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The Finer Things

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THE FINER THINGS

by

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ABSTRACT

It is through the grotesque that Flannery O'Connor's characters achieve grace, and often the only hope for self-actualization rests in death and malformation. This is perhaps her greatest irony. The protagonists of *The Finer Things*, however, never self-actualize: they simply act without understanding or questioning why. This is because they are rarely confronted with the grotesque; instead they actively seek it for themselves. The grotesque isn't revelatory, but rather, it satisfies romantic ideals and desires, or is pursued in effort to escape aggressive bureaucracies that typify Kafka's short stories. This characterizes the ironic aesthetic of *The Finer Things*. Working in tandem with the romantic and the grotesque is the overarching motif: there is little to distinguish the white walls of the city art galleries from the white walls of the asylum. People are created, manipulated, controlled, put on display against their will, judged, and in some cases destroyed, which further speaks to the universal longing for the macabre.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Rita adjusted her weight over the mattress to allay the heat rash that had spread the breadth of her shoulder blades. With eyes still closed she raised her head and flipped the pillow, hoping that the other side had dried since the last time she turned it a few hours ago. She could feel her boyfriend just begin to stir, and despite the heat that had gathered beneath the comforter for nine hours into the morning he let a clammy thigh plop on top of hers. It had become routine, to wake up to the sound of their ceiling fan, to brood over their energy bill and their landlord too cheap to replace the thermostat now fixed at seventy-seven. Every drop of sweat, it seemed, came at a cost. Just as she had gotten settled she felt a slick mass slide across her torso.

“Get off me.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Just get off. Off.”

Mat collapsed heavily onto his side. Rita arched to relieve the pressure in her lower spine while her boyfriend watched half-admiringly. He reached over to cup the round of her shoulder, but she batted his hand away and turned to face the wall.

“I was just looking at you, Rita.”

Without lifting from the bed she grasped at the sheets bundled at their feet and yanked upward, the hem catching beneath her boyfriend. She gave another exasperated tug that forced him to draw up his legs and wound herself in the covers.

“Are you going to just ignore me or—?”

Met with no response, Matt eased himself over the edge of the bed and bent down to grasp the brace crumpled on the floor. He slipped his leg into the device, and once the straps over his shin and thigh were secured, he pulled on the pair of jeans heaped at the foot of the bed. Rita waited until she could sense his weight leave the mattress. She fell on her back again and drew the covers down so that the hem laid just beneath the warm furrow of her breasts, but Matt had already reached the door. Before she could say anything he stepped out.

The ceiling fan overhead, a setting too high, turned at a frantic pace. The grating sound of an overworked motor put her on edge, and the propeller rocked as though it were just one fan-blade's turn from coming down altogether, but still she welcomed the cool on her damp skin. She let her head drop to one side toward the dresser and noticed Matt's crutch still propped against it. She didn't want to move, but she wondered whether she had the patience to wait for the alarm to go off.

The clang of pans followed by the paced spark of the gas burner. "Walls are too damn thin," she muttered under her breath, and swung herself off the mattress. Eggs again, she thought. He can have his own. She threw on a pair of jersey shorts and a t-shirt and shuffled her way to the kitchen.

Butter warmed on the stove while Matt hovered over the sink cleaning dishes from yesterday's dinner. There was little doubt he would struggle with the cheese sauce that dried overnight from her attempt at a tomato mozzarella risotto, which had turned out bland as hell, and Rita watched the muscles in his back pull and tense as he scrubbed vigorously at the residue with a steel wool sponge. Her eyes fell onto his left leg and looked for the slight protrusion of metal beneath the denim. Had she not known what to look for, she wouldn't have seen it at all. He shifted his weight over the kitchen mat, and the rods disappeared beneath the denim folds.

“We’re going to be late for the opening of that thing if you try to take care of all those now,” she said, dropping into a seat at the table.

“We have time.”

He lay down the dish he had been scouring on the rack and turned his attention to the stove. He swiveled the pan side to side, and with his other hand cracked an egg over the butter-coated bottom.

* * * *

Rita tapped her foot impatiently on the brick tile as they waited for the train to near. Boston’s little metropolitans lined the steep railway, fiddling with their phones and compulsively checking the overhead LED clocks for a ride that would arrive in little more than two minutes.

“Did you bring the tickets?” Rita asked.

“In my coat pocket,” Matt replied, patting his side.

The lights bordering the platform flashed and Rita stepped back as the head of the train roared passed them, catching flickers of faces and backs of bodies crammed within the cars. She gripped Matt’s arm as the train slowed and stationed them in front of a set of doors before a woman in a pastel suit could reach them. The doors opened. A crowd of passengers poured out and tromped off importantly to the escalators.

Rita entered the car first, her purse tucked snugly beneath her arm, and Matt followed after her, slipping through the doors as the female voicecom repeatedly threatened boarders with closing doors. The final boarder, the woman in the pastel suit, finally popped through the doors before burying her face in a stranger’s back.

They shouldered their way through the aisle to the single open seat by a subway map at the opposite end of the car. Matt took hold of an overhead grabhandle as the train crept its way into the tunnel ahead. Rita placed a hand on his shoulder.

“You can have the seat,” she said, leaning into his ear.

“I’m okay.”

“You should take the seat.” She hooked her finger around his elbow and tugged as the train picked up speed.

Matt parted his lips to speak, but the eyes of neighboring passengers darting in his direction silenced him. He let her guide him to his seat and dropped heavily beside a man who hadn’t the courtesy enough to move an inch or two to his right to fit them both comfortably.

It was quiet, the silence punctuated by a cough, a heavy footfall or a rattling lung. Matt glanced up at her from time to time and fumbled with the tickets in his overcoat pocket.

“Just a couple more stops,” she said.

“I know.”

* * * *

Each wall of the exhibition was occupied by a single painting barely the size of a sheet of standard printer paper. They wandered quietly to the one nearest them at the right of the room. A single line. A single, crooked line stranded awkwardly in the white space of an otherwise empty canvas, like some maimed thing. The price of admission floated before Rita’s eyes, and she wondered why she ever agreed to tag along. She scanned the paintings ahead of them to find that most of them—if not all of them—were about the same.

“I don’t get it.”

“What do you mean?” Matt asked.

“I could do this. You could do this.”

“I don’t think that’s the point.”

“Then what is?”

Overhearing their conversation, a suited curator, who had up until then been patrolling the back of the room, traveled briskly in their direction, the insight dribbling from his lips before he even reached them. Matt stepped back to make room.

“You know, some say Gerard Holloway, the artist here, was a true *poussiniste*, but that’s a misunderstanding. Gerard wasn’t particularly interested in the logic of line,” the curator said, rapping on the plastic inscription. “‘Line,’ he said, ‘is a single verse of poetry.’ Look around the room. They’re poems.”

Rita nodded mechanically as he spoke, waiting for a break in the monologue to scurry off to a spot where they could admire the squiggles quietly. To her horror, Matt began to indulge the intruder.

“Did he ever acknowledge a poet as being his inspiration?”

The balding caretaker’s cheeks flushed with delight, and he responded to Matt’s question with unprecedented zeal. Rita watched horrified as Matt clung to his every word, the men slowly turning towards one another like two rotating pillars.

It wasn’t long before Rita found herself bordering their exchange, as though she had been filtered from the conversation, and she drifted away from the two like a dimming thunderhead. She wandered into the next room to collect herself but hovered around the doorway to keep an eye on them. A slight cough at the opposed end of her room drew her attention. A couple stood arm in arm in front of a piece slightly larger than the others, whispering just loud enough to be heard. The woman raised a gloved hand to a dark scribble at the left-hand corner of the canvas,

Rita half expecting her to *avant-garde!* or some other sultry French bullshit, and the accent would be terrible. She couldn't quite pronounce it herself, it had been years since she had taken French in college for that handful of language credits, but she could identify lazy pronunciation when she heard it.

She returned to the scene in the first room to find Matt and the curator still engaged. She could feel the bitterness brim, and she was kept in check only by the silence between the walls.

With arms dangling casually by her side, she moved towards them, gauging her footfalls so as not to draw attention. She eased behind Matt, who started, and let her hand light upon his shoulder. "You've been a great help," she said through a plastic smile, eyeing the curator.

"Certainly," he replied, running his fingers through the thinning patch of his scalp. He promptly wandered to the back of the room without so much as a backward glance, to a snug little corner of the museum, which she assumed to be his post. Rita didn't wait for Matt to protest, but rather stepped ahead of him in hopes that he would follow. As they made their way out of the first room, Rita glimpsed at the curator behind them, pacing as before in wait for the next handful of patrons to trickle in.

Rita had a mind to speak to Matt, but knowing her voice would carry she kept her peace. They moved through the rooms like strangers, side by side, not allowing their eyes to cross paths.

They made to examine the artwork once more, and while Rita would at the very least give each painting the once-over, Matt paused to read every caption.

"You don't have to read them all," she said, her hand slipping beneath the knob of his left elbow. Matt told her she could move on ahead if she cared to, and that he wouldn't linger far behind.

By the time she completed the fourth and final room Matt had just begun to survey the third. She considered calling out his name so that he would hurry, but once more the quiet withheld her. It was not as though they had made plans for after the exhibit; they had designed to keep their schedule open to explore the rest of the city. She had given up on Gerard's scrawlings; instead she fixed her gaze on Matt, who walked alone about the empty space with a poise that set her teeth on edge. He caught sight of her standing there in the open doorway waiting for him, and he wandered in her direction with a calm that made her feel briefly as though she were seeing him for the first time.

Upon leaving the building they were met with a blast of cold, and once they readjusted their winter clothes Matt asked what was wrong.

"What do you think?" Rita replied, quickening her step.

"Weren't you looking forward to this? We're out now."

"I want to go home. Let's just go home."

"You mean that?"

"Yes. I want to go back."

"Fine."

The return home was about as quiet as before with fewer people onboard. Rita seated herself by a pair of doors. Matt remained standing, his fingers clenched over the grabhandle. At the second stop a pair of women entered the car. Their exchange, about as thoughtful were it to have taken place between adjacent stalls, carried through the car and competed with the grind of wheels outside.

That evening Matt asked if she cared to join him in the bath this time, but she declined and said she would prefer to take a shower in the morning. Rita heard the click of the lock behind him.

The bedroom was a mess, and she realized that most of the things lying about the floor were hers. She gathered the heaps in her arms, and carried them to the dresser by the picture window. The hamper was already full.

As she stuffed her things away in drawers she sensed movement outside. With the edge of her hand pressed over her brow, she peered out the window that overlooked the lawn, but distinguished little. The movement was slight, she remembered, if she had seen anything. She turned off the lamp on the nightstand, and once her eyes adjusted to the dark, looked out once more.

There was a man. Rita instinctively ducked from view and huddled beneath the window ledge. She thought of Matt, and it was then she realized he had already turned off the water. Her limbs shook like those of some palsied animal, and she flattened her palms against the floorboards to calm herself.

She wondered how he came, whether he had walked or staggered there. He just stood very still, his gaze directed at the window. Two trees loomed on either side of him. Her hands wandered absently to the curtains, her fingers curled deep into the fabric. She didn't know how long he had been standing there.

It took her a moment to remember herself; she woke only to the sound of water slogging down the drain. She drew the curtains closed. Vapors furred from the bathroom as Matt stepped through the door. Wrapped only in a towel he moved carefully into the bedroom to find Rita facing him, her back to the curtains.

“Not tired?” he asked, tousling his hair with the end of the towel.

“I am,” she said, and pulled back the comforter.

“Me too.”

“You’re red,” she said, pointing to his leg. “I can see it from here.”

“Chafing’s bad again,” he said, tracing his fingers over the flushed strips encircling his calf and thigh. “I put the stuff on it.”

Rita nodded. Matt let the towel drop in a heap on the floor, tinkered with the clock on the nightstand, and joined her beneath the covers.

* * * *

She was out of hot water the next morning, but she figured that she had to at least get her hair wet because she couldn’t let herself go a second day without. Matt had already set a pan on the stove. “Water heater’s fucked,” she said, opening the refrigerator. “It was cold the whole time.” She leaned into the mouth of the fridge and groped around for the orange juice in the back.

“At least you’re awake,” Matt teased. He glanced over to find that she was not amused. “I can give the guy a call if you want. We can get it taken care of pretty quickly, I think.”

“Thanks.”

He peered at the list of numbers posted on the refrigerator door and whipped out his cell phone from his pants pocket.

“You calling him now?”

He nodded as he dialed.

Rita pulled out two glasses from the cabinet nearest the sink and set them on opposite sides of the table. Matt paced the room calmly as he spoke, opening and closing a few drawers in search of a utensil. He opened the dishwasher and pulled out a spatula.

“All good,” he said, flipping his phone closed. “Plumber says he can make it in after 1:00. Someone’s going to need to be here to let him in.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Lunch with Tom, remember? How do you want your eggs?”

“With Tom?”

“Yes. With Tom.”

She jabbed at the quivering bulge of the egg with her fork and let the yolk run. Matt preferred his eggs scrambled, and she watched as he methodically broke up the yellow mass into even piles with his fork, like a machine. They had their meal quietly, the sound of silverware dragging across their plates the only break in the silence. Matt finished his meal first and made to leave.

“So I’m to wait here.”

“Is there a problem?” he asked, placing his dish in the sink. He turned on the faucet and let the water soak the plate.

“It’s fine,” she said, her eyes fixed on the table.

“Honey, I don’t know what you want me to do.”

“Nothing. I don’t want anything.”

“I’ll take your plate.”

The plumber arrived an hour and a half later than he said he would, and upon entry his eyes darted around the living room. He promptly complimented her on the state of the home,

expressing particular fondness for the bright coloring of the walls. Made the place “more spacious,” he said. The unusually low register of his voice put her one edge, and she didn’t like the way the thick tendons in his neck grew as he spoke. Before he could say much more, Rita quickly led him to the storage room in the basement to have him fiddle with the water heater, and although she considered keeping an eye on him—in case he were tempted to wander—she instead settled herself in the kitchen, away from view. She sat at the table, wondering how long the repair would take, and mused how she might spend the rest of the day once he left.

Yet those thoughts were soon blanketed by recollections of the previous evening, that unmoving figure in the dark. As though in need, she thought. It made no sense, but perhaps it didn’t have to. She didn’t know why she didn’t say anything, because she could have, but the moment was hers. Whatever that meant. She wondered what Matt would think, how he would react. Probably wouldn’t give a shit, she thought, her fingers absently pinching at the corner of a placemat. If she were to tell Matt, it would be when the time was fitting.

“Ma’am?”

Rita started in her seat.

“Didn’t mean to alarm you,” the plumber said, standing in the kitchen doorway. “The pilot light doesn’t stay lit. You just need the thermocouple replaced, so everything’s going to be okay, ma’am. I can do that right now for you.”

She didn’t like the sound of “just”—it made it seem as though she would end up paying extravagantly for a repair she could have “just” as easily carried out herself, were she to know what a thermo-whatever was. But she agreed to let him take care of it and the man walked out of the house to his van outside. To locate the part, she assumed. “Got it right here, miss,” he said,

upon his return. “Hot water will be up in no time.” And it was in no time she scribbled out a check for over two hundred dollars.

Lunch with Tom, it seemed, straggled off into dinner; but if she left now, Matt might return to an empty house. Would be too bad, she thought. Rita yanked her coat from the closet, flung open the door and stepped out, having finally decided on a place to go.

The tea bazaar was how she remembered it. The leafy must steeped in the porous floorboards, the dim beaded lamps scattered about the shop by stools and low-seated armchairs. It was about four and the place was packed, which made little sense—high-tide was typically noon—but the Christmas-themed chalkboards dangling overhead detailing a seasonal special cued her in. The line at the register stretched out into the middle of the shop and she doubted she would be able to locate a seat for herself.

She traipsed about the shop in search of an empty table, side-stepping condiment stations and display stands promoting the arrival of seasonal brews. She slipped through the customers gathered at the register and spotted a middle-aged man seated at one of the tables toward the left folding up his newspaper. Her numb fingers could only tease at her coat buttons, and as he stood up to leave, she prepared to take his seat. After removing her jacket and fitting it over the back of her chair, Rita readjusted her turtleneck to let the heat rush over her fingertips.

The familiar peal of the machines at the back masked the ambient music and competed with conversation. But that was how she preferred it. It allowed her to think. She remembered how they met. At that silly café downtown she never entered, even though her mother said that’s where the artists go. Rita knew that artists would rather have tea and that coffee shops are for the unemployed. But one weekend in winter a biting wind chased her inside, and having some shred

of decency, resigned to purchase a drink even if it were just to have something to warm her hands.

She remembered seating herself by the window, her fingers wrapped around her spiced chai latte, and watched as passersby outside buried themselves beneath knit scarves and high collars. She lifted her drink to her lips and gently licked away the froth gathered at the mouth of the lid, and as she took a sip she let her gaze wander. A woman sat with a child at one of the tables, both bundled in their winter coats, the woman unwrapping a slice of lemon pound cake for the two to share. A man with his hands folded over the pick-up countertop waited impatiently for the single barista to finish whipping his drink. Another customer walled himself behind the local post.

She continued to nurse her drink until she noticed the man with the newspaper shift suddenly in his seat, and it was then she caught the flash of metal striking suddenly from beneath the cloth of his pant leg. Rita couldn't recall much that came after, only that she seated herself in the empty chair in front of him before realizing that she hadn't yet seen his face.

She returned home in the evening to find Matt on the couch with a book flattened over his chest, his face flushed with sleep.

"Didn't mean to wake you up," she said, closing the front door behind her.

"Where did you go?" he asked through a yawn, propping himself on his elbow.

"Downtown."

"That it? Go anywhere specific?" Rita sensed the tension build in his voice.

"The coffeehouse," she said. She hung her coat on the rack by the door.

"You hate that place. Or at least you told me you did."

"I do. And the water's fixed."

Rita noticed that Matt didn't ask whether she'd join this time. From the bed she could hear the skin of his heels rub against the porcelain as he eased himself into the tub, and the sudden hiss of the showerhead. Still dressed she lay beneath the covers with a book pulled from their living room shelf, some novel she hadn't touched since college. She flipped through a few pages to pass the time but soon lay it down, unable to focus on the words.

She turned the light off this time and wandered to the picture window. The curtains were parted slightly, and she stood behind one of them and pushed the other to the opposite side of the frame. She didn't know what it was that compelled her to do this, preferring to think that she was just going through the motions, that her hands moved independently of her body. She leaned forward just enough to peer out.

He was there. Standing between the two dogwoods, he was there. His shadow stretched ominously across the lawn and broke over the ditch by the street. He stood still as before, his gaze held at the window. She stood there for a while, wondering if their eyes met or could meet, her only certainty that he would not move. She drew open the other curtain.

Matt had laid the brace by his side of the bed, and Rita, for reasons she could not explain, brought it to the window. Trembling she raised her right knee and let her heel rest on the window ledge. The brace was surprisingly heavy, but she still had balance enough to slip her leg within the device without tipping over. She let her foot hover half an inch above the shoe plate, and pressed the spine of the brace hard against the back of her calve and thigh with her palms. The two thick straps meant to bind the shin were still warm, and she carefully wrapped and secured them. She strapped in her thigh, and performed the task even slower and with greater precision. When it was complete, she just stood there, the one leg propped on the sill. She could only think to pause. It was an exchange, she thought. This was her part in the exchange.

Woken once more by Matt's movement in the other room, Rita dropped her leg from the sill and threw the curtains closed. She clawed at the straps. Having located the ends she pulled them back slowly so that Matt wouldn't hear the Velcro tear. Once she released herself from the second set of straps the brace clattered to the floor. Matt asked if she was all right from the other side of the door.

"I'm fine. Banged my knee on the dresser but I'm fine."

She clambered over the bed with the brace cradled in her arms, and set it down where she had found it as quietly as she could. She stripped down and slipped beneath the sheets before the turn of the knob.

"Water heater's working fine," he said on his way out of the bathroom. "Should be nice and warm for you in the morning."

"I'm glad to hear it. Start the day a bit better."

* * * *

The stranger had not returned for several nights. Rita figured at the very least she had given him what he wanted, but still she regretted his absence. Matt decided to skip the shower that night, and she told him that she had forgotten to place the leftovers back in the refrigerator from that evening.

"Won't take but a minute," she said.

By the time she stepped outside she realized that she had forgotten to put on shoes at the door, but she had already reached the porch. As she stepped out into the grass a bramble snagged the arch of her foot. Biting her lip she tread more carefully. She neared the spot, that vantage between the dogwoods, only to be doused by the floodlight. Squinting her eyes she rose

on the balls of her feet several times, as though to maneuver around the haze, but the harsh glare stained her vision, and not even the windowpane could make it through.

CHAPTER 2

THE WOODSMAN

“It’s in your hands, Emory. Give it to me,” she said, reaching out to her son behind her. The tallow had just begun to boil and she used her other hand to ladle out clumps of gristle that clung to the surface. “The wick, Emory. Hand it to me.” Emory, kneeling at his mother’s footstool, traced the movement of her outstretched fingers; the strand of cotton lay limp across the flat of his palms like a drowned earthworm. “Never mind,” she said, and plucked the cord from his hands. She strung it over a wooden rod propped over the hearth and dipped both ends into the pot. “Just sit at the table.”

Sit down, Emory, he mouthed.

That evening, as his mother set down bowls of cabbage stew on the table, Emory noticed that the seat across from him was vacant. He parted his lips to speak. “I know what you’re going to ask,” his mother interrupted, wiping the back of her hand against her apron. “I’ve said it. Every time you’ve asked I’ve said it. No more. Eat.” Emory reached forward for the bowl with both hands but missed, trapping only his spoon between his fingers. She watched as he gingerly reclaimed the bowl and swallowed his first mouthful.

Emory used to sit in front of his father at dinnertime. Now he faced an empty chair. His head fell to one side like a broken flower, and his left eye would never open. He could see, but little, and at times the room seemed to bend inward and pull toward him. When Emory was a child his mother spooned food into his mouth and mopped up the remnants that missed his lips and trickled down his chin onto his chest. When he struggled to swallow, she propped him up

against the length of her forearm and leaned him back. His father usually finished the meal first, and often wandered out of sight shortly after. His wife suspected that he locked himself away in the shed outside, doing things she never did care to know of. Come midnight, he would crawl into their bed with his shoes on, and by morning retrieve his gun from the foot of the bed, already dressed to leave. Emory, a young man, could eat on his own now.

He remembered waking to an ache nestled deep in the back of his neck. He shifted uncomfortably beneath the blanket, and as it lifted from his skin a rush of heat swept across his face. With a quick jerk of his leg he kicked the blanket from his body and let it drop to the floor, inviting the cool to lift the moisture from his skin. A slight creak drew his attention to the front door where a form stood. Emory lay there on his back, sinking into his bedding, wanting to move but unable to summon the energy to rise. His father dragged his feet across the threshold, and without a word slung two hares onto the table. Emory flinched as their heads cracked hard against the surface. His mother entered the keeping room wearing little more than her bed gown and picked up one of the hares by the ears to examine the gash in its side.

“There’s not time to prepare them,” his mother said, setting the animal down again. “It’s late.” His father placed his heavy hands over her shoulders. “It’s late,” she repeated.

Lifting the hares from the table by the cord binding their feet she offered to take them to the larder, yet something in the room seemed to distract her husband.

Emory craned his neck to see from bed but it hurt. His father sniffed at the air for a trace of some aroma that Emory could not detect and pushed his mother out of the way. He tore off the lid of the gallipot on the hearthstone and ripped out a handful of broken stems in a clenched fist. She asked that the boy be taken outside. It was cold and dark and Emory didn’t want to go out again.

His father lurched in Emory's direction and launched the yellow-budded stems at his face. Tea splattered his eyes. His father's lips were careless, and as he spoke a sweet-smelling mist fell over the bed.

Emory heard his name from time to time, and his mother spoke of sending him outside again. Propped on his elbow he watched them lock arms and tread about the room in a kind of reckless gambol that upset several earthenwares, until the two disappeared into their room, from whence loud, feral groans filtered from the crack beneath the closed door. Emory cleared the stems from his chest. He gripped the hem of his shirt. He was angry. He was always outside.

* * * *

It was afternoon. After hanging a row of candles to dry, Emory's mother prepared a basket on the table. She carefully lined the bottom with hemp cloth, on top of which she laid four bayberry candles and a small chunk of seedcake. He was to deliver the basket to Ellen Wilkins, a sickly old woman who depended on the charity of neighbors. Following the death of her husband four winters ago, visitors traveled many miles on foot to bring firewood, meat puddings and sweet corn to an old friend. *Curiosity brought them*, his mother said.

At first she was hesitant to send him off in this way, fearing he might get lost or that some vagrant might take advantage, but her son had a good memory, and the footpaths were secluded. His mother looped his arm around the bridge of the basket and hung a wool scarf over the back of his neck. "What do you do when you see Ellen?" He crumpled the end of his scarf and pressed it firmly against his left cheek. His mother placed a hand on his shoulder and told him to wait. She retrieved a knife from the hearth. "Slip it through your belt." From her apron pocket she drew an arms-length of hemp line and fastened it to his belt alongside the knife.

"I want you to collect any bayberry that you see. Do you remember it?"

Emory nodded.

She reminded him to take only what lined the path. The door opened, and he set out.

Bayberry. Around Christmas. Tallow burned old and stung his lungs, but bayberry was sweet and boiled an olive green. When it got cold he often found his mother crouched in the middle of the keeping room by heaps of bayberry that he had brought home, plucking the grey berries from the branches with her fingers. *This isn't enough, Emory.* Back when she sent him out alone with only a sack to pick the berries, the wind chilled his hands through the fabric of his gloves. He could not pinch the tiny fruit between his swollen fingers, and he would return home within the hour, having collected little more than a handful. *Cut them. Just take it all.*

One night while his mother picked at the stems Emory glanced between the flush of her cheeks and the dirt beneath his fingernails, and every time he looked up, the lines in her face seemed to deepen. It unsettled him. She noticed him smiling and told him to go outside where it was cold. He would sit by the door on the porch until she let him in again. At times she took too long.

* * * *

The clouds had darkened, and a gentle shower tapped the fallen leaves. Emory held the end of his scarf to his face and presented the basket to the old woman. “Your mother is so good to me,” Ellen rasped, taking the basket. “My woodsman is so good to me.” A gentle rattle caught his attention. Her fingers groped inside her apron pocket, and he watched disappointedly as she slipped several coins into his open hand, remembering the molasses ginger snap he had earned from his last visit. Before she sent him off a faint crackle of lighting broke in the distance.

“I don't like the look of that,” she said, and motioned him inside.

Guiding him by the wrist Ellen drew him into the keeping room. She had a slight hobble and her ankles swelled over the rims of her shoes; heavy footfalls halted their progress. Her upper back arched forward gently, and she clenched her handkerchief as one would a rosary.

The interior was small and warm, and dried tobacco sheafs hung by the windows. Several small plates lined the walls, and an earthenware pitcher rested on a shelf overhead a weathered cupboard. Several bayberry candles burnt down to stumps spotted the nightstand by the bed. Ellen led him into the adjoining room in the back and asked that he take the chair by the fire. With tremorous hands she lugged a rocking chair from the corner of the room nearest the candles and sat beside him. “You don’t think she would mind, do you?”

Emory shook his head.

“Good.” With the balls of her feet she pressed into the hoop-shaped back of her chair and gently rocked herself. The uneven floorboards creaked beneath her weight and jolted the swing of the chair. Aggravated by the irregular rhythm Emory dug his fingers into the lines of his palms. Above the hearth hung a decorative cloth, a floral intricacy upon which leaf, stem and vine entwined in near-perfect symmetry. There were but few buds Emory could make out distinctly, the color of the threads had faded, but the cloth piqued his curiosity, and he wanted to bring it close.

“I see you eyeing my work.” To his relief the rocking paused. “Mamma taught me, you know. To sew. I once cut up my only dress to make a pillow. She was so cross with me,” she chuckled. She briefly drew her handkerchief to her lips but set it down again. “Lost most of my sight just a couple years before John passed. Can’t do much of anything,” she said. As gently as one would smooth a furl in silk, Ellen tenderly pulled down the thin skin of her eyelid so that he might see the blue film.

After a couple of blinks she pointed towards a small heap of cloth on a shelf at their right. “I never finished that one. A wedding sheet for a young couple—I can’t remember where they went off to. John would help me sometimes, but he could never do it for long.” She leaned back into her chair. “What does your mother have you do, Emory? Do you make the candles?”

Emory nodded.

“Do you enjoy it?” He pursed his lips. “You don’t have to like it. We all just do what we have to.”

She clamped her fingers around the handkerchief in her lap.

“I know why you do that, Emory,” she said, her eyes set on the fire. “That scarf. You have yet to put it down.” Emory stiffened in his chair and gripped the insides of his shoes with his toes. “Don’t worry. I know why. I won’t let it bother me.” Upon noticing Emory’s unease she flashed a smile, one that timed so perfectly with her rocking that it, for a moment, seemed to creak. Emory strained to focus his gaze on Ellen, twisting his body in the chair to place his eyes, and his neck began to hurt.

“Have you ever held a needle?”

Emory shook his head.

“Would you like to give it a try?”

She eased out of her rocking chair, lifted the white cloth from the shelf and placed it on his lap. He peered at the blanket, tracing the vines lining the hem with his fingernails, pressing his palms over the patches of bead-berries tailored into the fabric here and there. Next she pulled out a box from beneath the bed and removed a needle and white thread, both of which she gave Emory. Had he not pressed the fine needle between the pads of his thumb and forefinger he could have forgotten that it was there in his hand. When he raised it to his face he could not

make out the form unless it caught the glimmer of firelight, and in the moments it suddenly appeared between his fingers, it seemed to bow away from him.

“Pull it up to you,” Ellen instructed. As he drew the needle upwards, several inches away from his eyes, the instrument seemed to straighten out, and for a moment he caught sight of the hole at the tip. With the frayed end of the thread pinched between his other two fingers he gently kneaded the strand between the cushion of his wetted lips, and with Ellen’s encouragement guided the thread into the mouth of the needle.

“We are finishing the hem. We’ll start with this corner.” It was haphazard at first—he often dropped the needle into his lap and stabbed his fingers, but Ellen helped him readjust the fabric and paced him, and within time, he managed to complete a small portion of the seam.

As he preoccupied himself with the next few stitches, Ellen ambled to the hearth and retrieved a mahogany box from the mantle, from which she withdrew a stave pipe and a thin leather pouch. Emory paused to watch her remove a pinch of tobacco from the small bag and tamp it into the tapered bowl with a pipe-nail. She repeated this three times. After lighting the tip of a pine twig on the fire, she ceremoniously circled the little flame over the bowl of the pipe until it began to smoke, toking gently on the mouthpiece. With a final tamp with the butt of the twig she buried the branch in an ash pale, twisting it until it extinguished, and set it back onto the mantle.

“I never understood why John was so partial to the pipe,” she said, returning to her chair. “I see now.”

A gentle curl of smoke wafted in Emory’s direction, which smelled like tallow only sweeter, and he delayed his hands to watch her draw another. The rain pounded against the roof.

A shallow puddle of water welled beneath the crack of the window, and pooled over the pane to the floor.

“When he died, Sarah Billings came by with a box of buttered rum tobacco from Virginia. Thought I smoked,” she laughed. “You remember her?”

Emory shook his head.

“Somehow I’ve made it last this long, but I’m down to my last pouch.”

By the time the storm ended, Emory managed to finish the last bit of the seam, and it was only when he laid his work on his lap that he realized he was tired. He paused to rub the sleep from his eyes, then stared down at his achievement and smiled. He took the cloth up again, but Ellen removed it from his hands.

“The thread just needs to be tied. You’ve done enough,” she said, holding the sheet out in front of her.

A numbness that had settled in his hip from sitting rendered his left leg useless, and he propped himself up against the wall to relieve the pressure.

“You’ll come back, won’t you?” she asked, rubbing her thumb against the dark mark on his cheek. Emory raised his scarf and nodded. Having once regained feeling in his leg, Ellen handed him a sack that had been sitting by the front door; a few yellow-budded stems peeked from the mouth.

Ellen parted her lips to speak but quickly turned away. Hunching over her handkerchief she coughed from some deep recess. Emory could hear some horrible thing rattle wildly within her chest, the sound followed by a thick, sour vapor. Ellen caught Emory’s eyes on her lips, and with the wadded handkerchief wiped away the thin brown ribbon trailing down the crease in her chin. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

* * * *

After two miles Emory came to the fork and took the left-hand path. On his way to Ellen he kept his eyes on the ground, watching water stream around the contours of his feet as he marched. The trees, many coated with moss, gathered thickly there, and they let fall their brittle favors into the breeze. One tree in the distance had only recently uprooted, and he remembered the last storm.

He walked in on his mother violently scrubbing at a dark patch on the floorboards with a hard-bristled brush. Upon seeing her son enter, she stood up with one arm locked firmly over her stomach and stumbled over the empty gallipot. She yanked the sack from his hands, and as she turned to place it by the hearth, Emory noticed a smudge the color of redcurrant jam down the back of her gown. He laughed but did not mean to, and she gripped him by the shoulders and shook him. Sharp shocks wrenched the back of his neck and he pushed her away. She told him to retrieve something from the shed, but Emory could barely hear her. He held the back of his neck with his warm palms and would not let her come anywhere near.

The pastel berries pocked the herb's branches. Bayberry, he thought. Unlike mugwort, which came to a gentle budding taper, bayberry didn't have flowers. The branches were too firm to snap away with bare hands. Emory knelt down beside the plant like his mother had directed him, and rubbed a leaf between the tips of his fingers. The sleek surface was pleasing to the touch, and he drew out his knife. *Do you want to keep your fingers?* he mouthed. *Cut away from you.* After sawing at the base of the branches he severed a piece of hemp line and tied them together. The bundle was small so he fastened it to his belt, allowing it to dangle loosely at his hip.

* * * *

Ellen's home finally came into view. He smiled slightly, remembering fondly his own home and how much larger it was. A crumbling chimney poked behind the high-sloping thatch roof and appeared as though it would soon topple, but there it stood, having endured the last storm, letting out a steady stream of smoke. A small crooked fence bordered the home, and as he approached the gate he noticed for the first time sprouts of mugwort scattered about the property.

The outdoor shutters on the windows were closed, yet the front door was left slightly ajar. *Hold up your scarf. Like this.* He remembered his mother ball up and press the end of his scarf firmly against his cheek. Emory jerked his head away. *Emory. You must hold it up. What do you do when you see Ellen?* Hold it up, Emory mouthed. *Hold what up? My scarf.*

Emory rapped against the door four times, each knock evenly spaced from the last, and watched his knuckles blush. Removing the scarf from his face he stood just close enough to the doorway to catch the faint scent of something sweet filtering through the crack. Emory gripped the doorknob and wedged his nose within the gap to take in the scent. His mouth moistened, and he recalled the many times during delivery he was given blocks of cheese or seedcake for his service. He furled his eyebrows. With his free hand he knocked again, knowing it would go unanswered, and drew the scarf to his face. This was not his home—that much he understood—but an open door was an invitation, and he wanted in.

When he stepped inside, the sweetness became a dense sour, a vinegar that clenched his jaw and roiled his stomach. He dropped the basket. The contents emptied onto the floor, and he stumbled into a wooden chair and vomited. Trembling he cleared the rest off his chin with the back of his hand and looked about the room with watery eyes. Despite the fire burning in the other room it was dim, and pieces of broken pottery crackled beneath his feet as he shuffled

forward. Taking short breaths he headed for the faint glow from the hearth in the adjoining bedroom. As he stepped forward his foot hooked the leg of an upturned table, but his reflexes were keen, and he caught hold of the wall before his knees crumpled beneath him. Dark stains spotted his sleeve.

There was movement. Emory scrambled for the fallen items scattered across the floor and tossed them into the basket. One of the candles that had fallen he left halved on the floor. As he crossed the room he caught sight of some great thing crouching over a lump in the bed. It was covered in a tangled thick of fur, and kept its back to the fire. The thing stiffened as Emory entered its space, and cumbersomely crept out of the bed. Its head initiated the movement and its body staggered after it as though reluctant to follow. Emory quickly stepped back but kept within the doorway, his eyes fixed on the creature as it stood there on hind legs, its skin seeming to drape from its body like a shroud. A series of low growls escaped it, and a slight smile formed on Emory's lips. Remembering himself he frowned. It took a heavy step forward.

Don't, Emory mouthed, dropping the basket. He eased his hand over the knife in his belt. Upon noticing the gesture the creature advanced.

Emory's hand became very warm. Its upper body hung over the crown of his head like a bowed tree, his face buried deep into its chest, until finally it crumpled to the ground, taking the knife with it. It writhed on the floor as Emory watched, and after a long, drawn out whine, turned slowly onto its stomach.

A couple red embers was all that remained of the fire. Having not yet adjusted to the dark, Emory eased himself to the floor with the help of his outstretched hands. On his knees he hovered over the shadowy form, on which fur, cloth and flesh lay indistinct. The sour returned, flooding his nostrils, and he scrambled for the ends of his scarf. But the garment had fallen.

Sweeping his palms across the floor he found it heaped beside the thing. Damp, but warm. He squinted his eyes. After wiping his hands on his scarf, he pressed the fabric to his nose. A slight breeze crept into the room through the open door and chilled his arms. Bayberry. He remembered bayberry.

CHAPTER 3

THE GRENADA GRANDE DAME

“Oh look. It’s like a little resort here.” Paul shifted uncomfortably in his seat as they neared the property, wishing that his wife would quit comparing his father’s stay at the Rauschenbach Hospital to a getaway because she was fooling no one.

As they pulled up towards the iron gate, Paul noticed that the building wasn’t nearly as large as it appeared advertised in *Open Mind* magazine. A large oak towered over the lawn, he remembered that, and several manicured shrubs dotted the walkway but that was about it. He rolled down the window and Sharon pulled out the slip of paper with the code from her purse for him to see. He punched in the numbers, waited for the gate to draw open, and they crawled into the courtyard.

“What do you think, Ray? Isn’t it gorgeous here?” Sharon called back.

“What?”

“Come on, Dad. Put your hearing aid back in,” Paul said.

“I’ll put it in when there’s something worth listening to.”

Paul patted his wife’s knee as he parked the car at the front of the building.

He rushed ahead to open the front door as Sharon inelegantly guided Raymond up the marble stair by the elbow in an unforgiving pair of heels.

There was little to distinguish the lobby from any other they had the pleasure to molder in, bar a few wall hangings the institution probably bought from some thrift store with the remaining few dollars of their slush fund.

Paul checked in at the front desk for their one-o'clock tour while Sharon and Raymond seated themselves by the magazine rack. He felt somewhat unsettled that they had even bothered to tour the facility provided they had already signed the paperwork to commit his father, but it was recommended, and Sharon thought that a little look-see might calm his nerves.

Paul took the seat beside his father with a clipboard, to which was attached a pen that dangled from a flimsy ball chain and a shallow stack of forms. The thinly-padded chair offered little lumbar support, and he soon regretted having taken advice to arrive the hour early. Despite Sharon's urgings he refused to visit a chiropractor. He determined that his vertebrae were about as stably stacked as a beached whelk case, and that little could be done about it—he just hoped that the forms would distract him from the subtle pinch that had already begun to creep up his corroded spine. He didn't get far.

"Now what do you think that is?" Sharon asked, pointing at one of the paintings on the wall.

"I don't know," Paul replied, looking away from the clipboard. "What do you think, Dad?"

"Go lick a tire."

A black blob hovered near the center of the piece, a series of small white lines marked the rim like haphazard graduations on a charcoal clock, and at the bottom left-hand corner, a poorly-drawn triangle. Ochre, green and brick red smattered the canvas, with few discernable shapes and a lazy squiggle.

“And they paid for that,” Paul said.

A man and woman entered and seated themselves at the opposite end of the lobby. The husband, wearing what looked like a maroon Christmas sweater, calmly flipped through the pages of a gardening magazine while his wife picked at the stuff beneath her nails. Raymond snacked on a bag of oyster crackers Sharon pulled from her purse, nibbling gingerly as though it were his last meal.

As Paul continued to fill out forms he remembered when he first spoke to the Director of Rauschenbach. She introduced herself as Dr. Hammonds over the phone—time wouldn’t allow an interview in person—and verified Raymond’s medical information that was submitted to the ward shortly after the hearing.

“So Raymond Cochran, your father, will be staying with us,” she said.

“That’s correct.”

“Seventy-six and history of diabetes.”

“Correct.”

“Also arthritis in his left knee but allergic to codeine. This correct?”

“Yes.”

“What does he take for that?”

“My wife has it written down somewhere.”

“And he does that thing.”

“That thing?”

“Yes.”

That thing. The only name they had for that thing he did. That thing. It was always at dinnertime, often while they waited for the meal to cool—if there was ever lag in conversation

he would open up with that time his calico was in heat. “You should have seen her,” he would say. “Absolutely pitiful. Whine all hours of the night by the door and keep me up, but there was this thing you could do with your shoe—” “Dad. She got fixed eight years ago.” “I know Paulie but wasn’t that a time?” There was a pause, and their mutual understanding was marked by the audible sound of fingers hammering into a keyboard on the other end of the line.

It was five past one by the time the group was assembled for the tour and the lady at the front desk led them to several rows of lockers to deposit their personal items. Once everyone surrendered their purses, cell phones and car keys, she flashed a barcoded laminate across a scanner on the ward door entry and punched in a numerical code on the keypad. “The Director will be right with you,” she said. With a subtle “click” the door unlocked and they entered.

Inside, they were not confronted with wandering scrubs as Paul had expected, but then he had never seen a psychiatric ward save the glimpses he caught on television. Instead, the residents that sat around the sunlit room were in sweatpants and sweaters, T-shirts and tennis shoes, and Paul determined that at first glance the only elements that distinguished the tour group from them was the way they flocked together and the sticker name tags they were to wear at all times.

Circular tables lined the room, each surrounded by three or four plush chairs, and several landscape paintings dotted the walls and square columns. Paul leaned into the canvas nearest him, a countryside in France, and noticed that it was caulked to the wall.

“There you are,” a voice called. A woman wearing a pine green cardigan appeared from the center of the room and walked in their direction. “Dr. Hammonds,” she said as she approached, and shook hands with each tour member. “We’re starting a little late it seems,” she

said, glancing at a wall-clock, "but just by a couple minutes. We should still be able to wrap things up within the next hour or so." With a fluid wave of the arm she motioned them to follow.

"The day area is where we hold our family visits. Daily visiting hours are held between six and eight in the evening."

"I really like the pictures," Sharon commented.

"Good eye," Dr. Hammonds replied. "All the pastoral scenes were hand-selected by Rauschenbach himself. We also have a few Kandinsky prints, but those are out in the lobby. You can catch them on your way out if you missed them."

Kandinsky. The name was familiar, Paul thought. The man must be pretty famous to land a Bed Bath and Beyond-quality duplicate in a mental hospital.

"What you'll notice is that all of the tables are bolted down. Chairs aren't, however they are filled with forty-pound sandbags so that they can't be lifted easily." To demonstrate, she gripped the arms of the one of the foam chairs and the tour group watched as she strained to lift it an inch from the tile. "Safety first," she groaned, and dropped the chair heavily back onto the floor.

"Residents have three group sessions per day in the day room, two of which are optional, and individual sessions take place every other day. There's also one hour for supervised recreation. They can either make use of the machines in the exercise room or the arts and crafts station at the back."

With a sweep of her arm she directed her crew to the other end of the room where a man and woman sat at what looked like a little workstation.

"They're gluing shells to a piece of wood," Raymond mumbled.

“They’re doing a great job,” their guide said, patting the man on the back. Sharon nodded and smiled as deliberately as one holding pins between her teeth. Paul looked down at the man who was, for the most part, avoidant of the crowd. With thumbnail and forefinger the man attempted to pick dried adhesive from the orange nipple of an Elmer’s glue bottle he had wedged in his fist. “My God the man’s colossal,” Paul thought. He watched as the brawn of his arms tensed and quivered as he completed the delicate chore, and how his broad, muscular shoulders seemed to avalanche forward as he leaned in to keep a closer eye on his efforts.

“This one here we call *Jack Dempsey, a Memorial*.”

They went still like a throng of does, their eyes darting between them, and it seemed that the longer they stood there, the more confident they became in their suspicions that they had, in fact, heard correctly.

“He has a title,” the older woman in the crowd whispered, breaking the silence.

“After the boxer,” Paul said.

“After the fish,” Dr. Hammonds corrected. “A very aggressive cichlid.”

The crowd squinted their eyes.

“I don’t see it,” Sharon said.

“Here.” Paul directed his wife by the shoulders to swap places with him.

She leaned in for a better look.

“Well I’ll be. There it is.”

As the group moved forward Sharon noticed two lingered behind. The man wearing a maroon pullover shifted uncomfortably from side to side as a shorter woman, she assumed his wife, whispered into his ear. Dr. Hammonds called after them to stay with the rest of the group.

It was lunchtime, she said, and they would get to visit the eating room.

“Breakfast, lunch and dinner are carted from the main cafeteria to the ward’s eating room.” Someone in the crowd asked about residents with allergies. “Good question. Those with food allergies have their meals brought directly to them.”

Paul looked down at the table closest to them. Two women sat with identical trays: an open-faced chicken sandwich with a side of rice and a cup of fruit soaked in a viscous sugar broth.

The night he broke news to his father was at dinner. Macaroni and cheese from the box because they were out of microwavable beef pot roast, Raymond’s first favorite. Sharon took her meal to the bedroom to give them some privacy. Paul remembered looking up at the overhead light fixture while his father sprinkled brown sugar over his bowl, and noticed a moth baking beneath the bulb.

The initial plan was to ease into it but he never was much of a smooth talker, and as his father tremored the first spoonful of mac into his mouth Paul could no longer hold back. He laid out everything—how they no longer felt they could offer the care he needed, how his cat Chloe refused to subsist off hard food, and how they couldn’t afford that four-star nursing home in Fairfield. Raymond paused with the wad of mac still clumped in his mouth, and gaped at Paul’s lips as though to prove to himself that what he heard was real. With his list of grievances finally out of the way, Paul asked his father what he thought. Raymond swallowed the remains of his mouthful and gently dabbed the corner of his lips with his napkin.

“I’m going to need you to say that one more time,” Raymond said, his right hand fumbling in his pants pocket. “I haven’t got my aid in.”

The sound of a fist slamming down broke his train of thought, and he watched with the rest of the group as two neighboring residents rushed in to calm a verbal dispute that erupted between three men at one of the tables.

“You’ll be surprised to know that we have three gods on this floor,” Dr. Hammonds said, “but alas, there can only be one.” She carefully directed them to the spot where the three simmered.

They raised their heads simultaneously and eyed their company as they approached. Dr. Hammonds motioned for them to speak.

“We are the *Tripartite Tiff*,” they said in unison.

“Simply divine,” Dr. Hammonds said, clapping her hands excitedly.

“There it is again,” Sharon whispered to Paul. “Is there a reason for this?”

Paul assured her that there had to be. They were probably trying to keep the residents anonymous or something, he told her, and mused over what they would come up with for Raymond. *A Man and His Cat*. He dug his nails into his palm to keep composure. But still he mulled over the irony and realized that it wasn’t all funny—the title would still give his father an air of mystery, he thought, for how could cat-man be if not for the object by which he is defined? Paul asked himself. It had to be Nietzsche, Descartes or something.

As Dr. Hammonds led the crowd down the hall to the residents’ rooms, Raymond staggered behind. “Come on, Dad,” Paul said, and with one arm wrapped around Raymond’s shoulders, he pushed the old man along.

“All doors are double-swing doors and open either direction,” Dr. Hammonds said. She demonstrated by opening and closing the door to an empty double-bed room several times.

“Residents can lock their rooms, but staff still has emergency access.”

Inside there was a thin-mattress bed, on top of which rested a flimsy teal blanket and flat pillow. The light fixtures were imbedded in the walls and the grated window opened up to the parking lot outside. A single oak desk sat up against the back wall. A place to glue shit in private, Paul thought.

Then the showers. “Shower sign-up can be found in front of the nurse’s station, guaranteeing residents access at least once every two days.” Just about half the group could fit inside the tile bathroom, and several of the stragglers poked their heads through the doorframe to catch a view of Dr. Hammond’s run through, balancing awkwardly on the balls of their feet.

“All glass windows were shatterproof tempered, and you’ll notice that there are no exposed pipes beneath the sinks. The showers are designed so that nothing can be hung off them. As you’ll see, they are equipped with easy-release shower drapes,” she said. She tugged on one edge of the beige curtain and with a loud snap the fabric dropped away along with the shower bar. “Thorough,” Paul thought. She put everything back in its place, and pushed her way back out into the hallway.

They made their way past the empty nurse’s station that overlooked the day room. The two artists were seated in the back just as before.

“In the rare case a resident disrupts the peace, we do have an isolation room, but it is not in view of residents. It can only be accessed through the nurse’s station. Residents are released once the offending behavior subsides.”

A faintly perceptible murmuring could be heard through the glass, nearly rhythmic—the sound seeming to repeat itself every couple of seconds.

“It sounds like you have someone in there,” Raymond muttered.

“Yes. *The Persistence of Emory.*”

“That’s a good one,” a gentleman said.

“Sounds like a real piece of work,” said another.

“Well it is his third curing,” the Director remarked. “And who do we have here?”

An old woman wearing a long strip of paper towels over her shoulders had just appeared around the corner and leaned against the wall.

“*The Grenada Grande Dame*,” the man in the maroon sweater gasped.

“Good eye,” Dr. Hammonds said.

“The one and only,” said the Dame, fluffing the paper towels.

“We do have reason to believe she is original.”

Maroon sweater reached out to touch a tail end of her disposable shawl.

“We ask that you don’t touch,” the Director scolded, stepping forward.

“Oh please I’m practically asking for it. How are you gentlemen?”

“Her benefactors speculate that she had never stepped foot outside Jersey, little less on the shores of the Caribbean,” said Dr. Hammonds.

“You don’t need a map to know where you are, am I right boys?”

“As I said we have yet to determine whether she is authentic, but she will be under examination come this June. Isn’t she just something?”

“A charmer,” someone said.

Unbeknownst to Paul or their docent, Raymond had drifted away from the rest of the crowd and stood near a door they had not yet entered.

“What is this room?” he asked. “It doesn’t look like any of those we’ve seen.”

“Ray,” Sharon called. “What are you doing there?”

“I’m afraid we won’t be going in there,” the Director replied.

“What is it for?” the older woman asked. “There isn’t so much as a peephole in this door.”

“Renovations,” said Dr. Hammonds.

“Excuse me?”

They heard a muffled moan escaped from inside, followed by murmurings. The tour group asked what was taking place behind that door.

“Renovations,” she said. “What you’re hearing are renovations.”

“What’s that mean?” Paul asked.

“Come here.” Dr. Hammonds froze. “You know I see you.”

A woman at the other end of the hall bordered by two orderlies called down to them. Glances popcorned between members of the group.

“I don’t have to,” their guide whined, slinking into the crowd.

“Come here,” the woman repeated, but Hammonds would not budge.

The woman walked importantly in their direction, her tennis shoes slapping the tile, her hands thrust into the depths of her beige pants pockets. Paul and Susan were the first to make way as she neared, and the others followed suit.

The two men in nurse uniform gripped either arm and escorted Hammonds to the nurse’s station.

“I apologize for any inconvenience this might have caused,” the woman said. “We came as quickly as possible.”

“Who are you?” the maroon shirt asked.

“I’m Dr. Hammonds,” she said, pointing at her nametag. “I was running a little late and it appears Faith jumped at the first opportunity. Please understand that this isn’t at all indicative of our practices here. This was—unfortunate.”

“What do we do now?” Raymond grumbled.

“If you have the time, I’d be more than happy to re-conduct the tour,” she said. Still somewhat shaken, the crowd exchanged glances and nodded collectively. “We could meet our friends at the art table over there,” she said, directing them to the workstation.

“We already met *Dempsey*,” Paul said.

Dr. Hammonds leaned in.

“Do you really believe we do that here?”

CHAPTER 4

AMBIENCE

It wouldn't be long. Just the four-way stop at the rail line overhead, a left turn five lights down and they would be home. Cars shuddered in their lines, waiting for a shuttle bus to make a turn too wide for city lanes. While the traffic ahead struggled to make room for the looming mass, James glanced at Helen sitting next to him, bundled up in the afghan from their living room couch, looking older. Thin hair sprouted above her brow like wire. Traffic inched forward as the bus' wheels crept up the curb, its front barely clearing the front bumper of the vehicle at its left.

“You still have a headache?” James asked, his eyes fixed on the taillights of the car in front of him. He caught a nod from the corner of his eye. “They told me not to give you anything but maybe we can put something on it.”

The steering wheel was still cold. James fiddled with the temperature dial with swollen fingers, forgetting that it was broken, his movements made all the more awkward by gloves that did fuck all. “You always said I should fix this thing. Never got around to it.” He had bought the replacement compressor belt several months ago and stowed it away in some crate in the garage that he couldn't find. He glanced over to find her staring at her own footprints on the underside of the windshield above the glove compartment. I should clean that too, he thought. The rest of the drive home was quiet, and he preferred it that way.

Helen removed her coat as James shut the door. He put their things in the closet and made his way to the kitchen to prepare some tea. There was about an inch of old water left in the kettle, but he figured it was good all the same and lit the burner. He rummaged through the rows of tin tea canisters in the overhead cupboard for her blend, ginger and orange blossom. He retrieved the tea ball from the drawer by the sink, groped at the tiny metal clasp with fingers too thick for minutiae, and suddenly realized that he was alone. She was standing on the shoe rug eyeing some thing in the living room; the beige floor lamp by the couch had caught her attention. “You picked that out,” he said, and she nodded calmly as though she had not really heard him. James motioned her to join him in the kitchen. With one hand pressed firmly against her forehead she eased herself into a seat at the table while he inspected a mug he pulled from the dishwasher.

“Are you going to have any?” she asked.

“I never really cared for it.” A puff of steam choked from the mouth of the kettle, the cloud followed by a steady hiss. He gently set the mug on the countertop as the water boiled. “I might make coffee or something.” He couldn’t think of what more to say. With his arms folded loosely across his chest he kept his back against the countertop.

The kettle cried for attention. James removed it from the orange coil and poured it over the tea ball.

“Thank you,” Helen said as he handed her the drink. She clasped it between her hands. “Weren’t you going to fix coffee?”

James glanced over at the coffeemaker on the countertop and shrugged.

“Not feeling like it anymore.”

Helen looked like she might speak, but instead drew the mug to her chin to let the steam warm her cheeks.

James gave her a tour of the downstairs first because it would be quick. In the kitchen, she was free to take what she wanted because it was also hers, the washroom to do her linens, and the living room. He led the way upstairs, making sure to take it slow, and showed her their bedroom. He had spent several hours cleaning up the room prior to her arrival: Windex the mirrors and windows, washed the sheets, made the bed. He opened the mirrored closet.

“You keep your clothes on the left, mine on the right, and there are a few more of your things in the chest of drawers over there,” he said, pointing to the largest piece of furniture in the room. “You can look through it if you want.” She nodded but didn’t move forward.

Their bathroom was in the hallway. He opened the cabinet beneath the sink to show her where the extra bottles of shampoo and rolls of toilet paper were kept, but she probably could have figured it out for herself, he thought.

After the tour was over he asked what she would like to do.

“I think I need to lie down,” she answered.

“I’ll take the couch tonight.”

* * * *

“I don’t feel like going tonight,” she said.

“Hon we bought tickets. You wanted to go to this thing.”

“I can’t.”

Standing by the window she pulled off her sweater. “You can still go. I don’t need to be there,” she said, and tossed it at a corner in the dark. With her back to him she unfastened her

jeans and bra and removed them also. Light fell in through the blinds from the street lamps outside. The strips stretched across her back like a barcode.

“You’re going to bed?”

“Yes. I’m going to bed.” She reached down for the nightgown wadded by her bedside and slipped it on. “I just said you can go if you want.” Even through the white fabric of her gown James could make out the deep lines where the straps of her bra had dug into her skin. Without turning to face him she climbed into bed with the deliberate crawl of an old woman, and pulled the comforter up to her neck.

He watched it alone at that small community theater downtown. They had looked through a few reviews the other night, most of which read that they shouldn’t be fooled by the building’s exterior, that the inside with the lit walkways, iron chandeliers, velvet seats and taped off orchestra pit gave the theater *ambiance*. They love that word, he thought. The French way. *Ambience*. To James the joint seemed like a half-assed attempt at an opera house, and when he arrived, it bore all the smells and trappings of an antique bar room. And just as small. He couldn’t remember what it was they were watching. He neglected the bulletins outside at will-call and had already dropped his program between the seats.

They recycled through the same four actors the entire duration of the performance, and went as far as to substitute a recorded voiceover for a fifth character who never once entered the stage, a low-budget ploy they called “experimental theater.” The lead, or “Charlie”, was played by the performer he saw wearing a black V-neck in the actor’s profiles. The little Shakespeare must be a pain in the ass backstage, James thought.

Playgoers trickled from the theater into the dark lot. Heaps of wet snow pressed against the curb and blocked the runoff from the gutters. Rivulets streamed into the divots in the street, making their trek slow and lumbering. With his back pressed against the playhouse brick he stood beneath a caged bulb that lit the entrance, and while the cold seeped through the thin layer of his jacket, he thought of things he knew he would soon forget. They moved further away from him, their steps made heavy and deliberate by the thick tread of boots, and they disappeared quietly into their cars. The bulb flickered out with the strain and prompted him to move. James stepped off the curb as the first couple vehicles cleared the lot. He didn't have boots. Slush gathered along the rims of his leather shoes and he shuffled his feet to keep grip on the road. His car was only a few rows ahead but he paused while others carefully maneuvered around him.

He banged his feet against the front tire before seating himself, and after turning on the ignition he absently yanked off the temperature knob. The plastic dial popped from between his fingers and fell behind the gas pedal. "Christ," he muttered, leaning forward, his coat bundling uncomfortably beneath his chin. With his face pressed against the wheel he groped with his right hand, biting his bottom lip hard as grit collected beneath his fingernails. He found it, and pushed it angrily back into place.

He leaned back into his seat waiting for the engine to warm, looked out at the building, and remembered that he'd seen a play. That God-awful play. The older actors over-acted and the music moved from major to minor too quickly. Terrible.

It took twice as long to return home as it normally did, the salt and sand trucks having done little to improve the traction on the roads, but he made it. He wiped his feet vigorously on the doormat on the porch and stepped inside.

The bedroom light was still off, and when he entered the room he found Helen still curled beneath the covers like a child. He should have taken his shoes off at the door because he'd probably find his tracks all over the carpet in the morning; not tracking it around the bed would have to be triumph enough. He laid them by the dresser, removed his socks, and quietly tiptoed to the empty side of the bed. He thought he was quiet.

"That you, hon?" Helen whispered.

"You're still awake."

"I couldn't sleep," she said, rolling slowly onto her back, "but I feel much better now."

Something in him dropped. She asked him whether he would be up for taking a walk with her around the neighborhood. They could just pull coats over their nightclothes, she said, but he had already been out.

* * * *

He asked if she remembered anything.

"I love you, too," she said. He didn't bother to correct her. She slept in their bed alone last night, still uncomfortable with the idea of sharing it, and said it because she felt she had to.

It was at this little tea bazaar downtown where she first learned to enjoy ginger and orange blossom tea, or "Orange Opanayiko." James never could pronounce it. "They always make it so well," Helen used to say, even though the teabag string dangled from the top of the teapot.

The little new age teahouse had its charm, but it wasn't a place James particularly enjoyed visiting. A collection of singing bowls for sale sat near the entrance, along with a few cast iron teapots ornamented with bamboo etchings, koi and the like. Helen had bought one once, to mark the day they first visited the bazaar together, a pretty olive green one with

dragonflies, and she kept it stowed away in their china cabinet for special occasions. It wasn't even that expensive, James thought, and they had yet to make use of it. It was that afternoon they first talked about marriage and how they didn't want children because it was time to give each other the lives they never had. He liked the idea. He fell in love with it.

"Anything at all?" James repeated.

"Not yet," she replied. Her candor surprised him.

One of the servers came by and placed a heavy tray on their table and James had Helen pour first. He watched her eyes fall on various decorations of the room as she took a sip. The blinking Christmas lights strung over the cashier's table, the paisley curtain that sheltered the hookah lounge in the back, the mismatched cushions on the floor that staff tripped over, and for the first time since she was discharged, he caught a flicker of a smile.

As he poured a cup for himself he noticed her glance at his left hand and sneak looks at her own. For the rings, he assumed. He looked at her hand for the impression of the band, and to his surprise, found none. After four years of ring-wearing, it took only hours for all traces of their matrimony to disappear from her skin. It struck him that her ring was still in his pants pocket, and he placed his hand over it to make sure. He had found it on the ledge of the sink the night of the accident, but he would hand it to her when she was ready. Keep it gradual, the doctor told him. He could do that.

"I guess the one good thing out of all this," he said, "is that I won't have to go back to work anytime soon."

"How long?"

"They gave me the next couple months to look after you."

She asked what she had to go back to.

He told her she was still looking around. The lie rolled off his tongue but the realization of it after the fact left an aftertaste. “You were checking out at a bunch of retail and hadn’t heard back yet so you have nothing worry about.”

He was quick, he thought. Shortly before the accident she had quit her last job as copy editor at a local publishing house. Not because she didn’t like it. It paid. It was the hour-long train commute that did her in, or at least that’s what she told him. As she was in the process of leaving several colleagues—not yet friends, she called them—told her it would be a mistake and tried to change her mind. A couple even made phone calls to the house, which perturbed James a great deal, but she was determined to end it.

“It makes it worse,” he remembered her say. “I tried, but it’s getting worse and it makes it worse.”

“How is your tea?”

* * * *

Some mornings James would find her sitting at the kitchen table, hovering over the morning paper, and he’d lean down to tell her she was beautiful. “It’s because I put makeup on.” He thought about it, and realized she was right.

* * * *

It had taken some time for Helen to get comfortable with taking food from the refrigerator without asking, and she made the bed every morning with the paranoid politeness of a houseguest, but within several weeks she was noticeably more relaxed. Let herself be a little sloppier, a little more carefree. She even slept in twice.

Part of him was glad to see her stretched out on the couch that morning, her bare heels on its arm. She spoke to her mom on the phone about simple things, like how it has been raining

since Saturday and how it rained their every trip to the Space Needle when she was a child. Keep the conversation casual, the doctor said, so as not to overwhelm.

He tried to think of things they could do that afternoon. He also figured her mother would want to see her soon but a roundtrip flight from Seattle would be difficult to afford, and he would have to clear out the guest bedroom which was filled with boxes of old clothes and kitchen appliances they had meant to donate but never got around to.

There wasn't much left over for dinner that evening—just a couple Tupperware containers of two-week-old baked chicken he wasn't willing to get sick over and a few bags of frozen vegetables—so they had delivery from that Chinese restaurant they resorted to when they grew tired of what hung around in their fridge. He would go grocery shopping tomorrow. She asked what was good on the menu, to which he answered that he always ordered lo mein.

* * * *

A woman wrapped in a black lotus kimono seated them around a square table, on top of which a great metal sheet was imbedded. She passed out a stack of menus and sake lists that had been resting in the crook of her arm. A Yuengling, Helen a rice sake, and her mother a cranberry cosmo. Made with authority, she said. It was a full house, and the harsh pang of metal, steam and crackling margarine drowned out the storm they had just managed to avoid.

“It's been a while, hasn't it?” Helen's mom said, smoothing her cloth napkin over her lap.

“It looks familiar. How long has it been?”

When Helen was a child and her father still alive, they had taken their daughter there for her first hibachi experience, and she cried the entire evening. They hadn't returned since.

“I think it was the noise,” Helen's mother said. “The noise scared you.”

Without pulling out a notepad their waitress went around the table for entrees. Helen and her mother both ordered the vegetable option. Before their waitress left the latter raised her cosmo to the waitress in praise of an excellent cocktail. She carefully handed the glass for her daughter to try. Helen pressed the rim to her lips and James noticed her wince before even a drop could have made it to her tongue.

Their chef came out from behind the kitchen curtain hunched over a loaded cart and parked it by their station.

Their meal began with a flash of fire. Their chef teased the face of the grill with his spatula and prongs, twirled them over his fingers and gently rapped them with no discernable rhythm. Still James watched the man carefully, how his hands tremored over the hot griddle and how his expression moved subtly between poise and boredom.

“James,” Helen whispered, nudging him with her elbow.

The chef faced James with an egg twirling on the flat of his spatula, and he asked him to call it. Hat or pocket, he repeated.

“Hat!” Helen’s mother shouted into her cosmo, and with a polite pop of the spatula the egg landed delicately into the mouth of his red, stovepipe hat as everyone knew it would. After he retrieved the egg and cracked it across the grill with several others, their chef picked up the bowl of shrimp that would make up James’ dish and dumped it in a heap in the far right corner.

The chef called for the birthday girl. The attention reddened Helen’s cheeks, and as she slowly raised her hand the chef responded with another loud whirl of his hands. He told her that he would make her a birthday hat, but James suspected it was code for the volcano, and when the onion rolled onto the grill he fell back in his seat in validation. A few erratic bounces of the

tools and suddenly there was fire, quietly streaming from the small hole of an onion cone. Helen and her mother glanced at one another absolutely beaming.

The chef gave the grill another smack with the spatula and tossed the egg pulp with a heap of rice and a few other vegetables he had chopped up with all the unnecessary pizzazz. James watched the lump of shrimp begin to blacken underneath, and wondered whether by the time any of it reached his plate he would be able to taste anything more than grease coagulate. He would have done it differently.

Their plates were filled. The chef bowed to the table's applause and strolled towards the kitchen with his big cart and disappeared behind the curtain.

"Wait, don't touch anything," Helen said. She called the waitress over to take a picture.

* * * *

It was going on evening, and James remembered that they still hadn't anything left in the fridge, and he didn't feel like ordering in again, so he drove off to the grocery store a few blocks down that was open twenty-four hours. Normally Helen took care of the food shopping, but despite being out of his element he could find calm walking down the aisles alone. He realized he probably should have made a list—that's what she always did—but as he made his way around he recognized a few items. More than he thought he would. A few fruit yogurts, wheat bagels and frozen bags of pre-prepared couscous he never cared for but ate anyway because he wasn't picky and Helen was a little more health-conscious.

It was unconscious for the most part; his hand grasped at things to fit in the cart, and he thought it decent to let it, but as he passed by the rows of freezers, something caught him off guard. He wasn't sure what it was at first—a mild fear obscured the message—but as the

motions aligned with desire, the situation finally became clear. He parked his cart by the fish counter and returned to the front of the store to retrieve an empty cart.

It started with a jar of sweet gherkin pickles he spotted in the condiments section, “my vice,” Helen used to call it, partly because she couldn’t say “gherkins” the first time without mispronouncing it and laughing. He picked up a jar and rotated it in his hand. Rather than toss it into his cart, he substituted it with a jar of Vlasic dills.

James kept it simple at first—red bartlett pears instead of satsuma plums, Wheat Thins instead of Kashi cereal—but soon he gave into disregard, dropping items indiscriminately into his cart with the nonchalance of a man without limits, a man who knew it. He ambled toward the self-checkout stations even though he had well over the maximum, and the employees were either too polite or too ready to go home to give a damn about his stockpile.

The living room was still vacant when he returned home. For the best, he thought. It gave him time. He placed the bags on the countertop in the kitchen and began to unpack them.

It was rare that he tried to summon the accident to memory, and when it arrived it came incomplete. Just the sound of the door hitting her shin as he entered in, right beneath the kneecap, and how it left a mark. The empty pill bottle in the trashcan, the steam swelling from the showerhead and the puddle of broken glass she lay on. From time to time he wondered whether it was one of those events that was supposed to leave him with a mark of his own. A time when he should have made extravagant promises to right his wrongs and when the smell of cucumber and aloe could time warp him back to this moment and keep him accountable. But that’s not what happened. He called the ambulance, and they took care of it.

Everything was in place. He raised himself from his knees, closed the door of the refrigerator and stepped back for the effect. When he opened it again, the contents of their fridge were absolutely unrecognizable.

He wasn't much of a cook but he knew what he needed. After setting the oven to broil he began to prepare the pound and a half of rib eye he had left on the countertop. A coat of salt, pepper and some Montreal Seasoning was all, and he slapped the slab onto a cast iron skillet and placed it in the oven when preheat blinked out.

James turned as Helen walked in; her thin lips wrinkled into a smile the brief moment their eyes met. She usually kept her hair up in a lazy ponytail and he couldn't remember the last time she had done anything more with it, but today she had taken the time to tease it, and let it fall playfully over her left shoulder. A mild perfume hung about her also, perhaps something she had found in the medicine cabinet.

She stood at the opening of the fridge to scan the shelves, and within moments she pulled out the jar of dills. An involuntary twitch took hold of his limbs as James watched her draw a spear from the brine. The sudden sour of the first bite puckered her lips, and he half-expected her to drop the rest back into the jar or toss it down the disposal, but she took her time and slowly finished off the spear. She closed the lid and put the jar back on its shelf.

"You should have something more substantial," James said, keeping composure.

"I'm not very hungry," she said.

"I'm making steak tonight. Smell that? Give it another half-hour and you'll be starving."

This is your favorite, he said. It was unusual, he thought, the effort she now put in to bridling her every expression and how it wore around the eyes, but she didn't play her cards close enough. With a slight nod she pulled herself a chair.

“Actually, give me fifteen.”

It cooked beautifully, he said. He asked Helen where she kept the oven mitts, to which she replied she had no idea, and eventually located them in a drawer by the sink. James pulled out the rib eye and cut pieces away to serve. He liked it rare, and he broke a loaf of French bread to mop the pink that drained into their plates.

“Tell me what you think,” James said.

She nodded in affirmation as she chewed, and he asked whether she would like a sauce to go with it.

“No, no. This is fine.”

Conversation was simple and there were frequent gaps, but this didn’t seem to bother her. They spoke of the flowers that hadn’t yet come up in the yard, how lo mein beat chow mein and they finished their meal with Helen regurgitating everything she and her mother talked about earlier that afternoon. Keep it light, the doctor said.

After dinner they cleared their plates, and as James set up the dishwasher he noticed her hunching over her placemat.

“I’m not feeling well.”

* * * *

“Every year. Every single year,” Helen answered.

She was talking to her mother on the phone about a Christmas card a coworker distributed to the office every season. He and a few buddies would go out hunting in the fall and take a picture of the largest turkey they killed. *Twenty-two pounds!* it read on the back. *Merry Christmas, The Campbell Family.* The picture showed Mr. Campbell—James couldn’t remember his first name—squatting behind a massive bird that lay prostrate on the ground, right behind a

broad fan of tail feathers. The turkey's neck crumpled like a shriveled worm beneath the weight of the body, the head crooked at such a terrible angle a person couldn't even pretend the bird was sleeping.

"How do you tell someone their Christmas card is offensive?" She asked him the same thing the other day, but he couldn't give her the answer she wanted. You don't, James had said. He doubted her mother could say more.

* * * *

James noticed a photo album on the coffee table. "This was in the bookcase," Helen said, plopping down on the couch. "I thought we could go through it. We haven't done it yet." She placed the album on his lap. Helen started the album seven months into their relationship, and continued it a couple years into their marriage. It was her second attempt at decoupage, a technique she learned when she took those lessons at the craft store down the street way back when; the cover was plastered with cutouts of hummingbirds and sunflowers she had taken from several gardening magazines her mother subscribed to.

It had been some time since James had seen them, and while he was more than slightly aggravated by the importunity, he was curious. He opened the album to the first page. Two headshot pictures were set one above the other and they were smiling in both. The first photo, he remembered, took several tries because her arm would get tired and she couldn't angle the camera right. It was their first picture together, he knew, but he couldn't recall where it had been taken because their heads took up most of the shot and blocked the background. A stranger had offered to take the second picture on the coast of Chincoteague. He turned the page to a set of four, let her eyes roam, and moved to the next.

"Could you explain them for me?" Helen asked, breaking the silence.

James nodded. He asked her to choose and she pointed to the first one in the top left corner. They were sitting with one of his college friends and his girlfriend at a bowling alley.

“That’s my old roommate Jeff and his date.” He paused. She asked him to elaborate. “You always thought I had a thing for that girl,” he said, forcing a laugh. “Spent my night on the couch the rest of the week.” Truth of the matter was, it had been a great evening. They all played two rounds, James managed a turkey in the second, and Jeff and what’s-her-name crashed at their place after a couple drinks at Marley’s just across the street from the alley. She pinned the corner page down with her fingers and hovered over the photograph as though to discern which lines in her smile made her the fraud. To commit them to memory.

She pointed to a photograph on the opposite page, which had James, Helen and her mom seated around a hibachi table.

“I think you would prefer it if we waited on that one,” James said under his breath, patting her shoulder. He flipped to the next page. Helen didn’t ask any more questions.

* * * *

She sat cross-legged on the couch in front of the TV with a bottle of Bailey’s Irish Crème set on the floor. They had bought it last year to celebrate their third-year anniversary, which they had moved to a Saturday, but the night was ruined by his failure to make a reservation at the restaurant they had planned to eat out at and for the second time. They tucked the bottle away under the kitchen sink and bitterly promised one another to open it the following year. Hell, he had forgotten all about it, but Helen pulled it out early, and on any old night. James stood by the left arm of the couch long enough for his wife to notice. She raised the remote to the screen and lowered the volume.

“You know I do this,” she said, and kicked the empty bottle with her heel. She meant to knock it under the couch but the frame was too low and it ricocheted toward the coffee table.

“That better?”

“Sure.”

She turned to face the screen again, but her eyebrows were narrowed which meant that there was something left she wanted to say.

He turned to leave but he was too slow to remove his hand from the couch arm and felt Helen’s hand drop onto his. It was heavier than he expected and grew warm fast. “I’ve been watching this program on the World’s Columbian Exposition. It said that they first began working on the first Ferris Wheel, this gigantic thing, in negative ten-degree weather. I can’t remember how big they said it was but it was just—huge.” She threw one arm out to the side for emphasis, and James remembered that his hand was still pinned to the couch and found himself focusing on the moisture beneath her palm. “This is almost over but there’s a follow-up segment on H.H Holmes at nine if you would like to watch it with me.”

He could hear what she said but little registered because the heat of her hand kept building and he could feel his fingers squirm beneath her palm and she must have noticed but she wouldn’t move away. Instead she wrapped her fingers around his wrist like a sweaty shackle and even as he shifted his weight to his heels to pull away they tightened.

“We can change it to something else,” she said, “if you want something else.”

“Maybe some other night,” he said, releasing his hand from her grip. The air suddenly cooled his skin, and with the same hand he reached for the bottle on the floor. “I’m going to recycle this.”

* * * *

Not knowing what more to do with himself James removed the crossword from the morning's newspaper to complete on the couch. He let his eyes run down the clues until something popped out at him. "Etnas," he thought, for *old lab burners*, one of the few things he actually picked up from college chemistry. As he began to plug in the answer he noticed something shift in his periphery and he flinched to see Helen standing in the doorframe of the kitchen. The bedroom door was closed so he thought she had hit the hay early. Bold, he thought. She had been waiting for him. He lay the newspaper on his lap and waited for her to speak.

"Where's mine?"

"Where's your what, Helen?" he replied over his shoulder.

"My ring. I just noticed I don't have mine." She held out a gnarled left hand to him from the doorway, running her fingers over the spot where it used to be. It was a lie and he knew it, but he'd let her get away with it. Besides, he already knew the words.

"You took it off," he said.

"I took it off," she mouthed. She asked where it was.

"I don't know, Helen." There was something about the way he said her name that made her recoil slightly, a subtle movement he could trace only in her shoulders. He looked down at her hand again to find that her knuckles had swelled, resembling those burls that cling to desiccated tree trunks. Before either of them could say anything more, the living room phone rang.

The director called him earlier that afternoon to remind him that leave expired next week, and said that while things had been running smoothly for the most part Hal has been struggling

to troubleshoot new cataloguing software so James would need to sort that out. He was sorry, James remembered him say. It was unlikely he would call again so soon, unless Hal royally fucked up and it wouldn't have been the first time. James stood and reached for the receiver.

“Hello.” Helen leaned against the kitchen doorframe to listen. “I’m sorry, we’re not interested. Please take us off your list. Thanks.” He hung up and shrugged. “They’re not supposed to call here.”

Helen jumped as the phone sounded again. James, who had kept his stance by the end table, answered once more. “I said we’re not interested. This is an unlisted number. Do not call again,” and he slammed the receiver down.

With his arms outstretched and hands pressed into the coffee table James waited for the rings to calm, but they came in one after the other, and it would not stop, and finally he ripped the cord from the jack. “They’re getting aggressive. I’ll make a call to Verizon tomorrow.” His words fell on deaf ears. She had already disappeared.

Back in the kitchen she had her legs propped on the chair opposite her end of the table, with a bottle of sauvignon blanc that had just been opened and a snifter glass she had pulled from the china cabinet. She must have forgotten where the wine glasses are, he thought, and he watched amused as she took a careful sip, pretending to read. Laid out in front of her was an old library book he had brought home from a “library sale” and packed in the bookshelf.

“Aren’t you supposed to hide that somewhere?” he chuckled, eyeing the bottle. She asked what he meant. “If you’re going to start that up again you might as well do it right.”

* * * *

“They’ll scar if you keep picking at those.” She ripped at the hangnails as one would pluck petals, her cuticles flushed and raw. The left hand was worse off.

“Too late for that,” she said, and continued to peel, and they watched as a quivering droplet pressed to the surface from the tear she made.

* * * *

James woke a couple hours early the next morning without meaning to; the sun had only just begun to peek over the rooftops, but he resolved to make use of the extra time. The expiration date for his medical leave had finally arrived, and he would have to return to work that morning. Even though James had to fight somewhat to obtain it, the library director managed to push for ten weeks with Human Resources, perhaps remembering the man responsible for the reorganization of a failing call number classification system. That, and Hal, the assistant manager, was competent enough to take over his position in the meantime. Or at least in theory.

He had closed the blinds downstairs before bed the other night and it took a minute for his eyes to adjust to the dark, and when the room finally came to focus he made his way to the staircase. Sitting on the top step was Helen, wrapped in a blanket. He couldn't tell whether she noticed him or she slept where she sat—she didn't move.

Upon closer look he realized the blanket was the afghan she had crocheted a couple months ago. A simple checker pattern of mint green, white and lavender that took her eight months to finish. She said it took her mind off things. Before the accident she frequently spent her nights on the couch with her hook and rolls of yarn and fiddled with her fingers into the early morning hours. More often than not she crawled into bed long after he had.

With her head bowed heavily over her knees, James thought he saw a patch where her hair was thinning. Before he could inspect she spoke.

“I couldn't sleep,” she said under her breath.

“I will be back at six.” She didn't ask where he was going.

The afghan dropped away from her body as she stood, and he watched her shoulder blades mechanically grate across her back just above the dip in her nightgown.

Before he could leave the groan of pipes in the ceiling brought him to attention. He had to make sure. He crept up the stairs to the bathroom down the hall and propped his ear against the door. The showerhead was on, but it was only until he heard the metal of the shower curtain rungs scrape across the bar he knew he could leave.

“How she doing?” Hal asked.

“She’s doing fine. Did you finish payroll?”

“At the tail end of it. Is she feeling any better at all or—?” He spoke as though all Helen needed were a bowl of chicken noodle.

“She still can’t recall much but things are coming to her slowly. She’s got bits and pieces of her childhood but that’s about it. Not even much about me in there.”

“That’s rough, man. This whole thing has me so paranoid. Look both ways, right?”

“It’s what they say,” James affirmed from the corner of his mouth.

“Which interstate was it?”

“I think you had better get back to payroll.”

The morning had gone by slowly, which surprised James, because it had been several months since he had last step foot in the building and he figured that maybe at least something could feel novel, but he had been there that long. The smell of books had begun to upset his stomach sooner than usual, and while he had plenty to do to distract himself, whether out of shape or out of habit the lethargy had also sunk in quickly. He glanced at the circulation desk and was glad to see that Robert was not behind it.

Rob was an uppity man with his sights set higher: meticulous, on task and on time. Wrenched up his sleeves like a goddamned hero. It's not that James could pinpoint anything specific that irked him, for it might as well have been everything: from the way he picked the dirt from beneath his nails when checkout was slow to the way he overemphasized his Ps when he spoke. James had an idea.

First he made note of a few books lined up on the book cart—didn't even need a pen and paper—and moved a couple after Rob had reshelfed them. A couple at a time. Sometimes more. On occasion he removed the chip from a book and brought it home and if Helen ever asked him what it was or why the spine label was still on it he'd say "library sale" or "giveaway" and she was none the wiser. It was only meant to last a while; to put Rob on edge, keep him on the eggshells. But it went somewhere.

At first Rob bore it, and while James could just about see the stress well up in every line in his face the first couple weeks, he went on about his job as though nothing were amiss. Hell he even kept his ear-to-ear smile. But as the complaints surfaced Rob suddenly began to suspect one of the interns they had hired that summer, a female, of sabotaging his tasks. It's amazing how quickly people assume they're targets, James thought. He wondered how often they were right, and as to why Rob figured their new intern was responsible for anything was beyond him, but the way he latched onto her was something to watch. Rob shot her the eye and mumbled when she passed him. Sometimes she noticed. When he spoke to her he was curt, and he often had her carry out her hours in the backroom to apply bar codes and chips to the new shipments where he could keep an eye on her and she knew it. Five months into the project, they were so overwhelmed with grievances from patrons who could not for the life of them locate a compilation of the notes and letters of John Keats for that dissertation, or *The Black Book of*

Communism that they had to boot poor Rob. The new staff member to replace him was mediocre but efficient, and that intern became the best intern they'd ever had.

* * * *

Dr. Rojas introduced herself to James in the waiting room and asked him to follow her to her office.

“Make yourself comfortable,” she said, pulling out a cheap cushioned seat at the front of her desk. James preferred to stand and mentioned as much; he had few other options to speed the process. “We have a bit to go over,” she replied, “but you do what’s comfortable.” He took the chair.

“I just want to make sure that everything has been covered before we send her off. As you are probably aware, the trauma from the fall and the drug-intake has left her with pretty severe memory loss. Procedural memories are still intact, so she can do all her little projects as she had before, but Helen struggles with episodic memory, so daily routines, relationships, holidays and other milestones have yet to be recovered.”

James asked what he was to do.

“We generally tell family two things. Introduce her to objects or activities that are significant to her. This might help jog her memory and increase her chances of retrieval. If you take lots of photos, show her those. If she is attached to an item like a piece of jewelry or souvenir, talk to her about it. But remember that your wife’s history makes matters even more sensitive. Don’t force things on her; be persistent about making recovery the goal.”

James asked about the second thing.

“It’s just precautionary, but we ask that family, especially spouses, not take it personally if their loved ones can’t remember big events like their first date or the wedding. These

memories may return, they may not, but it has nothing to do with Helen not wanting to remember them. Believe me, she does.”

Dr. Rojas handed James a small complimentary pad of paper that she kept in her desk drawer and a pen and told him to take notes. James nodded absently as she planned out his life with Helen for the next couple months. He wasn't to be afraid if Helen experienced chronic vascular headaches. “Cold compress,” he jotted down. “No meds.” Be patient, be present, be proactive. “The three Ps,” he wrote.

Then paper. Including the pad on his lap there were checklists and pamphlets with pictures on their covers, emergency numbers, forms and business cards and a folder to hold it all, for his convenience. Where there's people there's paper, he thought. You never quite realize how much paper there is in this world until a building blows up or your wife gets sick.

The doctor had him consider therapy sessions for Helen, “for coping, not for cure,” she reminded, and even solicited his counselor's information for his own healing. He took them all, smiled and nodded, asked a question or two that required short answers and was happy to be on his way.

“Are you ready to see her?”

* * * *

The rim of the penny in his pocket just barely fit the cleft in the doorknob, but still he managed to open the door and found her collapsed on the carpet, gutting out the dresser. She had been through the closet as well. Open boxes littered the floor, along with several totes and bags, their hamper emptied out onto the bed. The comforter was wadded up on the floor, and the fitted sheet had been ripped from the mattress.

James cleared his throat at the doorway loud enough for her to hear, and she turned to face him, her arms elbow-deep in the bottom drawer, waiting for him to speak. He would not.

“Where would I have put it?” The words came in a drawn out mewl that drained from between her lips, and he imagined them leak down her chin like something awful onto the front of her blouse.

“I don’t know.”

“Why would I have taken it off?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that either, Helen,” he said as he stepped forward, accidentally kicking a small two-ounce bottle with the toe of his shoe. She wouldn’t find the ring, but she found the liquor he tucked away in the bottom of their clothes hamper. He asked how many she had, but he had already spotted four empty ones on the floor. Who knows what became of the other two.

“Stop. Just stop it,” she groaned.

He kept his gate calm and even as he made his way to what was left of their bed, cleared a space with the back of his hand and sat down. Come here, he said.

Minding the piles of shoes and bank notes and pairs of underwear heaped around her feet she staggered towards him, and for the first time in months they sat on their bed together. She asked him to explain what had happened, to explain anything if not everything.

Keep it calm, the doctor said. He already knew the words.

* * * *

The sirens died several seconds before they approached the house. James Dawes waited for the knock at the door and let them in. One of the paramedics raised the back of his hand to

his nose. Where was she, they asked. Mr. Dawes, who remained on the shoe mat, pointed to the kitchen. As the three men disappeared inside something skittered across the linoleum.

One of the paramedics stepped out. He looked at Mr. Dawes for the first time, the cuffs of his dress pants, the untucked hem of a blue button-up shirt, his tie. Dawes' expression was fixed, and he stared back at the medic from beneath his brow with all the pomp of a horned owl.

“A box, please,” the medic asked.

James pointed left to the storage room.

The medic stumbled over a recycling bin as he groped the wall for a light switch. Having recovered himself, he spotted an old tv box, just big enough, propped against the water heater.

It took all but fifteen minutes. Two medics, led by the third who retrieved the container, stepped out into the living room, exaggerating their steps so that they might not trip over the carpet. They placed their hands firmly over the top so that the thing bustling inside might not escape. Mr. Dawes stepped aside as they warily crossed the threshold, and watched from the doorway as they disappeared into the ambulance parked outside.

CHAPTER 5

THE FINER THINGS

We met at the foyer. Her hand reached out for mine. “Ms. Evans,” she said, and we shook. When we spoke on the phone I told her I planned to sign the lease immediately, that I didn’t need a walk-through, but the landlady insisted and I thought it couldn’t hurt. My apartment, she told me, would be upstairs. “If you would follow me.”

The stairway was neatly wallpapered, a sort of red and ochre pinstripe, and our way was lit by a series of naked bulbs lining the wall. At the top, I was a little bothered that the wooden floorboards creaked underfoot, but I could still picture myself pacing the hall in my woolen socks, holding a cup of something to warm my hands.

I found the place in an old White Pages directory, which was tucked back in a storage closet I rarely used. I saw that the rent was cheap, and having had just recently been laid off, I figured at the time I could make do with cheap. Looking down the row of apartments on what would be my floor I imagined just how small my apartment could be. I didn’t regret my decision. I just wasn’t certain what choice I had. I remember Ms. Evans telling me utilities were included, but that I would have to do without several luxuries, such as air conditioning. “You can install a window unit if you like,” she said.

We made it to what would be my room. “Room 206” hovered just above the peephole in brass. A classic touch. I felt myself rising off the soles of my feet, refreshed almost, like a boy on his very first day of school, a child’s first contact with water. I was starting over. My old

apartment was dull. No flavor. Nothing classic about it. Nothing to be proud of. Ms. Evans pressed her ear against the door and lightly rapped the frame with her knuckles. I must have looked confused. “Just want to make certain. I’ve made mistakes before.” She unlocked the room with a key she retrieved from the breast pocket of her blouse, and we stepped inside.

The first thing I noticed was the walls: gritty, yellowing stucco that crumbled beneath the fingers. I could deal with that, I thought. The living room was mostly unfurnished, but there were a few things, like a worn armchair by the front of the fireplace. I was really taken to the olive lamp in the corner, the trim lined with dangling green beads. “They were left behind,” Ms. Evans explained. “Nice, aren’t they?”

The kitchenette was cramped, but considering the price I would pay, I couldn’t expect much. Limited cabinet space, no sink disposal and the fire alarm hovered just above the tiny gas stove, meaning I would have to be careful. I opened the refrigerator and a stale odor poured out. I clasped my nose while Ms. Evans scrubbed at a stubborn grease spot on the counter surface with her finger.

“The bulb flickers,” I said, closing the door.

“I suppose it happens.”

In the bedroom my eyes landed on a full-size metal bed frame at the center of the room. “You can, of course, place it where you want,” she said. I had a twin-size bed frame and mattress of my own but I decided to tell her later. I was thankful to see that I could get to the bathroom from my bedroom but I dreaded what it might look like. To my surprise it was clean. Very clean. “Bathrooms are almost always deal-breakers,” she said, nodding at me.

A deep pressure settled into my head, right at the top. “What time is it, ma’am?”

“Quarter ‘till.”

Not quite clockwork, but close. Just another Aspirin. Ms. Evans turned away. I slipped my hand into my pants pocket and with my thumb and forefinger quietly popped off the cap. I coaxed two capsules into my palm and pushed them between my lips. I had been silent for the most part, but a final rattle from my pocket betrayed me. Ms. Evans, ready to be startled, stiffened and stared directly at my pockets. I pulled out the bottle for her to see and rattled it gently in front of my face. Ready to get the paperwork over and done with, I suggested we head to the lobby downstairs to take care of things.

I'm surprised how little there was to cover. A few signatures and the place was mine. I'm not particularly proud of myself for having lied. A freelance marketer. That sold her. No verification. Nothing. She seemed surprised that I would even have a job. I would get one soon, though. I had enough saved up to last me a while, but I would be on the lookout.

My lease went into effect immediately, so with keys in hand I made several trips to my old apartment for my boxes. I could have hired a moving team. I considered it, and I suppose it would have saved me a great deal of time, but the thought of strangers entering my home agitated me. And I like to handle my own things. No, I'm glad to have done it myself. I didn't have much. I managed to transport all of my things that day, including the furniture. When I finished stacking boxes in the living room, I slipped into my pajamas and lay on the mattress I dragged in myself.

I barely remembered anything before plugging in the coffee maker the next morning, just the feel of grit beneath my feet in the kitchen and how it irritated me. I preferred to walk through my apartment barefoot, and the linoleum had that uneven, dirty color that told me that sweeping would do me little good. I had yet to get groceries and there was a bit of unpacking to do, so the

floor would have to wait, supposing it was worth my time at all. Food was the priority. I placed an open box of baking soda and some wads of newspaper in the fridge before heading out.

I didn't need much. Eggs, canned soup, coffee, and a few other things. I passed by a box of powdered milk and tossed it into my basket. Saco's brand, like the stuff we gave invalids at the Evergreen Convalescent Home. A misnomer really, because no one ever got better. Before I was hired, they tested me. I remembered the old woman in her nineties, paralyzed, deaf and blind. Momma Keller, they called her, and it didn't matter when they said it to her face. She hadn't always been that way, my mentor told me, and I didn't care to know more. Her eyes were open when we walked in, so blanketed by thick film she could have been sleeping for all I knew. Without warning the orderly kicked her bed hard, and Momma Keller let out a scream. The orderly thrust the nose of a bottle deep into her mouth and squirted some colorless paste on her tongue, which she haphazardly swallowed. Once the stuff cleared away she shrieked again, and down came the bottle. While she struggled with a mouthful, the orderly turned to me for the first time. "When she stops screaming, stop feeding her." Before I knew it, the bottle was in my hand. I made my living that way for several years to follow, but only because I passed. Patients that could sit up got the powdered milk mix— stuff I blended myself. I don't know why I bothered to try it in the first place, but it sort of grew on me, and the stuff was cheap as hell.

I emptied my bags from the car and carried them into the apartment building. Ms. Evans' office was near the bottom of the staircase, the door propped open by a brass figure of a sleeping cat. She looked up as I passed by. I wasn't sure if she smiled.

I stocked the fridge and cabinets, and before unpacking I flipped through some of the classifieds; it would give me something to think about as I put away my things. Two ads stuck out to me, but neither would do me any good. There was an opening for a customer service

representative at a local pharmaceutical, but I doubted I was qualified. There was also a position for a veterinary assistant available, but it would be an hour's drive to get to the clinic. Probably wouldn't be much different from Evergreen. Cleaning up after people. Cleaning up after the family dog. I had to give it time.

Unpacking took a while, and I worked well into the evening. During a break I installed a chain lock on my door and set some of the empty boxes by the dumpster at the side of the building. Ms. Evans was still in her office as I made my way up and down the stairs, and she waved when our eyes met. She was nice enough, but if there's one thing I don't like, it's eyes that move before the head does.

After a light meal of lentil soup and saltines, I set to work on some of the remaining boxes despite the hour. The only ones I had left to unpack were for the living room. I had a small foot rug somewhere, which was to go by the fireplace, and a ceramic vase I had hoped to set on a mantle. Seeing that I didn't have a mantle, I set it on the end table by the armchair. It would take a couple more hours to go through the rest, but it was all coming into place more smoothly than I had imagined.

I lay myself down on my bed only to realize that a knot had settled in my right shoulder. I tend to sleep on that side but it hurt too much to rest my weight on it. I turned over. It was then I noticed a small crack in my wall. Just a slight one, but wide enough to see into the adjoining apartment. I could see a bed at the opposite end of the room and a sweater draped over an oak chair. The room was dimly lit so I couldn't make out much more. It was when my eyes landed on a wall photo frame that I heard the sound of someone trapped between a mumble and a whisper, and I caught the flicker of a woman walking by. I'm embarrassed to say how long it took me to remember myself. I found some leftover newspaper used to box my things, and

jammed a wad of it in the crack. I would sleep on my right side that night, despite the cramp. I'm a gentleman. I popped a couple of Aspirin that I had forgotten to take and went to sleep.

* * * *

I woke to knocking. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and checked the clock by my bedside. I had slept in. I slipped on my robe and opened the door to find Ms. Evans at my doorstep. She appeared tired and there was a slight sag in her shoulders.

"Is everything all right?" I asked.

"Only if you are. We've come to check on you." I leaned out into the hall slightly to see that she was alone.

"Everything's fine."

"And the bathroom?"

"Exceptional."

"Good. That's good," she said, her voice trailing off. "Just remember that if you need anything, give us a ring or drop by."

I thought I could use a walk outside. I pulled on my jacket and stepped out. I had passed through the same street on my way to work before, but I didn't think much of it at the time. I should familiarize myself with the area, I thought. I knew some of the buildings. There was a barbershop on the left-hand side with an immobile barber's pole stationed out front. I'd always wondered about the name of the place but had never bothered to look it up or ask anyone. And there was a small convenience store next to the barbershop that I entered once or twice before, but it wasn't much; flickering florescent lights overhead and flies trapped in the cooling units with the dairy and cheeses.

I passed by a couple blocks and noticed my neighbor. Even with what little I saw of her, I knew it was her coming in my direction, walking her dog along the sidewalk. Going home, I supposed. Her shawl was wrapped tightly about her shoulders and a small hand peeked beneath the hem holding the leash. The other hand held a plastic droppings bag that she swung by her side like a thurible. Her tiny dog trotted briskly ahead of her, not minding me as it neared. I could have said hi but I dropped my eyes and kept moving. I don't know why, but something rose inside of me as she passed by, something that rose to be lost. The faint trail of perfume was all I wanted.

It's funny. On occasion I heard the dog walk around the apartment next to mine, or give a little yip. She was lucky that I didn't mind, and I believe she would have thought so, too. Things were quiet for the most part, but one evening I heard something like a deep moan come from her apartment, followed by the rapid opening and closing of drawers. My fingers instinctively clasped over the newspaper wad clogging the crack by my bed, but when the sound died down, I paused. I suddenly became aware of the light in my room and considered flipping the switch, but I didn't do it. I didn't have anything to hide. The sound came again, and I removed the wad from the wall and peeked inside. I was able to pick up a few more details than before, like the metal heater by the foot of the bed, and the pair of worn slippers beneath the chair. The dog was nowhere to be seen, but I found her, curled up on the mattress. She faced the wall opposite me with her hair strewn about the pillow. Her shoulders trembled beneath a beige blanket. She was crying. I rolled the newspaper between my fingers and wondered what she would have thought of me had she turned around and saw me. I am a gentleman, I remembered, and I placed the paper back where it belonged.

The next night I was in the kitchen when I heard the sound. The same low tone pressed through the walls and I returned to the bedroom to check on her. Just to check. The light in her room was off this time, and I quickly switched the light off in my room and returned to her. Once my eyes adjusted I could make out her form at the edge of the bed, slumped over the heater, her dog sleeping by her side. A sheer nightdress clung to her skin like a damp cheesecloth, and her pillow lay flat on her thighs. At that moment I imagined knocking on her door and introducing myself. And I'd come with two cups--coffee for me, and tea for her. Hot chamomile. She would come to her door, and I'd be in my robe with the two cups on a tray. A sweatshirt, not a robe. I glanced at my socks crumpled at the base of my dresser. There would be no time; the kettle wasn't even on. I could turn it on, I thought. I peered back inside and saw that she had fallen back onto her elbows. Now, I thought. It should be now. I plugged the wall, grabbed my socks and hurried into the kitchen.

I set up the kettle on the stove. While the water heated I slipped into my socks and pulled on a sweatshirt like I had planned. I retrieved the cups and two teabags. We would both have tea. I pulled open the bottom cabinets only to realize that I didn't have a tray to place them on. I could carry them. I would be careful. Although the kettle didn't steam I figured that it was best to offer lukewarm tea than none at all. Perhaps she preferred it that way. With a cup in either hand I exited my apartment and stood outside her door. I placed one of the cups on the floor. I didn't know what I was going to say, but I was sure it would come to me when she opened the door. Something about dogs. Before I managed to do anything, an absent step to the side knocked over the cup on the ground, and I watched as its clear contents seeped into the narrow crack beneath the door. Swearing under my breath I picked up the cups and ran back to my room. I peered through the hole once more to find that she had since left her bed.

* * * *

I'd attended several interviews, most of which aren't worth remembering. I had few options left, but there was one I looked forward to. A local dentist, a private practitioner, needed someone to do his filing. Although I wasn't fond of this sort of work, I imagined the routine would do me good. I spoke with a Dr. Wohler on the phone downstairs. I didn't care much for the way he laughed into the receiver, but I would have to deal because I was scheduled to sit with him within the week. I would have preferred an interview by phone, but he said he could learn more in person.

I checked on her several times since the embarrassment, but only when I heard her cry, or when I heard her dresser drawers move, because it was then she cried. Her dog, an unsympathetic thing, was by her at times, but I assumed it more often than not pattered around elsewhere when she broke down in the night, an event that became more and more frequent. Damn thing.

But one night she was quiet, and I knew something was wrong because it was so quiet. The drawers didn't move. No footsteps. No dog. I found her lying over the bed, staring through the ceiling. A taupe sheet draped about her body as though it had been laid over her by careful hands. Suddenly she brushed the sheet away and sat up. She let her feet drop. Wearing only underwear, she stepped away from the bed, and moved across the floor as carefully as one would with brimming water. She paused by the photo frame on the wall. It was there she removed her clothes and tossed them to the floor.

I realized that her bedroom chair had been moved beneath some ceiling fixture I could not see, an amenity my apartment must have lacked. I knew something was up there, because there was a long black power cord dangling from it. She turned in my direction and I ducked

from view before our eyes could meet. The floorboards creaked, and I found her standing in front of me. I didn't move this time. Her eyes fell on my wall, but her gaze rested just ever so slightly above me.

She climbed onto the chair. There was something mildly primitive in her movement, which, ironically, made her more human to me—the curve of her back, the gentle dip of her breasts, and the curl of her toes over the chair seat as she balanced herself.

I can't remember much, which is strange. I recall the way her body turned in air as she moved, and her feet kicked in such a way I didn't expect of her. When it was over her body swayed as gently as a willow branch. I rolled the newspaper between my palms. I'm a gentleman, but I do appreciate the finer things. I let the paper drop to the floor and kept watch until sunrise.

I knew the next morning that I would have to take care of the dog. There were no bolts on the apartment doors thankfully, so it wasn't particularly difficult to pick the lock to her apartment. A quick trick with a paperclip was all it took. I had considered luring out the pup with a treat, a piece of toast or something, and I had barely opened the door a crack when it came to me and made my job easy. I took it out onto the apartment stoop where I let it go.

One thing that concerned me was someone calling her. The apartments didn't come with phones, only jacks, so unless she hooked one up herself I wouldn't need to worry about someone trying to reach her. The building had a public phone downstairs in the lobby across from Ms. Evans' office, and I'd yet to hear it ring. It would be fine, I thought, and I shut the door to the apartment building behind me.

Before I reached the banister I caught movement in the corner of my eye, and there my landlady was, scribbling on forms at her desk. I didn't realize how long I had been staring, but it was long enough for her to notice and look up with that damn look on her face, like I were about to do God knows what. Wave. Wave her away, I thought. She waved back, a slight smile on her face. As I walked up the stairs I began to feel sheepish. Served me right, I guess.

I plopped down on the armchair by the fireplace. I used to read some, bits of poetry here and there—Keats, Byron, Shelley—but not so much anymore. I couldn't tell you where the collections were, anyway. I had a few books scattered about the place, and a small heap that once belonged to my mother—though she wasn't much of a reader. The books were her father's, she told me, and as far as I was concerned, he never touched them, yet still they smelled as though they had been handled many, many times. I chose the navy blue one to look at because it was at the top of the stack; a seventy-year-old grammar book that I had seen on my mother's library shelf. The binding was peeling away so I cradled the spine with the palm of my hand to keep it together. I didn't feel particularly eager to flip through it, and there was probably some poetry or whatnot elsewhere in the stack, but I had already opened it.

* * * *

Knocking. "I need to speak with you." Not knowing what to expect I threw on some clothes and made my way to the living room. I stood by the front door only to discover that Ms. Evans wasn't asking for me but for the lady who lived at my left. "Miss Randal?" A name. It didn't even occur to me that she would even have one. I could feel something sour settle in the back of my throat. Miss Randal. It didn't suit her. The knocks died down and I quietly undid the chain latch.

“What’s the problem?” I asked, leaning out the doorway. Ms. Evans had already reached the opening of the stairway.

“I ought to leave it between the two of us, but thank you,” she said, taking the first step.

“I ask because she’s not home.”

“I’ll come back later then. Thank you for telling me.”

“She won’t be back for a while.”

“Is she not around? At all?”

“She’s in Memphis with family.” I was surprised how quick I was. Almost proud. I had an aunt who lived in Memphis and I didn’t much care for her. Her temper and loathing for children were legendary. I should’ve said Chicago. She could’ve been from Chicago. Ms. Evans clasped her hands tightly in front of her. “What do you need?” I asked. “I think I might have an idea.” I had no clue.

“I really shouldn’t be saying anything, but it’s been over two weeks,” she said quietly, approaching me. “Last month’s rent has yet to come in.” I forgot. I had forgotten all about it.

“That’s because Miss Randal asked me to turn her check in for her,” I said, softening my expression. “It’s my fault.” Good, I thought. That was quick.

“You have it?”

“I can grab it now.”

“Would you?”

“Certainly.”

Checkbook. Inside I shuffled through the stacks of envelopes and newspaper clippings on my desk, all the while glancing behind me at the front door, but then it occurred to me that I wouldn’t have placed the thing there in the first place. First drawer of the dresser. I snatched a

pen from my desk and jotted down the necessary information. I supposed her rent was the same as mine, and I put down an arbitrary date. The twenty-ninth, seventeen days ago. I didn't know her first name, but a last name would do it. I put down a signature, in a sort of relaxed cursive—a large-lettered *Miss Randal* for February rent.

Ms. Evans had since entered my apartment, her hands pressed against the front of her skirt. She stood on the shoe mat at the door and examined the chain lock I had put on the doorframe. “I hope she won't be penalized for my mistake,” I said, placing the check into her open hand.

“Nothing to worry about. It's all taken care of.”

She thanked me quietly and turned away, going over the slip as she made her way down the corridor. For whatever reason I watched her leave through the crack of the door, but I regretted it almost immediately. Ms. Evans paused, and before I could shut the door she turned to face me. “They won't take this.” She hurried to the doorway with her arm extended. “This won't work.”

“What do you mean?” I took the slip from her hand.

“The bank won't accept this. There are two names on the check.” It looked bad. It looked very bad. Heat swelled beneath my shirt and I was almost certain she could feel it.

“I can write a new one if you like. If this doesn't work.” Jesus I sounded stupid. I should have just apologized. Kept it at that. “My mistake, ma'am.” She stood there in that same ridiculous posture, with her hands clasped prudishly over her skirt. The bitch was judging me. She would watch my hands. I returned inside and wrote a new check with my signature to hand to her. “This one should be good,” I said, and she read over the information in front of me. “Miss Randal can reimburse me.” I dug my hands into my pants pockets.

Her look told me I was in the clear, and a calm weighed me back down again. Her thanks was hard to hear, supposing she said it at all, but just in case I said “sure” and closed the door quickly once her back was to me. I would need this new job, sooner than I anticipated. And a shower. A shower for calm.

I prefer baths but the bathtub was a bit too small for my frame. Water that missed the bathmat often collected beneath the hem of the shower curtain, and I mopped away the puddle there with a rag I kept for that purpose before turning on the showerhead. Prior to Evergreen, I never thought much of the hazards. You fall, you get back up again. Well, that isn't quite true. “I'm not a prisoner,” they would say. We got that one a lot. If there was one thing I learned at Evergreen, it was that after a fall, no one trusted you to stand steady again, and no matter how readily you bounced back to your feet, they're already on the countdown for an even worse collapse. The day patients arrived was often the day they lost everything. Evergreen was forever, my mentor said, and it didn't take much to believe it. I watch my footing closely now.

It was good. The heat and steam, they relaxed me, and I let the water pound upon my back and shoulders with such force that I went numb. But as I stood there that thing about the phone began to bother me again. It bothered me a lot. I didn't know why it came up at that moment but I had this nagging feeling that I'd regret not checking for one. A single call from an employer, sister or whatnot would bring everything down. I could get into her apartment again. Walk in and walk out. That's all it would take. Dry off, pull something on and look.

I picked the lock with a casualness that frightened me, and as I made to turn the knob a bearded man passed behind me. He must have sensed my eyes on him because he glanced back on his way down the hall, but I kept composed. I entered into the living room as calmly as I could and closed the door after me. I kept my eyes low, glancing up periodically at the scant few

pieces of furniture. The smell. It hit hard. The pressure came, and I took hold of a wall to steady myself. I raised my blurring gaze and found her swinging in the adjoining room. Aspirin was in my mouth before I even thought to open the bottle. In my hand, the bottle was open. My stomach churned and I felt it all rise with the force of a dredge. There was no holding it back. I slammed the door shut behind me as I exited her apartment, and with one arm locked over my stomach I bent over and let go. I heard the click of a door unlocking somewhere down the hallway, and I rushed into my apartment to collapse.

* * * *

When I wasn't making calls or clipping ads, I was with her. Hours at a time. Not intentionally, of course; I just lost track. The swelling about her neck had gone down some, but her face had darkened into this mottled ugly color that didn't match the rest of her complexion. Still, things were better. The smell trickled into my room, but it was only a little. I'd make coffee and watch her swing gently, like an angel come down from the rafters. She often swayed even though there was nothing there, no current to make her move. There were times I wished I could have met her, not quite like this, but I guarantee to anybody that I knew her better than anyone on God's earth.

The following afternoon I wrote out two checks for March, even though it had only been a week or so since I made her last payment. It was too much too fast. I would need that job before April. Ms. Evans had a rent drop-box outside her office, but when her door was open she preferred the checks to be handed to her. I dropped them in the box anyway. I could get this job with Wohler, I thought. Filing papers. That's all it would be. Sure it would be foreign at first, but I'd fall into a routine and I was good at routine. I am patient.

And before I knew it, it was time for the interview. I took the newspaper clipping with me just in case. Dr. Wohler's practice was only a few blocks away, so I decided to walk there despite the cold. The exercise would be nice, and frankly I didn't feel up to scraping morning frost from my windshield. I wound my scarf tightly around my neck in the apartment lobby and stepped out.

The air was chill though not entirely unpleasant, but I supposed that would change with time. I didn't care. I figured that if I got the job, I wouldn't notice on my way back. I passed the point on the sidewalk where she and I had first crossed paths. Then it occurred to me that I had no idea what she did, or where she worked. There were but a few cars parked along the curb by the apartment building, and I'd seen all of them change locations at some point or another. That meant she must have walked to work, and worked somewhere nearby. She would have been good with her hands. I am good with my hands. Always have been. At the home, I could be strong when I needed to be strong, and delicate for the delicate tasks.

Dr. Wohler was in his office laughing into the receiver, into the ear of some undoubtedly annoyed client. A large degree from Vanderbilt loomed behind him, bordered by a swarm of pictures: children and their canyon-wide smiles, and a large Dr. Wohler grinning absurdly into space with them. When his eyes landed on me Dr. Wohler motioned me to sit in the swivel chair at the other side of his desk. I looked around with my hands folded in my lap like a schoolchild.

"Just give me a ring when you're schedule opens. Yes. You too." He lay the phone down with a click, and cleared away a residual chuckle with the back of his hand. "Sorry about that," he said. "Wohler." As I leaned forward to meet him I smelled something strong on his dress shirt. Like benzoin tincture—stuff no amount of rinsing could ever remove, from skin or clothes.

“On the phone you mentioned Evergreen, yes?” I nodded. “Considered taking my mother there once or twice. Didn’t like the sound of that.”

“Wouldn’t blame her,” I replied.

“That bad, was it?”

“I did what I could.”

“Good answer.” I couldn’t tell what made me more uncomfortable: what he said or the way he said it. “I’ve heard my share of things. Patients get transferred, and Evergreen blames funding. But from what I understand, it was more than that, am I right?”

“I know only what I was told, and that I was dismissed because of funding.”

“Dismissed,” he repeated under his breath. I supposed that, too, was too careful. “You mean fired.”

“Yes.”

“Right.” A smirk crept up his cheek, like a crack in a windshield. So this is how we are going to start things, I thought. “What were your responsibilities?” He adjusted his glasses over his nose in such a way that looked practiced. He was laughing at me. I wiped up after people only to get promoted to filing. Away from the fluids and the smells, kicking beds and feeding closed mouths; probably thought he was doing me a favor. But I told him. I told him everything anyways. As politely as I could, I told it all.

“So eleven years and no administrative experience?”

“No,” I answered, “but on a few occasions I took over at the reception desk.”

“You enjoy people?”

“I got to know the patients very well.”

“How about people?” I wasn’t sure what he meant and let him know it. “I had one lady here, a sweet thing, but she couldn’t hold a goddamn conversation.”

“I talked to them.”

“I bet.”

He asked other things—how I performed under pressure, what I expected to gain from filing his papers and if I were any good with a camera—and by the end of the interview I felt that I had somehow sold myself to a man who could only see shit on my hands.

Before I left he told me it was nice “getting acquainted,” and that I should expect a call. I knew I would have to tell Ms. Evans when I got back, to make sure I could even get it. I tossed the ad in a dumpster outside. Perhaps too dramatically, but I hoped he saw it. From that damn office window, by those ridiculous pictures, his sausage fingers twisted up in the miniblinds to see me out. As though he could even see what it was I pitched, anyway.

The walk back to the apartment was quiet like before, but colder. My steps were reflex, and I tried to think of happier times. Yet the further I walked from the smiling man and his smiling children, thoughts became harder to come by. Dr. Wohler’s words no longer bounced about my head, but trickled discreetly into the back of my mind. I didn’t hear much around me, and hell, I didn’t see much in front of me, either. I thought of the cold. I thought of my lady waiting for me. My legs took me back home—I could call it home—to my bed.

I made it to the door of the apartment building, and with a hard tug of the door handle I entered. The heat thawed my awareness, and I scraped my feet across the doormat half bitter that the mindlessness had been taken from me. I finally remembered the Aspirin in my pocket; I would take a capsule or two when I got to my room.

I headed upstairs to the hallway where I found the bearded man standing by 208. Her room. “May I help you?” I asked.

“This yours?”

“Yes,” I said, stepping forward.

“No offense sir, but it reeks something awful,” he said, pressing his cap against his nose.

“You smell it?” He was right. It was terrible.

“I know.”

“It’s in the hallway now.”

“I’m aware.”

“You are?”

“I think an animal got stuck in my chimney. I noticed the smell this morning.”

“Might want to get on it then,” he said, “if it’s gotten that bad that quick.”

“Right.”

I pretended to sift through my pockets for keys as he made his way down the hall, and when he disappeared down the stair. The smell would only get worse, there was no doubt about that. I retrieved a lavender candle I had stored in one of the drawers of my nightstand, placed it just a foot or so from the door in her apartment and lit it. I was surprised to find that I could enter her apartment without a problem. That’s perhaps the most valuable thing one can ever learn, that you can get used to anything.

That night traces of lavender and the other odor leaked into my apartment, and it was most pungent in the bedroom. Strangely the smells didn’t combine; rather, I would breathe in once and breathe lavender, only to breathe again and smell something quite different. I wasn’t worried, though. I would return the next day and take care of it.

I dreamt that night. She was like an angel hovering over a misting lavender field, the field I planted for her—one that stretched for miles. The blooms bowed beneath her toes as she drifted by. The cord was wound about her neck, yet still she travelled quietly across the field like an acolyte's candle. I might have been in the field with her, or I watched from a distance. I can't remember.

* * * *

He got back to me sooner than I thought he would.

"You have a call in for you," Ms. Evans said through my door. "A doctor?"

"Yes," I replied. "I'll take it."

"Not feeling well?"

"No." None of her damn business. "I'll get it." Once I got the job, I'd hook a damn phone up. No more of this, I thought. I followed her down the stairs.

The receiver lay on an end table beneath a large mirror. Ms. Evans returned to her office and I held the receiver an inch from my ear. "Hello?"

"Wohler. Long time no see?" he said laughing. "How are you doing?"

"Well. Yourself?"

"Fine, doing fine. Know why I'm calling?"

"I've won the lottery." Another howl from his end.

"Seriously now," he said, "Do you know why I'm calling?"

"Am I supposed to guess?" There was a pause, and a long drawn-out groan of a chair.

"I've called to ask if you would like to see me bright and early tomorrow. Just the two of us," he chuckled.

"What time, sir?"

A loud crash from upstairs stole my attention, and Ms. Evans popped out of her office, her eyes wide. Before I could get a word out she sped upstairs.

Words drizzled from the receiver but I only caught a few of them. “Can I expect you or—?”

“You can’t,” I blurted. I regretted it instantly, but it was too late. I’d already slammed the receiver down.

I scrambled to the top of the stairs to find several tenants, most of whom I’d never seen before, waiting outside their apartments. Some appeared concerned; others wanted a spectacle. Ms. Evans walked down the hall asking questions, but only learned that the noise came from the right side of the hallway. Her arms were folded tightly across her chest, and she walked with the urgency of a worry-worn mother, but thankfully the thrill of the moment died quickly; residents returned to their rooms before she could finish her inquiry. I moved away from the stairs toward my room as she made her way down the hallway. Before she passed me she paused in front of 208. Her gaze dropped to the floor. I had left the light on.

I considered following her back to her office but what would I say? What was there to say? Everything wasn’t lost. That’s what I told myself. Things were bad, but not irreparable. I’d call Wohler back, he’d laugh in my ear and I’d start work the next day. Nothing the landlady can do if she gets her money. But before I could even think to pick up the phone, there was something more important I had to take care of. I had to check.

She had disappeared from view. I adjusted myself half a dozen times to get a better look of the floor, but the crack in the wall was too high up to see anything. I entered her apartment and stepped inside her room before it even crossed my mind not to, and I found her slumped over jutting fragments of chair. A brown liquid snaked down the back of her thighs.

Before I left I noticed that the photo frame that had been hanging on the wall had come down with her. I didn't care to see more.

* * * *

I was running along the rim of my last dime and I tried calling Wohler back. Twice. Both times the bastard sent me right to voicemail. I left a message after the second call that didn't explain much of anything. I had no choice but to come up short for rent. I handed Ms. Evans my check and told her that I was still waiting for another project to come my way; she still bought that freelancing thing. To my surprise she forgave me readily because Miss Randal, who had yet to learn "how lucky she really was," owed me for two months. "If you remember, it's not in my nature to punish generosity," she said. "We'll set things straight." Upon my arrival to my apartment I reviewed our conversation, and the throbbing in my head returned. I would look through the White Pages again. I would find something. Just sit in the armchair and clip ads and make a few calls, I thought.

But still I couldn't shake the feeling that I was out of time, and that it would all fall apart as neatly as it started. I lay down on my bed, flat on my back, and allowed all feeling to soak into the mattress. I thought about how things could have gone differently, if they ever could have, and once you get to thinking about the last few weeks, there's nothing much to stop you from looking at all that came before. I went back—way back—and found exhaustion.

A numbness took over, numbness that started right at the top of my head and travelled quietly. It's like when your foot falls asleep, only this hit deeper. Instead of needle-prick tingling it was as though my nerves had been unraveled, respooled and set aside. But it wasn't over.

I kept my tools in a bag beneath the kitchen sink. I just needed a small ladder, which I found both in a storage unit in the complex without controversy, and a fan brace box and three meters of Samson rope, which I purchased cheap at a local hardware store with the last few dollars in my wallet. First, after having switched off the power at the circuit breaker box, I removed the bedroom light fixture from the ceiling and pulled out the junction box. The brace I bought appeared too large to insert into the hole, so I would have to improvise. With the butt of my screwdriver—I didn't own a hammer—it was one strike in the morning, one strike in the afternoon and one strike in the evening; just hard enough to make a dent in the ceiling, to inch my way through the drywall without drawing attention. I still remember the feel of the screwdriver in my hand, like power, plastic and freedom. I didn't eat. I didn't sleep. I lived hour by hour for the one strike that would bring me closer to my goal. Morning, afternoon, evening, I struck at the wall, and it was over in two days. Just wide enough. I inserted the bar, jammed either end between two joists, strung the rope over the bar and it was done. It would be several hours before nightfall, so I clipped a few ads, thawed some slivers of frozen chicken for dinner, and even let myself take a quick nap.

When I woke I was ready. Giddy, almost. I briefly stepped out into the hallway and walked down a ways, checking the cracks beneath the residents' doors for any light. Not one live apartment.

It occurred to me that this was, in fact, the first time I had ever stepped foot in her room, an affair which proved somewhat anticlimactic. I recognized a few pieces of furniture here and there, which did pique my excitement, but there were a few things that I missed from the vantage of my bedroom, such as the antique padlock chest at the end of the room and a leather valise tucked beneath the nightstand. She lay crumpled on the floor, her hair scattered over her face.

Her right ankle deep purple and swollen—probably landed on it when she fell. I took off my jacket, slipped my hands beneath her upper back and the crooks of her knees, and walked on the flat of my feet to minimize the noise as I crossed the floor to my apartment.

I knew I would miss the view into her room, but the plaster of paris held up nicely, and not to boast but I felt that I was pretty innovative going about it, seeing that it was my first attempt at patching a wall. It turns out that one can do just about anything with some wire, a pencil and a soup can lid. I even managed to cover it over with white paint I used for my last apartment, and though the wall was actually something of an off-white, the room is dim and you'd have to really look for it to notice a difference. Ms. Evans wouldn't think twice.

Sleep was coming fast. Miss Randal swung overhead as I swept up the bits of drywall that collected along the hedging on the wall and tossed it into the trash. The rest of the clean up I would take care of the next morning. Now, I believe I'm quite lucky—my outlook used to be anything but. I turned out the light and bade her goodnight.

CHAPTER 6
MOBY-DICKINSON

Comrades

Call me what you will but I am not one to draw the long bow. They say that liars make the happiest men, and I can assure you that I am very much unhappy. Permit me to recount how I have come to face such pitiful circumstances. Education and youth make sorry bedfellows, and finding myself at the brink of self-murder I boarded the Pequod to hunt whales in the Atlantic, for I held that if a man maintains to clamber up the greasy steps to Death's open door on his own, it is still polite to knock. But alas, the low-profit venture ate greedily into my paltry lay, I fell into debt, and as one Sisyphian sailor I had little choice but to embark on a more pragmatic one.

The morning before we set sail we were tasked with loading. Sun-drenched men swept on and off deck, oiling masts and manning winches to supply the galley and cargo hold. I remember crossing the main deck with several piggin bails stacked in my arms when I spied a junior mate lounging on a drum of coiled hempline, wearing little more than a tow shirt to shield his tawny shoulders from sun and assaulting wind. At sight of the chief mate Starbuck advancing the gangway, he and a bearded comrade made to saunter off, but the mate's eyes had already narrowed on them. Keeping watch over my shoulder I dropped the buckets by the rail nearest the whaleboats.

"Hallo. And where dost think thou art going?" said Starbuck.

“Waitin’ captain’s orders, is all,” replied the junior mate.

“Captain Ahab’s not well. Thou shall take thy commands from me.”

“May we take early, then?”

“Lubber!” cried Starbuck. “While ‘tis not my nature to lay out the cat, thy captain takes to a-flogging like he takes to Orleans whiskey, and ‘tis not in my power to arrest him.”

“I should know my captain ere I pledge me life to ‘em. Methinks ‘tis my rightful warrant.”

For a moment the chief mate’s eyes seemed to soften, and while he owed nothing to these two green sprouts, it was “the worm of conscience” that beckoned him to speak.

“Thy captain came in close neighborhood with a great monster whose wrath could quake the bones of a bronze monument. Fueled by demency, Ahab forfeit all in pursuit of that great fiend and was nearly cast down with his ship—mind, body and soul. But that man is thy captain, and now thou knowest him, and when aboard thy captain’s ship, ‘tis privilege, and ye insult that great kindness by loafing about! Beware, Ahab will not be served a cold coffee.”

“Don’t be givin’ any ear to that crab,” said the bearded one. “The man smelt a rat ere he step foot aboard.”

“Mind me, ye wisacres,” barked the first mate. “For aught I know, I know none a’tall, but more than thou withal. Ahab is my captain, and now thine also.” Several of the men who had been working nearby quieted their bustling to hear.

“Is tha’all that happened?”

With the gentle click of his boot heel against the deck, Starbuck stepped toward the junior mate, rubbing the calloused flat of his palms together as though to warm them beneath the cold, hard indignity of the sailor’s gaze.

“I find it grave offense to tattle the misfortunes of other men,” he said, “but never in my years on the open sea had I ever bore witness to such misfortune as that of poor Ahab. On that fateful eve, he asked what his men would do if it came in white, and our irons were made ready to spill. ‘Twas a mistake—it was—to indulge an angry man’s fancies, and I fear the pinch of the game has yet to pass. Now, I’ve said my piece. Do what thou hast been subscribed.”

With his hands thrust deep into his pockets he marched into the crowd of laboring men and disappeared.

“A yarn. And not one tittle of encouragement,” the bumpkin mocked.

“Aye,” his comrade replied. “I’d say he’s pretty well o’er the bay.”

“The man doesn’t drink,” Stubb said, stepping onto the deck. I wondered how much of the conversation he had caught a hold of. “Get back to loadin’ or I’ll sweeten ye meself.”

Oakum and the Weendigo

There was complaint that some of the floorboards in the forecastle had begun to split and that they were in dire need of re-caulking. I wasn’t particularly fond of the chore but I determined that it would at least offer me precious time to meditate on important things.

As I made my way below the hatches, the pitchpot dangling by my side, a sailor called after me and asked that I locate some gilted button he had dropped between the cracks, before I entomb it forever with the sweep of my tar brush. I asked what value he found in such a trinket, only to be informed that he pinched it from a Naval officer in Manhattan who had insulted him, and was very proud of the dear thing.

I lay the pitchpot beneath one of the bunks and drew up the sleeves of my monkey jacket. Before I could begin I had to reef out old substance between the planks with a marlinspike and

mallet. The other night one of the mariners, utterly drunk on brandy, recounted when he was incarcerated at Coldbath Fields Prison in Clerkenwell—eleven weeks for a debt he owed a London perfumer. It was there he and his jailmates were made to pick tarred oakum, or “junk,” so that it might be respun into new hemp rope or retailed as cheap mattress bedding. I had heard such doomful tales from grizzled panhandlers along tavern roadsides, of the torturous cranks and tread wheels that reeled in the bellies of English prisons, but never had I met a man with the slightest mark to substantiate them. They had only the assistance of their fingers to shred two pounds per diem, he said, and it was near impossible to meet quota; by evening his fingers were “as black had the babe of The Devil sucked ‘em,” and his fingertips split enough that he could balance a gold guinea in the raw divots of each. He raised his hands over lamplight for all to see.

Once the old stuff was removed I scanned the cracks with the glow of the oil lantern, but if there were ever a gleam of pirated yellow, it never reached my eye. After sprinkling a few parting words, I replaced the rot-spotted planks with spares I had collected from the hold, beetled down alternating layers of cotton and oakum with a hawsing iron into the grooves, and sealed the remaining seams with hot pine tar.

The captain had not come out for weeks since the *Pequod* had set sail, and there was rumor that the vessel were commandeered by a rogue band of marauders, but when men were asked the purpose of such a ruse, not one could come to a determination. It was at the greatest periods of disquiet that Tashtego, Stubb’s harpooner, seized occasion to tell tales of the *Weendigo*, an insatiable *lusus naturae*, a spirit driven mad by the relish of flesh and bone. One of the sailors argued that such a thing could never clear the sea.

“Superstition,” Tashtego replied, shaking his head gravely. “Once it has set its sights, there is no ocean wide or cold enough, no towering blockade great enough to prevent it from claiming its prize.”

A younger sailor asked, as meekly as a wind chime, what it looked like. Tashtego lowered his head—his narrowed eyes accentuated by lantern light and the broad brim of his hat.

“Oh, but the *Weendigo* may take on any likeness,” he said, glancing in the direction of the captain’s cabin. “‘Tis a clever spirit. Pray to your god that it don’t know any of us.”

By the end of his delivery, Tashtego—somewhat of a theaterman—raised his arms above his head and pleasantly bid the men a goodnight before absconding into the dark to the steerage for a dreamless sleep. The crew, now riled with suspicion, spent the course of a half-hour at variance with one another, each having designed an elaborate account of how the protean spirit would manifest. This led to many a heated chafe, until a puffy-eyed Starbuck and his mates arrived and threatened to suspend the daily gill of grog if they didn’t disperse. You’ll get no sooner reaction than to deny a man his spirits.

Scrimshaw, Gular Scutes, and Captain Ahab

A month of Sundays without a single whale sighting. After a sailor’s shift was over there was little to keep him from laying down the knife and fork to boredom. Some of the junior mates were set to jury-rig an oarlock that had finally tore away from the gunwale of one of the whaleboats, but the rest whose four-hour shifts had ended were left wandering. When our Danish mariner was relieved of duty he would carve double-nine domino sets with whalebone and lampblack, and while he never laid them out for himself, they often fell into the hands of the crewmen (who were equally determined to gamble their spirit rations within a round or two).

But one can chisel only so many bone tiles before black spots color all that he sees, and I later spied the Dane collecting kitchen scraps and bits of ship debris in pursuit of some other diversion.

Taking after our little friend I tried my hand at scrimshaw. Some sailors hone their skills on coconut shell and hunks of wood, but knowing that I'd be rather excellent at it, I took to tortoise shell (a piece of refuse the noble Cook let me steal from last evening's scrumptious mess—a succulent tortoise stew with parboiled turtle meat, potatoes, rice, a sprinkling of parsley and a faint trace of sherry—though it could have stood a spot of salt). I had been at the project for some time, chiseling away at the rigid surface with the end of a rusted nail, brooding over the irony of carving such mimetic likeness of the late sea turtle on the back of its own shell. I toiled with a diligence befitting a disciple of Ponos, daubing at the back of my neck with a damp rag I kept tucked in my belt, the sweet aroma of which would have delighted that very good god of labor. A couple days earlier I had set out to collect pigments during my downtime. Lampblack was easily procurable but it could not offer the contrast I desired. I realized later that a light green pigment would be a delightful compliment to the dark tone of the shell, so I underwent the painstaking process of shaving away verdigris from the ship's brass hinges—having the most luck at the base of the mainmast. Once I finish adding value to the gular scutes—frontal paired plates that make up the flat of the tortoise shell—I would, at last, add the pigment.

When aboard a vessel for so many days and nights, a man grows familiar with every groan of the hull and strain of the rigging. But one afternoon I heard a sound, a creak so strange to me that it arrested my very soul, and I broke out into such a cold sweat beneath the lining of my jacket that I might as well have plunged headfirst into the rimy drink.

Were the crew not facing the same direction as I, I would have thought myself having succumbed to the wiles of fever, but there Captain Ahab stood, the hem of his greatcoat billowing about his legs. He did not speak, but rather reigned our attentions with a dogged reserve. Oh brave man! An earth-bound Hephaestus! Every line in the man's brow forged by hazard and bitter trial. Oh! The worsted trim of his coat—the downy shagg sheared from the most flocculent ovis—a matchless exemplar of modern seafaring couture!

Not long after his entrance I felt the weight of eyes fall upon me, for it did not occur to me that I had said all such things aloud.

The Starkest Madness

A wish granted too readily. While no man would dare remark it, few desired more than for their captain to withdraw to that cabin whence he had so dramatically emerged. From morning until dusk Ahab silently paced the length of the ship, stopping only to appear suddenly and lean over men's shoulders as they travailed. At times he would stand so closely that one could see the very thews of his sea-blue eyes contract in the blaze of the noonday sun, as though to tap into a man's most intimate reflections, to root out any trace of an ill word. As a fellow sailor had so aptly expressed to me, “‘Twere not the sea that killed us, ‘twould be that ranging eye that scrutinized.”

But one morning the routine changed.

“All hands!” chief mate Starbuck called.

Within moments men scaled down the masts, emerged from beneath the hatches and reported to the main deck as they had been commanded, somewhat bewildered, for it was only in

crisis that they were wholly assembled. Ahab stood at the base of the mainmast with Pip under the crux of his arm, the latter reciting such nonsense that some men visibly kept their distance.

“Much madness is divinest sense to a discerning eye!” Pip shouted, wringing a handkerchief he drew from his canvas trousers, but his tone abruptly dropped to a whisper once he recognized that his audience was full house. “Much sense—the starkest madness—‘tis the majority. In this, as all, prevail—assent and you are sane,” said he, and let his voice trail off into a string of incomprehensible mutterings.

“Mark this!” Ahab cried, scanning the crowd. He gripped Pip by the shoulders. “D’ye see its foul work, men? The Devil himself would not dare attempt such handiwork as has been practiced on this boy.”

“Aye!” the men shouted.

“I tell ye this, me hearties,” Ahab, continued, “‘tis broad insult. Were you to spy the white evil that done this feat, tell me how ye might greet ‘em!”

“With the lance!”

“It shall come to that, men. And if unguarded when it comes, ‘twill consume ye. It will devour the whole of ye, gnaw at thy bones with its splintered teeth and spit you back out like gristled hogsmeat. Ye shall be left maimed and on your own, lost to thyself—unrecognizing of the world and the world unrecognizing of ye.”

“Sir,” a sailor interrupted. “What is it?”

“Ye shall know when ye see it. ‘Tis an awful rarity—one that cannot be put into the proper words. Ain’t that right, boy?” he said, patting Pip on the back. The young man would not respond.

Ahab reached into his pocket and walked about the deck in measured strides, with not one but two doubloons pinched between thumb and forefinger. He held them out so that we might all catch their precious glint in the sunlight.

“The man must not think too well of us to fall for that hocus,” said Tashtego, leaning against the bulwarks. He tightened his watch-coat and buried his calloused hands under his arms.

With a hammer and marlinspike Ahab nailed the golden ounces, one atop the other, to the mainmast. “He who lands the fatal blow shall be in receipt of these two Spanish pretties,” he said. “But more importantly, were there ever a debt to be paid, it would be the one all earthly men owed ‘em,” he said, and retreated somberly to his cabin with Pip close behind.

As though by Providence, we witnessed a spectacle that very night.

“Pray, what is that?” Stubb cried, pointing out into the dark.

“’Tis the *ween-dee-go*,” whispered one of the sailors.

“Don’t whelm us with thy fables,” admonished Starbuck, peering over the edge. “But I do see it.”

About a hundred or so feet from us there was a great splash, followed by another within seconds at the opposite end of the ship, and we pulled back from the sight as though it were cannonball fire. It was everywhere.

“There is nothing we can do now. We must wait ‘til first light,” said the first mate. “Back to thy compartments, lads. Until morning.” As we made our way to the forecabin Starbuck did not return to his quarters, but for whatever purpose stood vigil over the water.

Every man aboard kept wake with the night watchmen knowing that some great thing in the water mocked them, and if there were any question whether Ahab had seen the display that

evening, there was no mistake, for we could hear him pacing—pacing upon the jawbone of Moby Dick whom he had slain years ago.

The Only Lowering

The anomaly continued well into the night, and it wasn't until the men were roused from their bunks that all activity ceased. "It shall return for us," Starbuck muttered under his breath, shaking his head gravely. "Last night—'twas a warning. For Ahab and his helpers, 'twas warning for us all."

The chief mate couldn't have spoken truer words, for it wasn't until the sun touched the water that the calm was disrupted once more.

"Dare ye see the soul of the white heathen?" Ahab cried, pointing to ripples. "'Tis there!"

"I don't see anything, my captain," replied Flask.

"Pull out yer spy-glass ye damned cur! And to the rest of ye sons of bachelors--this demon shan't slip me on account of dawdling! Skin your eyes."

"White on the water!" shouted Tashtego, peering over the rail at the Starboard gangway, his lantern swinging in his hand. "Starboard bow!"

"Nay! Aaft, sir!" called a sailor from the crow's-nest.

"Diddle me not," growled Ahab. "For if a man's eyes see only gold, he sees no qualm takin' advantage of his brother. But I say, throw hatchets at me and I'll soon have all ye keelhauled fasterin' ye could spit! Answer the both of ye! Is there white on the water?"

"Aye!" they reported.

“Lower! Lower the boats!” Ahab cried, pushing past the third mate. “For all ye offended by that which would test thy mettle, vent your gall with the meanness of thy arms and the sting of thy irons! Lower the boats!”

I looked down at Tashtego, stalwart and severe, as poised as a young Ares while Stubb ferried him out to greet Ahab’s beast.

“Wild nights! Wild nights!” the captain howled, seized by frenzy as the monster tore through the waves.

Gripping onto the gunwale of his boat, Tashtego raised his harpoon to strike, but a great wave fell over the boat and knocked Stubb and his harpooneer into the water.

“Huzzah!” the remaining men cried, and drove their harpoons into the deep.

“Avast!” Ahab shouted.

A hush fell over the ocean, and little more could be heard than the crush of waves against the whaleboat hulls.

“Perchance she’s had enough of us,” a sailor whispered to me.

I raised my lantern out over the edge to catch the terrifying trace of lace-lined hem disappear into the dark water.

A roiling circle formed by the ship, and without warning the white atrocity launched from the center, as though it had been spat out, and the great monster that flopped on deck was none other than Emily Dickinson.

The Dash

Often confused with the hyphen (-), the dash (--), a horizontal line suspended approximately two millimeters in altitude on ruled parchment, is most often situated between two

clauses, lexemes and some free morphemes. Perhaps the most significant of all dashes is that which is known as the “em dash,” aptly named for its comparable width to the capital “M.” The “em dash” signifies a brief pause or moment of detachment from the primary text, which draws attention to the content succeeding the dash (in such a way that parenthesis cannot hope to achieve). The hyphen, on the other hand, which surpasses the dash only in its punctuational inferiority, is a fickle stroke that operates exclusively to join words or to split syllables. Even less impressive is the “en dash,” only half the length of the “em dash”—which is really just a lowly hyphen riding on the triumph of *the* dash—and a rude surrogate for the preposition “to,” used most frequently to denote a span of time (e.g. 1754–1763). The crew fancies the dash a sort of double-sided single flue iron, which can either lock or distance successive words depending on their context and the metaphorical relationship they share. This conceit, however, is absolute twaddle. “Dash,” as a noun, may indicate a small quantity, so if a gentleman were to sniff “a dash of snuff” (the use of this tobacco powder, which became popular among Europeans in the 17th century, can be traced as far back as 15th century Haiti), only a trifle of snuff is snuffed. “Dash” performs as both transitive and intransitive verb, meaning to “violently swish one’s legs to arrive at destination, prompted by a profound sense of urgency,” and relieves sentences that would be otherwise fettered down with vulgarities of “run” or “jog.” In its archaic usage, “to dash,” if we are to use the infinitive, means “to blow” or “to strike,” as one would, quote Lady Macbeth, “[dash] the brains out” (1.7.7).

Emily Dickinson

“Caught without her diadem!” Ahab cried. Emily raised herself from off the deck and stood as composed as an ivory statue, seemingly unfazed that she was soaked to the skin. One of

the sailors, apparently beholden, reached out to her, as though his hand would break through a wall of mist. “Careful lads. A loaded gun, that one is.”

“That isn’t very civil, Master,” the maiden replied. She wrung out her long chestnut hair as she spoke and let it spatter on the deck.

“Ye shan’t expect me to be politic with you, Em’ly.”

“Sir, you know the soggy lady?” Flask asked incredulously.

“Oh yes, dear Flask,” Ahab replied. “We’ve had an unfortunate series of encounters. But I returned for ye, oh but did I come back to capture ye.”

“And here I thought you were out of print.”

“Belay the ambiguities, girl.”

“It was kind to let me alight the Peacock this time,” she said, peeling away a thin strip of kelp from her shoulder.

“I caught ye!”

“Did you.” Neither harpoon nor towline had even grazed her—her dress was immaculate.

“’Tis of no matter!” Ahab cried, stomping his peg against the deck. “I have ye and ye know what I’m after,” he growled, hand extended. “Hand it over.”

“I fear you shall not procure a trophy such as that from me,” she said, pointing to his false leg, “but I can write you a mean ditty.”

“Ye nautical bitch.”

“A word can pierce a human heart as quickly as a spear. Yet oft is a man’s lance too blunt to shed the slightest tear.”

“If ye want my vengeance, ye shall have it.”

“For poesy?” cried Starbuck. “Captain Ahab, all this for pretty words?”

“Oh, ‘tis a sad day indeed when a first mate lay claim to the authority of the captain!”
snarled Ahab. “Do ye challenge me, ole Starbuck, ‘fore my crew and the God Almighty?”

“Nay, sir,” the mate whispered, and cowered back into the crowd.

“I don’t profess to be profound; but I do lay claim to common sense. Master—there is no handing ‘it’ over.”

“Tellin’ it slant as always.”

“Truth is so rare, it is delightful to tell it.”

“Em’ly. Ye dare stay me from my conquer?”

“To demand that I verse you in the vanquishment of poetry is like asking how one might conquer a daisy.”

“What is this roundabout? Tell me what’s to be done.”

“If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. You, Master, have only mangled your right leg.”

Before Ahab could protest, she scampered aft, her bare feet pattering against the deck, and locked herself away in the captain’s cabin.

CHAPTER 7

LOSING DEFENSE

Diane fumbled with the covers and turned to face me.

“Godammit. Godammit, honey.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“It’s my mouth. It’s like it’s bruised,” I said, pointing to it.

“Bruised? How would you have done that?”

“The hell would I know? Right at the top there.”

“I don’t think I can see,” she said, leaning in.

“Never mind.”

I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and made my way to the bathroom for Tylenol. I left the light switch alone and blindly patted at the wall for the medicine cabinet door. She called after me. “Gargle saltwater!” That was her solution for everything. The bottle was light and I shook it to hear only two or three gel capsules bounce around the plastic bottom. I popped the cap and took the lot for good measure.

When I returned I found Diane bundled up in the comforter like a wad of discarded gum.

“You coming back to bed?”

“It’s a quarter till,” I answered, pulling on an old pair of dress pants over my boxers. “I might as well stay up until I clock in. Make some coffee or something.”

“I think I’ll take the extra half-hour,” she said groggily. “I’m still tired.”

I put on my belt, pulled on a shirt, hung an old tie over the back of my neck and shuffled to the kitchen.

My nerves were still rattled but I was better. Sleep can do that. I paced the kitchen as the coffee maker dripped, and carefully slid my tongue across my palate, over a salty fault line that had formed there. I figured I'd cut myself on something. That bag of chips from last night, probably. I poured the coffee into the last clean mug from the overhead cabinet and tied my tie as it cooled. I sat at the table and braced myself before taking a sip. It stung at first, but the lingering throb was strangely pleasant. Bittersweet wasn't the word.

Someone had borrowed my stapler and hadn't returned it. I usually kept it in my desk but I must've left it out last time. I unlocked the side-drawer and pulled out a heavy stack of credit application forms for review. As usual, Susan to the left of me had already gotten started on the paperwork, typing loudly, stapling loudly, inking and stamping loudly. She had only been here for a couple months but she loved when Mr. Hayes noticed her away at work while all of the other desks were vacant. All the noise in the world wouldn't get her through the glass ceiling.

Mr. Hayes, the Director, sat in his office in a little corner of the room and only rarely looked up from his desk. I wondered which was worse, the small, felt-lined walls of my cubicle or a larger glass one.

I removed the first form from the stack. A pathetic employment history as a fast food delivery guy who earned a side income as an interior painter. No history of bankruptcy but four active credit cards and a car loan outstanding. I placed the form in the "maybe" pile. Plug him into the computer later. Answer a few phone calls, plug people into computers, play with some software and give the yay or nay for the credit line extension. Go home. Rinse and repeat.

I used to think about going home. She'd call me up in the middle of work, and when I got home and took off my tie we fucked like we were making up sleep. It was beautiful. We don't do that anymore. Now it was as though we'd forgotten how to sleep naked.

About ten minutes till one. Today was the day, I thought. I'd get rid of the rest of it. But still I couldn't shake my last exchange with Dr. Kravitz. *They've got nothing on me, Alan. That's the problem. You're saying there's no evidence. What I'm saying's that the shit's prescription only, dumbass—there's no record of thyroid tests, blood work or anything. Did you even keep a sleep diary?*

I remembered my first time out. Kravitz had just set me up with fifteen tablets, and I was to meet the guy at the intersection of Princeview Drive and Franklin, in front of the old inner-city tattoo shop that went bankrupt a couple years ago. I leaned against the brick of the building and kept my hood over my head. I knew I came early but I soon began to doubt he'd come. I paced the front some to keep warm, checking my watch from time to time, until finally I saw a head pop over the tall chain-link fence bordering the other side of the street. This was it, I thought. My first sling.

Despite his bulk the man scaled the fence quite easily, and once he hit ground he made in my direction. He looked both ways before he crossed, every step as calculating as a fucking panther's, his body obscured by the dark. Still, I kept my composure. This is my life now, I thought. I'm that guy.

When he finally made it to the building it occurred to me that he only came up to my chin. Couldn't have even graduated from high school.

"Hey, man," he said. *Jesus Christ.* His voice even cracked.

I drew us away from the light to conduct our business.

“Thing you should know is,” the kid said, glancing over his shoulder, “this place gets cased all the time. I almost didn’t come out.” I could feel my skin flush and I became very conscious of how the tag of my hoodie scraped across the back of my neck. There might still be time to return it to Sports Authority, I thought.

“Have the money?” I growled. Like a goddamned pro he dug his hand into his coat pocket and pulled out a wad of twenties. I took the cash and shoved the Ziploc bag into his tiny palm before jogging off to my car around the back of the shop.

I’d get better and this would be my life, I thought, but it wouldn’t be long before I’d make my rounds mid-day at the Target across the street, in front of God, the shoppers, and a blanket of mommy-mobiles. True, it wasn’t what I envisioned, but I supposed it was a step closer.

I locked my laptop in my desk drawer and made my way out. It was chilly and I had forgotten my sports jacket at home, but I figured that like the rest of them, this wouldn’t take too long. Traffic was exceptionally bad so I had to use the crosswalk several yards down from the service road to get to the strip mall at the other side. The parking lot was packed, but I kept an eye on my post at the second cart station in front of the store and spotted him. We made the exchange and it was over.

“Thank you much,” he said, and shook my hand.

I mumbled my “you’re welcome” and walked back to my building with time to spare for a bit of lunch.

* * * *

For dinner we warmed up cans of Campbell’s and shared slices of dry pumpkin seed loaf. I first took a bite of bread and a piece of the crust jabbed my palate hard—the sudden shock of

pain ripped to the roots of my teeth, but somehow I kept quiet enough for Diane not to notice. I broke off another hunk, dipped an edge into the steaming chowder in front of me, and slowly mashed it into a delicate paste with my tongue to swallow. The soup would have to cool before I could get to it. We asked each other how work went but aside from that we didn't say much. She looked tired.

After dinner I headed to our bedroom, grabbed the flashlight by the nightstand, and hurried to the bathroom before Diane could make it up the stairs. I leaned into the medicine cabinet mirror, parted my lips and tilted my head back to expose my mouth to the reflection. When I turned on the flashlight the direction of the beam cast a shadow across my palate, and all I could make out were rows of yellowing enamel, so I had to lean back a little further to get a better look. It wasn't shadow at all. Black. The entire thing black. The thin line of the cut was darker still, and looked as though it had been carved with the point of a fountain pen. Without thinking I downed two glasses of water, which was helpful I guess, but I might as well have tried to flush away a tattoo. With the flashlight still directed at my mouth I carefully slid a finger over the area and could see the tissue give, like the flesh of an apple made tender by a fall. I pressed a little harder and was met with a sudden surge of pain that stretched across my mouth and tunneled upward into my head somewhere, and I staggered back into the shower curtain. I raised my finger to my nose and smelled rot.

"Honey," I called out.

"Yeah?"

"Who do you see for the roof of your mouth?"

"Have you talked to Sam?" she asked, appearing in the doorway.

No more calls, no appointments, no more prescriptions, nothing. I couldn't.

“Shouldn’t I see a dentist or something?”

“Go see Sam, honey.” That was her solution for everything. “Not everyone gets free advice and for all we know he might make it a point to squeeze you into his schedule a bit early. Let me give him a call.”

“What will he know about this?”

“I don’t know, but you won’t know until you see him. He might even give you a recommendation.” Yeah. That I shove my head up my ass.

“I’m just saying it might be a waste of time.”

“Why are you making such a big deal out of it?”

“I don’t know. No reason.”

I have to let it go for now, I thought. It will have to heal on its own.

* * * *

“Morning Mr. Hayes,” I said, but my wave went unnoticed; as usual he hovered over his keyboard as though the vertebrae in his neck were fused together. Someone had slapped an extra stack of applications on my desk next to the old one I had been working on. Deadline next Wednesday, and I was already behind. Plus there was that stupid floor meeting to discuss our earnings at two. I opened my laptop, dropped the first application of the morning onto my desk for the look-over, but I couldn’t keep my mind on it for long.

If you would follow me. Dr. Kravitz will be with you in a moment.

I had been sitting in the doctor’s office for some time. I had Kravitz’s cut wedged beneath my belt, a good eight hundred bucks: two-thirds the sum we made off the thirty-pill bottle. Tablets sold for forty a pop and we considered hiking it to fifty, but Kravitz said that we’d risk losing our base. Four hundred was good, I thought, I could do with that, and I’d get to

pocket another four hundred by the time I made it through the second bottle hidden in my sock drawer.

Dr. Kravitz walked in, closed the door and sat on the little stool he kept beneath the desk. With his hands folded in his lap he kept his eyes locked on mine and would not move.

“You’ve ruined me, Alan.”

I asked him what he meant. He drew open a desk drawer, pulled out a rolled up copy of the local newspaper and turned to the Metro section.

“There,” he said, jabbing the print with his finger. “Look.”

My God. That guy. I sold him four last week, and now he was in custody for trying to knock out some girl at a bar downtown.

“He wouldn’t say anything. I guarantee you.” Frankly I had no idea. For all I knew he would rat us out first thing for a lighter sentence.

“Doesn’t matter. He can say as little as he wants. They found the stuff on him.”

I asked him what we could do.

There’s prison time for this shit. We’re finished. What do you mean finished? Fucked. We’re fucked.

I could hear it more than I could feel it, the sound of the first footfall in snow. I peered from beneath the open cover of my laptop. The carpet gave beneath her inch-long heels as Susan teetered toward my desk like a rickety puppet. Not now. For God’s sake not now. I should’ve gotten up and left but instead I was fused to the chair. I can’t remember what she said, just that she laid her hand on the end of my desk to steady herself as she spoke. I think she asked me something about Thanksgiving plans but I could feel a liquid snake down my chin as I tried to adjust my jaw, and instead of just wiping it away with the cuff of my sleeve, I stared.

She asked me if I was okay—at least I believe she did—and increased my panic. I stood abruptly, banging my legs against the edge of my desk on my way up and walked to the restroom.

I leaned into the mirror and opened my mouth as wide as I could to find that my palate had now cracked and dipped down. I didn't have time for this, I thought. There wasn't time. I knew it was crazy, but I managed to raise the mass up. It was clumsy at first but I poised it on top the tips of two fingers and pressed it back. I don't know how I was doing it, but after several attempts I got it all to balance like the fragile, uneven panes of cathedral glass. I backed away from the sink, cautiously sliding my tongue over the roof of my mouth to assess my work. It would hold, I thought.

A knock at the door. I exited the restroom with a distilled look but a lingering sense of accomplishment, and I nodded at Tashdid, our intern, as he took the door from me on my way out. I sat back down at my seat and continued to work. Susan's eyes darted up at me from time to time and I didn't know what I would say to her, if I had to say anything at all. I wondered what she thought of me. Unpredictable, maybe. Admittedly, there was something to that. Some sensation, as much a stranger to me as it was familiar, had settled in my abdomen, a feeling that caused my teeth to clench and urged my legs to cross. Perhaps I'd go to the meeting after all, though my breath would be terrible.

* * * *

I had promised to fix the kitchen sink disposal while Diane was out shopping with her sister, Lisa, the two preparing for that Thanksgiving dinner coming up. I could caulk the bathtub while I was at it, she said. Unfortunately, yanking the object wouldn't be as simple as reaching down the drain; the grinding wheel was jammed. I turned the breaker off and closed the water

valve beneath the sink. After positioning myself beneath the pipework, I retrieved a small Allen wrench from my toolbox and wiggled it in the hole beneath the disposal to loosen the jam.

Before I could check whether it worked, the kitchen phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Alan.” This call must be from home. He never called me from the office.

“I thought we weren’t doing this whole—talking thing.”

“I know. I dropped my appointments this morning.”

“You cancelled?”

“I think they’re doing a sweep at the hospital,” he said, taking short breaths. “I think we need to say something.”

“Well yeah there are some things we need to talk about, but so you know I still have your—”

“—Don’t send me my cut, you can keep it. Listen.”

I tried to. I really did. But it was like something was suddenly trying to make sense.

The math didn’t add up, I thought. This man probably makes over a hundred grand a year so what could eight hundred, this miserable blip in his salary, possibly be worth to him? Why in holy hell would he bother in the first place?

Then it hit me. This whole time, I thought. I had been so caught up in living the dream that it hadn’t even occurred to me that he had been working to set me up. Every family get-together, every conversation, every handshake, every interaction I’d ever had with Kravitz was suspect. He was going to pin all of this on me to get back at me for something, and for all I knew the feds were huddled behind him in a ballroom-sized living room, patting him on the back like a goddamned hero as he coaxed me into confession.

But was it for something I did? Or something I had? My wife, I thought. I goddamned knew it. I pictured Diane in scrubs, sitting there on that table doing unmentionable things with this unspeakable man. The divorce changed you, Kravitz, my God.

“Alan? You there?”

It was my moment, my Luzhin’s defense. I would not do prison for this man, I thought. I’d rather die and I’d let him know it. I knew what to tell this fucker.

But before I could say anything remotely witty, it collapsed. All of it. My jaws were locked open as though I had just eaten something too hot to chew, leaving just the thin seam of my lips to keep the mass contained. I tried to speak, but it was crowded behind my teeth. I slammed the phone down. I hoped it hurt his ears.

I raced to the bathroom with my hands cupped under my chin. Just pack it in like before, I thought. I watched myself in the mirror as I balanced the dangling mass on top two fingers, gently angling it upward into the cavity, and as I maneuvered it, it suddenly occurred to me that my hand looked strikingly like a pistol.

The scream ripped from my throat, battering the mass against the walls of my teeth. *Wouldn’t give you the fucking satisfaction*, I thought. Without thinking I jammed the remains of my palate back into the hollow with my thumbs, ignoring the flares of red and orange that blotched my vision. A marble-sized wad dropped out into the sink and I tossed it in the trash. It would hold, and I was going to set this straight.

* * * *

“You ready?” I asked.

“Not quite. I lost my keys.”

“I can drive.”

“I know honey but I still need to find them.”

We lived across the street from a preschool so we were used cars parked all over the neighborhood, but the Thanksgiving holiday kept the roads clear. While Diane was preoccupied upstairs I parted the blinds in the living room and looked outside for anything out of the ordinary. I didn't know for what. A stalking cop car, a white paneled van, but all I could see were a couple empty sedans crowded into our neighbor's driveway. I might actually be okay. Still, I wasn't sure which was more formidable: waiting for a drug bust at the home or seeing Diane's family. And Kravitz.

Diane came down in a sleeveless blouse that I hadn't seen before.

“Found them.”

“That new?” I asked.

“Got it with Lisa at Talbots. I like it.”

“It looks nice.”

Lisa welcomed us at the door before we arrived at the porch. She threw up her hands and wrapped her arms around my wife once she landed on the doormat. The tiny Pomeranian darted out unexpectedly from the living room and yipped anxiously from behind Lisa's ankles, blocking our way inside. “Back, you,” Lisa ordered, and nudged the dog to the side with her foot as we entered. “Jim's upstairs but he'll be right down.”

We dropped off our shoes at the foyer and entered the living room. Diane sat beside her mother on the loveseat nearest the picture window, their hands waving excitedly as they chatted between themselves.

Kravitz, the friendly family doctor, fiddled with his phone in the corner of the living room. Keeping it casual. Ever since she learned of the divorce, Lisa brought Kravitz along to their every Thanksgiving, despite the entire family having had, at some point or another, graced his examination table. They tried to speak with him from time to time, but conversation often fell short.

“She took the kids,” was Lisa’s only petition, and only a bastard would argue. Our six-year-old nephew, however, as unblushing as Adam, sought every opportunity to play with Kravitz despite his having gone in for pinworm last spring.

The table was set, the turkey centerpiece bordered by a cheap plastic autumn vine she got from a craft store and a set of Pilgrim shakers, male and female. The paper napkins had pumpkins on them. Once we were all seated, Lisa rose to remove the foil from the side dishes: mashed cauliflower, a green bean casserole, a heap of sweet corn, a basket of drop biscuits, and two trembling cylinders of cranberry sauce.

“This looks delicious, Lisa,” Diane said.

“It sure does,” her mother chimed in. The rest of the table nodded in agreement. Lisa dropped spoons by the hot serving bowls, and after a half-assed rendition of a grace prayer mumbled by her husband, the dishes made their clockwise rounds. Once plates were loaded they smoothed their napkins over their laps and hummed through mouthfuls. Diane’s father thoughtfully stroked the stem of his wine glass and spoke to anyone who’d give him the slightest acknowledgement, about stocks, raising taxes and the pet raccoon he kept as a child.

The dog—I never could remember its name—crept beneath the table, wove between legs in hopes of an offering. Its performance went mostly unnoticed until Lisa finally shooed it from

beneath the tablecloth. There was the patter of feet on linoleum, and I watched the stupid thing slump despairingly by the dishwasher.

Kravitz, seated at the other end of the table, absently let his fork herd stray corn kernels across his plate. Fuck you.

The sneeze came from nowhere. *Shit*. There goes another one. I watched as the tiny chunk of my palate tumbled onto the tablecloth beneath the casserole dish. Some bless you dotted the conversation.

“Food goes in not out,” Diane’s father chortled, and nudged me with his elbow.

“Good to know Rick, I’ll remember next time,” I said, and somehow, without burning myself, I plucked the piece away from the hot Pyrex and dropped it into my lap.

“I got to cut my blood pressure medicine in half,” he said, raising his beer to Kravitz.

“It’s because you’re retired,” Jim replied, patting Lisa on the knee. “Feels good, don’t it?”

“Work is bad for my health. I always said it.”

“Cheers.” They took a swig together.

I looked down at my lap to determine the loss. The tiny piece had settled in a fold of the cloth napkin. I pressed the tip of my tongue into the hole in the roof of my mouth next to the other one. I’ll just have to be more careful, I thought.

“Where’s your turkey, Alan?” Jim asked, eyeing my plate. “My wife put an awful lot of work into that bird.”

“He can have what he wants,” Lisa reassured.

I suppose I should have expected something sooner. There wasn’t a single solid on my plate—just an assortment of mash.

“My mouth has been bothering me. Otherwise I would be all over it.”

“You should have Sam look at that,” Diane said. Bitch.

As the meal wore on, conversation slowed to a halt; the din of silverware against plates and the groan of second servings took over. Excitement soon gave way to exertion, and the room grew hot. Diane’s father paused, his cheeks damp and flush from wine, to adjust the napkin tucked in his collar. His wife brushed wisps of hair away from her eyes as she chewed. Diane, like the rest of her family, sat crouched over her plate, loading her spoon with a near-unconscious resolve.

When it was all over, the guests dabbed at their lips with what remained of their napkins. Since no one would dare touch desert, we dismissed ourselves one by one and staggered our way to the basement to watch the final performances of that Macy’s Day Parade we watch every goddamn year.

It suddenly dawned on me that Dr. Kravitz hadn’t come down.

As I raised myself to stand Diane placed her hand over my knee.

“Heading up?”

“Bathroom,” I said. “Upstairs, right?” and made my way up before she could answer.

He was in the kitchen standing by the stove.

“Want your talk? Let’s go.”

“We’re not doing this here,” Kravitz said, and he slipped past me to join the rest of the family.

I figured that if I couldn’t reach him now I should at least get downstairs with wet hands. I entered the bathroom, flushed the toilet, briefly ran the faucet over my palms and headed back.

* * * *

“The fuck you doing here, Alan?”

“I want to talk.”

“About pinworm?” he said, flipping through my file. I wanted more time.

“You had your shot at Lisa’s but you didn’t take it. You tell me now why you agreed to all this or I go to the police and speak for the both of us.”

As he well knew, the ball was in my court and I intended to keep it there. Regardless, the answer he gave me was not what I expected.

“I was offered an incentive by Chula Vista Chemipharm. If I could prescribe chloral hydrate four times a month, they’d top me off.”

I asked him by how much.

“Ten thousand.”

There’s no denying that it took me a moment.

“So you’re telling me that for three years you were getting ten thousand a month, on top of your salary, and you still took your cut?”

No shit I was in dire straights. There was little time between now and my hopping the border with a duffle bag full of Jim Beam and the dogs on my tail. Then one night it occurred to me. It came out of nowhere really, and how I happened to recall that conversation at all was God’s grace all its own, but I remembered when I was a child, hovering over a bowl of Cheerios on a school day that my father mentioned that I was a sixteenth Cherokee.

I’d leave everything behind, Diane if I had to. Change my name to “running-something” and live off the fat of federally allotted land. Wattle and daub hut and outdoor well water pump

outside. I could learn the language, build a fire without the petty convenience of a butane lighter. I'd be free. Free from my past. Free from the feds. Free from hellfire and bureaucracy. I would extend my hand to Diane when my Cherokee citizenship was recognized, and it would be up to her to atone and hop into the car with me, or hit the sheets with Kravitz because in the end, I could find a squaw who'd do just as nice.

During my lunch break at work I phoned the Division of Indian Affairs to stipulate the terms of my settlement, but the woman over the phone with a rattle in her voice told me that they did not conduct genealogical searches for aspiring enrollees, and directed me to the Dawes Roll online to see whether one of my ancestors registered with the Yanks for an allotment. Hell if I knew what the name was, but I called my father who, after a week or so, pulled out the family Bible and told me that we were traced to a Fannie Landrum, and lo and behold, after sifting through two-hundred and fifty-five pages of a two hundred and fifty-eight page list of Cherokee, I found her.

After another call to the UDIA, I was told to visit the Cherokee Nation homepage for the application. Should be easy enough, I thought. Name, date of birth and social security number in black or blue ink—but it had to be accompanied by the birth and death certificate of every goddamn Indian in our family.

There was a point I wondered whether I would be able to do all this in time—for all I knew I was already a wanted man, but there was hope. I had to contact the Office of Vital records, and the call center rep said that I had better start scrounging for names and dates of birth and death dates of everyone tracing back to Fannie-girl, bring in a photo ID for a walk-in and be willing to pay twelve bucks for each certificate. Like hell that was going to happen. I called the nation the next day. “Is there some simpler process? Some loophole?” I asked, pressing my

tongue into the cracks in my palate. It was then I learned that it would take eight months to process the application package anyway.

It soon became clear to me that I would have to fashion my escape by some other means. I toyed with several ideas. It could be as simple hop the fence into Canada. Probably land in a puddle of maple syrup on my way down. Canada. Too cold. Several weeks had passed and I recognized that I might just have to cast aside my best escape route and sit it out.

I ran my tongue over the silicon ridges of my retainer. Although it rubbed against my gums from time to time, that “do it yourself” dental impression kit I bought offline really seemed to do the trick. Cheap, too. I wasn’t particularly fond of the wire that stretched across the front row of my teeth; it snagged my upper lip from time to time and reminded me somewhat of a horse bit, but there’s dental wax for that. When I first sported it at the office some of my colleagues asked me what I was fixing, to which I’d say “crossbite,” and they’d leave me alone for the most part. Some would reminisce over the expanders and braces they had to wear throughout childhood. And laughing gas. People love laughing gas.

“You remember when the standard tooth cap was metallic?” Tashdid asked Susan, both hovering over my workspace.

“God yes. I had one in eighth grade. Didn’t even smile for my yearbook picture. As soon as I learned there was porcelain I was in that office like *that*,” she replied, snapping her fingers.

They continued their little chat over my head as I sifted through the forms that had collected on my desk. I imagined Mr. Hayes behind us, crammed in his little glass office, watching us, perhaps pretending not to watch—it didn’t matter. Their voices carried off into

something like white noise, as it usually did, and I mulled over what I would do for lunch—whether I should plop myself down at a cafeteria booth or risk a bite at the cheap Italian fast food place in the plaza where the Target is. I settled on the former. I'd have to learn to give myself a couple minutes to wash out my retainer before getting back. Don't want to be late like last time.

CHAPTER 8

THE PEACE

“We apologize,” Janet Dalton said. “Parking was terrible.”

This wasn't quite true. She had forgotten to lay out the boys' Sunday clothes that morning, and neither one of the children could tie a tie. An old man with big ceramic teeth handed her a bulletin and smiled broadly as he directed them to their seats. Janet let her two sons enter the pew before her.

They had just arrived during the choir opening. David and Michael's feet dangled just over the kneeling bar, and the boys took turns kicking at it with the tips of their leather shoes. “Not here,” Janet muttered. She leaned forward to reset the bar.

The boys fell back into their seats and resigned themselves to listening to the choir. Long purple stoles draped the singers' white robes, and they reminded David of the tie his mother knotted too tightly. Michael watched as their jaws dropped on the long vowels. He glanced at the pipe organ to their left as it blared, and noticed that even the ceiling-tall pipes had mouths, and they were fixed open.

Once the song ended the rector walked to the front of the altar where a microphone stood. “If you would rise and join us in ‘Be Thou My Vision’, number five hundred and forty-seven in your hymnal.” With his arms wide he motioned the congregation to stand. Janet rose from her seat while her sons slipped from the edge of the bench onto their feet. Voices once against filled the air, only this time from all around. Janet held the book down to her right so that David could see, and the two blended in with the crowd to the best of their ability. Michael didn't attempt to

view the page. Instead he watched his mother sing as she always had, which was through her teeth.

“If you’ll turn with me to first Corinthians, chapter twelve. It should be—page eight-hundred and seventy-seven in the pew Bible.” Janet opened the blue book from the back of the bench in front of them, and turned to where she had placed the bulletin during the music. “You all there? I’m going to give a few words about the body. The body of Christ, the body of the Church. I’m sure you’ve heard a thing or two about them, but it’s good to be reminded. Am I right?” Several in the crowd muttered in agreement. “That’s what I like to hear. Verse twenty-one. ‘The eye cannot say to the hand, I don’t need you! And the head cannot say to the feet, I don’t need you! On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving great honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body...’”

Michael and David adjusted themselves in their seats to keep away, on occasion exchanging elbow-jabs to the ribs. Janet, who had otherwise kept her eyes on the rector as he spoke, caught on with the horseplay and promptly broke them apart. She hurried to leave when the service ended.

They passed through the sanctuary into the main lobby where a crowd awaiting the next service gathered. Refreshment tables bordered the entrance—Janet’s exit—and it was there most congregants stood, smiling, gnawing cookies and gesticulating wildly in pastel clothes. With a boy’s hand in each fist she shouldered her way through the crowd, smiling and nodding as she passed through, her boys stumbling after her.

“Haven’t seen you in a while,” she heard one call out to her.

“Been busy,” she replied over her shoulder, and kept moving. They were almost at the refreshment tables. “David, please keep moving.”

Just as Janet placed her hand on the door handle she felt a hand light upon her arm. “It’s good to see you here, Janet,” a woman said, still in her choir robes.

“Hi Marge,” Janet answered.

“And it looks like you brought the twins. How are you doing, you two?” Margaret cooed, crouching down to them.

“Good,” the boys replied. They could feel their mother’s palms warm.

Margaret’s smile faded as she rose to her feet, and she leaned into Janet over the boys’ heads.

“How are things going?” she whispered.

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, when Eric and I—”

“That’s very kind of you,” Janet interrupted. “Really.” And she stepped out.

When the Daltons arrived home, Michael and David raced up the stairs to their room.

“You need to change!” Janet shouted, and followed after them. The boys were perched at the end of their beds when she entered. She walked to the closet and pulled out two T-shirts, one a solid blue, and the other in striped print.

She raised the shirt to David who shook his head. “This one here,” Janet said, waving the garment in front of him. “I pulled it out. You’re not getting another one.” He took the shirt from her hand. “Thank you,” she said.

* * * *

“It’s going have to be Progresso. Didn’t have time to put something together.” The boys looked at one another, not knowing what Progresso could be, but the gravity in their mother’s voice made it clear that it wasn’t something they would like. There were three bowls lined up by the microwave, each accompanied by a large tin can. She hovered over the first can with a can opener in her fist, and bore down. David was preoccupied with a warped corner of his plastic placemat, but Michael watched as Janet’s arms tensed as she worked to remove the lid. Once finished she poured the contents of the can into its bowl, and set to work on the others while the first warmed.

Janet sat beside them and unfolded a napkin over her lap. Michael watched his mother’s eyes, which were often on David at the dinner table, and she glanced up every time she took a sip from her glass of Perrier. Michael grasped his spoon and slowly immersed it in the steaming bowl, watching the liquid flood the shallow dip.

It had been quiet for some time, as was usual, until Janet broke the silence. “So David,” she began, “you look forward to school?” He nodded. “David. Use your words.”

“Yes.”

“How about you, Michael?”

“I guess,” he replied, stirring his soup lazily.

“You guess?”

“Yeah.”

Janet watched as Michael lifted a steaming spoonful to his mouth, and as he puckered his lips to sip from the tip of the spoon he winced on contact and had to lay the utensil down. He leaned back into his chair. They were not going to use their dinner as an excuse not to speak.

During the several-minute silence that followed, the boys blew forcefully on spoonfuls they didn't have the patience to cool, spattering vegetable barley onto their placemats. She noticed David venture to eat half a spoonful while it still steamed.

No yes or no questions, she thought. "What do you like most about school, David?" David fell into the back of his chair and shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe Michael can answer first," she said, crumpling her napkin. She wedged it under her bowl. "What do you think, Michael?"

Michael's mouth was full. He glanced up at her once, and suddenly his jaw dropped open. Soup spilled from his mouth back into his bowl, and David fell into a fit of laughter.

"For God's sake David, stop it." She slipped a hand beneath Michael's jaw and helped him pop it back into place. She grabbed her wadded napkin and dabbed at the liquid dripping from his chin. David slapped his hand over his mouth, his shoulders shaking. "David, we've been over this."

"I can't help it," he blurted between his fingers.

"Then go upstairs."

David shoved his bowl away from him before leaving his seat.

"Push your chair in."

She finished her dinner alone. Shortly after David disappeared to his room Michael scarfed down his meal, but before he could scamper up the stairs Janet demanded that he place his shirt in the laundry room hamper, because if he didn't he would have to go to school with that brown food stain until he grew to a size ten and that wouldn't be very popular, would it?

Her spoon dragged casually across the bottom of her Corelle-brand soup bowl as she thought of St. Peter's Episcopal, and how long it took her and Kyle to settle on a church to get married in without having to pay extravagant membership fees—St. Peter's charge being the least objectionable. They appeared every Sunday morning since for their ten-o'clock service, perhaps to make it worth it.

Janet wasn't particularly interested in making friends, but she smiled and wore the sensible flats like everyone else. It took her a moment to recall how she first encountered Margaret, who flitted about the church grounds and introduced herself as Marge. She had seen the woman pull into the gravel parking lot several times with trays of Kroger sugar cookies for the hospitality tables in the lobby, and determined that it wouldn't be long before the social butterfly would seek her and her husband out.

And sure enough it happened, within the pews on a communion Sunday. When they were asked to rise, Marge greeted the congregants seated at either side of her before turning around. Janet recognized that she could never have anything in common with a woman who drove a car the color of pantyhose, but it was "the peace," and she shook hands anyway.

They spoke several times after that. Out in the lobby churchgoers broke off into several groups to chat over floral Dixie cups and Styrofoam plates—about the soup kitchen missions for women thirty-five and up and their need for volunteers for their flourishing youth program, and Janet humored her, because Kyle usually wandered off to visit the rector for a post-sermon chat.

But come her visible pregnancy with the boys in June, hands fell over her gestating paunch, and she could barely make it from point A to point B without being stopped by strangers. One Sunday Marge penned a nametag for Janet. "The Walking Crowd," and the

name caught on. Women pulled her aside by the crux of the arm to tell her what she already knew.

“There isn’t a greater joy.”

“That’s right. Your life will never be the same.”

* * * *

That evening a noise stirred Michael from sleep. Slowly he sat up, and tried to determine for himself what must have roused him—that it had returned to the closet. He repositioned himself in bed and let his legs dangle from the edge. He waited for the noise to die before touching down and tiptoed cautiously to his brother’s bed, pacing his steps, one foot in front of the other. His hands lit upon David’s shoulder and gently shook him awake. David rubbed his eyes, and before he could ask why he was disturbed he noticed Michael’s eyes on the closet door and suddenly understood. David darted for the light switch as Michael cried out for Janet, and she came to them in a pale blur.

“Is it the closet?” she asked.

“Yes,” the boys replied, buried beneath the blankets.

She turned off the light. “Get in bed.”

Before the separation, she’d watch from the doorway as Kyle would pose in front of the closet, assure the children that he would fend off the creature, and valiantly dart inside to battle. All of this took place while the doors were closed, and the boys could hear the skirmish—evinced by the sound of plastic hangers and battered cardboard. It was usually over within a minute, and Kyle would stumble dramatically out of their closet with his shirt ruffled and his hair mussed, and after planting a kiss on each forehead, withdraw heroically to his own bed.

Janet could sense the boys' panic, but she didn't have a flare for dramatics. The hem of her nightdress beat against her ankles as she moved forward. She crouched on her hands and knees and slowly pressed her ear against the door.

David eased himself out of bed. Before taking the first step he peered at Michael to his left, who was shaking his head at him. With a wave of his hand David urged his brother to follow suit but received no response. He stepped forward, as cautiously as his adolescent body would allow, and tiptoed around playthings scattered on the floor. His foot brushed into a crumpled pair of jeans, and the sound caught his mother's attention.

"David?" she whispered. "Do you want it to get you?" He shook his head before realizing what she said. "Get back in that bed."

Janet rose off her knees. Michael asked her what it was she heard. "It can hear," she replied. On her way out her hand instinctively reached for the light switch. Upon realizing it was already off, she turned to the boys' beds. "You are not to open this closet any more. Your father's not here."

* * * *

She should have gone before they left for church but she wanted to make sure they got their seats, third pew from the altar. The walls of her bladder pushed against her diaphragm and it was in these moments she wished that the rector cared less about hearing his own voice throughout the opening homily and get straight to the singing. When it was finally time to rise for "Abide With Me," she gently hummed the tune through her nose as she knocked into the knees of seated congregants and skirted her way out to the women's restroom. Too guilty to enter the handicapped stall she swung open one of the smaller stall doors, forgetting that it would bang against the metal box on the wall, and side-shuffled her way inside. Just as she rumbled up

her floral A-line she could hear the click of heels on the tile and distinguished the voices of Margaret and Kathy as they chatted between adjacent stalls.

“It was a mistake,” said Margaret.

“What was?”

“You know. With Janet.”

The two flushed simultaneously but Janet continued to hover there with her skirts hiked, her hands pressed against either wall of the stall for support, ignoring the strain building in her knees. The conversation continued, but she couldn't catch much with the running water and the blare of the automatic hand dryer. As the door swung open she could hear the last line of the morning's hymn sweep into her stall, and the organ, not to be outdone, bellowed its final note long enough to outlast the dwindling throng of voices.

Janet walked into the opening of the rector's address, and while no one looked at her directly she could feel peripheral glances from every corner of the nave. The sermon seemed dull and muted, like words spoken from behind a closed door, and she glided to her seat beside her husband without any recollection of having taken the steps.

* * * *

It was Early Out Wednesday and the children were released from Hayfield Elementary at 1:45. The bus stopped by the curb of their home at the end of the block by 2:10. As usual the door was left unlocked, and they ran upstairs to drop off their backpacks in their room. David reached out to grip the closet doorknobs but his fingers scraped along some metal box and he looked down to see that the doors had been padlocked shut. With the tips of his fingers he yanked the shackle of the lock but it would not budge.

They found Janet in the kitchen soaking a salmon patty in a bowl of whisked egg with her hands. “I already laid out your clothes for tomorrow,” she said, transferring the slick mass onto a plate peppered with Italian breadcrumbs.

Before dinner the boys completed the final equations in their math workbooks for school the next day, David occasionally feeding Michael answers when he mulled over a problem for too long. The meal was salmon and cream corn from the can. They tucked themselves in that night.

* * * *

With David carefully balanced in the crook of her arm she waited for the feeling to weigh in. She stared into his face. Little clumps of white gathered in the creases of his cheeks and lips. The nurse would soon return with baby Michael who had been born with his mouth locked open.

At first she didn’t realize she was in labor. The ache that was supposed to arrive in her back plagued her left side and felt as miraculous as a bowel movement, but despite her complaints Kyle carted her off to the hospital where the nurse propped her legs up, told her that she had already begun to dilate, and broke her water for her with what looked like a crochet needle.

One of the nurses returned with Michael and laid him on the other side of her chest. The babies were warm, she remembered, almost hot to the touch, and they buried themselves into either side of her bosom. Janet was surprised how composed Kyle was throughout the ordeal, considering how he would break into a cold sweat during Lamaze sessions at the Arlington Clinic. He let the back of his knuckle run across the nub that was the smaller one’s shoulder, the one they named Michael. Janet looked into their faces again and determined that fatigue had exhausted all feeling.

* * * *

Michael alerted David to the padlock on the floor—the metal hook detached from the case like some gnarled finger, the door left ajar.

* * * *

The court date had finally arrived. The boys remained at home with Janet's mother who had flown in from Indianapolis all expenses paid, having just learned of their plans to separate only three weeks before. Janet and Kyle sat on either side of the room at their respective tables, both absently organizing copied divorce files on their desks while the judge shuffled through a shallow stack of documents at his bench. The judge cleared his throat, and narrated the court proceedings.

When it was Janet's turn to speak, she kept her composure as she offered her testimony, marking in her periphery how Kyle buried his face in the palms of hands as she delivered it, and the longer he sat there with his elbows propped over the table the more assured and deliberate her speech became. By the time she finished the litany, she knew she had already won.

Shortly after the divorce proceedings Kyle would have to move to San Diego for eight months for management consultation. The timing could not have been better, she thought. He had spent the past two weeks packing his things away in boxes with bubble wrap and enough foam peanuts to fill a Buick, most of which took place after work while the boys finished up their homework. At the table they talked about school, as they usually did, but when Janet asked about his new project in California, Kyle took a bite out of the turkey and mustard sandwich he had whipped up for himself despite her having made sweet potato casserole and seasoned pork chops for their final meal.

He had called several times since, threatening to report her to the Clerk of Courts Office for denying him visitation and contact, but they'd blame him for trying to dodge child support, her lawyer confided. It would take at least a year before they'd even consider his case with the backlog. There was time.

* * * *

“Boys? Boys—” Janet said, yanking the comforters from their beds. “Get up. I need you up.” Michael bolted upright, his hands pressed over his eyes to shield from the hallway light filtering into the room. His brother pulled the sheets over his right shoulder and curled into fetal position. “Get up. Take your things. We need to move you to the guestroom.” Michael stared at her incredulously as she flipped the switch. The overhead fan light would not turn on. He glanced at the nightstand to see that the little LED lights of their bedside clock had disappeared.

“Did the power go out?” David asked.

“Does it look like that to you?” Janet asked, pointing to the hallway. “Your room is out.”

Michael anxiously gathered several stacks of pants and socks from their chest of drawers. David dragged their backpacks out from under the bed and loaded them with a few knickknacks from their dresser, and conveyed everything to the guestroom.

Before they could crawl into the covers Janet removed a few boxes full of old Christmas decorations she meant to put up into the attic and piled them on the floor by her sons' things.

They slipped between course sheets that scratched their legs, balled-up polyester covers that no one bothered to toss out. They had inherited the damask comforter from Kyle's mother who succumbed to emphysema not long before they were married, and despite its having been washed three times with the Laundromat utility washer down the street no amount of quarters could oust the smoke from the fabric. They would have to make do.

Once they were settled, Janet pulled out a small nightlight from one of the dresser drawers.

“I want you to sleep with this,” she said, plugging the nightlight into the nearest outlet to the bed.

“Don’t you need one?” David asked.

“It’s not after me, honey.”

She switched off the lamp and wished them goodnight before closing the door behind her.

Both kept their eyes on the light, neither knowing quite what for. An inexplicable doom fell over the guestroom with its thick curtains, sour bedcovers and quatrefoil armchair that kept them alert and very quiet. David volunteered to keep the first watch, but neither would fall asleep anytime soon.

* * * *

The little section of tape snagged on the teeth of the dispenser. With a ballpoint clenched between her teeth Janet cursed under her breath as she discarded the mangled strip, and tore off another clean piece. After pasting it by the appropriate switch, she labeled it “My Room,” several switches beneath the “Guest R” tab she had printed the night before. As though the trips up and down the staircase weren’t bad enough, the thick carpet dampened her footfalls and exhausted her energy, leaving her breathless and her thighs aching. But she was diligent, and within half an hour or so she managed to map out the entire house.

* * * *

It had taken about a week for the boys to finally adjust to the new space, and even the comforter seemed less sour. They no longer tiptoed past their old room, and once or twice David

darted in to retrieve a few more of their things to supply the guestroom. But the night the nightlight flickered out, the rest of the upstairs extinguished with it.

They had set up camp downstairs with their backpacks and a few flashlights in case the dark followed. Janet took down several hampers of clothes and toiletries for the downstairs bathroom. Michael, somewhat ashen and wide-eyed, unpacked their bags while David laid out their blankets with his typical reserve.

Before they were made to sleep on the couch she invited the boys into the kitchen. They seemed glad to see that the numbered panel of the microwave still glowed. David asked if was really midnight. She had forgotten to reset it. It was really closer to two—but the microwave defaulted at twelve. She warmed a pot of hot chocolate on the stove to calm their nerves. After ladling the drink into their mugs, both boys sidled up next to her at the table.

She tucked her sons in at either end of the couch. It took some time before they could get comfortable—David complained that Michael’s foot dug into his back, and their knees punched the underside of the blankets until they were settled. Janet dimmed the lights and kissed each of them on the forehead, but before she reached the stair, David called out to her.

“Can you sleep with us tonight?”

It was only until he repeated himself that the words seemed to register. They seemed so small on the couch, she thought, so small, and as she watched them part the blankets to make room it was as though she recognized her boys for the first time. Shaken, her steps were fragile and calculated. Without a word she took her seat in the middle and let them curl up under either arm.

“Mom?” Michael said.

“Yes, love?”

“Do we have to go to church tomorrow?”

“No.”

She thought of Marge, of that ridiculous little car and her sugar cookies, the church lady sheep and even a little of Kyle, and how little it all mattered.

She woke early despite not having set an alarm. A steady beam of sunlight directed at her eyes, making it impossible to go back to sleep, yet after having gained her senses, she realized that the cushion where David slept was vacant. He might be in the bathroom, she thought, but when she turned around behind her, the door was open.

With both hands she gently transferred Michael’s heavy head from her shoulder to the couch. A morning snack, she determined, but when she peeked inside the kitchen, there was no one.

She opened the door to her room.

“David. What are you doing.”

There he stood, by her bed, with the phone propped against his left ear and a tiny slip of paper with a number recorded in black pen.

“What are you doing David?” she asked, eyeing his fingers poised on the dials.

“Fixing it.”

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

It was the God-awful smell that kept visitors away, but she tried not to mind it. Her husband complained, but she was resolved to clean only what crept beneath the crack of the bedroom door. Hand pressed against the wall she eased herself down to a kneeling position, and rubbed out the sap that trespassed onto the carpet with baking soda and lukewarm water. It was compromise. Once she finished, she rolled up a clean bath towel and pressed it against the crack. She would replace it in two days.

She entered her son's room on occasion, if only to look for a few seconds, but these visits became more and more infrequent. She would grip the door handle with some degree of diffidence—the smell was terrible—but she always managed to enter. Today the room was much like before, only slightly worse. The floor had once been wet, but most of the slick was now little more than a resin: sticky, shapeless hills about the floorboards. The withered sack suspended in the middle of the room had soured, and, having ruptured a couple weeks ago, continued to drip. A rivulet of its contents leaked to that spot under the door. The walls had darkened, and some patch of mold had begun to colonize the furthest right-hand corner, but this was of little consequence. Everything was as it should be.

* * * *

Darren walked in on his parents watching television in the living room on a dark couch that offset the neutral tones of the wallpaper and carpeting. His mother clenched a Kleenex and

rubbed her nose vigorously. She looked up as her son shuffled towards the kitchen, and she sneezed into the crumpled tissue as though on cue.

“You feeling sick, hon?” her husband asked her, his eyes on the screen.

“You know I am.”

“I was just asking.”

“Well I wish you wouldn’t.”

Darren paused at the kitchen entry.

“Can I get you something, Mom?” he asked. It had become routine.

“No, love. I was just heading to bed.” She tore another Kleenex from the box as she eased herself from the cushion.

Darren warmed a kettle on the stove, and after he scooped a few tablespoons of sugar into a mug, he poured to the brim. It wasn’t the legitimate stuff, the loose tea whose fragrance made books “volumes”, but was more the second cousin of hot chocolate. Just as cloying. He made tea every morning, and this mug he knew he would leave out, because sometimes all he really needed was the warmth beneath his fingers.

He dropped in a spoon and stirred, looking briefly out the window above the kitchen sink. Leaning forward he pursed his lips by the mug’s rim as though to take a sip, but retracted. He checked his watch, and with mug in hand hurried to his room to get dressed for work.

* * * *

Burgundy carpet and stucco walls. The only adornments to be found were the curtains, on which little brown paisleys clung to the fabric like a decorative infection. “How are you feeling, Dr. Medwell?” When he had first arrived at Woodcreek Home the professor’s name made him laugh, being horribly ironic, but for the same reason Darren couldn’t find it funny

anymore. Famed historian and anthropologist, celebrated for his writings on the Library of Alexandria, loving husband and father of two, calcified and perpetually moist. The patient was overweight, but not so much so that Darren couldn't move him alone. Brian Walt, his lift partner, couldn't make it in that morning, and so today Darren would have to perform a soloist. "I'm going to put you in your wheelchair so that Linda can take you out of this room." Darren stepped out of the room to roll in the mobile patient lift he left at the doorway and placed it by the bed. "I'm going to turn you over now," he said, carefully rolling the man on his side. Dr. Medwell groaned as his ligaments creaked beneath the weight, and Darren eased his rigid body onto half of the sling he laid out on the sheets. He then rolled the patient toward him, readjusting the sling to lay flat across the bed beneath, and he could hear Dr. Medwell sigh once he was permitted to face the ceiling again. He released the hydraulic valve of the lift, lowered the overhead bar to the bed and attached the sling chains to the machine. Once Dr. Medwell was situated in the sling Darren pumped the hydraulic valve, raising the man off the bed. Shortly after Darren lowered his patient into the wheelchair, Linda came in, white towels bundled in her arms, and Darren removed the sling.

"I haven't cleaned him up yet."

"I was buzzed in to get him in his wheelchair at this time."

"I haven't gotten to it. Miss Bellows next door had an episode," the nurse said, dropping the towels on the end of the bed. She turned around to see Darren hadn't moved. "I was delayed."

"I got that."

“You need to put him back. He’s not ready for that chair.” Darren slipped the sling behind Dr. Medwell, yanking the ends beneath his legs. They would have to go through the process all over again.

In time Dr. Medwell was back on the bed and Darren’s pager buzzed, directing him upstairs to B12. A patient had fallen. “You know you’ll have to come back here,” said the nurse, leaning over Dr. Medwell with a balled cloth in her fist. Darren rolled the patient lift out of the room and to the elevator nearby.

* * * *

Darren returned home later and groggier than usual. Typically he and Brian would sip on a Red Stripe or two at the pub downtown before heading home, but he was relieved to have a slight break in routine. He spent his leftover time driving about town to think, which was pleasant enough until he got caught up in rush-hour traffic an hour from home.

He would make some tea, and he resolved to drink it this time. As he stepped out of the kitchen he caught sight of his father reclined on the couch in the dark. All he had to cover him was a green bathrobe that hung uncomfortably loose about his thighs. Darren hoped to make it by without talking, but his father raised his hand to stop him. A long silence followed, and it occurred to him that his father expected him to initiate. Gripping his mug with both hands he asked, “What’s going on, Dad?”

“Nothing.”

“You sure?” His dad shifted his weight and pressed himself deeper into the couch.

“You know,” he said, and paused. Darren could smell something sweet on his breath, and it was only then he noticed the empty glass on the coffee table. “You know,” he said,

waving his thick fingers in the air, as though to trigger a memory, “people just want to do things.”

Darren nodded but didn't know why.

“You have your life ahead of you. It's all there. What did I do? I majored in psychology. The hell you going to do with that? Fix your own problems? There's not even time for that.”

“There's time.”

“You have your writing,” his father continued. “That's some good shit there. To write.”

Darren parted his lips to speak but was at a loss. After college, without so much as two nickels to rub together, Darren's father ran from home with an old high school buddy to write poetry together. They rented out a room in a dingy apartment in Manhattan, run by an overweight man and his wife. The dream ended about as soon as it started. One day his apartment-mate arrived home drunk with fighting on his mind, breaking furniture as he reached for Darren's father. Unable to pay for the damage his dad fled the building via the fire escape before the cops arrived, and apparently the landlords followed suit, having furnished all the apartments with stolen property. That was as close to an artist his father had ever been. Then came the desk job.

“Do you still write?” his father asked.

“I never really wrote anything.”

“Sure you did. You remember that one poem you did? The one you submitted to that contest or whatever?”

“That was high school.”

“High school? No, this was much later.”

“It was high school.”

“And nothing since?”

“Not really.”

“That’s a shame,” he said, reaching for the glass on the coffee table. “Sometimes I wish I could just lock myself away in my room and read forever.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do. I really do.”

When his father spoke that way, it reminded him of the time he went camping with his parents in Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado. He was eight, or he believed he was, and it was their second night out around the campfire. His father had just slipped a cigarette from an Alpine pack and lit it over the flames. His mom was opening a bag of marshmallows only to realize that the sticks were nowhere nearby.

It hadn’t been long before a very sharp, drawn out hiss whistled from the center of the fire, and Darren asked his dad if something had somehow managed to crawl into the mound. He said he doubted it, and that what he heard was probably moisture escaping from the logs, and with a learned indifference tossed the cigarette stump into the fire. Darren didn’t understand him. The hissing had since stopped, and despite the heat that pressed against his cheeks he leaned in closer to look. Something moved, and within moments he realized that a creature, a black field cricket, had jumped onto the mound, not directly into the flames, but into the glowing embers beneath. He scrambled for a twig at his feet to flick it out of the mound, but before he could even touch it, the cricket mechanically buried itself headfirst into the embers until it was nearly irretrievable. The embers were frail and would ash under contact, but then again, what use really are child’s fingers. He eventually managed to flick it out of the mound, and although

he expected the tiny thing to have melted, it had instead greyed and curled forcibly into a fetal position. There was something about this thing in his palm that made him tired. There was a sort of calm behind its plastic face, and he wanted to be there.

He didn't realize that he had been standing there silently for some time. His father had already given up on the conversation. "I don't know what to say," Darren said.

"Who does?" His father patted his right knee. "I'm going to get back to my book. Don't stay up too late, hm?"

Darren nodded. His father gripped the glass and carried it back with him to his study.

* * * *

Darren woke up late the next morning, after intentionally neglecting to set his alarm the night before. He also slept in his clothes. He ambled to the kitchen and encountered his mother hovering over the trash bin, tugging at the red plastic handles. He took them from her and lugged the bag out of the container. "I'll take it out," he said.

Smiling she moved to the other end of the kitchen to the bottom cabinets. Darren stepped out of the house and dumped the bag into its receptacle by the end of the driveway, and once the screen door shut behind him he spotted his mother standing in the kitchen doorway.

"Don't you have work?" she asked, spatula in hand.

"I'm not going today." With her eyes low she nodded. Darren watched her turn back to the stove. He realized that she shuffled her feet as she walked. She hadn't always, and he wished he had noticed when it started. Maybe he could have convinced her not to give in. He walked in after her. "I'm working on a project."

She turned to face him, gripping her spatula still up high like a scepter. "What project? Your father says you're writing."

“I’m not.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll show you sometime.”

Darren skipped breakfast, and after slipping into his shoes he headed out the door.

* * * *

He arrived home that afternoon with a stack of books in his arm and he stepped into the living room where his parents were sitting watching the television. He nodded to them, and before either could utter a word he promptly headed to his bedroom. It wouldn’t be long before he would return with his sheets and comforter wadded up in his arms.

“Doing your laundry?” his mother asked.

“No.”

“Your project?”

He nodded and continued on his way to the garage.

The next thing he escorted out was his mattress. “Won’t you need that, honey?” his mother asked, but Darren was too preoccupied to respond. He lugged it through the living room and down the basement steps. Next it was his disassembled bed frame, followed by his dresser and work desk.

“What sort of project is this?” she asked as he made his return trip to the living room.

“I don’t know.”

“You told me he was writing again,” she said, turning to her husband.

“You’re not?”

“No,” Darren replied.

“Why not?”

“Don’t do this now,” his mother mumbled under her breath.

“There’s nothing wrong with me asking.”

“It’s been said,” she replied.

“There is nothing wrong with me asking it.”

She let out a great sigh. “Well, I don’t think I need to hear it again, so I’ll just go to bed.” She eased herself off the couch, and after picking up the tissue box she retreated to her room.

“I have the right to ask.” Gripping his drink he turned back to the glare of the screen, and Darren continued down the hallway to his room.

Before he reached it he paused by his mother’s door. He could hear her whispering. She was covering the spat with her husband, and it made him feel embarrassed. She was like a parody, rehearsing for an encore that would never come. He pictured her before a mirror doing this. She rehearsed over and over again, refining her speech, sounding wittier and more confident. His mother displayed more symptoms of shame than anyone Darren had ever known, and they often came in whispers. Darren’s life would be poetry, and he would never, ever, speak to himself.

* * * *

He didn’t return to work the next day. Or the day after. Darren rarely left his room at all in the daytime, but when he did, it was only to return late with large plastic bags, bundles he dragged down the hallway to his room without help. His mother tried to peek into the bags, but always had the mouths tightly tied, although one day he wasn’t so vigilant, and for a moment she could make out what appeared to be a roll of something, a giant tube. But that was all. He would stow himself away for hours, and whenever his parents approached his door to ask what it was he was up to, he would say reading. Always reading.

Occasionally the sound of his bedroom door opening woke his mother up at night, and those nights she often spotted her son jogging to the front door with several sheets of paper in his hand and a stapler. While he was away, she figured she might take a peek into his room, but Darren had his door locked even then, and she would quietly retreat to bed.

After a month of failing to show up at the nursing home, Brian dropped by. Darren's mother greeted him at the front door, and without a word led him to the bedroom down the hallway. He raised his fist to the door and paused, which Darren's mother took to be her cue to leave. He rapped against the door with the back of his balled hand, each knock evenly spaced apart. "Hey," he said. "How've you been, buddy?" He let several seconds pass. No response. "I'm pretty thirsty, Dare. We're about overdue for a visit to Sam's downtown, don't you think?" He pressed his ear against the door and could hear the faint sound of papers shuffling. He knelt down onto the carpet and eased forward until his face was pressed up to the crack beneath the door. His head cocked awkwardly to the side, he caught sight of several flickers of shadow. "I know you're in there, buddy," he mumbled through the crack, "I can see you in there." He was soon met with a muffled declaration, and the loud sound of something fallen, like some great metal thing had collapsed. "You all right?"

"I'm reading."

Brian quickly climbed back onto his feet and faced the door once more. "Reading? That isn't reading you're doing."

"I'm reading."

"Bullshit you are." He pursed his lips. Brian placed his fingers on the knob and tried to turn it slowly, but it was locked, as he assumed it would be. "Come on buddy—give yourself a break."

He sensed it was over before he ever opened his mouth. After offering his goodbye he trudged down the hallway to find Darren's mother at the other end of it. When their eyes met he shook his head, and after refusing her offer of a cup of coffee, he stepped out. Brian would return every now and again to check in, prompted by Darren's parents' urgings, but Darren would either tell him he was too busy reading to step out, or say nothing at all.

* * * *

One morning Darren's mother found him on the couch. She gently shook him awake. "I need to make a few calls," he said, easing himself up, and he trudged to the kitchen for the phone. She wouldn't follow him in, afraid he might leave for his room, and instead resolved to wake her sleeping husband who, like her, hadn't really seen their son for some time. Once roused Darren's father crept into the living room to catch a glimpse of his boy, only to see him replace the receiver. Darren met his parents by the couch. "It's done. Just so you know."

"What's done?" his father asked, pulling his bathrobe closed.

"You'll see in a moment. There are some people coming over."

Sure enough the doorbell rang, and after answering Darren directed his guests to the living room. His father scurried to the bedroom for more appropriate attire. People continued to trickle through the front door well into the afternoon as Darren held the storm door open, many his mother didn't recognize, and they chatted idly expecting something, but nothing she could readily place. Once Brian arrived he extended his arm to Darren, but he was met with a wafting motion directing to the living room. Brian looked about for anyone he recognized and found Darren's mom leaning against the living room table. The seats were all taken. "Who are these people?" he asked. "Friends?" She shrugged her shoulders.

Without a word Darren motioned for the crowd to follow. With his parents coupled behind him, Darren led the procession down the hallway to his bedroom door. He dug his hand into his pants pocket and retrieved a tiny wire, a paperclip bent out of shape. He slipped the two ends of the wire into a hole in the doorknob, and with a few vigorous jerks of his wrist the lock gave with a loud click. He opened the door.

They stepped inside and all eyes landed upon what looked to be a bulging, membrane globe attached to ropes and several pulley systems that hung overhead. It was a thick, sagging sack laced with a slick capillary network. The great mass slumped over several sheets of plastic tarp lining the floor, and the crowd kept along the edges of the room to avoid stepping on the drippings. The great sack took up most of the room, but Darren motioned them onward, and one by one they filtered in, their backs pressed against the wall to keep distance.

Darren, who was standing beside Brian at the doorway, kept his eyes fixed on his own project. “How did you *do* this?” Brian asked.

“Cellophane.”

He let the crowd take their photos and shake his hand, but it was about time.

Darren stood by the womb gripping a thick rope that dangled from one of the pulleys, and positioning his feet he heaved, and raised it off the ground until it hovered a couple feet above the tarp below. Several mucus cords clung to the floor, taking the tarp with them, and a member from the audience kindly readjusted the sheets. Darren strained to tie the rope end to the metal loop of a giant eye screw he had installed in the frame of the bedroom door.

His parents had been standing in the corner, silent. While their son secured the rope end to the wall, they raised their gaze to the upmost section of scaffolding, on top of which rested a wooden platform.

Darren walked over to his mother and extended his arm. Without thinking she took hold, and slowly he led her to a ladder propped against the scaffolding. He motioned for her to mount, and despite her protests he guided her hand to the left side rail, then took off up the scaffolding. She followed his lead, and once Darren clambered onto the platform he reached down for his mother, and helped her onto the stage. The ceiling seemed to weigh down on them, and they had to maneuver with their heads hung low. He leaned in and whispered something into her ear. His father below eyed them intently as the two convened, his wife with her head bowed. She shook her head once, and he could see Darren wrap his arm around her shoulders.

Darren gently guided his mother to the middle of the platform and kissed her cheek. She looked down at her husband who remained standing at the wall shaking his head.

Darren clamped his hands over the chains holding the sling to its metal frame, and like a child rocked his legs over the brimming womb lip. The murmurings of the crowd subsided, and with a final farewell to his audience, he dropped in. They could see a dark blur struggle to the middle of the glowing pink, and once it centered itself, it stopped moving.

As the hours crawled by the audience dwindled, and by the time midnight arrived only Brian and Darren's mother remained. No words passed between them. They kept their eyes fixed on the sack, dripping onto the tarp. Darren's father had since gone to bed, and after his departure Brian had just enough mind left to realize that he should go home. As he was about to offer his condolences, Darren's mother turned to him. "Would you mind grabbing a towel for me? From the bathroom down the hall. I think we'll need towels."