door of the bedroom, and stood with slanting head listening intently. No sound came from within. Meanwhile it had struck me that it would be wise to secure our retreat through the outer door, so I examined it. To my amazement it was neither locked nor bolted! I touched Holmes on the arm, and he turned his masked face in that direction. I saw him start, and he was evidently as surprised as I.

"I don't like it," he whispered, putting his lips to my very ear. "I can't quite make it out. Anyhow, we have no time to lose."

"Can I do anything?"

"Yes; stand by the door. If you hear anyone come, bolt it on the inside, and we can get away as we came. If they come the other way, we can get through the door if our job is done, or hide behind these window curtains if it is not. Do you understand?"

I nodded and stood by the door. My first feeling of fear had passed away, and I thrilled now with a keener zest than I had ever enjoyed when we were the defenders of the law instead of its defiers. The high object of our mission, the consciousness that it was unselfish and chivalrous, the villainous character of our opponent, all added to the sporting interest of the adventure. Far from feeling guilty, I rejoiced and exulted in our dangers. With a glow of admiration I watched Holmes unrolling his case of instruments and choosing his tool with the calm, scientific accuracy of a surgeon who performs a delicate operation. I knew that the opening of safes was a particular hobby with him, and I understood the joy which it gave him to be confronted with this green and gold monster, the dragon which held in its maw the reputations of many fair ladies. Turning up the cuffs of his dress-coat — he had placed his overcoat on a chair — Holmes laid out two drills, a jemmy, and several skeleton keys. I stood at the centre door with my eyes glancing at each of the others, ready for any emergency; though, indeed, my plans were somewhat vague as to what

I should do if we were interrupted. For half an hour Holmes worked with concentrated energy, laying down one tool, picking up another, handling each with the strength and delicacy of the trained mechanic. Finally I heard a click, the broad green door swung open, and inside I had a glimpse of a number of paper packets, each tied, sealed, and inscribed. Holmes picked one out, but it was hard to read by the flickering fire, and he drew out his little dark lantern, for it was too dangerous, with Milverton in the next room, to switch on the electric light. Suddenly I saw him halt, listen intently, and then in an instant he had swung the door of the safe to, picked up his coat, stuffed his tools into the pockets, and darted behind the window curtain, motioning me to do the same.

It was only when I had joined him there that I heard what had alarmed his quicker senses. There was a noise somewhere within the house. A door slammed in the distance. Then a confused, dull murmur broke itself into the measured thud of heavy footsteps rapidly approaching. They were in the passage outside the room. They paused at the door. The door opened. There was a sharp snick as the electric light was turned on. The door closed once more, and the pungent reek of a strong cigar was borne to our nostrils. Then the footsteps continued backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, within a few yards of us. Finally, there was a creak from a chair, and the footsteps ceased. Then a key clicked in a lock and I heard the rustle of papers.

So far I had not dared to look out, but now I gently parted the division of the curtains in front of me and peeped through. From the pressure of Holmes's shoulder against mine I knew that he was sharing my observations. Right in front of us, and almost within our reach, was the broad, rounded back of Milverton. It was evident that we had entirely miscalculated his movements, that he had never been to his bedroom, but that he had been sitting up in some smoking or billiard room in the farther wing of the house, the windows of which we had not seen. His broad, grizzled head, with its shining patch of baldness, was in the immediate foreground of our vision. He was leaning far back in the red leather chair, his legs outstretched, a long black cigar projecting at an angle from his mouth. He wore a semi-military smoking jacket, claret-coloured, with a black velvet collar. In his hand he held a long legal document, which he was reading in an indolent fashion, blowing rings of tobacco smoke from his lips as he did so. There was no promise of a speedy departure in his composed bearing and his comfortable attitude.

I felt Holmes's hand steal into mine and give me a reassuring shake, as if to say that the situation was within his powers and that he was easy in his mind. I was not sure whether he had seen what was only too obvious from my position, that the door of the safe was imperfectly closed, and that Milverton might at any moment observe it. In my own mind I had determined that if I were sure, from the rigidity of his gaze, that it had caught his eye, I would at once spring out, throw my great-coat over his head, pinion him, and leave the rest to Holmes. But Milverton never looked up. He was languidly interested by the papers in his hand, and page after page was turned as he followed the argument of the lawyer. At least, I thought, when he has finished the document and the cigar he will go to his room; but before he had reached the end of either there came a remarkable development which turned our thoughts into quite another channel.

Several times I had observed that Milverton looked at his watch, and once he had risen and sat down again, with a gesture of impatience. The idea, however, that he might have an appointment at so strange an hour never occurred to me until a faint sound reached my ears from the veranda outside. Milverton dropped his papers and sat rigid in his chair. The sound was repeated, and then there came a gentle tap at the door. Milverton rose and opened it.

"Well," said he, curtly, "you are nearly half an hour late."

So this was the explanation of the unlocked door and of the nocturnal vigil of Milverton. There was the gentle rustle of a woman's dress. I had closed the slit between the curtains as Milverton's face had turned in our direction, but now I ventured very carefully to open it once more. He had resumed his seat, the cigar still projecting at an insolent angle from the corner of

his mouth. In front of him, in the full glare of the electric light, there stood a tall, slim, dark woman, a veil over her face, a mantle drawn round her chin. Her breath came quick and fast, and every inch of the lithe figure was quivering with strong emotion.

"Well," said Milverton, "you've made me lose a good night's rest, my dear. I hope you'll prove worth it. You couldn't come any other time — eh?"

The woman shook her head.

"Well, if you couldn't you couldn't. If the Countess is a hard mistress you have your chance to get level with her now. Bless the girl, what are you shivering about? That's right! Pull yourself together! Now, let us get down to business." He took a note from the drawer of his desk. "You say that you have five letters which compromise the Countess d'Albert. You want to sell them. I want to buy them. So far so good. It only remains to fix a price. I should want to inspect the letters, of course. If they are really good specimens — Great heavens, is it you?"

The woman without a word had raised her veil and dropped the mantle from her chin. It was a dark, handsome, clear-cut face which confronted Milverton, a face with a curved nose, strong, dark eyebrows shading hard, glittering eyes, and a straight, thin-lipped mouth set in a dangerous smile.

"It is I," she said; "the woman whose life you have ruined."

Milverton laughed, but fear vibrated in his voice. "You were so very obstinate," said he. "Why did you drive me to such extremities? I assure you I wouldn't hurt a fly of my own accord, but every man has his business, and what was I to do? I put the price well within your means. You would not pay."

"So you sent the letters to my husband, and he — the noblest gentleman that ever lived, a man whose boots I was never worthy to lace — he broke his gallant heart and died. You remember that last night when I came through that door I begged and prayed you for mercy, and you laughed in my face as you are trying to laugh now, only your coward heart cannot keep your lips from twitching? Yes, you never thought to see me here again, but it was that night which taught me how I could meet you face to face, and alone. Well, Charles Milverton, what have you to say?"

"Don't imagine that you can bully me," said he, rising to his feet. "I have only to raise my voice, and I could call my servants and have you arrested. But I will make allowance for your natural anger. Leave the room at once as you came, and I will say no more."

The woman stood with her hand buried in her bosom, and the same deadly smile on her thin lips.

"You will ruin no more lives as you ruined mine. You will wring no more hearts as you wrung mine. I will free the world of a poisonous thing. Take that, you hound, and that! — and that! — and that!"

She had drawn a little, gleaming revolver, and emptied barrel after barrel into Milverton's body, the muzzle within two feet of his shirt front. He shrank away and then fell forward upon the table, coughing furiously and clawing among the papers. Then he staggered to his feet, received another shot, and rolled upon the floor. "You've done me," he cried, and lay still. The woman looked at him intently and ground her heel into his upturned face. She looked again, but there was no sound or movement. I heard a sharp rustle, the night air blew into the heated room, and the avenger was gone.

No interference upon our part could have saved the man from his fate; but as the woman poured bullet after bullet into Milverton's shrinking body I was about to spring out, when I felt Holmes's cold, strong grasp upon my wrist. I understood the whole argument of that firm, restraining grip — that it was no affair of ours; that justice had overtaken a villain; that we had our own duties and our own objects which were not to be lost sight of. But hardly had the woman rushed from the room when Holmes, with swift, silent steps, was over at the other door. He turned the key in the lock. At the same instant we heard voices in the house and the sound of



hurrying feet. The revolver shots had roused the household. With perfect coolness Holmes slipped across to the safe, filled his two arms with bundles of letters, and poured them all into the fire. Again and again he did it, until the safe was empty. Someone turned the handle and beat upon the outside of the door. Holmes looked swiftly round. The letter which had been the messenger of death for Milverton lay, all mottled with his blood, upon the table. Holmes tossed it in among the blazing papers. Then he drew the key from the outer door, passed through after me, and locked it on the outside. "This way, Watson," said he; "we can scale the garden wall in this direction."

I could not have believed that an alarm could have spread so swiftly. Looking back, the huge house was one blaze of light. The front door was open, and figures were rushing down the drive. The whole garden was alive with people, and one fellow raised a view-halloa as we emerged from the veranda and followed hard at our heels. Holmes seemed to know the ground perfectly, and he threaded his way swiftly among a plantation of small trees, I close at his heels, and our foremost pursuer panting behind us. It was a six-foot wall which barred our path, but he sprang to the top and over. As I did the same I felt the hand of the man behind me grab at my ankle; but I kicked myself free and scrambled over a glass-strewn coping. I fell upon my face among some bushes; but Holmes had me on my feet in an instant, and together we dashed away across the huge expanse of Hampstead Heath. We had run two miles, I suppose, before Holmes at last halted and listened intently. All was absolute silence behind us. We had shaken off our pursuers and were safe.

We had breakfasted and were smoking our morning pipe on the day after the remarkable experience which I have recorded when Mr. Lestrade, of Scotland Yard, very solemn and impressive, was ushered into our modest sitting-room.

"Good morning, Mr. Holmes," said he; "good morning. May I ask if you are very busy just now?"

"Not too busy to listen to you."

"I thought that, perhaps, if you had nothing particular on hand, you might care to assist us in a most remarkable case which occurred only last night at Hampstead."

"Dear me!" said Holmes. "What was that?"

"A murder — a most dramatic and remarkable murder. I know how keen you are upon these things, and I would take it as a great favour if you would step down to Appledore Towers and give us the benefit of your advice. It is no ordinary crime. We have had our eyes upon this Mr. Milverton for some time, and, between ourselves, he was a bit of a villain. He is known to have held papers which he used for blackmailing purposes. These papers have all been burned by the murderers. No article of value was taken, as it is probable that the criminals were men of good position, whose sole object was to prevent social exposure."

"Criminals!" said Holmes. "Plural!"

"Yes, there were two of them. They were, as nearly as possible, captured red-handed. We have their foot-marks, we have their description; it's ten to one that we trace them. The first fellow was a bit too active, but the second was caught by the under-gardener and only got away after a struggle. He was a middle-sized, strongly-built man — square jaw, thick neck, moustache, a mask over his eyes."

"That's rather vague," said Sherlock Holmes. "Why, it might be a description of Watson!"

"It's true," said the inspector, with much amusement. "It might be a description of Watson."

"Well, I am afraid I can't help you, Lestrade," said Holmes. "The fact is that I knew this fellow Milverton, that I considered him one of the most dangerous men in London, and that I think there are certain crimes which the law cannot touch, and which therefore, to some extent, justify private revenge. No, it's no use arguing. I have made up my mind. My sympathies are with the criminals rather than with the victim, and I will not handle this case."

Holmes had not said one word to me about the tragedy which we had witnessed, but I

observed all the morning that he was in his most thoughtful mood, and he gave me the impression, from his vacant eyes and his abstracted manner, of a man who is striving to recall something to his memory. We were in the middle of our lunch when he suddenly sprang to his feet. "By Jove, Watson; I've got it!" he cried. "Take your hat! Come with me!" He hurried at his top speed down Baker Street and along Oxford Street, until we had almost reached Regent Circus. Here on the left hand there stands a shop window filled with photographs of the celebrities and beauties of the day. Holmes's eyes fixed themselves upon one of them, and following his gaze I saw the picture of a regal and stately lady in Court dress, with a high diamond tiara upon her noble head. I looked at that delicately-curved nose, at the marked eyebrows, at the straight mouth, and the strong little chin beneath it. Then I caught my breath as I read the time-honoured title of the great nobleman and statesman whose wife she had been. My eyes met those of Holmes, and he put his finger to his lips as we turned away from the window.

# William Wilson - Edgar Allan Poe

(1839)

Let me call myself, for the present, William Wilson. The fair page now lying before me need not be sullied with my real appellation. This has been already too much an object for the scorn — for the horror — for the detestation of my race. To the uttermost regions of the globe have not the indignant winds bruted its unparalleled infamy? Oh, outcast of all outcasts most abandoned! — to the earth art thou not forever dead? to its honors, to its flowers, to its golden aspirations? — and a cloud, dense, dismal, and limitless, does it not hang eternally between thy hopes and heaven?

I would not, if I could, here or to-day, embody a record of my later years of unspeakable misery, and unpardonable crime. This epoch — these later years — took unto themselves a sudden elevation in turpitude, whose origin alone it is my present purpose to assign. Men usually grow base by degrees. From me, in an instant, all virtue dropped bodily as a mantle. From comparatively trivial wickedness I passed, with the stride of a giant, into more than the enormities of an Elah-Gabalus. What chance — what one event brought this evil thing to pass, bear with me while I relate. Death approaches; and the shadow which foreruns him has thrown a softening influence over my spirit. I long, in passing through the dim valley, for the sympathy — I had nearly said for the pity — of my fellow men. I would fain have them believe that I have been, in some measure, the slave of circumstances beyond human control. I would wish them to seek out for me, in the details I am about to give, some little oasis of fatality amid a wilderness of error. I would have them allow — what they cannot refrain from allowing — that, although temptation may have erewhile existed as great, man was never thus, at least, tempted before — certainly, never thus fell. And is it therefore that he has never thus suffered? Have I not indeed been living in a dream? And am I not now dying a victim to the horror and the mystery of the wildest of all sublunary visions?

I am the descendant of a race whose imaginative and easily excitable temperament has at all times rendered them remarkable; and, in my earliest infancy, I gave evidence of having fully inherited the family character. As I advanced in years it was more strongly developed; becoming, for many reasons, a cause of serious disquietude to my friends, and of positive injury to myself. I grew self-willed, addicted to the wildest caprices, and a prey to the most ungovernable passions. Weak-minded, and beset with constitutional infirmities akin to my own, my parents could do but little to check the evil propensities which distinguished me. Some feeble and ill-directed efforts resulted in complete failure on their part, and, of course, in total triumph on mine. Thenceforward my voice was a household law; and at an age when few children have abandoned their leading-strings, I was left to the guidance of my own will, and became, in all but name, the master of my own actions.

My earliest recollections of a school-life, are connected with a large, rambling, Elizabethan house, in a misty-looking village of England, where were a vast number of gigantic and gnarled trees, and where all the houses were excessively ancient. In truth, it was a dream-like and spirit-soothing place, that venerable old town. At this moment, in fancy, I feel the refreshing chilliness of its deeply-shadowed avenues, inhale the fragrance of its thousand shrubberies, and thrill anew with undefinable delight, at the deep hollow note of the church-bell, breaking, each hour, with sullen and sudden roar, upon the stillness of the dusky atmosphere in which the fretted Gothic steeple lay imbedded and asleep.

It gives me, perhaps, as much of pleasure as I can now in any manner experience, to dwell upon minute recollections of the school and its concerns. Steeped in misery as I am — misery, alas! only too real — I shall be pardoned for seeking relief, however slight and temporary, in the

weakness of a few rambling details. These, moreover, utterly trivial, and even ridiculous in themselves, assume, to my fancy, adventitious importance, as connected with a period and a locality when and where I recognise the first ambiguous monitions of the destiny which afterwards so fully overshadowed me. Let me then remember.

The house, I have said, was old and irregular. The grounds were extensive, and a high and solid brick wall, topped with a bed of mortar and broken glass, encompassed the whole. This prison-like rampart formed the limit of our domain; beyond it we saw but thrice a week — once every Saturday afternoon, when, attended by two ushers, we were permitted to take brief walks in a body through some of the neighbouring fields — and twice during Sunday, when we were paraded in the same formal manner to the morning and evening service in the one church of the village. Of this church the principal of our school was pastor. With how deep a spirit of wonder and perplexity was I wont to regard him from our remote pew in the gallery, as, with step solemn and slow, he ascended the pulpit! This reverend man, with countenance so demurely benign, with robes so glossy and so clerically flowing, with wig so minutely powdered, so rigid and so vast, — could this be he who, of late, with sour visage, and in snuffy habiliments, administered, ferule in hand, the Draconian laws of the academy? Oh, gigantic paradox, too utterly monstrous for solution!

At an angle of the ponderous wall frowned a more ponderous gate. It was riveted and studded with iron bolts, and surmounted with jagged iron spikes. What impressions of deep awe did it inspire! It was never opened save for the three periodical egressions and ingressions already mentioned; then, in every creak of its mighty hinges, we found a plenitude of mystery — a world of matter for solemn remark, or for more solemn meditation.

The extensive enclosure was irregular in form, having many capacious recesses. Of these, three or four of the largest constituted the play-ground. It was level, and covered with fine hard gravel. I well remember it had no trees, nor benches, nor anything similar within it. Of course it was in the rear of the house. In front lay a small parterre, planted with box and other shrubs, but through this sacred division we passed only upon rare occasions indeed — such as a first advent to school or final departure thence, or perhaps, when a parent or friend having called for us, we joyfully took our way home for the Christmas or Midsummer holidays.

But the house! — how quaint an old building was this! — to me how veritably a palace of enchantment! There was really no end to its windings — to its incomprehensible subdivisions. It was difficult, at any given time, to say with certainty upon which of its two stories one happened to be. From each room to every other there were sure to be found three or four steps either in ascent or descent. Then the lateral branches were innumerable — inconceivable — and so returning in upon themselves, that our most exact ideas in regard to the whole mansion were not very far different from those with which we pondered upon infinity. During the five years of my residence here, I was never able to ascertain with precision, in what remote locality lay the little sleeping apartment assigned to myself and some eighteen or twenty other scholars.

The school-room was the largest in the house — I could not help thinking, in the world. It was very long, narrow, and dismally low, with pointed Gothic windows and a ceiling of oak. In a remote and terror-inspiring angle was a square enclosure of eight or ten feet, comprising the sanctum, "during hours," of our principal, the Reverend Dr. Bransby. It was a solid structure, with massy door, sooner than open which in the absence of the "Dominie," we would all have willingly perished by the *peine forte et dure*. In other angles were two other similar boxes, far less revered, indeed, but still greatly matters of awe. One of these was the pulpit of the "classical" usher, one of the "English and mathematical." Interspersed about the room, crossing and recrossing in endless irregularity, were innumerable benches and desks, black, ancient, and time-worn, piled desperately with much-bethumbed books, and so bespattered with initial letters, names at full length, grotesque figures, and other multiplied efforts of the knife, as to have entirely lost what little of original form might have been their portion in days long departed. A

huge bucket with water stood at one extremity of the room, and a clock of stupendous dimensions at the other.

Encompassed by the massy walls of this venerable academy, I passed, yet not in tedium or disgust, the years of the third lustrum of my life. The teeming brain of childhood requires no external world of incident to occupy or amuse it; and the apparently dismal monotony of a school was replete with more intense excitement than my riper youth has derived from luxury, or my full manhood from crime. Yet I must believe that my first mental development had in it much of the uncommon — even much of the *outré*. Upon mankind at large the events of very early existence rarely leave in mature age any definite impression. All is gray shadow — a weak and irregular remembrance — an indistinct regathering of feeble pleasures and phantasmagoric pains. With me this is not so. In childhood I must have felt with the energy of a man what I now find stamped upon memory in lines as vivid, as deep, and as durable as the *exergues* of the Carthaginian medals.

Yet in fact — in the fact of the world's view — how little was there to remember! The morning's awakening, the nightly summons to bed; the connings, the recitations; the periodical half-holidays, and perambulations; the play-ground, with its broils, its pastimes, its intrigues; — these, by a mental sorcery long forgotten, were made to involve a wilderness of sensation, a world of rich incident, an universe of varied emotion, of excitement the most passionate and spirit-stirring. "*Oh, le bon temps, que ce siècle de fer!*"

In truth, the ardor, the enthusiasm, and the imperiousness of my disposition, soon rendered me a marked character among my schoolmates, and by slow, but natural gradations, gave me an ascendancy over all not greatly older than myself; — over all with a single exception. This exception was found in the person of a scholar, who, although no relation, bore the same Christian and surname as myself; — a circumstance, in fact, little remarkable; for, notwithstanding a noble descent, mine was one of those everyday appellations which seem, by prescriptive right, to have been, time out of mind, the common property of the mob. In this narrative I have therefore designated myself as William Wilson, — a fictitious title not very dissimilar to the real. My namesake alone, of those who in school phraseology constituted "our set," presumed to compete with me in the studies of the class — in the sports and broils of the play-ground — to refuse implicit belief in my assertions, and submission to my will — indeed, to interfere with my arbitrary dictation in any respect whatsoever. If there is on earth a supreme and unqualified despotism, it is the despotism of a master-mind in boyhood over the less energetic spirits of its companions.

Wilson's rebellion was to me a source of the greatest embarrassment; the more so as, in spite of the bravado with which in public I made a point of treating him and his pretensions, I secretly felt that I feared him, and could not help thinking the equality which he maintained so easily with myself, a proof of his true superiority; since not to be overcome cost me a perpetual struggle. Yet this superiority — even this equality — was in truth acknowledged by no one but myself; our associates, by some unaccountable blindness, seemed not even to suspect it. Indeed, his competition, his resistance, and especially his impertinent and dogged interference with my purposes, were not more pointed than private. He appeared to be destitute alike of the ambition which urged, and of the passionate energy of mind which enabled me to excel. In his rivalry he might have been supposed actuated solely by a whimsical desire to thwart, astonish, or mortify myself; although there were times when I could not help observing, with a feeling made up of wonder, abasement, and pique, that he mingled with his injuries, his insults, or his contradictions, a certain most inappropriate, and assuredly most unwelcome affectionateness of manner. I could only conceive this singular behavior to arise from a consummate self-conceit assuming the vulgar airs of patronage and protection.

Perhaps it was this latter trait in Wilson's conduct, conjoined with our identity of name, and the mere accident of our having entered the school upon the same day, which set afloat the

notion that we were brothers, among the senior classes in the academy. These do not usually inquire with much strictness into the affairs of their juniors. I have before said, or should have said, that Wilson was not, in the most remote degree, connected with my family. But assuredly if we had been brothers we must have been twins; for, after leaving Dr. Bransby's, I casually learned that my namesake was born on the nineteenth of January, 1813 — and this is a somewhat remarkable coincidence; for the day is precisely that of my own nativity.

It may seem strange that in spite of the continual anxiety occasioned me by the rivalry of Wilson, and his intolerable spirit of contradiction, I could not bring myself to hate him altogether. We had, to be sure, nearly every day a quarrel in which, yielding me publicly the palm of victory, he, in some manner, contrived to make me feel that it was he who had deserved it; yet a sense of pride on my part, and a veritable dignity on his own, kept us always upon what are called "speaking terms," while there were many points of strong congeniality in our tempers, operating to awake me in a sentiment which our position alone, perhaps, prevented from ripening into friendship. It is difficult, indeed, to define, or even to describe, my real feelings towards him. They formed a motley and heterogeneous admixture; — some petulant animosity, which was not yet hatred, some esteem, more respect, much fear, with a world of uneasy curiosity. To the moralist it will be unnecessary to say, in addition, that Wilson and myself were the most inseparable of companions.

It was no doubt the anomalous state of affairs existing between us, which turned all my attacks upon him, (and they were many, either open or covert) into the channel of banter or practical joke (giving pain while assuming the aspect of mere fun) rather than into a more serious and determined hostility. But my endeavours on this head were by no means uniformly successful, even when my plans were the most wittily concocted; for my namesake had much about him, in character, of that unassuming and quiet austerity which, while enjoying the poignancy of its own jokes, has no heel of Achilles in itself, and absolutely refuses to be laughed at. I could find, indeed, but one vulnerable point, and that, lying in a personal peculiarity, arising, perhaps, from constitutional disease, would have been spared by any antagonist less at his wit's end than myself; — my rival had a weakness in the faucal or guttural organs, which precluded him from raising his voice at any time above a very low whisper. Of this defect I did not fail to take what poor advantage lay in my power.

Wilson's retaliations in kind were many; and there was one form of his practical wit that disturbed me beyond measure. How his sagacity first discovered at all that so petty a thing would vex me, is a question I never could solve; but, having discovered, he habitually practised the annoyance. I had always felt aversion to my uncourtly patronymic, and its very common, if not plebeian prænomen. The words were venom in my ears; and when, upon the day of my arrival, a second William Wilson came also to the academy, I felt angry with him for bearing the name, and doubly disgusted with the name because a stranger bore it, who would be the cause of its twofold repetition, who would be constantly in my presence, and whose concerns, in the ordinary routine of the school business, must inevitably, on account of the detestable coincidence, be often confounded with my own.

The feeling of vexation thus engendered grew stronger with every circumstance tending to show resemblance, moral or physical, between my rival and myself. I had not then discovered the remarkable fact that we were of the same age; but I saw that we were of the same height, and I perceived that we were even singularly alike in general contour of person and outline of feature. I was galled, too, by the rumor touching a relationship, which had grown current in the upper forms. In a word, nothing could more seriously disturb me, (although I scrupulously concealed such disturbance,) than any allusion to a similarity of mind, person, or condition existing between us. But, in truth, I had no reason to believe that (with the exception of the matter of relationship, and in the case of Wilson himself,) this similarity had ever been made a subject of comment, or even observed at all by our schoolfellows. That he observed it in all its

bearings, and as fixedly as I, was apparent; but that he could discover in such circumstances so fruitful a field of annoyance, can only be attributed, as I said before, to his more than ordinary penetration.

His cue, which was to perfect an imitation of myself, lay both in words and in actions; and most admirably did he play his part. My dress it was an easy matter to copy; my gait and general manner were, without difficulty, appropriated; in spite of his constitutional defect, even my voice did not escape him. My louder tones were, of course, unattempted, but then the key — it was identical; *and his singular whisper, it grew the very echo of my own.*

How greatly this most exquisite portraiture harassed me, (for it could not justly be termed a caricature,) I will not now venture to describe. I had but one consolation — in the fact that the imitation, apparently, was noticed by myself alone, and that I had to endure only the knowing and strangely sarcastic smiles of my namesake himself. Satisfied with having produced in my bosom the intended effect, he seemed to chuckle in secret over the sting he had inflicted, and was characteristically disregarding of the public applause which the success of his witty endeavours might have so easily elicited. That the school, indeed, did not feel his design, perceive its accomplishment, and participate in his sneer, was, for many anxious months, a riddle I could not resolve. Perhaps the gradation of his copy rendered it not so readily perceptible; or, more possibly, I owed my security to the master air of the copyist, who, disdainful of the letter, (which in a painting is all the obtuse can see,) gave but the full spirit of his original for my individual contemplation and chagrin.

I have already more than once spoken of the disgusting air of patronage which he assumed toward me, and of his frequent officious interference with my will. This interference often took the ungracious character of advice; advice not openly given, but hinted or insinuated. I received it with a repugnance which gained strength as I grew in years. Yet, at this distant day, let me do him the simple justice to acknowledge that I can recall no occasion when the suggestions of my rival were on the side of those errors or follies so usual to his immature age and seeming inexperience; that his moral sense, at least, if not his general talents and worldly wisdom, was far keener than my own; and that I might, to-day, have been a better, and thus a happier man, had I less frequently rejected the counsels embodied in those meaning whispers which I then but too cordially hated and too bitterly despised.

As it was, I at length grew restive in the extreme under his distasteful supervision, and daily resented more and more openly what I considered his intolerable arrogance. I have said that, in the first years of our connexion as schoolmates, my feelings in regard to him might have been easily ripened into friendship; but, in the latter months of my residence at the academy, although the intrusion of his ordinary manner had, beyond doubt, in some measure, abated, my sentiments, in nearly similar proportion, partook very much of positive hatred. Upon one occasion he saw this, I think, and afterwards avoided, or made a show of avoiding me.

It was about the same period, if I remember aright, that, in an altercation of violence with him, in which he was more than usually thrown off his guard, and spoke and acted with an openness of demeanor rather foreign to his nature, I discovered, or fancied I discovered, in his accent, his air, and general appearance, a something which first startled, and then deeply interested me, by bringing to mind dim visions of my earliest infancy — wild, confused and thronging memories of a time when memory herself was yet unborn. I cannot better describe the sensation which oppressed me than by saying that I could with difficulty shake off the belief of my having been acquainted with the being who stood before me, at some epoch very long ago — some point of the past even infinitely remote. The delusion, however, faded rapidly as it came; and I mention it at all but to define the day of the last conversation I there held with my singular namesake.

The huge old house, with its countless subdivisions, had several large chambers communicating with each other, where slept the greater number of the students. There were, however, (as must necessarily happen in a building so awkwardly planned,) many little nooks or

recesses, the odds and ends of the structure; and these the economic ingenuity of Dr. Bransby had also fitted up as dormitories; although, being the merest closets, they were capable of accommodating but a single individual. One of these small apartments was occupied by Wilson.

One night, about the close of my fifth year at the school, and immediately after the altercation just mentioned, finding every one wrapped in sleep, I arose from bed, and, lamp in hand, stole through a wilderness of narrow passages from my own bedroom to that of my rival. I had long been plotting one of those ill-natured pieces of practical wit at his expense in which I had hitherto been so uniformly unsuccessful. It was my intention, now, to put my scheme in operation, and I resolved to make him feel the whole extent of the malice with which I was imbued. Having reached his closet, I noiselessly entered, leaving the lamp, with a shade over it, on the outside. I advanced a step, and listened to the sound of his tranquil breathing. Assured of his being asleep, I returned, took the light, and with it again approached the bed. Close curtains were around it, which, in the prosecution of my plan, I slowly and quietly withdrew, when the bright rays fell vividly upon the sleeper, and my eyes, at the same moment, upon his countenance. I looked; — and a numbness, an iciness of feeling instantly pervaded my frame. My breast heaved, my knees tottered, my whole spirit became possessed with an objectless yet intolerable horror. Gasping for breath, I lowered the lamp in still nearer proximity to the face. Were these — these the lineaments of William Wilson? I saw, indeed, that they were his, but I shook as if with a fit of the ague in fancying they were not. What was there about them to confound me in this manner? I gazed; — while my brain reeled with a multitude of incoherent thoughts. Not thus he appeared — assuredly not thus — in the vivacity of his waking hours. The same name! the same contour of person! the same day of arrival at the academy! And then his dogged and meaningless imitation of my gait, my voice, my habits, and my manner! Was it, in truth, within the bounds of human possibility, that what I now saw was the result, merely, of the habitual practice of this sarcastic imitation? Awe-stricken, and with a creeping shudder, I extinguished the lamp, passed silently from the chamber, and left, at once, the halls of that old academy, never to enter them again.

After a lapse of some months, spent at home in mere idleness, I found myself a student at Eton. The brief interval had been sufficient to enfeeble my remembrance of the events at Dr. Bransby's, or at least to effect a material change in the nature of the feelings with which I remembered them. The truth — the tragedy — of the drama was no more. I could now find room to doubt the evidence of my senses; and seldom called up the subject at all but with wonder at extent of human credulity, and a smile at the vivid force of the imagination which I hereditarily possessed. Neither was this species of scepticism likely to be diminished by the character of the life I led at Eton. The vortex of thoughtless folly into which I there so immediately and so recklessly plunged, washed away all but the froth of my past hours, engulfed at once every solid or serious impression, and left to memory only the veriest levities of a former existence.

I do not wish, however, to trace the course of my miserable profligacy here — a profligacy which set at defiance the laws, while it eluded the vigilance of the institution. Three years of folly, passed without profit, had but given me rooted habits of vice, and added, in a somewhat unusual degree, to my bodily stature, when, after a week of soulless dissipation, I invited a small party of the most dissolute students to a secret carousal in my chambers. We met at a late hour of the night; for our debaucheries were to be faithfully protracted until morning. The wine flowed freely, and there were not wanting other and perhaps more dangerous seductions; so that the gray dawn had already faintly appeared in the east, while our delirious extravagance was at its height. Madly flushed with cards and intoxication, I was in the act of insisting upon a toast of more than wonted profanity, when my attention was suddenly diverted by the violent, although partial unclosing of the door of the apartment, and by the eager voice of a servant from without. He said that some person, apparently in great haste, demanded to speak with me in the hall.

Wildly excited with wine, the unexpected interruption rather delighted than surprised me. I



staggered forward at once, and a few steps brought me to the vestibule of the building. In this low and small room there hung no lamp; and now no light at all was admitted, save that of the exceedingly feeble dawn which made its way through the semi-circular window. As I put my foot over the threshold, I became aware of the figure of a youth about my own height, and habited in a white kerseymere morning frock, cut in the novel fashion of the one I myself wore at the moment. This the faint light enabled me to perceive; but the features of his face I could not distinguish. Upon my entering he strode hurriedly up to me, and, seizing me by the arm with a gesture of petulant impatience, whispered the words "William Wilson!" in my ear.

I grew perfectly sober in an instant.

There was that in the manner of the stranger, and in the tremulous shake of his uplifted finger, as he held it between my eyes and the light, which filled me with unqualified amazement; but it was not this which had so violently moved me. It was the pregnancy of solemn admonition in the singular, low, hissing utterance; and, above all, it was the character, the tone, the key, of those few, simple, and familiar, yet whispered syllables, which came with a thousand thronging memories of bygone days, and struck upon my soul with the shock of a galvanic battery. Ere I could recover the use of my senses he was gone.

Although this event failed not of a vivid effect upon my disordered imagination, yet was it evanescent as vivid. For some weeks, indeed, I busied myself in earnest inquiry, or was wrapped in a cloud of morbid speculation. I did not pretend to disguise from my perception the identity of the singular individual who thus perseveringly interfered with my affairs, and harassed me with his insinuated counsel. But who and what was this Wilson? — and whence came he? — and what were his purposes? Upon neither of these points could I be satisfied; merely ascertaining, in regard to him, that a sudden accident in his family had caused his removal from Dr. Bransby's academy on the afternoon of the day in which I myself had eloped. But in a brief period I ceased to think upon the subject; my attention being all absorbed in a contemplated departure for Oxford. Thither I soon went; the uncalculating vanity of my parents furnishing me with an outfit and annual establishment, which would enable me to indulge at will in the luxury already so dear to my heart, — to vie in profuseness of expenditure with the haughtiest heirs of the wealthiest earldoms in Great Britain.

Excited by such appliances to vice, my constitutional temperament broke forth with redoubled ardor, and I spurned even the common restraints of decency in the mad infatuation of my revels. But it were absurd to pause in the detail of my extravagance. Let it suffice, that among spendthrifts I out-Heroded Herod, and that, giving name to a multitude of novel follies, I added no brief appendix to the long catalogue of vices then usual in the most dissolute university of Europe.

It could hardly be credited, however, that I had, even here, so utterly fallen from the gentlemanly estate, as to seek acquaintance with the vilest arts of the gambler by profession, and, having become an adept in his despicable science, to practise it habitually as a means of increasing my already enormous income at the expense of the weak-minded among my fellow-collegians. Such, nevertheless, was the fact. And the very enormity of this offence against all manly and honourable sentiment proved, beyond doubt, the main if not the sole reason of the impunity with which it was committed. Who, indeed, among my most abandoned associates, would not rather have disputed the clearest evidence of his senses, than have suspected of such courses, the gay, the frank, the generous William Wilson — the noblest and most liberal commoner at Oxford — him whose follies (said his parasites) were but the follies of youth and unbridled fancy — whose errors but inimitable whim — whose darkest vice but a careless and dashing extravagance?

I had been now two years successfully busied in this way, when there came to the university a young parvenu nobleman, Glendinning — rich, said report, as Herodes Atticus — his riches, too, as easily acquired. I soon found him of weak intellect, and, of course, marked him as a fitting

subject for my skill. I frequently engaged him in play, and contrived, with the gambler's usual art, to let him win considerable sums, the more effectually to entangle him in my snares. At length, my schemes being ripe, I met him (with the full intention that this meeting should be final and decisive) at the chambers of a fellow-commoner, (Mr. Preston,) equally intimate with both, but who, to do him justice, entertained not even a remote suspicion of my design. To give to this a better coloring, I had contrived to have assembled a party of some eight or ten, and was solicitously careful that the introduction of cards should appear accidental, and originate in the proposal of my contemplated dupe himself. To be brief upon a vile topic, none of the low finesse was omitted, so customary upon similar occasions that it is a just matter for wonder how any are still found so besotted as to fall its victim.

We had protracted our sitting far into the night, and I had at length effected the manoeuvre of getting Glendinning as my sole antagonist. The game, too, was my favorite *écarté!* The rest of the company, interested in the extent of our play, had abandoned their own cards, and were standing around us as spectators. The *parvenu*, who had been induced by my artifices in the early part of the evening, to drink deeply, now shuffled, dealt, or played, with a wild nervousness of manner for which his intoxication, I thought, might partially, but could not altogether account. In a very short period he had become my debtor to a large amount, when, having taken a long draught of port, he did precisely what I had been coolly anticipating — he proposed to double our already extravagant stakes. With a well-feigned show of reluctance, and not until after my repeated refusal had seduced him into some angry words which gave a color of pique to my compliance, did I finally comply. The result, of course, did but prove how entirely the prey was in my toils: in less than an hour he had quadrupled his debt. For some time his countenance had been losing the florid tinge lent it by the wine; but now, to my astonishment, I perceived that it had grown to a pallor truly fearful. I say to my astonishment. Glendinning had been represented to my eager inquiries as immeasurably wealthy; and the sums which he had as yet lost, although in themselves vast, could not, I supposed, very seriously annoy, much less so violently affect him. That he was overcome by the wine just swallowed, was the idea which most readily presented itself; and, rather with a view to the preservation of my own character in the eyes of my associates, than from any less interested motive, I was about to insist, peremptorily, upon a discontinuance of the play, when some expressions at my elbow from among the company, and an ejaculation evincing utter despair on the part of Glendinning, gave me to understand that I had effected his total ruin under circumstances which, rendering him an object for the pity of all, should have protected him from the ill offices even of a fiend.

What now might have been my conduct it is difficult to say. The pitiable condition of my dupe had thrown an air of embarrassed gloom over all; and, for some moments, a profound silence was maintained, during which I could not help feeling my cheeks tingle with the many burning glances of scorn or reproach cast upon me by the less abandoned of the party. I will even own that an intolerable weight of anxiety was for a brief instant lifted from my bosom by the sudden and extraordinary interruption which ensued. The wide, heavy folding doors of the apartment were all at once thrown open, to their full extent, with a vigorous and rushing impetuosity that extinguished, as if by magic, every candle in the room. Their light, in dying, enabled us just to perceive that a stranger had entered, about my own height, and closely muffled in a cloak. The darkness, however, was now total; and we could only feel that he was standing in our midst. Before any one of us could recover from the extreme astonishment into which this rudeness had thrown all, we heard the voice of the intruder.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a low, distinct, and never-to-be-forgotten whisper which thrilled to the very marrow of my bones, "Gentlemen, I make no apology for this behaviour, because in thus behaving, I am but fulfilling a duty. You are, beyond doubt, uninformed of the true character of the person who has to-night won at *écarté* a large sum of money from Lord Glendinning. I will therefore put you upon an expeditious and decisive plan of obtaining this

very necessary information. Please to examine, at your leisure, the inner linings of the cuff of his left sleeve, and the several little packages which may be found in the somewhat capacious pockets of his embroidered morning wrapper."

While he spoke, so profound was the stillness that one might have heard a pin drop upon the floor. In ceasing, he departed at once, and as abruptly as he had entered. Can I — shall I describe my sensations? Must I say that I felt all the horrors of the damned? Most assuredly I had little time given for reflection. Many hands roughly seized me upon the spot, and lights were immediately reprocured. A search ensued. In the lining of my sleeve were found all the court cards essential in *écarté*, and, in the pockets of my wrapper, a number of packs, facsimiles of those used at our sittings, with the single exception that mine were of the species called, technically, *arrondees*; the honours being slightly convex at the ends, the lower cards slightly convex at the sides. In this disposition, the dupe who cuts, as customary, at the length of the pack, will invariably find that he cuts his antagonist an honor; while the gambler, cutting at the breadth, will, as certainly, cut nothing for his victim which may count in the records of the game.

Any burst of indignation upon this discovery would have affected me less than the silent contempt, or the sarcastic composure, with which it was received.

"Mr. Wilson," said our host, stooping to remove from beneath his feet an exceedingly luxurious cloak of rare furs, "Mr. Wilson, this is your property." (The weather was cold; and, upon quitting my own room, I had thrown a cloak over my dressing wrapper, putting it off upon reaching the scene of play.) "I presume it is supererogatory to seek here (eyeing the folds of the garment with a bitter smile) for any farther evidence of your skill. Indeed, we have had enough. You will see the necessity, I hope, of quitting Oxford — at all events, of quitting instantly my chambers."

Abased, humbled to the dust as I then was, it is probable that I should have resented this galling language by immediate personal violence, had not my whole attention been at the moment arrested by a fact of the most startling character. The cloak which I had worn was of a rare description of fur; how rare, how extravagantly costly, I shall not venture to say. Its fashion, too, was of my own fantastic invention; for I was fastidious to an absurd degree of coxcombrity, in matters of this frivolous nature. When, therefore, Mr. Preston reached me that which he had picked up upon the floor, and near the folding doors of the apartment, it was with an astonishment nearly bordering upon terror, that I perceived my own already hanging on my arm, (where I had no doubt unwittingly placed it,) and that the one presented me was but its exact counterpart in every, in even the minutest possible particular. The singular being who had so disastrously exposed me, had been muffled, I remembered, in a cloak; and none had been worn at all by any of the members of our party with the exception of myself. Retaining some presence of mind, I took the one offered me by Preston; placed it, unnoticed, over my own; left the apartment with a resolute scowl of defiance; and, next morning ere dawn of day, commenced a hurried journey from Oxford to the continent, in a perfect agony of horror and of shame.

I fled in vain. My evil destiny pursued me as if in exultation, and proved, indeed, that the exercise of its mysterious dominion had as yet only begun. Scarcely had I set foot in Paris ere I had fresh evidence of the detestable interest taken by this Wilson in my concerns. Years flew, while I experienced no relief. Villain! — at Rome, with how untimely, yet with how spectral an officiousness, stepped he in between me and my ambition! At Vienna, too — at Berlin — and at Moscow! Where, in truth, had I not bitter cause to curse him within my heart? From his inscrutable tyranny did I at length flee, panic-stricken, as from a pestilence; and to the very ends of the earth I fled in vain.

And again, and again, in secret communion with my own spirit, would I demand the questions "Who is he? — whence came he? — and what are his objects?" But no answer was there found. And then I scrutinized, with a minute scrutiny, the forms, and the methods, and the leading traits of his impertinent supervision. But even here there was very little upon which to base a

conjecture. It was noticeable, indeed, that, in no one of the multiplied instances in which he had of late crossed my path, had he so crossed it except to frustrate those schemes, or to disturb those actions, which, if fully carried out, might have resulted in bitter mischief. Poor justification this, in truth, for an authority so imperiously assumed! Poor indemnity for natural rights of self-agency so pertinaciously, so insultingly denied!

I had also been forced to notice that my tormentor, for a very long period of time, (while scrupulously and with miraculous dexterity maintaining his whim of an identity of apparel with myself,) had so contrived it, in the execution of his varied interference with my will, that I saw not, at any moment, the features of his face. Be Wilson what he might, this, at least, was but the veriest of affectation, or of folly. Could he, for an instant, have supposed that, in my admonisher at Eton — in the destroyer of my honor at Oxford, — in him who thwarted my ambition at Rome, my revenge at Paris, my passionate love at Naples, or what he falsely termed my avarice in Egypt, — that in this, my arch-enemy and evil genius, could fail to recognise the William Wilson of my school boy days, — the namesake, the companion, the rival, — the hated and dreaded rival at Dr. Bransby's? Impossible! — But let me hasten to the last eventful scene of the drama.

Thus far I had succumbed supinely to this imperious domination. The sentiment of deep awe with which I habitually regarded the elevated character, the majestic wisdom, the apparent omnipresence and omnipotence of Wilson, added to a feeling of even terror, with which certain other traits in his nature and assumptions inspired me, had operated, hitherto, to impress me with an idea of my own utter weakness and helplessness, and to suggest an implicit, although bitterly reluctant submission to his arbitrary will. But, of late days, I had given myself up entirely to wine; and its maddening influence upon my hereditary temper rendered me more and more impatient of control. I began to murmur, — to hesitate, — to resist. And was it only fancy which induced me to believe that, with the increase of my own firmness, that of my tormentor underwent a proportional diminution? Be this as it may, I now began to feel the inspiration of a burning hope, and at length nurtured in my secret thoughts a stern and desperate resolution that I would submit no longer to be enslaved.

It was at Rome, during the Carnival of 18 — , that I attended a masquerade in the palazzo of the Neapolitan Duke Di Broglio. I had indulged more freely than usual in the excesses of the wine-table; and now the suffocating atmosphere of the crowded rooms irritated me beyond endurance. The difficulty, too, of forcing my way through the mazes of the company contributed not a little to the ruffling of my temper; for I was anxiously seeking, (let me not say with what unworthy motive) the young, the gay, the beautiful wife of the aged and doting Di Broglio. With a too unscrupulous confidence she had previously communicated to me the secret of the costume in which she would be habited, and now, having caught a glimpse of her person, I was hurrying to make my way into her presence. At this moment I felt a light hand placed upon my shoulder, and that ever-remembered, low, damnable *whisper* within my ear.

In an absolute phrenzy of wrath, I turned at once upon him who had thus interrupted me, and seized him violently by the collar. He was attired, as I had expected, in a costume altogether similar to my own; wearing a Spanish cloak of blue velvet, begirt about the waist with a crimson belt sustaining a rapier. A mask of black silk entirely covered his face.

"Scoundrel!" I said, in a voice husky with rage, while every syllable I uttered seemed as new fuel to my fury, "scoundrel! impostor! accursed villain! you shall not — you shall not dog me unto death! Follow me, or I stab you where you stand!" — and I broke my way from the ball-room into a small ante-chamber adjoining, dragging him unresistingly with me as I went.

Upon entering, I thrust him furiously from me. He staggered against the wall, while I closed the door with an oath, and commanded him to draw. He hesitated but for an instant; then, with a slight sigh, drew in silence, and put himself upon his defence.

The contest was brief indeed. I was frantic with every species of wild excitement, and felt

within my single arm the energy and power of a multitude. In a few seconds I forced him by sheer strength against the wainscoting, and thus, getting him at mercy, plunged my sword, with brute ferocity, repeatedly through and through his bosom.

At that instant some person tried the latch of the door. I hastened to prevent an intrusion, and then immediately returned to my dying antagonist. But what human language can adequately portray that astonishment, that horror which possessed me at the spectacle then presented to view? The brief moment in which I averted my eyes had been sufficient to produce, apparently, a material change in the arrangements at the upper or farther end of the room. A large mirror, — so at first it seemed to me in my confusion — now stood where none had been perceptible before; and, as I stepped up to it in extremity of terror, mine own image, but with features all pale and dabbled in blood, advanced to meet me with a feeble and tottering gait.

Thus it appeared, I say, but was not. It was my antagonist — it was Wilson, who then stood before me in the agonies of his dissolution. His mask and cloak lay, where he had thrown them, upon the floor. Not a thread in all his raiment — not a line in all the marked and singular lineaments of his face which was not, even in the most absolute identity, mine own!

It was Wilson; but he spoke no longer in a whisper, and I could have fancied that I myself was speaking while he said:

*"You have conquered, and I yield. Yet, henceforward art thou also dead — dead to the World, to Heaven and to Hope! In me didst thou exist — and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself."*

# The Other - Jorge Luis Borges

(1972)

Translated by Andrew Hurley

The incident occurred in February, 1969, in Cambridge, north of Boston. I didn't write about it then because my foremost objective at the time was to put it out of my mind, so as not to go insane. Now, in 1972, it strikes me that if I do write about what happened, people will read it as a story and in time I, too, may be able to see it as one.

I know that it was almost horrific while it lasted — and it grew worse yet through the sleepless nights that followed. That does not mean that anyone else will be stirred by my telling of it.

It was about ten o'clock in the morning. I was sitting comfortably on a bench beside the Charles River. Some five hundred yards to my right there was a tall building whose name I never learned. Large chunks of ice were floating down the gray current. Inevitably, the river made me think of time ... Heraclitus' ancient image. I had slept well; the class I'd given the previous evening had, I think, managed to interest my students. There was not a soul in sight.

Suddenly, I had the sense (which psychologists tell us is associated with states of fatigue) that I had lived this moment before. Someone had sat down on the other end of my bench. I'd have preferred to be alone, but I didn't want to get up immediately for fear of seeming rude. The other man had started whistling. At that moment there occurred the first of the many shocks that morning was to bring me. What the man was whistling — or *trying* to whistle (I have never been able to carry a tune) — was the popular Argentine milonga *La tapera*, by Elías Regules. The tune carried me back to a patio that no longer exists and to the memory of Alvaro Melián Lafinur, who died so many years ago. Then there came the words. They were the words of the *décima* that begins the song. The voice was not Alvaro's but it tried to imitate Alvaro's. I recognized it with horror.

I turned to the man and spoke.

"Are you Uruguayan or Argentine?"

"Argentine, but I've been living in Geneva since '14," came the reply.

There was a long silence. Then I asked a second question.

"At number seventeen Malagnou, across the street from the Russian Orthodox Church?"

He nodded.

"In that case," I resolutely said to him, "your name is Jorge Luis Borges. I too am Jorge Luis Borges. We are in 1969, in the city of Cambridge."

"No," he answered in my own, slightly distant, voice, "I am here in Geneva, on a bench, a few steps from the Rhône."

Then, after a moment, he went on:

"It is odd that we look so much alike, but you are much older than I, and you have gray hair."

"I can prove to you that I speak the truth," I answered. "I'll tell you things that a stranger couldn't know. In our house there's a silver *mate* cup with a base of serpents that our great-grandfather brought from Peru. There's also a silver washbasin that was hung from the saddle. In the wardrobe closet in your room, there are two rows of books: the three volumes of Lane's translation of the *Thousand and One Nights* — which Lane called *The Arabian Nights Entertainment* — with steel engravings and notes in fine print between the chapters, Quicherat's Latin dictionary, Tacitus' *Germania* in Latin and in Gordon's English version, a *Quixote* in the Gamier edition, a copy of Rivera Indarte's *Tablas de sangre* signed by the author, Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, a biography of Amiel, and, hidden behind the others, a paperbound volume

detailing the sexual customs of the Balkans. Nor have I forgotten a certain afternoon in a second-floor apartment on the Plaza Dubourg."

"Dufour," he corrected me.

"All right, Dufour," I said. "Is that enough for you?"

"No," he replied. "Those 'proofs' of yours prove nothing. If I'm dreaming you, it's only natural that you would know what I know. That long-winded catalog of yours is perfectly unavailing."

His objection was a fair one.

"If this morning and this encounter are dreams," I replied, "then each of us does have to think that he alone is the dreamer. Perhaps our dream will end, perhaps it won't. Meanwhile, our clear obligation is to accept the dream, as we have accepted the universe and our having been brought into it and the fact that we see with our eyes and that we breathe."

"But what if the dream should last?" he asked anxiously.

In order to calm him — and calm myself, as well — I feigned a self-assurance I was far from truly feeling.

"My dream," I told him, "has already lasted for seventy years. And besides — when one wakes up, the person one meets is always oneself. That is what's happening to us now, except that we are two. Wouldn't you like to know something about my past, which is now the future that awaits you?"

He nodded wordlessly. I went on, a bit hesitatingly:

"Mother is well, living happily in her house in Buenos Aires, on the corner of Charcas and Maipú, but Father died some thirty years ago. It was his heart. He had had a stroke — that was what finally killed him. When he laid his left hand over his right, it was like a child's hand resting atop a giant's. He died impatient for death, but without a word of complaint. Our grandmother had died in the same house. Several days before the end, she called us all in and told us, 'I am an old, old woman, dying very slowly. I won't have anyone making a fuss over such a common, ordinary thing as that.' Norah, your sister, is married and has two children. By the way — at home, how is everyone?"

"Fine. Father still always making his jokes against religion. Last night he said Jesus was like the gauchos, who'll never commit themselves, which is why He spoke in parables."

He thought for a moment, and then asked: "What about you?"

"I'm not sure exactly how many books you'll write, but I know there are too many. You'll write poetry that will give you a pleasure that others will not fully share, and stories of a fantastic turn. You will be a teacher — like your father, and like so many others of our blood."

I was glad he didn't ask me about the success or failure of the books. I then changed my tack.

"As for history ... There was another war, with virtually the same antagonists. France soon capitulated; England and America battled a German dictator name Hitler — the cyclical Battle of Waterloo. Buenos Aires engendered another Rosas in 1946, much like our kinsman, the first one. In '55, the province of Córdoba saved us, as Entre Rios had before. Things are bad now. Russia is taking over the planet; America, hobbled by the superstition of democracy, can't make up its mind to be an empire. Our own country is more provincial with every passing day — more provincial and more self-important, as though it has shut its eyes. I shouldn't be surprised if the teaching of Latin were replaced by the teaching of Guarani."

I realized that he was barely listening. The elemental fear of the impossible yet true had come over him, and he was daunted. I, who have never been a father, felt a wave of love for the poor young man who was dearer to me than a child of my own flesh and blood. I saw that his hands were clutching a book. I asked what he was reading.

"*The Possessed* — or, I think would be better, *The Devils*, by Fyodor Dostoyevsky," he answered without vanity.

"It's a bit hazy to me now. Is it any good?"

The words were hardly out of my mouth when I sensed that the question was blasphemous.

"The great Russian writer," he affirmed sententiously, "has penetrated more deeply than any other man into the labyrinths of the Slavic soul."

I took that rhetorical pronouncement as evidence that he had grown calmer.

I asked him what other works by Dostoyevsky he had read.

He ticked off two of three, among them *The Double*.

I asked him whether he could tell the difference between the characters when he read, as one could with Joseph Conrad, and whether he planned to read on through Dostoyevsky's entire corpus.

"The truth is, I don't," he answered with a slight note of surprise.

I asked him what he himself was writing, and he told me he was working on a book of poetry called *Red Anthems*. He'd also thought about calling it *Red Rhythms* or *Red Songs*.

"Why not?" I said. "You can cite good authority for it — Rubén Darío's blue poetry and Verlaine's gray song."

Ignoring this, he clarified what he'd meant — his book would be a hymn to the brotherhood of all mankind. The modern poet cannot turn his back on his age.

I thought about this for a while, and then asked if he really felt that he was brother to every living person — every undertaker, for example? every letter carrier? every undersea diver, everybody that lives on the even-numbered side of the street, all the people with laryngitis? (The list could go on.) He said his book would address the great oppressed and outcast masses.

"Your oppressed and outcast masses," I replied, "are nothing but an abstraction. Only individuals exist — if, in fact, anyone does. Yesterday's man is not today's, as some Greek said. We two, here on this bench in Geneva or in Cambridge, are perhaps the proof of that."

Except in the austere pages of history, memorable events go unaccompanied by memorable phrases. A man about to die tries to recall a print that he glimpsed in his childhood; soldiers about to go into battle talk about the mud or their sergeant. Our situation was unique and, frankly, we were unprepared. We talked, inevitably, about literature; I fear I said no more than I customarily say to journalists. My *alter ego* believed in imagination, in creation — in the discovery of new metaphors; I myself believed in those that correspond to close and widely acknowledged likenesses, those our imagination has already accepted: old age and death, dreams and life, the flow of time and water. I informed the young man of this opinion, which he himself was to express in a book, years later.

But he was barely listening. Then suddenly he spoke.

"If you have been me, how can you explain the fact that you've forgotten that you once encountered an elderly gentleman who in 1918 told you that he, too, was Borges?"

I hadn't thought of that difficulty. I answered with conviction.

"Perhaps the incident was so odd that I made an effort to forget it."

He ventured a timid question.

"How's your memory?"

I realized that for a mere boy not yet twenty, a man of seventy some-odd years was practically a corpse.

"It's often much like forgetfulness," I answered, "but it can still find what it's sent to find. I'm studying Anglo-Saxon, and I'm not at the foot of the class."

By this time our conversation had lasted too long to be a conversation in a dream.

I was struck by a sudden idea.

"I can prove to you this minute," I said, "that you aren't dreaming me. Listen to this line of poetry. So far as I can recall, you've never heard it before."

I slowly intoned the famous line: "*L'hydre-univers tordant son corps écaillé d'astre.*"

I could sense his almost fear-stricken bafflement. He repeated the line softly, savoring each glowing word.

"It's true," he stammered, "I could never write a line like that."



Hugo had brought us together.

I now recall that shortly before this, he had fervently recited that short poem in which Whitman recalls a night shared beside the sea — a night when Whitman had been truly happy.

"If Whitman sang of that night," I observed, "it's because he desired it but it never happened. The poem gains in greatness if we sense that it is the expression of a desire, a longing, rather than the narration of an event."

He stared at me.

"You don't know him," he exclaimed. "Whitman is incapable of falsehood."

A half century does not pass without leaving its mark. Beneath our conversation, the conversation of two men of miscellaneous reading and diverse tastes, I realized that we would not find common ground. We were too different, yet too alike. We could not deceive one another, and that makes conversation hard. Each of us was almost a caricature of the other. The situation was too unnatural to last much longer. There was no point in giving advice, no point in arguing, because the young man's inevitable fate was to be the man that I am now.

Suddenly I recalled a fantasy by Coleridge. A man dreams that he is in paradise, and he is given a flower as proof. When he wakes up, there is the flower.

I hit upon an analogous stratagem.

"Listen," I said, "do you have any money?"

"Yes," he replied. "About twenty francs. I invited Simón Jichlinski to have dinner with me at the Crocodile tonight."

"Tell Simón that he'll practice medicine in Carouge, and that he will do a great deal of good ... now, give me one of your coins."

He took three silver pieces and several smaller coins out of his pocket. He held out one of the silver pieces to me; he didn't understand.

I handed him one of those ill-advised American bills that are all of the same size though of very different denominations. He examined it avidly.

"Impossible!" he cried. "It's dated 1964."

(Months later someone told me that banknotes are not dated.)

"This, all this, is a miracle," he managed to say. "And the miraculous inspires fear. Those who witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus must have been terrified."

We haven't changed a bit, I thought. Always referring back to books.

He tore the bill to shreds and put the coin back in his pocket.

I had wanted to throw the coin he gave me in the river. The arc of the silver coin disappearing into the silver river would have lent my story a vivid image, but fate would not have it.

I replied that the supernatural, if it happens twice, is no longer terrifying; I suggested that we meet again the next day, on that same bench that existed in two times and two places.

He immediately agreed, then said, without looking at his watch, that it was getting late, he had to be going. Both of us were lying, and each of us knew that the other one was lying. I told him that someone was coming to fetch me.

"Fetch you?" he queried.

"Yes. When you reach my age, you'll have almost totally lost your eyesight. You'll be able to see the color yellow, and light and shadow. But don't worry. Gradual blindness is not tragic. It's like the slowly growing darkness of a summer evening."

We parted without having touched one another. The next day, I did not go to the bench. The other man probably didn't, either.

I have thought a great deal about this encounter, which I've never told anyone about. I believe I have discovered the key to it. The encounter was real, but the other man spoke to me in a dream, which was why he could forget me; I spoke to him while I was awake, and so I am still tormented by the memory.

The other man dreamed me, but did not dream me *rigorously* — he dreamed, I now realize,

the impossible date on that dollar bill.

# Cathedral - Raymond Carver

(1981)

This blind man, an old friend of my wife's, he was on his way to spend the night. His wife had died. So he was visiting the dead wife's relatives in Connecticut. He called my wife from his in-laws'. Arrangements were made. He would come by train, a five-hour trip, and my wife would meet him at the station. She hadn't seen him since she worked for him one summer in Seattle ten years ago. But she and the blind man had kept in touch. They made tapes and mailed them back and forth. I wasn't enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs. A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to.

That summer in Seattle she had needed a job. She didn't have any money. The man she was going to marry at the end of the summer was in officers' training school. He didn't have any money, either. But she was in love with the guy, and he was in love with her, etc. She'd seen something in the paper: HELP WANTED — Reading to Blind Man, and a telephone number. She phoned and went over, was hired on the spot. She'd worked with this blind man all summer. She read stuff to him, case studies, reports, that sort of thing. She helped him organize his little office in the county social-service department. They'd become good friends, my wife and the blind man. How do I know these things? She told me. And she told me something else. On her last day in the office, the blind man asked if he could touch her face. She agreed to this. She told me he touched his fingers to every part of her face, her nose — even her neck! She never forgot it. She even tried to write a poem about it. She was always trying to write a poem. She wrote a poem or two every year, usually after something really important had happened to her.

When we first started going out together, she showed me the poem. In the poem, she recalled his fingers and the way they had moved around over her face. In the poem, she talked about what she had felt at the time, about what went through her mind when the blind man touched her nose and lips. I can remember I didn't think much of the poem. Of course, I didn't tell her that. Maybe I just don't understand poetry. I admit it's not the first thing I reach for when I pick up something to read.

Anyway, this man who'd first enjoyed her favors, the officer-to-be, he'd been her childhood sweetheart. So okay. I'm saying that at the end of the summer she let the blind man run his hands over her face, said goodbye to him, married her childhood etc., who was now a commissioned officer, and she moved away from Seattle. But they'd kept in touch, she and the blind man. She made the first contact after a year or so. She called him up one night from an Air Force base in Alabama. She wanted to talk. They talked. He asked her to send him a tape and tell him about her life. She did this. She sent the tape. On the tape, she told the blind man about her husband and about their life together in the military. She told the blind man she loved her husband but she didn't like it where they lived and she didn't like it that he was a part of the military-industrial thing. She told the blind man she'd written a poem and he was in it. She told him that she was writing a poem about what it was like to be an Air Force officer's wife. The poem wasn't finished yet. She was still writing it. The blind man made a tape. He sent her the tape. She made a tape. This went on for years. My wife's officer was posted to one base and then another. She sent tapes from Moody AFB, McGuire, McConnell, and finally Travis, near Sacramento, where one night she got to feeling lonely and cut off from people she kept losing in that moving-around life. She got to feeling she couldn't go it another step. She went in and swallowed all the pills and capsules in the medicine chest and washed them down with a bottle of gin. Then she got into a hot bath and passed out.

But instead of dying, she got sick. She threw up. Her officer — why should he have a name? he was the childhood sweetheart, and what more does he want? — came home from somewhere, found her, and called the ambulance. In time, she put it all on a tape and sent the tape to the blind man. Over the years, she put all kinds of stuff on tapes and sent the tapes off lickety-split. Next to writing a poem every year, I think it was her chief means of recreation. On one tape, she told the blind man she'd decided to live away from her officer for a time. On another tape, she told him about her divorce. She and I began going out, and of course she told her blind man about it. She told him everything, or so it seemed to me. Once she asked me if I'd like to hear the latest tape from the blind man. This was a year ago. I was on the tape, she said. So I said okay, I'd listen to it. I got us drinks and we settled down in the living room. We made ready to listen. First she inserted the tape into the player and adjusted a couple of dials. Then she pushed a lever. The tape squeaked and someone began to talk in this loud voice. She lowered the volume. After a few minutes of harmless chitchat, I heard my own name in the mouth of this stranger, this blind man I didn't even know! And then this: "From all you've said about him, I can only conclude — " But we were interrupted, a knock at the door, something, and we didn't ever get back to the tape. Maybe it was just as well. I'd heard all I wanted to.

Now this same blind man was coming to sleep in my house.

"Maybe I could take him bowling," I said to my wife. She was at the draining board doing scalloped potatoes. She put down the knife she was using and turned around.

"If you love me," she said, "you can do this for me. If you don't love me, okay. But if you had a friend, any friend, and the friend came to visit, I'd make him feel comfortable." She wiped her hands with the dish towel.

"I don't have any blind friends," I said.

"You don't have any friends," she said. "Period. Besides," she said, "goddamn it, his wife's just died! Don't you understand that? The man's lost his wife!"

I didn't answer. She'd told me a little about the blind man's wife. Her name was Beulah. Beulah! That's a name for a colored woman.

"Was his wife a Negro?" I asked.

"Are you crazy?" my wife said. "Have you just flipped or something?" She picked up a potato. I saw it hit the floor, then roll under the stove. "What's wrong with you?" she said. "Are you drunk?"

"I'm just asking," I said.

Right then my wife filled me in with more detail than I cared to know. I made a drink and sat at the kitchen table to listen. Pieces of the story began to fall into place.

Beulah had gone to work for the blind man the summer after my wife had stopped working for him. Pretty soon Beulah and the blind man had themselves a church wedding. It was a little wedding — who'd want to go to such a wedding in the first place? — just the two of them, plus the minister and the minister's wife. But it was a church wedding just the same. It was what Beulah had wanted, he'd said. But even then Beulah must have been carrying the cancer in her glands. After they had been inseparable for eight years — my wife's word, inseparable — Beulah's health went into a rapid decline. She died in a Seattle hospital room, the blind man sitting beside the bed and holding on to her hand. They'd married, lived and worked together, slept together — had sex, sure — and then the blind man had to bury her. All this without his having ever seen what the goddamned woman looked like. It was beyond my understanding. Hearing this, I felt sorry for the blind man for a little bit. And then I found myself thinking what a pitiful life this woman must have led. Imagine a woman who could never see herself as she was seen in the eyes of her loved one. A woman who could go on day after day and never receive the smallest compliment from her beloved. A woman whose husband could never read the expression on her face, be it misery or something better. Someone who could wear makeup or not — what difference to him? She could, if she wanted, wear green eye-shadow around one eye,

a straight pin in her nostril, yellow slacks, and purple shoes, no matter. And then to slip off into death, the blind man's hand on her hand, his blind eyes streaming tears — I'm imagining now — her last thought maybe this: that he never even knew what she looked like, and she on an express to the grave. Robert was left with a small insurance policy and a half of a twenty-peso Mexican coin. The other half of the coin went into the box with her. Pathetic.

So when the time rolled around, my wife went to the depot to pick him up. With nothing to do but wait — sure, I blamed him for that — I was having a drink and watching the TV when I heard the car pull into the drive. I got up from the sofa with my drink and went to the window to have a look.

I saw my wife laughing as she parked the car. I saw her get out of the car and shut the door. She was still wearing a smile. Just amazing. She went around to the other side of the car to where the blind man was already starting to get out. This blind man, feature this, he was wearing a full beard! A beard on a blind man! Too much, I say. The blind man reached into the back seat and dragged out a suitcase. My wife took his arm, shut the car door, and, talking all the way, moved him down the drive and then up the steps to the front porch. I turned off the TV. I finished my drink, rinsed the glass, dried my hands. Then I went to the door.

My wife said, "I want you to meet Robert. Robert, this is my husband. I've told you all about him." She was beaming. She had this blind man by his coat sleeve.

The blind man let go of his suitcase and up came his hand. I took it. He squeezed hard, held my hand, and then he let it go.

"I feel like we've already met," he boomed.

"Likewise," I said. I didn't know what else to say. Then I said, "Welcome. I've heard a lot about you." We began to move then, a little group, from the porch into the living room, my wife guiding him by the arm. The blind man was carrying his suitcase in his other hand. My wife said things like, "To your left here, Robert. That's right. Now watch it, there's a chair. That's it. Sit down right here. This is the sofa. We just bought this sofa two weeks ago."

I started to say something about the old sofa. I'd liked that old sofa. But I didn't say anything. Then I wanted to say something else, small-talk, about the scenic ride along the Hudson. How going to New York, you should sit on the right-hand side of the train, and coming from New York, the left-hand side.

"Did you have a good train ride?" I said. "Which side of the train did you sit on, by the way?"

"What a question, which side!" my wife said. "What's it matter which side?" she said.

"I just asked," I said.

"Right side," the blind man said. "I hadn't been on a train in nearly forty years. Not since I was a kid. With my folks. That's been a long time. I'd nearly forgotten the sensation. I have winter in my beard now," he said. "So I've been told, anyway. Do I look distinguished, my dear?" the blind man said to my wife.

"You look distinguished, Robert," she said. "Robert," she said. "Robert, it's just so good to see you."

My wife finally took her eyes off the blind man and looked at me. I had the feeling she didn't like what she saw. I shrugged.

I've never met, or personally known, anyone who was blind. This blind man was late forties, a heavy-set, balding man with stooped shoulders, as if he carried a great weight there. He wore brown slacks, brown shoes, a light-brown shirt, a tie, a sports coat. Spiffy. He also had this full beard. But he didn't use a cane and he didn't wear dark glasses. I'd always thought dark glasses were a must for the blind. Fact was, I wished he had a pair. At first glance, his eyes looked like anyone else's eyes. But if you looked close, there was something different about them. Too much white in the iris, for one thing, and the pupils seemed to move around in the sockets without his knowing it or being able to stop it. Creepy. As I stared at his face, I saw the left pupil turn in toward his nose while the other made an effort to keep in one place. But it was only an effort, for

that eye was on the roam without his knowing it or wanting it to be.

I said, "Let me get you a drink. What's your pleasure? We have a little of everything. It's one of our pastimes."

"Bub, I'm a Scotch man myself," he said fast enough in this big voice.

"Right," I said. Bub! "Sure you are. I knew it."

He let his fingers touch his suitcase, which was sitting alongside the sofa. He was taking his bearings. I didn't blame him for that.

"I'll move that up to your room," my wife said.

"No, that's fine," the blind man said loudly. "It can go up when I go up."

"A little water with the Scotch?" I said.

"Very little," he said.

"I knew it," I said.

He said, "Just a tad. The Irish actor, Barry Fitzgerald? I'm like that fellow. When I drink water, Fitzgerald said, I drink water. When I drink whiskey, I drink whiskey." My wife laughed. The blind man brought his hand up under his beard. He lifted his beard slowly and let it drop.

I did the drinks, three big glasses of Scotch with a splash of water in each. Then we made ourselves comfortable and talked about Robert's travels. First the long flight from the West Coast to Connecticut, we covered that. Then from Connecticut up here by train. We had another drink concerning that leg of the trip.

I remembered having read somewhere that the blind didn't smoke because, as speculation had it, they couldn't see the smoke they exhaled. I thought I knew that much and that much only about blind people. But this blind man smoked his cigarette down to the nubbin and then lit another one. This blind man filled his ashtray and my wife emptied it.

When we sat down at the table for dinner, we had another drink. My wife heaped Robert's plate with cube steak, scalloped potatoes, green beans. I buttered him up two slices of bread. I said, "Here's bread and butter for you." I swallowed some of my drink. "Now let us pray," I said, and the blind man lowered his head. My wife looked at me, her mouth agape. "Pray the phone won't ring and the food doesn't get cold," I said.

We dug in. We ate everything there was to eat on the table. We ate like there was no tomorrow. We didn't talk. We ate. We scarfed. We grazed that table. We were into serious eating. The blind man had right away located his foods, he knew just where everything was on his plate. I watched with admiration as he used his knife and fork on the meat. He'd cut two pieces of meat, fork the meat into his mouth, and then go all out for the scalloped potatoes, the beans next, and then he'd tear off a hunk of buttered bread and eat that. He'd follow this up with a big drink of milk. It didn't seem to bother him to use his fingers once in a while, either.

We finished everything, including half a strawberry pie. For a few moments, we sat as if stunned. Sweat beaded on our faces. Finally, we got up from the table and left the dirty places. We didn't look back. We took ourselves into the living room and sank into our places again. Robert and my wife sat on the sofa. I took the big chair. We had us two or three more drinks while they talked about the major things that had come to pass for them in the past ten years. For the most part, I just listened. Now and then I joined in. I didn't want him to think I'd left the room, and I didn't want her to think I was feeling left out. They talked of things that had happened to them — to them! — these past ten years. I waited in vain to hear my name on my wife's sweet lips: "And then my dear husband came into my life" — something like that. But I heard nothing of the sort. More talk of Robert. Robert had done a little of everything, it seemed, a regular blind jack-of-all-trades. But most recently he and his wife had had an Amway distributorship, from which, I gathered, they'd earned their living, such as it was. The blind man was also a ham radio operator. He talked in his loud voice about conversations he'd had with fellow operators in Guam, in the Philippines, in Alaska, and even in Tahiti. He said he'd have a lot of friends there if he ever wanted to go visit those places. From time to time, he'd turn his

blind face toward me, put his hand under his beard, ask me something. How long had I been in my present position? (Three years.) Did I like my work? (I didn't.) Was I going to stay with it? (What were the options?) Finally, when I thought he was beginning to run down, I got up and turned on the TV.

My wife looked at me with irritation. She was heading toward a boil. Then she looked at the blind man and said, "Robert, do you have a TV?"

The blind man said, "My dear, I have two TVs. I have a color set and a black-and-white thing, an old relic. It's funny, but if I turn the TV on, and I'm always turning it on, I turn on the color set. It's funny, don't you think?"

I didn't know what to say to that. I had absolutely nothing to say to that. No opinion. So I watched the news program and tried to listen to what the announcer was saying.

"This is a color TV," the blind man said. "Don't ask me how, but I can tell."

"We traded up a while ago," I said.

The blind man had another taste of his drink. He lifted his beard, sniffed it, and let it fall. He leaned forward on the sofa. He positioned his ashtray on the coffee table, then put the lighter to his cigarette. He leaned back on the sofa and crossed his legs at the ankles.

My wife covered her mouth, and then she yawned. She stretched. She said, "I think I'll go upstairs and put on my robe. I think I'll change into something else. Robert, you make yourself comfortable," she said.

"I'm comfortable," the blind man said.

"I want you to feel comfortable in this house," she said.

"I am comfortable," the blind man said.

After she'd left the room, he and I listened to the weather report and then to the sports roundup. By that time, she'd been gone so long I didn't know if she was going to come back. I thought she might have gone to bed. I wished she'd come back downstairs. I didn't want to be left alone with a blind man. I asked him if he wanted another drink, and he said sure. Then I asked if he wanted to smoke some dope with me. I said I'd just rolled a number. I hadn't, but I planned to do so in about two shakes.

"I'll try some with you," he said.

"Damn right," I said. "That's the stuff."

I got our drinks and sat down on the sofa with him. Then I rolled us two fat numbers. I lit one and passed it. I brought it to his fingers. He took it and inhaled.

"Hold it as long as you can," I said. I could tell he didn't know the first thing.

My wife came back downstairs wearing her pink robe and her pink slippers.

"What do I smell?" she said.

"We thought we'd have us some cannabis," I said.

My wife gave me a savage look. Then she looked at the blind man and said, "Robert, I didn't know you smoked."

He said, "I do now, my dear. There's a first time for everything. But I don't feel anything yet."

"This stuff is pretty mellow," I said. "This stuff is mild. It's dope you can reason with," I said. "It doesn't mess you up."

"Not much it doesn't, bub," he said, and laughed.

My wife sat on the sofa between the blind man and me. I passed her the number. She took it and toked and then passed it back to me. "Which way is this going?" she said. Then she said, "I shouldn't be smoking this. I can hardly keep my eyes open as it is. That dinner did me in. I shouldn't have eaten so much."

"It was the strawberry pie," the blind man said. "That's what did it," he said, and he laughed his big laugh. Then he shook his head.

"There's more strawberry pie," I said.

"Do you want some more, Robert?" my wife said.

"Maybe in a little while," he said.

We gave our attention to the TV. My wife yawned again. She said, "Your bed is made up when you feel like going to bed, Robert. I know you must have had a long day. When you're ready to go to bed, say so." She pulled his arm. "Robert?"

He came to and said, "I've had a real nice time. This beats tapes doesn't it?"

I said, "Coming at you," and I put the number between his fingers. He inhaled, held the smoke, and then let it go. It was like he'd been doing it since he was nine years old.

"Thanks, bub," he said. "But I think this is all for me. I think I'm beginning to feel it," he said. He held the burning roach out for my wife.

"Same here," she said. "Ditto. Me, too." She took the roach and passed it to me. "I may just sit here for a while between you two guys with my eyes closed. But don't let me bother you, okay? Either one of you. If it bothers you, say so. Otherwise, I may just sit here with my eyes closed until you're ready to go to bed," she said. "Your bed's made up, Robert, when you're ready. It's right next to our room at the top of the stairs. We'll show you up when you're ready. You wake me up now, you guys, if I fall asleep." She said that and then she closed her eyes and went to sleep.

The news program ended. I got up and changed the channel. I sat back down on the sofa. I wished my wife hadn't pooped out. Her head lay across the back of the sofa, her mouth open. She'd turned so that her robe slipped away from her legs, exposing a juicy thigh. I reached to draw her robe back over her, and it was then that I glanced at the blind man. What the hell! I flipped the rope open again.

"You say when you want some strawberry pie," I said.

"I will," he said.

I said, "Are you tired? Do you want me to take you up to your bed? Are you ready to hit the hay?"

"Not yet," he said. "No, I'll stay up with you, bub. If that's all right. I'll stay up until you're ready to turn in. We haven't had a chance to talk. Know what I mean? I feel like me and her monopolized the evening." He lifted his beard and he let it fall. He picked up his cigarettes and his lighter.

"That's all right," I said. Then I said, "I'm glad for the company."

And I guess I was. Every night I smoked dope and stayed up as long as I could before I fell asleep. My wife and I hardly ever went to bed at the same time. When I did go to sleep, I had these dreams. Sometimes I'd wake up from one of them, my heart going crazy.

Something about the church and the Middle Ages was on the TV. Not your run-of-the-mill TV fare. I wanted to watch something else. I turned to the other channels. But there was nothing on them, either. So I turned back to the first channel and apologized.

"Bub, it's all right," the blind man said. "It's fine with me. Whatever you want to watch is okay. I'm always learning something. Learning never ends. It won't hurt me to learn something tonight, I got ears," he said.

We didn't say anything for a time. He was leaning forward with his head turned at me, his right ear aimed in the direction of the set. Very disconcerting. Now and then his eyelids drooped and then they snapped open again. Now and then he put his fingers into his beard and tugged, like he was thinking about something he was hearing on the television.

On the screen, a group of men wearing cowls was being set upon and tormented by men dressed in skeleton costumes and men dressed as devils. The men dressed as devils wore devil masks, horns, and long tails. This pageant was part of a procession. The Englishman who was narrating the thing said it took place in Spain once a year. I tried to explain to the blind man what was happening.

"Skeletons," he said. "I know about skeletons," he said, and he nodded.

The TV showed this one cathedral. Then there was a long, slow look at another one. Finally,



the picture switched to the famous one in Paris, with its flying buttresses and its spires reaching up to the clouds. The camera pulled away to show the whole of the cathedral rising above the skyline.

There were times when the Englishman who was telling the thing would shut up, would simply let the camera move around the cathedrals. Or else the camera would tour the countryside, men in fields walking behind oxen. I waited as long as I could. Then I felt I had to say something. I said, "They're showing the outside of this cathedral now. Gargoyles. Little statues carved to look like monsters. Now I guess they're in Italy. Yeah, they're in Italy. There's paintings on the walls of this one church."

"Are those fresco paintings, bub?" he asked, and he sipped from his drink.

I reached for my glass. But it was empty. I tried to remember what I could remember. "You're asking me are those frescoes?" I said. "That's a good question. I don't know."

The camera moved to a cathedral outside Lisbon. The differences in the Portuguese cathedral compared with the French and Italian were not that great. But they were there. Mostly the interior stuff. Then something occurred to me, and I said, "Something has occurred to me. Do you have any idea what a cathedral is? What they look like, that is? Do you follow me? If somebody says cathedral to you, do you have any notion what they're talking about? Do you know the difference between that and a Baptist church, say?"

He let the smoke dribble from his mouth. "I know they took hundreds of workers fifty or a hundred years to build," he said. "I just heard the man say that, of course. I know generations of the same families worked on a cathedral. I heard him say that, too. The men who began their life's work on them, they never lived to see the completion of their work. In that wise, bub, they're no different from the rest of us, right?" He laughed. Then his eyelids drooped again. His head nodded. He seemed to be snoozing. Maybe he was imagining himself in Portugal. The TV was showing another cathedral now. This one was in Germany. The Englishman's voice droned on. "Cathedrals," the blind man said. He sat up and rolled his head back and forth. "If you want the truth, bub, that's about all I know. What I just said. What I heard him say. But maybe you could describe one to me? I wish you'd do it. I'd like that. If you want to know, I really don't have a good idea."

I stared hard at the shot of the cathedral on the TV. How could I even begin to describe it? But say my life depended on it. Say my life was being threatened by an insane guy who said I had to do it or else.

I stared some more at the cathedral before the picture flipped off into the countryside. There was no use. I turned to the blind man and said, "To begin with, they're very tall." I was looking around the room for clues. "They reach way up. Up and up. Toward the sky. They're so big, some of them, they have to have these supports. To help hold them up, so to speak. These supports are called buttresses. They remind me of viaducts, for some reason. But maybe you don't know viaducts, either? Sometimes the cathedrals have devils and such carved into the front. Sometimes lords and ladies. Don't ask me why this is," I said.

He was nodding. The whole upper part of his body seemed to be moving back and forth.

"I'm not doing so good, am I?" I said.

He stopped nodding and leaned forward on the edge of the sofa. As he listened to me, he was running his fingers through his beard. I wasn't getting through to him, I could see that. But he waited for me to go on just the same. He nodded, like he was trying to encourage me. I tried to think what else to say. "They're really big," I said. "They're massive. They're built of stone. Marble, too, sometimes. In those olden days, when they built cathedrals, men wanted to be close to God. In those olden days, God was an important part of everyone's life. You could tell this from their cathedral-building. I'm sorry," I said, "but it looks like that's the best I can do for you. I'm just no good at it."

"That's all right, bub," the blind man said. "Hey, listen. I hope you don't mind my asking you.

Can I ask you something? Let me ask you a simple question, yes or no. I'm just curious and there's no offense. You're my host. But let me ask if you are in any way religious? You don't mind my asking?"

I shook my head. He couldn't see that, though. A wink is the same as a nod to a blind man. "I guess I don't believe in it. In anything. Sometimes It's hard. You know what I'm saying?"

"Sure, I do," he said.

"Right," I said.

The Englishman was still holding forth. My wife sighed in her sleep. She drew a long breath and went on with her sleeping.

"You'll have to forgive me," I said. "But I can't tell you what a cathedral looks like. It just isn't in me to do it. I can't do any more than I've done."

The blind man sat very still, his head down, as he listened to me.

I said, "The truth is, cathedrals don't mean anything special to me. Nothing. Cathedrals. They're something to look at on late-night TV. That's all they are."

It was then that the blind man cleared his throat. He brought something up. He took a handkerchief from his back pocket. Then he said, "I get it, bub. It's okay. It happens. Don't worry about it," he said. "Hey, listen to me. Will you do me a favor? I got an idea. Why don't you find us some heavy paper? and a pen. We'll do something. We'll draw one together. Get us a pen and some heavy paper. Go on, bub, get the stuff," he said.

So I went upstairs. My legs felt like they didn't have any strength in them. They felt like they did after I'd done some running. In my wife's room, I looked around. I found some ballpoints in a little basket on her table. And then I tried to think where to look for the kind of paper he was talking about.

Downstairs, in the kitchen, I found a shopping bag with onion skins in the bottom of the bag. I emptied the bag and shook it. I brought it into the living room and sat down with it near his legs. I moved some things, smoothed the wrinkles from the bag, spread it out on the coffee table.

The blind man got down from the sofa and sat next to me on the carpet.

He ran his fingers over the paper. He went up and down the sides of the paper. The edges, even the edges. He fingered the corners.

"All right," he said. "All right, let's do her."

He found my hand, the hand with the pen. He closed his hand over my hand. "Go ahead, bub, draw," he said. "Draw. You'll see. I'll follow along with you. It'll be okay. Just begin now like I'm telling you. You'll see. Draw," the blind man said.

So I began. First I drew a box that looked like a house. It could have been the house I lived in. Then I put a roof on it. At either end of the roof, I drew spires. Crazy.

"Swell," he said. "Terrific. You're doing fine," he said. "Never thought anything like this could happen in your lifetime, did you, bub? Well, it's a strange life, we all know that. Go on now. Keep it up."

I put in windows with arches. I drew flying buttresses. I hung great doors. I couldn't stop. The TV station went off the air. I put down the pen and closed and opened my fingers. The blind man felt around over the paper. He moved the tips of his fingers over the paper, all over what I had drawn, and he nodded.

"Doing fine," the blind man said.

I took up the pen again, and he found my hand. I kept at it. I'm no artist. But I kept drawing just the same.

My wife opened up her eyes and gazed at us. She sat up on the sofa, her robe hanging open. She said, "What are you doing? Tell me, I want to know."

I didn't answer her.

The blind man said, "We're drawing a cathedral. Me and him are working on it. Press hard," he said to me. "That's right. That's good," he said. "Sure. You got it, bub, I can tell. You didn't

think you could. But you can, can't you? You're cooking with gas now. You know what I'm saying? We're going to really have us something here in a minute. How's the old arm?" he said. "Put some people in there now. What's a cathedral without people?"

My wife said, "What's going on? Robert, what are you doing? What's going on?"

"It's all right," he said to her. "Close your eyes now," the blind man said to me.

I did it. I closed them just like he said.

"Are they closed?" he said. "Don't fudge."

"They're closed," I said.

"Keep them that way," he said. He said, "Don't stop now. Draw."

So we kept on with it. His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now.

Then he said, "I think that's it. I think you got it," he said. "Take a look. What do you think?"

But I had my eyes closed. I thought I'd keep them that way for a little longer. I thought it was something I ought to do.

"Well?" he said. "Are you looking?"

My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything.

"It's really something," I said.

# The Swimmer - John Cheever

(1964)

It was one of those midsummer Sundays when everyone sits around saying, "I drank too much last night." You might have heard it whispered by the parishioners leaving church, heard it from the lips of the priest himself, struggling with his cassock in the *vestiarium*, heard it from the golf links and the tennis courts, heard it from the wildlife preserve where the leader of the Audubon group was suffering from a terrible hangover. "I drank too much," said Donald Westerhazy. "We all drank too much," said Lucinda Merrill. "It must have been the wine," said Helen Westerhazy. "I drank too much of that claret."

This was at the edge of the Westerhazys' pool. The pool, fed by an artesian well with a high iron content, was a pale shade of green. It was a fine day. In the west there was a massive stand of cumulus cloud so like a city seen from a distance — from the bow of an approaching ship — that it might have had a name. Lisbon. Hackensack. The sun was hot. Neddy Merrill sat by the green water, one hand in it, one around a glass of gin. He was a slender man — he seemed to have the especial slenderness of youth — and while he was far from young he had slid down his banister that morning and given the bronze backside of Aphrodite on the hall table a smack, as he jogged toward the smell of coffee in his dining room. He might have been compared to a summer's day, particularly the last hours of one, and while he lacked a tennis racket or a sail bag the impression was definitely one of youth, sport, and clement weather. He had been swimming and now he was breathing deeply, stertorously as if he could gulp into his lungs the components of that moment, the heat of the sun, the intenseness of his plea sure. It all seemed to flow into his chest. His own house stood in Bullet Park, eight miles to the south, where his four beautiful daughters would have had their lunch and might be playing tennis. Then it occurred to him that by taking a dogleg to the south-west he could reach his home by water.

His life was not confining and the delight he took in this observation could not be explained by its suggestion of escape. He seemed to see, with a cartographer's eye, that string of swimming pools, that quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the county. He had made a discovery, a contribution to modern geography; he would name the stream Lucinda after his wife. He was not a practical joker nor was he a fool but he was determinedly original and had a vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure. The day was beautiful and it seemed to him that a long swim might enlarge and celebrate its beauty.

He took off a sweater that was hung over his shoulders and dove in. He had an inexplicable contempt for men who did not hurl themselves into pools. He swam a choppy crawl, breathing either with every stroke or every fourth stroke and counting somewhere well in the back of his mind the one-two one-two of a flutter kick. It was not a serviceable stroke for long distances but the domestication of swimming had saddled the sport with some customs and in his part of the world a crawl was customary. To be embraced and sustained by the light green water was less a plea sure, it seemed, than the resumption of a natural condition, and he would have liked to swim without trunks, but this was not possible, considering his project. He hoisted himself up on the far curb — he never used the ladder — and started across the lawn. When Lucinda asked where he was going he said he was going to swim home.

The only maps and charts he had to go by were remembered or imaginary but these were clear enough. First there were the Grahams, the Hammers, the Lears, the Howlands, and the Crosscups. He would cross Ditmar Street to the Bunkers and come, after a short portage, to the Levys, the Welchers, and the public pool in Lancaster. Then there were the Hallorans, the Sachses, the Biswangers, Shirley Adams, the Gilmartins, and the Clydes. The day was lovely, and that he lived in a world so generously supplied with water seemed like a clemency, a

beneficence. His heart was high and he ran across the grass. Making his way home by an uncommon route gave him the feeling that he was a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with a destiny, and he knew that he would find friends all along the way; friends would line the banks of the Lucinda River.

He went through a hedge that separated the Westerhazys' land from the Grahams', walked under some flowering apple trees, passed the shed that housed their pump and filter, and came out at the Grahams' pool. "Why, Neddy," Mrs. Graham said, "what a marvelous surprise. I've been trying to get you on the phone all morning. Here, let me get you a drink." He saw then, like any explorer, that the hospitable customs and traditions of the natives would have to be handled with diplomacy if he was ever going to reach his destination. He did not want to mystify or seem rude to the Grahams nor did he have the time to linger there. He swam the length of their pool and joined them in the sun and was rescued, a few minutes later, by the arrival of two carloads of friends from Connecticut. During the uproarious reunions he was able to slip away. He went down by the front of the Grahams' house, stepped over a thorny hedge, and crossed a vacant lot to the Hammers'. Mrs. Hammer, looking up from her roses, saw him swim by although she wasn't quite sure who it was. The Lears heard him splashing past the open windows of their living room. The Howlands and the Crosscups were away. After leaving the Howlands' he crossed Ditmar Street and started for the Bunkers', where he could hear, even at that distance, the noise of a party.

The water refracted the sound of voices and laughter and seemed to suspend it in midair. The Bunkers' pool was on a rise and he climbed some stairs to a terrace where twenty-five or thirty men and women were drinking. The only person in the water was Rusty Towers, who floated there on a rubber raft. Oh, how bonny and lush were the banks of the Lucinda River! Prosperous men and women gathered by the sapphire-colored waters while caterer's men in white coats passed them cold gin. Overhead a red de Haviland trainer was circling around and around and around in the sky with something like the glee of a child in a swing. Ned felt a passing affection for the scene, a tenderness for the gathering, as if it was something he might touch. In the distance he heard thunder. As soon as Enid Bunker saw him she began to scream: "Oh, look who's here! What a marvelous surprise! When Lucinda said that you couldn't come I thought I'd die." She made her way to him through the crowd, and when they had finished kissing she led him to the bar, a progress that was slowed by the fact that he stopped to kiss eight or ten other women and shake the hands of as many men. A smiling bartender he had seen at a hundred parties gave him a gin and tonic and he stood by the bar for a moment, anxious not to get stuck in any conversation that would delay his voyage. When he seemed about to be surrounded he dove in and swam close to the side to avoid colliding with Rusty's raft. At the far end of the pool he bypassed the Tomlinsons with a broad smile and jogged up the garden path. The gravel cut his feet but this was the only unpleasantness. The party was confined to the pool, and as he went toward the house he heard the brilliant, watery sound of voices fade, heard the noise of a radio from the Bunkers' kitchen, where someone was listening to a ball game. Sunday afternoon. He made his way through the parked cars and down the grassy border of their driveway to Alewives Lane. He did not want to be seen on the road in his bathing trunks but there was no traffic and he made the short distance to the Levys' driveway, marked with a private property sign and a green tube for The New York Times. All the doors and windows of the big house were open but there were no signs of life; not even a dog barked. He went around the side of the house to the pool and saw that the Levys had only recently left. Glasses and bottles and dishes of nuts were on a table at the deep end, where there was a bathhouse or gazebo, hung with Japanese lanterns. After swimming the pool he got himself a glass and poured a drink. It was his fourth or fifth drink and he had swum nearly half the length of the Lucinda River. He felt tired, clean, and pleased at that moment to be alone; pleased with everything.

It would storm. The stand of cumulus cloud — that city — had risen and darkened, and while

he sat there he heard the percussiveness of thunder again. The de Haviland trainer was still circling overhead and it seemed to Ned that he could almost hear the pilot laugh with plea sure in the afternoon; but when there was another peal of thunder he took off for home. A train whistle blew and he wondered what time it had gotten to be. Four? Five? He thought of the provincial station at that hour, where a waiter, his tuxedo concealed by a raincoat, a dwarf with some flowers wrapped in newspaper, and a woman who had been crying would be waiting for the local. It was suddenly growing dark; it was that moment when the pin-headed birds seem to organize their song into some acute and knowledgeable recognition of the storm's approach. Then there was a fine noise of rushing water from the crown of an oak at his back, as if a spigot there had been turned. Then the noise of fountains came from the crowns of all the tall trees. Why did he love storms, what was the meaning of his excitement when the door sprang open and the rain wind fled rudely up the stairs, why had the simple task of shutting the windows of an old house seemed fitting and urgent, why did the first watery notes of a storm wind have for him the unmistakable sound of good news, cheer, glad tidings? Then there was an explosion, a smell of cordite, and rain lashed the Japanese lanterns that Mrs. Levy had bought in Kyoto the year before last, or was it the year before that?

He stayed in the Levys' gazebo until the storm had passed. The rain had cooled the air and he shivered. The force of the wind had stripped a maple of its red and yellow leaves and scattered them over the grass and the water. Since it was mid-summer the tree must be blighted, and yet he felt a peculiar sadness at this sign of autumn. He braced his shoulders, emptied his glass, and started for the Welchers' pool. This meant crossing the Lindleys' riding ring and he was surprised to find it overgrown with grass and all the jumps dismantled. He wondered if the Lindleys had sold their horses or gone away for the summer and put them out to board. He seemed to remember having heard something about the Lindleys and their horses but the memory was unclear. On he went, barefoot through the wet grass, to the Welchers', where he found their pool was dry.

This breach in his chain of water disappointed him absurdly, and he felt like some explorer who seeks a torrential head water and finds a dead stream. He was disappointed and mystified. It was common enough to go away for the summer but no one ever drained his pool. The Welchers had definitely gone away. The pool furniture was folded, stacked, and covered with a tarpaulin. The bathhouse was locked. All the windows of the house were shut, and when he went around to the driveway in front he saw a for sale sign nailed to a tree. When had he last heard from the Welchers — when, that is, had he and Lucinda last regretted an invitation to dine with them? It seemed only a week or so ago. Was his memory failing or had he so disciplined it in the repression of unpleasant facts that he had damaged his sense of the truth? Then in the distance he heard the sound of a tennis game. This cheered him, cleared away all his apprehensions and let him regard the overcast sky and the cold air with indifference. This was the day that Neddy Merrill swam across the county. That was the day! He started off then for his most difficult portage.

Had you gone for a Sunday afternoon ride that day you might have seen him, close to naked, standing on the shoulders of Route 424, waiting for a chance to cross. You might have wondered if he was the victim of foul play, had his car broken down, or was he merely a fool. Standing barefoot in the deposits of the highway — beer cans, rags, and blowout patches — exposed to all kinds of ridicule, he seemed pitiful. He had known when he started that this was a part of his journey — it had been on his maps — but confronted with the lines of traffic, worming through the summery light, he found himself unprepared. He was laughed at, jeered at, a beer can was thrown at him, and he had no dignity or humor to bring to the situation. He could have gone back, back to the Westerhazys', where Lucinda would still be sitting in the sun. He had signed nothing, vowed nothing, pledged nothing, not even to himself. Why, believing as he did, that all human obduracy was susceptible to common sense, was he unable to turn back? Why was he

determined to complete his journey even if it meant putting his life in danger? At what point had this prank, this joke, this piece of horseplay become serious? He could not go back, he could not even recall with any clearness the green water at the Westerhazys', the sense of inhaling the day's components, the friendly and relaxed voices saying that they had drunk too much. In the space of an hour, more or less, he had covered a distance that made his return impossible.

An old man, tooling down the highway at fifteen miles an hour, let him get to the middle of the road, where there was a grass divider. Here he was exposed to the ridicule of the north-bound traffic, but after ten or fifteen minutes he was able to cross. From here he had only a short walk to the Recreation Center at the edge of the village of Lancaster, where there were some handball courts and a public pool.

The effect of the water on voices, the illusion of brilliance and suspense, was the same here as it had been at the Bunkers' but the sounds here were louder, harsher, and more shrill, and as soon as he entered the crowded enclosure he was confronted with regimentation. "all swimmers must take a shower before using the pool. all swimmers must use the footbath. all swimmers must wear their identification disks." He took a shower, washed his feet in a cloudy and bitter solution, and made his way to the edge of the water. It stank of chlorine and looked to him like a sink. A pair of lifeguards in a pair of towers blew police whistles at what seemed to be regular intervals and abused the swimmers through a public address system. Neddy remembered the sapphire water at the Bunkers' with longing and thought that he might contaminate himself — damage his own prosperousness and charm — by swimming in this murk, but he reminded himself that he was an explorer, a pilgrim, and that this was merely a stagnant bend in the Lucinda River. He dove, scowling with distaste, into the chlorine and had to swim with his head above water to avoid collisions, but even so he was bumped into, splashed, and jostled. When he got to the shallow end both lifeguards were shouting at him: "Hey, you, you without the identification disk, get outa the water." He did, but they had no way of pursuing him and he went through the reek of suntan oil and chlorine out through the hurricane fence and passed the handball courts. By crossing the road he entered the wooded part of the Halloran estate. The woods were not cleared and the footing was treacherous and difficult until he reached the lawn and the clipped beech hedge that encircled their pool.

The Hallorans were friends, an elderly couple of enormous wealth who seemed to bask in the suspicion that they might be Communists. They were zealous reformers but they were not Communists, and yet when they were accused, as they sometimes were, of subversion, it seemed to gratify and excite them. Their beech hedge was yellow and he guessed this had been blighted like the Levys' maple. He called hullo, hullo, to warn the Hallorans of his approach, to palliate his invasion of their privacy. The Hallorans, for reasons that had never been explained to him, did not wear bathing suits. No explanations were in order, really. Their nakedness was a detail in their uncompromising zeal for reform and he stepped politely out of his trunks before he went through the opening in the hedge.

Mrs. Halloran, a stout woman with white hair and a serene face, was reading the Times. Mr. Halloran was taking beech leaves out of the water with a scoop. They seemed not surprised or displeased to see him. Their pool was perhaps the oldest in the country, a fieldstone rectangle, fed by a brook. It had no filter or pump and its waters were the opaque gold of the stream.

"I'm swimming across the county," Ned said.

"Why, I didn't know one could," exclaimed Mrs. Halloran.

"Well, I've made it from the Westerhazys'," Ned said. "That must be about four miles."

He left his trunks at the deep end, walked to the shallow end, and swam this stretch. As he was pulling himself out of the water he heard Mrs. Halloran say, "We've been terribly sorry to hear about all your misfortunes, Neddy."

"My misfortunes?" Ned asked. "I don't know what you mean."

"Why, we heard that you'd sold the house and that your poor children ... "

"I don't recall having sold the house," Ned said, "and the girls are at home."

"Yes," Mrs. Halloran sighed. "Yes ... " Her voice filled the air with an unseasonable melancholy and Ned spoke briskly. "Thank you for the swim."

"Well, have a nice trip," said Mrs. Halloran.

Beyond the hedge he pulled on his trunks and fastened them. They were loose and he wondered if, during the space of an afternoon, he could have lost some weight. He was cold and he was tired and the naked Hallorans and their dark water had depressed him. The swim was too much for his strength but how could he have guessed this, sliding down the banister that morning and sitting in the Westerhazys' sun? His arms were lame. His legs felt rubbery and ached at the joints. The worst of it was the cold in his bones and the feeling that he might never be warm again. Leaves were falling down around him and he smelled wood smoke on the wind. Who would be burning wood at this time of year?

He needed a drink. Whiskey would warm him, pick him up, carry him through the last of his journey, refresh his feeling that it was original and valorous to swim across the county. Channel swimmers took brandy. He needed a stimulant. He crossed the lawn in front of the Hallorans' house and went down a little path to where they had built a house for their only daughter, Helen, and her husband, Eric Sachs. The Sachs's pool was small and he found Helen and her husband there.

"Oh, Neddy," Helen said. "Did you lunch at Mother's?"

"Not really," Ned said. "I did stop to see your parents." This seemed to be explanation enough. "I'm terribly sorry to break in on you like this but I've taken a chill and I wonder if you'd give me a drink."

"Why, I'd love to," Helen said, "but there hasn't been anything in this house to drink since Eric's operation. That was three years ago."

Was he losing his memory, had his gift for concealing painful facts let him forget that he had sold his house, that his children were in trouble, and that his friend had been ill? His eyes slipped from Eric's face to his abdomen, where he saw three pale, sutured scars, two of them at least a foot long. Gone was his navel, and what, Neddy thought, would the roving hand, bed-checking one's gifts at 3 a.m., make of a belly with no navel, no link to birth, this breach in the succession?

"I'm sure you can get a drink at the Biswangers'," Helen said. "They're having an enormous do. You can hear it from here. Listen!"

She raised her head and from across the road, the lawns, the gardens, the woods, the fields, he heard again the brilliant noise of voices over water. "Well, I'll get wet," he said, still feeling that he had no freedom of choice about his means of travel. He dove into the Sachs's cold water and, gasping, close to drowning, made his way from one end of the pool to the other. "Lucinda and I want terribly to see you," he said over his shoulder, his face set toward the Biswangers'. "We're sorry it's been so long and we'll call you very soon."

He crossed some fields to the Biswangers' and the sounds of revelry there. They would be honored to give him a drink, they would be happy to give him a drink. The Biswangers invited him and Lucinda for dinner four times a year, six weeks in advance. They were always rebuffed and yet they continued to send out their invitations, unwilling to comprehend the rigid and undemocratic realities of their society. They were the sort of people who discussed the price of things at cocktails, exchanged market tips during dinner, and after dinner told dirty stories to mixed company. They did not belong to Neddy's set — they were not even on Lucinda's Christmas-card list. He went toward their pool with feelings of indifference, charity, and some unease, since it seemed to be getting dark and these were the longest days of the year. The party when he joined it was noisy and large. Grace Biswanger was the kind of hostess who asked the optometrist, the veterinarian, the real-estate dealer, and the dentist. No one was swimming and the twilight, reflected on the water of the pool, had a wintry gleam. There was a bar and he started for this. When Grace Biswanger saw him she came toward him, not affectionately as he



had every right to expect, but bellicosely.

"Why, this party has everything," she said loudly, "including a gate crasher."

She could not deal him a social blow — there was no question about this and he did not flinch. "As a gate crasher," he asked politely, "do I rate a drink?"

"Suit yourself," she said. "You don't seem to pay much attention to invitations."

She turned her back on him and joined some guests, and he went to the bar and ordered a whiskey. The bartender served him but he served him rudely. His was a world in which the caterer's men kept the social score, and to be rebuffed by a part-time barkeep meant that he had suffered some loss of social esteem. Or perhaps the man was new and uninformed. Then he heard Grace at his back say: "They went for broke overnight — nothing but income — and he showed up drunk one Sunday and asked us to loan him five thousand dollars ... " She was always talking about money. It was worse than eating your peas off a knife. He dove into the pool, swam its length and went away.

The next pool on his list, the last but two, belonged to his old mistress, Shirley Adams. If he had suffered any injuries at the Biswangers' they would be cured here. Love — sexual roughhouse in fact — was the supreme elixir, the pain killer, the brightly colored pill that would put the spring back into his step, the joy of life in his heart. They had had an affair last week, last month, last year. He couldn't remember. It was he who had broken it off, his was the upper hand, and he stepped through the gate of the wall that surrounded her pool with nothing so considered as self-confidence. It seemed in a way to be his pool, as the lover, particularly the illicit lover, enjoys the possessions of his mistress with an authority unknown to holy matrimony. She was there, her hair the color of brass, but her figure, at the edge of the lighted, cerulean water, excited in him no profound memories. It had been, he thought, a light-hearted affair, although she had wept when he broke it off. She seemed confused to see him and he wondered if she was still wounded. Would she, God forbid, weep again?

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I'm swimming across the county."

"Good Christ. Will you ever grow up?"

"What's the matter?"

"If you've come here for money," she said, "I won't give you another cent."

"You could give me a drink."

"I could but I won't. I'm not alone."

"Well, I'm on my way."

He dove in and swam the pool, but when he tried to haul himself up onto the curb he found that the strength in his arms and shoulders had gone, and he paddled to the ladder and climbed out. Looking over his shoulder he saw, in the lighted bathhouse, a young man. Going out onto the dark lawn he smelled chrysanthemums or marigolds — some stubborn autumnal fragrance — on the night air, strong as gas. Looking overhead he saw that the stars had come out, but why should he seem to see Andromeda, Cepheus, and Cassiopeia? What had become of the constellations of midsummer? He began to cry.

It was probably the first time in his adult life that he had ever cried, certainly the first time in his life that he had ever felt so miserable, cold, tired, and bewildered. He could not understand the rudeness of the caterer's barkeep or the rudeness of a mistress who had come to him on her knees and showered his trousers with tears. He had swum too long, he had been immersed too long, and his nose and his throat were sore from the water. What he needed then was a drink, some company, and some clean, dry clothes, and while he could have cut directly across the road to his home he went on to the Gilmartins' pool. Here, for the first time in his life, he did not dive but went down the steps into the icy water and swam a hobbled sidestroke that he might have learned as a youth. He staggered with fatigue on his way to the Clydes' and paddled the length of their pool, stopping again and again with his hand on the curb to rest. He climbed up the ladder

and wondered if he had the strength to get home. He had done what he wanted, he had swum the county, but he was so stupefied with exhaustion that his triumph seemed vague. Stooped, holding on to the gateposts for support, he turned up the driveway of his own house.

The place was dark. Was it so late that they had all gone to bed? Had Lucinda stayed at the Westerhazys' for supper? Had the girls joined her there or gone someplace else? Hadn't they agreed, as they usually did on Sunday, to regret all their invitations and stay at home? He tried the garage doors to see what cars were in but the doors were locked and rust came off the handles onto his hands. Going toward the house, he saw that the force of the thunderstorm had knocked one of the rain gutters loose. It hung down over the front door like an umbrella rib, but it could be fixed in the morning. The house was locked, and he thought that the stupid cook or the stupid maid must have locked the place up until he remembered that it had been some time since they had employed a maid or a cook. He shouted, pounded on the door, tried to force it with his shoulder, and then, looking in at the windows, saw that the place was empty.

# Nirvana - Adam Johnson

(2013)

It's late, and I can't sleep. I raise a window for some spring Palo Alto air, but it doesn't help. In bed, eyes open, I hear whispers, which makes me think of the President because we often talk in whispers. I know the whisper sound is really just my wife, Charlotte, who listens to Nirvana on her headphones all night and tends to sleep-mumble the lyrics. Charlotte has her own bed, a mechanical one.

Yes, hearing the President whisper is creepy because he's been dead now, what — three months? But even creepier is what happens when I close my eyes: I keep visualizing my wife killing herself. More like the ways she might *try* to kill herself, since she's paralyzed from the shoulders down. The paralysis is quite temporary, though good luck trying to convince Charlotte of that. She slept on her side today, to fight the bedsores, and there was something about the way she stared at the safety rail at the edge of the mattress. The bed is voice-activated, so if she could somehow get her head between the bars of the safety rail, "incline" is all she'd have to say. As the bed powered up, she'd be choked in seconds. And then there's the way she stares at the looping cable that descends from the Hoyer lift, which swings her in and out of bed.

What can really keep a guy up at night is the knowledge that she doesn't need an exotic exit strategy, not when she's exacted a promise from you to help her do it when the time comes.

I rise and go to her, but she's not listening to Nirvana yet — she tends to save it for when she needs it most, after midnight, when her nerves really start to crackle.

"I thought I heard a noise," I tell her. "Kind of a whisper."

Short, choppy hair frames her drawn face, skin faint as refrigerator light.

"I heard it, too," she says.

She spent months two, four, and seven crying pretty hard — there's no more helpless feeling for a husband, let me tell you. But this period that's come after is harder to take: Her eyes are wide, drained of emotion, and you can't tell what she's thinking. It's like she's looking at things that aren't even in the room.

In the silver dish by her voice remote is a half-smoked joint. I light it for her and hold it to her lips.

"How's the weather in there?" I ask.

"Windy," she says through the smoke.

Windy is better than hail or lightning, or, God forbid, flooding, which is the sensation she felt when her lungs were just starting to work again. But there are different kinds of wind.

I ask, "Windy like a whistle through window screens, or windy like the rattle of storm shutters?"

"A strong breeze, hissy and buffeting, like a microphone in the wind."

She smokes again. Charlotte hates being stoned, but she says it quiets the inside of her. She has Guillain-Barré syndrome, a condition in which her immune system attacks the insulation around her nerves, so that when the brain sends signals to the body, the electrical impulses ground out before they can be received. A billion nerves inside her send signals that go everywhere, nowhere. This is the ninth month, a month that is at the edge of the medical literature. It's a place where the doctors no longer feel qualified to tell us whether Charlotte's nerves will begin to regenerate or whether Charlotte will be stuck like this forever.

She exhales, coughing. Her right arm twitches, which means her brain has attempted to tell her arm to rise and cover the mouth. She tokes again, and through the smoke she says, "I'm worried."

"What about?"

"You."

"You're worried about me?"

"I want you to stop talking to the President. It's time to accept reality."

I try to be lighthearted. "But he's the one who talks to me."

"Then stop listening, okay? He's gone. When your time comes, you're supposed to fall silent."

Reluctantly I nod. But she doesn't understand. In the third month of paralysis, she did nothing but watch videos, which made her crazy. It made her swear off all screens, so she's probably the only person in America who didn't see the video clips of the assassination. If she'd beheld the look in the President's eyes when his life was taken, she'd understand why I talk to him late at night. If she could leave this room and feel the nation trying to grieve, she'd know why I reanimated the commander in chief and brought him back to life.

"In regards to listening to the President," I say, "I just want to point out that you spend a third of your life listening to Nirvana, whose songs are all from a guy who blew his brains out."

Charlotte tilts her head and looks at me like I'm a stranger, like I don't know the first thing about her. "Kurt Cobain took the pain of his life and made it into something that mattered, that spoke to people. Do you know how rare that is? What did the President leave behind? Uncertainties, emptiness, a thousand rocks to overturn."

She talks like that when she's high. I decide to let it go. I tap out the joint and lift her headphones. "Ready for your Nirvana?" I ask.

"That sound, I hear it again," she says.

She tries to point, then gives up and nods toward the window.

"It's coming from there," she says.

At the window, I look out into the darkness. It's a normal Palo Alto night — the hiss of sprinklers, blue recycling bins, a raccoon digging in the community garden. Then I notice it, right before my eyes, a small black drone, hovering outside my window. Its tiny servos swivel to regard me. Real quick, like I'm snatching a cookie from a hot baking sheet, I steal the drone out of the air and pull it inside. I close the window and curtains, then study the thing: Its shell is made of black foil, stretched over tiny struts, like the bones of a bat's wing. Behind a propeller of clear cellophane, a tiny infrared engine throbs with warmth.

I look at Charlotte.

"Now will you listen to me?" she asks. "Now will you stop this President business?"

"It's too late for that" I tell her and release the drone. Together, we watch it bumble around the room, bouncing off the walls, running into the Hoyer lift. Is it autonomous? Has someone been operating it, someone watching our house? I lift it from its column of air and, turning it over, flip off its power switch.

Charlotte looks toward her voice remote. "Play music," she tells it.

Closing her eyes, she waits for me to place the headphones on her ears, where she will hear Kurt Cobain come to life once more.

I wake later in the night. The drone has somehow turned itself on and is hovering above my body, mapping me with a beam of soft red light. I toss a sweater over it, dropping it to the floor. After making sure Charlotte's asleep, I pull out my iProjector. I turn it on and the President appears in three dimensions, his torso life-sized in an amber glow.

He greets me with a smile. "It's good to be back in Palo Alto," he says.

My algorithm has accessed the iProjector's GPS chip and searched the President's database for location references. This one came from a commencement address he gave at Stanford back when he was a senator.

"Mr. President," I say. "I'm sorry to bother you again, but I have more questions."

He looks into the distance, contemplative. "Shoot," he says.

I move into his line of sight but can't get him to look me in the eye. That's one of the design problems I ran across. Hopefully, I'll be able to fix it in beta.

"Did I make a mistake in creating you, in releasing you into the world?" I ask. "My wife says that you're keeping people from mourning, that *this you* keeps us from accepting the fact that the *real you* is gone."

The President rubs the stubble on his chin. He looks down and away.

"You can't put the genie back in the bottle," he says.

Which is eerie, because that's a line he'd spoken on *60 Minutes*, a moment when he expressed regret for legalizing drones for civilian use.

"Do you know that I'm the one who made you?"

"We are all born free," he says. "And no person may traffic in another."

"But you weren't born," I tell him. "I wrote an algorithm, based on the Linux operating kernel. You're an open-source search engine married to a dialog bot and a video compiler. The program scrubs the Web and archives a person's images and videos and data — everything you say, you've said before."

For the first time, the President falls silent.

I ask, "Do you know that you're ... that you've died?"

The President doesn't hesitate. "The end of life is another kind of freedom," he says.

The assassination flashes in my eyes. I've seen the video so many times it plays without consent — the motorcade is slowly crawling along while the President, on foot, parades past the barricaded crowds. Someone in the throng catches the President's eye. The President stops and turns, lifts a hand in greeting. Then a bullet strikes him in the abdomen. The impact bends him forward, and his eyes lift to confront the shooter, a person the camera never gets a look at. A dawning settles into the President's gaze, a look of clear recognition — of a particular person, of some kind of truth, of something he has foreseen? He takes the second shot in the face. You can see the switch go off — his limbs give and he's down. Men in suits converge, shielding him, and the clip is over. They put him on a machine for a few days, but the end had already come.

I glance at Charlotte, asleep. Still, I whisper, "Mr. President, did you and the First Lady ever talk about the future, about these kinds of possibilities?"

I wonder if the First Lady was the one to turn off the machine.

The President smiles, "The First Lady and I have a wonderful relationship. We share everything."

"But were there instructions? Did you two make a plan?"

His voice lowers, becomes sonorous. "Are you asking about bonds of matrimony?"

I pause. "Yes."

"In this regard," he says, "our only duty is to be of service, in any way we can."

My mind ponders the ways in which I might have to be of service to Charlotte.

The President then looks into the distance, like a flag is waving there.

"I'm the President of the United States," he says, "and I approved this message."

That's when I know our conversation is over. When I reach to turn off the iProjector, the President looks me squarely in the eye, a coincidence of perspective, I guess. We regard one another, his eyes deep and melancholy, and my finger hesitates at the switch.

"Seek your inner resolve," he tells me.

Can you tell a story that doesn't begin, it's just suddenly happening? The woman you love gets the flu. Her fingers tingle, her legs go rubbery. In the morning, she can't grip a coffee cup. What finally gets her to the hospital is the need to pee. She has got to pee, she's dying to pee, but the paralysis has begun: The bladder can no longer hear the brain. After an ER doc inserts a Foley catheter, you learn new words — *axon*, *areflexia*, *dendrite*, *myelin*, *ascending peripheral polyneuropathy*.

Charlotte says she's filled with "noise." Inside her is a "storm."

The doctor has a big needle. He tells Charlotte to get on the gurney. Charlotte's scared to get on the gurney. She's scared she won't ever get up again. "Please, honey," you say. "Get on the

gurney." Soon, you behold the glycerin glow of a fresh-drawn vial of spinal fluid. And she's right. She doesn't get up again.

To begin plasmapheresis, a femoral stent must be placed. This is performed by a tattooed phlebotomist whose headphones buzz with *Rage Against the Machine*.

Next comes high-dose immunoglobulin therapy.

The doctors mention, casually, the word *ventilator*.

Charlotte's mother arrives. She brings her cello. She's an expert on the Siege of Leningrad. She has written a book on the topic. When the coma is induced, she fills the neuro ward with the saddest sounds ever conceived. For seven days, there is nothing but the swish of vent baffles, the trill of vital monitors, and Shostakovich, Shostakovich, Shostakovich. No one will tell her to stop. Nervous nurses appear and disappear, whispering in Tagalog.

Two months of physical therapy in Santa Clara. Here are dunk tanks, sonar stimulators, exoskeletal treadmills. Charlotte is fitted for AFOs and a head array. She becomes the person in the room who makes the victims of other afflictions feel better about their fate. She does not make progress, she's not a "soldier" or a "champ" or a "trouper."

Charlotte convinces herself that I will leave her for a woman who "works." In the rehab ward, she screams at me to get a vasectomy so this other woman and myself will suffer a barren future. My refusal becomes proof of this other woman and our plans.

To soothe her, I read aloud Joseph Heller's memoir about contracting Guillain-Barré syndrome. The book was supposed to make us feel better. Instead, it chronicles how great Heller's friends are, how high Heller's spirits are, how Heller leaves his wife to marry the beautiful nurse who tends to him. And for Charlotte, the book's ending is particularly painful: Joseph Heller gets better.

We tumble into a well of despair, which is narrow and deep, a place that seals us off, where we only hear our own voices, and we exist in a fluid that's clear and black. Everything is in the well with us — careers, goals, travel, parenthood — so close that we can drown them to save ourselves.

A doctor wants to float Charlotte on a raft of antidepressants. She will take no pills. Lightheartedly, the doctor says, "That's what IVs are for." Charlotte levels her eyes and says, "Next doctor, please."

The next doctor recommends discharge.

Home is unexpectedly surreal. Amid familiar surroundings, the impossibility of normal life is amplified. But the cat is happy, so happy to have Charlotte home that it spends an entire night sprawled across Charlotte's throat, across her tracheal incision. Goodbye, cat! There comes, strangely, a vaudevillian week of slaphappy humor, where bedpans and withering limbs are suddenly funny, where a booger that can't be picked is hilarious, where everyday items drip with bizarre humor — I put a hat on Charlotte and we laugh and laugh. She stares in bafflement at the sight of a bra. There are lots of cat jokes!

This period passes, normal life returns. The cap to a hypodermic needle, dropped unnoticed into the sheets, irritates a hole into Charlotte's back. While I am in the garage, Charlotte watches a spider slowly descend from the ceiling on a single thread. Charlotte tries to blow it away. She blows and blows, but the spider disappears into her hair.

Still to be described are tests, tantrums, and silent treatments. To come are the discoveries of Kurt Cobain, marijuana, and ever shorter haircuts. Of these times, there is only one moment I must relate. It was a normal night. I was beside Charlotte in the mechanical bed, holding up her magazine and turning the pages, so I wasn't really facing her.

She said, "You don't know how bad I want to get out of this bed."

Her voice was quiet, uninflected. She'd said similar things a thousand times.

I flipped the page and laughed at a picture whose caption read, "Stars are just like us!"

"I'd do anything to escape," she said.

Charlotte's job was to explicate the intricate backstories of celebrities, showing me how their narratives rightfully adorned the Sistine Chapel of American culture. My job was to make fun of the celebrities and pretend that I hadn't also become caught up in their love battles and breakups.

"But I could never do that to you," she said.

"Do what?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"What are you talking about, what's going through your head?"

I turned to look at her. She was inches away.

"Except for how it would hurt you," she said. "I would get away."

"Get away where?"

"From here."

Neither of us had spoken of the promise since the night it was exacted. I'd tried to pretend the promise didn't exist, but it existed — it existed.

"Face it, you're stuck with me," I said, forcing a smile. "We're destined, we're fated to be together. And soon you'll be better, things will be normal again."

"My entire life is this pillow."

"That's not true. You've got your friends and family. And you've got technology. The whole world is at your fingertips."

friends I meant her nurses and physical therapists. By family I meant her distant and brooding mother. It didn't matter: Charlotte was too disengaged to even point out her nonfunctional fingers and their nonfeeling tips.

She rolled her head to the side and stared at the safety rail.

"It's okay," she said. "I would never do that to you."

In the morning, before the nurses arrive, I open the curtains and study the drone in the early light. Most of the stealth and propulsion parts are off the shelf, but the processors are new to me, half hidden by a Kevlar shield. To get the drone to talk, to get some forensics on who sent it my way, I'll have to get my hands on the hash reader from work.

When Charlotte wakes, I prop her head and massage her legs. It's our morning routine.

"Let's generate those Schwann cells," I tell her toes. "It's time for Charlotte's body to start producing some myelin membranes."

"Look who's Mr. Brightside," she says. "You must have been talking to the President. Isn't that why you talk to him, to get all inspired? To see the silver lining?"

I lift her right foot and rub her Achilles tendon. Last week, Charlotte failed a big test, the DTRE, which measures deep tendon response and signals the *beginning* of recovery. "Don't worry," the doctor told us. "I know of another patient that also took nine months to respond, and he managed a full recovery." I asked if we could contact this patient, to know what he went through, to help us see what's ahead. The doctor informed us this patient was attended to in France, in the year 1918.

After the doctor left, I went into the garage and started making the President. A psychologist would probably say the reason I created him had to do with the promise I made Charlotte and the fact that the President also had a relationship with the person who took his life. But it's simpler than that: I just needed to save somebody, and with the President, it didn't matter that it was too late.

I tap Charlotte's patella but there's no response. "Any pain?"

"So what did the President say?"

"Which president?"

"The dead one," she says.

I articulate the plantar fascia. "How about this?"

"Feels like a spray of cool diamonds," she says. "Come on, I know you talked to him."

It's going to be one of her bad days, I can tell.

"Let me guess," Charlotte says. "The President told you to move to the South Pacific to take up painting. That's uplifting, isn't it?"

I don't say anything.

"You'd take me with you, right? I could be your assistant. I'd hold your palette in my teeth. If you need a model, I specialize in reclining nudes."

She's thirsty. We use a neti pot as a bedside water cup. Charlotte, lying down, can drink from the spout. While she sips, I say, "If you must know, the President told me to locate my *inner resolve*."

"*Inner resolve*," she says. "I could use some help tracking down mine."

"You have more resolve than anyone I know."

"Jesus, you're sunny. Don't you know what's going on? Don't you see that I'm about to spend the rest of my life like this?"

"Pace yourself, darling. The day's only a couple minutes old."

"I know," she says. "I'm supposed to have reached a stage of enlightened acceptance or something. You think I like it that the only person I have to get mad at is you? I know it's not right — you're the one thing I love in this world."

"You love Kurt Cobain."

"He's dead."

"Too bad he's not alive for you to get mad at."

"Man, I would let him have it," she says.

We hear Hector, the morning nurse, pull up outside — he drives an old car with a combustion engine.

"I have to grab something from work," I tell her. "But I'll be back."

"Promise me something," she says.

"No."

"Come on. If you do, I'll release you from the other promise."

Far from being scary, the mention of the promise is strangely relieving.

Still, I shake my head. I know she doesn't mean it — she'll never release me.

She says, "Will you please agree to be straight with me? You don't have to make me feel better, you don't have to be all fake and optimistic. It doesn't help."

"I am optimistic."

"You shouldn't be," she says. "Pretending, that's what killed Kurt Cobain."

I think it was the shotgun he pointed at his head, but I don't say that.

I only know one line from Nirvana. I karaoke it to Charlotte:

"With the lights on," I sing, "she's less dangerous."

She rolls her eyes. "You got it wrong," she says. But she smiles.

I try to encourage this. "What, I don't get points for trying?"

"You don't hear that?" Charlotte asks.

"Hear what?"

"That's the sound of me clapping."

"I give up," I say and make for the door.

"Bed, incline," Charlotte tells her remote. Her torso slowly rises. It's time to start her day.

I take the 101 Freeway south toward Mountain View, where I write code at a company called Reputation Curator. Basically the company bribes/threatens Yelpers and Facebookers to retract negative comments about dodgy lawyers and incompetent dentists. The work is labor intensive, so I was hired to write a program that would sweep the Web to construct client profiles. Creating the President was only a step away.

In the vehicle next to me is a woman with her iProjector on the passenger seat, and she's having an animated discussion with the President as she drives. At the next overpass, I see an older black man in a tan jacket, looking down at the traffic. Standing next to him is the President.



They're not speaking, just standing together, silently watching the cars go by.

A black car, driverless, begins pacing me in the next lane. When I speed up, it speeds up. Through its smoked windows, I can see it has no cargo — there's nothing inside but a battery array big enough to ensure no car could outrun it. Even though I like driving, even though it relaxes me, I shift to automatic and dart into the Google lane, where I let go of the wheel and sign on to the Web for the first time since I released the President a week ago. I log in and discover that fourteen million people have downloaded the President. I also have seven hundred new messages. The first is from the dude who started Facebook, and it is not spam — he wants to buy me a burrito and talk about the future. I skip to the latest message, which is from Charlotte: "I don't mean to be mean. I lost my feeling, remember? I'll get it back. I'm trying, really, I am."

I see the President again, on the lawn of a Korean church. The minister has placed an iProjector on a chair, and the President appears to be engaging a Bible that's been propped before him on a stand. I understand that he is a ghost that will haunt us until our nation comes to grips with what has happened: that he is gone, that he has been stolen from us, that it is irreversible. And I'm not an idiot. I know what's really being stolen from me, slowly and irrevocably, before my eyes. I know that late at night I should be going to Charlotte instead of the President.

But when I'm with Charlotte, there's a membrane between us, a layer my mind places there to protect me from the tremor in her voice, from the pulse visible in her desiccated wrists, from all the fates she sarcastically paints. It's when I'm away from her that it comes crashing in — it's in the garage that it hits me how scared she is, it's at the store when I cross tampons off the list that I consider how cruel life must seem to her. Driving now, I think about how she has started turning toward the wall even before the last song on the Nirvana album is over, that soon, even headphones and marijuana will cease to work. My off-ramp up ahead is blurry, and I realize there are tears in my eyes. I drive right past my exit. I just let the Google lane carry me away.

When I arrive home, my boss, Sanjay, is waiting for me. I'd messaged him to have an intern deliver the hash reader, but here is the man himself, item in hand. Theoretically, hash readers are impossible. Theoretically, you shouldn't be able to crack full-field, hundred-key encryption. But some guy in India did it, some guy Sanjay knows. Sanjay's sensitive about being from India, and he thinks it's a cliché that a guy with his name runs a start-up in Palo Alto. So he goes by "SJ" and dresses all D school. He's got a Stanford MBA, but he basically just stole the business model of a company called Reputation Defender. You can't blame the guy — he's one of those types with the hopes and dreams of an entire village riding on him.

SJ follows me into the garage, where I dock the drone and use some slave code to parse its drive. He hands me the hash reader, hand-soldered in Bangalore from an old motherboard. We marvel at it, the most sophisticated piece of cryptography on earth, here in our unworthy hands. But if you want to "curate" the reputations of Silicon Valley, you better be ready to crack some codes.

He's quiet while I initialize the drone and run a diagnostic.

"Long time no see," he finally says.

"I needed some time," I tell him.

"Understood," SJ says. "We've missed you is all I'm saying. You bring the President back to life, send fifteen million people to our Web site, and then we don't see you for a week."

The drone knows something is suspicious — it powers off. I force a reboot.

"Got yourself a drone there?" SJ asks.

"It's a rescue," I say. "I'm adopting it."

SJ nods. "Thought you should know the Secret Service came by."

"Looking for me?" I ask. "Doesn't sound so secret."

"They must have been impressed with your President. I know I was."

SJ has long lashes and big, manga brown eyes. He hits me with them now.

"I've gotta tell you," he says. "The President is a work of art, a seamlessly integrated data interface. I'm in real admiration. This is a game-changer. You know what I envision?"

I notice his flashy glasses. "Are those Android?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Can I have them?"

He hands them over, and I search the frames for their IP address.

SJ gestures large. "I envision your algorithm running on Reputation Curator. Average people could bring their personalities to life, to speak for themselves, to customize and personalize how they're seen by the world. Your program is like Google, Wikipedia, and Facebook, all in one. Everyone with a reputation on the planet would pay to have you animate them, to make them articulate, vigilant ... eternal."

"You can have it," I tell SJ. "The algorithm's core is open source — I used a freeware protocol."

SJ flashes a brittle smile. "We've actually looked into that," he says, "and, well, it seems like you coded it with seven-layer encryption."

"Yeah, I guess I did, didn't I? You're the one with the hash reader. Just crack it."

"I don't want it to be like that," SJ says. "Let's be partners. Your concept is brilliant — an algorithm that scrubs the Web and compiles the results into a personal animation. The President is the proof, but it's also given away the idea. If we move now, we can protect it, it will be ours. In a few weeks, though, everyone will have their own."

I don't point out the irony of SJ wanting to protect a business model.

"Is the President just an animation to you?" I ask. "Have you spoken with him? Have you listened to what he has to say?"

"I'm offering stock," SJ says. "Wheelbarrows of it."

The drone offers up its firewall like a seductress her throat. I deploy the hash reader, whose processor hums and flashes red. We sit on folding chairs while it works.

"I need your opinion," I tell him.

"Right on," he says and removes a bag of weed. He starts rolling a joint, then passes me the rest. He's been hooking me up the last couple months, no questions.

"What do you think of Kurt Cobain?" I ask.

"*Kurt Cobain*," he repeats as he works the paper between his fingers. "The man was pure," he says and licks the edge. "Too pure for this world. Have you heard Patti Smith's cover of 'Smells Like Teen Spirit'? Unassailable, man."

He lights the joint and passes it my way, but I wave it off. He sits there, staring out the open mouth of my garage into the Kirkland plumage of Palo Alto. Apple, Oracle, PayPal, and Hewlett-Packard were all started in garages within a mile of here. About once a month, SJ gets homesick and cooks litti chokha for everyone at work. He plays Sharda Sinha songs and gets this look in his eyes like he's back in Bihar, land of peepul trees and roller birds. He has this look now. He says, "You know my family downloaded the President. They have no idea what I do out here, as if I could make them understand that I help bad sushi chefs ward off Twitter trolls. But the American President, that they understand."

The mayor, barefoot, jogs past us. Moments later, a billboard drives by.

"Hey, can you make the President speak Hindi?" SJ asks. "If you could get the American President to say, 'I could go for a Pepsi' in Hindi, I'd make you the richest man on earth."

The hash reader's light turns green. Just like that, the drone is mine. I disconnect the leads and begin to synch the Android glasses. The drone uses its moment of freedom to rise and study SJ.

SJ returns the drone's intense scrutiny.

"Who do you think sent it after you?" he asks. "Mozilla? Craigslist?"

"We'll know in a moment."

"Silent. Black. Radar deflecting," SJ says. "I bet this is Microsoft's dark magic."

The new OS suddenly initiates, the drone responds, and, using retinal commands, I send it on a lap around the garage. "Lo and behold," I say. "Turns out our little friend speaks Google."

"Wow," SJ says. "Don't be evil, huh?"

When the drone returns, it targets SJ in the temple with a green laser.

"What the fuck," SJ says.

"Don't worry," I tell him. "It's just taking your pulse and temperature."

"What for?"

"Probably trying to read your emotions," I say. "I bet it's a leftover subroutine."

"You sure you're in charge of that thing?"

I roll my eyes and the drone does a back flip.

"My emotion is simple," SJ tells me. "It's time to come back to work."

"I will," I tell him. "I've just got some things to deal with."

SJ looks at me. "It's okay if you don't want to talk about your wife. But you don't have to be so alone about things. Everyone at work, we're all worried about you."

Inside, Charlotte is suspended in a sling from the Hoyer Lift, which has been rolled to the window so she can see outside. She's wearing old yoga tights, which are slack on her, and she smells of the cedar oil her massage therapist rubs her with. I go to her and open the window.

"You read my mind," she says and breathes the fresh air.

I put the glasses on her, and it takes her eyes a minute of flashing around before the drone lifts from my hands. A grand smile crosses her face as she puts it through its paces — hovering, rotating, swiveling the camera's servos. And then the drone is off. I watch it cross the lawn, veer around the compost piles, and then head for the community garden. It floats down the rows, and though I don't have the view Charlotte does in her glasses, I can see the drone inspecting the blossoms of summer squash, the fat bottoms of Roma tomatoes. It rises along the bean trellises and tracks watermelons by their umbilical stems. When she makes it to her plot, she gasps.

"My roses," she says. "They're still there. Someone's been taking care of them."

"I wouldn't let your roses die," I tell her.

She has the drone inspect every bud and bloom. Carefully, she maneuvers it through the bright petals, brushing against the blossoms, then shuttles it home again. Suddenly it is hovering before us. Charlotte leans slightly forward and sniffs the drone deeply. "I never thought I'd smell my roses again," she says, her face flush with hope and amazement, and suddenly the tears are streaming.

I remove her glasses, and we leave the drone hovering there.

She regards me. "I want to have a baby," she says.

"A baby?"

"It's been nine months. I could have had one already. I could've been doing something useful this whole time."

"But your illness," I say. "We don't know what's ahead."

She closes her eyes like she's hugging something, like she's holding some dear truth.

"With a baby, I'd have something to show for all this. I'd have a reason. At the least, I'd have something to leave behind."

"You can't talk like that," I tell her. "We've talked about you not talking like this."

But she won't listen to me, she won't open her eyes.

All she says is "And I want to start tonight."

Later in the day, I carry the iProjector out back to the gardening shed. Here, in the gold of afternoon light, the President rises and comes to life. He adjusts his collar, cuffs, runs his thumb down a black lapel as if he exists only in the moment before a camera will broadcast him live to the world.

"Mr. President," I say. "I'm sorry to bother you again."

"Nonsense," he tells me. "I serve at the pleasure of the people."

"Do you remember me?" I ask. "Do you remember the problems I've been talking to you about?"

"Perennial is the nature of the problems that plague man. Particular is the voice with which they call to each of us."

"My problem today is of a personal nature."

"Then I place this conversation under the seal."

"I haven't made love to my wife in a long time." He holds up a hand to halt me. He smiles in a knowing, fatherly way.

"Times of doubt," he tells me, "are inherent in the compact of civil union."

"My question is about children."

"Children are the future," he tells me.

"Would you have still brought yours into the world, knowing that only one of you might be around to raise them?"

"Single parenting places too much of a strain on today's families," he says. "That's why I'm introducing legislation that will reduce the burden on our hardworking parents."

"What about your children? Do you miss them?"

"My mind goes to them constantly. Being away from them is the great sacrifice of the office."

In the shed, suspended dust makes his specter glitter and swirl. It makes him look like he is cutting out, like he will leave at any moment. I feel some urgency.

"When it's all finally over," I ask, "where is it that we go?"

"I'm no preacher," the President says, "but I believe we go where we are called."

"Where were you called to? Where is it that you are?"

"Don't we all try to locate ourselves among the pillars of uncommon knowledge?"

"You don't know where you are, do you?" I ask the President.

"I'm sure my opponent would like you to believe that."

"It's okay," I say, more to myself. "I didn't expect you to know."

"I know exactly where I am," the President says. Then, in a voice that sounds pieced from many scraps, he adds, "I'm currently positioned at three seven point four four north by one two two point one four west."

I think he's done. I wait for him to say *Good night and God bless America*. Instead, he reaches out to touch my chest. "I have heard that you have made much personal sacrifice," he says. "And I'm told that your sense of duty is strong."

I don't think I agree, but I say, "Yes sir."

His glowing hand clasps my shoulder, and it doesn't matter that I can't feel it.

"Then this medal that I affix to your uniform is much more than a piece of silver. It is a symbol of how much you have given, not just in armed struggle and not just in service to your nation. It tells others how much more you have to give. It marks you forever as one who can be counted upon, as one who in times of need will lift up and carry those who have fallen." Proudly, he stares into the empty space above my shoulder. He says, "Now return home to your wife, soldier, and start a new chapter of life."

When darkness falls, I go to Charlotte. The night nurse has placed her in a negligee. Charlotte lowers the bed as I approach. The electric motor is the only sound in the room.

"I'm ovulating," she announces. "I can feel it."

"You can feel it?"

"I don't need to *feel* it," she says. "I just know."

She's strangely calm.

"Are you ready?" she asks.

"Sure."

I steady myself on the safety rail that separates us.

She asks, "Do you want some oral sex first?"

I shake my head.

"Come join me, then," she says.

I start to climb on the bed — she stops me.

"Hey, Sunshine," she says. "Take off your clothes."

I can't remember the last time she called me that.

"Oh, yeah," I say and unbutton my shirt, unzip my jeans. When I drop my underwear, I feel weirdly, I don't know, *naked*. I'm not sure whether I should remove my socks. I leave them on. I swing a leg up, then kind of lie on her.

A look of contentment crosses her face. "This is how it's supposed to be," she says. "It's been a long time since I've been able to look into your eyes."

Her body is narrow but warm. I don't know where to put my hands.

"Do you want to pull down my panties?"

I sit up and begin to work them off. I see the scar from the femoral stent. When I heft her legs, there are the bedsores we've been fighting.

"Remember our trip to Mexico," she asks, "when we made love on top of that pyramid? It was like we were in the past and the future at the same time. I kind of feel that now."

"You're not high, are you?"

"What?" she asks. "Like I'd have to be stoned to remember the first time we talked about having a baby?"

When I have her panties off and her legs hooked, I pause. It takes all my focus to get an erection, and then I can't believe I have one. I see the moment coldly, distant, the way a drone would see it: Here's my wife, paralyzed, invalid, insensate, and though everything's the opposite of erotic, I am poised above her, completely hard.

"I'm wet, aren't I?" Charlotte asks. "I've been thinking about this all day."

I do remember the pyramid. The stone was cold, the staircase steep. The past to me was a week of Charlotte in Mayan dresses, cooing every baby she came across. Having sex under faint and sleepy stars, I tried to imagine the future: a faceless *someone* conceived on a sacrificial altar. I finished early and tried to shake it off. That person would probably never come to be. Plus, we had to focus on matters at hand if we were going to make it down all those steps in the dark.

"I think I feel something," she says. "You're inside me, right? Because I'm pretty sure I can feel it."

Here I enter my wife and begin our lovemaking. I try to focus on the notion that if this works, Charlotte will be safe, that for nine months she'd let no harm come to her, and maybe she's right, maybe the baby will stimulate something and recovery will begin.

Charlotte smiles. It's brittle, but it's a smile. "How's this for finding the silver lining — I won't have to feel the pain of childbirth."

This makes me wonder if a paralyzed woman *can* push out a baby, or does she get the scalpel, and if so, is there anesthesia, and suddenly my body is at the edge of not cooperating.

"Hey, are you here?" she asks. "I'm trying to get you to smile."

"I just need to focus for a minute," I tell her.

"I can tell you're not really into this," she says. "I can tell you're still hung up on the idea I'm going to do something drastic to myself, right? Just because I talk about crazy stuff sometimes doesn't mean I'm going to do anything."

"Then why'd you make me promise to help you do it?"

The promise came early, in the beginning, just before the ventilator. She had a vomiting reflex that lasted for hours. The doctors said *it can happen*. Imagine endless dry heaves while you're paralyzed. The doctors finally gave her narcotics. Drugged, dead-limbed, and vomiting, that's when it hit her that she was no longer in control. I was holding her hair, keeping it out of the basin. She was panting between heaves.

She said, "Promise me that when I tell you to make it stop, you'll make it stop."

"Make what stop?" I asked.

She retched, long and cord-rattling. I knew what she meant.

"It won't come to that," I said.

She tried to say something but retched again.

"I promise," I said.

Now, in her mechanical bed, her negligee straps slipping off her shoulders, Charlotte says, "It's hard for you to understand, I know. But the idea that there's a way out, it's what allows me to keep going. I'd never take it. You believe me, don't you?"

"I hate that promise, I hate that you made me make it."?

"I'd never do it, and I'd never make you help."

"Then release me," I tell her.

"I'm sorry," she says.

I decide to just shut it all out and keep going. I'm losing my erection, and my mind wonders what will happen if I go soft — do I have it in me to fake it? — but I shut it out and keep going and going, pounding on Charlotte until I can barely feel anything. Her breasts loll alone under me. From the bedside table, the drone turns itself on and rises, hovering. It flashes my forehead with its green laser, as if what I'm feeling is that easy to determine, as if there would be a name for it. Is it spying on me, mining my emotions, or executing old code? I wonder if the hash reader failed or if the drone's OS reverted to a previous version or if Google reacquired it or if it's in some kind of autonomous mode. Or it could be that someone hacked the Android glasses, or maybe ... that's when I look down and see Charlotte is crying.

I stop.

"No, don't," she says. "Keep going."

She's not crying hard, but they are fat, lamenting tears.

"We can try again tomorrow," I tell her.

"No, I'm okay," she says. "Just keep going and do something for me, would you?"

"All right."

"Put the headphones on me."

"You mean, while we're doing it?"

"Music on," she says, and from the headphones on her bedside table, I hear Nirvana start to hum.

"I know I'm doing it all wrong," I say. "It's been a long time, and ... "

"It's not you," she says. "I just need my music. Just put them on me."

"Why do you need Nirvana? What is it to you?"

She closes her eyes and shakes her head.

"What is it with this Kurt Cobain?" I say. "What's your deal with him?"

I grab her wrists and pin them down, but she can't feel it.

"Why do you have to have this music? What's wrong with you?" I demand. "Just tell me what it is that's wrong with you."

I go to the garage, where the drone wanders lost along the walls, looking for a way out. I turn on a computer and search online until I find one of these Nirvana albums. I play the whole thing, just sitting there in the dark. The guy, this Kurt Cobain, sings about being stupid and dumb and unwanted. In one song he says that Jesus doesn't want him for a sunbeam. In another song, he says he wants milk and laxatives along with cherry-flavored antacids. He has a song called "All Apologies," where he keeps singing, "What else can I be? All apologies." But he never actually apologizes. He doesn't even say what he did wrong.

The drone, having found no escape, comes to me and hovers silently. I must look pretty pathetic because the drone takes my temperature.

I lift the remote for the garage-door opener. "Is this what you want?" I ask. "Are you going to come back, or am I going to have to come find you?"

The drone silently hums, impassive atop its column of warm air.

I press the button. The drone waits until the garage door is all the way up. Then it snaps a photograph of me and zooms off into the Palo Alto night.

I stand and breathe the air, which is cool and smells of flowers. There's enough moonlight to cast leaf patterns on the driveway. Down the street, I spot the glowing eyes of our cat. I call his name but he doesn't come. I gave him to a friend a couple blocks away, and for a few weeks the cat returned at night to visit me. Not anymore. This feeling of being in proximity to something that's lost to you, it seems like my whole life right now. It's a feeling Charlotte would understand if she'd just talk to the President. But he's not the one she needs to speak to, I suddenly understand. I return to my computer bench and fire up a bank of screens. I stare into their blue glow and get to work. It takes me hours, most of the night, before I'm done.

It's almost dawn when I go to Charlotte. The room is dark, and I can only see her outline. "Bed incline," I say, and she starts to rise. She wakes and stares at me but says nothing. Her face has that lack of expression that comes only after it's been through every emotion.

I set the iProjector in her lap. She hates the thing but says nothing. She only tilts her head a little, like she's sad for me. Then I turn it on.

Kurt Cobain appears before her, clad in a bathrobe and composed of soft blue light.

Charlotte inhales. "Oh my God," she murmurs.

She looks at me. "Is it him?"

I nod.

She marvels at him. "What do I say?" she asks. "Can he talk?"

I don't answer.

Kurt Cobain's hair is in his face. Shifting her gaze, Charlotte tries to look into his eyes. While the President couldn't quite manage to find your eyes, Kurt is purposefully avoiding them.

"I can't believe how young you are," Charlotte tells him. "You're just a boy."

Kurt's silent, then he mumbles, "I'm old."

"Are you really here?" she asks.

"Here we are now," he sings. "Entertain us."

His voice is rough and hard lived. It's some kind of proof of life to Charlotte.

Charlotte looks at me, filled with wonder. "I thought he was gone," she says. "I can't believe he's really here."

Kurt shrugs. "I only appreciate things when they're gone," he says.

Charlotte looks stricken. "I recognize that line," she says to me. "That's a line from his suicide note. How does he know that? Has he already written it, does he know what he's going to do?"

"I don't know," I tell her. This isn't my conversation to have. I back away toward the door, and just as I'm leaving, I hear her start to talk to him.

"Don't do what you're thinking about doing," she pleads with him. "You don't know how special you are, you don't know how much you matter to me. Please don't take yourself from me," she says carefully, like she's talking to a child. "You can't take yourself from me."

She leans toward Kurt Cobain, like she wants to throw her arms around him and hold him, like she's forgotten that her arms don't work and there's no him to embrace.

# Exhalation - Ted Chiang

(2008)

It has long been said that air (which others call argon) is the source of life. This is not in fact the case, and I engrave these words to describe how I came to understand the true source of life and, as a corollary, the means by which life will one day end.

For most of history, the proposition that we drew life from air was so obvious that there was no need to assert it. Every day we consume two lungs heavy with air; every day we remove the empty ones from our chest and replace them with full ones. If a person is careless and lets his air level run too low, he feels the heaviness of his limbs and the growing need for replenishment. It is exceedingly rare that a person is unable to get at least one replacement lung before his installed pair runs empty; on those unfortunate occasions where this has happened — when a person is trapped and unable to move, with no one nearby to assist him — he dies within seconds of his air running out.

But in the normal course of life, our need for air is far from our thoughts, and indeed many would say that satisfying that need is the least important part of going to the filling stations. For the filling stations are the primary venue for social conversation, the places from which we draw emotional sustenance as well as physical. We all keep spare sets of full lungs in our homes, but when one is alone, the act of opening one's chest and replacing one's lungs can seem little better than a chore. In the company of others, however, it becomes a communal activity, a shared pleasure.

If one is exceedingly busy, or feeling unsociable, one might simply pick up a pair of full lungs, install them, and leave one's emptied lungs on the other side of the room. If one has a few minutes to spare, it's simple courtesy to connect the empty lungs to an air dispenser and refill them for the next person. But by far the most common practice is to linger and enjoy the company of others, to discuss the news of the day with friends or acquaintances and, in passing, offer newly filled lungs to one's interlocutor. While this perhaps does not constitute air sharing in the strictest sense, there is camaraderie derived from the awareness that all our air comes from the same source, for the dispensers are but the exposed terminals of pipes extending from the reservoir of air deep underground, the great lung of the world, the source of all our nourishment.

Many lungs are returned to the same filling station the next day, but just as many circulate to other stations when people visit neighboring districts; the lungs are all identical in appearance, smooth cylinders of aluminum, so one cannot tell whether a given lung has always stayed close to home or whether it has traveled long distances. And just as lungs are passed between persons and districts, so are news and gossip. In this way one can receive news from remote districts, even those at the very edge of the world, without needing to leave home, although I myself enjoy traveling. I have journeyed all the way to the edge of the world, and seen the solid chromium wall that extends from the ground up into the infinite sky.

It was at one of the filling stations that I first heard the rumors that prompted my investigation and led to my eventual enlightenment. It began innocently enough, with a remark from our district's public crier. At noon of the first day of every year, it is traditional for the crier to recite a passage of verse, an ode composed long ago for this annual celebration, which takes exactly one hour to deliver. The crier mentioned that on his most recent performance, the turret clock struck the hour before he had finished, something that had never happened before. Another person remarked that this was a coincidence, because he had just returned from a nearby district where the public crier had complained of the same incongruity.

No one gave the matter much thought beyond the simple acknowledgement that seemed warranted. It was only some days later, when there arrived word of a similar deviation between



the crier and the clock of a third district, that the suggestion was made that these discrepancies might be evidence of a defect in the mechanism common to all the turret clocks, albeit a curious one to cause the clocks to run faster rather than slower. Horologists investigated the turret clocks in question, but on inspection they could discern no imperfection. In fact, when compared against the timepieces normally employed for such calibration purposes, the turret clocks were all found to have resumed keeping perfect time.

I myself found the question somewhat intriguing, but I was too focused on my own studies to devote much thought to other matters. I was and am a student of anatomy, and to provide context for my subsequent actions, I now offer a brief account of my relationship with the field.

Death is uncommon, fortunately, because we are durable and fatal mishaps are rare, but it makes difficult the study of anatomy, especially since many of the accidents serious enough to cause death leave the deceased's remains too damaged for study. If lungs are ruptured when full, the explosive force can tear a body asunder, ripping the titanium as easily as if it were tin. In the past, anatomists focused their attention on the limbs, which were the most likely to survive intact. During the very first anatomy lecture I attended a century ago, the lecturer showed us a severed arm, the casing removed to reveal the dense column of rods and pistons within. I can vividly recall the way, after he had connected its arterial hoses to a wall-mounted lung he kept in the laboratory, he was able to manipulate the actuating rods that protruded from the arm's ragged base, and in response the hand would open and close fitfully.

In the intervening years, our field has advanced to the point where anatomists are able to repair damaged limbs and, on occasion, attach a severed limb. At the same time we have become capable of studying the physiology of the living; I have given a version of that first lecture I saw, during which I opened the casing of my own arm and directed my students' attention to the rods that contracted and extended when I wiggled my fingers.

Despite these advances, the field of anatomy still had a great unsolved mystery at its core: the question of memory. While we knew a little about the structure of the brain, its physiology is notoriously hard to study because of the brain's extreme delicacy. It is typically the case in fatal accidents that, when the skull is breached, the brain erupts in a cloud of gold, leaving little besides shredded filament and leaf from which nothing useful can be discerned. For decades the prevailing theory of memory was that all of a person's experiences were engraved on sheets of gold foil; it was these sheets, torn apart by the force of the blast, that were the source of the tiny flakes found after accidents. Anatomists would collect the bits of gold leaf — so thin that light passes greenly through them — and spend years trying to reconstruct the original sheets, with the hope of eventually deciphering the symbols in which the deceased's recent experiences were inscribed.

I did not subscribe to this theory, known as the inscription hypothesis, for the simple reason that if all our experiences are in fact recorded, why is it that our memories are incomplete? Advocates of the inscription hypothesis offered an explanation for forgetfulness — suggesting that over time the foil sheets become misaligned from the stylus which reads the memories, until the oldest sheets shift out of contact with it altogether — but I never found it convincing. The appeal of the theory was easy for me to appreciate, though; I too had devoted many an hour to examining flakes of gold through a microscope, and can imagine how gratifying it would be to turn the fine adjustment knob and see legible symbols come into focus.

More than that, how wonderful would it be to decipher the very oldest of a deceased person's memories, ones that he himself had forgotten? None of us can remember much more than a hundred years in the past, and written records — accounts that we ourselves inscribed but have scant memory of doing so — extend only a few hundred years before that. How many years did we live before the beginning of written history? Where did we come from? It is the promise of finding the answers within our own brains that makes the inscription hypothesis so seductive.

I was a proponent of the competing school of thought, which held that our memories were

stored in some medium in which the process of erasure was no more difficult than recording: perhaps in the rotation of gears, or the positions of a series of switches. This theory implied that everything we had forgotten was indeed lost, and our brains contained no histories older than those found in our libraries. One advantage of this theory was that it better explained why, when lungs are installed in those who have died from lack of air, the revived have no memories and are all but mindless: Somehow the shock of death had reset all the gears or switches. The inscriptionists claimed the shock had merely misaligned the foil sheets, but no one was willing to kill a living person, even an imbecile, in order to resolve the debate. I had envisioned an experiment which might allow me to determine the truth conclusively, but it was a risky one, and deserved careful consideration before it was undertaken. I remained undecided for the longest time, until I heard more news about the clock anomaly.

Word arrived from a more distant district that its public crier had likewise observed the turret clock striking the hour before he had finished his new year's recital. What made this notable was that his district's clock employed a different mechanism, one in which the hours were marked by the flow of mercury into a bowl. Here the discrepancy could not be explained by a common mechanical fault. Most people suspected fraud, a practical joke perpetrated by mischief makers. I had a different suspicion, a darker one that I dared not voice, but it decided my course of action; I would proceed with my experiment.

The first tool I constructed was the simplest: in my laboratory I fixed four prisms on mounting brackets and carefully aligned them so that their apexes formed the corners of a rectangle. When arranged thus, a beam of light directed at one of the lower prisms was reflected up, then backward, then down, and then forward again in a quadrilateral loop. Accordingly, when I sat with my eyes at the level of the first prism, I obtained a clear view of the back of my own head. This solipsistic periscope formed the basis of all that was to come.

A similarly rectangular arrangement of actuating rods allowed a displacement of action to accompany the displacement of vision afforded by the prisms. The bank of actuating rods was much larger than the periscope, but still relatively straightforward in design; by contrast, what was attached to the end of these respective mechanisms was far more intricate. To the periscope I added a binocular microscope mounted on an armature capable of swiveling side to side or up and down. To the actuating rods I added an array of precision manipulators, although that description hardly does justice to those pinnacles of the mechanic's art. Combining the ingenuity of anatomists and the inspiration provided by the bodily structures they studied, the manipulators enabled their operator to accomplish any task he might normally perform with his own hands, but on a much smaller scale.

Assembling all of this equipment took months, but I could not afford to be anything less than meticulous. Once the preparations were complete, I was able to place each of my hands on a nest of knobs and levers and control a pair of manipulators situated behind my head, and use the periscope to see what they worked on. I would then be able to dissect my own brain.

The very idea must sound like pure madness, I know, and had I told any of my colleagues, they would surely have tried to stop me. But I could not ask anyone else to risk themselves for the sake of anatomical inquiry, and because I wished to conduct the dissection myself, I would not be satisfied by merely being the passive subject of such an operation. Auto-dissection was the only option.

I brought in a dozen full lungs and connected them with a manifold. I mounted this assembly beneath the worktable that I would sit at, and positioned a dispenser to connect directly to the bronchial inlets within my chest. This would supply me with six days' worth of air. To provide for the possibility that I might not have completed my experiment within that period, I had scheduled a visit from a colleague at the end of that time. My presumption, however, was that the only way I would not have finished the operation in that period would be if I had caused my own death.

I began by removing the deeply curved plate that formed the back and top of my head; then the two, more shallowly curved plates that formed the sides. Only my faceplate remained, but it was locked into a restraining bracket, and I could not see its inner surface from the vantage point of my periscope; what I saw exposed was my own brain. It consisted of a dozen or more subassemblies, whose exteriors were covered by intricately molded shells; by positioning the periscope near the fissures that separated them, I gained a tantalizing glimpse at the fabulous mechanisms within their interiors. Even with what little I could see, I could tell it was the most beautifully complex engine I had ever beheld, so far beyond any device man had constructed that it was incontrovertibly of divine origin. The sight was both exhilarating and dizzying, and I savored it on a strictly aesthetic basis for several minutes before proceeding with my explorations.

It was generally hypothesized that the brain was divided into an engine located in the center of the head which performed the actual cognition, surrounded by an array of components in which memories were stored. What I observed was consistent with this theory, since the peripheral subassemblies seemed to resemble one another, while the subassembly in the center appeared to be different, more heterogeneous and with more moving parts. However the components were packed too closely for me to see much of their operation; if I intended to learn anything more, I would require a more intimate vantage point.

Each subassembly had a local reservoir of air, fed by a hose extending from the regulator at the base of my brain. I focused my periscope on the rearmost subassembly and, using the remote manipulators, I quickly disconnected the outlet hose and installed a longer one in its place. I had practiced this maneuver countless times so that I could perform it in a matter of moments; even so, I was not certain I could complete the connection before the subassembly had depleted its local reservoir. Only after I was satisfied that the component's operation had not been interrupted did I continue; I rearranged the longer hose to gain a better view of what lay in the fissure behind it: other hoses that connected it to its neighboring components. Using the most slender pair of manipulators to reach into the narrow crevice, I replaced the hoses one by one with longer substitutes. Eventually, I had worked my way around the entire subassembly and replaced every connection it had to the rest of my brain. I was now able to unmount this subassembly from the frame that supported it, and pull the entire section outside of what was once the back of my head.

I knew it was possible I had impaired my capacity to think and was unable to recognize it, but performing some basic arithmetic tests suggested that I was uninjured. With one subassembly hanging from a scaffold above, I now had a better view of the cognition engine at the center of my brain, but there was not enough room to bring the microscope attachment itself in for a close inspection. In order for me to really examine the workings of my brain, I would have to displace at least half a dozen subassemblies.

Laboriously, painstakingly, I repeated the procedure of substituting hoses for other subassemblies, repositioning another one farther back, two more higher up, and two others out to the sides, suspending all six from the scaffold above my head. When I was done, my brain looked like an explosion frozen an infinitesimal fraction of a second after the detonation, and again I felt dizzy when I thought about it. But at last the cognition engine itself was exposed, supported on a pillar of hoses and actuating rods leading down into my torso. I now also had room to rotate my microscope around a full three hundred and sixty degrees, and pass my gaze across the inner faces of the subassemblies I had moved. What I saw was a microcosm of auric machinery, a landscape of tiny spinning rotors and miniature reciprocating cylinders.

As I contemplated this vista, I wondered, where was my body? The conduits which displaced my vision and action around the room were in principle no different from those which connected my original eyes and hands to my brain. For the duration of this experiment, were these manipulators not essentially my hands? Were the magnifying lenses at the end of my periscope not essentially my eyes? I was an everted person, with my tiny, fragmented body situated at the

center of my own distended brain. It was in this unlikely configuration that I began to explore myself.

I turned my microscope to one of the memory subassemblies, and began examining its design. I had no expectation that I would be able to decipher my memories, only that I might divine the means by which they were recorded. As I had predicted, there were no reams of foil pages visible, but to my surprise neither did I see banks of gearwheels or switches. Instead, the subassembly seemed to consist almost entirely of a bank of air tubules. Through the interstices between the tubules I was able to glimpse ripples passing through the bank's interior.

With careful inspection and increasing magnification, I discerned that the tubules ramified into tiny air capillaries, which were interwoven with a dense latticework of wires on which gold leaves were hinged. Under the influence of air escaping from the capillaries, the leaves were held in a variety of positions. These were not switches in the conventional sense, for they did not retain their position without a current of air to support them, but I hypothesized that these were the switches I had sought, the medium in which my memories were recorded. The ripples I saw must have been acts of recall, as an arrangement of leaves was read and sent back to the cognition engine.

Armed with this new understanding, I then turned my microscope to the cognition engine. Here too I observed a latticework of wires, but they did not bear leaves suspended in position; instead the leaves flipped back and forth almost too rapidly to see. Indeed, almost the entire engine appeared to be in motion, consisting more of lattice than of air capillaries, and I wondered how air could reach all the gold leaves in a coherent manner. For many hours I scrutinized the leaves, until I realized that they themselves were playing the role of capillaries; the leaves formed temporary conduits and valves that existed just long enough to redirect air at other leaves in turn, and then disappeared as a result. This was an engine undergoing continuous transformation, indeed modifying itself as part of its operation. The lattice was not so much a machine as it was a page on which the machine was written, and on which the machine itself ceaselessly wrote.

My consciousness could be said to be encoded in the position of these tiny leaves, but it would be more accurate to say that it was encoded in the ever-shifting pattern of air driving these leaves. Watching the oscillations of these flakes of gold, I saw that air does not, as we had always assumed, simply provide power to the engine that realizes our thoughts. Air is in fact the very medium of our thoughts. All that we are is a pattern of air flow. My memories were inscribed, not as grooves on foil or even the position of switches, but as persistent currents of argon.

In the moments after I grasped the nature of this lattice mechanism, a cascade of insights penetrated my consciousness in rapid succession. The first and most trivial was understanding why gold, the most malleable and ductile of metals, was the only material out of which our brains could be made. Only the thinnest of foil leaves could move rapidly enough for such a mechanism, and only the most delicate of filaments could act as hinges for them. By comparison, the copper burr raised by my stylus as I engrave these words and brushed from the sheet when I finish each page is as coarse and heavy as scrap. This truly was a medium where erasing and recording could be performed rapidly, far more so than any arrangement of switches or gears.

What next became clear was why installing full lungs into a person who has died from lack of air does not bring him back to life. These leaves within the lattice remain balanced between continuous cushions of air. This arrangement lets them flit back and forth swiftly, but it also means that if the flow of air ever ceases, everything is lost; the leaves all collapse into identical pendent states, erasing the patterns and the consciousness they represent. Restoring the air supply cannot recreate what has evanesced. This was the price of speed; a more stable medium for storing patterns would mean that our consciousnesses would operate far more slowly.

It was then that I perceived the solution to the clock anomaly. I saw that the speed of these

leaves' movements depended on their being supported by air; with sufficient air flow, the leaves could move nearly frictionlessly. If they were moving more slowly, it was because they were being subjected to more friction, which could occur only if the cushions of air that supported them were thinner, and the air flowing through the lattice was moving with less force.

It is not that the turret clocks are running faster. What is happening is that our brains are running slower. The turret clocks are driven by pendulums, whose tempo never varies, or by the flow of mercury through a pipe, which does not change. But our brains rely on the passage of air, and when that air flows more slowly, our thoughts slow down, making the clocks seem to us to run faster.

I had feared that our brains might be growing slower, and it was this prospect that had spurred me to pursue my auto-dissection. But I had assumed that our cognition engines — while powered by air — were ultimately mechanical in nature, and some aspect of the mechanism was gradually becoming deformed through fatigue, and thus responsible for the slowing. That would have been dire, but there was at least the hope that we might be able to repair the mechanism, and restore our brains to their original speed of operation.

But if our thoughts were purely patterns of air rather than the movement of toothed gears, the problem was much more serious, for what could cause the air flowing through every person's brain to move less rapidly? It could not be a decrease in the pressure from our filling stations' dispensers; the air pressure in our lungs is so high that it must be stepped down by a series of regulators before reaching our brains. The diminution in force, I saw, must arise from the opposite direction: The pressure of our surrounding atmosphere was increasing.

How could this be? As soon as the question formed, the only possible answer became apparent: Our sky must not be infinite in height. Somewhere above the limits of our vision, the chromium walls surrounding our world must curve inward to form a dome; our universe is a sealed chamber rather than an open well. And air is gradually accumulating within that chamber, until it equals the pressure in the reservoir below.

This is why, at the beginning of this engraving, I said that air is not the source of life. Air can neither be created nor destroyed; the total amount of air in the universe remains constant, and if air were all that we needed to live, we would never die. But in truth the source of life is a difference in air pressure, the flow of air from spaces where it is thick to those where it is thin. The activity of our brains, the motion of our bodies, the action of every machine we have ever built is driven by the movement of air, the force exerted as differing pressures seek to balance each other out. When the pressure everywhere in the universe is the same, all air will be motionless, and useless; one day we will be surrounded by motionless air and unable to derive any benefit from it.

We are not really consuming air at all. The amount of air that I draw from each day's new pair of lungs is exactly as much as seeps out through the joints of my limbs and the seams of my casing, exactly as much as I am adding to the atmosphere around me; all I am doing is converting air at high pressure to air at low. With every movement of my body, I contribute to the equalization of pressure in our universe. With every thought that I have, I hasten the arrival of that fatal equilibrium.

Had I come to this realization under any other circumstance, I would have leapt up from my chair and ran into the streets, but in my current situation — body locked in a restraining bracket, brain suspended across my laboratory — doing so was impossible. I could see the leaves of my brain flitting faster from the tumult of my thoughts, which in turn increased my agitation at being so restrained and immobile. Panic at that moment might have led to my death, a nightmarish paroxysm of simultaneously being trapped and spiraling out of control, struggling against my restraints until my air ran out. It was by chance as much as by intention that my hands adjusted the controls to avert my periscopic gaze from the latticework, so all I could see was the plain surface of my worktable. Thus freed from having to see and magnify my own apprehensions, I

was able to calm down. When I had regained sufficient composure, I began the lengthy process of reassembling myself. Eventually I restored my brain to its original compact configuration, reattached the plates of my head, and released myself from the restraining bracket.

At first the other anatomists did not believe me when I told them what I had discovered, but in the months that followed my initial auto-dissection, more and more of them became convinced. More examinations of people's brains were performed, more measurements of atmospheric pressure were taken, and the results were all found to confirm my claims. The background air pressure of our universe was indeed increasing, and slowing our thoughts as a result.

There was widespread panic in the days after the truth first became widely known, as people contemplated for the first time the idea that death was inevitable. Many called for the strict curtailment of activities in order to minimize the thickening of our atmosphere; accusations of wasted air escalated into furious brawls and, in some districts, deaths. It was the shame of having caused these deaths, together with the reminder that it would be many centuries yet before our atmosphere's pressure became equal to that of the reservoir underground, that caused the panic to subside. We are not sure precisely how many centuries it will take; additional measurements and calculations are being performed and debated. In the meantime, there is much discussion over how we should spend the time that remains to us.

One sect has dedicated itself to the goal of reversing the equalization of pressure, and found many adherents. The mechanics among them constructed an engine that takes air from our atmosphere and forces it into a smaller volume, a process they called "compression." Their engine restores air to the pressure it originally had in the reservoir, and these Reversalists excitedly announced that it would form the basis of a new kind of filling station, one that would — with each lung it refilled — revitalize not only individuals but the universe itself. Alas, closer examination of the engine revealed its fatal flaw. The engine itself is powered by air from the reservoir, and for every lungful of air that it produces, the engine consumes not just a lungful, but slightly more. It does not reverse the process of equalization, but like everything else in the world, exacerbates it.

Although some of their adherents left in disillusionment after this setback, the Reversalists as a group were undeterred, and began drawing up alternate designs in which the compressor was powered instead by the uncoiling of springs or the descent of weights. These mechanisms fared no better. Every spring that is wound tight represents air released by the person who did the winding; every weight that rests higher than ground level represents air released by the person who did the lifting. There is no source of power in the universe that does not ultimately derive from a difference in air pressure, and there can be no engine whose operation will not, on balance, reduce that difference.

The Reversalists continue their labors, confident that they will one day construct an engine that generates more compression than it uses, a perpetual power source that will restore to the universe its lost vigor. I do not share their optimism; I believe that the process of equalization is inexorable. Eventually, all the air in our universe will be evenly distributed, no denser or more rarefied in one spot than in any other, unable to drive a piston, turn a rotor, or flip a leaf of gold foil. It will be the end of pressure, the end of motive power, the end of thought. The universe will have reached perfect equilibrium.

Some find irony in the fact that a study of our brains revealed to us not the secrets of the past, but what ultimately awaits us in the future. However, I maintain that we have indeed learned something important about the past. The universe began as an enormous breath being held. Who knows why, but whatever the reason, I am glad that it did, because I owe my existence to that fact. All my desires and ruminations are no more and no less than eddy currents generated by the gradual exhalation of our universe. And until this great exhalation is finished, my thoughts live on.

So that our thoughts may continue as long as possible, anatomists and mechanics are

designing replacements for our cerebral regulators, capable of gradually increasing the air pressure within our brains and keeping it just higher than the surrounding atmospheric pressure. Once these are installed, our thoughts will continue at roughly the same speed even as the air thickens around us. But this does not mean that life will continue unchanged. Eventually the pressure differential will fall to such a level that our limbs will weaken and our movements will grow sluggish. We may then try to slow our thoughts so that our physical torpor is less conspicuous to us, but that will also cause external processes to appear to accelerate. The ticking of clocks will rise to a chatter as their pendulums wave frantically; falling objects will slam to the ground as if propelled by springs; undulations will race down cables like the crack of a whip.

At some point our limbs will cease moving altogether. I cannot be certain of the precise sequence of events near the end, but I imagine a scenario in which our thoughts will continue to operate, so that we remain conscious but frozen, immobile as statues. Perhaps we'll be able to speak for a while longer, because our voice boxes operate on a smaller pressure differential than our limbs, but without the ability to visit a filling station, every utterance will reduce the amount of air left for thought, and bring us closer to the moment that our thoughts cease altogether. Will it be preferable to remain mute to prolong our ability to think, or to talk until the very end? I don't know.

Perhaps a few of us, in the days before we cease moving, will be able to connect our cerebral regulators directly to the dispensers in the filling stations, in effect replacing our lungs with the mighty lung of the world. If so, those few will be able to remain conscious right up to the final moments before all pressure is equalized. The last bit of air pressure left in our universe will be expended driving a person's conscious thought.

And then, our universe will be in a state of absolute equilibrium. All life and thought will cease, and with them, time itself.

But I maintain a slender hope.

Even though our universe is enclosed, perhaps it is not the only air chamber in the infinite expanse of solid chromium. I speculate that there could be another pocket of air elsewhere, another universe besides our own that is even larger in volume. It is possible that this hypothetical universe has the same or higher air pressure as ours, but suppose that it had a much lower air pressure than ours, perhaps even a true vacuum?

The chromium that separates us from this supposed universe is too thick and too hard for us to drill through, so there is no way we could reach it ourselves, no way to bleed off the excess atmosphere from our universe and regain motive power that way. But I fantasize that this neighboring universe has its own inhabitants, ones with capabilities beyond our own. What if they were able to create a conduit between the two universes, and install valves to release air from ours? They might use our universe as a reservoir, running dispensers with which they could fill their own lungs, and use our air as a way to drive their own civilization.

It cheers me to imagine that the air that once powered me could power others, to believe that the breath that enables me to engrave these words could one day flow through someone else's body. I do not delude myself into thinking that this would be a way for me to live again, because I am not that air, I am the pattern that it assumed, temporarily. The pattern that is me, the patterns that are the entire world in which I live, would be gone.

But I have an even fainter hope: that those inhabitants not only use our universe as a reservoir, but that once they have emptied it of its air, they might one day be able to open a passage and actually enter our universe as explorers. They might wander our streets, see our frozen bodies, look through our possessions, and wonder about the lives we led.

Which is why I have written this account. You, I hope, are one of those explorers. You, I hope, found these sheets of copper and deciphered the words engraved on their surfaces. And whether or not your brain is impelled by the air that once impelled mine, through the act of reading my words, the patterns that form your thoughts become an imitation of the patterns that

once formed mine. And in that way I live again, through you.

Your fellow explorers will have found and read the other books that we left behind, and through the collaborative action of your imaginations, my entire civilization lives again. As you walk through our silent districts, imagine them as they were; with the turret clocks striking the hours, the filling stations crowded with gossiping neighbors, criers reciting verse in the public squares and anatomists giving lectures in the classrooms. Visualize all of these the next time you look at the frozen world around you, and it will become, in your minds, animated and vital again.

I wish you well, explorer, but I wonder: Does the same fate that befell me await you? I can only imagine that it must, that the tendency toward equilibrium is not a trait peculiar to our universe but inherent in all universes. Perhaps that is just a limitation of my thinking, and your people have discovered a source of pressure that is truly eternal. But my speculations are fanciful enough already. I will assume that one day your thoughts too will cease, although I cannot fathom how far in the future that might be. Your lives will end just as ours did, just as everyone's must. No matter how long it takes, eventually equilibrium will be reached.

I hope you are not saddened by that awareness. I hope that your expedition was more than a search for other universes to use as reservoirs. I hope that you were motivated by a desire for knowledge, a yearning to see what can arise from a universe's exhalation. Because even if a universe's lifespan is calculable, the variety of life that is generated within it is not. The buildings we have erected, the art and music and verse we have composed, the very lives we've led: None of them could have been predicted, because none of them were inevitable. Our universe might have slid into equilibrium emitting nothing more than a quiet hiss. The fact that it spawned such plenitude is a miracle, one that is matched only by your universe giving rise to you.

Though I am long dead as you read this, explorer, I offer to you a valediction. Contemplate the marvel that is existence, and rejoice that you are able to do so. I feel I have the right to tell you this because, as I am inscribing these words, I am doing the same.



# Reply to a Dead Man - Walter Mosley

(2012)

When the doorbell rang, I at first had no inkling of who was there or what his or her business might be. I was sitting at the dining table in a room that had never been used for entertaining. Books and notepads, two weeks' worth of newspapers, and a few stacks of dirty dishes were piled here and there around the dark-stained hickory plank. I had been writing a letter to my sister about the death of our brother in the fall.

It was spring now, and I had missed the funeral. Our brother had been buried in Cincinnati by Dearby, his fourth wife. She, Dearby, told me that if she was going to pay for the burial, then he'd be interred in the same cemetery as her and the rest of her family.

I was having a hard time, financially, when Seth passed. I'd just lost my job as a regional manager for Lampley Car Insurance, and unemployment benefits hadn't been enough to pay the rent. I couldn't take time off from my temp position at Lenny's Auto Parts, and the funeral was on a Wednesday, a workday. My boss, Alan Renee Bertrand, didn't particularly like me, and so I couldn't even take the chance of asking him for the time off. Lenny's paid \$22.50 an hour, the best temp rate in town, and so I sent a dozen white lilies and a note thanking Dearby for honoring my brother.

You see, I knew that Dearby and Seth were on the outs when he died. My sister had told me that Seth had been seeing his second wife, Althea, again, and Dearby had been threatening to kick him out of the house.

She, Dearby, called to tell me about Seth.

"He had a heart attack," she said. "I warned him about the high blood pressure and fatty foods. He wouldn't listen. He never listened."

I was thinking that Dearby was pretty big herself.

As if she could read my thoughts across the 2,000-plus miles that separated us, she said, "I know that I'm big, but my heft is fruit fat, weight from fresh fruit with fiber and natural sugars. My doctors tell me that I'm okay the way I am."

"I know you are," I said, to fill the empty space in our conversation that loomed like the blank line at the bottom of a boilerplate contract.

"What do you want me to do with him?" she asked.

"Um ... "

"The body, Roger. What do you want me to do with the body?"

"I don't understand what you mean," I said. "He's dead."

"I know that," Dearby said. "He's gone, and somebody has to bury him."

"Oh ... oh, yeah. Right. Um ... "

I got up from the table, remembering that awkward moment half a year earlier when I had to tell Dearby that I didn't have the money to help pay for a funeral.

The walk from my worktable to the front door wasn't long. No distance in the 634-square-foot half-home was that great. The other side of the subdivided Wilshire District house was inhabited by a woman named Rose Henley. I had seen Rose only once, a few days after I'd moved in seven years and ten months before. She'd rung my bell and introduced herself as my neighbor.

Rose Henley was old, maybe sixty, and she had one gold tooth. She was fairly short, even for a woman, and her black hair was sliding into white. She was a white woman, broad-faced and stout.

"Mr. Vaness?" she had said, all those years ago.

"Yes?"

"I'm Rose Henley, your neighbor."

"Oh. Hello."

"I don't mean to interrupt, just wanted you to see my face. And I wanted to see yours."

"Would you like to come in?," I asked, not putting much heart into it.

"No, no, no," she said. "I just wanted to greet you. I don't get out very much."

This was no exaggeration. I never saw or heard my neighbor again.

But that day, when I was writing to my sister, Angeline, about our brother's death, I was sure that Rose was at my door. I hadn't got much company since losing my job. My friends liked to party, and I couldn't afford the gas money, much less my part of the bill at our favorite bars and restaurants.

After I was fired, I had asked my girlfriend, Terri, if she would move in, so we could share the rent.

Terri broke it off with me three days later.

No one ever knocked at my door, and Rose was the only person I was acquainted with in the neighborhood. It had to be her, I thought; that was just cold hard logic.

So I opened the door looking down, expecting to see my diminutive neighbor's wide face under a thatch of black hair turned gray.

Instead I was looking at the red-and-blue vest of a white man even taller than me. He had a bald head and not much facial hair. His skin was the color of yellowing ivory and his eyes were a luminous gray — like a mist-filled valley at dawn.

"Mr. Vaness?" the stranger asked, in a magnificent tenor voice.

"Yes?"

"My name is Harding, Lance Harding. I am here representing the last wish of Seth Vaness."

"What?"

"I work for a small firm called Final Request Co. We execute the last wishes of clients who have passed on."

"You're a lawyer?"

I looked the slender tenor up and down. He had on a nice suit, but it was reddish-brown, not a lawyer's color, in my estimation.

"No, Mr. Vaness. We at FRC don't execute wills. Our job is to deliver messages from the dead." He smiled after the last word, giving me a slight chill.

"Uh-huh. You use a Ouija board or somethin'?"

"We are engaged by the deceased before their demise."

"My brother hired you to give me a message after he was dead?"

Harding smiled and nodded.

"He died six and a half months ago," I said. "What took you so long?"

"His wish was for us to execute his instructions not less than half a year after his demise."

"Is this some kinda legal thing?"

"It is a simple agreement between FRC and your brother," Lance Harding said, maintaining an aura of imperturbable patience. "Often individuals wish to pass on knowledge outside of the rubric of wills and other legal formats. Some leave a spoken message, others might wish to pass along a note or a small package."

"Seth didn't have much," I said. "He couldn't have anything to hide."

"We all have something to hide, Mr. Vaness. Either that or something is hidden from us."

"So you're — "

"May I come in?," Harding asked, cutting off my question.

"Oh," I said.

"Is this a bad time?"

"No, no, it's okay, I just ... "

"I came by on Wednesday, but you weren't here," Harding said. "Your neighbor, Mrs. Henley, told me that you were at work."

"You talked to Rose?"

"May I come in?"

My house was untidy, to say the least. When I have a girlfriend, I usually pick up and air out my little place at least once a week, but I lose the drive when I'm unattached. As a rule, the mess doesn't bother me unless I have unexpected guests.

Harding didn't seem put off by the clutter. I moved a small stack of old comic books from a chair next to the one I had been sitting in and gestured for him to take a seat.

"*Fantastic Four*," he said, looking at the topmost magazine as I set the stack on the table next to him.

"They were my father's," I said. "I have one through twelve. Know anybody who might want to buy them?"

"Your blood father?" he asked. "Patrick Hand?"

I nodded, wondering how he knew my real father's name.

He flipped through the issues, smiling slightly. Harding was maybe ten years older than me. That would have made him about fifty.

"Not in mint or near-mint condition," he said. "That makes them nearly worthless. At any rate, these books call up your father from across the pale. That's a connection that money can't buy."

"How do you know my father's dead?"

"Both of your fathers," he said. "Patrick, who sired you, and Norland, who married your mother and adopted her three children."

"How do you know all that?"

"They were Seth's fathers too."

"Oh ... yeah. That's why you're here."

"Shall we begin?"

"It's funny that you came here just now," I said. "I mean, not funny, but ... I was just writing to my sister —"

"Angeline Vaness-Brownley," Lance Harding of the FRC interjected. "She lives in Cambridge with her husband, Ivan Brownley, the union organizer."

"Wha — ? Oh, right, Seth's sister too. How much do you know about us?"

"About you, particularly, we know that you have never been charged with, much less convicted of, a crime, and that most of your working life you were either employed or at college. You have three years' matriculation at Cal State. Your concentration was in history, but you dropped out and began to work for various businesses. You've never been married, but you were once engaged to a woman named Irene Littleton."

"Seth told you all that?"

"No."

"Then where'd you hear about it?"

Harding's face was oblong, a little larger than even his tall frame might predict. For the most part his expression was tranquil, but my question teased out a mild frown.

"I am here at your brother's request," he said.

"But you know all this shit about me, and he didn't tell you. So I'd like to know how you know it."

"Nora Dunbar," he replied, his face once again at peace.

"Who?"

"She is the statistical and research analyst at our firm. When a client engages our services, Miss Dunbar does a background check on the client and the recipient of the message or package."

"Why?"

Harding sighed and then said, "Suppose the message that someone wished to pass on was a name and an address. If the recipient was a known killer, or maybe someone who had a grudge

against a person with the name we were being asked to deliver, we would refuse the job. We are not bound by fealty to the state, but we are a moral corporation."

"So you wanted to make sure that I wasn't a hit man or a stalker or somethin'?"

"Quite right."

"But you figured that I was a good bet and that you could deliver your message without messin' anything up."

The great sculpted face smiled and bobbed.

"You got a sliding scale you charge?," I asked. I realized that I wasn't eager to obtain information passed on to me across the border of death.

"We charge \$5,000, plus expenses, for every message a client wishes to entrust to us."

"Expenses?"

Lance Harding smiled and seemed to relax a bit. He seemed to have surrendered to my fear of his task.

"Once," he said, "we were engaged by a woman to deliver an apple pie she'd baked to the man she'd loved but never married. In order to keep the pie in fair condition, we had to freeze it. The accommodations were made, and she was charged accordingly."

"So Seth paid \$5,000 for you to deliver this message to me?"

"That is the fee all clients are charged," he said, "plus expenses."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Why do you say that?"

"Three reasons. First, I can't see Seth payin' that kinda money when he coulda sent a letter to my sister or our mother to give me after he died. Second, I can't see Seth spendin' that kinda money on me — period. And third, travelin' all over the country and the world, makin' these kinda visits, would cost a lot more than \$5,000."

I would have talked all day long to keep this man, the most official man I had ever met, from discharging his message.

"As to your first two arguments — we question our clients, but never their money, once they've passed our qualification test. Your third dispute would make sense if the FRC didn't have regions of responsibility divided among its various agents. My area is California. You asked why I'm late delivering this message. That is because I was in Central and Northern California for the past two weeks. We would like to have delivered this communication exactly at the six-month mark, but the wording of Seth Vaness's last request allowed me some leeway: 'Not less than six months after my demise.'"

I had nothing left to ask, but I still was not ready for any information from the dead.

"Are all the people who work for the FRC white?" The question was one my stepfather would have had me ask.

"FRC," Lance Harding corrected. "Most of the employees of the company are Caucasian, but not all. Now, may I deliver my message?"

I took in a deep breath, exhaled, and then nodded.

Lance Harding reached into the left side of his reddish-brown jacket with his right hand.

I leaped up from my chair, sure that he was going to take out a gun or a knife; my fear was that great.

But the FRC agent merely brought out an ivory envelope, almost exactly the same color as his skin.

"This is the letter that your brother charged us to deliver," he said. "As I hand it to you, our duty in this matter is fulfilled."

He extended his hand, offering me the rectangle of paper. I hesitated before taking it.

The mood was so ceremonial that I expected some kind of devastation or revelation to follow. But nothing happened.

The FRC agent stood abruptly.

"I will leave you to do with the letter as you will," he said.

"Don't you want me to sign something," I asked, "to prove that you actually gave me this?"

"The client didn't ask for corroboration," he said, smiling. "That usually means that the delivery contains nothing of material value. I can see myself out."

I sat there at the messy table, holding the still-sealed envelope for long minutes after Lance Harding was gone. Something about the white man's demeanor and the fact that I was writing a letter concerning Seth when the note from him arrived was strange — something having to do with me not attending his funeral, and now he was reaching out to me ...

I put the letter down and picked up my smartphone. I entered A-N-G, and Angeline's number appeared.

She answered on the fourth ring.

"Where are you?" she said, instead of hello.

"At home."

"But you're on your cell."

"I had the landline disconnected. Figured I didn't need two numbers. People hardly ever call one."

"You're not a kid anymore, Roger. Having your phone disconnected makes you seem transient."

"How's Boston, Sis?"

"Cold. They're predicting snow for tomorrow."

"Snow? But it's spring."

"How are you, Rog?"

"All right. Have you heard from Seth?"

"What?"

"A letter, package, or somethin'?"

"Seth is dead."

"I know," I said. "I know, but a guy just dropped by and hand-delivered a letter to me that Seth wrote before he died."

Angeline didn't say a word for at least a minute. This told me more than any confession or lie. Whatever it was that Seth was telling me, Angeline knew about it already.

"Did you read it?" she asked at last.

"No. Not yet. I was wondering if he'd sent the same note to you and Mom."

"You should burn it, Roger," she said. "Nothing good can come from a dead man's hand."

"The guy who brought it to me was very much alive."

"Burn it, shred it, or just throw it away, Roger," she said, in her best big-sister voice. "You know how Seth was always trying to mess with you."

"What does it say, Angeline?"

"How do you expect me to know?"

"Don't *you* mess with me, Sis."

"I haven't heard anything from Seth, and neither has Mom, as far as I know. I talked to her last Monday, and she didn't say anything about any letters."

"How is Mom?"

"Fine. She said that she hasn't heard from you in over six months. You know, you could go to her house. She's a few miles from your place. I see her more often than you do, and here I live 3,000 miles away."

All the anger that I had at my mother and sister and deceased stepfather, Norland Reese, came up in my breast.

"I gotta go, Angeline," I said.

"Wait, Roger. What about that letter — ?"

I pressed the red button on my phone, and the connection was broken. I put the little device

down and picked up the sealed envelope again.

Seth had terrorized me when we were children. He locked me in closets and big trunks just for a laugh. I learned the value of silence from him. Because when he put me in the big trunk in the attic of our house, I learned that he would never let me out as long as I yelled. But if I was quiet, he worried that maybe I had suffocated or something. He was the kind of torturer who fed off the screams of his victims.

I might have hated my brother, but his brand of torment wasn't nearly as bad as that of my parents — I should say my mother and her husband, Norland. My blood father was a white man named Patrick Hand. The story goes that he abandoned our family when I was two, Angeline was four, and Seth was five.

"He just ran off and left me with three children and a dollar seventy-five," my mother would say. Then she'd spit on the ground, cursing him.

Seth never believed that our father abandoned us. Patrick Hand was a known gambler, and Seth was convinced that he had been slaughtered over a bad debt and that our mother, instead of cursing him, should have gone out looking for his killers.

Norland wouldn't let Seth tell that tale. He was of my mother's opinion, and ruled over us with an iron hand.

In my mind I managed to believe both Seth and my mother. Sometimes I hated my father; other times, I prayed for his murdered soul.

*Dear Roger,*

*I know that we haven't talked in a long time. We might not ever talk again if what the doctors say about my heart is true. That in mind, I thought I should write you a letter and get the bitter truth off my chest. I guess you remember back when you were seventeen and you were going with that white girl, Timberly Alexander. I know that you broke up with her because Mama and Norland leaned on you so hard. I know it wasn't your fault for breaking Timberly's heart, and so I went over to her house out in West Covina after the breakup. I told her how much Mama and Norland thought that interracial relations only ended in heartbreak. I tried to explain how much you needed Mama and that her rules were too much for you to deny.*

*That's when Timberly told me that she was pregnant. I didn't even know what to say. She asked me whether she told you would you be able to break away from Mama and Norland and start a life with her. I told her that I didn't believe that you could.*

*So for the past twenty years I've been giving Timmy a couple hundred dollars a month and her little girl, Sovie (named after Sojourner Truth), has called me Uncle Seth.*

*Timmy didn't want me to tell you about your daughter, because she was mad and hurt that you left her and never called again. I probably should have told you, but I guess I got a little possessive. Anyway, the doctors are telling me that I'd better settle up my business, because the world is soon going to have to learn to live without me.*

*At the bottom of the page is Sovie's address in Los Angeles. Yes, she lives in L.A., just like you.*

*Timmy died a year ago from breast cancer and so, when I'm gone, Sovie's going to be alone in the world.*

*I'm sorry for keeping this from you, Little Brother. I know it's worse than anything else I ever did.*

*I love you.*

*Seth*

My heart started beating rapidly a minute or two after the third time I read the letter. I could have sat there and guessed for a hundred years and never come up with what Seth had to say. I had a child in the world and hadn't known it. I was a father with none of the responsibilities, fears, or joys of parenthood.

I went out to the liquor store and bought two fifths of Jack Daniel's and three packs of

filterless Camels.

For a day and a half, all I did was drink and smoke. I had given up both habits when I was twenty-three years old. I'd realized one day that I was trying to kill myself with the legal drugs of my culture. And every day for seventeen years I'd wanted to end my smokeless sobriety.

I crashed around the house, cursing my brother and mother, my sister, who knew, and even Timberly for trusting Seth more than she did me. At one point, near the end of my private orgy, I raised a hickory chair up above my head and smashed it on the hardwood floor. Then, melodramatically, I crumpled to my knees and cried over the broken furniture.

Maybe five minutes after my outburst a rapping came at the door. A few seconds later I heard another, bolder knock.

I climbed to my feet, suppressed a gag reflex, and stumbled to the front of my boxy little home.

Standing there on our common porch was Rose Henley. She was as short as ever, but her hair had not yet turned completely white.

"Are you all right, Mr. Vaness?"

"No, ma'am, I am not."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing I can point at, but everything else."

"I don't understand. I heard a crash, and I wanted to make sure you weren't hurt."

"You're a brave woman," I said, barely aware of what I was saying. "Somebody could have been killing me over here."

"Does it have to do with that man who came here a few days ago?"

"Yes. But he was only the bearer of the message that I have fucked up everything."

"Why don't you come over to my house and have a cup of coffee?" she suggested. "Sober up a little bit."

Rose Henley's home was everything that my apartment was not. The floor was carpeted, and not a thread was out of place. A painting on the living-room wall was of a reclining nude woman who looked somewhat like a younger version of my neighbor.

She had me sit on a tan sofa and served me a weak cup of percolated coffee.

"Now," she said, when we were both settled, "what's the problem?"

Her face was broad, but her black eyes were set close together. The concern in that face was something I didn't remember ever having been shown me before.

I told her everything, all about how Seth had tortured me, and how my sister probably knew about the child I'd fathered, about my mother and father and stepfather, my failure to surpass the image that everyone seemed to hold of me.

"I don't even know why I dropped out of college," I said at one point. "I don't know when I gave up on myself."

"You haven't been to work in a few days, have you?" she asked.

"I'm sure they fired me. The temp agency called, but I didn't answer."

"You need to take a cold shower, get a good night's sleep, and then go to see your daughter," Rose said.

"I have to get a job first," I replied. "You know Mr. Poplar wants his rent."

"Poplar works for the landlord," she said. "I don't think the owner would kick you out under these circumstances."

"Oh? Why not?"

"Because I own this house, Mr. Vaness. And I like you."

The address for Sojourner "Sovie" Alexander was on Overland, just south of Pico Boulevard. It was the smallest house on the block and in need of a paint job. But the lawn was green and manicured. There were healthy rose bushes under the front windows.

The door was open and the screen closed. I saw a doorbell, but knocked anyway. After a few

moments a tallish, honey-colored girl in her early twenties appeared.

"Miss Alexander?," I said. I'd practiced calling her Miss.

"No," she replied, pursing her lips as if she was going to whistle, or maybe kiss someone. "Who are you?"

"I'm here to see Miss Alexander," I said. "Is she home?"

Staring quizzically at me, the honey-colored young woman shouted, "Sovie! It's for you!"

The young woman went away, and before I could count to ten, a young white girl of the same age as her roommate walked up. She had light-blond hair and looked at me with a furrowed brow. She took in a quick breath and then realized something.

"Roger Vaness?" she said.

"Um, yes."

"You look a lot like Uncle Seth. Three days ago I got a letter from him," she said. "This tall bald guy brought it. The man told me that Uncle Seth had died. He said — Uncle Seth said in the letter — that my real father was ... was you."

"I got the same letter. I never knew. Nobody — not your mother or Seth or anybody — ever told me that I had a little girl."

We stared at each other through the gray haze of the screen, both of us unsure of what to do.

"Can I take you out for coffee?," I asked.

"I'll get my sweater," she said.

We commandeered a small round table at the window of a coffeehouse on Westwood, near Pico. There we talked for hours.

Timmy had told her daughter that she didn't know who her father was, that she had been wild as a child but sobered up when Sovie came. Seth was an old friend who dropped by regularly. Sovie had often wished that Seth was her father, or at least her real uncle.

"I guess he was my uncle," she said at one point, realizing for the first time the blood relation.

"But Timmy never told you that I was black?," I asked.

"Never."

"Does that bother you?"

"It bothers me that she lied about you."

"I mean it doesn't bother you that you're black?"

"Oh," she said, looking very much like me and not. "I didn't even think about that. Wow."

"I don't know what to say to you, Sojourner. I'm sittin' here with a stranger, but I feel so much love that has been lost."

"Me too. When I read Seth's letter, I felt like ... I don't know ... I felt like an old-time explorer on the verge of discovering a new continent."

"Did he give you my address?"

"Yes," she said, meekly. "I drove by, but I couldn't make myself stop. I was just so nervous."

"That's okay. It's better that I came to you. A father should be there for his daughter."

I could see in Sojourner's eyes that she had been waiting her entire life to call a man Father. I put my big brown hand on her clenched white fists. She relaxed, and I thought that this was how I would have wanted it to be with my own father.

I called absolute temps and talked to the receptionist, Tanya Reed. I explained to Tanya exactly what happened, and she hooked me up with a six-week gig at Leonine Records, on Sunset. It was only \$16.75 an hour, but that covered the rent and gas.

For the next month, Sovie and I saw or talked to each other every day.

She was a history major, like I had been, and had a boyfriend, Chad, who I met and liked very much. I gave her my blood father's stack of Fantastic Four comics, saying that it was the only thing of value I owned. She didn't like comic books but took them anyway. I don't know why, but giving her those magazines felt like taking a two-ton weight off my skull.

Another month later, on a Saturday, I was cleaning my apartment to prepare for her and her



roommate, Ashanti Bowles, to come over for dinner the next day.

When the knock came on the door, I didn't think before opening it.

Lance Harding was wearing a pink suit with a red shirt and no tie. I wondered then if agents of the FRC had a dress code.

"Mr. Vaness," he said.

"I'm so glad to see you," I said, opening the door wide and ushering him into my clean house. "Come in, come in."

Sitting in the same chairs as before, we faced each other. Harding crossed his left leg over the right one and nodded.

"I wanted to call you, but I couldn't find a number for the FRC in the Yellow Pages," I said. "I planned to get on somebody's computer and look it up soon."

"Why were you looking for us?"

"For you," I said. "I wanted to ask you something that I didn't think of the last time we met."

"And what was that?"

"You mentioned my real father when we talked before. Do you know when he died?"

When Harding reached into his breast pocket, I was reminded of the fear I'd had of him the first time he sat at my table.

He came out with a small notepad and flipped through the pages. He stopped for a moment, read something, and then turned a leaf.

"In 1974," he said, "when you were two years old. He was found murdered in the home of a young prostitute named Pearl Watson."

"Do you know if anybody claimed the body?"

"Have you gone to see your daughter?" the FRC agent asked.

"How do you even know to ask that?"

"I'm here with another wish."

"Another \$5,000?"

"Have you visited your daughter?"

"Yes. Yes I have."

"Do you love her?"

"I do. This has to do with Seth's last wish?"

Instead of answering, Harding took another ivory envelope from his pocket.

Again he handed me a letter.

Again I hesitated.

When at last I accepted the letter, I expected Harding to leap up and leave like he did the first time. But he remained seated, staring at me.

"I am supposed to wait for a reply," he said.

"A reply to a dead man?"

Harding hunched his shoulders, and I tore open the envelope.

*Dear Roger,*

*now you've probably met Sovie, and I know because you're reading this letter that you at least say that you love her. I've been telling Dearby that I've been visiting with Althea because she has cancer and is dying. Althea does have cancer and she is dying, but I've also been doing my old thing in her house on her phone. Seems like bookies are back in style. I couldn't tell Dearby, because she'd want the money I'm making, and I needed that money for Sovie. I also needed to tell you about your daughter and to make sure that you cared for her.*

*The man sitting in front of you has a third envelope. This one has a legal document saying that the bearer should be allowed access to my safe-deposit box at Concordia Bank in downtown Cincinnati. There's \$137,941 in that box.*

*I saved that money for Sovie, but I owe you something too. And so you can either accept the document and help the child with her bills or you can turn the whole thing over to her and let her*

*decide how to handle it.*

*It's up to you, Brother.*

*Seth*

I folded the note and put it in my pocket.

"I got another question for you, Mr. Harding."

"Yes?"

"Do you take on trainee agents now and then?"

"Yes."

"Could I apply for that job?"

"I can make the proper connections. I happen to need an assistant, and your background fits our major criteria."

"Then you give that envelope you got in your pocket to Sojourner Alexander and send me the application form."

# The Gangsters - Colson Whitehead

(2008)

First, you had to settle the question of out. *When did you get out?* Asking this was like showing off, even though anyone you could ask had already received the same gift: the same sun wrapped in shiny paper, the same soft benevolent sky, the same gravel road that sooner or later would skin you, pure joy in the town of Sag Harbor. Still, it was hard not to believe that it all belonged to you more than to anyone else, that it had been made for you, had been waiting for years for you to come along. We all felt that way. We were so grateful just to be there, in the heat, after a long bleak year in the city. *When did you get out?*

In the summer of 1985, I was fifteen years old. My brother, Reggie, was fourteen. That year, we got out the second Saturday in June, in an hour and a half flat from the Upper West Side, having beat the traffic. Over the course of the summer, you heard a lot of different strategies for how to beat the traffic, or at least slap it around a little. There were those who ditched the office early on Friday afternoon, casually letting their co-workers know the reason for their departure, in order to enjoy a little low-pressure envy. Others headed back to the city late on Sunday evening, choking every last pulse of joy from the weekend with cocoa-buttered hands. They stopped to grab a bite and watched the slow red surge outside the restaurant window while dragging clam strips through tartar sauce — soon, soon, not yet — until the coast was clear. My father's method was easy and brutal: hit the road at five in the morning, so that we were the only living souls on the Long Island Expressway, making a break for it in the haunted dark. Well, it wasn't really dark — June sunrises are up and at 'em — but I always remember the drives that way, perhaps because my eyes were closed most of the time. The trick of those early-morning jaunts was to wake up just enough to haul a bag of clothes down to the car, nestle in, and then retreat back into sleep. My brother and I did a zombie march, slow and mute, to the back seat, where we turned into our separate nooks, sniffing the upholstery, butt to butt, looking more or less like a Rorschach test. What do you see in this picture? Two brothers going off in different directions.

We had recently ceased to be twins. We were born ten months apart, and until I started high school we had come as a matched set, more Siamese than identical, defined by our uncanny inseparability. Joined not at the hip or the spleen or the nervous system but at that most important place — that spot on your self where you meet the world. There was something in the human DNA that had compelled people to say "Benji 'n' Reggie, Benji 'n' Reggie" in a singsong way, as if we were cartoon characters. On the rare occasions when we'd been caught alone, the first thing people had asked was "Where's Benji?" or "Where's Reggie?," whereupon we'd delivered a thorough account of our other's whereabouts, quickly including context, as if embarrassed to be caught out in the sunlight with only half a shadow: "He rode into town. He lost his *cat* Diesel Power cap at the beach and went to get a new one at the five-and-ten."

Where is the surgeon gifted enough to undertake separating these hapless conjoined? Paging Doc Puberty, arms scrubbed, smocked to the hilt, smacking the nurses on the ass and well versed in the latest techniques. More suction! Javelin and shot put — that's about right. Hormones had sent me up and air-borne, tall and skinny, a knock-kneed reed, while Reggie, always chubby in the cheeks and arms, had bulged out into something round and pinchable. Through junior high, we had disentangled week by week, one new hair at a time. There were no complications of the physical separation, but what about the mental one — severing the phantom connection whereby if Reggie stubbed his toe I cried out in pain, and vice versa? By the time we left for Sag Harbor in the summer of 1985, we'd reached the point where if someone asked, "Where's Reggie?" I didn't always know.

My mother said, "We're making good time." The L.I.E. had stopped slicing towns in half and now cut through untamed Nassau County greenery, always a good sign. I tried to claw my way back into sleep until we'd ditched Route 27 and cruise control and weaved down Scuttlehole Road, zipping past the white fencing and rusting wire that held back the bulging acres at the side of the road. I smelled the sweetly muddy fumes of the potato fields and pictured the cornstalks in their long regiments. My mother said, "That sweet Long Island corn," as she always did. She'd been coming out since she was a kid, her father part of the first wave of black folks from the city to start spending their summers in Sag Harbor. Which made my brother and me, and all our raggedy friends out there, the third generation. For what it was worth. Reggie had been farting for the last five minutes while pretending to be asleep. My feet scrabbled under the front seat in anticipation. Almost there. We slowed by the old red barn at the Turnpike and made the left. From there to our house was like falling down a chute: nothing left to do but prepare for landing. It was six-thirty in the morning. That was that. We were out for the summer.

All the ill shit went down on Thursdays.

Our parents went back to the city every Sunday night, leaving us alone in Sag for five days while they brought home the bacon. Mondays Reggie and I slept in, lulled by the silence in the rest of the house. The only racket was the sound of the carpenter ants gnawing the soft wood under the deck — not much of a racket at all. When we met up with the rest of our crew — most of our friends in Sag were similarly unsupervised during the week — we traded baroque schemes about what we'd get up to before all our parents came out again. The week was a vast continent for us to explore and conquer. Then suddenly we ran out of land. Wednesdays we woke up agitated, realizing that our idyll was half over. We got busy trying to cram it all in between minimum-wage shifts at the local fast-food spots. Sometimes we messed up on Wednesdays, but it was never a Thursday-size mess-up. No, Thursday we reserved for the thoroughly botched mishaps that called for shame and first aid and apologies. All the ill shit — the disasters we made with our own hands — went down on Thursdays, because on Fridays the parents returned and disasters were out of our control.

The first gun was Randy's. Which should have been a sign that we were heading toward a classic Thursday. This was Randy's first summer in our group of friends, the blame for which falls on his parents' lovemaking schedule. He was an in-between, living like a weed in the cracks between the micro-demographic groups of the Sag Harbor developments. Too old to hang out with us, really, and too young to be fully accepted by the older kids, he had wafted in a social netherworld for years. Now he had just finished his freshman year in college but, against usual custom, he still came out to Sag. He drove a moss-green Toyota hatchback that he claimed to have bought for a hundred bucks. Its fenders were dented and dimpled, rust mottled the frame in leprous clumps, and the inside smelled like hippie anarchists on the lam had made it their commune. But who was I to cast aspersions? Randy had a car, he was old enough to buy us beer, and for this we accepted him into our tribe and overlooked his shortcomings.

I usually didn't go to Randy's — he didn't have a hanging-out house. But everybody else was working that day. Nick at the Jonni Waffle ice-cream shop, where I worked, too, Clive bar-backing at the Long Wharf Restaurant, Reggie and Bobby flipping Whoppers at Burger King. I felt like I hadn't seen Reggie in weeks. We had contrary schedules, me working in town, him in Southampton. When we overlapped in the house we were usually too exhausted from work to even bicker properly. I had no other option but to call N.P., not my No. 1 choice, and his mother told me that he was at Randy's. Normally I would have said forget it, but there was a chance that they might be driving somewhere, an expedition to Karts-A-Go-Go or Hither Hills, and later I'd have to hear them exaggerate how much fun they had.

Randy lived in Sag Harbor Hills, on Hillside Drive, a dead-end street off our usual circuit. I knew it as the street where the Yellow House was, the one Mark Barrows used to stay in. Mark was a nerdy kid I got along with, who came out for a few summers to visit his grandmother.

When I turned the corner to Hillside, I saw that the Yellow House's yard was overgrown and the blinds were drawn, as they had been for years now. I hadn't seen Mark in a long time, but a few weeks before I'd happened to ask my mother if she knew why he didn't come out anymore, and she'd said, "Oh, it turned out that Mr. Barrows had another family."

There was a lot of Other Family going around that summer. For a while it verged on an epidemic. I found it fascinating, wondering at the mechanics of it all. One family in New Jersey and one in Kansas — what kind of cover story hid those miles? These were lies to aspire to. And who was to say which was the Real Family and which was the Other Family? Was the Sag Harbor family of our acquaintance the shadowy antimatter family, or was it the other way around — that family living in a new Delaware subdivision, the one gobbling crumbs with a smile? I pictured the kids scrambling to the front door at the sound of Daddy's car in the driveway at last (the brief phone calls from the road only magnify his absence), and Daddy taking a moment after he turned off the ignition to orient himself and figure out who and where he was this time. *Yes, I recognize those people standing in the doorway — that's my family.* Everyone tucked in tight. The family ate together and communicated. And then Daddy lit out for this Zip Code, changed his face, and everything was reversed. One man, two houses. Two faces. Which house you lived in, kids, was the luck of the draw.

Randy and N.P. were in the street. They were bent over, looking at something on the ground. I yelled, "Yo!" They didn't respond. I walked up.

"Look at that," N.P. said.

"What happened to it?" I asked. A robin was lying on the asphalt, but it didn't have the familiar tread-mark tattoo of most roadkill. It was tiny and still.

"Randy shot it," N.P. said.

Randy grinned and held up his BB rifle proudly. The metal was sleek, inky black, the fake wood grain of the stock and forearm glossy in the sun. "I got it at Caldor," he said.

We looked down at the robin again.

"It landed on the power pole and I just took the shot," Randy said. "I've been practicing all day."

"Is it dead?" I asked.

"I don't see any blood," N.P. answered.

"Maybe it's just a concussion," I said.

"You should stuff it and mount it," N.P. said.

I thought, That's uncool, a judgment I'd picked up from the stoners at my "predominately white" private school, who had decided, toward the end of the spring semester, that I was O.K., and let me hang out in their vicinity, or at least linger unmolested, as a prelude to a provisional adoption by their clan next fall. I liked "uncool" because it meant that there was a code that everyone agreed on. The rules didn't change — everything in the universe was either cool or uncool, no confusion. "That's uncool," someone said, and "That is so uncool," another affirmed, the voice of justice itself, nasal and uncomplicated.

Randy let N.P. take the rifle and N.P. held it in his hands, testing its weight. It looked solid and formidable. He aimed at invisible knuckleheads loitering at the end of the street: "Stick 'em up!" He pumped the stock three times, *clack clack clack*, and pulled the trigger. And again.

"It's empty, dummy," Randy said.

To observe N.P. was to witness a haphazard choreography of joints and limbs. His invisible puppeteer had shaky hands, making it seem as if N.P. were always on the verge of busting out into some freaky dance move. Looking back, I think that his condition was more likely caused by him trying to keep his freaky dance moves in check — whatever convulsive thing he'd taken notes on at a party the week before and had just finished practicing in his room. That I wouldn't have heard of the dance was a given — the Phillie Bugaloo, the Reverse Cabbage Patch. To hang out with N.P. was to try to catch up on nine months of black slang and other sundry soulful

artifacts I'd missed out on at school.

Not that I didn't learn anything at school, culturewise. The hallways between classes were a tutelage into the wide range of diversions that our country's white youth had come up with to occupy themselves. When I had free time between engineering my own humiliations, I was introduced to the hacky sack, a sort of miniature leather beanbag that compelled white kids to juggle with their feet. It was a wholesome communal activity, I saw, as they lobbed the object among each other, cheering themselves on. It appeared to foster teamwork and good will among its adherents. Bravo! There was also a kind of magical rod called a lacrosse stick. It directed the more outgoing and athletic specimens of my school to stalk the carpeted floors and obsessively wring their hands around it, as if to call forth popularity or a higher degree of social acceptance through diligent application of friction. You heard them muttering "*hut hut hut*" in a masturbatory fervor as they approached. Good stuff, in an anthropological sense. But these things were not the Technotronic Bunny Hop, or the Go Go Bump-Stomp, the assorted field exercises of black boot camp.

We called him N.P., for "Nigger, please," because no matter what came out of his mouth, that was usually the most appropriate response. He was our best liar, a raconteur of baroque teen-age shenanigans. Everything in his field of vision reminded him of some escapade he needed to share, or directed him to some escapade about to begin, as soon as all the witnesses had departed. He was dependable for nonsense like "Yo, last night, after you left, I went back to that party and got with that Queens girl. She told me she was raised strict, but I was all up in those titties! She paid me fifty dollars!"

Nigger, please.

"Yo, yo, listen: I was walking by the Miller house and I went to take a look at their Rolls, and get this, I was, like, they left the keys in the ignition. You know I took that shit for a spin. I was like Thurston Howell III up in that bitch! With Gilligan!"

Nigger, please.

Like me and Reggie, N.P. had come out to Sag every summer of his life — and even before he was born, as his mother had waded out into the bay to cool her pregnant belly. We had beaten each other up, stolen each other's toys, fallen asleep in the back seats of station wagons together as we caravanned back from double features at the Bridgehampton Drive-In, the stars scrolling beyond the back window. We were copying our parents, who had been beating each other up, eating each other's barbecue, chasing each other down the hacked-out footpaths to the beach, thirty years earlier, under the same sky.

According to the world, we were the definition of paradox: black boys with beach houses. What kind of bourgeois sellout Negroes were we, with BMWs (Black Man's Wagons, in case you didn't know) in our driveways and private schools to teach us how to use a knife and fork, and sort *that* from *dat*? What about keeping it real? What about the news, the statistics, the great narrative of black pathology? Just check out the newspapers, preferably in a movie-style montage sequence, the alarming headlines dropping in-frame with a thud, one after the other: "*crisis in the inner city!*"; "*whither all the baby daddies*"; "*the truth about the welfare state: they just don't want to work*"; "*not like in the good old days.*"

Black boys with beach houses. It could mess with your head sometimes, if you were the susceptible sort. And if it messed with your head, got under your brown skin, there were some typical and well-known remedies. You could embrace the beach part — revel in the luxury, the perception of status, wallow without care in what it meant to be born in America with money, or the appearance of money, as the case may be. No apologies. Or you could embrace the black part — take some idea you had about what real blackness was, and make theatre out of it, your own 24/7 one-man show. Street, ghetto. Act hard, act out, act in a way that would come to be called gangsterish, pulling petty crimes, a soft kind of tough, knowing that there'd always be someone to post bail if one of your grubby schemes fell apart. Or you could embrace the contradiction.

You could say, What you call paradox, I call *myself*. At least, in theory: those inclined to this remedy didn't have a lot of obvious models.

We headed into Randy's house to get some more ammo. He opened the screen door and yelled, "Mom, I'm inside with my friends!" and the sound of a TV was silenced as a door closed with a thud. Randy got the BBs from his room, then led us out through the kitchen into the back yard. Brown leaves drifted in dirty pools in the butts of chairs. Behind the house were woods, which allowed him to convert the patio into a firing range. He'd dragged the barbecue grill to the edge of the trees — I saw a trail of ashes — and around its three feet lay cans and cups riddled with tiny holes.

Steve Austin, the Six Million Dollar Man, who had been rebuilt at great expense with taxpayers' money, stood on the red dome of the barbecue, his bionic hands in eternal search of necks to throttle. Randy took aim. The action figure stared impassively, his extensive time on the operating table having granted him a stoic's quiet grace. It took five shots, Randy pumping and clacking the stock with increasing fury as we observed his shitty marksmanship. Then Steve Austin tumbled off the lid and lay on his side, his pose undisturbed in the dirt. Didn't even blink. They really knew how to make an action figure back then.

"I want to get the optional scope for greater accuracy," Randy explained, "but that costs more money."

"Lemme try that shit now," N.P. said.

I left soon after. I threw out a "You guys want to head to East Hampton to buy records?," but no one bit. I'd thought we were past playing with guns. I walked around the side of the house, and when I got to the street the bird was gone.

That was the first gun. The next was Bobby's. This one was a pistol, a replica of a 9-mm.

Bobby was still in the early stages of his transformation into that weird creature the prep-school militant. The usual schedule for good middle-class black boys and girls called for them to get militant and fashionably Afrocentric in the first semester of freshman year of college: underlining key passages in "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" and that passed-around paperback of "Black Skin, White Masks"; organizing a march or two to protest the lack of tenure for that controversial professor in the Department of Black Studies; organizing a march or two to protest the lack of a Department of Black Studies. It passed the time until business school. But Bobby got an early start on all that, returning to Sag from his sophomore year of high school with a new, clipped pronunciation of the word "whitey," and a fondness for using the phrases "white-identified" and "false consciousness" while watching "The Cosby Show." It caused problems as he fretted over his Zip Code ("Scarsdale ain't nothing but a high-class shantytown. It's a gilded lean-to") and how changing his name might affect his Ivy League prospects ("Your transcript says Bobby Emerson, but you said your name was Sadat X").

We used to make fun of him for being so light-skinned, and this probably contributed to some of his overcompensating. The joke was that, if the K.K.K. came pounding on Bobby's door and demanded, "Where the black people at?" (it's well known — the fondness of the K.K.K. for ending sentences with a preposition), he'd say, "They went thataway!" with a minstrel eye-roll and a vaudeville arm flourish. He rebelled against his genes, the Caucasian DNA in his veins square-dancing with strong African DNA. It's a tough battle, defending one flank against nature while nurture sneaks in from the east with whole battalions. He directed most of his hostile talk at his mother, who worked on Wall Street. "My mom wouldn't give me twenty dollars for the weekend. She's sucking the white man's dick all day, Morgan Stanley cracker, and can't give me twenty dollars!" His mother bore the brunt of his misguided rage, even though his father worked at Goldman Sachs and wasn't exactly a dashiki-clad community leader. But get a bunch of teenage virgins together, and you're bound to rub up against some mother issues. Let he who is without sin cast the first plucked-out orb of Oedipal horror.

We were in Bobby's room. He had invited me over to play Lode Runner on his Apple II+, but

when I got up there he dug under his mattress and pulled out a BB pistol.

I jerked my head toward the open door. "What about your grandpa?"

He pointed to his alarm clock. It was 7:35 *p.m.* Which meant that his grandparents had been asleep for five minutes. Bobby's parents were there only on weekends, like ours; unlike us, he was not completely unsupervised during the week. His grandparents were there to make sure that he got fed. But after seven-thirty he crawled over the wall.

"Me and N.P. went with Randy to Caldor and got one," Bobby said. "He got the silver one, but I wanted the black one. It's the joint, right? Greg Tiller's cousin has a gun like this," he added, squinting down the pistol's sight. "I saw it once at his house. You know what he's into, right?"

"No, what?"

"You know, some hardcore shit. He was in jail." He held it out. "Do you want to hold it?"

"No, that's all right."

"What are you, a pussy?"

I shrugged.

"Me and Reggie were shooting stuff over at the creek today," Bobby said. "He has good aim. He should be a sniper in the Marine Corps."

I'd seen Reggie before he went off to Burger King, asked him what he'd been up to.

"Nothing," he'd said.

"Let me see that," I said. It was heavier than it looked. I curled my finger around the trigger. O.K. Got the gist. I pretended to study it for a moment more, then gave it back to him.

"I'm going to bring this shit to school," Bobby said. He put his crazy face on. "Stick up some pink motherfuckers. *Bla-blam!*"

Which was bullshit. Hunting preppies — the Deadliest Game of All — would have cut into his daily vigil outside the college counsellor's office. This BB-gun shit was making people act like dummies.

To wit: he pointed it at me. "Hands in the air!"

I shielded my eyes with my hand. "Get that shit outta my face!"

He laughed. "Hot oil! Hot oil!" he said, rolling his eyes manically.

Reggie had started saying "Hot oil! Hot oil!" whenever I bossed him around or said something lame. After the twentieth time, I asked him why he kept saying that, and he said that there was a semi-retarded guy who worked at Burger King through a special program, and he always got agitated when he walked by the fryers, squealing "Hot oil! Hot oil!" to remind himself.

"Don't worry. I got the safety on," Bobby said, pulling the trigger. A BB shot out, hit the wall, ricocheted into his computer monitor, bounced against the window, and disappeared under his bed. "Sorry, man! Sorry, sorry!" he yelped. Downstairs, one might conjecture, Grandpa stirred in his sleep.

At least it was a plastic BB. Randy had copper BBs. The plastic ones didn't hurt that much. The copper ones could do some real damage, as I saw the following week when I found myself out on "target practice." We were on our way to Bridgehampton to walk around, Randy driving, Clive, N.P., and me. Then Randy pulled into the parking lot of Mashashimuet Park.

"I thought we were going to Bridgehampton," I said.

"After we go shooting," Randy said.

We walked onto the trails behind the park. N.P. carried a moldy cardboard box. When I asked him what was inside, he said, "That would be telling."

Randy had the spot all picked out. The abandoned Karmann Ghia. It made sense. We'd tried to make a plaything of it many a boredom-crazed afternoon, but it was too rusted to incorporate into high jinks beyond throwing rocks through its dwindling windows. (We were a tetanus-phobic group, lockjaw being the most sinister villain we could imagine.) But not anymore. The guns gave us the distance to hasten the car's ruin.



Randy's first attempts were unspectacular, his BBs zipping straight through the car's exterior, leaving a tiny, fingertip-size hole you had to get up close to see. But, as his aim improved and he figured out the key pressure points, a BB disintegrated a nice section of the car's weakened frame. "You see how I pump it?" he asked rhetorically. "The more you pump it, the faster the f.p.s." Feet per second, I guessed, and later confirmed when I sat on some ketchup-stained rifle literature in the back seat of Randy's car. "Low f.p.s. is good if you just want to scare a deer or another critter off your property. Higher f.p.s. is when you really want to send a message." *Yee-haw!*

N.P. and Clive took turns with N.P.'s pistol — Randy was clinging tight to his baby today — and although it was diverting for a while, I started to wonder if we'd have enough time to drive to Bridgehampton and back before my shift.

"We just got here, dag," N.P. said.

"I'm not ready to go," Randy said as he reloaded his rifle.

Clive had taken a few shots. He seemed to be enjoying himself. "Why don't you go ahead and try it?" he asked me.

Clive had always been the leader of our group. He was just cool, no joke. He was that rare thing among us: halfway normal, socialized, capable, and charismatic. Tall and muscular, he had the physical might to beat us up, but he broke up fights instead, separating combatants while dodging their whirling fists, and no one complained. Plus, he knew how to talk to girls, had girlfriends, plural. Good-looking girlfriends, too, by all accounts, with all their teeth and everything. Last summer he'd even dated an older woman — in her twenties! Who lived in Springs! Who had a kid! He had his problems, like the rest of us, but he hadn't let them deform his character. Not back then.

I took N.P.'s gun. Clive offered me the carton of BBs. In their small blue box, the copper BBs turned molten in the sun. N.P. said, "Let's break out the stuff," and opened the box he'd brought along. It was filled with items scavenged from his basement — a porcelain vase, a bunch of drinking glasses with groovy sixties designs, a Nerf football with tooth marks in it, a bottle of red nail polish, and other junk chosen for its breakable quality.

"Here, do the radio," N.P. said. He dug into the box and perched an old transistor radio on top of the Karmann Ghia. I took my time. I wiped the sweat off my forehead. I held my shooting arm with my left hand, gunslinger style. Drew a bead.

The radio made a sad *ting*, tottered in cheap suspense, and fell into the dirt. I'd hit it toward the top, knocking it off balance. The words "center of gravity" came to me, secondhand track-and-field lingo from my vain attempt to place out of P.E. that spring. I couldn't throw a ball worth shit with my girly arm, but somehow I'd hit the radio. N.P. whooped it up, slapping me on the back. Clive offered a terse "Good shooting," like a drill instructor trying not to be too affirming. I grinned.

We positioned the other relics from N.P.'s basement. The vase didn't explode, but each time it was hit another jagged section fell off, so that we could see more of its insides. It finally collapsed on its own while we were reloading. I aimed at an old lampshade of rainbow-colored glass, and, though I didn't re-create the swell marksmanship of my first attempt, I had to admit it was fun. Not the shooting itself, but the satisfaction of discovering a new way to kill a chunk of summer. It was like scraping out a little cave, making a new space in the hours to hide in for a time.

I placed the final victim on top of the car — the neon-green Nerf football. We'd saved it for last because nothing topped Nerf abuse. It was Randy's turn, but, as it was N.P.'s Nerf ball, he established dibs. It turned out that N.P. couldn't hit it. Time after time. We'd been out there in the sun for hours and we were dehydrated. The rush, the novelty, was gone, and we all felt it. Finally, N.P. gave up and handed his pistol to Clive. Randy said, "N.P. couldn't hit the broad side of a barn," that hoary marksman's slur.

N.P. exploded. He always had put-downs to spare, but now he grasped after his trademark finesse. "I could hit your fat fuckin' ass fine, you fuckin' Rerun-from-'What's Happ'ning'-looking motherfucker."

"What the fuck did you say?"

"You fuckin' biscuit-eatin' bitch!"

Randy's hours of picking off his old toys in the back yard finally found their true outlet. He stroked his rifle, *clack clack*, and started shooting the dirt at N.P.'s feet. "Dance, nigger, dance!" he shouted, in Old West saloon fashion, which was pretty fucked-up, and the copper BBs detonated in the ground in brief puffs. N.P. skipped from foot to foot, his bright-white sneakers flashing like surrender flags. "Dance!" I don't think Randy was aiming at N.P.'s feet, but I couldn't be sure. What if he missed? One of those BBs, depending on the f.p.s., would rip through the sneaker, definitely. How much deeper I didn't know.

Clive and I shouted for Randy to knock it off. Clive took a step toward Randy, hands out defensively. He was fast enough to rush him, but nevertheless. Randy glared at Clive — I swear he made a calculation — and then lowered the rifle, with an "I was just playing."

N.P. charged Randy, cursing like a motherfucker. Clive restrained him. "That's uncool," I said, but no one chimed in with the other-shoe "That's so uncool." The boys boiled off in their neutral corners, and we left soon after, scratching the Bridgehampton excursion without discussion.

That was on a Wednesday. The next Monday, we were back at the threshold of another empty week we needed to fill. We convened at our place that night: Reggie, Randy, Bobby, Clive, and Nick, who was living out there full time now. He'd been a summer kid, one of our gang through many adventures, but something had happened between his parents — we never asked about family processes, only accepted the results when informed — and now he and his mom were living in Sag Harbor Hills. He went to Pierson High School, was technically a townie, by definitions that he himself would have upheld, and was embarrassed by this. "This whole Sag thing is just temporary," he frequently told us, to reassure himself. I saw that he had a new gold chain. His old one had said "Nick," in two-inch letters. His new chain said "Big Nick," in two-inch letters, and was studded with tiny white rhinestones.

"Nice," I said.

"Got my man in Queens Plaza to do it," he said.

My father would've kicked me out of the house if I'd walked in with a gold chain around my neck. Not that it ever would've occurred to me to get a gold chain. But Nick! Circumstances had forced Nick to embrace the early-eighties fashions of urban black boys with verve and unashamed gusto. He loved two-tone jeans, gray in the front, black in the back, months out of fashion but authentic city artifacts out there in Sag. The laces on his Adidases were puffy and magnificent, and if he wasn't wearing his Jonni Waffle T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up, juvenile-delinquent style, he wore a Knicks jersey that showed off his muscles. Muscles that had been produced by lugging his enormous boom box around. His radio was the most ridiculous thing, the biggest radio any of us had ever seen or ever would see. It was a yard wide, half as much tall, a gleaming silver slab of stereophonic dynamism. It didn't do much. Played the terrible East End radio stations. Played cassettes. Made a dub at the touch of a button. For all I know it was mostly air inside, save for the bushel of double-D batteries it took to power the thing, and which Nick spent most of his wages on.

Randy had brought beer, which was a new feature of our lives that summer. The drinking age was nineteen then, which made Randy legal and Clive tall enough to buy take-out six-packs at the corner bar unchallenged. One beer and I was buzzed, two beers I was drunk. We asked one another, "Which one are you on?," to see who was ahead and who was falling behind. Pointing at the empties for proof.

"Why don't you open the screen door to let the air in here?" Randy said.

"It's a screen door. The air comes through," Reggie said. "Plus the mosquitoes will get us."

"Then leave the lights out. They won't come in," Randy said. "I'm hot."

Reggie opened the screen door, and we hunkered in the gloom. We had three days to fill. Clive suggested night blue-fishing off Montauk. But the rest of us agreed that it was too expensive to go more than once a season, given the realities of minimum wage, and we'd already been once. Reggie, who this summer had decided that he was no longer afraid of the water, disavowing a key tenet of the men in our family, said that we should borrow Nick's uncle's motorboat again. But Nick said that his uncle was having the hull refinished. Bobby busted out that old chestnut Ask Mrs. Upland if We Can Go in Her Pool, but Clive and Nick immediately said no dice. Mrs. Upland's son had died five years before. He'd grown up in Sag in a crew with Clive's father and Nick's father, and the last time they'd used her pool she'd kept calling them by their fathers' names and it had creped them out.

Stumped, and it wasn't even August yet.

"Let's show dicks," Randy suggested.

Cricket, cricket.

"Why the hell would we do that?" Clive asked, finally.

"To see who has the biggest dick," Randy said.

"Next time we go to Karts-A-Go-Go, we should race for money and time ourselves to see who's the fastest," I said, steering the proceedings like a good host. I wasn't much of a go-cart driver, but I thought the novelty of the scheme might appeal.

Bobby turned on his m.c. voice: "One Two Three, in the place to be." And Reggie said, "All right!" They started their routine and I rolled my eyes in the darkness. Bobby and my brother had memorized the lyrics to Run-D.M.C.'s "Here We Go" and had to perform it at least ten times a day. Bobby was Run, Reggie was D.M.C. Bobby took the lead, Reggie sidekicking after each line like an exclamation point. Back and forth, a real fucking duo. Clive kept the beat with his hands.

"It's like that, y'all."

"That y'all!"

"It's like that, y'all."

"That y'all."

"It's like that-a-tha-that, a-like that, y'all."

"That y'all!"

"Cool chief rocker, I don't drink vodka, but keep a bag of cheeba inside my locker."

"HUH!"

"Go to school every day."

"HUH!"

"Always time to get paid."

"HA HUH!"

" 'Cause I'm rockin' on the mic until the break of day!"

Run-D.M.C. boasting about staying in school — quaint days in the history of hip-hop. To my chagrin, I had never heard the song before Reggie and Bobby started singing it. I thought I knew all of Run-D.M.C.'s records, the self-titled *début* and "King of Rock," but I was a square. The song was a limited-edition live recording made at a club called the Funhouse, taped "Funky fresh for 1983," according to the lyrics. Bobby had introduced the song to Reggie, who dubbed a copy on Nick's boom box.

Distracted, no one followed up on my Karts-A-Go-Go plan. In my jealousy, I pictured Bobby and Reggie performing their bit behind the counter at Burger King, their clubhouse where I was not allowed, in their paper Burger King caps and hairnets, while the retarded guy chimed in with "Hot oil! Hot oil!" like an amen.

We continued to brainstorm. No progress. Then someone said, "We should have a BB-gun

fight," and it stuck. The only thing to silence the new hunger. That was that. Our house was full of mosquitoes for a week, and Reggie and I had to sleep with our heads under the sheets to keep them out of our ears.

The next day, Randy drove me and Clive to Caldor, the East End's one-stop emporium for action figures and beach towels, insect-repelling candles and beach chairs, lighter fluid and flip-flops. After consulting our savings, kept in battered envelopes in topnotch hiding places around the house to prevent each other from skimming some off the top, Reggie and I had decided that it would be best if we shared a BB pistol, with one of us borrowing Randy's spare for the fight itself. This arrangement would also allow me to keep track of Reggie's gun activity. I was sure he was going to hurt himself. Bobby would cook up some dumb idea and Reggie would go along with it and he'd get hurt. I had to look out for him; in fact, the night of the Mosquito Summit, I decided to try to get the BB-gun fight scheduled to overlap with one of his shifts at Burger King. We all missed key shenanigans because of work. There was no reason that this couldn't be one of Reggie's turns to listen to glorious tales and rue his absence until the end of time.

Reggie and I hadn't had toy guns, growing up, so we had to catch up. Green or orange water pistols had been O.K., but anything else had sent our father speechifying. "That's some white-man shit," he'd say, confiscating the cap gun from a birthday-party goody bag. "Whitey loves his guns. Shoot somebody — he loves that shit. So let him. No kid of mine is going to get that mind-set." I practiced solo, deep in the recesses of the creek, out of sight of beachgoers and homeowners. Why startle the happy vacationers with the sight of a skinny, slouching teen-ager, the sun glinting off his braces and his handgun?

When it was Reggie's turn to practice, he'd disappear with Bobby for one of their secret confabs, probably a razzle-dazzle rapping/shooting extravaganza of great theatre. *It's like that, y'all*. Not that the rest of us were immune. N.P. tucked his piece into his belt like a swaggering cop on the take or the cracker sheriff of a Jim Crow Podunk. Clive was observed busting a Dirty Harry move when he thought we weren't looking, and Randy was often found cradling his rifle to his chest, a gruesome sneer on his face, as if he were about to take an East Hampton bistro hostage. I myself favored a two-handed promising-rookie pose, the kind used by "Starsky and Hutch" extras who got clipped before the first commercial and were avenged for the rest of the hour. "He woulda made a good cop, just like his old man."

It was only a matter of time before we started posing for album covers. Not one from innocent '85, but one from a few years later, after the music had changed from this:

*Rhymes so def*

*Rhymes rhymes galore*

*Rhymes that you've never even heard before*

*Now if you say you heard my rhyme*

*We gonna have to fight*

*'Cause I just made the motherfuckers up last night*

to this:

*"Hey yo, Cube, there go that motherfucker right there."*

*"No shit. Watch this ... Hey, what's up, man?"*

*"Not too much."*

*"You know you won, G."*

*"Won what?"*

*"The wet T-shirt contest, motherfucker!"*

*[sounds of gunfire]*

Lyrics from the aforementioned "Here We Go" and "Now I Gotta Wet 'Cha," copyright 1992, by Ice Cube, born the same year as me, who grew up on Run-D.M.C. just like we all did. "Wet 'cha," as in "wet your shirt with blood." Something happened in those nine years. Something happened that changed the terms, and we went from fighting (*I'll knock that grin off your face*) to

annihilation (*I will wipe you from this earth*). How we got from here to there is a key passage in the history of young black men that no one cares to write.

On Wednesday, we went over the rules at Clive's house. No shooting at the eyes or face — that was a no-brainer. No cheating — if you're hit, you're hit, don't be a bitch about it. Sag Harbor Hills was the boundary of the battlefield — no cutting through to other developments and sneaking back to emerge ambush-style. I said that we should all wear goggles, just in case, and to my surprise the others seemed to agree. There was talk of synchronizing watches, but no one wore a watch in the summer except me, because summer is its own time and I was the only one who didn't know this. When the scheduling question came up, I said, "Tomorrow night?," and everyone but Reggie was free then. The weekend was out — too many people around — and no one wanted to put it off till the following week. Reggie was benched and I was glad.

Not that it could have gone down any other way. Although we had hatched the plan for a BB-gun war on a Monday, there was no question that in the end it would go down on a Thursday.

There was just one matter left to discuss: the issue of Randy's rifle and the f.p.s. A metal BB from one of the pistols, at the range we were going to be shooting at one another, would hurt a little but not that much, according to hearsay. Pump the rifle enough times, however, and it was going to break the skin.

"But if I can't pump I'll be at a disadvantage," Randy moaned.

"We have to figure out how many rifle pumps is equal to the standard pistol shot," I offered.

"How do we figure that out?" Clive asked.

"We can test it out on Marcus," Randy said.

Marcus said, "O.K.," and we headed out into the yard.

Marcus was a key player in our group, in that he reassured us that there was someone more unfortunate than ourselves. He possessed three primary mutant powers. 1) He was able to attract to his person all the free-floating derision in the vicinity through a strange magnetism. 2) He bent light waves, rendering the rest of us invisible to bullies; when Marcus was present, the big kids were incapable of seeing us, picking on him exclusively, delivering noogies, knuckle punches, and Indian rope burns to his waiting flesh. 3) He had superior olfactory capability; he could smell barbecue from four miles away, attaining such mastery that he could ascertain, with the faintest nostril quivering, if the stuff on the grill had just been thrown on, or was about to come off, and acted accordingly. Like a knife and fork, he appeared around dinner time. Call him a mooch to hurt his feelings, and he'd just smile, wipe his mouth on his wrist, and snatch the last piece of chicken — probably a wing, damn him.

Marcus took off his shirt, and Randy loaded his rifle. "Let's start at one," he said.

I said, "Marcus, why don't you turn around so it doesn't go in your face or something?"

Marcus turned around and gritted his teeth. There was a routine he did when one of us got mad at him, pulling up his shirt and clowning, "Please, Massa, Massa, Massa, please," anticipating the whip, "Roots"-style. He had the same expression on his face now. Randy stood four yards away, aimed, and fired. The BB hit Marcus in the spine and bounced off.

"Shit, that didn't hurt," Marcus said. "Do I have a mark?"

We told him no. Randy said, "Then let's try three times," and stepped closer.

"Ow," Marcus cried. But it still didn't break the skin.

*Clack clack clack clack clack.* I noticed that Randy kept creeping closer between shots, but I didn't say anything. Neither did Clive.

Five times and Marcus screamed and a crescent of blood smiled on his skin. "So don't pump it more than four times," Clive said.

"Yo, that hurt," Marcus said.

"Let's make it no more than two, just to be safe," I said.

I couldn't sleep that night. I was thinking about Thursday and its tally over the years: the time N.P. broke his ankle sneaking into his bedroom window after hanging out late at the Rec Room

with those townie girls; the time I didn't properly hose off the lounge chairs on the deck, and the next day I got confined to the property line for a week and obediently stuck around like a fool even when my parents were out of town and would never know; fight after fight, too many to count. When the chain fell off Marcus's bike and he smeared his bare feet all the way across the gravel of the Hill trying to stop — that was Thursday all over. Our weekly full moon.

I woke up late. I heard noises in the living room. It should have been quiet. "Why aren't you at work?" I asked my brother.

"I switched my shift so I can be in the war," he said.

I told him he couldn't go. He'd get hurt. "When Mom and Dad are away, I'm in charge," I reminded him.

"You're not in charge of me."

"Yes, I am."

"What are you going to do — tell on me?" he said, and he had me there. I couldn't rat him out or else I'd get it, too. He went off to get in some last-minute practice.

At fight time, I headed up Walker. I passed the stop sign at Meredith and noticed that it was freckled with silver, the red paint chipped away — target practice for one of our friends, probably Marcus, who lived two houses down. Nice cluster on the "T" and the "O." He had good aim, depending on how far away he'd been standing.

When I got to Clive's house, we were all there, except for Nick. He'd called, whispering about how his mom was home and he couldn't get out of the house with his BB gun. Marcus suggested that we start without him.

"But then we'd have uneven teams," Bobby said.

"One of us can sit out," I said. "Youngest first?"

"Four is better than three," Clive announced, and we caved. By the time Nick arrived, it was almost dark, so we got busy making teams. Everybody wanted to be on Clive's team because Clive's team always won, but Randy was a factor with his rifle expertise. Reggie said, "Me and Bobby are a mini-team because we've been practicing together," and I was appalled. Reggie and I had never not been a mini-team, what with the whole "Benji 'n' Reggie, Benji 'n' Reggie" singsong thing through the years. The only thing that had kept me calm that afternoon was knowing that I could protect him if he was on my team. Send him on some crazy mission out of the way. He didn't look at me.

The final teams were: me, Clive, Marcus, and Nick on the Vice (for "Miami Vice") and Randy, Bobby, Reggie, and N.P. on the Cool Chief Rockers. When Nick finally got his ass over there, I pulled out the paint goggles I'd rescued from the cobwebs under our deck, and N.P. said, "Goggles?"

"No one said anything about goggles."

"I don't got goggles."

"I'm not wearing any pussy-ass goggles," Marcus said. Nor was Reggie — I didn't even bother to fight with him about it. I didn't wear them, either.

The sky was getting dark. We went over the rules again and then it was on. We started counting to two hundred, per the guidelines, as we ran away, scattering according to haywire teen-age logic toward the highway, toward the beach. I jogged around the corner, checking to see if I was in anyone's sights, and jumped into the undeveloped lot next to the Nichols House. I waded in deep enough that I couldn't be seen from the road, but shallow enough that I could see anyone coming. Fifty-two, fifty-three. Getting there. It was almost too dark to play at this point, but the poor visibility would help me. I was going to wait for one of the Cool Chief Rockers to recon my way and then ambush him, a favorite tactic of mine to this day. Wait for the right moment in an argument with a loved one, then ambush her with some hurt I've held on to for years, the list of indictments nurtured in the darkness of my hideout, and say, "Gotcha!" See how you ruined me. If I was lucky, Bobby and Reggie would stop right in front of where I was hiding,

to regroup or break into song, and I'd take them both out. A firefly blinked into existence, drew half a word in the air. Then it was gone.

I moved closer to the street so that I could get a better view and someone hit me in the face with a rock.

Hot oil! Hot oil!

A rock. That's what it felt like. My head snapped back and the top half of my face throbbed like I'd been slapped. I cursed and stumbled out into the street. Who throws rocks at a BB-gun fight? I yelled for a time-out.

Randy popped out of the woods on the other side of the street. "I hit you," he said, in surprise and pride.

"Why are you throwing rocks?"

"No, it was a BB."

I poked gingerly around my left eye. He'd hit me in the socket, in the hollow between the tear duct and the eyebrow. There may be a proper anatomical name for that part of the eye socket, but I don't know it. It felt like a rock. I couldn't see out of that eye. There was stuff in it. Randy reached forward and I batted his hand away. I heard N.P. say, "What's up?" I traced my fingertip along the lumpy hole in my face, the stinging flesh. It had broken the skin. He'd pumped it more than two times.

"What happened?" Clive asked.

"Benji's out. I hit him," Randy declared.

"I'm not out," I said. "He pumped it more than twice! I'm bleeding! He's disqualified!"

I touched the hole in my face and staggered into the cone of the street light. Fat June bugs crawled over each other on the ground in their wretched street-light ritual. I held up my finger. It was bloody.

Bobby and Reggie appeared, and then all the Cool Chief Rockers and Vicers, guns dangling. Reggie grabbed my arm and wanted to know if I was all right. I hadn't heard him sound so concerned in a long time. I shook my head drunkenly. "What the hell did you do, Randy?" Reggie said.

"He pumped it more than twice," I said. Everybody murmured "dag," in their disparate dag registers. When they got a look at the wound, they re-dagged at how close it had come to my eye.

Then I realized the Horrible Thing. I probed around the wound. The skin was tough and swollen, but beneath that was something harder, like a pearl. "It's still in there," I said.

Randy didn't believe it. "Let me see," he said, his hands out.

"Get away from him," Reggie shouted. He stepped between us. "Benji," he started, squinting at the bloody hole in the poor light, "you have to go to the hospital."

"We can't do that," Marcus said. "We'll get in trouble."

"We'll all be in some serious trouble when our parents come out tomorrow."

I looked around. They had decided. Even Clive, who in his alpha-dogness could have grabbed Randy's car keys and taken me if he wanted, fuck everybody. He was looking down the street, as if he heard his parents pulling up, avoiding my gaze. Half-gaze.

Randy said, "How are you going to get there?"

"That's uncool," Reggie said. He was my brother. I loved him. The way he said it, I knew. He'd found the stoners, too. Maybe he was going to be all right after all.

"That's so uncool," I said. Justice according to brothers and stoners: If someone needs to go to the hospital and you've got the car, you have to take them.

Reggie said, "Bobby, your grandpa can drive us!"

Bobby got weaselly. "He's asleep — look, it's dark."

"I don't have to go to the hospital. I'm O.K.," I said. Reggie protested, but everyone else was so thoroughly relieved that it was someone else's Thursday that the point was moot. I'd take one for the team — I'd take the hit because that's what I did. The other guys turned on Randy for

having put them in this position, bitching about the pumping and whether his aiming for my face was an accident or not. He didn't give an inch — "It just happened" — but he did offer me "automatic shotgun for two weeks" as compensation.

My plan was to go home and try to squeeze the BB out, pimple-style. My brother and I walked away. I had one palm over my eye and my other hand on his shoulder.

In the bathroom mirror, my eye looked disgusting. Like I'd gone a few rounds with a real heavyweight. The socket was all swollen, and blood was trickling down over my nose and older, dried-up trickles of blood. I washed my face and got a better look. I could feel the BB in there. I couldn't move it. It was lodged in the flesh or something. Reggie hovered around, trying to be helpful, but he was freaking me out so I asked him to give me a minute. I tried to wiggle the BB again, applying the time-honored zit-popping principles of strategic leverage like a modern-day Archimedes. Nothing happened, and the inflamed flesh was so tender that I couldn't really have at it. Blood with dark little bits in it dribbled over my fingers. We'd thought it all out and decided that metal BBs were O.K. because, in theory, they weren't going to break the skin, but now I had a tetanus-covered time bomb in my head. I was going to wake up with lockjaw and waste away in bone-popping misery. Should I have occasion to fly before my death day — to visit an international lockjaw specialist at his mountaintop clinic, for example — metal detectors would go off and I'd have to explain the whole dumb story.

We drank some of our father's seven-ounce Miller bottles. I put ice on my eye and we watched the last half of "The Paper Chase." I decided to try again in the morning.

The next morning, the swelling had gone down a little and the hole was scabbed over. I tried squeezing it again. The BB wasn't stuck in the tough flesh anymore, but now the "entry wound" had closed over. Our parents were coming out that night and they were going to murder us. Playing with BB guns. Allowing Reggie to play with BB guns when I was in charge of the house. Each of us letting the other play with BB guns when we should have known better. Three capital offenses right there.

We didn't know what to do. It was like the good old days when we broke a lamp or put a hole in the couch and ran around each other like crazy cockroaches waiting for the Big Shoe. We prayed they'd decide at the last minute not to come out. We cleaned the house extra special; we even used Windex for the fingerprints on the fridge. Maybe that would distract them. We stuck the wad of bloody paper towels and a blood-soaked washcloth into a plastic King Kullen bag and shoved it way down in the garbage.

In the middle of the afternoon, Reggie went out to sell our gun to N.P., who bought it for fifty cents on the dollar. We rehearsed cover stories and settled on: We were running through the woods to Clive's house and I ran into a branch that was sticking out! I coulda poked my eye out! That way they could scold us for running in the woods, and leave it at that.

But they got home and never noticed. This big thing almost in my eye.

The BB guns didn't come out again that summer. The thrill was gone. Those were our first guns, a rehearsal. I'd like to say, all these years later, now that one of us is dead and another paralyzed from the waist down by actual bullets — drug-related, as the papers put it — that the game back then was innocent. But it's not true. We always fought for real. Only the nature of the fight changed. As time went on, we learned to arm ourselves in our different ways. Some of us with real guns, some of us with more ephemeral weapons — an improbable plan or some sort of formulation about how best to move through the world. An idea that would let us be. Protect us and keep us safe. But a weapon, nonetheless.

The BB is still there. Under the skin. It's good for a story, something to shock people with after I've known them for years and feel a need to surprise them with the boy I was. It's not a scar that people notice. I asked a doctor about it once, about blood poisoning over time. He shook his head. Then he shrugged. "It hasn't killed you yet," he said.



# The Fugitive - T. Coraghessan Boyle

(2016)

They told him he had to wear a mask in public. Which was ridiculous. It made him feel like he had a target painted on his back — or his face, actually, right in the middle of his face. But if he wanted to walk out the door of the clinic he was going to walk out with that mask on — either that or go to jail. Outside, it was raining, which made everything that much harder, because what were you going to do with a wet mask? How could you even breathe? Here, inside the office, with the doctor and his caseworker from Health Services, there was no sound of the rain, or if there was he couldn't hear it — all he could hear was the rasp and wheeze of his own compromised breathing as he sucked air through the fibres of the mask.

The doctor was saying something to him now, and Marciano watched him frame the words with his hands before they both looked to the caseworker, a short slim woman with a big bust and liquid eyes, whom he would have liked to fuck if he weren't so sick. She was named Rosa Hinojosa, and he kept saying her name in his head, because of the way it rhymed, which somehow made him feel better.

"You understand what the doctor is telling you?" she asked in her clipped north-of-the-border Spanish, which he could have listened to all day under other circumstances. But these were the circumstances, and until he got better he would have to play their game, Dr. Rosen's game and Rosa Hinojosa's, too.

He nodded.

"No more lapses, you understand that? You will report here at eight each morning, when the clinic opens, for your intravenous medication, and" — she held up two plastic pill containers — "you will take your oral medication, *without fail*, every night at dinner. And you must wear your mask at all times."

"Even when I'm alone?"

She looked to the doctor, said something to him in English, nodded, then turned back to Marciano, her breasts straining at the fabric of her blouse, a pink blouse that made her look even younger than she was, which, he guessed, was maybe twenty-four or five. "You have your own room in this house" — she glanced down at the clipboard in her lap — "at 519 West Haley Street? Is that right?"

"Yes."

"There are other roomers there?"

"Yes."

"All right. When you're alone in your room, you can remove the mask, but only then, and never if you're in the common area. You're highly contagious, and if you were to cough without the mask on, the bacteria could get into the air and infect your roommates, and you wouldn't want that, would you?"

No, he agreed, he wouldn't, but now the doctor was saying something more, his tone harsh and hectoring, and though Marciano didn't register what he was saying, or not exactly, he got the gist of it: this was his warning, his final warning, and now there could be no appeal. He watched the doctor's eyes, which looked at him as if he were less than human, something to step on in the street and crush, angry eyes, hateful, and what had he done to deserve this? He'd got sick, that was all — and couldn't anybody get sick?

Rosa Hinojosa (her lips were fascinating — plump and adhesive — and he wanted desperately in that moment to get well, if for no other reason than to maybe be able to kiss them) told him what she'd already told him, that because he'd stopped taking his medication a year ago, his case of tuberculosis had mutated into the multi-drug-resistant form, and his life was at risk,

because after this there were no more drugs. That was it. They didn't exist. But there was more, and worse: if he did not comply fully — no lapses — Dr. Rosen would get a court order and incarcerate him to be sure he got the full round of treatment. And why? Not out of charity, entertain no illusions about that, but to protect society, and at a cost — did he even have any idea of the cost? — of as much as two hundred thousand dollars for him alone. She paused. Compressed her lips. Looked to the doctor. Then, as if she were tracking the drift of the very microbes hanging invisibly in the air, she brought her eyes back to him. "You agree?" she demanded.

He wanted to say yes, of course he did — he wanted to be cured — but he honestly didn't know if he could go through with it, and wasn't that the problem last time? He'd taken the medicine, which was no easy thing, because it made him sick to his stomach and made him itch, as if there were something under his skin clawing its way out. They'd told him he'd have to stay on the regimen anywhere from six to thirty months, but within three months he'd felt fine, his cough nearly gone and his arms and chest filling out again, so he'd started selling the pills, because he didn't need them anymore, and then he'd stopped coming to the clinic altogether, until the disease returned to shake him like a rat in a cage and he spat up blood and came back here to their contempt and their antiseptic smells and their masks and their dictates and their ultimatums. He wanted to say yes, and he tried to, but at that moment the cough came up on him, the long dredging cough that was like the sea drawing back over the stones at low tide, and the inside of the mask was suddenly crimson and he couldn't seem to stop coughing.

When finally he looked up, both the doctor and Rosa Hinojosa were wearing masks of their own, and Rosa Hinojosa was pushing a box of disposable surgical masks across the desk to him. He couldn't see her lips now, only her eyes, and her eyes — as rich and brown as two chocolates in the dark wrappers of her lashes — didn't have an ounce of sympathy left in them.

Before he got sick the second time, he'd been working as part of a crew that did landscaping and gardening for the big estates strung out along the beach and carved out of the hills, a good job, steady, and with a *patrón* who didn't try to cheat you. One of his tasks was to trap and dispose of the animals that infested these places — rats, gophers, possums, raccoons, and whatever else tore up the lawns or raided the orchards. His *patrón* wouldn't allow the use of poison of any kind — the owners didn't like it, and it worked its way up the food chain and killed everything out there, which Marciano didn't think was such a bad proposition, but it wasn't his job to think. His job was to do as he was told. The gophers weren't a problem — they died underground, transfixed on the spikes of the Macabee traps he set in the dark cool dirt of their runs — but the possums and the raccoons and even the rats had to be captured alive in Havahart traps of varying sizes, depending on the species. Which raised the question of what to do with them once you'd caught them.

The first time he did actually catch something — a raccoon — it was on a big thirty-acre estate with its own avocado grove and a fishpond stocked with Japanese koi that cost a thousand dollars each. It was early, misty yet, and when he went to check the cage he'd baited with a dab of peanut butter and half a sardine it was a shock to find the robber itself, with its black mask and tense fingers grasping the mesh as if it were a monkey and not a *mapache* at all. In the next moment, he was running down the slope to where the *patrón* was assembling a sprinkler system for a new flower bed, crying out, "I got one, I got one!"

The *patrón*, big-bellied but tough, a man who must have been as old as Marciano's father yet could work alongside his men on the hottest day without even breathing hard, glanced up from what he was doing. "One what?"

"A raccoon."

"O.K., good. Is it a female?"

A female? What was he talking about? It was a raccoon. What did he expect him to do? Flip it over and inspect its equipment?

"Because if it's a female there'll be more. Get rid of it and reset the trap."

Breathless, excited, the microbes working in him, though he didn't yet know it, Marciano just stood there, puzzled. "Get rid of it how?"

A steady look. A sigh. "O.K., listen, because I'm only going to tell you once. Take one of those plastic trash cans lined up there behind the garage and fill it with water, right to the top, you understand? Then just drop the cage in, and it'll be over in three minutes."

"You mean drown it, just like that?"

"What are you going to do, take it home and train it to walk on a leash?" The *patrón* was grinning now, pleased with his own joke, but there was work to do, and already he was turning back to it. "And do me a favor," he added, glancing over his shoulder. "Bury it out in the weeds, where Mrs. Lewis won't have to see it."

Why he was thinking of that he couldn't say, except that he missed the job — and the money — and as he walked to the bus in the rain, the box of face masks tucked under one arm, he wanted to be back there again, under the sun, working, just that, working. They'd scared him at the clinic, they always scared him, and he was feeling light-headed on top of it. The blood was bad, he knew that — he could see it in their eyes. But he was twenty-three years old, and thirty months was like a lifetime sentence, and even then there were no guarantees — Rosa Hinojosa had made that clear. He was sick from the intravenous. His arm was sore. His throat ached. Even his feet didn't seem to want to cooperate, zigging and zagging, so that he was walking like a drunk.

The sidewalk before him was strewn with the worms that were coming up out of the earth because if they stayed down there they'd drown, whereas up here, in the rain, they'd have a chance at life before somebody stepped on them or the birds got to them. He liked worms, nature's recyclers, and he was playing a little game with himself, trying to avoid them and hold in the next cough at the same time, watching his feet and the pattern the worms made on the pavement, and when he looked up he was right in front of the bar — Herlihy's — he'd seen from the bus stop but had never been inside of. It was just past ten in the morning and he wasn't working today — his new job, strictly gardening, was with an old white-haired *campesino*, Rudy, who booked the clients and then sat in his beater truck and read spy novels while Marciano did all the work — so he really had nothing to do but sit in front of the television in his room all day. That had something to do with it. That and the fact that Rudy had just paid him the day before.

He didn't go directly in, but walked by the place as if he were on an errand elsewhere, then stripped off the mask and stuffed it in his pocket, doubled back, and pushed open the door. Inside were all the usual things, neon signs for Budweiser and Coors, a jukebox that might once have worked, honey-colored bottles lined up behind the bar, and the head of a deer — or, no, an elk — jammed into one wall as if this were Alaska and somebody had just shot it. There were three customers, all white, strung together on three adjoining barstools, and the bartender, also white, and fat, with big buttery arms in a short-sleeved shirt. They all turned to look at him as he came in, and that made him nervous, so he chose a stool at the far end of the bar, rehearsing in his head the phrase he was going to give the bartender — "Please, a beer" — which made use of his favorite word in English, and the word wasn't "please."

The bartender heaved himself up off his own stool and came down the bar to him, put two thick white hands on the counter, and asked him something, which must have been "What do you want?," and Marciano uttered his phrase. There was a moment of ambiguity, the man poised there still, instead of bending to the cooler, and then there was a further question, which he didn't grasp until the man began rattling off the names of the beers he stocked, pointing as he did so to a line of bottles on the top row, ten or twelve different brands. "Corona," Marciano said, unfolding a five-dollar bill on the bar, and all at once he was coughing and he put his hand up to cover his mouth, but he couldn't seem to stop until he had the bottle to his lips, draining it in three swallows, as if he were a nomad who'd just come in off the desert.

One of the men at the end of the bar said something then, and the other two looked at Marciano and broke out laughing, and whether it was good-natured or not, a little joke at his expense, it made him feel tight in his chest and the cough came up again, so severe this time he thought he was going to pass out. But here was the bartender, saying something more, and what it was he couldn't imagine, because it wasn't illegal to cough, was it? But, no, that wasn't it. The bartender was pointing at the empty bottle, and so Marciano repeated his phrase, "Please, a beer," and the heavy man bent to the cooler, extracted a fresh Corona, snapped off the cap, and set it before him.

He sipped the second beer and watched the rain spatter the dirty windows and run off in streaks. At some point, he saw his bus pull up at the stop across the street, a vivid panel of color that made him think of what was waiting for him at home — nothing, zero, exactly zero — and he watched it pull away again as he tried to fight down the scratch in his throat. He was scared. He was angry. And he sat there, staring out into the gloom, drinking one beer after another, and when he coughed, really coughed, they all looked at him and at the wet cardboard box of face masks, then looked away again. Nobody said another word to him, which was all right with him — he just focussed on the television behind the bar, some news channel, and tried to interpret the words the people were saying there while the backdrop shifted from warplanes and explosions to some sort of pageant with models on a runway, looking raccoon-eyed and haughty and not half as good as Rosa Hinojosa. The bloody mask remained in his pocket, and the box of masks, the new ones, stayed right where it was, on the stool beside him.

All that week, he went into the clinic at eight, as instructed, and all that week he felt nauseated and skipped breakfast and went to work with Rudy anyway, and the only good thing there was that Rudy didn't like to start early — and he didn't ask questions, either. Still, Marciano was lagging and he knew it, and knew that it was only a matter of time before Rudy said something. Which he did, that Friday, T.G.I.F., end of the week, the first week with this new cocktail of antibiotics running through his veins, one week down and how many more to go? He did a quick calculation in his head: fifty-two weeks in a year, double that and then add twenty-six more. It was like climbing a mountain backward — no matter how many steps you took you never got to see the peak.

They were on their third or fourth house of the day, everything gray and wet with the fog off the ocean and the sun nowhere in sight. His chest felt sore. He was hungry, but the idea of food — of a taco or a burger or anything — made his stomach turn. "Jesus," Rudy said, startling him out of a daydream, "you're like one of the walking dead. I mean, at that last place I couldn't tell whether you were pushing the mower or the mower was pushing you." The best Marciano could do was give him a tired grin. "What?" Rudy said, staring now. "Late night last night?"

Rudy was helping him lift the mower down from the back of the truck, so he couldn't avoid his eyes. He just nodded.

"Youth," Rudy said, shaking his head as they set the mower down in the driveway of a little mustard-colored house with a patch of lawn in front and back and a towering hedge all the way around that had to be clipped every other week, and this was that week, which meant hauling out the ladder, too. "I used to be like that, burn the candle at both ends, drink till they closed the bars and get up for work three hours later." Rudy sighed. "But no more. Now I'm in bed before the ten-o'clock news — and Norma's already snoring."

Marciano had heard all this before, twenty times already, and he didn't say anything, just leaned into the mower to push it up the driveway, but the mower didn't seem to want to budge, and he felt weak all of a sudden, weak and sick, and here came the cough, right on cue. He really hacked this time, hacked till he doubled over and tears came to his eyes. When he straightened up, Rudy was watching him, and his smile was gone.

"That doesn't sound too good," he said. "You ever go to the clinic like I told you?"

"Yes," he said. "Or, no, not really —"

"What do you mean, *not really*? You sound like your lungs are shot."

He paused to catch his breath, because he couldn't really cough and talk at the same time, could he? He lifted one hand and let it drop. "It's just a cold," he said, then turned and pushed the mower up the drive.

They were waiting for him when he got home, a cop in uniform and Rosa Hinojosa, who looked so fierce and grim she might have been wearing somebody else's face. He'd run into her at the clinic the day before, and she'd asked him if he was sticking to the regimen, and he told her he was, and she flashed a smile so luminous it made him feel unmoored. "Good," she said. "Good. Do it for me, O.K.?" But now here she was. He saw her before he saw the cop, the crisp line her skirt cut just above her knees, her pretty legs, the heels she wore to work, and for the briefest flash of a second he wondered what she was doing there, and then he saw the cop and he knew. Rudy had just dropped him off, was already pulling away from the curb, and Marciano wanted desperately to climb back into the pickup and go wherever Rudy would take him, but everything was in slow motion now, like in the outer-space movies where the astronauts are just floating there on their tethers and the ship slides away from them in a long smear of light and shadow.

He pulled a mask from his pocket — a dirty one, to show it had been used — looped it over his ears, and snapped it in place, as if that would make him look better in Rosa Hinojosa's eyes, but her face showed only disappointment and something else, too: anger. He'd let her down. He'd had his warning, his final warning, and he'd been caught out, but how had she known? Had somebody informed on him? Some enemy he didn't even know he had?

The cop, he could see at a glance, wasn't a real cop, more some sort of Health Services mule, and he was old and slow and his head was like a big *calabaza* propped up on his shoulders, and Rosa Hinojosa, for all her youth, was no runner, not in those shoes. So he ran. Not like in the track meets at school when he was a boy, because his lungs were like wet clay, but still he put one foot in front of the other, hustling down the alley between his house and the one next door, to where the fence out back opened onto the dry streambed and the path through the weeds he sometimes used as a shortcut to the corner store. He got as far as the fence before he gave out, and, he had to admit, both Rosa Hinojosa and the *calabaza* head were quicker than he would have thought. He was just lying there, pathetic, humiliated in front of this woman he wanted to prove himself to, and he watched them pause to snap on their own masks before the cop bent to him and encircled his wrists with the handcuffs.

The next thing he saw was the hospital, a big clean white stucco box of a building that had secondary boxes attached to it, a succession of them lined up like children's blocks all the way out into the parking lot in back. He'd been here once before, to the emergency room, when he'd nearly severed the little finger of his left hand with the blade of the hedge trimmer, and they'd spoken Spanish to him, sewed and bandaged the wound and sent him on his way. That wasn't how it was this time. This time he was wearing a mask, and so was Rosa Hinojosa and so was the mule, who kept guiding him down the corridors with a stiff forefinger till they went through a door and briefly out into the sunlight before entering an outbuilding that looked like one of the temporary classrooms you saw when you went by the high school. What was funny about it, or not so funny, was the way people made room for them in the corridors, shrinking into the walls as they passed by in their masks.

When he'd had a chance to take in the barred windows and the heavy steel door that pulled shut behind them with a whoosh of compression, Rosa Hinojosa, cold as a fish, explained to him that he was being remanded to custody as a threat to public safety under the provisions of the statutory code of the State of California, and that he would be confined here temporarily before he could be moved to the Men's Colony, in the next county, which was equipped with a special ward for prisoners with medical conditions. He felt sick, sicker than ever, and what made it worse was that there was no smell to that room, which might as well have been on the moon. He

saw a sterile white counter and a man in thick-framed glasses and some sort of hospital scrubs stationed behind it. Rosa Hinojosa was doing all the talking. She had a sheaf of papers in one hand and she turned away from him to lay them on the counter. There was a U.S. flag in the corner. A drinking fountain. Black and white tiles on the floor. "I didn't do anything," Marciano protested.

Rosa Hinojosa, who was conferring with the man behind the counter, gave him a sharp glance. "You were warned."

"What do you mean? I took my medicine. You saw me — "

"Don't even give me that. We have you on the feed from the security camera at the 7-Eleven making a purchase without your mask on — and there was testimony from the bartender at Herlihy's that you were in there without a mask, *drinking*, on the very first day you walked out of the clinic."

"I'm an American citizen."

She shrugged.

"Look it up." This was true. He'd been born in San Diego, two years old when his parents were deported, so he'd never had a chance to learn English or go to school here or anything else, but he had his rights, he knew that — they couldn't just lock him up. That was against the Constitution.

Rosa Hinojosa had turned back to the counter, riffling through the stack of forms, but now she swung angrily around to him, a crease of irritation between her eyes. She wasn't pretty anymore, not even remotely, and all he felt for her was hate, because, no matter what she said, when it came down to it she was part of the system, and the system was against him. "I don't care if you're the President," she snapped. "We bent over backward, and now you've left us no choice. Don't you understand? The order's been signed."

"I want a lawyer."

He saw that she had a little dollop of flesh under her chin — she was already going to fat — and he realized that she was nothing to him, and, worse, that he was nothing to her but one more charity case, and what he did next was born of the sadness of that realization. He wasn't a violent person, just the opposite — he was shy and he went out of his way to avoid confrontation. But they were the ones confronting him — Rosa Hinojosa and the whole Health Services Department, the big stupid-looking mule who'd clamped the handcuffs on him and made the mistake of removing them after they stepped through the door, and the man behind the desk, too. Marciano took as deep a breath as he could manage and felt the mucus rattling in his throat, the bad stuff he kept dredging up all day and spitting into a handkerchief until the handkerchief was stiff with it. What he was about to do was wrong, he knew that, and he regretted it the instant he saw it before him, but he wasn't going to any prison, no way. That just wasn't in the cards.

So now he was running again, only this time they weren't chasing him, or not yet, because, mask or no mask, they were all three of them frantically trying to wipe his living death off their faces — and good, good, see how they like it, see how they like being condemned and ostracized and locked up without a trial or a lawyer or anything — and he didn't stop spitting till he had the door open and was back out in the sunlight, dodging around the cars in the lot and heading for the street and the cover of the trees there. His heart was pounding and his lungs felt as if they'd been turned inside out, but he kept going, slowing to a stiff-kneed walk now, down one street, then another, the windshields of the parked cars pooling in the light like puddles after a storm, birds chattering in the trees, the smell of the earth and the grass so intense it was intoxicating. He patted down his pockets: wallet, house key, the little vial of pills. And where was he going? What was he doing? He didn't have any money — no more than maybe ten or fifteen dollars in his wallet — and there was nobody he could turn to, not really. There was Sergio, the only one of his housemates he was close to, and Sergio would loan him money, he was sure of it, but Sergio probably didn't have much more than he did. The only thing for certain was that he couldn't stay

here anymore.

He hadn't seen his mother in two years, hadn't really given her a thought, but he thought of her now, saw her face as vividly as if she were that woman right there slipping into the front seat of her car. She'd nursed him through the measles, whooping cough, the flu, and whatever else had come along to disrupt his childhood, and why couldn't she nurse him through this, too? She could, if he was careful and took his pills and wore the mask every single minute of every day, because he wouldn't want to infect her — that would be the worst thing a son could do. No matter what the doctors said, his mother would save him, protect him, do anything for him. But how was he going to get to her? They'd be watching for him at the bus station and at the train depot and at the airport, too, even if he could scrape up enough for a ticket, which he couldn't ... But what about Rudy? Maybe he could get Rudy to drive him as far as Tijuana — or, no, he'd tell Rudy he needed to borrow the truck to help one of his roommates move a refrigerator or a couch, and then he'd do the driving himself and get somebody to bring the truck back, pay somebody, make promises, whatever it took. That was a plan, wasn't it? He had to have a plan. Without a plan he was lost.

He kept moving, breathing hard now, the sidewalk like a treadmill rolling under him, but he had to fight it, had to be quick because they'd have the cops after him in their patrol cars, an all-points bulletin like on TV, and they weren't going to be gentle with him, either. Up ahead, at the end of the street, was a park he'd gone to once or twice with Sergio to drink beer and throw horseshoes, and there were bushes there, weren't there, along the streambed. Pushing through the park gate — kids, mothers, swings, a couple of bums laid out on the grass as if they'd been installed there along with the green wooden benches — he tried to look casual, even as the sirens began to scream in the distance and he told himself it was only just ambulances bringing people to the emergency room. He went straight across the lawn, looking at nobody, and then he was in the bushes and out of sight and he dropped to the ground and just lay there until his heart stopped hammering and the burning in his lungs began to subside. It would be dark soon, and then he could make his way back to the house, borrow somebody's phone, call Rudy, pack a few things, and be gone before anybody could do anything about it.

Paranoia was when you felt that everybody was after you even if they weren't, but what would you call this? Common sense? They'd come to his house and handcuffed him and put him in that white room, and he hadn't done anything. Now they'd charge him with escaping or resisting arrest or whatever they wanted to call it — and assault, too, assault with the deadly weapon that was his own spit. It didn't matter. The result would be the same — thirty months in a sterile room with the fans sucking in and the warders wearing masks and gloves and pushing a tray of what passed for food through a slot in the door and coming in twice a day to stick the intravenous in him. He'd rather be dead. Rather be in Mexico. Rather take his chances with his mother and the clinic in Ensenada, where at least they spoke his language and wouldn't look at him like he was a cockroach.

He was thirsty, crazy thirsty, but he forced himself to stay where he was till it was dark, then slipped back into the park to get a drink at the faucet in the rest room. Only problem was the door was locked. He stood there a long moment, rattling the doorknob, feeling disoriented. There was the steady hiss of cars from the freeway that was somewhere behind him in the intermediate distance. The trees were shrouds. The sky was black overhead and painted with stars, and it had never seemed so close. He could almost feel the weight of it, all the weight of the sky that went on and on to infinity, outer space, the planets, the stars, pressing down on him till he could barely breathe. Desperate, he knelt in the grass and felt around till he located a sprinkler head. At first it wouldn't budge, but he kept at it till the seal gave and he was able to unscrew it and put his mouth to the warm gurgling flow there, and that made him feel better and pushed the vagueness into another corner of his mind. After a while, he got to his feet, eased himself down into the streambed, and began working his way back in the direction of the house.

It wasn't easy. What would have taken him ten minutes out on the street took an hour at least, his feet unsteady in a slurry of mud and trash, stiff dead reeds knifing at him, dogs barking, the drift of people's voices freezing him in place. He was sweating, and shivering, too, and his shirt was torn at the right elbow, where he'd snagged it on something in the strange half-light of the gully.

He didn't really know how far he'd gone or where he was when he emerged, scrambling up a steep incline and into the yard of a house that was mercifully dark. There were lights on in the houses on both sides of it, though, and the black humped shape of an automobile parked in the driveway. He moved toward the car and then past it, and if he was startled by a voice calling out behind him, a single syllable he would have recognized in any language — *Hey!* — he didn't hesitate or turn around or even look over his shoulder but just kept going, down the driveway and straight across the street to the sidewalk on the far side, where he was only another pedestrian out for a stroll on a cool night in a quiet city.

When he got to his own street, he made himself slow down and scan the cars parked on both sides of the road, looking for anything suspicious, the police or the Health Services, Rosa Hinojosa, though that *was* being paranoid — Rosa Hinojosa would be at home with her parents at this hour, or her husband, if she had one, absorbed in her own life, not his. He took his time, though he was feeling worse by the minute, shivering so hard he had to wrap his arms around himself, his shirt soaked and too thin against the night and the temperature, which must have dropped into the mid-fifties by now. And then, steeling himself, he slipped across the street and into the dark yard of the rooming house, where they'd come for him once and would come for him again.

He ducked in the back door, tentative, all the blood in his brain now, screaming at him, but there was nobody in the hall, and in the next moment he was in his room, the familiar scent of his things — unwashed laundry, soap, shampoo, the foil-wrapped burrito he'd set aside to microwave for dinner — rising to his nostrils in the ordinary way, as if nothing had happened. The cough was right there waiting to erupt, but he fought it down, afraid even to make the slightest sound, and though he was tempted to turn the light on, he knew better — if anyone was out there, this was what they'd be watching for. He found his jacket thrown over the back of the chair where he'd left it that morning and wrapped himself in it, then went to the window and opened the blinds, so that six thin stripes of illumination fell across the bed. That was when he remembered his pills — he had to take his pills no matter where he was or what happened, that was the truth of his life, whether he ever saw Rosa Hinojosa again or not.

He went to the sink for a glass of water, shook out two of the little white pills and swallowed them. Then — and he couldn't help himself — he lay down on the bed and closed his eyes, just for a minute.

The knock startled him out of a dreamless sleep, the knock at the front door that thundered through the house as if the wrecking ball had come to reduce it all to splinters. But who would knock? Everybody who lived here had a key, so there was no need for knocking, not unless you were immigration or the police. Or Health Services. For one fluttering instant, he pictured Rosa Hinojosa in police blues with a cap cocked over her eye, a nightstick in one hand and a can of Mace in the other, and then he was pulling his door softly shut and fastening the latch, as if that would save him — but what was he going to do, hide under the bed? He didn't know much, but he knew they'd be at the back door, too, just like in the movies when they nailed the gangsters and the pimps and the drug lords and the whole audience stood up and cheered.

No time for his backpack, no time for clothes, his toothbrush, for the change he kept in a pickle jar in the top drawer, no time for anything but to jerk up the window in its creaking frame while the knocking at the front door rose to a relentless pounding and the voices started up, Sergio's and somebody else's and a dog barking, and then he was down in the grass and scrambling, hunched over, for the next yard and then the next one after that. It took everything he



had. Twice, he tripped in the dark, going down hard on somebody's patio, all the little sounds of the neighborhood amplified now, every TV turned up full blast, motorcycles blaring like gunfire out on the street, even the crickets shrieking at him, and that dog, the ratcheting bark of that dog back at the house, a police dog, the kind of dog that never gave up, that could sniff you out even if you sprouted wings and flew up into the sky.

Where was he? Some dark place. Some citizen's back yard with its jade plants and flower bed and patch of lawn. A cold hand was inside him, yanking at his lungs, squeezing and bunching and pulling the meat there up into his throat, so that he couldn't breathe. He went down on his hands and knees, and there was no plan now but to find the darkest corner of the yard, the place where nobody had bothered to cut the grass or trim the shrubs, where the earth was real and present and he could let the blood come up and forget about the pills and Rosa Hinojosa and his mother and Rudy and everybody else.

Time leaped ahead. He was stretched out in the dirt. What was on his shirt was hot and secret and wet. He closed his eyes. And when he opened them again all he could see was the glint of a metal trap, bubbles rising in the clear cold water, and the hands of the animal fighting to get out.

# Cell One - Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

(2007)

The first time our house was robbed, it was our neighbor Osita who climbed in through the dining-room window and stole our TV and VCR, and the "Purple Rain" and "Thriller" videotapes that my father had brought back from America. The second time our house was robbed, it was my brother Nnamabia, who faked a break-in and stole my mother's jewelry. It happened on a Sunday. My parents had travelled to their home town to visit our grandparents, so Nnamabia and I went to church alone. He drove my mother's green Peugeot 504. We sat together in church as we usually did, but we did not have time to nudge each other and stifle giggles about somebody's ugly hat or threadbare caftan, because Nnamabia left without a word after ten minutes. He came back just before the priest said, "The Mass is ended, go in peace." I was a little piqued. I imagined that he had gone off to smoke or to see some girl, since he had the car to himself for once; but he could at least have told me. We drove home in silence, and when he parked in our long driveway I stayed back to pick some ixora flowers while Nnamabia unlocked the front door. I went inside to find him standing in the middle of the parlor.

"We've been robbed!" he said.

It took me a moment to take in the room. Even then, I felt that there was a theatrical quality to the way the drawers had been flung open. Or perhaps it was simply that I knew my brother too well. Later, when my parents had come home and neighbors began to troop in to say *ndo* — sorry — and to snap their fingers and heave their shoulders up and down, I sat alone in my room upstairs and realized what the queasiness in my gut was: Nnamabia had done it, I knew. My father knew, too. He pointed out that the window louvres had been slipped out from the inside, rather than from the outside (Nnamabia was usually smarter than that — perhaps he had been in a hurry to get back to church before Mass ended), and that the robber knew exactly where my mother's jewelry was: in the back left corner of her metal trunk. Nnamabia stared at my father with wounded eyes and said that he may have done horrible things in the past, things that had caused my parents pain, but that he had done nothing in this case. He walked out the back door and did not come home that night. Or the next night. Or the night after. Two weeks later, he came home gaunt, smelling of beer, crying, saying he was sorry, that he had pawned the jewelry to the Hausa traders in Enugu, and that all the money was gone.

"How much did they give you for my gold?" our mother asked him. And when he told her she placed both hands on her head and cried, "Oh! Oh! *Chi m egbuo m!* My God has killed me!" I wanted to slap her. My father asked Nnamabia to write a report: how he had pawned the jewelry, what he had spent the money on, with whom he had spent it. I didn't think that Nnamabia would tell the truth, and I don't think that my father thought he would, but he liked reports, my professor father, he liked to have things written down and nicely documented. Besides, Nnamabia was seventeen, with a carefully tended beard. He was already between secondary school and university, and was too old for caning. What else could my father have done? After Nnamabia had written the report, my father filed it in the steel cabinet in his study where he kept our school papers.

"That he could hurt his mother like that!" was the last thing my father said on the subject.

But Nnamabia hadn't set out to hurt her. He had done it because my mother's jewelry was the only thing of any value in the house: a lifetime's accumulation of solid-gold pieces. He had done it, too, because other sons of professors were doing it. This was the season of thefts on our serene campus. Boys who had grown up watching "Sesame Street," reading Enid Blyton, eating cornflakes for breakfast, and attending the university staff primary school in polished brown sandals were now cutting through the mosquito netting of their neighbors' windows, sliding out

glass louvres, and climbing in to steal TVs and VCRs. We knew the thieves. Still, when the professors saw one another at the staff club or at church or at a faculty meeting, they were careful to moan about the riffraff from town coming onto their sacred campus to steal.

The thieving boys were the popular ones. They drove their parents' cars in the evening, their seats pushed back and their arms stretched out to reach the steering wheel. Osita, our neighbor who had stolen our TV only weeks before Nnamabia's theft, was lithe and handsome in a brooding sort of way, and walked with the grace of a cat. His shirts were always crisply ironed, and I used to watch him across the hedge, then close my eyes and imagine that he was walking toward me, coming to claim me as his. He never noticed me. When he stole from us, my parents did not go over to Professor Ebube's house to ask for our things back. But they knew it was Osita. Osita was two years older than Nnamabia; most of the thieving boys were a little older than Nnamabia, and maybe that was why Nnamabia had not stolen from another person's house. Perhaps he did not feel old enough, qualified enough, for anything more serious than my mother's jewelry.

Nnamabia looked just like my mother — he had her fair complexion and large eyes, and a generous mouth that curved perfectly. When my mother took us to the market, traders would call out, "Hey! Madam, why did you waste your fair skin on a boy and leave the girl so dark? What is a boy doing with all this beauty?" And my mother would chuckle, as though she took a mischievous and joyful responsibility for Nnamabia's looks. When, at eleven, Nnamabia broke the window of his classroom with a stone, my mother gave him the money to replace it and didn't tell my father. When, a few years later, he took the key to my father's car and pressed it into a bar of soap that my father found before Nnamabia could take it to a locksmith, she made vague sounds about how he was just experimenting and it didn't mean anything. When he stole the exam questions from the study and sold them to my father's students, she yelled at him, but then told my father that Nnamabia was sixteen, after all, and really should be given more pocket money.

I don't know whether Nnamabia felt remorse for stealing her jewelry. I could not always tell from my brother's gracious, smiling face what he really felt. He and I did not talk about it, and neither did my parents. Even though my mother's sisters sent her their gold earrings, even though she bought a new gold chain from Mrs. Mozie — the glamorous woman who imported gold from Italy — and began to drive to Mrs. Mozie's house once a month to pay in installments, we never talked about what had happened to her jewelry. It was as if by pretending that Nnamabia had not done the things he had done we could give him the opportunity to start afresh. The robbery might never have been mentioned again if Nnamabia had not been arrested two years later, in his second year of university.

By then, it was the season of cults on the Nsukka campus, when signs all over the university read in bold letters, "*SAY NO TO CULTS.*" The Black Axe, the Buccaneers, and the Pirates were the best known. They had once been benign fraternities, but they had evolved, and now eighteen-year-olds who had mastered the swagger of American rap videos were undergoing secret initiations that sometimes left one or two of them dead on Odim Hill. Guns and tortured loyalties became common. A boy would leer at a girl who turned out to be the girlfriend of the Capone of the Black Axe, and that boy, as he walked to a kiosk later to buy a cigarette, would be stabbed in the thigh. He would turn out to be a Buccaneer, and so one of his fellow-Buccaneers would go to a beer parlor and shoot the nearest Black Axe in the leg, and then the next day another Buccaneer would be shot dead in the refectory, his body falling onto aluminum plates of *garri*, and that evening a Black Axe — a professor's son — would be hacked to death in his room, his CD player splattered with blood. It was inane. It was so abnormal that it quickly became normal. Girls stayed in their rooms after classes, and lecturers quivered, and when a fly buzzed too loudly people jumped. So the police were called in. They sped across campus in their rickety blue Peugeot 505 and glowered at the students, their rusty guns poking out of the car windows.

Nnamabia came home from his lectures laughing. He thought that the police would have to do better than that; everyone knew the cult boys had newer guns.

My parents watched Nnamabia with silent concern, and I knew that they, too, were wondering if he was in a cult. Cult boys were popular, and Nnamabia was very popular. Boys yelled out his nickname — "The Funk!" — and shook his hand whenever he passed by, and girls, especially the popular ones, hugged him for too long when they said hello. He went to all the parties, the tame ones on campus and the wilder ones in town, and he was the kind of ladies' man who was also a guy's guy, the kind who smoked a packet of Rothmans a day and was reputed to be able to finish a case of Star beer in a single sitting. But it seemed more his style to befriend all the cult boys and yet not be one himself. And I was not entirely sure, either, that my brother had whatever it took — guts or diffidence — to join a cult.

The only time I asked him if he was in a cult, he looked at me with surprise, as if I should have known better than to ask, before replying, "Of course not." I believed him. My dad believed him, too, when he asked. But our believing him made little difference, because he had already been arrested for belonging to a cult.

This is how it happened. On a humid Monday, four cult members waited at the campus gate and waylaid a professor driving a red Mercedes. They pressed a gun to her head, shoved her out of the car, and drove it to the Faculty of Engineering, where they shot three boys who were coming out of the building. It was noon. I was in a class nearby, and when we heard the shots our lecturer was the first to run out the door. There was loud screaming, and suddenly the stairwells were packed with scrambling students unsure where to run. Outside, the bodies lay on the lawn. The Mercedes had already screeched away. Many students hastily packed their bags, and *okada* drivers charged twice the usual fare to take them to the motor park to get on a bus. The vice-chancellor announced that all evening classes would be cancelled and everyone had to stay indoors after 9 P.M. This did not make much sense to me, since the shooting had happened in sparkling daylight, and perhaps it did not make sense to Nnamabia, either, because the first night of the curfew he didn't come home. I assumed that he had spent the night at a friend's; he did not always come home anyway. But the next morning a security man came to tell my parents that Nnamabia had been arrested at a bar with some cult boys and was at the police station. My mother screamed, "*Ekwuzikwana!* Don't say that!" My father calmly thanked the security man. We drove to the police station in town, and there a constable chewing on the tip of a dirty pen said, "You mean those cult boys arrested last night? They have been taken to Enugu. Very serious case! We must stop this cult business once and for all!"

We got back into the car, and a new fear gripped us all. *Nsukka*, which was made up of our slow, insular campus and the slower, more insular town, was manageable; my father knew the police superintendent. But Enugu was anonymous. There the police could do what they were famous for doing when under pressure to produce results: kill people.

The Enugu police station was in a sprawling, sandy compound. My mother bribed the policemen at the desk with money, and with jollof rice and meat, and they allowed Nnamabia to come out of his cell and sit on a bench under a mango tree with us. Nobody asked why he had stayed out the night before. Nobody said that the police were wrong to walk into a bar and arrest all the boys drinking there, including the barman. Instead, we listened to Nnamabia talk.

"If we ran Nigeria like this cell," he said, "we would have no problems. Things are so organized. Our cell has a chief and he has a second-in-command, and when you come in you are expected to give them some money. If you don't, you're in trouble."

"And did you have any money?" my mother asked.

Nnamabia smiled, his face more beautiful than ever, despite the new pimple-like insect bite on his forehead, and said that he had slipped his money into his anus shortly after the arrest. He knew the policemen would take it if he didn't hide it, and he knew that he would need it to buy his peace in the cell. My parents said nothing for a while. I imagined Nnamabia rolling hundred-

naira notes into a thin cigarette shape and then reaching into the back of his trousers to slip them into himself. Later, as we drove back to Nsukka, my father said, "This is what I should have done when he stole your jewelry. I should have had him locked up in a cell."

My mother stared out the window.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because this has shaken him. Couldn't you see?" my father asked with a smile. I couldn't see it. Nnamabia had seemed fine to me, slipping his money into his anus and all.

Nnamabia's first shock was seeing a Buccaneer sobbing. The boy was tall and tough, rumored to have carried out one of the killings and likely to become Capone next semester, and yet there he was in the cell, cowering and sobbing after the chief gave him a light slap on the back of the head. Nnamabia told me this in a voice lined with both disgust and disappointment; it was as if he had suddenly been made to see that the Incredible Hulk was really just painted green. His second shock was learning about the cell farthest away from his, Cell One. He had never seen it, but every day two policemen carried a dead man out of Cell One, stopping by Nnamabia's cell to make sure that the corpse was seen by all.

Those in the cell who could afford to buy old plastic paint cans of water bathed every other morning. When they were let out into the yard, the policemen watched them and often shouted, "Stop that or you are going to Cell One now!" Nnamabia could not imagine a place worse than his cell, which was so crowded that he often stood pressed against the wall. The wall had cracks where tiny *kwalikwata* lived; their bites were fierce and sharp, and when he yelped his cellmates mocked him. The biting was worse during the night, when they all slept on their sides, head to foot, to make room for one another, except the chief, who slept with his whole back lavishly on the floor. It was also the chief who divided up the two plates of rice that were pushed into the cell every day. Each person got two mouthfuls.

Nnamabia told us this during the first week. As he spoke, I wondered if the bugs in the wall had bitten his face or if the bumps spreading across his forehead were due to an infection. Some of them were tipped with cream-colored pus. Once in a while, he scratched at them. I wanted him to stop talking. He seemed to enjoy his new role as the sufferer of indignities, and he did not understand how lucky he was that the policemen allowed him to come out and eat our food, or how stupid he'd been to stay out drinking that night, and how uncertain his chances were of being released.

We visited him every day for the first week. We took my father's old Volvo, because my mother's Peugeot was unsafe for trips outside Nsukka. By the end of the week, I noticed that my parents were acting differently — subtly so, but differently. My father no longer gave a monologue, as soon as we were waved through the police checkpoints, on how illiterate and corrupt the police were. He did not bring up the day when they had delayed us for an hour because he'd refused to bribe them, or how they had stopped a bus in which my beautiful cousin Ogechi was travelling and singled her out and called her a whore because she had two cell phones, and asked her for so much money that she had knelt on the ground in the rain begging them to let her go. My mother did not mumble that the policemen were symptoms of a larger malaise. Instead, my parents remained silent. It was as if by refusing to criticize the police they would somehow make Nnamabia's freedom more likely. "Delicate" was the word the superintendent at Nsukka had used. To get Nnamabia out anytime soon would be delicate, especially with the police commissioner in Enugu giving gloating, preening interviews about the arrest of the cultists. The cult problem was serious. Big Men in Abuja were following events. Everybody wanted to seem as if he were doing something.

The second week, I told my parents that we were not going to visit Nnamabia. We did not know how long this would last, and petrol was too expensive for us to drive three hours every day. Besides, it would not hurt Nnamabia to fend for himself for one day.

My mother said that nobody was begging me to come — I could sit there and do nothing

while my innocent brother suffered. She started walking toward the car, and I ran after her. When I got outside, I was not sure what to do, so I picked up a stone near the ixora bush and hurled it at the windshield of the Volvo. I heard the brittle sound and saw the tiny lines spreading like rays on the glass before I turned and dashed upstairs and locked myself in my room. I heard my mother shouting. I heard my father's voice. Finally, there was silence. Nobody went to see Nnamabia that day. It surprised me, this little victory.

We visited him the next day. We said nothing about the windshield, although the cracks had spread out like ripples on a frozen stream. The policeman at the desk, the pleasant dark-skinned one, asked why we had not come the day before — he had missed my mother's jollof rice. I expected Nnamabia to ask, too, even to be upset, but he looked oddly sober. He did not eat all of his rice.

"What is wrong?" my mother said, and Nnamabia began to speak almost immediately, as if he had been waiting to be asked. An old man had been pushed into his cell the day before — a man perhaps in his mid-seventies, white-haired, skin finely wrinkled, with an old-fashioned dignity about him. His son was wanted for armed robbery, and when the police had not been able to find his son they had decided to lock up the father.

"The man did nothing," Nnamabia said.

"But you did nothing, either," my mother said.

Nnamabia shook his head as if our mother did not understand. The following days, he was more subdued. He spoke less, and mostly about the old man: how he could not afford bathing water, how the others made fun of him or accused him of hiding his son, how the chief ignored him, how he looked frightened and so terribly small.

"Does he know where his son is?" my mother asked.

"He has not seen his son in four months," Nnamabia said.

"Of course it is wrong," my mother said. "But this is what the police do all the time. If they do not find the person they are looking for, they lock up his relative."

"The man is ill," Nnamabia said. "His hands shake, even when he's asleep."

He closed the container of rice and turned to my father. "I want to give him some of this, but if I bring it into the cell the chief will take it."

My father went over and asked the policeman at the desk if we could be allowed to see the old man in Nnamabia's cell for a few minutes. The policeman was the light-skinned acerbic one who never said thank you when my mother handed over the rice-and-money bribe, and now he sneered in my father's face and said that he could well lose his job for letting even Nnamabia out and yet now we were asking for another person? Did we think this was visiting day at a boarding school? My father came back and sat down with a sigh, and Nnamabia silently scratched at his bumpy face.

The next day, Nnamabia barely touched his rice. He said that the policemen had splashed soapy water on the floor and walls of the cell, as they usually did, and that the old man, who had not bathed in a week, had yanked his shirt off and rubbed his frail back against the wet floor. The policemen started to laugh when they saw him do this, and then they asked him to take all his clothes off and parade in the corridor outside the cell; as he did, they laughed louder and asked whether his son the thief knew that Papa's buttocks were so shrivelled. Nnamabia was staring at his yellow-orange rice as he spoke, and when he looked up his eyes were filled with tears, my worldly brother, and I felt a tenderness for him that I would not have been able to describe if I had been asked to.

There was another attack on campus — a boy hacked another boy with an axe — two days later.

"This is good," my mother said. "Now they cannot say that they have arrested all the cult boys." We did not go to Enugu that day; instead my parents went to see the local police superintendent, and they came back with good news. Nnamabia and the barman were to be

released immediately. One of the cult boys, under questioning, had insisted that Nnamabia was not a member. The next day, we left earlier than usual, without jollof rice. My mother was always nervous when we drove, saying to my father, "*Nekwa ya!* Watch out!," as if he could not see the cars making dangerous turns in the other lane, but this time she did it so often that my father pulled over before we got to Ninth Mile and snapped, "Just who is driving this car?"

Two policemen were flogging a man with *koboko* as we drove into the police station. At first, I thought it was Nnamabia, and then I thought it was the old man from his cell. It was neither. I knew the boy on the ground, who was writhing and shouting with each lash. He was called Aboy and had the grave ugly face of a hound; he drove a Lexus around campus and was said to be a Buccaneer. I tried not to look at him as we walked inside. The policeman on duty, the one with tribal marks on his cheeks who always said "God bless you" when he took his bribe, looked away when he saw us, and I knew that something was wrong. My parents gave him the note from the superintendent. The policeman did not even glance at it. He knew about the release order, he told my father; the barman had already been released, but there was a complication with the boy. My mother began to shout, "What do you mean? Where is my son?"

The policeman got up. "I will call my senior to explain to you."

My mother rushed at him and pulled on his shirt. "Where is my son? Where is my son?" My father pried her away, and the policeman brushed at his chest, as if she had left some dirt there, before he turned to walk away.

"Where is our son?" my father asked in a voice so quiet, so steely, that the policeman stopped.

"They took him away, sir," he said.

"They took him away? What are you saying?" my mother was yelling. "Have you killed my son? Have you killed my son?"

"Where is our son?" my father asked again.

"My senior said I should call him when you came," the policeman said, and this time he hurried through a door.

It was after he left that I felt suddenly chilled by fear; I wanted to run after him and, like my mother, pull at his shirt until he produced Nnamabia. The senior policeman came out, and I searched his blank face for clues.

"Good day, sir," he said to my father.

"Where is our son?" my father asked. My mother breathed noisily.

"No problem, sir. It is just that we transferred him. I will take you there right away." There was something nervous about the policeman; his face remained blank, but he did not meet my father's eyes.

"Transferred him?"

"We got the order this morning. I would have sent somebody for him, but we don't have petrol, so I was waiting for you to come so that we could go together."

"Why was he transferred?"

"I was not here, sir. They said that he misbehaved yesterday and they took him to Cell One, and then yesterday evening there was a transfer of all the people in Cell One to another site."

"He misbehaved? What do you mean?"

"I was not here, sir."

My mother spoke in a broken voice: "Take me to my son! Take me to my son right now!"

I sat in the back with the policeman, who smelled of the kind of old camphor that seemed to last forever in my mother's trunk. No one spoke except for the policeman when he gave my father directions. We arrived about fifteen minutes later, my father driving inordinately fast. The small, walled compound looked neglected, with patches of overgrown grass strewn with old bottles and plastic bags. The policeman hardly waited for my father to stop the car before he opened the door and hurried out, and again I felt chilled. We were in a godforsaken part of town, and there was no sign that said "Police Station." There was a strange deserted feeling in the air.

But the policeman soon emerged with Nnamabia. There he was, my handsome brother, walking toward us, seemingly unchanged, until he came close enough for my mother to hug him, and I saw him wince and back away — his arm was covered in soft-looking welts. There was dried blood around his nose.

"Why did they beat you like this?" my mother asked him. She turned to the policeman. "Why did you people do this to my son? Why?"

The man shrugged. There was a new insolence to his demeanor; it was as if he had been uncertain about Nnamabia's well-being but now, reassured, could let himself talk. "You cannot raise your children properly — all of you people who feel important because you work at the university — and when your children misbehave you think they should not be punished. You are lucky they released him."

My father said, "Let's go."

He opened the door and Nnamabia climbed in, and we drove home. My father did not stop at any of the police checkpoints on the road, and, once, a policeman gestured threateningly with his gun as we sped past. The only time my mother opened her mouth on the drive home was to ask Nnamabia if he wanted us to stop and buy some *okpa*. Nnamabia said no. We had arrived in Nsukka before he finally spoke.

"Yesterday, the policemen asked the old man if he wanted a free half bucket of water. He said yes. So they told him to take his clothes off and parade the corridor. Most of my cellmates were laughing. Some of them said it was wrong to treat an old man like that." Nnamabia paused. "I shouted at the policeman. I told him the old man was innocent and ill, and if they kept him here it wouldn't help them find his son, because the man did not even know where his son was. They said that I should shut up immediately, that they would take me to Cell One. I didn't care. I didn't shut up. So they pulled me out and slapped me and took me to Cell One."

Nnamabia stopped there, and we asked him nothing else. Instead, I imagined him calling the policeman a stupid idiot, a spineless coward, a sadist, a bastard, and I imagined the shock of the policemen — the chief staring openmouthed, the other cellmates stunned at the audacity of the boy from the university. And I imagined the old man himself looking on with surprised pride and quietly refusing to undress. Nnamabia did not say what had happened to him in Cell One, or what happened at the new site. It would have been so easy for him, my charming brother, to make a sleek drama of his story, but he did not.



# Dayward - ZZ Packer

(2010)

Early yet, the morning clouds the color of silver fox, and Lazarus was running. His sister, Mary Celeste, hadn't heard the dogs chasing after them — nor could hear them, being deaf — and, despite his signing to her what the plan was and for her to keep up as best she could, she'd nevertheless been treed, and soon so would he, if he was lucky and could make it to a likely pine in time. Earlier he'd thrown rocks, possibly wounding two of the dogs, which he'd heard nothing from in a while, but the third was still in full barking pursuit.

"Stay!" he yelled at his sister. But of course yelling without signing did no good, and all he could hope was that she'd made the rustle he'd sensed, ten or so pines away. Such an animal ranting he'd never heard before and hoped never to hear again. He couldn't help cursing his luck for getting split from Mary Celeste, then cursing her for being so stubborn and full of vinegar and so deaf.

From the sound of it, the dog that had been tailing him was neither gaining nor retreating; there was just an incessant yelping that was part snarls of threat and part screams of feeling threatened. Perhaps it had already found its quarry up a tree. If so, that left Lazarus with nothing to do but stop and push away the pounding blood in his head and struggle to divine where each round of sounds could be coming from. Perhaps, though, the quarry the dog had found was Mary Celeste. He cocked his ear, subtracting all the echoes bouncing off the pines until one spot seemed sure. With no time, he ran toward it until he got to the trees where wood sense told him she might be. No real knowing about it, but the dog leaping out at him from nowhere proved him right.

Two years free, Lazarus was hoisting himself up a pine like a runaway, digging his nails into the soft bark, aiming toward the clouds above, and praying that the next branch up wasn't nearly as far away as it looked nor the hound below as close as it sounded. Where its two companions had gone, who knew, but this one gnashed its teeth and ripped and ranted and barked so mightily Lazarus swore he felt the tree shake. It was one thing to be chased by hounds as a runaway slave, and another thing entirely to be a runaway once free, with a deaf sister who'd spent the first unchased part of their journey traipsing off in the woods as if she had time to examine every leaf that caught her fancy.

"Git!" he yelled, catching his breath on the second or third branch, hanging like a possum, but all the dog did was yell and curse back in its own language. It was now just a small picture below, but that terrified Lazarus even more — no scent, no trail. No trail on him, and the dog would go after Mary Celeste, who, being a girl and only nine, mightn't climb so high or so fast. He would simply have to do something — however foolish and foolhardy — as he could not leave a deaf sister, his charge, up in a tree, liable to fall at any moment.

"Mary Celeste!" he yelled. He knew it was useless, but he did it again. He got back nothing.

He had no way of telling her progress up her tree, but he scaled his own, wondering what was the use of it. It mattered not whether he was safe. She'd get killed by Kittredge's dog, or perhaps the other dogs would come from nowhere and claw her to death.

It was all his fault. Back at Four Daughters, when Lazarus had told Miss Thalia that he and Mary Celeste were striking out to reunite with their own people in New Orleans, their former mistress had called the African race an ungrateful lot of thieves for deserting once emancipation came round. "All I got to say," Miss Thalia said, curls agog as if she'd been caught in a freezing rain, "is that we always fed and clothed you slaves."

"Some might say," Lazarus ventured, " 'twere the slaves that's fed and clothed you."

Lo, the weather of her face.

Lazarus hadn't mentioned the deaf school for Mary Celeste — it was none of her business — but he had let loose a great deal else about what he thought of their mistress. He'd got into trouble before for back talk, acting first and thinking later. Egg, the blind man with whom they shared a cabin, used to tell him he was tempting fate when he talked out of his head so. That if he wasn't his father, and couldn't deliver the goods, he ought not to talk like his father. Sure enough, that same night, mere days after they'd buried Egg and told her they were leaving, Miss Thalia had knocked on their cabin door to announce that she'd decided to have them sicced by Kittredge's dogs and in all probability hanged, but that she was giving them a half day's head start. Kittredge — Miss Thalia's overseer in slavery, and her hired hand when freedom came — was surely happy to be enlisted once more.

If Lazarus had thought she was joking about the dogs, or about the head start, he was wrong on both counts. Of course, he and Mary Celeste were good and free by law and by poor dead Abe Lincoln himself, but Kittredge and his dogs came after them anyway, and no amount of pepper that Lazarus shook behind him would sneeze them off.

Now the hound below sent up a howling message, as if from Kittredge and Miss Thalia both. With nothing else to do, Lazarus growled back, which set the dog to cussing him out in hellhound once again.

"Lazarus!" It was Mary Celeste. She would not have called out unless she thought all danger was gone or thought she'd be in more danger if she didn't call for him.

It was all his fault that they were in it like this. Ever suspicious of a God who hadn't spoken to man, woman, or child in more than a thousand years, he nevertheless sent up a pinprick-brief prayer, even as he felt his throat try to puke up his heart. He knew what he'd have to do to keep her safe and alive: he'd have to kill himself.

His father, who'd run off not once, or twice, but three times, had heard tell of a man in Missouri who'd had no river or brook or stream water to plash through to cover his scent; instead, he wrapped some homespun from his shirt round his hand and rammed it down a dog's throat to choke it. The mutt had left the hand nothing but blood and gristle, healed over with a few blond whiskers poking through, but the man would hold up his stump with pride, testifying, "My hand's back in slavery, but the rest of me's free, by God. The rest a me's free."

Lazarus unbuttoned his shirt with one hand in order to keep his other in full grip of the tree. He wound the shirt round his fist. He shimmied midway down the pine and let himself drop to the ground. He knew not whether the dog leaped back or pounced forward, only that he felt the terrible bristle of stiff hound fur at his throat, across his neck, along his belly, the animal trying to twist him out of his soul inasmuch as a bear bones a fish. No matter which way he turned, there was nothing but dog — dog teeth, dog claws, dog hunger, nothing but dog forever — and he knew that the dog would either bury him here, under the cool of the pine needles, or leave his body out for days like one of Miss Thalia's half-carved Sunday roasts.

And still he fought, until, suddenly and without knowledge of how it had been done, he risked everything — his life, Mary Celeste's, the dog's, he hoped — and plunged his hand down the beast's throat.

The dog both choked and gasped as if half-drowned, mastering itself enough to sink teeth into flesh, and now Lazarus heard his own screams as teeth struck bone, then reared back without loosening their hold; he screamed for mercy, the teeth pulling his flesh as if yanking at taffy.

Still, with his free hand Lazarus punched the beast's throat, punched the tongue thick as pork loin, hollered all the while as the teeth stabbed him worse than the nails rammed through the poor Saviour. Lazarus pulled every which way to get his hand out, cursing his lying daddy, who'd probably never met the Missouri man at all, cursing Mary Celeste and her everlasting deafness, cursing as he howled worse than the dog, wrestling the dog's body from the anchor of its mouth until he felt the cool, chill silent scream of his own blood meeting air for the first time, pulsing out of him like gushes of water at the pump, some ripped artery or vein begging mercy,

begging through Death, which spoke to him in his mother's voice, then his own voice, as if he had no choice but to agree.

But it had worked.

For the first time in a long while, he heard no growls, no snarls. Then he knew: he'd choked the dog with his own hand, and the dog was dead.

He climbed Mary Celeste's tree as best he could, but he must have passed out, for the next he remembered he was on the ground and she was looking into his eyes as if peering at fish in a gully. When he stood, the blood gushed more.

It hardly looked like a hand, or anything, really.

*Nasty*, she signed.

"Well, I can't help that, can I?"

*I'm just commenting*, she said.

"You ain't saying nothing, so just hush your hands."

*You can't make me*.

Mary Celeste was not one for blood, never was, but when the hand began spurting anew she quit signing anything, just led him like the blind until they found freshwater, and had him plunge the hand into a stream somewhere outside Lafayette County. His blood bloomed red, then pink, in the water, and little whip-tailed tadpoles and fish came to nibble at the meat of his hand. He felt an awful pride rise up in him, having done it, and though the hand looked like something a plow had tried tilling into the earth, he'd saved his sister, and kept his promise to his dead folks of never leaving her to harm.

Now, with that part over, he understood just how far they'd come. He didn't know if they'd made it out of Mississippi or even out of the county, but he knew they'd been two days walking, and one day with hounds on them, and that was enough to get them somewhere. He felt both a sadness and a relief at being the farthest from home he'd ever been.

*You think we in Canada?* she asked.

"There ain't no such place," Lazarus said. "Besides, it's New Orleans. Ain't that where you wanted to go? To the school and to our folks?"

She said nothing to that, just smoked a few puffs, the last of his tobacco.

The hand, now clean, looked all the worse: teeth holes, erupted muscle, and mangled tendon, and something bubbling and maroon at what seemed to be its core.

*We got to go back and get a doctor*, she signed.

"You more than anyone should know about a blamed doctor." He felt cruel, having said it, but didn't take it back: more words only made everything worse. When she was five, she'd woken from a fever hearing nothing save a buzz — a sound, she'd reported, remarkably like a trapped June bug, travelling the road from mouth to ear and back. Her hearing might have been saved had Miss Thalia and the late Master Thompson called in a white folks' doctor instead of Mr. Swope, the county veterinarian, who specialized in horse carbuncles. The horse doctor had advised both Master and Miss to refuse to tolerate the girl's melancholy and to end her bed rest. If they would merely tend to their property and cease abetting the girl's masquerade, he said, they would quickly find her hearing repaired. He then packed away his stethoscope, his silver thumping cone, his verruca salts, his jar of leeches. A month passed, her hearing going from a buzz to a muffle. She said the voices sounded as though people were being suffocated, desperately trying to speak but hampered by pillow down, or straw ticking, or pond water. He didn't want to know what it sounded like — listening to their mother moan about it was punishing enough — but Mary Celeste was ever the talker, and the more deaf she grew the less she talked to others and the more she talked to him. She told him how the sound became a strict calm of long corridors, unaccompanied by anything. She seemed not to grasp what it was until her deafness was final, and no amount of straining or interpretation would bring sound, much less words, to her ears. When she came to understand this, she screamed for days on end. But

that, too, ended, and she wiped her tears with the brave resolve of a child seeing the family hog off to slaughter.

*No doctor!* Her hands tsked at him in disbelief. *You just ornery.*

"Nan bit of thanks from you. I'm the one with a busted hand, liable to be cut off."

*Remember Daddy's story about the man with the stump?*

"No."

*Yes, you do.*

"We got to go. Who knows where Kittredge is. Could be right behind."

*He ain't behind. I ain't seen this place before.*

"You ain't hardly been out of house and field since deaf, so what you know?"

"I know lots," she said, speeching it. When she wanted him to get her meaning, she'd do both. She was always going on about the lady from up North who'd held and warped her hands into signs, some relation of Miss Thalia's who'd wanted to take Mary Celeste off North to a school that no children could attend but those as deaf as Mary Celeste. She hadn't known if Colored were taken on or not, but even without knowing she seemed ready to wager everything that Mary Celeste should leave mother, father, and brother to go there. When Miss Thalia refused, this aunt or cousin or cousin-in-law outfitted Mary Celeste to sleep in the Thompson house, even if it was at the foot of the bed, where Mary Celeste said the woman's feet gave off a powerful stink.

And Mary Celeste was right. She did know more than she should. She could tell when it was going to rain, when a body would die. She knew how to make a garden grow twice as big in half the time. Cats always came her way. She was of such magic, people half expected she'd heal herself of her own lost hearing. But that didn't happen.

"Just shut it and hush," Lazarus told her.

He upped himself from the streambank and began walking. He wore his bloodstained shirt, soaked with the smell of dog, perforated to cheesecloth with innumerable bites and tears. He knew with a certainty that he was going to lose the hand. Mary Celeste whiskered her feet behind him to catch up.

He was fourteen years old. Perhaps fifteen.

For forty-two days after the dogs, he and Mary Celeste survived on blackberries, tiny fish, and questionable mushrooms. The hand went from bad to worse, a throbbing thing that some hours felt as though it would calm itself if he could only plunge it into some ointment, and other times as though chariot wheels were running over it with every bounce of his gait. At first it refused to scab over, and they suspected gangrene; Mary Celeste used her pinafore to wrap the thing. It smelled like unsalted hog in a summer sun, and each day they walked he couldn't help unwinding the pinafore from his hand, every fresh unveiling aching like skin unskinned from flesh, the new air like a razor to it. One night, he woke himself with his own howling. Still, he kept going, though it got so bad near the end that Mary Celeste brought out the knife and asked where to cut.

"Don't you know anything? That won't do it," he told her. "You'd need an axe, at least."

*You need someone else then, too. I'm not chopping anything off anyone with an axe.*

They'd started out on the high roads, then took the low ones. Later on, they'd outwitted old swamp-dwelling veterans and vagrant hunters alike, and barely escaped from a dirty old Confederate who'd made it his business to collect a passel of girl orphans from the war, selling their innocence in a thicket of mulberry bushes. The man had taken Mary Celeste away from Lazarus when he'd been dead asleep, and he'd had her for a full sun hour before Lazarus tracked and ambushed him, tackling him to the ground. The man finally bested him and pulled out an ancient pistol, pushing it against Lazarus's mackinaw cap to blow his head off.

He pulled the trigger.

After the smoke and cordite cleared and the clowder of little-girl voices quit their chiming screams, Lazarus touched his temple, his finger finding a dab of blood no bigger than a drop of claret. The man drew back, amazed, now convinced that the skulls of colored men were hard as

iron. Back at Four Daughters, blind Egg had laid his hands on Lazarus and told him he had a gift of being hard to kill. Egg had many a time congratulated him on his name bringing him good luck, but Lazarus had reminded the oldhead that he'd heard of nearabout two score slaves named Lazarus in Lafayette County alone, and still the name hadn't brought additional life or a trip back from the dead for a single one.

Now poor Egg himself was dead. He'd named the date, and had been late one day, but the hour was true: after eight, after sundown. Lazarus and Mary Celeste laid him in the ground and began to plot their way to New Orleans.

Lazarus thought on it all. How their father had come to be killed, not from his ear being nailed to the post but from scratching it day and night until it pussed over. How their mother had run off into the woods, witless and mad, after their father's death. She'd been gone nearly three days, then caught pneumonia and died before she could be properly whipped for attempting to escape — if churning around the same copse of trees less than four miles off could be called escaping.

Mary Celeste hugged his head, her grateful tears wetting his face; meanwhile, the old Confederate was running as far and as fast as his spindly legs and his rope-tied girls would allow. All the activity of wrestling Mary Celeste away had torn Lazarus's hand anew, and though he could see its throbbing, he couldn't at all feel its message.

Lazarus thought on the Missouri runaway and the blond-whiskered souvenir of his stump. *My hand's back in slavery, but the rest of me's free, by God. The rest a me's free.*

It had been his father's favorite bedtime story.

His father had liked to whip them sometimes before bed, and when they asked him "Why, Papa?" after they'd brought in the moss for the bed ticking and limed the eggs and poured ashes and hair clippings on the little collard garden and done all their tasks right and proper and in full obedience, their father wouldn't or couldn't say. But other times he peeled them pawpaws and told them stories that kept them up with the horribleness of their endings, which were not at all like the ones Miss Thalia told when she gathered the tykes around her at Christmas and Easter to read a page of "Ivanhoe" or "King Arthur" or "Robin Hood."

Lazarus's once-upon-a-time girl, Savannah, had told him that her father did the same — beat her — but that it was only to show he could be a man, the same as Master Thompson or Kittredge; he was only trying to say he owned her more. That made sense enough to Lazarus, and after that his mind wasn't so sore to get whipped, despite being sore in body and spirit.

the time they set foot in Louisiana, landing on the far banks of the Pearl River north of Bogalusa, the Gulf sun was tracking them without pause, and each day broiled with the smell of hot swamp water and the sound of mosquitoes. He could not walk for fainting; it was as if the gentle air were full of nails and the sun a hammer, striking his hand each moment it shone. It was the first time in a while that Mary Celeste had seen him cry, tears and tears without stop, and she looked disturbed and rabby.

Lazarus might as well have been wearing a loincloth instead of trousers; the sleeves and apron of Mary Celeste's dress had also been stripped into rags long ago to stanch the bleeding soles of her feet. They kept on, limbs weighted with heat, shredded by thorns. No water left in their eyes, no feeling left in their joints. The last stretch toward New Orleans they did nearabout in their sleep. Starved, chigger-bitten, something flaking from their skin like rust.

And the hand got worse, but by then he couldn't feel it at all.

New Orleans itself seemed days in approach. Herons rose up and over them, a litter of wings, soundless flaps turning to white rags against a white-rag sky. Even with Lake Pontchartrain a mile behind, there were still herons aplenty, after them like beggars. In no mood to be shat upon, they turned off their road and down another, a twisty, long, and brambly path. Mary Celeste was given to dawdling, and he'd had to yank on her, on occasion, with the one good hand. Then the thrips and dragonflies gave way to street Arabs, ornery Creoles, and armed whites spitting razor strops about the loss of the Sesesh. They knew by the gas lamps and wooden walkways that

they'd made it to New Orleans.

The city was beautiful, even in its filth. On every corner, someone was selling berries or apples or hot corn pone; someone was offering to cobble your shoes right then and there, if you were lucky enough to be shod in the first place. Fishmongers in sandpapered gloves held up gleaming, still quivering fish, then plunged them back into water-filled haversacks. They passed by shops selling cigars, shoes, clarinets — a whole piano, even.

Runners — white boys — came up to any couple, well-dressed man, or broken-down carriage and yelled, pleaded, or sang the merits of the hotel or boarding house that had sent them to drum up business. Men paced the planked sidewalks like preachers, offering to sell you the very same flowers you'd see growing out the ground for free.

*How, Mary Celeste signed, are we going to find Aunt Minnie here?*

"We got to ask after her plantation," Lazarus told her.

*You want me to do the talking?* she signed.

"You hush."

*Stop saying that. I'll talk. We'll get into less trouble that way.*

He made a show of ignoring her. She'd been after him about the dogs, and, it seemed, about every little thing she felt he'd wobbled on or mucked up. The dogs were the least of it: no pallets to sleep on, no way to know how far to Louisiana, then no way to know how far to New Orleans. She probably blamed him for Egg's death. For Mama and Papa, too.

They walked the city as if without aim, and he bought Mary Celeste a peppermint, though she let him split it. The entire day he found no one he could trust, no colored people to help them like those they'd met on the road. The more they walked, the more soldiers he saw, Union officers everywhere.

It had been a day to behold when the Union soldiers first arrived in Oxford, Mississippi. All the whites in a conniption fit, running about, the whole town burned, all the slaves happy as Christmas about it, saying stuff about white folk and to white folk that Lazarus had never before heard in his natural-born life. Insults and oaths and threats about a fool master that one might have muttered in the safety of a cabin to a wife who'd heard it all before, but never in open air.

He thought back to Miss Thalia, fairly screaming over the Union's having used her place as a pigsty, only to file out carrying whatever wasn't bolted down. Hens, gone. Piano, ruined. They took all the chicory. They even took from the slave quarters, so there was no fun in that for them and Egg, but it was worth it to see someone like Miss Thalia brought low. If it weren't for her, Mary Celeste might very well have her hearing. If it weren't for Miss Thalia, his mother and father might still be alive. "Bottom rail's on top, top rail's on bottom!" Egg said. But that night, when Lazarus watched the far-off glow of Oxford burning, he felt that he could stand a good deal more top rail being brought low, and knew that, given half a chance, he would kill Miss Thalia and Kittredge, too. Even if he had to go back to do it.

Mary Celeste could always smell out thoughts like a water stick: *Stop thinking about Miss.*

"I ain't," he lied.

They had the name of the plantation and the directions to it, but didn't make it too far outside town the first day, as Lazarus had to wrap and rewrap his hand endlessly as it oozed. The second morning finally brought them to the place, and after inquiring about their Aunt Minnie they were told the road that led to where she lived. Indeed, a few miles from the plantation lay a metropolis of shantytowns, housing colored folk who'd lit out for New Orleans and Baton Rouge after emancipation and found that their freedom ended right here, in a township of mangroves and muskrats, stranded and muleless.

The road narrowed to a path so choked with low-swinging catalpa and mangrove they had to swat at dangling fronds and Spanish moss with every step; it seemed unlikely that anyone's house would be at this end of the world.

Nevertheless, Lazarus heard some noises through the trees: the cries of a colicky infant,

yowling as unceasing and otherworldly as a tomcat at night. Then came more noises: rhythmic thrumming on what sounded like a drum, the sizzle of something frying. The closer they got, the more they heard: a passel of children spewed insults, their bitter argument punctuated by a crash of pewterware. A woman's voice climbed atop the children's fuss, yelling, "I got but two words for the lot a y'all! *Be have!*"

Her yelling had its effect: all was silent.

They'd never met their Aunt Minnie, but she was nonetheless their last living kin on earth. And yet when his mother had told stories about Minnie Lazarus had only half listened to the reminiscences, which seemed to have no real beginning or end and, unlike "Ivanhoe" and "Robin Hood," no hero in sight. It was always something about how Minnie could sew the best, or how she had a piece of mirrored silver that she wouldn't let anyone else use. How she had loved her sister more than anything, but had stolen away at the age of fifteen, wearing every dress their mistress owned — three, one on top of the other.

A morning rain started up, with drops of water as fat as pumpkin seeds. Another round of quarrelling came through the leaves. He cupped his ear and cocked his head toward it to let Mary Celeste know. *She's that way*, Lazarus signed to her with his one good hand, then tugged her toward where he'd heard the tangle of voices. Mary Celeste couldn't hear the racket, but she could always tell when something was amiss. She shook her head no.

But Lazarus pulled her along so that they both battled through the vines and bluebottle flies and brush. It was Mary Celeste who finally spotted the shack, engulfed in wilderness.

"You say you Clarissa's childrens?" the woman who opened the door said.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Then where the hell Clarissa at?"

"She passed, Ma'am."

The woman's face had more yellow to it than their mother's had, and not a healthy yellow, either, but the wan, sickly color of cornmeal past its prime. "Clarissa," she said in the dark of the room, talking to no one save herself. "Clarissa, Clarissa . . ." She cantillated the name as if she either knew a Clarissa or were trying to remember if she did.

"You Minnie?"

The woman said nothing; instead, she drew up a cheroot and smoked it, her cheeks going hollow from the drag. With the same hand, she rubbed her eyebrows, then her frown lines. Lazarus searched the planes of her face and the carry of her lip for any likeness to their dead mother. Yes. There was a resemblance, somewhere around the eyes, but it flickered off and on like a firefly.

"What's that smell?" she asked. Lazarus held up his rotting hand, which looked like some species of toadstool.

"Hounds," he answered.

She nodded, once, like a white schoolmarm. As though everything he would ever tell her was something she already knew. So he didn't tell about Miss Thalia and Master Thompson, or what they'd done to Mary Celeste to make her deaf; or how both father and mother had come to their ends. He did not speak any further about what happened with the dogs treeing Mary Celeste or his nearly losing half his hand.

That night, when Mary Celeste began to sleepwalk, trembling and crying without sound, Lazarus had to prize her fingers from where she clawed at Minnie's door, trying to flee the sheets she mistook for dogs, confusing her own thrashing with being ripped apart by hounds.

He guided her back to their pallet, where she remembered not a thing she'd done. Minnie's seven children groaned and complained before they returned to their rest, and Lazarus lay in the dark unable to sleep, unwilling to rise from his first real bed in months. He watched Minnie, who'd got up to see what afflicted this deaf child and now sat at the cabin's lone table.

"Nine goddam children," she said to the dark. It was neither a curse nor a lament but a pledge.

Lazarus watched her. But nothing on Minnie moved; not her trumpet-flare nostrils or her lips, thin as an oak splint. Only the smoke from her cheroot danced up and through the air, like a spirit.



# Patient Zero - Tananarive Due

(2010)

The picture came! Veronica tapped on my glass and woke me up, and she held it up for me to see. It's autographed and everything! For you, Veronica mouthed at me, and she smiled a really big smile. The autograph says, TO JAY — I'LL THROW A TOUCHDOWN FOR YOU. I couldn't believe it. Everybody is laughing at me because of the way I yelled and ran in circles around my room until I fell on the floor and scraped my elbow. The janitor, Lou, turned on the intercom box outside my door and said, "Kid, you gone crazier than usual? What you care about that picture for?"

Don't they know Dan Marino is the greatest quarterback of all time? I taped the picture to the wall over my bed. On the rest of my wall I have maps of the United States, and the world, and the solar system. I can find Corsica on the map, and the Palau Islands, which most people have never heard of, and I know what order all the planets are in. But there's nothing else on my wall like Dan Marino. That's the best. The other best thing I have is the cassette tape from that time the President called me on the telephone when I was six. He said, "Hi, is Jay there? This is the President of the United States." He sounded just like on TV. My heart flipped, because it's so weird to hear the President say your name. I couldn't think of anything to say back. He asked me how I was feeling, and I said I was fine. That made him laugh, like he thought I was making a joke. Then his voice got real serious, and he said everyone was praying and thinking about me, and he hung up. When I listen to that tape now, I wish I had thought of something else to say. I used to think he might call me another time, but it only happened once, in the beginning. So I guess I'll never have a chance to talk to the President again.

After Veronica gave me my picture of Marino, I asked her if she could get somebody to fix my TV so I can see the football games. All my TV can play is videos. Veronica said there aren't any football games, and I started to get mad because I hate it when they lie. It's September, I said, and there's always football games in September. But Veronica told me the NFL people had a meeting and decided not to have football anymore, and maybe it would start again, but she wasn't sure, because nobody except me was thinking about football. At first, after she said that, it kind of ruined the autograph, because it seemed like Dan Marino must be lying, too. But Veronica said he was most likely talking about throwing a touchdown for me in the future, and I felt better then.

This notebook is from Ms. Manigat, my tutor, who is Haitian. She said I should start writing down my thoughts and everything that happens to me. I said I don't have any thoughts, but she said that was ridiculous. That is her favorite word, ridiculous.

Oh, I should say I'm ten today. If I were in a regular school, I would be in fifth grade like my brother was. I asked Ms. Manigat what grade I'm in, and she said I don't have a grade. I read like I'm in seventh grade and I do math like I'm in fourth grade, she says. She says I don't exactly fit anywhere, but I'm very smart. Ms. Manigat comes every day, except on weekends. She is my best friend, but I have to call her Ms. Manigat instead of using her first name, which is Emmeline, because she is so proper. She is very neat and wears skirts and dresses, and everything about her is very clean except her shoes, which are dirty. Her shoes are supposed to be white, but whenever I see her standing outside of the glass, when she hasn't put on her plastic suit yet, her shoes look brown and muddy.

Those are my thoughts.

#

September 20

I had a question today. Veronica never comes on Fridays, and the other nurse, Rene, isn't as

nice as she is, so I waited for Ms. Manigat. She comes at one. I said, "You know how they give sick children their last wish when they're dying? Well, when Dr. Ben told me to think of the one thing I wanted for my birthday, I said I wanted an autograph from Dan Marino, so does that mean I'm dying and they're giving me my wish?" I said this really fast.

I thought Ms. Manigat would say I was being ridiculous. But she smiled. She put her hand on top of my head, and her hand felt stiff and heavy inside her big glove. "Listen, little old man," she said, which is what she calls me because she says I do so much worrying, "You're a lot of things, but you aren't dying. When everyone can be as healthy as you, it'll be a happy day."

The people here always seem to be waiting, and I don't know what for. I thought maybe they were waiting for me to die. But I believe Ms. Manigat. If she doesn't want to tell me something, she just says, "Leave it alone, Jay," which is her way of letting me know she would rather not say anything at all than ever tell a lie.

#

October 5

The lights in my room started going on and off again today, and it got so hot I had to leave my shirt off until I went to bed. Ms. Manigat couldn't do her lessons the way she wanted because of the lights not working right. She said it was the emergency generator. I asked her what the emergency was, and she said something that sounded funny: "Same old same old." That was all she said. I asked her if the emergency generator was the reason Dr. Ben took the television out of my room, and she said yes. She said everyone is conserving energy, and I have to do my part, too. But I miss my videos. There is nothing at all to do when I can't watch my videos. I hate it when I'm bored. Sometimes I'll even watch videos I've seen a hundred times, *really* a hundred times. I've seen *Big* with Tom Hanks more times than any other video. I love the part in the toy store with the really big piano keys on the floor. My mom taught me how to play Three Blind Mice on our piano at home, and it reminds me of that. I've never seen a toy store like the one in *Big*. I thought it was just a made-up place, but Ms. Manigat said it was a real toy store in New York.

I miss my videos. When I'm watching them, it's like I'm inside the movie, too. I hope Dr. Ben will bring my TV back soon.

#

October 22

I made Veronica cry yesterday. I didn't mean to. Dr. Ben said he knows it was an accident, but I feel very sorry, so I've been crying too. What happened is, I was talking to her, and she was taking some blood out of my arm with a needle like always. I was telling her about how me and my dad used to watch Marino play on television, and then all of a sudden she was crying really hard.

She dropped the needle on the floor and she was holding her wrist like she broke it. She started swearing. She said Goddammit, goddammit, goddammit, over and over, like that. I asked her what happened, and she pushed me away like she wanted to knock me over. Then she went to the door and punched the number code really fast and she pulled on the doorknob, but the door wouldn't open, and I heard something in her arm snap from yanking so hard. She had to do the code again. She was still crying. I've never seen her cry.

I didn't know what happened. I mashed my finger on the buzzer hard, but everybody ignored me. It reminded me of when I first came here, when I was always pushing the buzzer and crying, and nobody would ever come for a long time, and they were always in a bad mood when they came.

Anyway, I waited for Ms. Manigat, and when I told her about Veronica, she said she didn't know anything because she comes from the outside, but she promised to find out. Then she made me recite the Preamble to the Constitution, which I know by heart. Pretty soon, for a little while, I forgot about Veronica.

After my lessons, Ms. Manigat left and called me on my phone an hour later, like she promised. She always keeps her promises. My telephone is hooked up so people on the inside can call me, but I can't call anybody, inside or outside. It hardly ever rings now. But I almost didn't want to pick it up. I was afraid of what Ms. Manigat would say.

"Veronica poked herself," Ms. Manigat told me. "The needle stuck through her hot suit. She told Dr. Ben there was sudden movement."

I wondered who made the sudden movement, Veronica or me?

"Is she okay?" I asked. I thought maybe Ms. Manigat was mad at me, because she has told me many times that I should be careful. Maybe I wasn't being careful when Veronica was here.

"We'll see, Jay," Ms. Manigat said. From her voice, it sounded like the answer was no.

"Will she get sick?" I asked.

"Probably, yes, they think so," Ms. Manigat said.

I didn't want her to answer any more questions. I like it when people tell me the truth, but it always makes me feel bad, too. I tried to say I was sorry, but I couldn't even open my mouth.

"It's not your fault, Jay," Ms. Manigat said.

I couldn't help it. I sobbed like I used to when I was still a little kid. "Veronica knew something like this could happen," she said.

But that didn't make anything better, because I remembered how Veronica's face looked so scared inside her mask, and how she pushed me away. Veronica has been here since almost the beginning, before Ms. Manigat came, and she used to smile at me even when nobody else did. When she showed me my picture from Dan Marino, she looked almost as happy as me. I had never seen her whole face smiling like that. She looked so pretty and glad.

I was crying so much I couldn't even write down my thoughts like Ms. Manigat said to. Not until today.

#

November 4

A long time ago, when I first came here and the TV in my room played programs from outside, I saw the first-grade picture I had taken at school on TV. I always hated that picture because Mom put some greasy stuff in my hair that made me look like a total geek. And then I turned on the TV and saw that picture on the news! The man on TV said the names of everyone in our family, and even spelled them out on the screen. Then, he called me Patient Zero. He said I was the first person who got sick.

But that wasn't really what happened. My dad was sick before me. I've told them that already. He got it away on his job in Alaska. My dad traveled a lot because he drilled for oil, but he came home early that time. We weren't expecting him until Christmas, but he came when it was only September, close to my birthday. He said he'd been sent home because some people on his oil crew got sick. One of them had even died. But the doctor in Alaska had looked at my dad and said he was fine, and then his boss sent him home. Dad was really mad about that. He hated to lose money. Time away from a job was always losing money, he said. He was in a bad mood when he wasn't working.

And the worse thing was, my dad wasn't fine. After two days, his eyes got red and he started sniffing. Then I did, too. And then my mom and brother.

When the man on TV showed my picture and called me Patient Zero and said I was the first one to get sick, that was when I first learned how people tell lies, because that wasn't true. Somebody on my dad's oil rig caught it first, and then he gave it to my dad. And my dad gave it to me, my mom and my brother. But one thing he said was right. I was the only one who got well.

My Aunt Lori came here to live at the lab with me at first, but she wasn't here long, because her eyes had already turned red by then. She came to help take care of me and my brother before my mom died, but probably she shouldn't have done that. She lived all the way in California, and

I bet she wouldn't have gotten sick if she hadn't come to Miami to be with us. But even my mom's doctor didn't know what was wrong then, so nobody could warn her about what would happen if she got close to us. Sometimes I dream I'm calling Aunt Lori on my phone, telling her please, please not to come. Aunt Lori and my mom were twins. They looked exactly alike.

After Aunt Lori died, I was the only one left in my whole family.

I got very upset when I saw that news report. I didn't like hearing someone talk about my family like that, people who didn't even know us. And I felt like maybe the man on TV was right, and maybe it was all my fault. I screamed and cried the whole day. After that, Dr. Ben made them fix my TV so I couldn't see the news anymore or any programs from outside, just cartoons and kid movies on video. The only good thing was, that was when the President called me. I think he was sorry when he heard what happened to my family.

When I ask Dr. Ben if they're still talking about me on the news, he just shrugs his shoulders. Sometimes Dr. Ben won't say yes or no if you ask him a question. It doesn't matter, though. I think the TV people probably stopped showing my picture a long time ago. I was just a little kid when my family got sick. I've been here four whole years!

Oh, I almost forgot. Veronica isn't back yet.

#

November 7

I have been staring at my Dan Marino picture all day, and I think the handwriting on the autograph looks like Dr. Ben's. But I'm afraid to ask anyone about that. Oh, yeah — and yesterday the power was off in my room for a whole day! Same old same old. That's what Ms. M. would say.

#

November 12

Ms. Manigat is teaching me a little bit about medicine. I told her I want to be a doctor when I grow up, and she said she thinks that's a wonderful idea because she believes people will always need doctors. She says I will be in a good position to help people, and I asked her if that's because I have been here so long, and she said yes.

The first thing she taught me is about diseases. She says in the old days, a long time ago, diseases like typhoid used to kill a lot of people because of unsanitary conditions and dirty drinking water, but people got smarter and doctors found drugs to cure it, so diseases didn't kill people as much anymore. Doctors are always trying to stay a step ahead of disease, Ms. Manigat says.

But sometimes they can't. Sometimes a new disease comes. Or, maybe it's not a new disease, but an old disease that has been hidden for a long time until something brings it out in the open. She said that's how nature balances the planet, because as soon as doctors find cures for one thing, there is always something new. Dr. Ben says my disease is new. There is a long name for it I can't remember how to spell, but most of the time people here call it Virus-J.

In a way, see, it's named after me. That's what Dr. Ben said. But I don't like that.

Ms. Manigat said after my dad came home, the virus got in my body and attacked me just like everyone else, so I got really, really sick for a lot of days. Then, I thought I was completely better. I stopped feeling bad at all. But the virus was already in my brother and my mom and dad, and even our doctor from before, Dr. Wolfe, and Ms. Manigat says it was very *aggressive*, which means doctors didn't know how to kill it.

Everybody wears yellow plastic suits and airtight masks when they're in my room because the virus is still in the air, and it's in my blood, and it's on my plates and cups whenever I finish eating. They call the suits hot suits because the virus is *hot* in my room. Not hot like fire, but dangerous.

Ms. Manigat says Virus-J is extra special in my body because even though I'm not sick anymore, except for when I feel like I have a temperature and I have to lie down sometimes, the

virus won't go away. I can make other people sick even when I feel fine, so she said that makes me a carrier. Ms. Manigat said Dr. Ben doesn't know anybody else who's gotten well except for me.

Oh, except maybe there are some little girls in China. Veronica told me once there were some little girls in China the same age as me who didn't get sick either. But when I asked Dr. Ben, he said he didn't know if it was true. And Ms. Manigat told me it might have been true once, but those girls might not be alive anymore. I asked her if they died of Virus-J, and she said no, no, no. Three times. She told me to forget all about any little girls in China. Almost like she was mad.

I'm the only one like me she knows about for sure, she says. The only one left.

That's why I'm here, she says. But I already knew that part. When I was little, Dr. Ben told me about antibodies and stuff in my blood, and he said the reason him and Rene and Veronica and all the other doctors take so much blood from me all the time, until they make purple bruises on my arms and I feel dizzy, is so they can try to help other people get well, too. I have had almost ten surgeries since I have been here. I think they have even taken out parts of me, but I'm not really sure. I look the same on the outside, but I feel different on the inside. I had surgery on my belly a year ago, and sometimes when I'm climbing the play-rope hanging from the ceiling in my room, I feel like it hasn't healed right, like I'm still cut open. Ms. Manigat says that's only in my mind. But it really hurts! I don't hate anything like I hate operations. I wonder if that's what happened to the other little girls, if they kept getting cut up and cut up until they died. Anyway, it's been a year since I had any operations. I keep telling Dr. Ben they can have as much blood as they want, but I don't want any more operations, please.

Dr. Ben said there's nobody in the world better than me to make people well, if only they can figure out how. Ms. Manigat says the same thing. That makes me feel a little better about Virus-J.

I was happy Ms. Manigat told me all about disease, because I don't want her to treat me like a baby the way everybody else does. That's what I always tell her. I like to know things.

I didn't even cry when she told me Veronica died. Maybe I got all my crying over with in the beginning, because I figured out a long time ago nobody gets better once they get sick. Nobody except for me.

#

November 14

Today, I asked Ms. Manigat how many people have Virus-J.

"Oh, Jay, I don't know," she said. I don't think she was in the mood to talk about disease.

"Just guess," I said.

Ms. Manigat thought for a long time. Then she opened her notebook and began drawing lines and boxes for me to see. Her picture looked like the tiny brown lines all over an oak-tree leaf. We had a tree called a live oak in our backyard, and my dad said it was more than a hundred years old. He said trees sometimes live longer than people do. And he was right, because I'm sure that tree is still standing in our yard even though my whole family is gone.

"This is how it goes, Jay," Ms. Manigat said, showing me with her pencil-tip how one line branched down to the next. "People are giving it to each other. They don't usually know they're sick for two weeks, and by then they've passed it to a lot of other people. By now, it's already been here four years, so the same thing that happened to your family is happening to a lot of families."

"How many families?" I asked again. I tried to think of the biggest number I could. "A million?"

Ms. Manigat shrugged just like Dr. Ben would. Maybe that meant yes.

I couldn't imagine a million families, so I asked Ms. Manigat if it happened to her family, too, if maybe she had a husband and kids and they got sick. But she said no, she was never married. I

guess that's true, because Ms. Manigat doesn't look that old. She won't tell me her age, but she's in her twenties, I think. Ms. Manigat smiled at me, even though her eyes weren't happy.

"My parents were in Miami, and they got it right away," Ms. Manigat said. "Then my sister and nieces came to visit them from Haiti, and they got it, too. I was away working when it happened, and that's why I'm still here."

Ms. Manigat never told me that before.

My family lived in Miami Beach. My dad said our house was too small — I had to share a room with my brother — but my mother liked where we lived because our building was six blocks from the ocean. My mother said the ocean can heal anything. But that can't be true, can it?

My mother wouldn't like it where I am, because there is no ocean and no windows neither. I wondered if Ms. Manigat's parents knew someone who worked on an oil rig, too, but probably not. Probably they got it from my dad and me.

"Ms. Manigat," I said, "Maybe you should move inside like Dr. Ben and everybody else."

"Oh, Jay," Ms. Manigat said, like she was trying to sound cheerful. "Little old man, if I were that scared of anything, why would I be in here teaching you?"

She said she *asked* to be my teacher, which I didn't know. I said I thought her boss was making her do it, and she said she didn't have a boss. No one sent her. She wanted to come.

"Just to meet me?" I asked her.

"Yes, because I saw your face on television, and you looked to me like a one-of-a-kind," she said. She said she was a nurse before, and she used to work with Dr. Ben in his office in Atlanta. She said they worked at the CDC, which is a place that studies diseases. And he knew her, so that was why he let her come teach me.

"A boy like you needs his education. He needs to know how to face life outside," she said.

Ms. Manigat is funny like that. Sometimes she'll quit the regular lesson about presidents and the Ten Commandments and teach me something like how to sew and how to tell plants you eat from plants you don't, and stuff. Like, I remember when she brought a basket with real fruits and vegetables in it, fresh. She said she has a garden where she lives on the outside, close to here. She said one of the reasons she won't move inside is because she loves her garden so much, and she doesn't want to leave it.

The stuff she brought was not very interesting to look at. She showed me some cassava, which looked like a long, twisty tree branch to me, and she said it's good to eat, except it has poison in it that has to be boiled out of the root first and the leaves are poisonous too. She also brought something called akee, which she said she used to eat from trees in Haiti. It has another name in Haiti that's too hard for me to spell. It tasted fine to me, but she said akee can never be eaten before it's opened, or before it's ripe, because it makes your brain swell up and you can die. She also brought different kinds of mushrooms to show me which ones are good or bad, but they all looked alike to me. She promised to bring me other fruits and vegetables to see so I will know what's good for me and what isn't. There's a lot to learn about life outside, she said.

Well, I don't want Ms. Manigat to feel like I am a waste of her time, but I know for a fact I don't have to face life outside. Dr. Ben told me I might be a teenager before I can leave, or even older. He said I might even be a grown man.

But that's okay, I guess. I try not to think about what it would be like to leave. My room, which they moved me to when I had been here six months, is really, really big. They built it especially for me. It's four times as big as the hotel room my mom and dad got for us when we went to Universal Studios in Orlando when I was five. I remember that room because my brother, Kevin, kept asking my dad, "Doesn't this cost too much?" Every time my dad bought us a T-shirt or anything, Kevin brought up how much it cost. I told Kevin to stop it because I was afraid Dad would get mad and stop buying us stuff. Then, when we were in line for the King Kong ride, all by ourselves, Kevin told me, "Dad got fired from his job, stupid. Do you want to go on Welfare?" I waited for Dad and Mom to tell me he got fired, but they didn't. After Kevin

said that, I didn't ask them to buy me anything else, and I was scared to stay in that huge, pretty hotel room because I thought we wouldn't have enough money to pay. But we did. And then Dad got a job on the oil rig, and we thought everything would be better.

My room here is as big as half the whole floor I bet. When I run from one side of my room to the other, from the glass in front to the wall in back, I'm out of breath. I like to do that. Sometimes I run until my ribs start squeezing and my stomach hurts like it's cut open and I have to sit down and rest. There's a basketball net in here, too, and the ball doesn't ever touch the ceiling except if I throw it too high on purpose. I also have comic books, and I draw pictures of me and my family and Ms. Manigat and Dr. Ben. Because I can't watch my videos, now I spend a lot of time writing in this notebook. A whole hour went by already. When I am writing down my thoughts, I forget about everything else.

I have decided for sure to be a doctor someday. I'm going to help make people better.

#

November 29

Thanksgiving was great! Ms. Manigat cooked real bread and brought me food she'd heated up. I could tell everything except the bread and cassava was from a can, like always, but it tasted much better than my regular food. I haven't had bread in a long time. Because of her mask, Ms. Manigat ate her dinner before she came, but she sat and watched me eat. Rene came in, too, and she surprised me when she gave me a hug. She never does that. Dr. Ben came in for a little while at the end, and he hugged me too, but he said he couldn't stay because he was busy. Dr. Ben doesn't come visit me much anymore. I could see he was growing a beard, and it was almost all white! I've seen Dr. Ben's hair when he's outside of the glass, when he isn't wearing his hot suit, and his hair is brown, not white. I asked him how come his beard was white, and he said that's what happens when your mind is overly tired.

I liked having everybody come to my room. Before, in the beginning, almost nobody came in, not even Ms. Manigat. She used to sit in a chair outside the glass and use the intercom for my lessons. It's better when they come in.

I remember how Thanksgiving used to be, with my family around the table in the dining room, and I told Ms. Manigat about that. Yes, she said, even though she didn't celebrate Thanksgiving in Haiti like Americans do, she remembers sitting at the table with her parents and her sister for Christmas dinner. She said she came to see me today, and Rene and Dr. Ben came too, because we are each other's family now, so we are not alone. I hadn't thought of it like that before.

#

December 1

No one will tell me, not even Ms. M., but I think maybe Dr. Ben is sick. I have not seen him in five whole days. It is quiet here. I wish it was Thanksgiving again.

#

January 23

I didn't know this before, but you have to be in the right mood to write your thoughts down. A lot happened in the days I missed.

The doctor with the French name is gone now, and I'm glad. He wasn't like Dr. Ben at all. I could hardly believe he was a real doctor, because he always had on the dirtiest clothes when I saw him take off his hot suit outside of the glass. And he was never nice to me — he wouldn't answer at all when I asked him questions, and he wouldn't look in my eyes except for a second. One time he slapped me on my ear, almost for nothing, and his glove hurt so much my ear turned red and was sore for a whole day. He didn't say he was sorry, but I didn't cry. I think he wanted me to.

Oh yeah, and he hooked me up to IV bags and took so much blood from me I couldn't even stand up. I was scared he would operate on me. Ms. Manigat didn't come in for almost a week,

and when she finally came, I told her about the doctor taking too much blood. She got really mad. Then I found out the reason she didn't come all those days — he wouldn't let her! She said he tried to bar her from coming. *Bar* is the word she used, which sounds like a prison.

The new doctor and Ms. Manigat do not get along, even though they both speak French. I saw them outside of the glass, yelling back and forth and moving their hands, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. I was afraid he would send Ms. Manigat away for good. But yesterday she told me he's leaving! I told her I was happy, because I was afraid he would take Dr. Ben's place.

No, she told me, there isn't anyone taking Dr. Ben's place. She said the French doctor came here to study me in person because he was one of the doctors Dr. Ben had been sending my blood to ever since I first came. But he was already very sick when he got here, and he started feeling worse, so he had to go. Seeing me was his last wish, Ms. Manigat said, which didn't seem like it could be true because he didn't act like he wanted to be with me.

I asked her if he went back to France to his family, and Ms. Manigat said no, he probably didn't have a family, and even if he did, it's too hard to go to France. The ocean is in the way, she said.

Ms. Manigat seemed tired from all that talking. She said she'd decided to move inside, like Rene, to make sure they were taking care of me properly. She said she misses her garden. The whole place has been falling apart, she said. She said I do a good job of keeping my room clean — and I do, because I have my own mop and bucket and Lysol in my closet — but she told me the hallways are filthy. Which is true, because sometimes I can see water dripping down the wall outside of my glass, a lot of it, and it makes puddles all over the floor. You can tell the water is dirty because you can see different colors floating on top, the way my family's driveway used to look after my dad sprayed it with a hose. He said the oil from the car made the water look that way, but I don't know why it looks that way here. Ms. Manigat said the water smells bad, too.

"It's ridiculous. If they're going to keep you here, they'd damn well better take care of you," Mrs. Manigat said. She must have been really mad, because she never swears.

I told her about the time when Lou came and pressed on my intercom really late at night, when I was asleep and nobody else was around. He was talking really loud like people do in videos when they're drunk. Lou was glaring at me through the glass, banging on it. I had never seen him look so mean. I thought he would try to come into my room but then I remembered he couldn't because he didn't have a hot suit. But I'll never forget how he said, *They should put you to sleep like a dog at the pound.*

I try not to think about that night, because it gave me nightmares. It happened when I was pretty little, like eight. Sometimes I thought maybe I just dreamed it, because the next time Lou came he acted just like normal. He even smiled at me a little bit. Before he stopped coming here, Lou was nice to me every day after that.

Ms. Manigat did not sound surprised when I told her what Lou said about putting me to sleep. "Yes, Jay," she told me, "For a long time, there have been people outside who didn't think we should be taking care of you."

I never knew that before!

I remember a long time ago, when I was really little and I had pneumonia, my mom was scared to leave me alone at the hospital. "They won't know how to take care of Jay there," she said to my dad, even though she didn't know I heard her. I had to stay by myself all night, and because of what my mom said, I couldn't go to sleep. I was afraid everyone at the hospital would forget I was there. Or maybe something bad would happen to me.

It seems like the lights go off every other day now. And I know people must really miss Lou, because the dirty gray water is all over the floor outside my glass and there's no one to clean it up.

#

February 14



6-4-6-7-2-9-4-3

6-4-6-7-2-9-4-3

6-4-6-7-2-9-4-3

I remember the numbers already! I have been saying them over and over in my head so I won't forget, but I wanted to write them down in the exact right order to be extra sure. I want to know them without even looking.

Oh, I should start at the beginning. Yesterday, no one brought me any dinner, not even Ms. Manigat. She came with a huge bowl of oatmeal this morning, saying she was very sorry. She said she had to look a long time to find that food, and it wore her out. The oatmeal wasn't even hot, but I didn't say anything. I just ate. She watched me eating.

She didn't stay with me long, because she doesn't teach me lessons anymore. After the French doctor left, we talked about the Emancipation Proclamation and Martin Luther King, but she didn't bring that up today. She just kept sighing, and she said she had been in bed all day yesterday because she was so tired, and she was sorry she forgot to feed me. She said I couldn't count on Rene to bring me food because she didn't know where Rene was. It was hard for me to hear her talk through her hot suit today. Her mask was crooked, so the microphone wasn't in front of her mouth where it should be.

She saw my notebook and asked if she could look at it. I said sure. She looked at the pages from the beginning. She said she liked the part where I said she was my best friend. Her face-mask was fogging up, so I couldn't see her eyes and I couldn't tell if she was smiling. I am very sure she did not put her suit on right today.

When she put my notebook down, she told me to pay close attention to her and repeat the numbers she told me, which were 6-4-6-7-2-9-4-3.

I asked her what they were. She said it was the security code for my door. She said she wanted to give the code to me because my buzzer wasn't working, and I might need to leave my room if she overslept and nobody came to bring me food. She told me I could use the same code on the elevator, and the kitchen was on the third floor. There wouldn't be anybody there, she said, but I could look on the shelves, the top ones up high, to see if there was any food. If not, she said I should take the stairs down to the first floor and find the red EXIT sign to go outside. She said the elevator doesn't go to the first floor anymore.

I felt scared then, but she put her hand on top of my head again just like usual. She said she was sure there was plenty of food outside.

"But am I allowed?" I asked her. "What if people get sick?"

"You worry so much, little man," she said. "Only you matter now, my little one-of-a-kind."

But see I'm sure Ms. Manigat doesn't really want me to go outside. I've been thinking about that over and over. Ms. Manigat must be very tired to tell me to do something like that. Maybe she has a fever and that's why she told me how to get out of my room. My brother said silly things when he had a fever, and my father too. My father kept calling me *Oscar*, and I didn't know who Oscar was. My dad told us he had a brother who died when he was little, and maybe his name was Oscar. My mother didn't say anything at all when she got sick. She just died very fast. I wish I could find Ms. Manigat and give her something to drink. You get very thirsty when you have a fever, which I know for a fact. But I can't go to her because I don't know where she is. And besides, I don't know where Dr. Ben keeps the hot suits. What if I went to her and she wasn't wearing hers?

Maybe the oatmeal was the only thing left in the kitchen, and now I ate it all. I hope not! But I'm thinking maybe it is because I know Ms. Manigat would have brought me more food if she could have found it. She's always asking me if I have enough to eat. I'm already hungry again.

6-4-6-7-2-9-4-3

6-4-6-7-2-9-4-3

#

February 15

I am writing in the dark. The lights are off. I tried to open my lock but the numbers don't work because of the lights being off. I don't know where Ms. Manigat is. I'm trying not to cry.

What if the lights never come back on?

#

February 16

There's so much I want to say but I have a headache from being hungry. When the lights came back on I went out into the hall like Ms. M told me and I used the numbers to get the elevator to work and then I went to the kitchen like she said. I wanted to go real fast and find some peanut butter or some Oreos or even a can of beans I could open with the can opener Ms. M left me at Thanksgiving.

There's no food in the kitchen! There's empty cans and wrappers on the floor and even roaches but I looked on every single shelf and in every cabinet and I couldn't find anything to eat.

The sun was shining really REALLY bright from the window. I almost forgot how the sun looks. When I went to the window I saw a big, empty parking lot outside. At first I thought there were diamonds all over the ground because of the sparkles but it was just a lot of broken glass. I could only see one car and I thought it was Ms. M's. But Ms. M would never leave her car looking like that. For one thing it had two flat tires!

Anyway I don't think there's anybody here today. So I thought of a plan. I have to go now.

Ms. M, this is for you — or whoever comes looking for me. I know somebody will find this notebook if I leave it on my bed. I'm very sorry I had to leave in such a hurry.

I didn't want to go outside but isn't it okay if it's an emergency? I am really really hungry. I'll just find some food and bring it with me and I'll come right back. I'm leaving my door open so I won't get locked out. Ms. M, maybe I'll find your garden with cassavas and akee like you showed me and I'll know the good parts from the bad parts. If someone sees me and I get in trouble I'll just say I didn't have anything to eat.

Whoever is reading this don't worry. I'll tell everybody I see please please not to get too close to me. I know Dr. Ben was very worried I might make somebody sick.

# Stone Mattress - Margaret Atwood

(2011)

At the outset Verna had not intended to kill anyone. What she had in mind was a vacation, pure and simple. Take a breather, do some inner accounting, shed worn skin. The Arctic suits her: there's something inherently calming in the vast cool sweeps of ice and rock and sea and sky, undisturbed by cities and highways and trees and the other distractions that clutter up the landscape to the south.

Among the clutter she includes other people, and by other people she means men. She's had enough of men for a while. She's made an inner memo to renounce flirtations and any consequences that might result from them. She doesn't need the cash, not anymore. She's not extravagant or greedy, she tells herself: all she ever wanted was to be protected by layer upon layer of kind, soft, insulating money, so that nobody and nothing could get close enough to harm her. Surely she has at last achieved this modest goal.

But old habits die hard, and it's not long before she's casting an appraising eye over her fleeced fellow-travellers dithering with their wheely bags in the lobby of the first-night airport hotel. Passing over the women, she ear-tags the male members of the flock. Some have females attached to them, and she eliminates these on principle: why work harder than you need to? Prying a spouse loose can be arduous, as she discovered via her first husband: discarded wives stick like burrs.

It's the solitaries who interest her, the lurkers at the fringes. Some of these are too old for her purposes; she avoids eye contact with them. The ones who cherish the belief that there's life in the old dog yet: these are her game. Not that she'll do anything about it, she tells herself, but there's nothing wrong with a little warmup practice, if only to demonstrate to herself that she can still knock one off if she wishes to.

For that evening's meet-and-greet she chooses her cream-colored pullover, perching the Magnetic Northward nametag just slightly too low on her left breast. Thanks to Aquacize and core strength training, she's still in excellent shape for her age, or indeed for any age, at least when fully clothed and buttressed with carefully fitted underwiring. She wouldn't want to chance a deck chair in a bikini — superficial puckering has set in, despite her best efforts — which is one reason for selecting the Arctic over, say, the Caribbean. Her face is what it is, and certainly the best that money can buy at this stage: with a little bronzer and pale eyeshadow and mascara and glimmer powder and low lighting, she can finesse ten years.

"Though much is taken, much remains," she murmurs to her image in the mirror. Her third husband had been a serial quotation freak with a special penchant for Tennyson. "Come into the garden, Maud," he'd been in the habit of saying just before bedtime. It had driven her mad at the time.

She adds a dab of cologne — an understated scent, floral, nostalgic — then she blots it off, leaving a mere whiff. It's a mistake to overdo it: though elderly noses aren't as keen as they may once have been, it's best to allow for allergies; a sneezing man is not an attentive man.

She makes her entrance slightly late, smiling a detached but cheerful smile — it doesn't do for an unaccompanied woman to appear too eager — accepts a glass of the passable white wine they're doling out, and drifts among the assembled nibblers and sippers. The men will be retired professionals: doctors, lawyers, engineers, stockbrokers, interested in Arctic exploration, polar bears, archeology, birds, Inuit crafts, perhaps even Vikings or plant life or geology. Magnetic Northward attracts serious punters, with an earnest bunch of experts laid on to herd them around and lecture to them. She's investigated the two other outfits that tour the region, but neither appeals. One features excessive hiking and attracts the under-fifties — not her target market —

and the other goes in for singsongs and dressing up in silly outfits, so she's stuck with Magnetic Northward, which offers the comfort of familiarity. She travelled with this company once before, after the death of her third husband, five years ago, so she knows pretty much what to expect.

There's a lot of sportswear in the room, much beige among the men, many plaid shirts, vests with multiple pockets. She notes the nametags: a Fred, a Dan, a Rick, a Norm, a Bob. Another Bob, then another: there are a lot of Bobs on this trip. Several appear to be flying solo. Bob: a name once of heavy significance to her, though surely she's rid herself of that load of luggage by now. She selects one of the thinner but still substantial Bobs, glides close to him, raises her eyelids, and lowers them again. He peers down at her chest.

"Verna," he says. "That's a lovely name."

"Old-fashioned," she says. "From the Latin word for 'spring.' When everything springs to life again." That line, so filled with promises of phallic renewal, had been effective in helping to secure her second husband. To her third husband she'd said that her mother had been influenced by the eighteenth-century Scottish poet James Thomson and his vernal breezes, which was a preposterous but enjoyable lie: she had, in fact, been named after a lumpy, bun-faced dead aunt. As for her mother, she'd been a strict Presbyterian with a mouth like a vise grip, who despised poetry and was unlikely to have been influenced by anything softer than a granite wall.

During the preliminary stages of netting her fourth husband, whom she'd flagged as a kink addict, Verna had gone even further. She'd told him she'd been named for "The Rite of Spring," a highly sexual ballet that ended with torture and human sacrifice. He'd laughed, but he'd also wriggled: a sure sign of the hook going in.

Now she says, "And you're ... Bob." It's taken her years to perfect the small breathy intake, a certified knee-melter.

"Yes," Bob says. "Bob Goreham," he adds, with a diffidence he surely intends to be charming. Verna smiles widely to disguise her shock. She finds herself flushing with a combination of rage and an almost reckless mirth. She looks him full in the face: yes, underneath the thinning hair and the wrinkles and the obviously whitened and possibly implanted teeth, it's the same Bob — the Bob of fifty-odd years before. Mr. Heartthrob, Mr. Senior Football Star, Mr. Astounding Catch, from the rich, Cadillac-driving end of town where the mining-company big shots lived. Mr. Shit, with his looming bully's posture and his lopsided joker's smile.

How amazing to everyone, back then — not only everyone in school but everyone, for in that armpit of a town they'd known to a millimetre who drank and who didn't and who was no better than she should be and how much change you kept in your back pocket — how amazing that golden-boy Bob had singled out insignificant Verna for the Snow Queen's Palace winter formal. Pretty Verna, three years younger; studious, grade-skipping, innocent Verna, tolerated but not included, clawing her way toward a scholarship as her ticket out of town. Gullible Verna, who'd believed she was in love.

Or who *was* in love. When it came to love, wasn't believing the same as the real thing? Such beliefs drain your strength and cloud your vision. She's never allowed herself to be skewered in that tiger trap again.

What had they danced to that night? "Rock Around the Clock." "Hearts Made of Stone." "The Great Pretender." Bob had steered Verna around the edges of the gym, holding her squashed up against his carnation buttonhole, for the unskilled, awkward Verna of those days had never been to a dance before and was no match for Bob's strenuous and flamboyant moves. For meek Verna, life was church and studies and household chores and her weekend job clerking in the drugstore, with her grim-faced mother regulating every move. No dates; those wouldn't have been allowed, not that she'd been asked on any. But her mother had permitted her to go to the well-supervised high-school dance with Bob Goreham, for wasn't he a shining light from a respectable family? She'd even allowed herself a touch of smug gloating, silent though it had been. Holding her head up after the decampment of Verna's father had been a full-time job, and had given her a very stiff

neck. From this distance Verna could understand it.

So out the door went Verna, starry-eyed with hero worship, wobbling on her first high heels. She was courteously inserted into Bob's shiny red convertible with the treacherous Mickey of rye already lurking in the glove compartment, where she sat bolt upright, almost catatonic with shyness, smelling of Prell shampoo and Jergens lotion, wrapped in her mother's mothbally out-of-date rabbit stole and an ice-blue tulle-skirted dress that looked as cheap as it was.

Cheap. Cheap and disposable. Use and toss. That was what Bob had thought about her, from the very first.

Now Bob grins a little. He looks pleased with himself: maybe he thinks Verna is blushing with desire. But he doesn't recognize her! He really doesn't! How many fucking Vernas can he have met in his life?

Get a grip, she tells herself. She's not invulnerable after all, it appears. She's shaking with anger, or is it mortification? To cover herself she takes a gulp of her wine, and immediately chokes on it. Bob springs into action, giving her a few brisk but caressing thumps on the back.

"Excuse me," she manages to gasp. The crisp, cold scent of carnations envelops her. She needs to get away from him; all of a sudden she feels quite sick. She hurries to the ladies' room, which is fortunately empty, and throws up her white wine and her cream-cheese-and-olive canapé into a cubicle toilet. She wonders if it's too late to cancel the trip. But why should she run from Bob again?

Back then she'd had no choice. By the end of that week, the story was all over town. Bob had spread it himself, in a farcical version that was very different from what Verna herself remembered. Slutty, drunken, willing Verna, what a joke. She'd been followed home from school by groups of leering boys, hooting and calling out to her: *Easy out! Can I have a ride? Candy's dandy but liquor's quicker!* Those were some of the milder slogans. She'd been shunned by girls, fearful that the disgrace — the ludicrous, hilarious smuttiness of it all — would rub off on them.

Then there was her mother. It hadn't taken long for the scandal to hit church circles. What little her mother had to say through her clamp of a mouth was to the point: Verna had made her own bed, and now she would have to lie in it. No, she could not wallow in self-pity — she would just have to face the music, not that she would ever live it down, because one false step and you fell, that's how life was. When it was evident that the worst had happened, she bought Verna a bus ticket and shipped her off to a church-run Home for Unwed Mothers on the outskirts of Toronto.

There Verna spent the days peeling potatoes and scrubbing floors and scouring toilets along with her fellow-delinquents. They wore gray maternity dresses and gray wool stockings and clunky brown shoes, all paid for by generous donations, they were informed. In addition to their scouring and peeling chores, they were treated to bouts of prayer and self-righteous hectoring. What had happened to them was justly deserved, the speeches went, because of their depraved behavior, but it was never too late to redeem themselves through hard work and self-restraint. They were cautioned against alcohol, tobacco, and gum chewing, and were told that they should consider it a miracle of God if any decent man ever wanted to marry them.

Verna's labor was long and difficult. The baby was taken away from her immediately so that she would not get attached to it. There was an infection, with complications and scarring, but it was all for the best, she overheard one brisk nurse telling another, because those sorts of girls made unfit mothers anyway. Once she could walk, Verna was given five dollars and a bus ticket and instructed to return to the guardianship of her mother, because she was still a minor.

But she could not face that — that or the town in general — so she headed for downtown Toronto. What was she thinking? No actual thoughts, only feelings: mournfulness, woe, and, finally, a spark of defiant anger. If she was as trashy and worthless as everyone seemed to think, she might as well act that way, and, in between rounds of waitressing and hotel-room cleaning, she did.

It was only by great good luck that she stumbled upon an older married man who took an interest in her. She traded three years of noontime sex with him for the price of her education. A fair exchange, to her mind — she bore him no ill will. She learned a lot from him, how to walk in high heels being the least of it — and pulled herself up and out. Little by little she jettisoned the crushed image of Bob that she still carried like a dried flower — incredibly! — next to her heart.

She pats her face back into place and repairs her mascara, which has bled down her cheeks despite its waterproof claims. Courage, she tells herself. She will not be chased away, not this time. She'll tough it out; she's more than a match for five Bobs now. And she has the advantage, because Bob doesn't have a clue who she is. Does she really look that different? Yes, she does. She looks better. There's her silver-blond hair, and the various alterations, of course. But the real difference is in the attitude — the confident way she carries herself. It would be hard for Bob to see through that façade to the shy, mousy-haired, snivelling idiot she'd been at fourteen.

After adding a last film of powder, she rejoins the group and lines up at the buffet for roast beef and salmon. She won't eat much of it, but then she never does, not in public: a piggy, gobbling woman is not a creature of mysterious allure. She refrains from scanning the crowd to pinpoint Bob's position — he might wave to her, and she needs time to think — and selects a table at the far end of the room. But presto, Bob is sliding in beside her without so much as a may-I-join-you. He assumes he's already pissed on this fire hydrant, she thinks. Spray-painted this wall. Cut the head off this trophy and got his picture taken with his foot on the body. As he did once before, not that he realizes it. She smiles.

He's solicitous. Is Verna all right? Oh, yes, she replies. It's just that something went down the wrong way. Bob launches straight into the preliminaries. What does Verna do? Retired, she says, though she had a rewarding career as a physiotherapist, specializing in the rehabilitation of heart and stroke victims. "That must have been interesting," Bob says. Oh, yes, Verna says. So fulfilling to help people.

It had been more than interesting. Wealthy men recovering from life-threatening episodes had recognized the worth of an attractive younger woman with deft hands, an encouraging manner, and an intuitive knowledge of when to say nothing. Or, as her third husband put it in his Keatsian mode, heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter. There was something about the intimacy of the relationship — so physical — that led to other intimacies, though Verna had always stopped short of sex: it was a religious thing, she'd said. If no marriage proposal was forthcoming, she would extricate herself, citing her duty to patients who needed her more. That had forced the issue twice.

She'd chosen her acceptances with an eye to the medical condition involved, and once married she'd done her best to provide value for money. Each husband had departed not only happy but grateful, if a little sooner than might have been expected. But each had died of natural causes — a lethal recurrence of the heart attack or stroke that had hit him in the first place. All she'd done was give them tacit permission to satisfy every forbidden desire: to eat artery-clogging foods, to drink as much as they liked, to return to their golf games too soon. She'd refrained from commenting on the fact that, strictly speaking, they were being too zealously medicated. She'd wondered about the dosages, she'd say later, but who was she to set her own opinion up against a doctor's?

And if a man happened to forget that he'd already taken his pills for that evening and found them neatly laid out in their usual place and took them again, wasn't that to be expected? Blood thinners could be so hazardous, in excess. You could bleed into your own brain.

Then there was sex: the terminator, the coup de grâce. Verna herself had no interest in sex as such, but she knew what was likely to work. "You only live once," she'd been in the habit of saying, lifting a champagne glass during a candlelit supper and then setting out the Viagra, a revolutionary breakthrough but so troubling to the blood pressure. It was essential to call the paramedics in promptly, though not too promptly. "He was like this when I woke up" was an

acceptable thing to say. So was "I heard a strange sound in the bathroom, and then when I went to look ... "

She has no regrets. She did those men a favor: surely better a swift exit than a lingering decline.

With two of the husbands, there'd been difficulties with the grownup children over the will. Verna had graciously said that she understood how they must feel, then she'd paid them off, more than was strictly fair considering the effort she'd put in. Her sense of justice has remained Presbyterian: she doesn't want much more than her due, but she doesn't want much less, either. She likes balanced accounts.

Bob leans in toward her, sliding his arm along the back of her chair. Is her husband along for the cruise? he asks, closer to her ear than he should be, breathing in. No, she says, she is recently widowed — here she looks down at the table, hoping to convey muted grief — and this is a sort of healing voyage. Bob says he's very sorry to hear it, but what a coincidence, for his own wife passed away just six months ago. It had been a blow — they'd been really looking forward to the golden years together. She'd been his college sweetheart — it was love at first sight. Does Verna believe in love at first sight? Yes, Verna says, she does.

Bob confides further: they'd waited until after his law degree to get married and then they'd had three kids, and now there are five grandkids — he's so proud of them all. If he shows me any baby pictures, Verna thinks, I'll hit him.

"It does leave an empty space, doesn't it?" Bob says. "A sort of blank." Verna admits that it does. Would Verna care to join Bob in a bottle of wine?

You crap artist, Verna thinks. So you went on to get married and have children and a normal life, just as if nothing ever happened. Whereas for me ... She feels queasy.

"I'd love to," she says. "But let's wait until we're on the ship. That would be more leisurely." She gives him the eyelids again. "Now I'm off to my beauty sleep." She smiles, wafts upward.

"Oh, surely you don't need that," Bob says gallantly. The asshole actually pulls out her chair for her. He hadn't shown such fine manners back then. Nasty, brutish, and short, as her third husband had said, quoting Hobbes on the subject of natural man. Nowadays a girl would know to call the police. Nowadays Bob would go to jail no matter what lies he might tell, because Verna was underage. But there had been no true words for the act then: rape was what occurred when some maniac jumped on you out of a bush, not when your formal-dance date drove you to a side road in the mangy twice-cut forest surrounding a tin-pot mining town and told you to drink up like a good girl and then took you apart, layer by torn layer. To make it worse, Bob's best friend, Ken, had turned up in his own car to help out. The two of them had been laughing. They'd kept her panty girdle as a souvenir.

Afterward, Bob had pushed her out of the car halfway back, surly because she was crying. "Shut up or walk home," he'd said. She has a picture of herself limping along the icy roadside with her bare feet stuck in her dyed-to-match ice-blue heels, dizzy and raw and shivering and — a further ridiculous humiliation — hiccupping. What had concerned her most at that moment was her nylons — where were her nylons? She'd bought them with her own drugstore money. She must have been in shock.

Did she remember correctly? Had Bob stuck her panty girdle upside down on his head and danced about in the snow with the garter tabs flopping around like jesters' bells?

Panty girdle, she thinks. How prehistoric. It, and all the long-gone archeology that went with it. Now a girl would be on the pill or have an abortion without a backward glance. How Paleolithic to still feel wounded by any of it.

It was Ken — not Bob — who'd come back for her, told her brusquely to get in, driven her home. He, at least, had had the grace to be shamefaced. "Don't say anything," he'd muttered. And she hadn't, but her silence had done her no good.

Why should she be the only one to have suffered for that night? She'd been stupid, granted,

but Bob had been vicious. And he'd gone scot-free, without consequences or remorse, whereas her entire life had been distorted. The Verna of the day before had died, and a different Verna had solidified in her place: stunted, twisted, mangled. It was Bob who'd taught her that only the strong can win, that weakness should be mercilessly exploited. It was Bob who'd turned her into — why not say the word? — a murderer.

The next morning, during the chartered flight north to where the ship is floating on the Beaufort Sea, she considers her choices. She could play Bob like a fish right up to the final moment, then leave him cold with his pants around his ankles: a satisfaction, but a minor one. She could avoid him throughout the trip and leave the equation where it's been for the past fifty-some years: unresolved.

Or she could kill him.

She contemplates this third option with theoretical calm. Just say, for instance, if she were to murder Bob, how might she do it during the cruise without getting caught? Her meds-and-sex formula would be far too slow and might not work anyway, since Bob did not appear to suffer from any ailments. Pushing him off the ship is not a viable option. Bob is too big, the railings are too high, and she knows from her previous trip that there will always be people on deck, enjoying the breathtaking views and taking pictures. A corpse in a cabin would attract police and set off a search for DNA and fabric hairs and so forth, as on television. No, she would have to arrange the death during one of the onshore visits. But how? Where? She consults the itinerary and the map of the proposed route. An Inuit settlement will not do: dogs will bark, children will follow. As for the other stops, the land they'll be visiting is bare of concealing features. Staff with guns will accompany them to protect against polar bears. Maybe an accident with one of the guns? For that she'd need split-second timing.

Whatever the method, she'd have to do it early in the voyage, before he had time to make any new friends — people who might notice he was missing. Also, the possibility that Bob will suddenly recognize her is ever present. And if that happens it will be game over. Meanwhile, it would be best not to be seen with him too much. Enough to keep his interest up, but not enough to start rumors of, for instance, a budding romance. On a cruise, word of mouth spreads like the flu.

Once on board the ship — it's the Resolute II, familiar to Verna from her last voyage — the passengers line up to deposit their passports at Reception. Then they assemble in the forward lounge for a talk on procedure given by three of the discouragingly capable staff members. Every time they go ashore, the first one says with a severe Viking frown, they must turn their tags on the tag board from green to red. When they come back to the ship, they must turn their tags back to green. They must always wear life jackets for the Zodiac trips to shore; the life jackets are the new, thin kind that inflate once in water. They must deposit their life jackets on the shore when landing, in the white canvas bags provided, and put them back on when departing. If there are any tags unturned or any life jackets left in the bags, the staff will know that someone is still ashore. They do not want to be left behind, do they? And now a few housekeeping details. They will find laundry bags in their cabins. Bar bills will be charged to their accounts, and tips will be settled at the end. The ship runs on an open-door policy, to facilitate the work of the cleaning staff, but of course they can lock their rooms if they wish. There is a lost-and-found at Reception. All clear? Good.

The second speaker is the archeologist, who, to Verna, looks about twelve. They will be visiting sites of many kinds, she says, including Independence 1, Dorset, and Thule, but they must never, never take anything. No artifacts, and especially no bones. Those bones might be human, and they must be very careful not to disturb them. But even animal bones are an important source of scarce calcium for ravens and lemmings and foxes and, well, the entire food chain, because the Arctic recycles everything. All clear? Good.

Now, says the third speaker, a fashionably bald individual who looks like a personal trainer, a



word about the guns. Guns are essential, because polar bears are fearless. But the staff will always fire into the air first, to scare the bear away. Shooting a bear is a last resort, but bears can be dangerous, and the safety of passengers is the first priority. There is no need to fear the guns: the bullets will be taken out during the Zodiac trips to and from shore, and it will not be possible for anyone to get shot. All clear? Good.

Clearly a gun accident won't do, Verna thinks. No passenger is going to get near those guns.

After lunch, there's a lecture on walruses. There are rumors of rogue walruses that prey on seals, puncturing them with their tusks, then sucking out the fat with their powerful mouths. The women on either side of Verna are knitting. One of them says, "Liposuction." The other laughs.

Once the talks are over, Verna goes out on deck. The sky is clear, with a flight of lenticular clouds hovering in it like spaceships; the air is warm; the sea is aqua. There's a classic iceberg on the port side, with a center so blue it looks dyed, and ahead of them is a mirage — a *fata morgana*, towering like an ice castle on the horizon, completely real except for the faint shimmering at its edges. Sailors have been lured to their deaths by those; they've drawn mountains on maps where no mountains were.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Bob says, materializing at her side. "How about that bottle of wine tonight?"

"Stunning," Verna says, smiling. "Perhaps not tonight — I promised some of the girls." True enough — she's made a date with the knitting women.

"Maybe tomorrow?" Bob grins, and shares the fact that he has a single cabin: "No. 222, like the painkiller," he quips, and comfortably amidships. "Hardly any rock and roll at all," he adds. Verna says that she, too, has a single: worth the extra expense, because that way you can really relax. She draws out "relax" until it sounds like a voluptuous writhe on satin sheets.

Glancing at the tag board while strolling around the ship after dinner, Verna notes Bob's tag — close enough to her own. Then she buys a pair of cheap gloves in the gift shop. She's read a lot of crime novels.

The next day starts with a talk on geology by an energetic young scientist who has been arousing some interest among the passengers, especially the female ones. By great good fortune, he tells them, and because of a change in itinerary owing to ice pack, they'll be making an unanticipated stop, where they'll be able to view a wonder of the geological world, a sight permitted to very few. They'll be privileged to see the world's earliest fossilized stromatolites, clocking in at an astonishing 1.9 billion years old — before fish, before dinosaurs, before mammals — the very first preserved form of life on this planet. What is a stromatolite? he asks rhetorically, his eyes gleaming. The word comes from the Greek *stroma*, a mattress, coupled with the root word for "stone." Stone mattress: a fossilized cushion, formed by layer upon layer of blue-green algae building up into a mound or dome. It was this very same blue-green algae that created the oxygen they are now breathing. Isn't that astonishing?

A wizened, elflike man at Verna's lunchtime table grumbles that he hopes they'll be seeing something more exciting than rocks. He's one of the other Bobs: Verna's been taking an inventory. An extra Bob may come in handy. "I'm looking forward to them," she says. "The stone mattresses." She gives the word "mattress" the tiniest hint of suggestiveness, and gets an approving twinkle out of Bob the Second. Really, they're never too old to flirt.

Out on deck after coffee, she surveys the approaching land through her binoculars. It's autumn here: the leaves on the miniature trees that snake along the ground like vines are red and orange and yellow and purple, with rock surging out of them in waves and folds. There's a ridge, a higher ridge, then a higher one. It's on the second ridge that the best stromatolites are to be found, the geologist has told them.

Will someone who has slipped behind the third ridge be visible from the second one? Verna doesn't think so.

Now they're all stuffed into their waterproof pants and their rubber boots; now they're being

zipped and buckled into their life jackets like outsized kindergarten kids; now they're turning their tags from green to red; now they're edging down the gangway and being whisked into the black inflatable Zodiacs. Bob has made it into Verna's Zodiac. He lifts his camera, snaps her picture.

Verna's heart is beating more rapidly. If he recognizes me spontaneously, I won't kill him, she thinks. If I tell him who I am and he recognizes me and then apologizes, I still won't kill him. That's two more escape chances than he gave her. It will mean forgoing the advantage of surprise, a move that could be hazardous — Bob is much bigger than she is — but she wishes to be more than fair.

They've landed and have shed their life jackets and rubber footwear and are lacing up their hiking boots. Verna strolls closer to Bob, notes that he hasn't bothered with the rubber boots. He's wearing a red baseball cap; as she watches, he turns it backward.

Now they're all scattering. Some stay by the shore; some move up to the first ridge. The geologist is standing there with his hammer, a twittering cluster already gathered around him. He's in full lecture mode: they will please not take any of the stromatolites, but the ship has a sampling permit, so if anyone finds a particularly choice fragment, especially a cross section, check with him first and they can put it on the rock table he'll set up on board, where everyone can see it. Here are some examples, for those who may not want to tackle the second ridge ...

Heads go down; cameras come out. Perfect, Verna thinks. The more distraction the better. She feels without looking that Bob is close by. Now they're at the second ridge, which some are climbing more easily than others. Here are the best stromatolites, a whole field of them. There are unbroken ones, like bubbles or boils, small ones, ones as big as half a soccer ball. Some have lost their tops, like eggs in the process of hatching. Still others have been ground down, so that all that's left of them is a series of raised concentric oblongs, like a cinnamon bun or the growth rings on a tree.

And here's one shattered into four, like a Dutch cheese sliced into wedges. Verna picks up one of the quarters, examines the layers, each year black, gray, black, gray, black, and at the bottom the featureless core. The piece is heavy, and sharp at the edges. Verna lifts it into her backpack.

Here comes Bob as if on cue, lumbering slowly as a zombie up the hill toward her. He's taken off his outer jacket, tucked it under his backpack straps. He's out of breath. She has a moment of compunction: he's over the hill; frailty is gaining on him. Shouldn't she let bygones be bygones? Boys will be boys. Aren't they all just hormone puppets at that age? Why should any human being be judged by something that was done in another time, so long ago it might be centuries?

A raven flies overhead, circles around. Can it tell? Is it waiting? She looks down through its eyes, sees an old woman — because, face it, she is an old woman now — on the verge of murdering an even older man because of an anger already fading into the distance of used-up time. It's paltry. It's vicious. It's normal. It's what happens in life.

"Great day," Bob says. "It's good to have a chance to stretch your legs."

"Isn't it?" Verna says. She moves toward the far side of the second ridge. "Maybe there's something better over there. But weren't we told not to go that far? Out of sight?"

Bob gives a rules-are-for-peasants laugh. "We're paying for this," he says. He actually takes the lead, not up the third ridge but around behind it. Out of sight is where he wants to be.

The gun bearer on the second ridge is yelling at some people straying off to the left. He has his back turned. A few more steps and Verna glances over her shoulder: she can't see anyone, which means that no one can see her. They squelch over a patch of boggy ground. She takes her thin gloves out of her pocket, slips them on. Now they're at the far side of the third ridge, at the sloping base.

"Come over here," Bob says, patting the rock. His backpack is beside him. "I brought us a few drinks." All around him is a tattered gauze of black lichen.

"Terrific," Verna says. She sits down, unzips her backpack. "Look," she says. "I found a

perfect specimen." She turns, positioning the stromatolite between them, supporting it with both hands. She takes a breath. "I think we've known each other before," she says. "I'm Verna Pritchard. From high school."

Bob doesn't miss a beat. "I thought there was something familiar about you," he says. He's actually smirking.

She remembers that smirk. She has a vivid picture of Bob capering triumphantly in the snow, sniggering like a ten-year-old. Herself wrecked and crumpled.

She knows better than to swing widely. She brings the stromatolite up hard, a short sharp jab right underneath Bob's lower jaw. There's a crunch, the only sound. His head snaps back. Now he's sprawled on the rock. She holds the stromatolite over his forehead, lets it drop. Again. Once again. There. That seems to have done it.

Bob looks ridiculous, with his eyes open and fixed and his forehead mashed in and blood running down both sides of his face. "You're a mess," she says. He looks laughable, so she laughs. As she suspected, the front teeth are implants.

She takes a moment to steady her breathing. Then she retrieves the stromatolite, being careful not to let any of the blood touch her or even her gloves, and slides it into a pool of bog water. Bob's baseball cap has fallen off; she stuffs it into her pack, along with his jacket. She empties out his backpack: nothing in there but the camera, a pair of woollen mitts, a scarf, and six miniature bottles of Scotch — how pathetically hopeful of him. She rolls the pack up, stuffs it inside her own, adds the camera, which she'll toss into the sea later. Then she dries the stromatolite off on the scarf, checking to make sure there's no visible blood, and stows it in her pack. She leaves Bob to the ravens and the lemmings and the rest of the food chain. Then she hikes back around the base of the third ridge, adjusting her jacket. Anyone looking will assume she's just been having a pee. People do sneak off like that, on shore visits. But no one is looking.

She finds the young geologist — he's still on the second ridge, along with his coterie of admirers — and produces the stromatolite.

"May I take it back to the ship?" she asks sweetly. "For the rock table?"

"Fantastic sample!" he says.

Travellers are making their way shoreward, back to the Zodiacs. When she reaches the bags with the life jackets, Verna fumbles with her shoelaces until all eyes are elsewhere and she can cram an extra life jacket into her backpack. The pack is a lot bulkier than it was when she left the ship, but it would be odd if anyone noticed that.

Once up the gangway, she diddles around with her pack until everyone else has moved past the tag board, then flips Bob's tag from red to green. And her own tag, too, of course.

On the way to her cabin she waits till the corridor is clear, then slips through Bob's unlocked door. The room key is on the dresser; she leaves it there. She hangs up the life jacket and Bob's waterproof and baseball cap, runs some water in the sink, messes up a towel. Then she goes to her own cabin along the still-empty corridor, takes off her gloves, washes them, and hangs them up to dry. She's broken a nail, worse luck, but she can repair that. She checks her face: a touch of sunburn, but nothing serious. For dinner, she dresses in pink and makes an effort to flirt with Bob the Second, who gamely returns her serves but is surely too decrepit to be a serious prospect. Just as well — her adrenaline level is plummeting. If there are northern lights, they've been told, there will be an announcement, but Verna doesn't intend to get up for them.

So far she's in the clear. All she has to do now is maintain the mirage of Bob, faithfully turning his tag from green to red, from red to green. He'll move objects around in his cabin, wear different items from his beige-and-plaid wardrobe, sleep in his bed, take showers, leaving the towels on the floor. He will receive a first-name-only invitation to have dinner at a staff table, which will then quietly appear under the door of one of the other Bobs, and no one will spot the substitution. He will brush his teeth. He will adjust his alarm clock. He will send in laundry, without, however, filling out the slip: that would be too risky. The cleaning staff won't care — a

lot of older people forget to fill out their laundry slips.

Meanwhile, the stromatolite will sit on the geological samples table and will be picked up and examined and discussed, acquiring many fingerprints. At the end of the trip it will be jettisoned. The Resolute II will travel for fourteen days; it will stop for shore visits eighteen times. It will sail past ice caps and sheer cliffs, and mountains of gold and copper and ebony black and silver gray; it will glide through pack ice; it will anchor off long, implacable beaches and explore fjords gouged by glaciers over millions of years. In the midst of such rigorous and demanding splendor, who will remember Bob?

There will be a moment of truth at the end of the voyage, when Bob will not appear to pay his bill and pick up his passport; nor will he pack his bags. There will be a flurry of concern, followed by a staff meeting — behind closed doors, so as not to alarm the passengers. Ultimately, there will be a news item: Bob, tragically, must have fallen off the ship on the last night of the voyage while leaning over to get a better camera angle on the northern lights. No other explanation is possible.

Meanwhile, the passengers will have scattered to the winds, Verna among them. If, that is, she pulls it off. Will she or won't she? She ought to care more about that — she ought to find it an exciting challenge — but right now she just feels tired and somewhat empty.

Though at peace, though safe. Calm of mind all passion spent, as her third husband used to say so annoyingly after his Viagra sessions. Those Victorians always coupled sex with death. Who was that poet anyway? Keats? Tennyson? Her memory isn't what it was. But the details will come back to her later.

# The Shawl - Cynthia Ozick

(1980)

Stella, cold, cold, the coldness of hell. How they walked on the roads together, Rosa with Magda curled up between sore breasts, Magda wound up in the shawl. Sometimes Stella carried Magda. But she was jealous of Magda. A thin girl of fourteen, too small, with thin breasts of her own, Stella wanted to be wrapped in a shawl, hidden away, asleep, rocked by the march, a baby, a round infant in arms. Magda took Rosa's nipple, and Rosa never stopped walking, a walking cradle. There was not enough milk; sometimes Magda sucked air; then she screamed. Stella was ravenous. Her knees were tumors on sticks, her elbows chicken bones.

Rosa did not feel hunger; she felt light, not like someone walking but like someone in a faint, in trance, arrested in a fit, someone who is already a floating angel, alert and seeing everything, but in the air, not there, not touching the road. As if teetering on the tips of her fingernails. She looked into Magda's face through a gap in the shawl: a squirrel in a nest, safe, no one could reach her inside the little house of the shawl's windings. The face, very round, a pocket mirror of a face: but it was not Rosa's bleak complexion, dark like cholera, it was another kind of face altogether, eyes blue as air, smooth feathers of hair nearly as yellow as the Star sewn in to Rosa's coat. You could think she was one of *their* babies.

Rosa, floating, dreamed of giving Magda away in one of the villages. She could leave the line for a minute and push Magda into the hands of any woman on the side of the road. But if she moved out of line they might shoot. And even if she fled the line for half a second and pushed the shawl-bundle at a stranger, would the woman take it? She might be surprised, or afraid; she might drop the shawl, and Magda would fall out and strike her head and die. The little round head. Such a good child, she gave up screaming, and sucked now only for the taste of the drying nipple itself. The neat grip of the tiny gums One mite of a tooth tip sticking up in the bottom gum, how shining, an elfin tombstone of white marble gleaming there. Without complaining, Magda relinquished Rosa's teats, first the left, then the right; both were cracked, not a sniff of milk. The duct-crevice extinct, a dead volcano, blind eye, chill hole, so Magda took the corner of the shawl and milked it instead. She sucked and sucked, flooding the threads with wetness. The shawl's good flavor, milk of linen.

It was a magic shawl, it could nourish an infant for three days and three nights. Magda did not die, she stayed alive, although very quiet. A peculiar smell, of cinnamon and almonds, lifted out of her mouth. She held her eyes open every moment, forgetting how to blink or nap, and Rosa and sometimes Stella studied their blueness. On the road they raised one burden of a leg after another and studied Magda's face. "Aryan," Stella said, in a voice grown as thin as a string; and Rosa thought how Stella gazed at Magda like a young cannibal. And the time that Stella said "Aryan," it sounded to Rosa as if Stella had really said "Let us devour her."

But Magda lived to walk. She lived that long, but she did not walk very well, partly because she was only fifteen months old, and partly because the spindles of her legs could not hold up her fat belly. It was fat with air, full and round. Rosa gave almost all her food to Magda, Stella gave nothing; Stella was ravenous, a growing child herself, but not growing much. Stella did not menstruate. Rosa did not menstruate. Rosa was ravenous, but also not; she learned from Magda how to drink the taste of a finger in one's mouth. They were in a place without pity, all pity was annihilated in Rosa, she looked at Stella's bones without pity. She was sure that Stella was waiting for Magda to die so she could put her teeth into the little thighs.

Rosa knew Magda was going to die very soon; she should have been dead already, but she had been buried away deep inside the magic shawl, mistaken there for the shivering mound of Rosa's breasts; Rosa clung to the shawl as if it covered only herself. No one took it away from

her. Magda was mute. She never cried. Rosa hid her in the barracks, under the shawl, but she knew that one day someone would inform; or one day someone, not even Stella, would steal Magda to eat her. When Magda began to walk Rosa knew that Magda was going to die very soon, something would happen. She was afraid to fall asleep; she slept with the weight of her thigh on Magda's body; she was afraid she would smother Magda under her thigh. The weight of Rosa was becoming less and less; Rosa and Stella were slowly turning into air.

Magda was quiet, but her eyes were horribly alive, like blue tigers. She watched. Sometimes she laughed — it seemed a laugh, but how could it be? Magda had never seen anyone laugh. Still, Magda laughed at her shawl when the wind blew its corners, the bad wind with pieces of black in it, that made Stella's and Rosa's eyes tear. Magda's eyes were always clear and tearless. She watched like a tiger. She guarded her shawl. No one could touch it; only Rosa could touch it. Stella was not allowed. The shawl was Magda's own baby, her pet, her little sister. She tangled herself up in it and sucked on one of the corners when she wanted to be very still.

Then Stella took the shawl away and made Magda die.

Afterward Stella said: "I was cold." And afterward she was always cold, always. The cold went into her heart: Rosa saw that Stella's heart was cold. Magda flopped onward with her little pencil legs scribbling this way and that, in search of the shawl; the pencils faltered at the barracks opening, where the light began. Rosa saw and pursued. But already Magda was in the square outside the barracks, in the jolly light. It was the roll-call arena. Every morning Rosa had to conceal Magda under the shawl against a wall of the barracks and go out and stand in the arena with Stella and hundreds of others, sometimes for hours, and Magda, deserted, was quiet under the shawl, sucking on her corner. Every day Magda was silent, and so she did not die. Rosa saw that today Magda was going to die, and at the same time a fearful joy ran in Rosa's two palms, her fingers were on fire, she was astonished, febrile: Magda, in the sunlight, swaying on her pencil legs, was howling. Ever since the drying up of Rosa's nipples, ever since Magda's last scream on the road, Magda had been devoid of any syllable; Magda was a mute. Rosa believed that something had gone wrong with her vocal cords, with her windpipe with the cave of her larynx; Magda was defective, without a voice; perhaps she was deaf; there might be something amiss with her intelligence; Magda was dumb. Even the laugh that came when the ash-stippled wind made a clown out of Magda's shawl was only the air-blown showing of her teeth. Even when the lice, head lice and body lice, crazed her so that she became as wild as one of the big rats that plundered the barracks at daybreak looking for carrion, she rubbed and scratched and kicked and bit and rolled without a whimper. But now Magda's mouth was spilling a long viscous rope of clamor.

"Maaaa — "

It was the first noise Magda had ever sent out from her throat since the drying up of Rosa's nipples.

"Maaaa ... aaa!"

Again! Magda was wavering in the perilous sunlight of the arena, scribbling on such pitiful little bent shins. Rosa saw. She saw that Magda was grieving for the loss of her shawl, she saw that Magda was going to die. A tide of commands hammered in Rosa's nipples: Fetch, get, bring! But she did not know which to go after first, Magda or the shawl. If she jumped out into the arena to snatch Magda up, the howling would not stop, because Magda would still not have the shawl; but if she ran back into the barracks to find the shawl, and if she found it, and if she came after Magda holding it and shaking it, then she would get Magda back, Magda would put the shawl in her mouth and turn dumb again.

Rosa entered the dark. It was easy to discover the shawl. Stella was heaped under it, asleep in her thin bones. Rosa tore the shawl free and flew — she could fly, she was only air — into the arena. The sunheat murmured of another life, of butterflies in summer. The light was placid, mellow. On the other side of the steel fence, far away, there were green meadows speckled with

dandelions and deep-colored violets; beyond them, even farther, innocent tiger lilies, tall, lifting their orange bonnets. In the barracks they spoke of "flowers," of "rain": excrement, thick turdbraids, and the slow stinking maroon waterfall that slunk down from the upper bunks, the stink mixed with a bitter fatty floating smoke that greased Rosa's skin. She stood for an instant at the margin of the arena. Sometimes the electricity inside the fence would seem to hum; even Stella said it was only an imagining, but Rosa heard real sounds in the wire: grainy sad voices. The farther she was from the fence, the more clearly the voices crowded at her. The lamenting voices strummed so convincingly, so passionately, it was impossible to suspect them of being phantoms. The voices told her to hold up the shawl, high; the voices told her to shake it, to whip with it, to unfurl it like a flag. Rosa lifted, shook, whipped, unfurled. Far off, very far, Magda leaned across her air-fed belly, reaching out with the rods of her arms. She was high up, elevated, riding someone's shoulder. But the shoulder that carried Magda was not coming toward Rosa and the shawl, it was drifting away, the speck of Magda was moving more and more into the smoky distance. Above the shoulder a helmet glinted. The light tapped the helmet and sparkled it into a goblet. Below the helmet a black body like a domino and a pair of black boots hurled themselves in the direction of the electrified fence. The electric voices began to chatter wildly. "Maamaa, maaamaa," they all hummed together. How far Magda was from Rosa now, across the whole square, past a dozen barracks, all the way on the other side! She was no bigger than a moth.

All at once Magda was swimming through the air. The whole of Magda travelled through loftiness. She looked like a butterfly touching a silver vine. And the moment Magda's feathered round head and her pencil legs and balloonish belly and zigzag arms splashed against the fence, the steel voices went mad in their growling, urging Rosa to run and run to the spot where Magda had fallen from her flight against the electrified fence; but of course Rosa did not obey them. She only stood, because if she ran they would shoot, and if she tried to pick up the sticks of Magda's body they would shoot, and if she let the wolf's screech ascending now through the ladder of her skeleton break out, they would shoot; so she took Magda's shawl and filled her own mouth with it, stuffed it in and stuffed it in, until she was swallowing up the wolf's screech and tasting the cinnamon and almond depth of Magda's saliva; and Rosa drank Magda's shawl until it dried.

# Sunrise, Sunset - Edwidge Danticat

(2017)

It comes on again on her grandson's christening day. A lost moment, a blank spot, one that Carole does not know how to measure. She is there one second, then she is not. She knows exactly where she is, then she does not. Her older church friends tell similar stories about their surgeries, how they count backward from ten with an oxygen mask over their faces, then wake up before reaching one, only to find that hours, and sometimes even days, have gone by. She feels as though she were experiencing the same thing.

Her son-in-law, James, a dreadlocked high-school math teacher, is holding her grandson, Jude, who has inherited her daughter's globe-shaped head, penny-colored skin, and long fingers, which he wraps around Carole's chin whenever she holds him. Jude is a lively giggler. His whole body shakes when he laughs. Carole often stares at him for hours, hoping that his chubby face will bring back memories of her own children at that age, memories that are quickly slipping away.

Her daughter, Jeanne, is still about sixty pounds overweight on Jude's christening day, seven months after his birth. Jeanne is so miserable about this — and who knows what else — that she spends most days in her bedroom, hiding.

Since her daughter is stuck in a state of mental fragility, Carole welcomes the opportunity to join Jude's other grandmother, Grace, in watching their grandson as often as she's asked. Carole likes to entertain Jude with whatever children's songs and peekaboo games she can still remember, including one she calls Solèy Leve, Solèy Kouche — Sunrise, Sunset — which she used to play with her children. She drapes a black sheet over her grandson's playpen and pronounces it "sunset," then takes the sheet off and calls it "sunrise." Her grandson does not seem to mind when she gets confused and reverses the order. He doesn't know the difference anyway.

Sometimes Carole forgets who Grace is and mistakes her for the nanny. She does, however, remember that Grace disapproved of her son's marrying Jeanne, whom she believed was beneath him. That censure now seems justified by Jeanne's failures as a mother.

Jeanne, Carole thinks, has never known real tragedy. Growing up in a country ruled by a merciless dictator, Carole watched her neighbors being dragged out of their houses by the dictator's denim-uniformed henchmen. One of her aunts was beaten almost to death for throwing herself in front of her husband as he was being arrested. Carole's father left the country for Cuba when she was twelve and never returned. Her mother's only means of survival was cleaning the houses of people who were barely able to pay her. Carole's best friend lived next door, in another tin-roofed room, rented separately from the same landlord. During the night, while her mother slept, Carole often heard her friend being screamed at by her own mother, who seemed to hate her for being a burden. Carole tried so hard to protect her U.S.-born children from these stories that they are now incapable of overcoming any kind of sadness. Not so much her son, Paul, who is a minister, but Jeanne, whom she named after her childhood friend. Her daughter's psyche is so feeble that anything can rattle her. Doesn't she realize that the life she is living is an accident of fortune? Doesn't she know that she is an exception in this world, where it is normal to be unhappy, to be hungry, to work non-stop and earn next to nothing, and to suffer the whims of everything from tyrants to hurricanes and earthquakes?

The morning of her grandson's christening, Carole is wearing a long-sleeved white lace dress that she can't recall putting on. She has combed her hair back in a tight bun that now hurts a little.

Earlier in the week, she watched from the terrace of her daughter's third-floor apartment as



Jeanne dipped her feet in the condo's kidney-shaped communal pool. She'd walked out onto the terrace to look at the water, the unusual cobalt-blue color it becomes in late afternoon and the slow ripple of its surface, even when untouched by a breeze or bodies.

"I won't christen him!" Jeanne was shouting on the phone. "That's her thing, not ours."

"We're up soon," James says, snapping Carole out of her reverie. He is using the tone of voice with which he speaks to Jude. It's clear that this is not the first time he's told her this.

Her daughter is looking neither at her nor at the congregation full of Carole's friends. She's not even looking at Jude, who has been dressed, most likely by James, in a plain white romper. Jeanne stares at the floor, as others take turns holding Jude and keeping him quiet in the church: first Grace, then Carole's husband, Victor, then James's younger sister, Zoe, who is the godmother, then James's best friend, Marcos, the godfather.

Carole keeps reminding herself that her daughter is still young. Only thirty-two. Jeanne was once a happy young woman, a guidance counsellor at the school where James teaches. (When James and Jeanne were first married, their friends called them J.J.; then Jude was born, and the three of them became Triple J.) "She used to like children, right?" Carole sometimes asks Victor. "Before she had her son?"

When Jude's name is called from the pulpit by his uncle Paul, James motions for them to approach the altar. Paul, dressed in a long white ministerial robe, steps down from the pulpit and, while Jude is still in his father's arms, traces a cross on his forehead with scented oil. The oil bothers Jude's eyes and he wails. Undeterred, Paul takes Jude and begins praying so loudly that he shocks Jude into silence. After the prayer, he hands Jude back to his mother. Jeanne kisses her son's oil-soaked forehead and her eyes balloon with tears, either from the strong smell of the oil or from the emotions of the day.

Carole knows that her daughter is not enjoying any of this, but she has found comfort in such rituals and she believes that her grandson will not be protected against the world's evils — including his mother's lack of interest in him — until this one is performed.

Later, at the post-christening lunch at her daughter's apartment, Carole spots James and Jeanne walking out of their bedroom. Jude is in Jeanne's arms. They have changed the boy out of his plain romper into an even plainer sleeveless onesie. Jeanne stops in the doorway and lowers a bib over Jude's face and murmurs, "Sunset." Then she raises the bib and squeals, "Sunrise!" Watching her daughter play this game with the baby, Carole feels as though she herself were going through the motions, raising and lowering the bib. Not at this very moment but at some point in the hazy past. It's as if Jeanne had become Carole and James had become her once dapper and lanky husband, Victor, who now walks with a cane that he is always tapping against the ground. All is not lost, Carole thinks. Her daughter has learned a few things from her, after all. Then it returns again, that now familiar sensation of herself waning. What if this is the last day that she recalls anything? What if she never recognizes anyone again? What if she forgets her husband? What if she stops remembering what it's like to love him, a feeling that has changed so much over the years, in ways that her daughter's love for her own husband seems also to be changing, even though James, like Victor, is patient. She's never seen him shout at or scold Jeanne. He doesn't even tell her to get out of bed or pay more attention to their child. He tells Carole and his own mother that Jeanne just needs time. But how long will this kind of tolerance last? How long can anyone bear to live with someone whose mind wanders off to a place where their love no longer exists?

Carole's husband is the only one who knows how far along she is. He is constantly subjected to her sudden mood changes, her bursts of anger followed by total stillness. He has tried for years to help her hide her symptoms, or lessen them with puzzles and other educational games, with coconut oil and omega-3 supplements, which she takes with special juices and teas. He is always turning off appliances, finding keys she's stored in unusual places like the bathtub, the oven, or the freezer. He helps her finish sentences, nudges her to let her know if she has repeated

something a few times. But maybe one day he will grow tired of this and put her in a home, where strangers will have to take care of her.

When Jude was born, Victor bought her a doll so that she could practice taking care of their grandson. It's a brown boy doll with a round face and tight peppercorn curls, like Jude's. When she puts the doll in the bath, its hair clings to its scalp, just like Jude's. Bathing the doll, then dressing it before bed, makes her feel calm, helps her sleep more soundly. But this, like her illness, is still a secret between her husband and her, a secret that they may not be able to keep much longer.

How do you become a good mother? Jeanne wants to ask someone, anyone. She wishes she'd been brave enough to ask her mother before her dementia, or whatever it is that she is suffering from, set in. Her mother refuses to have tests done and get a definitive diagnosis, and her father is fine with that.

"You don't poke around for something you don't want to find," he's told her a few times.

Her father offers the first toast at the christening lunch. "To Jude, who brought us together today," he says in Creole, then in English.

James hands Jeanne a champagne glass, which she has trouble balancing while holding their son. Her mother puts her own glass down and reaches over and takes Jude from Jeanne's arms.

"I'll toast with him," Carole says, and Jeanne fears her mother may actually believe that Jude's body is a champagne glass. She is afraid these days to let her mother hold her son, to leave them alone together, but since she and James are close by and Jude isn't fussing or fidgeting she does not protest.

After the toast, James asks if he can get Jeanne and her mother a plate of food. Carole nods, then quickly changes her mind. "Maybe later," she says. Jude is looking up at her now, his baby eyes fixed on her wrinkled and weary-looking face.

Carole isn't eating much these days. Jeanne, on the other hand, feels as though a deep and sour hole were burrowing through her body, an abyss that is always demanding to be filled.

Her husband doesn't insist. It's not his style. Throughout their courtship and marriage, he's never pressured her to do anything. Everything is always presented to her as a suggestion or a recommendation. It's as if he were constantly practicing being patient for the rowdy kids he teaches at school. Even there, he never loses his temper. Her mother, on the other hand, has been lashing out lately, though afterward she seems unable to remember doing it. She has always been a quiet woman. She is certainly kinder than James's mother, who wouldn't have given Jeanne or Carole the time of day if it weren't for James.

Jeanne often wonders if her mother was happier in Haiti. She doubts it. Jeanne has no right to be sad, her mother has often told her. Only Carole has the right to be sad, because she has seen and heard terrible things. Jeanne's father's approach to life is different. He is more interested than anybody Jeanne knows in the pleasure of joy, or the joy of pleasure, however you want to put it. It's as if he had sworn to enjoy every second of his life — to wear the best clothes he can afford, to eat the best food, to go to dances where his favorite Haitian bands are playing.

Victor drove a city bus for most of Jeanne's childhood, then when he got older he switched to driving a taxicab. Between fares, he sat in the parking lot at Miami International Airport, discussing Haitian politics with his cabdriver friends. Perhaps her mother wouldn't be losing her mind if she'd worked outside their home. Church committees and family were her life's work, a luxury they'd been able to afford because Victor worked double shifts and took extra weekend jobs. Carole could have worked, if she'd wanted to, as a lunch lady in a school cafeteria or as an elder companion or a nanny, like many of her church friends.

Jeanne never wanted to be a housewife like her mother, but here she is now, stuck at home with her son. She doesn't leave the house much anymore, except for her son's doctor's appointments. Most of the time, she's afraid to leave her bed, afraid even to hold her son, for fear that she might drop him or hug him too tightly and smother him. Then the fatigue sets in, an

exhaustion so forceful it doesn't even allow her to sleep. Motherhood is a kind of foggy bubble she can't step out of long enough to wrap her arms around her child. Oddly enough, he's an easy child. He's been sleeping through the night since the day they brought him home. He naps regularly. He isn't colicky or difficult. He is just there.

James decides to offer a toast of his own. He taps his champagne glass with a spoon to catch everyone's attention.

"I want to make a toast to my wife, not only for being a phenomenal wife and mother but for bravely bringing Jude into our lives," he says.

Why does he want to think of her as brave? Perhaps he's thinking of the twenty-six hours of labor that ended in a C-section, during which her son was pulled out with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck. He had nearly died, the doctor told her, because of her stubborn insistence on a natural birth.

The pregnancy had also been easy. She'd worked a regular schedule until the day she went into labor. The pain was intense, pulsating, throbbing, but bearable, even after the twenty-fifth hour. First babies can put you through the wringer, the nurses kept telling her, but the second one will be easier.

She was lucky, blessed, her mother said, that the baby was saved in time.

After his toast, her husband kisses her cheek.

"Hear, hear," her brother says in his booming minister's voice.

Jeanne's eyes meet her husband's and she wishes that a new spark would pass between them, something to connect them still, besides their child. She feels like crying, but she does not want to incite one of her mother's rants about her being a spoiled brat who needs to stop sulking and get on with her life. In all the time since her child was born and she realized that his birth would not necessarily make her joyful, and in all the time since she became aware that her mother's mind, as well as her mother's love, was slipping away, today at the church was the first time she has cried.

A week before Jude was born, Carole went to the Opa Locka Hialeah Flea Market, which Haitians called Ti Mache, and got some eucalyptus leaves and sour oranges for her daughter's first postpartum bath. She bought her daughter a corset and a few yards of white muslin, which she sewed into a *bando* for Jeanne to wrap around her belly. But because of the C-section neither the bath nor the binding was possible, which was why her daughter's belly did not go back to the way it had been before. Jeanne became larger, in fact, because she refused to drink the fennel and aniseed infusions that both Carole and Grace brewed for her. And she refused to breastfeed, which would not only have melted her extra fat but would also have made her feel less sad.

When Jeanne and Paul were babies, no other woman was around to help. Carole didn't have the luxury of lying in bed while relatives took care of her and her children. Her husband did the best he could. He went out and got her the leaves and made her the teas. He gave her the baths himself. He helped her retie the *bando* every morning before he left for work, but during the hours that he was gone she was so lonely and homesick that she kept kissing her babies' faces, as if their cheeks were plots of land in the country she'd left behind.

She couldn't imagine life without her children. She would have felt even more lost and purposeless without them. She wanted them both to have everything they desired. And whenever money was tight, especially after she and Victor bought their house in Miami's Little Haiti, she would clean other people's homes while her children were at school and her husband was at work, something her husband never knew about.

Her secret income made him admire her even more. Every week, before he handed her the allowance for household expenses, he would proudly tell the children, "Your manman sure knows how to stretch a dollar."

Her cleaning money also paid for all the things her daughter believed she'd be a pariah without — brand-name sneakers and clothes, class rings, prom dresses. Her son wasn't interested

in anything but books, and only library books at that. He would happily walk around with holes in his cheap shoes.

She should have told her daughter about the sacrifices she'd made. If she had, it would be easier now to tell her that she couldn't stay sad forever. Where would the family be if Carole had stayed sad when she arrived in this country? Sometimes you just have to shake the devil off you, whatever that devil is. Even if you don't feel like living for yourself, you have to start living for your child, for your children.

Jeanne doesn't realize that her husband and her mother have wandered off with Jude until she finds herself alone with her father.

She hasn't discussed her mother's condition with him for some time. She does not want to tell him or her husband how earlier in the week, when her mother was visiting, she'd forced herself to go out and sit by the pool while her son was napping. As soon as she put her feet in the water, she glanced up and saw her mother watching her from the terrace. Her mother looked bewildered, as though she had no idea where she was. Jeanne was in the middle of a phone call with James. She ended the call quickly and ran upstairs, and by the time she reached the apartment her mother was standing by the door. She pushed the door shut, grabbed Jeanne by the shoulders, and slammed her into it. Had Carole been bigger, she might have cracked open Jeanne's head. Jeanne kept saying, "Manman, Manman," like an incantation, until it brought her back.

"What happened?" her mother asked.

Jeanne wanted to call an ambulance, or at least her father, but she was in shock and her mother seemed fine the rest of the day. Jeanne avoided her as much as she could, let her watch a talk show she liked, and made sure that she was not left alone with Jude.

The next day, her mother showed up after James had gone to work and began shouting at her in Creole. "You have to fight the devil," she yelled. "Stop being selfish and living for yourself. Start living for your child."

Those incidents have made Jeanne afraid both of and for her mother. She agreed to go through with the christening in the hope that it might help. Maybe her mother was only pretending to be losing her mind in order to get her way.

Sitting next to James on their living-room sofa, with Jude in her arms, Carole appears calmer than she has all week. Paul is sitting on the other side of her, and the three of them seem to be talking about Jude, or about children in general. Then James's friend Marcos joins them, and Jude reaches out for his big cloud of an Afro.

Jeanne wonders how her brother could fail to notice that their mother is deteriorating. In all their conversations about the christening, he never mentioned Carole's state of mind. Was it because he was used to seeing her as a pious woman, not as his mother but as his "sister" in the Lord? Paul has never paid much attention to practical things. He spent most of their childhood reading books that even the adults they knew had never heard of, obscure novels and anthropological studies, the biographies of famous theologians and saints. Before he officially joined their mother's church, when he was a senior in high school, he had considered becoming a priest. He was always more concerned about the next world than he was about this one.

Her mother motions for Paul to scoot over, then lowers Jude into the space between them on the sofa. Jude turns his face back and forth and keeps looking up at the adults, especially at James.

"How are you these days?" Jeanne's father asks. As he speaks to Jeanne, he's looking at her mother in a way she has never seen before, with neither admiration nor love but alarm, or even distress.

"O.K.," she says. Usually that is enough for him. Her father, like her husband, doesn't usually push. But this time he does.

"Why do all this today?" her father asks, though he already knows the answer. "Did you have

this child for her, too? Because she won't be able to take care of him for you. You'll have to do it for yourself."

"Of course I didn't have my son for her," Jeanne says.

"Then why have him?" he asks. "It doesn't seem like you want him."

This, whatever it is that she is feeling, she wants to tell him, isn't about not wanting her son. It's about not being up to the task; the job is too grand, too permanent, even with her husband's help. It's hard to explain to her father or to anyone else, but something that was supposed to kick in, maybe a light that was meant to turn on in her head, never did. Despite her complete physical transformation, at times she feels as though she had not given birth at all. It's not that she doesn't want her son, or wishes he hadn't been born; it's just that she can't believe that he is truly hers.

She's desperate to change the subject. "What's really wrong with Manman?" she asks.

"We're not done talking about you," her father says.

"What's wrong with her?" she insists.

"She's not herself," he says.

"It's more than that."

"What do you want me to say?"

"We need to know the truth."

"We," he says, pointing to her mother, then to himself, "already know the truth."

Jeanne hears her mother laughing, softly at first then louder, at something that either James or Marcos has said. She realizes that possibly there have been doctors, a diagnosis, one that her parents are keeping to themselves.

"What are you saying?" she asks.

"I'll soon have to put her somewhere," he says.

She thinks of the expense and how her mother will not be the only one who is dislocated. Her father may have to sell the house in order to afford a decent place where her mother won't be neglected or abused. She thinks of the irony of her family's not being able to take care of her mother, who has dedicated so much of her life to them.

"I'm not saying it will happen tomorrow, but we'll have to put her somewhere one day."

Jeanne hasn't seen the pain in her father's face before, because she hasn't been looking for it. She hasn't been thinking about other people's pain at all. But now she can see the change in him. His hair is grayer and his voice drags. His eyes are red from lack of sleep, his face weathered with worry.

Carole and her childhood friend Jeanne used to talk to each other through a hole they'd poked in the plywood that separated their rooms. In the morning, when Jeanne went to fetch water at the neighborhood tap, she would whistle a wake-up call to Carole. Jeanne's whistle sounded like the squeaky chirping of a pipirit gri, the gray kingbirds that flew around the area until boys knocked them down with slingshots, roasted them in firepits, and ate them.

One morning, Jeanne did not whistle, and Carole never saw her again. The boys in the neighborhood said that her mother had killed her and buried her, then disappeared, but Jeanne's mother had probably just been unable to make the rent and skipped out before daylight.

The next occupant of that room was Victor. Victor's father worked on a ship that often travelled to Miami, and everyone in the neighborhood knew that Victor would be going there, too, one day. His father brought back suitcases full of clothes a couple of times a year, and Victor would always come over with some T-shirts or dresses that his mother said she had no use for, or a plate of food that she claimed would go uneaten if Carole and her mother didn't take it off her hands. Victor soon discovered the hole in the plywood and would slip his finger through and wave it at her. Then she would whistle to him, like the last kingbird of their neighborhood.

Carole knew from the moment she met Victor that he would take care of her. She never thought he'd conspire against her, or even threaten to put her away. But here he is now, plotting against her with a woman she does not know, a fleshy, pretty woman, just the way he once liked

them, just the way she was, when he liked her most.

Her husband and this woman are speaking in whispers. What are they talking about? And why is she sitting next to this peppercorn-haired doll that her husband sometimes uses to trick her, pretending it's a real baby. Her real babies are gone. They disappeared with her friend Jeanne, and all she has left is this doll her husband bought her.

She looks around the room to see if anyone else can see what's going on, how this young woman is trying to steal her husband from her right under her nose, while she is stuck on this sofa between strangers and a propped-up baby doll. She grabs the doll by its armpits and raises it to her shoulder. The doll's facial expressions are so real, so lifelike, that its lips curl and its cheeks crumple as though it were actually about to cry. To calm it down, she whistles the pipirit's spirited squeak.

Carole is trying to explain all this to the men on either side of her, but they can't understand her. One of them holds his hands out to her as if he wanted her to return the doll to him.

They are crowding around her now. The fleshy young woman, too, is moving closer. Carole doesn't understand what all the fuss is about. She just wants to take the doll out to the yard, the way she often does when her husband isn't around. She wants to feel the sun-filled breeze on her face and see the midday lustre of the pool. She wants to prove to everyone that not only can she take care of herself but she can take care of this doll, too.

How does her mother get past James and Paul and run to the terrace with Jude in her arms? Jude is squirming and wailing, his bare pudgy legs cycling erratically as her mother dangles him over the terrace railing.

Her father is the first to reach the terrace, followed by James and everyone else. Though Carole is standing on the shady side of the terrace, she is sweating. Her bun has loosened as though Jude, or someone else, had been pulling at it.

Jeanne isn't sure how long her mother's bony arms will be able to support her son, especially since Jude is crying and twisting, all while turning his head toward the faces on the terrace as though he knew how desperate they were to have him back inside.

Paul has rushed downstairs, and Jeanne is now looking down at his face as she tries to figure out where her son might land if her mother drops him. The possibility of his landing in Paul's arms is as slim or as great as his landing in the pool or on the ficus hedge below the terrace.

Marcos also appears down by the pool, as does James's sister, Zoe, adding more hands for a possible rescue. James is on the phone with the police. Grace has Jeanne caged in her arms, as if to keep her from crumbling to the floor. Her father is standing a few feet from her mother, begging, pleading.

Once James is off the phone, he switches places with her father. Jude balls his small fists, reopens them, then aims both his hands at his father. He stops crying for a moment, as if waiting for James to grab him. When James reaches for him, Carole pushes him farther out. Everyone gasps and, once Grace releases Jeanne, she doubles over, as if she had been sliced in two.

"Manman, please," James says.

"Manman, please," Jeanne echoes, straightening herself up. "*Souple*, Manman. Manman. Please. *Tanpri*, Manman. Manman, please."

Other tenants come out of their apartments. Some are already on their terraces. Others are by the pool with Paul, Zoe, and Marcos. There are now many hands ready to catch Jude should he be dropped or slip from her mother's grasp.

Her son at his last checkup weighed twenty-seven pounds, which is about a fifth of her mother's current weight. Her mother will not be able to hold on to him much longer.

Jeanne walks toward her husband, approaching carefully, brushing past her father, who appears to be in shock.

"Manman, please give me my baby," Jeanne says. She tries to speak in a firm and steady voice, one that will not frighten her son.

Her mother regards her with the dazed look that is now too familiar.

"Let me have him, Carole," Jeanne says. Maybe not being her daughter will give her more authority in her mother's eyes. Her mother may think that Jeanne is someone she has to listen to, someone she must obey.

"Baby," her mother says, and it sounds more like a term of endearment for Jeanne than like the realization that she's holding a small child.

"Yes, Manman," Jeanne says. "It's a baby. My baby." She is trying not to shout over the wails of her child.

"Your baby?" Carole asks, her arms wavering now, as if she were finally feeling Jude's full weight.

"Yes." Jeanne lowers her voice. "He's my child, Manman. Please give him to me."

Jeanne can see in the loosening of her mother's arms that she is returning. But her mother is still not fully back, and, if she returns too suddenly, she may get confused and drop Jude. While her mother's eyes are focussed on her, she signals with a nod for her husband to move in, and, with one synchronized lurch, her father reaches for her mother and her husband grabs their son. Her mother relaxes her grip on Jude only after he is safely back across the railing.

James collapses on the terrace floor, his still crying son pressed tightly against his chest. Jeanne's father takes her mother by the hand and leads her back inside. He sits with her on the sofa and wraps his arms around her as she calmly rests her head on his shoulder.

Two police officers, a black woman and a white man, arrive soon after. They are followed by E.M.T.s. A light is shined in her mother's pupils by one of the E.M.T.s, then her blood pressure is taken. Though her mother seems to have snapped out of her episode and now only looks tired, it's determined that Carole needs psychiatric evaluation. Jude is examined and has only some bruising under his armpits from his grandmother's tight grip.

Jeanne sees the dazed look return to her mother's eyes as she climbs onto the lowered gurney, with some help from Victor and from Paul. Her father asks that her mother not be strapped down, but the head E.M.T. insists that it is procedure and promises not to hurt her.

Jeanne had hoped that her mother was only trying to teach her a lesson, to shock her out of her blues and remind her that she is capable of loving her son, but then she sees her mother's eyes as she is being strapped to the gurney. They are bleary and empty. She seems to be looking at Jeanne but is actually looking past her, at the wall, then at the ceiling.

Carole's body goes limp as the straps are snapped over her wrists and ankles, and it seems as though she were surrendering, letting go completely, giving in to whatever has been ailing her. She seems to know that she'll never be back here, at least not in the way she was before. She seems to know, too, that this moment, unlike a birth, is no new beginning.

Carole thought she'd never see this again. Yet here they are, her daughter and her son-in-law with their baby boy. James's arms are wrapped around his wife, as she holds their son, who has fallen asleep. Perhaps Jeanne will now realize how indispensable her son is to her, how she can't survive without him. Carole regrets not telling her daughter a few of her stories. Now she will never get to tell them to her grandson, either. She will never play with him again.

The first time her husband took her to the doctor, before all the brain scans and spinal taps, the doctor asked about her family's medical history. He asked whether her parents or her grandparents had suffered from any mental illnesses, Alzheimer's, or dementia. She had not been able to answer any of his questions, because when he asked she could not remember anything about herself.

"She's not a good historian," the doctor told her husband, which was, according to Victor, the doctor's way of saying that she was incapable of telling her own life story.

She is not a good historian. She never has been. Even when she was well. Now she will never get a chance to be. Her grandson will grow up not knowing her. The single most memorable story that will exist about her and him will be of her dangling him off a terrace, in what some

might see as an attempt to kill him. For her, all this will soon evaporate, fade away. But everyone else will remember.

They are about to roll her out of the apartment on the gurney. Although her wrists are strapped down, her son is holding her left hand tightly. Jeanne gives Jude to his other grandmother and walks over to the gurney. She moves her face so close to Carole's that Carole thinks she is going to bite her. But then Jeanne pulls back and it occurs to Carole that she is playing Alo, Bye, another peekaboo game her children used to enjoy. With their faces nearly touching, Jeanne crinkles her nose and whispers, "Alo, Manman," then "Bye, Manman."

It would be appropriate, if only she could make herself believe that this is what her daughter is actually doing. It would be a fitting close to her family life, or at least to her life with children. You are always saying hello to them while preparing them to say goodbye to you. You are always dreading the separations, while cheering them on, to get bigger, smarter, to crawl, babble, walk, speak, to have birthdays that you hope you'll live to see, that you pray they'll live to see. Jeanne will now know what it's like to live that way, to have a part of yourself walking around unattached to you, and to love that part so much that you sometimes feel as though you were losing your mind.

Her daughter reaches down and takes her right hand, so that both of her children are now holding her scrawny, shaky hands, which seem not to belong to her at all.

"*Mèsi*, Manman," her daughter says. "Thank you."

There is nothing to thank her for. She has only done her job, her duty as a parent. There is no longer any need for hellos or goodbyes, either. Soon there will be nothing left, no past to cling to, no future to hope for, only now.



# Who Will Greet You at Home - Lesley Nneka Arimah

(2015)

The yarn baby lasted a good month, emitting dry, cotton-soft gurgles and pooping little balls of lint, before Ogechi snagged its thigh on a nail and it unravelled as she continued walking, mistaking its little huffs for the beginnings of hunger, not the cries of an infant being undone. By the time she noticed, it was too late, the leg a tangle of fibre, and she pulled the string the rest of the way to end it, rather than have the infant grow up maimed. If she was to mother a child, to mute and subdue and fold away parts of herself, the child had to be perfect.

Yarn had been a foolish choice, she knew, the stuff for women of leisure, who could cradle wool in the comfort of their own cars and in secure houses devoid of loose nails. Not for an assistant hairdresser who took danfo to work if she had money, walked if she didn't, and lived in an "apartment" that amounted to a room she could clear in three large steps. Women like her had to form their children out of sturdier, more practical material to withstand the dents and scrapes that came with a life like hers. Her mother had formed her from mud and twigs and wrapped her limbs tightly with leaves, like moin moin: pedestrian items that had produced a pedestrian girl. Ogechi was determined that her child would be a thing of whimsy, soft and pretty and tender and worthy of love. But first she had to go to work.

She brushed her short choppy hair and pulled on one of her two dresses. Her next child would have thirty dresses, she decided, and hair so long it would take hours to braid, and she would complain about it to anyone who would listen, all the while exuding smug pride.

Ogechi treated herself to a bus ride only to regret it. Two basket weavers sat in the back row with woven raffia babies in their laps. One had plain raffia streaked with blues and greens, while the other's baby was entirely red, and every passenger admired them. They would grow up to be tough and bright and skillful.

The children were not yet alive, so the passengers sang the call-and-response that custom dictated:

Where are you going?

*I am going home.*

Who will greet you at home?

*My mother will greet me.*

What will your mother do?

*My mother will bless me and my child.*

It was a joyous occasion in a young woman's life when her mother blessed life into her child. The two girls flushed and smiled with pleasure when another woman commended their handiwork (such tight, lovely stitches) and wished them well. Ogechi wished them death by drowning, though not out loud. The congratulating woman turned to her, eager to spread her admiration, but once she had looked Ogechi over, seen the threadbare dress, the empty lap, and the entirety of her unremarkable package, she just gave an embarrassed smile and studied her fingers. Ogechi stared at her for the rest of the ride, hoping to make her uncomfortable.

When Ogechi had taken her first baby, a pillowy thing made of cotton tufts, to her mother, the older woman had guffawed, blowing out so much air she should have fainted. She'd then taken the molded form from Ogechi, gripped it under its armpits, and pulled it in half.

"This thing will grow fat and useless," she'd said. "You need something with strong limbs that can plow and haul and scrub. Soft children with hard lives go mad or die young. Bring me a child with edges and I will bless it and you can raise it however you like."

When Ogechi had instead brought her mother a paper child woven from the prettiest wrapping paper she'd been able to scavenge, her mother, laughing the whole time, had plunged it into the

mop bucket until it softened and fell apart. Ogechi had slapped her, and her mother had slapped her back, and slapped her again and again till their neighbors heard the commotion and pulled the two women apart. Ogechi ran away that night and vowed never to return to her mother's house.

At her stop, Ogechi alighted and picked her way through the crowded street until she reached Mama Said Hair Emporium, where she worked. Mama also owned the store next door, an eatery to some, but to others, like Ogechi, a place where the owner would bless the babies of motherless girls. For a fee. And Ogechi still owed that fee for the yarn boy who was now unravelled.

When she stepped into the Emporium, the other assistant hairdressers noticed her empty arms and snickered. They'd warned her about the yarn, hadn't they? Ogechi refused to let the sting of tears in her eyes manifest and grabbed the closest broom.

Soon, clients trickled in, and the other girls washed and prepped their hair for Mama while Ogechi swept up the hair shed from scalps and wigs and weaves. Mama arrived just as the first customer had begun to lose patience and soothed her with compliments. She noted Ogechi's empty arms with a resigned shake of her head and went to work, curling, sewing, perming until the women were satisfied or in too much of a hurry to care.

Shortly after three, the two younger assistants left together, avoiding eye contact with Ogechi but smirking as if they knew what came next. Mama dismissed the remaining customer and stroked a display wig, waiting.

"Mama, I — "

"Where is the money?"

It was a routine Mama refused to skip. She knew perfectly well that Ogechi didn't have any money. Ogechi lived in one of Mama's buildings, where she paid in rent almost all of the meagre salary she earned, and ate only once a day, at Mama's canteen next door.

"I don't have it."

"Well, what will you give me instead?"

Ogechi knew better than to suggest something.

"Mama, what do you want?"

"I want just a bit more of your joy, Ogechi."

The woman had already taken most of her empathy, so that she found herself spitting in the palms of beggars. She'd started on joy the last time, agreeing to bless the yarn boy only if Ogechi siphoned a bit, just a dab, to her. All that empathy and joy and who knows what else Mama took from her and the other desperate girls who visited her back room kept her blessing active long past when it should have faded. Ogechi tried to think of it as a fair trade, a little bit of her life for her child's life. Anything but go back to her own mother and her practical demands.

"Yes, Mama, you can have it."

Mama touched Ogechi's shoulder, and she felt a little bit sad, but nothing she wouldn't shake off in a few days. It was an even trade.

"Why don't you finish up in here while I check on the food?"

Mama was not gone for three minutes when a young woman walked in. She was stunning, with long natural hair and delicate fingers and skin as smooth and clear as fine chocolate. And in her hands was something that Ogechi wouldn't have believed existed if she hadn't seen it with her own eyes. The baby was porcelain, with a smooth glazed face wearing a precious smirk. It wore a frilly white dress and frilly socks and soft-soled shoes that would never touch the ground. Only a very wealthy and lucky woman would be able to keep such a delicate thing unbroken for the full year it would take before the child became flesh.

"I am looking for this Mama woman. Is this her place?"

Ogechi collected herself enough to direct the girl next door, then fell into a fit of jealous tears. Such a baby would never be hers. Even the raffia children of that morning seemed like dirty sponges meant to soak up misfortune when compared with the china child to whom misfortune

would never stick. If Ogechi's mother had seen the child, she would have laughed at how ridiculous such a baby would be, what constant coddling she would need. It would never occur to her that mud daughters needed coddling, too.

Where would Ogechi get her hands on such beautiful material? The only things here were the glossy magazines that advertised the latest styles, empty product bottles, which Mama would fill with scented water and try to sell, and hair. Hair everywhere — short, long, fake, real, obsidian black, delusional blond, bright, bright red. Ogechi upended the bag she'd swept the hair into, and it landed in a pile studded with debris. She grabbed a handful and shook off the dirt. Would she dare?

After plugging one of the sinks, she poured in half a cup of Mama's most expensive shampoo. When the basin was filled with water and frothy with foam, she plunged the hair into it and began to scrub. She filled the sink twice more until the water was clear. Then she soaked the bundle in the matching conditioner, rinsed and towelled it dry. Next, she gathered up the silky strands and began to wind them.

Round and round until the ball of hair became a body and nubs became arms, fingers. The strands tangled together to become nearly impenetrable. This baby would not snag and unravel. This baby would not dissolve in water or rain or in nail-polish remover, as the plastic baby had that time. This was not a sugar-and-spice child to be swarmed by ants and disintegrate into syrup in less than a day. This was no practice baby formed of mud that she would toss into a drain miles away from her home.

She wrapped it in a head scarf and went to find Mama. The beautiful woman and her beautiful baby had concluded their business. Mama sat in her room counting out a boggling sum of money. Only after she was done did she wave Ogechi forward.

"Another one?"

"Yes, Mama."

Ogechi did not uncover the child, and Mama didn't ask, long since bored by the girl's antics. They sang the traditional song:

Where are you going?

*I am going home.*

Who will greet you at home?

*My mother will greet me.*

What will your mother do?

*My mother will bless me and my child.*

Mama continued with her own special verse:

What does Mama need to bless this child?

*Mama needs whatever I have.*

What do you have?

*I have no money.*

What do you have?

*I have no goods.*

What do you have?

*I have a full heart.*

What does Mama need to bless this child?

*Mama needs a full heart.*

Then Mama blessed her and the baby and, in lieu of a celebratory feast, gave Ogechi one free meat pie. Then she took a little bit more of Ogechi's joy.

There was a good reason for Ogechi not to lift the cloth and let Mama see the child. For one, it was made of items found in Mama's store, and even though they were trash, Mama would add this to her ledger of debts. Second, everybody knew how risky it was to make a child out of hair, infused with the identity of the person who had shed it. But a child of many hairs? Forbidden.

But the baby was glossy, and the red streaks glinted just so in the light, and it was sturdy enough to last a full year, easy. And after that year she would take it to her mother and throw it (not "it" the baby but the idea of it) in her mother's face.

She kept the baby covered even on the bus, where people gave her coy glances and someone tried to sing the song, but Ogechi stared ahead and did not respond to her call.

The sidewalk leading to the door of her little room was so dirty she tiptoed along it, thinking that, if her landlord weren't Mama, she would complain.

In her room, she laid the baby on an old pillow in an orphaned drawer. In the morning, it would come to life, and in a year it would be a strong and pretty thing.

There was an old tale about hair children. Long ago, girls would collect their sheddings every day until they had a bundle large enough to spin a child. One day, a storm blew through the town, and every bundle was swept from its hiding place into the middle of the market, where the hairs became entangled and matted together. The young women tried desperately to separate their own hairs from the others. The elder mothers were amused at the girls' histrionics, how they argued over the silkiest patches and the longest strands. They settled the commotion thus: every girl would draw out one strand from every bundle until they all had an equal share. Some grumbled, some rejoiced, but all complied, and each went home with an identical roll.

When the time came for the babies to be blessed, all the girls came forward, each bundle arriving at the required thickness at the same time. There was an enormous celebration of this once-in-an-age event, and tearful mothers blessed their tearful daughters' children to life.

The next morning, all the new mothers were gone. Some with no sign, others reduced to piles of bones stripped clean, others' bones not so clean. But that was just an old tale.

The baby was awake in the morning, crying dry sounds, like stalks of wheat rubbing together. Ogechi ran to it, and smiled when the fibrous, eyeless face turned to her.

"Hello, child. I am your mother."

But still it cried, hungry. Ogechi tried to feed it the detergent she'd given to the yarn one, but it passed through the baby as if through a sieve. Even though she knew it wouldn't work, she tried the sugar water she had given to the candy child, with the same result. She cradled the child, the scritch of its cries grating her ears, and as she drew a deep breath of exasperation her nose filled with the scent of Mama's expensive shampoo and conditioner, answering her question.

"You are going to be an expensive baby, aren't you?" Ogechi said, with no heat. A child that cost much brought much.

Ogechi swaddled it, ripping her second dress into strips that she wound around the baby's torso and limbs until it was almost fully covered, save for where Ogechi imagined the nose and mouth to be. She tried to make do with her own shampoo for now, which was about as luxurious as the bottom of a slow drain, but the baby refused it. Only when Ogechi strapped the child to her back did she find out what it wanted. The baby wriggled upward, and Ogechi hauled it higher, then higher still, until it settled its head on the back of her neck. Then she felt it, the gentle suckling at her nape as the child drew the tangled buds of her hair into its mouth. Ahh, now this she could manage.

Ogechi decided to walk today, unsure of how to nurse the child on the bus and still keep it secret, but she dreaded the busy intersection she would cross as she neared Mama's Emporium. The people milling about with curious eyes, the beggars scanning and calculating the worth of passersby. Someone would notice, ask.

But as she reached the crossing not one person looked at her. They were all gathered in a crowd, staring at something that was blocked from Ogechi's sight by the press of bodies. After watching a woman try and fail to haul herself onto the low-hanging roof of a nearby building for a better view, Ogechi pulled herself up in one, albeit labored, move. Mud girls were good for something. She ignored the woman stretching her arm out for assistance and stood up to see what

had drawn the crowd.

A girl stood with her mother, and though Ogechi could not hear them from where she perched, the stance, the working of their mouths — all was familiar. They were revealing a child in public? In the middle of the day? Even a girl like her knew how terribly vulgar this was. It was no wonder the crowd had gathered. Only a child of some magnitude would be unwrapped in public this way. What was this one, gold? No, the woman and the girl were not dressed finely enough for that. Their clothes were no better than Ogechi's.

The child startled Ogechi when it moved. What she'd thought an obscene ruffle on the front of the girl's dress was in fact the baby, no more than interlocking twigs and sticks — was that grass? — bound with old cloth. Scraps. A rubbish baby. It cried, the friction of sound so frantic and dry Ogechi imagined a fire flickering from the child's mouth. A hiccup interrupted the noise, and when it resumed it was a human cry. The girl's mother laughed and danced, and the girl just cried, pressing the baby to her breast. They uncovered the child together, shucking a thick skin of cloth and sticks, and Ogechi leaned as far as she could without falling from the roof to see what special attribute might have required a public showing.

The crowd was as disappointed as she was. It was just an ordinary child with an ordinary face. They started to disperse, some throwing insults at the two mothers and the baby they held between them for wasting everybody's time. Others congratulated them with enthusiasm — it was a baby, after all. Something didn't add up, though, and Ogechi was reluctant to leave until she understood what nagged her about the scene.

It was the new mother's face. The child was as plain as pap, but the mother's face was full of wonder. One would think the baby had been spun from silk. One would think the baby was speckled with diamonds. One would think the baby was loved. Mother cradled mother, who cradled child, a tangle of ordinary limbs of ordinary women.

There has to be more than this for me, Ogechi thought.

At the shop, the two young assistants prepped their stations and rolled their eyes at the sight of Ogechi and the live child strapped to her back. Custom forced politeness from them, and with gritted teeth they sang:

Welcome to the new mother

*I am welcomed*

Welcome to the new child

*The child is welcomed*

May her days be longer than the breasts of an old mother and fuller than the stomach of a rich man.

The second the words were out, they went back to work, as though the song were a sneeze, to be excused and forgotten. Until, that is, they took in Ogechi's self-satisfied air, so different from the anxiousness that had followed in her wake whenever she had blessed a child in the past. The two girls were forced into deference, stepping aside as Ogechi swept where they would have stood still a mere day ago. When Mama walked in, she paused, sensing the shift of power in the room, but it was nothing to her. She was still the head. What matter if one toenail argued with the other? She eyed the bundle on Ogechi's back but didn't look closer and wouldn't, as long as the child didn't interfere with the work and, by extension, her coin.

Ogechi was grateful for the child's silence, even though the suction on her neck built up over the day to become an unrelenting ache. She tired easily, as if the child were drawing energy from her. Whenever she tried to ease a finger between her nape and the child's mouth, the sucking would quicken, so she learned to leave it alone. At the end of the day, Mama stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

"So you are happy with this one."

"Yes, Mama."

"Can I have a bit of that happiness?"

Ogechi knew better than to deny her outright.

"What can I have in exchange?"

Mama laughed and let her go.

When Ogechi dislodged the child at the end of the day, she found a raw, weeping patch on her nape, where the child had sucked her bald. On the ride home, she slipped to the back of the bus, careful to cradle the child's face against her ear so that no one could see it. The baby immediately latched on to her sideburn, and Ogechi spent the journey like that, the baby sucking an ache into her head. At home, she sheared off a small patch of hair and fed the child, who took the cottony clumps like a sponge absorbing water. Then it slept, and Ogechi slept, too.

If Mama wondered at Ogechi's sudden ambition, she said nothing. Ogechi volunteered to trim ends. She volunteered to unclog the sink. She kept the store so clean a rumor started that the building was to be sold. She discovered that the child disliked fake hair and would spit it out. Dirty hair was best, flavored with the person from whose head it had fallen. Ogechi managed a steady stream of food for the baby, but it required more and more as each day passed. All the hair she gathered at work would be gone by the next morning, and Ogechi had no choice but to strap the child to her back and allow it to chaw on her dwindling nape.

Mama was not curious about the baby, but the two assistants were. When Ogechi denied their request for a viewing, their sudden deference returned to malice tenfold. They made extra messes, strewing hair after Ogechi had cleaned, knocking bottles of shampoo over until Mama twisted their ears for wasting merchandise. One of the girls, the short one with the nasty scar on her arm, grew bolder, attempting to snatch the cover off the baby's head and laughing and running away when Ogechi reacted. Evading her became exhausting, and Ogechi took to hiding the child in the shop on the days she opened, squeezing it in among the wigs or behind a shelf of unopened shampoos, and the thwarted girl grew petulant, bored, then gave up.

One day, while the child was nestled between two wigs, and Ogechi, the other assistants, and Mama were having lunch at the eatery next door, a woman stopped by their table to speak to Mama.

"Greetings."

"I am greeted," Mama said. "What is it you want?"

Mama was usually more welcoming to her customers, but this woman owed Mama money, and she subtracted each owed coin from her pleasantries.

"Mama, I have come to pay my debt."

"Is that so? This is the third time you have come to pay your debt, and yet we are still here."

"I have the money, Mama."

"Let me see."

The woman pulled a pouch from the front of her dress and counted out the money owed. As soon as the notes crossed her palm, Mama was all smiles.

"Ahh, a woman of her word. My dear, sit. You are looking a little rough today. Why don't we get you some hair?"

The woman was too stunned by Mama's kindness to heed the insult. Mama shooed one of the other assistants toward the shop, naming a wig the girl should bring. A wig that was near where Ogechi had stashed the baby.

"I'll get it, Mama," Ogechi said, getting up, but a swift slap to her face sat her back down.

"Was anyone talking to you, Ogechi?" Mama asked.

She knew better than to reply.

The assistant Mama had addressed snickered on her way out, and the other one smiled into her plate. Ogechi twisted her fingers into the hem of her dress and tried to slow her breathing. Maybe if she was the first to speak to the girl when she returned she could beg her. Or bribe her. Anything to keep her baby secret.

But the girl didn't return. After a while, the woman who had paid her debt became restless and

stood to leave. Mama's tone was muted fury.

"Sit. Wait." To Ogechi, "Go and get the wig, and tell that girl that if I see her again I will have her heart." Mama wasn't accustomed to being disobeyed.

Ogechi hurried to the shop expecting to find the girl agape at the sight of her strange, fibrous child. But the girl wasn't there. The wig she'd been asked to bring was on the floor, and there, on the ledge where it had been, was the baby. Ogechi pushed it behind another wig and ran the first wig back to Mama, who insisted that the woman take it. Then Mama charged her, holding out her hand for payment. The woman hesitated, but paid. Mama gave nothing for free.

The assistant did not return to the Emporium, and Ogechi worried that she'd gone to call some elder mothers for counsel. But no one stormed the shop, and when Ogechi stepped outside after closing there was no mob gathered to dispense judgment. The second assistant left as soon as Mama permitted her to, calling for the first one over and over. Ogechi retrieved the baby and went home.

In her room, Ogechi tried to feed the child, but the hair rolled off its face. She tried again, selecting the strands and clumps it usually favored, but it rejected them all.

"What do you want?" Ogechi asked. "Isn't this hair good enough for you?" This was said with no malice, and she leaned in to kiss the baby's belly. It was warm, and Ogechi drew back from the unexpected heat.

"What have you got there?" she asked, a rhetorical question to which she did not expect an answer. But then the baby laughed, and Ogechi recognized the sound. It was the snicker she heard whenever she tripped over discarded towels or dropped the broom with her clumsy hands. It was the snicker she'd heard when Mama cracked her across the face at the eatery.

Ogechi distanced herself even more, and the child struggled to watch her, eventually rolling onto its side. It stilled when she stilled, and so Ogechi stopped moving, even after a whirl of snores signalled the child's sleep.

Should she call for help? Or tell Mama? Help from whom? Tell Mama what, exactly? Ogechi weighed her options till sleep weighed her lids. Soon, too soon, it was morning.

The baby was crying, hungry. Ogechi neared it with caution. When it saw her, the texture of its cry softened and — Ogechi couldn't help it — she softened, too. It was hers, wasn't it? For better or for ill, the child was hers. She tried feeding it the hairs again, but it refused them. It did, however, nip hard at Ogechi's fingers, startling her. She hadn't given it any teeth.

She wanted more than anything to leave the child in her room, but the strangeness of its cries might draw attention. She bundled it up, trembling at the warmth of its belly. It latched on to her nape with a powerful suction that blurred her vision. This is the sort of thing a mother should do for her child, Ogechi told herself, resisting the urge to yank the baby off her neck. A mother should give all of herself to her child, even if it requires the marrow in her bones. Especially a child like this, strong and sleek and shimmering.

After a few minutes, the sucking eased to something manageable, the child sated.

At the Emporium, Ogechi kept the child with her, worried that it would cry if she removed it. Besides, the brash assistant who had tried to uncover the child was no longer at the shop, and Ogechi knew that she would never return. The other assistant was red-eyed and sniffling, unable to stop even after Mama gave her dirty looks. By lockup, Ogechi's head was throbbing, and she trembled with exhaustion. She wanted to get home and pry the baby off her. She was anticipating the relief of that when the remaining assistant said, "Why have you not asked after her?"

"Who?" Stupid answer, she thought as soon as she uttered it.

"What do you mean who? My cousin that disappeared. Why haven't you wondered where she is? Even Mama has been asking people about her."

"I didn't know you were cousins."

The girl recognized Ogechi's evasion.

"You know what happened to her, don't you? What did you do?"

The answer came out before Ogechi could stop it.

"The same thing I will do to you," she said, and the assistant took a step back, then another, before turning to run.

At home, Ogechi put the child to bed and stared until it slept. She felt its belly, which was cooling now, and recoiled at the thought of what could be inside. Then it gasped a little hairy gasp from its little hairy mouth, and Ogechi felt again a mother's love.

The next morning, it was Ogechi's turn to open the store, and she went in early to bathe the baby with Mama's fine shampoo, sudsing its textured face, avoiding the bite of that hungry, hungry mouth. She was in the middle of rinsing off the child when the other assistant entered. She retreated in fear at first, but then she took it all in — Ogechi at the sink, Mama's prized shampoo on the ledge, suds covering mother-knows-what — and she turned sly, running outside and shouting for Mama. Knowing that it was no use calling after her, Ogechi quickly wrapped the baby back up in her old torn-up dress, knocking over the shampoo in her haste. That was when Mama walked in.

"I hear you are washing something in my sink." Mama looked at the spilled bottle, then back at Ogechi. "You are doing your laundry in my place?"

"I'm sorry, Mama."

"How sorry are you, Ogechi, my dear?" Mama said, calculating. "Are you sorry enough to give me some of that happiness? So that we can forget all this?"

There was no need for a song now, as there was no new child to be blessed. Mama simply stretched her hand forward and held on, but what she thought was Ogechi's shoulder was the head of the swaddled child.

Mama fell to the ground in undignified shudders. Her eyes rolled, as if she were trying to see everything at once. Ogechi fled. She ran all the way home, and, even through her panic, she registered the heat of the child in her arms, like the just-stoked embers of a fire. In her room, she threw the child into its bed, expecting to see whorls of burned flesh on her arms but finding none. She studied the baby, but it didn't look any different. It was still a dense tangle of dark fibre with the occasional streak of red. She didn't touch it, even when the mother in her urged her to. At any moment, Mama would show up with her goons, and Ogechi was too frightened to think of much else. But Mama didn't appear, and she fell asleep waiting for the pounding at her door.

Ogechi woke in the middle of the night with the hair child standing over her. It should not have been able to stand, let alone haul itself onto her bed. Nor should it have been able to fist her hair in a grip so tight her scalp puckered or stuff an appendage into her mouth to block her scream. She tried to tear it apart, but the seams held. Only when she rammed it into the wall did it let go. It skittered across the room and hid somewhere that the candle she lit couldn't reach. Ogechi backed toward the door, listening, but what noise does hair make?

When the hair child jumped onto Ogechi's head, she shrieked and shook herself, but it gripped her hair again, tighter this time. She then did something that would follow her all her days. She raised the candle and set it on fire. And when the baby fell to the ground, writhing, she covered it with a pot and held it down, long after her fingers had blistered from the heat, until the child, as tough as she'd made it, stopped moving.

Outside, she sat on the little step in front of the entrance to her apartment. No one had paid any mind to the noise — this wasn't the sort of building where one checked up on screams. Knees to her chin, Ogechi sobbed into the calloused skin, feeling part relief, part something else — a sliver of empathy Mama hadn't been able to steal. There was so much dirt on the ground, so much of it everywhere, all around her. When she turned back into the room and lifted the pot, she saw all those pretty, shiny strands transformed into ash. Then she scooped dirt into the pot and added water.

This she knew. How to make firm clay — something she was born to do. When the mix was just right, she added a handful of the ashes. Let this child be born in sorrow, she told herself. Let



this child live in sorrow. Let this child not grow into a foolish, hopeful girl with joy to barter. Ogechi formed the head, the arms, the legs. She gave it her mother's face. In the morning, she would fetch leaves to protect it from the rain.