BLACKLAND PRAIRIE

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Blackland Prairie contains a scholarly preface, “Cross Timbers,” that discusses the emerging role of place as a narrative agent in contemporary fiction. The preface is followed by six original short stories. “Parts” depicts the growth of a boy’s power over his family. “A Movie House to Make Us All Rich” involves the sacrifice of familial values by the son of Italian immigrants in the early 20th century. “The Place on Chenango Street” is about a man who views his world in monetary terms. “The Nine Ideas For A Happier Whole” explores the self-help industry and personal guru age. “All The Stupid Things I Said” is about a long-separated couple meeting for very different reasons. “Flooded Timber” concerns a couple who discover hidden reasons for their relationship’s longevity.

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PART I

PREFACE

Cross Timbers

A narrow line of forest, a belt of post oak, mulberry, sycamore, and other North Texas brush and scrubby vegetation called the Eastern Cross Timbers runs through the center of Denton County, Texas, separating the Grand Prairie geographical terrain to the west from Blackland Prairie to the east. During the 19th century, early North Texans and Native Americans observed the wooded boundary as a dividing line between their two cultures, neither venturing too deeply into the little bluestem or switchgrass. Though I've lived in Denton County for 7 of the last 10 years, spent hundreds of hours of recreational time on Lake Ray Roberts, and roamed the region's backroads and gravel trails chasing thunderstorms, I learned about this striking feature *on the internet*. Rather than observing a tree line somewhere, and noting the sudden changes from one area to the next, I examined a map on my home computer, and stared in amazement at the green and brown colors marking the strip's extent, no more than 40 miles wide at any point. I called my friend Bobby who lives just north of the lake; a few years ago he bought a small brick house on four acres.

"We don't even know where we live," I said. Outside my east-facing apartment window, shadows slid over grass and concrete, then rooftops beyond the property fence and trees in the distance. Bobby's house, far north of Denton, was built in the Cross Timbers. When I described their outline and extent he recognized the description, began to trace the treeline from highway and lakeside vantage points in his mind.

Our well-documented ecological crisis stems, in part, from the distance our stories and myths measure between ourselves and our planet. Western literature and American literary fiction in particular, has focused on stories inside houses, apartments, relationships, and inner

lives. Writing teachers emphasize interior monologue and the revelation of a character‘s deepest motivations. Scott Russell Sanders writes:

> Much contemporary fiction seems barren to me because it draws such tiny, cautious circles, in part because it pretends that nothing lies beyond its timid boundaries. Such fiction treats some “little human morality play” as the whole of reality, and never turns outward to acknowledge the “wilderness raging round.” And by wilderness I mean quite literally the untrammeled being of nature, which might include–depending on where you look–a woods, river, an alien planet, the genetic code, a cloud of subatomic particles, or a cluster of galaxies. What is missing from much recent fiction, I feel, is any sense of nature, any acknowledgement of a nonhuman context. (Sanders 183)

While there is no question that people like to read about people, it is revealing that we have, in general, found so few connections between our own fate and the places we live.

But recently, in an atmosphere of growing ecological awareness, place may be gaining more authority and articulation in contemporary American fiction. We see place *moving* the story as an agent, a powerful and irresistible compulsion, and, in some cases, serving in a sense as the *very story itself*, within which human characters are one among many sets of elements.

American writers have struggled to reconcile loyalty to European traditions with an overwhelming outdoor dynamic as the young nation struggled against indigenous landscapes and peoples. Scientific humanism in the Judeo-Christian tradition offers little opportunity for nature to communicate or even stand for much besides a representation of religious wonder or scientific principle. Writers caught up in the post-medieval marriage of science and technology frequently ignored the voices of place and the world around us. Christopher Manes writes that, even in areas of progressive environmental thought, “the character of man as the only creature with anything to say cuts across these developments and persists, even in the realm of environmental ethics” (Manes 21). Modern humans discount communicative possibilities for other creatures or

entities–we assume that what does not speak our language must have nothing to say or, more importantly, to reveal.

This has not always been the case in human narrative. Tatanga Mani of the Stoney Nation is reported to have asked: “Do you know that trees speak? They do! They speak to each other and they'll speak to you if only you listen to them: The problem of white people is that they don't listen! This way they have never listened the other voices of nature. But I assure you, trees have taught me a lot: about time, about animals, about the Big Spirit” (McLuhan 24). White observes that, “In antiquity, every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci” (White 10).

From the tradition of Emerson, Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold, new writers such as Edward Abbey, Rick Bass, Ernest Gaines, and Annie Proulx write narrative in which place asserts a dynamic presence rather than acting as a static yet picturesque backdrop. The nonhuman, which may be a better term than the loaded and limiting ideas of “nature” or “wilderness,” works *through* these stories, emerges from a carefully-balanced portrait of human struggle and natural cycles to demonstrate timeless ideas of being and ecological interaction. One might say that the landscape speaks through the events these writers address as subject matter, though ascribing humanly-understood sentience to a plot of land or a parcel of air would be another error of anthropocentrism.

When I learned the geographical history of Denton County, I thought about the stories we tell each other, not only those we watch on television or the movie screen, but those we live by, the narratives that bind our society along racial, national, economic, sexual, and other lines. How often are those stories tied up with the place we live? If we concede that the nonhuman has much to teach us, can we truthfully say that we are listening? In our haste to create better lives for

ourselves, did we obliterate the boundaries of the Eastern Cross Timbers before we even knew it was there? Much of it is gone now; in central Denton County the outline is nearly impossible to detect under the incursions of asphalt and structure. Almost certainly, the Eastern Cross Timbers will disappear from the North Texas landscape with little or no fanfare, the knowledge of its existence vanishing in less than a generation. There are no spectacular herds of caribou, no endangered survivors of an entire species eligible for human pity. The bobcats and blackbirds inspire little affection from humans, the rattlesnakes and rabbits being common inhabitants of a number of similar places. The story of this place is untold and so, for many, it simply does not exist.

Perhaps place re-asserts itself in our stories in part because American writers, heirs to a long tradition of wilderness and regional literature, have become receptive conduits for ideas promoting themselves through intellectual discovery and biological necessity. If we acknowledge that each element in an ecological system serves a purpose, is it not conceivable that writers, and perhaps all artists, have a responsibility to assist with the definition of those rescuing cultural narratives?

Ideas of place have always figured prominently in American literature, understandable for a nation forged by settlers struggling against a powerful and vast wilderness. In America, Europeans encountered an endless variety of challenging and dangerous geographical features and terrain. As colonists re-shaped the land, places shaped them, built muscles and sensibilities, concepts of life or death, and common sense and foolishness. The agrarian society of the 19th century applied much of what was seen on the farm to human society, often engendering wise decisions without the benefit of science or advanced study, in other cases suppressing and violating what we now consider basic human rights, often on a barbarous scale. Mark Twain

took us over the Mississippi, and we learned how change and growth could be a level journey rather than an arc or ascension: we didn‘t have to lift ourselves up after Huckleberry Finn; we could just move on down the line.

Henry David Thoreau introduced the persistent idea that an escape to nature or the wild invited a simplification of life not to be found elsewhere, an interior place where one could examine essentials of existence and realize full humanity. Building upon Thoreau‘s work, John Muir radically changed our concept of wilderness as a condition not of undeveloped wasteland but of real value, ingeniously borrowing the language of economics to convince Americans that the woods were important, that the mountain valleys and rivers existed for their own sake, and, more strikingly, that perhaps we would not survive without them. The creation of a national park system, federal protection for millions of acres, and positive media portrayal of the wilderness aesthetic owe much to Muir‘s transformational and prolific writings.

In the mid to late 20th century, however, American fiction retreated indoors to air conditioning and television, reflecting the lives of its subject, ignoring, like the underclass of Ray Carver‘s stark episodes, anything outside the admittedly profound human drama. Realism defines the real with a scientific-humanist dictionary, marginilizing the *nonhuman* to such an extent that stories in this tradition can safely ignore the element entirely. Many stories from the late 20th century take place in an environmental vacuum–a spacecraft outfitted with contemporary furniture might offer no visible distinctions from these nondescript surroundings. Some will argue that, for better or worse, this is where we live now. Scott Russell Sanders responds that "...durable art, art that matters, has never merely reproduced the superficial consciousness of an age. Cervantes did not limit himself to the platitudes of feudalism, nor Melville to Puritanism, nor Faulkner to racism, nor Garcia Marquez to nationalism and

capitalism. They quarreled with the dominant ways of seeing, and in that quarreling with the actual they enlarged our vision of the possible" (Sanders 194). Kurt Vonnegut compared the writer's role to that of a canary in a coal mine, listening for danger, using some extraordinary perception to signal danger. "And when a society is in great danger, we're likely to sound the alarms" (Vonnegut 238). If, as Abbey maintains, the writer's proper role is not to answer questions "but to question the answers…to be impertinent, insolent, and if necessary, subversive," then there is a basis for writers to open their narratives again to the messages from outside the sealed windows and doors of suburban America (Abbey's Web 1).

Mounting evidence shows this happening in fiction today. Rick Bass's "The Hermit's Story" and Annie Proulx's "The Bunchgrass Edge of the World" and "People in Hell Just Want A Glass Of Water" all appear in recent editions of The Best American Short Stories series. In the Bass story, the Canadian landscape of Saskatchewan forges a story of renewal, life, and death *averted* by intimacy with the landscape and a dose of luck for a dog-trainer named Ann and an old man named Gray Owl. Ann has trained Gray Owl's dogs to hunt in a pack, to co-operate, and she takes them home to show him how to lead this newly-refined herd.

The story's frequent allusions to the nonhuman can be mistaken for magical realism. For example, after their trip back to Canada, "Ann and the dogs slept for twelve hours straight, as if submerged in another time, or as if everyone else in the world were submerged in time–encased in stone–and as if she and the dogs were pioneers, or survivors of some kind: upright and exploring the present, alive in the world, free of that strange chitin" (Bass 3). The scene suggests that Ann and Gray Owl's dogs are preparing for a day of exercise, resting from the long drive north. It is comforting to sense the renewal they find, but, at the same time, Bass's language forebodes danger, the lethargy of bitter winter. It is a hard sleep such a climate presses onto its

mammalian inhabitants, and the consequences of recklessness in such a place are foreshadowed: the phrase “encased in stone” echoes primal fears of freezing to death in a whiteout.

In the storm, Gray Owl discovers a lake from which he hopes to draw water for the dogs. He kicks at the ice and falls through. Ann goes to find him, hoping at best to save him, at worst to dive naked into the water–keeping her clothes dry–to retrieve the day pack Gray Owl wore containing a tent and emergency rations. Though she is sorry to see her client and friend suffer such a fate, she plans her own survival from the first moment. But looking into the lake she sees Gray Owl standing on the lake bottom peering up at her.

> “This happens a lot more than people realize,” he said. “It‘s not really a phenomenon; it‘s just what happens. A cold snap comes in October, freezes a skin of ice over the lake–it‘s got to be a shallow one, almost a marsh. Then a snowfall comes, insulating the ice. The lake drains in fall and winter–percolates down through the soil” – he stamped the spongy ground beneath them – “but the ice up top remains. And nobody ever knows differently. People look out at the surface and think, *Aha, a frozen lake*.” Gray Owl laughed. (Bass 7)

Later in their conversation, he tells her, “I just got lucky.” But what we understand is that Gray Owl‘s intimacy with his surroundings made such luck possible, that his home has in some sense rewarded him for having paid attention.

They share the unusual shelter with snipe, small birds that the dogs flush as they‘ve been trained to do. Roused from slumber, the birds bang their heads against the icy ceiling and fall back unconscious. Ann and Gray Owl tuck the woozy creatures “into little crooks in the branches, up against the trunks of trees and off the ground, out of harm‘s way” (Bass 12). Then the story projects the future for them:

> Long after Ann and Gray Owl and the pack of dogs had passed through, the birds would awaken, their bright eyes luminous in the moonlight, and the first sight they would see would be the frozen marsh before them, with its chain of still-steaming vent-holes stretching back across all the way to the other shore. Perhaps these were birds that had been unable to migrate owing to injuries, or some genetic absence. Perhaps they had tried to migrate in the past but had found either

> their winter habitat destroyed or the path down there so fragmented and fraught with danger that it made more sense–to these few birds–to ignore the tuggings of stars and seasons and instead to try to carve out new lives, new ways of being, even in such a stark and severe landscape: or rather, in a stark and severe period–knowing that lushness and bounty were still retained within that landscape. That it was only a phase; that better days would come. That in fact (the snipe knowing these things with their blood, ten-million-years-in-the-world), the austere times were the very thing, the very imbalance, that would summon the resurrection of that frozen richness within the soil–if indeed that richness, that magic, that hope, did still exist beneath the ice and snow. Spring would come like its own green fire, if only the injured ones could hold on. (Bass 13)

This metaphorical suggestion of possibility contains within it not only the suggestion that human beings, too, as injured members of the natural community, can find hope in wild renewal, but more importantly asserts, via the strange snipe who stayed in Canada, that new ways of being are possible for creatures of even the simplest intellect.

In "The Hermit's Story," Bass takes dictation from a place far north of humankind's cities and highways, a place where many might look and see nothing but a winter moonscape. There are messages in the air, on the ground, and beneath the surface of the lake. There is wisdom in Ann and Gray Owl's relationship; the hint of sex in the story's center suggests a primal, penultimate survival mechanism, but they abstain, Ann noting later that she thought about "those kinds of things" under the lake. Their union is based upon survival, one that opens their eyes and minds to necessary possibilities, an allegory for all humanity.

The opening story of my thesis, "Parts," shares similar themes of renewal and emergence, as well as long-held secrets revealed by circumstances tied to place. Dakota and his father are on a collision course, and it is a matter of time before the unseen is revealed. The welding of the family by his father, the usage of such a crude bind, fails to conceal the guilt or perhaps even shame his father feels about the identity of his son and his own reluctance to confront the question honestly. The death of the dog, a creature upon whom both depended for connection,

reveals a fissure neither can ignore, particularly in a place where fathers and sons rely on one another for help with chores, tutelage in specialized equipment, and passed down leadership of the family estate and affairs. In this place, very little work is "hired out."

Dakota's moment on the roof when he realizes that, from certain vantage points, much can be seen and comprehended at once, is an important step for him to understand that many things can be contained in the same place:

> His father looked and saw the dog sitting on his haunches, tail wagging now as they both watched him and smiled. "All right," his father said and pointed at the tiles. "Keep *going*." Dakota finished the job and walked around the roof looking for other tiles, looking out at the trees and the highway in the distance. He wanted to stay on the roof, hidden out in the open, where you could see everything coming.
>
> Dakota was glad his father had asked him to come up to the roof, had needed him to do it. Dakota felt the warmth of his father's confidence in the simple request, the implication that it was so easily done: climbing up there for the first time. There was a rhythm to the task at hand, a repetition in pulling out the old shingles and hammering the new. Dakota felt something slide into place there, something surprising to both of them, he thought. A pleasant surprise for both of them.
>
> Dakota had no idea how to get back on the ladder. (31)

Perhaps this is when he knows that he can be someone else's offspring and still his father's son. The power of this location, the roof of the house, opens possibilities for Dakota that would have not been visible from the shed, or behind the bulky welding mask. From this moment his power grows until, by story's end, he holds the ability to rend or reinforce the bond his father so poorly applied. It is not a coincidence, it seems to me now, that the majority of this story takes place out of doors.

"People In Hell Just Want A Glass of Water" opens with a careful revelation of the story's most influential element: the place in which it occurs. None of the characters can be understood outside of place, and the story demonstrates the danger of separation, and the more

dubious mythology of returning home with expectations of security and comfort. The story begins by suggesting the weight of learning and surviving the stories of a new place:

> Dangerous and indifferent ground: against its fixed mass the tragedies of people count for nothing…no past slaughter or cruelty, no accident or murder that occurs on the little ranches or at the isolate crossroads with their bare populations of three or seventeen or in the reckless trailer courts of mining towns, delays the flood of morning light. Fences, cattle, roads, refineries, mines, gravel pits, traffic lights, graffiti'd celebration of athletic victory on bridge overpass, crust of blood on the Wal-Mart loading dock, the sunfaded wreaths of plastic flowers marking death on the highways, are ephemeral.
>
> In 1908, on the run from Texas drought and dusters, Isaac "Ice" Dunmire arrived in Laramie, Wyoming, at three-thirty in the dark February morning. It was thirty-four degrees below zero, the wind shrieking along the tracks.
>
> "It sure can't get any worse than this," he said. He didn't know anything about it. (Proulx 316)

Proulx opens "The Bunchgrass Edge of the World" on a family farm, a more humanized setting than the tundra, but one to which her characters are keenly attuned. A hardened ranch family and their oddball daughter Ottaline become as gritted and coarse as all the life in this place, which Proulx describes as careless observers might mistake it:

> The country appeared as empty ground, big sagebrush, rabbit-brush, intricate sky, flocks of small birds like packs of cards thrown up in the air, and a faint track drifting toward the red-walled horizon. Graves were unmarked, fallen house timbers and corrals burned up in the old campfires. Nothing much but weather and distance, the distance punctuated once in a while by ranch gates, and to the north the endless murmur and sun-flash of semis rolling along the interstate. (Proulx 294)

The appearances suggest a random, barren nature, open spaces without purpose–a benign and powerless place. At least this is how it seems to Ottaline, our effaced narrator, and to most of the family other than her mean-spirited grandfather Old Red. But place maneuvers this story to demonstrate otherwise. It is far from a happy tale of nature Romanticism.

Ottaline longs to be away from the ranch, but as an overweight and unseemly tomboy, she sees little hope in rescue by men. Sinking further into despair, she begins to converse with a

whispered voice from an abandoned tractor in the barn. This disembodied voice causes her to question her own sanity:

> She was alone, there were no alien spacecraft in the sky. She stood quite still. She had eaten from a plateful of misery since childhood, suffered avoirdupois, unfeeling parents, the circumstances of the place. Looniness was possible, it could happen to anyone. Her mother's brother Mapston Hipsag had contracted a case of lumpy jaw from the stock, and the disease took him by stages from depressive rancher to sniggering maniac. (Proulx 303)

Few things on the ranch go according to plan, and none of the characters find harmony there except Old Red, whose goal is merely to survive a few more years and make "his century." As well as fighting themselves, the family struggles against their setting in a story that renders the futility of their effort. In the final movement, Ottaline's father is killed while landing his new plane. One of the Piper's wheels catches in the talking tractor's frame that Ottaline herself had moved outside to begin repairs. The entire family is watching; her father had insisted so, reminding them that a new plane is a cause for celebration. Old Red sees the future while his son's body still burns in the wreckage:

> "He done it hisself," called old Red from the porch. It was clear to him the way things had to go…The main thing in life was staying power. That was it: stand around long enough, you'd get to sit down. (Proulx 315)

Red is alive, barely, because *he* has fought the place the least, has accepted the "circumstances" of the place which the others battle.

Proulx's unflinching measure of the setting's disregard for humanity echoes Ralph Ellison's remarkable "February," an essay of escape into a wilderness offering little solace from the death of his mother. Ellison describes a context unmoved by his emotion. He writes:

> So that now all Februarys have the aura of that early morning coldness, the ghost of quail tracks on the snow-powdered brook to drink: and how the little quail tracks went up the ice, precise and delicate, into the darker places of the bank-ledge undisturbed. February is climbing up a hill into the full glare of the early sun, alone in all that immensity of

> snowscape with distant Dayton drowsing wavery to my eyes like the sound of distant horns. (Ellison 3)

Edward Abbey offers a similar account of the desert in his classic *Desert Solitaire.* In the chapter called "Water," he writes:

> If you have what is called a survival problem and try to dig for water during the heat of the day the effort may cost you more in sweat than you will find to drink. A bad deal. Better to wait for nightfall when the cottonwoods and other plants along the steambed will release some of the water which they have absorbed during the day…If the water still does not appear you may then wish to dig for it. Or you might do better by marching further up the canyon. Sooner or later you should find a spring or at least a little seep on the canyon wall. On the other hand you could possibly find no water at all, anywhere. The desert is a land of surprises, some of them terrible surprises. Terrible as derived from terror…If no one is looking for you, write your will in the sand and let the wind carry your last words and signature east to borders of Colorado and south to the pillars of Monument Valley–someday, never fear, your bare elegant bones will be discovered and wondered and marveled at. (Abbey 144-45)

In writing where wilderness speaks, what it says is not always pleasant to human ears; it is decidedly unbiased, lacking any hint of anthropocentrism, with a detached beauty in its regard for the entirety of life. For many reasons: environmental awareness, outdoor experiences, or a longing for some connection to place long missing in contemporary experience, more and more readers are responding to these stories, turning their ear to the whispers of trees and rivers and the writers who stand as scribes for the secrets of humanity‘s home.

My own writing has, so far, been a short and rewarding journey filled with discovery. I often write about people in and around the Red River Valley, people from Denton, Texas, and areas north, or people from Bonham, Texas, where I spent many years of my boyhood. Agreeing with most of Hemingway‘s superstitions I have avoided probing too deeply into the causes for my subjects; so long as the well re-filled, I believed, better not to flood it with light. Yet I could not help but wonder why I returned to these people again and again. *You write about rural people*, I was told. And it was true. But eventually I understood that I was writing not about just

any rural people, but about the men and women in a *particular* place, in this certain area of North Central Texas, these regions of Blackland Prairie, and Eastern Cross Timbers, and as much as their lives, I was interested in their *lives in those places*.

As an amateur weather hobbyist and a stormchaser, my most frequent and direct experience with wilderness these days is through the weather. During the drought period of the late 1990s, I watched as Lake Ray Roberts fell between 8 and 10 feet. Ray Roberts has an interesting history: one of the largest man-made lakes in the nation, the basin flooded from sudden downpours two years before the Army Corps of Engineers intended. Many structures and bridges marked for removal went underwater, the sudden lake oblivious to the careful plans of geographers and cartographers. When the water level dropped a few years ago, many of those things re-emerged, rusted but standing, surrounded by a growing field of dead trees–flooded timber–in eerie and beautiful scenes of exposure. The wise angler always uses such events to his or her advantage. Recording the location of these things, he or she can return in time, with the lake at normal depth, and expect to find abundant bass and other fish in and around these underwater shelters.

I had for some time considered what effect such a prolonged drought has on human beings. "Flooded Timber," the final story in the collection, is an exploration of these questions. Of course there is almost never an interruption in running water, and beyond some limitations in lawn care for suburban homeowners, most people can pass a drought with little effect on their own lives. In rural places, the weather has a more obvious impact–wells dry up, land yellows and grows parched, animals become more scarce, and lakes fall. I believe the instinct to leave such a place, the compulsion to go and find water after six or more weeks without rain, is still present in human beings, however submerged and potentially irrelevant. It seems unlikely that

modern convenience could so quickly dispatch millions of years of hard-coded survival instructions. In the story, this restlessness moves Florida to see her husband Otis differently:

> His face was wide, features separated like a map of West Texas. Florida could still watch him for hours, twitches like the first warmth in a spring rain, some gentle suggestion. He hated to break things apart. He was inclined to avoid decisions like this one. Florida could imagine another twenty years passing in their two bedroom apartment and suddenly she was afraid for them: that after everything, they might not make it after all. She wouldn‘t stay. (118)

One of the intentions of “Flooded Timber” was to question how such a severe and sudden climate change drives human inhabitants, and what is revealed when that migratory compulsion translates to everyday contemporary life.

Yet a re-emergence of place in narrative need not be restricted to the manifestations of wilderness or “nature writing.” Places with power are not limited to forests, deserts, or mountain ranges, though these places inspire wonder from an indoor culture. People live in cities, too, and it is likely that the agency of urban environments will grow as place and context gain narrative value.

“A Movie House To Make Us All Rich,” holds no tracts of wild space where characters find spiritual renewal or other Transcendental instruction. But the Endicott-Johnson shoe factory is undeniably a primary agent of the story; Dominic‘s actions and decisions–his very identity–are inseparable from the machines and acids of the tannery, and his position there:

> Yet there was no sending Oscar to school without money, and there was no money in the leather sheets, soaking wet, that Dominic yanked and pulled, their weight nearly bringing him to his knees, dipping them in chemicals rotten and sweet smelling, lifting the shining skins onto a line to dry, cheating on the work sheets. How many hides did Maricelli have today? As many as he marked. Who would check down here, in the sweaty dungeon of processed flesh and hulking Polacks and Wops, ready to throw each other into the vats at any second? Pay them what they mark and keep the hides coming. Stay out of there, Dominic imagined the bosses said to one another over warm coffee. The other boys kidded themselves that they were getting away with it, stretching invisible hides over the eyes of Americans who

> built this factory with numbers and figures, but Dominic knew better. He knew the bosses let it go because they looked upon him like an animal. (54)

This turn in literary subject and attenuation is nothing new. It is as if we are returning to a more traditional and balanced treatment of human drama. Silko writes:

> As offspring of Mother Earth, the ancient Pueblo people could not conceive of themselves without a specific landscape. Location, or "place," nearly always plays a central role in the Pueblo oral narratives. Indeed, stories are most frequently recalled as people are passing by a specific geographical feature or the exact place where a story takes place. The precise date of the incident often is less important than the place or location of the happening. ...Often because the turning point in the narrative involved a peculiarity or special quality of a rock or tree or plant found only at that place. Thus, in the case of many of the Pueblo narratives, it is impossible to determine which came first: the incident or the geographical feature which begs to be brought alive in a story that features some unusual aspect of this location (Silko 269).

These new voices in our defining narratives do not replace or even reduce the central human subject of all drama. On the contrary, stories of our places identify and complete us, *contextualize* us in a way that gives if not a clearer then at least a more recognizable footing in our inner and outer lives. Amy Tan says that reading fiction makes us more human, suggesting that "there are so many possibilities, and this is only one" (Tan xxviii). Equally true is that stories revealing the places we live and the power of our fragmented connection show that our humanity is defined by *where* we are as well as who we are. There is no separation. They are the same.

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PART II

ORIGINAL STORIES

Parts

Dakota Barrick and his dog Tanner ran through the woods together, gliding around the skinny bois d‘ arc trees and bushes to the edge of the shadow-canopy and the broad sunlight beyond the treeline. A nylon gun case swung from the boy‘s shoulder, back and forth with every stride. The dog, an old black and white collie, angled toward the boy and nearly tripped his feet, pulling away at the last moment. He circled fast and barked, then started hard after Dakota again, the unchained compulsion to herd driving every muscle.

Dakota ran hard too, nearly bursting with the anticipation of showing his father the paper target. He had only just finished shooting his pistol, a new Smith and Wesson given as a Christmas gift from his Uncle. The target he‘d used, now folded neatly and stuffed in his back pocket, showed a remarkable improvement in his skill. While he‘d only used the gun since February, being too cold to shoot in winter, he was inconsistent with it. He had the common problem of jerking the trigger at the last moment, anticipating the shot and kick, and lifting the gun a few millimeters as a result. This small movement translated into several inches at the end of the bullet‘s trajectory, and, as an uncontrolled flinch, gave his first several targets a scattered spray of holes. It was a bad habit but worse for him it suggested fear, and an unsteady hand.

Dakota had worked hard to shoot better targets and this was his finest yet, proof of a firm stance and gentle trigger squeeze. He had fired only one magazine but it would be enough. The number of shots in the group showed the first few were not just luck. His father couldn‘t argue with that: he would see for himself. Dakota was fourteen now and he was a good shot.

His Uncle Dale had given him the gun for Christmas and it was the beginning of a bad stretch for his parents. Dakota hated how they argued so hard over small things, as if it mattered

more to hurt each other than to win the point. Dakota‘s mother had taught him to sing the Star Spangled Banner once as they sat in the truck with the windows down, waiting for his father to come out of the grocery store. A strong sun made them sweat, his skin slick on the vinyl seats as they sang together with strangers walking past. She sang it with him over and over until he had the words near to him. Dakota thought his mother was the prettiest woman he knew, with small curls steadying her blonde hair. She smiled at people when she saw them. The fighting lasted through the winter, unresponsive to the gentle coaxing of a blackland prairie sun, and Dakota felt they were all in danger.

His mother did not want him to have the gun. His parents argued in the kitchen, the room farthest from his bedroom, as if it were soundproof, or he might not be listening. How could he not hear every word, every note of the angry refrain as if it were a secret? Always he waited for the muffled grunts of a shove or a crisp slap to the face, spellbound, wondering how far it would go. He would have given up the gun immediately, handed it back to Dale without a thought because he wanted to spare her more of this, because she had put up with so much already. They fought hardest over it three weeks after Christmas.

“I‘m not too worried about Dakota and a gun,” his father said. “You tend to put those sorts of things away if you‘re no good at them. He‘ll fire that thing and shit his pants.”

“Then you take it from him, Gene!” his mother said. “That‘s what you‘re supposed to be doing here, isn‘t it?”

“My brother paid good money for that pistol. I ain‘t gonna tell him the boy‘s mother don‘t think he should have it.” Dakota heard the rattle of the dishwasher racks as his father loaded the machine, then the running water. “He won‘t shoot his own foot off. Christ. Even if the boy‘s not my blood, he‘s not stupid.”

The words came crashing down like a shelf that was bound to fall, the things it held tumbling in a clatter to the soft earth floor of a barn or shop, dulling the sound. Dakota was fascinated by the ugly casualness of it. From his bedroom window, he could see the shop in the backyard, the door open enough to spot a pile of angle iron, rusted metal corner braces, too big for most of his father‘s projects.

“You‘d rather see him get hurt than embarrass you,” his mother said.

“I‘ve been through twelve years of embarrassment, Rebecca.” His father choked up on the words, pride and pain caught in his throat.

“Jesus!“ his mother shouted. “He‘s gonna turn out like the rest of you–all you assholes!” She ran to the master bedroom and slammed the door.

“I don‘t think we have to worry about that,” his father said quietly, as if to himself, as if to Dakota.

Baiting him for the first time.

Dakota stared hard into the shop, both of them silent, he and his father, listening, Dakota watching the parts in the shed recede in the moonlight, those objects that men like his father used to hold things together.

Over the next few weeks, Dakota waited for his mother to ask him for the gun. He stood with her in the kitchen as she coated chicken to fry while his father sat in his recliner and watched baseball. Dakota waited to tell her no.

Now, Dakota had mastered the gun. He pulled the good target from his pocket as they ran and slapped Tanner playfully on the butt with it. The dog was slower these days, it was true, but Dakota was growing faster and stronger. They came into the small pasture behind the house,

a single-story white frame in blue trim, the view of it partially blocked by a large silver shed in the backyard. In front of the shed, Dakota‘s father stood over a bench, a black mask covering his head and neck, and he wore long, brown leather gloves up to his elbows. The fire from the arcwelder glowed bright white and violet in his visor. The shower of sparks like a celebratory spray of embers seemed to come right out of his father‘s hands and drew Dakota‘s gaze, but he knew better than to look. The engine sputtered and kicked, and he kept his eyes on the hooded figure as he approached. He wondered how Tanner kept from looking at the fire. His father had said dogs know naturally not to stare at something so hot.

The Lincoln Arcwelder was his father‘s favorite machine. Very soon, Dakota would use the welder too. He‘d have to hold a gun steady first, his father said. No use in wasting welding rods on a scared hand. Dakota walked to the patio and took the target out of his pocket. The sunlight shone through the group in narrow beams, thin rods like the rusted rebarb in the junk iron pile. He wondered if he could look at the welding fire through the holes in the target, the same way you watched an eclipse.

All his life, his father told him not to look at the welding fire. It‘s brighter than the sun, his father would say, and that‘s all you need to know. Dakota learned later that the motor produced electricity, and as the welder approached the seam, the rod became the weak link in the circuit. A blinding arc of lightning jumped from the part to the rod, melting the flux sheath first, then the metal itself. Naturally, he looked several times one day when he was seven, glancing down at the fire and then away, blinking at the bright dot in his vision. After a few peeks, he felt the sting on his eyeballs like a scratch, like sand buried into both pupils. He was scared it would never go away. The blisters healed in a few days, but he wasn‘t anxious to try it again. He never

told anyone he‘d looked at the weld. He was sure his father knew. He must have figured it out when Dakota stopped asking what would happen.

He sat on the patio and swung his feet while his father welded shut the axle hole of a plow disc. When the spray stopped and the engine wound down, he ran to the bench. Dakota slapped his blue-jeaned thigh to bring Tanner alongside. He planned to do a lot of welding soon– the dog would have to get over his fear of the machine.

“This was today,” he said and unfolded the paper target. His father pulled the thick black shield away from his face. His red skin glistened with sweat. His eyes looked small, overwhelmed in the layers of skin on his face. His father was a big man who ate two steaks on Tuesday. Look at how small this is, his father would say and hold the entire steak up with a fork. C‘mon Rebecca, give me another one, he‘d say to Dakota‘s mother. His father winked at him once after his mother stomped off to pan-fry another piece.

Dakota held up the target, pointing to the group with his free hand. His father laughed. “Who shot that?”

“I shot it with the Smith. One right after the other!”

His father shook his head. “I‘ll be damned.”

“It‘s good, huh?”

His father held a small hammer, a chipping iron, and gently knocked away the flux from the weld, revealing the shining, layered bond. Dakota ran the tips of his fingers over the holes in the paper target.

“What are you building?” Dakota asked. He recognized the heating element his father had extracted from an old hot water heater, a circular burner with holes every few inches,

designed to nearly boil a huge tank of water when powered with propane fuel. It sat on the ground inside a tire wheel.

"You take the Baby Eagle next weekend and then show me your group," his father said. The Baby Eagle was a .40 caliber pistol that sounded like a cannon to Dakota. He'd shot it once and trembled from the first muzzle blast.

"Yeah," Dakota said and folded the target in half. "Are you making a barbecue?" The shapes seemed to fit: the circular burner could be welded to the inside of the wheel. Connect the propane, light the fuel, and suspend a grate over the top. The fire would be too short, however. It wouldn't reach the food.

"You stay away from it until I finish. I'll show you how to use it when I'm done. Understand me?" Dakota nodded his head and examined the project closely, working over the shapes in his head, looking for seams where the pieces came together.

In April the storms were loud and violent, and the thunder made Tanner run in circles and bark.

"Take the dog in your room, Dakota," his father called from the kitchen table. "Keep him quiet." Dakota lifted Tanner into his bed with him. The dog burrowed his long snout under Dakota's arm and whimpered with each mountainous thunderclap. The wind was hard and steady; the loose things of the night tossed around and rattled in the gale. A rope slapped against the wall of the shed and cans rolled in the yard, bouncing around the wrought iron and other pieces near the tin building. Dakota listened to his parents talking, the whispered chatter from the bedroom that meant truce. They wouldn't bother to lower their voices otherwise. He didn't remember falling asleep when his father woke him with a hard shake.

"C‘mon," he said. "We gotta go up on the roof. No school for you today. Vacation."

Dakota thought most kids would be glad to miss school for a day, but he would rather go. His father had a hard time breathing when they worked on the house. It made him mean. Dakota was afraid of heights, and his father said that was the goddamnest thing he ever saw.

His father drove to the hardware store while Dakota ate breakfast. Tanner sat beside him, waiting for scraps to fall. When his father returned they climbed the aluminum ladder to the roof, both carrying shingles and some tools. His father was standing on the roof when Dakota reached the fourth rung from the top.

"All right, hand me those and go back and get the staple gun and the nails and caulking. Bring them up here too."

When Dakota came back, his father was ten feet up the sloping roof, pulling nails with the back of his hammer, breathing heavily and red as a tomato in the morning sun. It was going to get much hotter. The boy stood on the fourth rung from the top and watched his father work. In the pasture behind the house, bluebonnets were scattered in bright patches, and the grass was a pale green in the new sun. He stood on the ladder and remembered not to look down. He didn‘t get on the roof with his father.

In an hour, his father‘s face was dark red like the blood would burst through his skin. He put down his tools.

"Come up here, Dakota. Why don‘t you come up here and help me? I need your help," his father said. The sun was like a razor slicing softly into them both, so bright now Dakota could only look down, or at the rust-colored tiles on the roof.

Dakota stepped up one more rung and looked down. He leaned forward so his upper body was over the steep roof, his feet on the third rung from the top.

He looked down again.

"Oh my sweet mother," his father said. "Get down. Get off the ladder." Dakota didn't leave. He tried to think of how he would get on the roof.

He stepped up to the next rung and bent at the waist, holding his arms straight out to catch himself. He closed his eyes and took another step and tipped over onto the roof, landing on his elbows with his legs dangling out over the edge. He crawled on his belly and pedaled his feet to give himself a push. He kicked the ladder and it rang a protest, banging against the overhang.

"Don't knock that ladder away, Dakota, for God's sake."

He crawled to the pile of shingles and handed one to his father. In a moment, he sat upright and nailed a few himself.

"It's not so bad up here," he said. Tanner sat down on the ground watching them. He'd backed up far enough to keep both of them in sight. Dakota laughed that Tanner figured it out so quickly. He'd never had to do it before, never had to back away from the base of the ladder to see everyone on the roof together.

His father looked and saw the dog sitting on his haunches, tail wagging now as they both watched him and smiled. "All right," his father said and pointed at the tiles. "Keep *going*." Dakota finished the job and walked around the roof looking for other tiles, looking out at the trees and the highway in the distance. He wanted to stay on the roof, hidden out in the open, where you could see everything coming.

Dakota was glad his father had asked him to come up to the roof, had needed him to do it. Dakota felt the warmth of his father's confidence in the simple request, the implication that it was so easily done: climbing up there for the first time. There was a rhythm to the task at hand, a repetition in pulling out the old shingles and hammering the new. Dakota felt something slide

into place there, something surprising to both of them, he thought. A pleasant surprise for both of them.

Dakota had no idea how to get back on the ladder. He couldn‘t imagine stepping off the edge of the roof. His father told him what to do step by step. When he reached the bottom, his hands and arms were shaking and he threw up his breakfast. He pulled Tanner away by the collar when the dog barked and circled the yellow puddle. His father walked by with old shingles under his arm.

As darkness came later each night, Dakota went out to the woods with the Baby Eagle as often as he could. He loaded a red plastic slug in the chamber, not a blank, but a dummy cartridge used to practice pulling the trigger without live ammunition. The red cartridge protected the delicate firing pin and carriage mechanism. He would never dry fire a good gun. He took a live cartridge and placed it on the narrow, flat top of the gun barrel. The brass cartridge stood upright on its own flat base. He held the gun away from him like this, with the round resting on top, and practiced squeezing the trigger as gently as he could. If he tilted the gun even slightly, the cartridge would fall over. He practiced until the round was completely still. He took a deep breath, aimed, exhaled partially, sighted the target and squeezed the trigger. He practiced for weeks and weeks stretching into the heart of spring.

One night the sky was clear and silver moonlight flooded his bedroom. His parents argued in the kitchen. His mother said it was time to save for college, that six years would come and go in no time. Dakota‘s father didn‘t seem to believe in the future, or at least thought it could take care of itself. Dakota‘s mother said she could take the boy and leave. Dakota grabbed Tanner by the neck and held him still.

"Are you threatening me?" his father said. "You're gonna take some wino's son away from me? What are you threatening me with?"

Dakota's mother screamed like she was on fire and there was the crack of her hand slapping his father's face. Dakota wanted to run out and tell his mother that it was okay, that he already knew, and should have realized it long before. They could all agree on that. At the reunions, aunts circled his cousins, crowing about how the boys took after their fathers. Dakota never saw the resemblance. He knew they never said it to him.

He started for the kitchen but found he didn't want to go after all. He was embarrassed. His father probably expected he'd figured this out by now. It was so easy to see, how the parts didn't join perfectly. He stroked Tanner's neck, the black fur matted and dry. Tanner turned and licked Dakota's face. Tanner was the only one he told when he'd looked at the fire. The dog shivered.

"You better settle down, Rebecca," his father said. "You better shut your mouth." He sounded worried and Dakota was glad. There was the edge of it now, and the same nervous momentum he felt when he looked over the railing at the top of the football stands, drawing him closer, as if the natural inclination were to tumble over the barrier and fall to earth. As if it were his fate. He never let anyone stand behind him when he neared an edge, never trusted a soul not to push him over finally. He could feel the falling in his hands and chest, as if it were already happening.

He understood now about the plow disc, too. Like a wok, the disc would rest above the circular burner, and the metal would heat to an indescribable temperature. But hot as it would be, wouldn't food stick to the disc? He started to get up and go ask. Then he remembered the

argument. The man in the kitchen was not his real father. It wasn‘t any difference; he wanted to figure it out by himself anyway.

In the morning, no one came out for breakfast. It was Sunday, but instead of television preachers and the smell of bacon drifting in the air, or the ruffle of the sports page, there was silence. His father sat outside on a stool by the welder, the parts of his project on the ground beside him. Tanner lay nearby, and Dakota was about to turn back to the living room when the dog shook violently, tried to stand and collapsed on his belly again. Green leaves and dirt showed on the white patches of fur down his back and sides, as if he‘d been rolling in the pasture.

Dakota opened the screen door.

“What‘s the matter with Tanner?” he said.

“He‘s old,” his father said.

“Should we take him to Dr. Rathful?” Dakota came out and walked toward him.

“No point to it. Tanner‘s an old dog. He doesn‘t feel good anymore.” His father held the circular burner from the water heater inside the tire wheel and spun it around, measuring the gap between the parts, preparing to weld them with liquid metal and a violet fire no one could watch. “He‘s not gonna feel better,” his father said.

“What are you going to do?” Dakota yelled. The voice came from deep inside him, a new place, warm and solid. Perhaps it was hate. His father looked up from the pieces he meant to join. They stared at one another.

“The plow disc will get too hot,” Dakota said between fast breaths. “The fish will burn and stick to it. It won‘t work.”

His father smirked. “Get in the house.”

Dakota ran inside and woke up his mother. It was the right thing to do, she said. It was the thing a friend would do, and Tanner was their friend. Dakota said that he and Tanner would get in the car and she could drive them all to his grandparents‘ house. They could stay there.

The screen door shut with a crack. A key slid into the lock of the gun cabinet in the living room. The velvet anchor popped when the rifle was pulled away and the loose shells in a thin cardboard box rattled brightly.

Dakota sat on the edge of his mother‘s bed and listened to his father load the rifle and go back outside. He wondered if Tanner would hear the shot. Tanner didn‘t like guns. He was a herder. It was strange his father was using a rifle.

He waited for the shot. Several minutes passed. The backdoor opened again. His father appeared in the doorway of the bedroom, holding the rifle to his side and crying. Dakota was shocked at the small tears coursing over his cheeks and burrowing into his beard. The base of his neck was bright red, matching the skin on his upper arms, sunburns from the blaze of the welder, exposed below the protection of the hood and above the covering of the long, leather gloves.

“What is it?” his mother said, raising her head off the pillow for the first time.

“I can‘t shoot that son of a bitch dog,” Dakota‘s father said and wept. Just like a little girl, Dakota thought.

Dakota stood up and walked to his room. When he came back into the living room, the carrying case was strapped around his waist.

His mother sat up straight, her eyes set hard. “No way, Dakota,” she said. “We‘ll get your Uncle Dale to come do it. He won‘t mind a bit.” She was scared, and for the first time Dakota saw that she was old, too, and was afraid of losing him, of giving him over to this man who barreled through both their lives. “Goddamnit, Gene,” she said.

His father looked at her and shook his head. Dakota saw frustration on his face, and it was as shocking as the tears, and more terrible. His father looked at her like an old obstacle. Dakota knew they could never be together, never all three on the same side.

"Don't you use that .40 caliber," his father said. "You can't hold it steady. You'll hit him in the chest or the leg. I'll call your uncle."

"I don't like the Baby Eagle," Dakota said. "I have my gun." It made him mad his father thought he'd risk a bad shot. He was aware his anger sounded like a lack of emotion, or maybe even an eagerness to kill the dog. It was a false impression he didn't care to correct. The three of them watched one another for a moment, the screen door tapping lightly against the doorframe. His father hadn't latched it.

"Well go and do it then," his father said.

Tanner sat behind the shed, flat on his belly, breathing short, stuttered breaths. Only his eyes followed as Dakota stepped in front of him.

"Don't let him see you, Dakota!" his father called from the screen door. "For God's sake. Get back ten more yards."

He hesitated. He wondered what he should say to Tanner. He was empty inside and nothing came to mind. He thought he should say something. He stood fifteen yards from the dog and heard the screen door shut. He opened the case and lifted the pistol into position. He cupped his left hand beneath his right and unlocked the safety with his right thumb. The tree line beyond the pasture formed a wall of dark green waving in the breeze, the air thick with humidity. He fired and Tanner shuddered like a ripple of water.

His father ran to the dog, leaned over to find the shot.

"Right in the head," he said out loud. "No pain for him."

Dakota pressed the cartridge release with his thumb and the magazine slid out of the handle. He caught it in his left palm.

"It was a good shot," his father said. "You're a good shot with the pistol."

Dakota did not reply. He held the blank look on his face and watched his father pet the dog. His father's shoulders shook as he did it and Dakota was scared to see it this time and now they were all broken apart. His father wiped his eyes with his hands and looked over at the project. "The plow disc gets so hot the food never touches it," his father said. "The fillet rests on a thin cushion of air from the convection. Never touches the metal. You only leave them on for a second."

His father waited for him to answer, the same anticipation on his face as he had on the roof, the secret joy they had shared. But Dakota only stared back. He imagined what it looked like from behind the welder's mask, the glare like a star fallen to earth still blazing.

Dakota walked in the house and found old newspapers to lay across the kitchen table. He took the cleaning kit from the cabinet and disassembled the pistol piece by piece, rubbing each part with a rag dabbed in the three-in-one oil, scrubbing the inside of the barrel with the long, metal brush. His father pulled a red wagon across the yard. Dakota hadn't played with it in years. How long had it sat in that shed? Only his father remembered all the junk in there, thinking of just the part when there was a need.

Dakota took the silicon cloth out the plastic pouch and ran it along the outside of the barrel. The blue tint of the black metal shone best with the silicon, and he liked the sweet smell of the soft yellow fabric. His father walked past again, holding the black handle of the wagon behind him, Tanner riding in the back. Dakota started to laugh. He looked down at his hands,

grimy from the gunpowder residue and oil, small hands with soft skin, nothing like his father‘s, but then they wouldn‘t be.

The components of the gun lay neatly arranged on the towel, like Tanner riding in the wagon, his legs folded up inside. Dakota‘s hands shook as he replaced the barrel lug and recoil spring. He pressed the back of the cylinder against the spring and tried to wedge the muzzle end into the notch that held it in place. It slipped, and the narrow silver tube popped away and rolled along the towel. His mother turned on the television, where a blonde preacher wiped his forehead with a clean, white cloth. Dakota wiped his hands on the towel and took up the cylinder again, wedging it firmly into the notch this time, holding his breath. He held the slide back against the hammer spring with one hand, trying to align the holes for the stop pin that held the assembly together. He wished he‘d closed his eyes when his father appeared in the door with two shovels, watching him and waiting. Dakota dropped the gun on the table before the pin was through, and the silver barrel popped loose and rolled slowly off the towel onto the wooden tabletop. It hit the floor and rang like an old bell.

He ran to his room and sat against the door so no one could come in. His uncle drove up to help bury Tanner.

“He‘s in his room, crying like a baby,” his father said. “Shoots the dog like a mercenary and then has a fit.” His father laughed. “I‘m not surprised. He‘s got no stomach for it.”

Dakota heard the sound of the shovels driving into the soft earth, the crash of the dirt chunks as they hit the ground and crumbled. The moon was out in the early evening, pale against the dimming horizon and full, bright enough to see blue streaks across the surface, the scars on the face of it. Easy to see the craters up there, formed by rocks crashing into the surface

and tearing through the ground. His teacher said the moon was once part of the earth, according to a theory. She said a piece of our planet was ripped away somehow, torn from the rest, maybe very early when the planet was young, perhaps from the explosive impact of another, larger meteor. That theory sounded suspiciously religious, like taking the rib from Adam to make Eve. More likely the moon was a stray rock, caught suddenly in the Earth‘s orbit, a prisoner now, drawn closer year after year, spiraling down to the cataclysmic, inevitable collision.

You could stare at the moon all night long. Maybe you could wait and watch for the meteors too, try to catch a new scar forming. He thought he might try it. He heard the voices in the yard, twisting around one another as they floated into the room, hard to tell one from the other. For a moment he didn‘t recognize them.

Early in the morning, Dakota sifted through the angle iron and rods, making a new pile. A blue glow hovered over the pasture, the rising sun spraying through thick clouds. He arranged some rebarb, and rubbed the rust particles and dirt between his fingertips, as any piece out here would leave, none clean before the seams were ground for the weld. He knew that the skilled welder examined the parts exhaustively before starting, easing the rod over the seam from feel and memory, blinded even behind the mask.

His mother knocked on the frame around the door. She looked at him like a stranger. “I‘m so sorry, Dakota,” she said. He waited for more but she shook her head and that was all.

“Sorry about what?” he said.

“About your dog, honey. About the way you felt.” She put her hand on her forehead. “We can go now, baby. We‘ll leave here.” Dakota looked at the machine, the massive Lincoln engine at rest.

“The dog needed to be put down,” he said. “I don‘t want to go anywhere. You go.”

“I wouldn‘t leave you here alone.”

“I‘m not alone. Dad‘s here,” Dakota said. “This is where I belong.”

“I won‘t go without you,” she said.

“Then I guess you‘re stuck here.”

Her eyes narrowed and Dakota turned back to the scrap metal. Dakota dropped an armful of corner braces and his mother‘s eyes fluttered from the racket. “Go on now, Mom,” he said.

Soon he had the items he wanted arranged on the ground. His parents talked in the kitchen as they fixed breakfast together. Dakota‘s father said he didn‘t know what was the matter with the boy, but he was sure full of himself this morning. Silverware rattled as his mother searched for a knife to cut the grapefruit. She asked his father how many pieces he wanted. Dakota was hungry, too. He sat on the dirt floor near the scrap pile, moving the items around in his mind like pieces of a puzzle.

A Movie House to Make Us All Rich

When he was a boy, they took in boarders, black-haired men recently arrived from Italy who paid to stay in the house and enjoy homemade meals as they looked for work and a place of their own. It was his mother‘s idea to do it. There was always one or two of them playing poker on the flimsy card table in the kitchen. The year was 1934, and the men were pouring into the Port of New York. Many wandered away from the city, hitchhiking upstate to the small Italian neighborhoods around Binghamton and Endicott. Pop said it was undignified to seat strangers at the table.

“You‘re the strange one,” Dominic‘s mother would tell him.

That they were different than the other families was apparent to Dominic the first time a red-faced man with thick stubble like coal dust ran to the door and pounded on it after rattling the knob. Dominic‘s mother pushed her oldest son aside. She wiped her hands on a stained apron, and leaned out to look up and down the street, blocking the man‘s entrance.

“Come.” Both of them stared at Dominic when they stepped into the hallway.. The new guest began to speak when Dominic‘s mother pointed to the open door. “Go outside and play.” She pulled Dominic by the shoulder, still clutching the stranger‘s sleeve with the other. “Close the door the behind you, Dommy. Stay in the yard.” He did as she said, but closed the door slowly enough to see his mother open a compartment beneath the staircase and the stranger crawl in on his hands and knees, sweat dripping from his chin and darkening the wooden floor. The seam disappeared when the door closed. Dominic stood on the porch, amazed and thrilled by this secret room, when a police car stopped in the road.

Morning sun scattered on the officer‘s silver badge. A revolver slapped the side of his woolen pant leg. He regarded Dominic wordlessly as he climbed the short steps to the porch.

Dominic‘s mother waited in the doorway. After a few mumbled words she began shouting in Italian, a cascade of obscenities that seemed to push the shadow of the porch deeper into the yard, over the toes of Dominic‘s shoes, then past his hands and face until he, too, could see his mother‘s strained neck, and the wild motions of her lips and hands. The officer never touched her. When he was a boy, Dominic Maricelli thought the police were afraid of his mother.

But his favorite guests in those days wore suits and walked gracefully up the stairs, silk cloth bending in shiny folds, crisp fedoras on their heads. They knocked softly and Dominic ran to answer because they gave him candy. His mother did not greet them at the door. They came to eat, and spoke in whispers over eggplant and cannoli, or a lasagna she‘d prepared. Dominic understood his mother‘s cooking was considered extraordinary. The family avoided the kitchen while these men took their meals, his mother retiring to her letters from Italy, warning Dominic to stop peering into the kitchen, to mind his own business. One of the diners stopped once to study the photographs on the wall. Dominic walked up behind him.

“Those people live in an old world,” the boy said.

The man spun around on polished black shoes and smiled. “Hey kiddo. They sure do. You‘re lucky to be here–we all are. You like your school?”

Dominic held his nose. “You smell like cigar smoke.”

“Leave Mr. Barbara alone, Dommy. He‘s a busy man.” His mother held open the kitchen door.

“I bet I smell *awful*,” Barbara said and laughed. He troubled Dominic‘s hair with callused fingers. “Help your ma clean up. Then take yourself to see a movie. No fun staring at these crusty old photographs. That‘s all over with anyway.” He pressed a shiny quarter into Dominic‘s palm and patted the side of his head. “Keep your nose clean.”

Dominic ran to show his mother and stopped cold at the kitchen table. A clean twenty-dollar bill lay beneath the salt shaker: a tip, he learned later. He'd never seen a twenty-dollar bill. He didn't know they made them. His mother leaned over the sink, a white towel wrapped around her head like some strange nun. Dominic's father said she stayed too thin because she ate hot dogs, her favorite American food. —Not *fit* for dogs," he said when she boiled them in the afternoon. Then he'd laugh and bay like a hound until she chased him from the kitchen.

Eventually she would smile at his antics, his simple wish to see her laugh. "There you are, Maria. Stay with me," he'd say and open his arms. Dominic's mother waved him away or rolled her eyes.

Dominic used his quarter to see *King Kong*, and came home in time to hear Pop talking on the telephone about buying a small movie theater in California. Clean aisles with handsome young ushers: American boys, Pop said. Dominic wondered if they would hire *King Kong*, too, if the monster would live with them like the boarders. Where would he sleep?

In the morning, Dominic took a quarter from his mother's purse without asking. After school, he went to the movies again and watched the ticket girl greet customers, the way she asked them to enjoy the show with a shadow of red lipstick across her teethy smile. He stayed while the credits rolled and red-suited ushers bummed their way through cleaning the auditorium with hand brooms and small wooden bins shaped like boxes of Valentines candy. These same ushers who before the show had cris-crossed the audience with thin penlights, solemnly directing latecomers to open seats. "You get out of here, kid." The largest boy pointed his broom to the exit. "We ain't gonna leave no change on the floor for you."

After another week of excited phone calls, Pop threw the boarders out of the house. "Bums," he said when they were gone.

After Sunday Mass, Pop met Joe Barbara and his friends at the door. He explained that his wife could no longer cook for them after this week. Dominic pressed his ear to the bedroom glass.

"My cousin in California, Armond Neal–you know he changed his last name," Pop explained, "but we're not going to do that–he's putting us into these movie houses in Los Angeles. Near the beach! We'll move out there when it's set up. I don't have the chance to tell you before, Joe–everything happened so fast. But I want to come see you soon, *per vostro consiglio*, for your advice about the business, no?" Joe Barbara, known as Joe the Barber, lived in Appalachian a few miles west of Endicott, and hired local boys to help with his various businesses. Joe and Pop were old friends, Pop always told people, so he could say "Joe" when others said "Mr. Barbara." Dominic asked if Mr. Barbara had a candy-striped barber pole outside his shop like the man who cut his father's hair.

On the porch where Dominic's mother couldn't hear him, Pop bid farewell to Joe Barbara and the others. He wore a baby blue silk vest and his hair was white. Joe said he wished him well, that he looked forward to Pop's visit, and whatever help he could lend. Joe had friends in Los Angeles of course. They embraced and kissed one another on the cheek, and when Joe was gone Pop breathed as if having come up from underwater.

After coffee, Pop announced to the family what he'd decided, and Dominic's mother screamed at him like he was a policeman. She threatened to smash his head with the frying pan. What would they do for money? What was he thinking about?

They pooled their salaries from the shoe factory and saved where they could. Dominic's mother picked wild mushrooms in the field behind the house. Pop sent a check to Armond Neal

each month, called two weeks later to confirm delivery and ask questions about their progress. They talked about the shape of ticket booth–should it be inside or out? Pop should see what New York was doing, Armond counseled. Drive to the city. They argued over the shade of red runway carpet for the auditorium‘s grand aisle. Rose red or pink like a chablis? Armond had no sense of elegance, Pop said, no understanding of the need, in America, for the appearance of success. Armond thought like an Italian, as if they were planning a Napoli peep show.

Pop took a job delivering mail at the shoe factory‘s sick ward, his first steady work since he‘d injured his back in the leather tannery three years earlier. Dominic wondered if he would be an usher, or if his skin held too much olive tone, his full head of black hair shining brightly. Perhaps a projectionist. Three years passed, and the calls grew quieter each month. Pop complained to Armond about the price of speaking long distance and hurried to end the conversations. It takes money, Pop told the family. Patience. They were too far along to stop now.

A few weeks after his eighteenth birthday, Dominic used a small bonus check to buy a gun and a leather holster. Pop would have admired the subtle stitching and firmness that wrapped the gun like a glove, the mark of a craftsman. The old man had been a Master Tanner, the job Dominic held now. But rather than show his father, he hid the gun under the seat of his car.

It was a Friday night when Dominic told his parents he had invited guests for dinner the next week, men from the Basilone family. It was customary to visit a potential associate‘s home and meet his family, and take black coffee or a meal. They could talk about the weather and the Yankees, Dominic said. He hoped they‘d talk about cars. He knew more about cars than anything besides leather hides. He didn‘t share his father‘s interest in American politicians. Pop

would sit in his leather chair and listen to them talk on the radio. When Hoover was mentioned, Pop would yell out loud: “Hoo? Hoo?”

If the visit was satisfactory for all parties, the Basilones would come again with another, higher-ranking member of the family and invite Dominic to their captain‘s home. That was his hope, Dominic said.

They were silent while Dominic spoke. His father ate faster than usual. He had a fantastic white mustache and his hair was neatly parted. He never sat down in the evening without his best white shirts and vests. He would tell Dominic that a man without dignity at his own table was worthless. Gray paint peeled in narrow strips from the radiator behind his chair.

“I‘m hoping we can talk about pleasant things when they come,” Dominic said.

“What are you talking about?” Pop rested his fork on the rim of his plate. He patted his mouth with a white cloth napkin then held it in his fist, his elbow propped on the table.

Dominic faced his father. “I don‘t want to talk about politics or money. Unless they bring it up.”

“Unless they bring it up.” Pop waved his hand toward the front of the house.”—Unless they bring it up!” Dominic‘s mother ignored the performance and her husband‘s neglected plate. Dominic felt heavy in his seat, as if the shape of the room had changed so that he remained central, despite his father‘s invocation, as though Pop had just mounted his own image on the wall, become another portrait among the stern faces in gold-leaf frames. Dominic‘s favorite was a photograph of two girls, his mother‘s young sisters, standing on a long flight of marble stairs. On the back of the picture someone had written in Italian: “More from the same day. Aren‘t they wonderful and don‘t they look grand?”

“You don‘t want to do it that way, Dommy. You want to be able to sleep at night. Sleep without the gun under your wife‘s pillow.”

“All that sleep brings crazy dreams, Pop. Dreams like a maze.” Dominic held his fork over his plate, jabbed it in the direction of the staircase. “Like a house full of trap doors.”

“The weather in Southern California is like Italy,” Pop said. Dominic‘s mother acted as if her husband were addressing someone else‘s concerns. “A Mediterranean climate.” Dominic wondered if Pop thought she only missed the warm autumns and bright skies.

“I‘m going to find these theaters of yours someday,” Dominic said. “I want to see the movie houses that will make us all rich men!” Pop shook his head in disbelief, and his father‘s disappointment made Dominic feel small, as if he were a child who didn‘t know right from wrong, as though the invitation to the Basilone family had not been Dominic‘s decision at all, but the terrible effect of some remote cause, a mistake of his own perhaps, some failure of the house he kept, or of his honor.

“Don‘t you see, Pop? We‘ve been waiting a long time.”

His mother passed the breadbasket to Dominic. A letter came each month from overseas, and she would hurry from the kitchen to sit in her comfortable chair and read it. She hadn‘t objected to Dominic‘s courting the Mafioso, though he knew that she thought they were evil and lazy men. Her dark eyes that evening glanced around the table to the other children eating quietly. She was a practical woman, and it was a time to consider all possibilities.

Dominic‘s youngest brother Oscar rested his fork as their father had done. “I want to go up to EJ‘s,” he said, speaking of the shoe factory where Dominic and his father worked. Thin and smart, the wisecracking boy was out of place in a neighborhood ordered by bloody fistfights and knives.

"Straight to the tannery, no?" Dominic said. "If one of those hides falls on you, there won't be anything left for the mortician!" His mother froze his laughter with a glance.

"I want my own money to see a picture. I'm big enough." Oscar turned to Dominic and raised his voice. "If you can be a gangster, then I can get a real job! Why should you be such a big shot?"

"You shut your mouth. You're as spoiled as the rest–"

"You're going to college with the other smart American boys," Pop said. "You can take your family out of this rat hole." He waved his hand in a circle. The ceiling was like a quilt of rainwater stains. "I never want to see you up there making cheap shoes with the goddamn Russians and Polacks! *Ê posto per un uomo.* No place for a man," he repeated the English and began to cough. Dominic fumed at Pop's arrogance. His father took a long drink of water and cleared his throat. "The garlic, it's too much, Maria."

On Saturday Dominic drove to the garage where he worked a few hours with his friend Al Noble. He enjoyed solving problems without words or emotion. He found that machines resisted only when his mind was closed to solutions. Al was German, and they talked about Europe. They carried deutchmarks in wheelbarrows now. A pile of money for a loaf of bread.

"It's worse than you know," Al said. The sun was out, carrying the slight warmth of autumn rays. The men worked without shirts. "Worse than you can believe."

Dominic knew it was the same in Italy. His mother no longer shared the details from her letters. Instead, darkness shrouded her face while she read them, and she ignored Pop's calls for a glass of red wine or his newspaper. A wave of desperation was washing over the whole world.

It didn‘t matter if his father understood or approved. He thought of his parents and felt the rough edges of their peasantry, their hopeful purity, and he knew it would never be his.

The bright sunlight washed his eyes clear, and the breeze shook the bushes. Associates of the Basilones could provide–they were neither ushers nor mechanics.
Well-placed friends could visit Armond Neal in California and learn the truth. Dominic would show Pop that things were not so different here than in Italy. Maybe they could get some of the money back, whatever might remain.

The air outside the garage was cold like the tannery machines before they warmed, like morning steel, a September chill marking the slow tumble to winter and a long gray season without light in upstate New York.

At Mass, a painted statue of the Virgin rested near the big Irish priest who pronounced the Declaration of Faith. Dominic spoke the words slowly, turning them over and over to find the meaning and power that eluded him.

“We believe in one Holy Catholic and Apostolic church.”

The priest waved his hand over the chalice. Dominic knew Pop believed that the host had been transformed, that the wafers were now the literal body of Christ and the wine His blood. As a boy, Dominic always paid close attention at this moment, but no longer. That his mother might believe such a fairy tale seemed impossible, intimate as she was with flour and water. People lined up for the sacrament, their heads bowed until the priest commanded they regard the body of Christ. After another prayer, his mother turned to him as the liturgy directed.

“Peace be with you,” she said.

“And also with you,” he replied.

Dominic slipped into the confessional after Mass and asked the priest to forgive his violent thoughts. In his dream, the Basilone *capo* sends him to California, and he finds no movie houses, only his cousin Armond Neal, a fat, gambling whoremaster he kills for stealing his father‘s money. When he returns to Endicott, he tells Pop the money is gone. The old man shakes his head, his eyes falling. Then Dominic tells him that the cousin is dead, that he had killed him with his own hands, and Pop looks up and cries out like a child.

His father waited outside the confessional when Dominic emerged. Dominic stood several inches taller, and Pop tilted his head to look his son in the eyes. “You don‘t bring your pistol into the church, do you, Dommy? Not in front of the Holy Mother?” He nodded at the statue.

“No, Pop. Never in the church.”

“No.” His father leaned back further, watching Dominic from the bottom of his eyes as if his son were rising from the sanctuary floor, or disappearing into the horizon. “Your friends, they come this week?”

“That‘s right. One night this week.”

“Mmm.” Pop looked at Dominic‘s waist. “It‘s an Italian gun, your pistol? A Beretta?”

“A Smith and Wesson,” Dominic said. A ventriloquist‘s choir of Hail Marys echoed around the chamber. “I don‘t have it with me now.”

“Smith and Wesson,” Pop said and nodded. “Good. That‘s good–an American gun. Americans know a lot about guns. They like to shoot each other.” Dominic smiled at the old man. “Your mother, she saw it in your car. They talk, you know.”

Dominic shrugged and his father waved the issue away. “It‘s a fine case you have for it. No German made that.”

"No, Pop."

Feathery incense hung in the air like the velvet curtain of the confessional. Father and son walked down the aisle together to the door of the church. They dipped their fingers in the holy water, turned to the altar and bent their right knees, waving over their chests the outline of the cross.

Dominic learned that the Basilone soldiers would visit on Tuesday. They would not invite him directly but gauge his interest, and the approval of his family. Joe the Barber was not associated with the Basilone family, but Dominic thought he might solicit his father's consent by invoking Barbara's name.

"This is important, Pop. These men, they're important too. They'll go back to the *capo* and tell him if you're agreed."

"And Basilone, then he'll talk to Joe Barbara? You'll work for Joe?"

"I think so."

"You're afraid we'll be impolite to your friends, Dominic?" his mother said. "You don't think we know how to act? What's wrong with your food?" At that moment, Dominic imagined his mother locked inside the glass and chrome octagon of a ticket taker's booth, cowering before a line of Californians stretching down the sidewalk and checking their watches against the show time posted overhead. She would hate being an easy mark for quick-change artists, flailing at them with broken English. He was ashamed of his parents' ignorance, and rather than confronting the Basilone men with some moral objection to their visit, he feared Pop might instead reveal pathetic images from his fitfully-wrought American dream.

If Pop mentioned how much money he'd sent, how long ago it had all begun, the Basilone men might look to Dominic to understand how it could have been allowed, as if he had stolen every penny himself.

"No, Ma. The food is fine, like always."

Dominic dressed in a white shirt and a pair of tan slacks with leather shoes before he left the factory Tuesday evening. The Maricelli boys each wore Italian shoes, handmade in the small shops that lined the narrow passageways of Rome and Frozinone. It was a mark of distinction, Pop said, the shoes a man wore.

Dominic drove Rivermeade Avenue and through the center of town. Orange and yellow storefronts and red Coca-Cola signs slid under the glow of dusk. He pulled alongside Oscar walking home from school and waved him inside the car.

"Pretty ritzy!" the boy said. "Is that how you'll dress if you get on with the Basilones?"

"Shut your mouth. And keep quiet at dinner. Just listen, understand?"

"Sure." The boy sat almost still, his hand clutching and releasing the silver window handle.

Dominic thought about the tannery and the big cuts of hide, shocking how heavy they were off the rollers, and the slight bones and light skin of Oscar. He hardly looked Italian at all with his bulb nose and dimpled chin. Dominic imagined his brother would venture far from their jagged lives in Endicott, put away a schoolboy's stained tweeds for a professor's jacket or a doctor's lab coat. He might change his name to get ahead. Maybe it would be the right thing to do.

Yet there was no sending Oscar to school without money, and there was no money in the leather sheets, soaking wet, that Dominic yanked and pulled, their weight nearly bringing him to

his knees, dipping them in chemicals rotten and sweet smelling, lifting the shining skins onto a line to dry, cheating on the work sheets. How many hides did Maricelli have today? As many as he marked. Who would check down here, in the sweaty dungeon of processed flesh and hulking Polacks and Wops, ready to throw each other into the vats at any second? Pay them what they mark and keep the hides coming. Stay out of there, Dominic imagined the bosses said to one another over warm coffee. The other boys kidded themselves that they were getting away with it, stretching invisible hides over the eyes of Americans who built this factory with numbers and figures, but Dominic knew better. He knew the bosses let it go because they looked upon him like an animal.

Dominic turned onto Victory Street and made the steep climb to the blue frame house, parked cars lining both sides of the road. He stopped when Oscar pointed excitedly, his finger tapping the thick windshield glass. "Dommy, look! Look!"

Two men in long overcoats and fedoras smoked cigarettes on the curb in front of the house. One was smiling and the shrugged his shoulders. Both held their hands up at their sides.

From the porch, Pop pointed a shotgun, waved it a little left and right, his face red as the end of his cigar after dinner. He wore a white dress shirt. The gun was black and double-barreled. Dominic remembered the weapon from a chest in his parents' room.

Dominic pulled over and reached under his seat. He lifted the holster and pulled his pistol from the leather case.

"Dommy?" Oscar whispered.

"Stay in the car."

Dominic stuffed the gun under his belt and walked to the house, keeping close to the parked cars on the side.

His father shouted in Italian: “I‘ll blow your goddamn heads off, so help me God. Sons of bitches stay away from my house. We‘re Americans in this house.”

One of the men was skinny and had a long nose that stretched to his lip. Dominic wondered if they called him “The Bird.” The other was heavy and looked annoyed, like he was hungry. Surely they knew about Signora Maricelli‘s cooking, had heard that she‘d been a personal favorite of Joe Barbara‘s, and looked forward to the visit: eating a full meal and talking about the baseball games and opportunities for young neighborhood men like Dominic, later smoking a good cigar with coffee or some bourbon if they preferred. It was easy to imagine that they enjoyed this part of the job: honored guests.

“Get the hell out of here,” Pop shouted.

Then they spotted Dominic. The Bird threw his hands out, his palms facing up. The hungry one stared, and Pop came down one step.

“These men could have killed you at any time, Pop. See what kind of men they are?” Dominic held his hands away from his body and cupped them together in the direction of the men. “They know what you‘re doing – they respect you. Let‘s sit and talk at a table like men, not out here with everyone watching.”

“Let them shoot me. You think I‘m afraid? You think your mother and me–that we‘re afraid of dirty Sicilian thieves? They can shoot me here on my own porch.” He came down another step. There were more white clouds in the sky now, too many to count. The sun hurried through the gaps between them, casting a wall of yellow light between Dominic and the Basilone men, narrow and shifting, the shadowed edges on the street swaying like underwater.

“Your father doesn‘t want us here, doesn‘t want us to come into his house and meet his family, and so we won‘t.” The Bird spoke in perfect English. “He‘s waving that gun back and forth, though. He‘s liable to kill everybody except us.”

“He couldn‘t hit the factory wall with that thing,” Dominic said. The men nodded that they understood and the hungry one opened the driver‘s side door.

“Wait,” Dominic said. “I want to talk to you.” He wanted to tell them that his father was a simple but honorable man, and that he was his father‘s son.

“You tell Barbara that if wants my sons, he can be a man and come for them himself,” Pop shouted. “I swear on my mother‘s grave, God rest her soul. You tell Joe Barbara that I say he‘s a coward!”

“Jesus,” The Bird said.

That‘s when Dominic noticed his mother behind the screen door, just an outline, a shadowed stick figure in an apron. The Basilone soldiers must have seen her too, there behind the man with a shotgun pointed at them. They saw her as surely as Pop assumed she was in the bedroom, cowering in a corner away from the window, waiting for him to return alive, hungry, triumphant. Instead she watched their future waiting on the curb, expecting only the same hospitality they had extended dozens of similar men for years.

“Give me time,” Dominic said. “He‘s crazy.”

The hungry one stepped into the car and sat down in the driver‘s seat as The Bird walked to the passenger side.

“You shouldn‘t talk about your father like that,” he said without looking up. “You should have some respect.”

The car started and the engine purred: a long, black Lincoln like Dominic saw in the movies. He knew the seats were wrapped in leather, though he would have to touch it to know the quality of the cut, the attention and craftsmanship of the tanner. He could see the hides glowed from a delicate sheen that, with care, they would hold for years and years. Dominic imagined that you slid into a seat like that, the leather wrapping itself around you, bathing you in its cool finish and softness. The driver looked again at the old man on the porch, who had put the shotgun down to his side. Dominic looked at his father too, and saw him considering the elegant car, almost tenderly he thought, as it drove down the road to the bottom of the hill, turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

The Place on Chenango Street

The paperboy was a hardheaded German kid named Pierce, and if I told him once, I told him a thousand times to close that goddamned gate behind him before he went back downstairs. My son Kevin was one year old in 1959 and scooted around our apartment in a wheeled toy walker. I'd remind Pierce about the gate because I kept the front door open during the day in summer. Kevin's walker was red with a cloth seat in the center–like a netting really–and it kept him upright–so he was sort of walking on his own. He pushed himself across the carpet and out on the patio, too, when the door was open. You never saw a happier kid. I installed a metal gate across the top of the stairway with a spring latch that couldn't be opened from the inside and closed with a sharp metal click.

It was June when one of our tenants, an old Englishwoman named Mrs. Paige, screamed like someone was trying to kill her. Jesus, it makes my hair stand just to think about it. I was eighty feet in the air, painting the window trim on the third story, the sides of my silver ladder hot to the touch. There were clouds everywhere, low and stringy, and my shirt was soaked in the dampness. The weather in Upstate New York–Christ, you couldn't catch a break with it.

I don't know if I took the steps or slid down holding the rails with my hands. Kevin had come to a stop on the landing between the second and third floors, crying his eyes out, mouth wide open. He was upright in the walker flapping his pudgy arms like he wanted to fly back to the door. Mrs. Paige stood at the foot of the steps walking in tight circles and mumbling. I ran my fingers through that full head of shiny brown hair. Not a scratch on him. I lifted him from the walker and took him downstairs to show her.

"I knew something would happen," she said. "Something awful. This is so improper. It's just improper. You're not *fit* to look after children. Oh, it's not *you*, Oscar. Men," she said

and stammered, "*men* are not fit to look after children. When does Rose get *home*?" I had Kevin in my arms trying to calm him down while Mrs. Paige carried on like that, no sign of letting up. Then she said: "Let me see him," and reached for the boy. "Give him to me."

"Hey now," I said and turned Kevin away from her.

"This is indefensible, a baby tumbling down the stairs in that–that *thing*!" Then she rolled up the sleeves of her tan shirt like she was about to knock me right on my ass. Imagine that. You had to get a kick out of an old woman like that.

I'd told Pierce not to *throw* the paper up here because he was liable to knock out a window. What's it gonna hurt him to climb a few steps, for God sakes? I don't know how many times I told him about the gate. "Close that gate behind you, Pierce," I'd say. "I got this kid in here." "Yeah," he'd grunt back, like he's sick of hearing me say it. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't do it on purpose, the little bastard. You can't trust the Germans.

I hadn't made up my mind *what* to do about it all before Mrs. Paige stuck her nose in our business and called the newspaper office downtown. She was a talker, that one, and wouldn't you know she gets right to the top? When they put her through, she must have told Billy Hill–Binghamton Sun Publisher *himself*–that her landlord was going to shoot one of the paperboys.

I painted the whole apartment house every year. Lots of guys didn't want to work that hard. They went back to the shoe factory in Endicott after the war and got treated like royalty for a while. They told me about it–cheating on the hide counts in the tannery, taking two hour lunches. We did as we pleased. You're damn right the boys felt like this country owed them something. Don't forget, we had just licked the unholiest alliance that ever threatened the world. After my discharge, I hopped off the boat in San Francisco and rode passenger trains from California to Binghamton, taking free burgers and breakfasts at every stop on the way. The girls

were there for us, too, after passing time with old men and 4F stiffs for five years. Had the uniform on my back, yellow sergeant‘s stripes on the green wool sleeve. I‘ll tell you, brother: in 1946, that *meant* something.

But I knew the free ride at the factory wouldn‘t last long. I bought a three-story apartment house on Chenango Street and fixed it up nice so people wanted to live there. Kevin was a few months old when my wife Rose went back to work. I spent most of that summer on the ladder, and my sister Sylvia would come to check on Kevin and fix both of us some lunch. Nobody bothered me except Mrs. Paige, my only tenant who didn‘t work. Retirees. Jesus, I didn‘t make that mistake again. Mrs. Paige rented an apartment on the bottom floor. Rose and I lived at the top.

Mrs. Paige insisted I come down from the ladder before she‘d speak to me. Didn‘t like to raise her voice. She knocked on the steps–clang, clang, clang–like a metal door. It must have hurt her knuckles to rap on the heavy steel. The English. What are you going to do?

I called down to her: “What is it, Mrs. Paige?” I laid the roller in the pan of sky-blue paint and tapped the can lid with a hammer to seal it. I didn‘t have a choice, you know. She‘d stand down there forever, sweating and fanning herself with a magazine or the paper. Hard-headed.

Her adult children in England never came to see her. Rose and I kept her company. That‘s the worst thing about it, that her kids never visited her, all alone in that apartment. It‘s a shame. She said she wouldn‘t go, but they should have taken her back to England. Worthless sons of bitches every one of them.

They probably couldn‘t afford the trip. God knows their mother wasn‘t going to pay for it. Stingiest old broad you ever met. Wouldn‘t buy a new *lightbulb*. She had an old lamp that

went through new bulbs every three weeks. The base of it looked like a gold leaf frame from a fancy painting that somebody rolled in a circle like a pie crust. Sitting in that–this is what gets you–was an oval-shaped fishbowl with a jungle inside: two roses, two gardenias, a plastic quail, and a gray ash-colored plant like a weed. The lightbulb housing sat on the rim surrounded by four tear-shaped crystals that dangled from the watermarked lampshade like earrings. I mean it was a hell of a thing to look it.

"Mrs. Paige," I said to her once. "This old thing burns through bulbs faster than I can replace them. Why don't you go with Rose and pick out a nice new lamp for the place, huh?"

"The lamp was fine until I moved here," she says. "Your wiring in this house is so old it's a wonder we don't all go up in flames."

I didn't pay any attention to her. I figured her old man gave her the lamp, but I had a good mind to take the cost of those bulbs out of her deposit. What the hell was I running anyway?

I remember her lamp when I think of how we found her the last night she lived in the apartment, sitting on the bed, money spread all over the floor.

"Why don't you hire a painter like Mr. Hill tells you, Oscar?" Mrs. Paige said when I climbed off the ladder. By then we all knew Billy Hill pretty well, some of us better than others. Mrs. Paige always said I should be more like him, since he'd made a fortune after the war and I was painting my apartments. She didn't know her ass from a hole in the ground, of course. But I smiled and nodded my head. She didn't know how things worked in this country. A painter, she wants me to hire. Like it's the Ritz-Carlton I'm running.

"Mrs. Paige, what am I going to do with a painter?" I said. "Watch him? Let him borrow my ladder? I'd have to raise your rent."

“Oh for heaven‘s sake,” she said. “I‘m trying to be helpful and you‘re nothing but vulgar.” She straightened her silver and red hair tied back behind her head.

“Billy Hill is a multimillionaire, Mrs. Paige,” I said. “He hires people to do things like paint because his time is worth about one hundred times more than mine, see?”

“I hear rats, Oscar. Rats over my head at night seems like a more pressing concern than painting the outside of this building.” I couldn‘t help but laugh. She remembered the last time I went in the attic when I‘d slipped from one of the planks and put my foot through the insulation and her ceiling. I think she got a big kick out of that.

She enjoyed the company when I spent a few days patching the drywall and repainting. There weren‘t any damn rats up there.

“You need to use my apartment for tea with Mr. Hill today? That why you made me come down off the ladder?”

“Haven‘t I always given you a day‘s notice when Mr. Hill and I plan a visit?” She turned and walked down the small patch of grass in front of the building. She hated walking on the grass, but there was no avoiding it if she wanted to knock on my ladder. You could tell how she moved that she‘d been a graceful woman when she was younger, smooth steps like a dancer or athlete. Her husband had run a coffee business in this country for years back when everybody drank coffee: five, ten cups a day. We all smoked, too, back then. You didn‘t think anything of it.

“So it‘s the rats then?”

“It‘s time to wake Kevin from his nap,” she called back. The kid had been asleep forty minutes on the dot. Everyone was giving me advice since the accident. They were all experts.

Who would have guessed that on the morning after Kevin‘s fall, before I even had time to ask Judge Raino, my lawyer, what something like that might be worth with a bigshot like Billy Hill involved, a long black Continental would pull up outside and Mr. Hill himself would climb out of the back? You never think of someone like Billy Hill out in that kind of heat. He straightened his beige tie, bent over and looked back into the car. Pierce the paperboy didn‘t want to come out and I don‘t blame him. He knew I wanted to ring his neck. Rose brought everyone cokes with ice, and had just sat at the kitchen table herself when Mrs. Paige walked in without knocking.

“Mr. Hill, you should take this very seriously,” she said. She pointed at Pierce with a bony finger. “This employee of yours could have killed that child.”

Billy Hill walked over to Mrs. Paige and bowed carefully.

“I want to know what you plan to do about it,” she said.

Mr. Hill gripped the inside of his lapel and rocked on the balls of his feet. “First, what is your *name*, if I may ask?”

Now I‘d had about enough of this.

“Of course. Terribly rude of me. Cecilia Paige,” she said. “A concerned citizen. And a friend of that child.” She nodded down the hall to Kevin‘s room. Like me and Rose are chopped liver.

“Look now,” I said. “Mrs. Paige, Mr. Hill and me are discussing this matter. You go back downstairs and Rose will tell you about it when she leaves for work.” Even though it‘s none of your goddamn business, I wanted to say.

"Hmmph! He wouldn't be here if I hadn't called," she said. "You would have just tried to bully this young man." See, what I'm telling you is that Mrs. Paige didn't know how things worked in this country. What am I gonna get out of the kid?

"Young Mr. Taylor believes he closed the gate, Mrs. Paige," Billy Hill said.

"He's a goddamn liar!" I said and stood up.

"Oscar, settle down," Rose said. "Everybody needs to settle down. Mrs. Paige, I'll talk to you later tonight, okay?" Rose took my wrist and pulled me down to the chair. "She means well, Oscar," she whispered.

"But Mr. Taylor is here to apologize anyway," Billy Hill said and spun around to face me. "And I'm here to back up that apology. I did not, however, ask him to lie about what he believes to be fact. I've asked him to admit the possibility that he remembers incorrectly, and apologize. All of us," he said, "are capable of remembering incorrectly."

"That's more like it," I said. "I'm not interested in what he *believes*. I'm interested in what you're going to *do* about it."

"I always pull the gate before I go back down!" Pierce said, casting glances around the table before settling on Mrs. Page. "It clicks when it's closed. I listen for it!"

"Pierce!" Mrs. Paige put her index finger over her lips.

"Somebody else left it open, Mrs. Paige, I swear! I see it open sometimes when I get here!"

"Shut your mouth!" Mr. Hill shouted so loud that Rose and I both jumped a little. I wanted to strangle Pierce, but I knew there was a check coming, and we could use the money. It was the least Billy Hill could do for us. And I didn't expect to ever pay for the *Binghamton Sun* again. Wasn't worth the paper it was printed on anyhow.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Paige," I said and walked to the door. I pointed down the stairs. She never took her eyes off me, but I didn't give a shit.

Then the funniest damn thing happened. Billy Hill came *back* up a few days later. He handed me the paper when I opened the door.

I made coffee while he asked me questions about Mrs. Paige, things I didn't have any business telling him, but I figured if you can't trust a newspaper man who can you trust? Sure enough, as I told him about her kids overseas and how they never come to see her, there's a knock at the door.

"There's her highness now, I suspect," I said. "She sees it all, and what she doesn't see, she hears. Like the Signal Corps," I said and Hill laughed. We had more in common than you might think, me and Billy Hill. He had more money, sure, but we were both GI's in the South Pacific, and you don't outgrow that. Both enlisted men. "You answer it," I said. "Give her a hell of a scare."

With his hand on the doorknob, I noticed Mr. Hill wore no wedding ring. I didn't know what the story was, but I knew enough to understand that his class expected entertainment: parties, receptions, and all that damn hoopla. I guessed he was looking for a hostess.

He opened the door and bowed. He lifted Mrs. Paige's hand and kissed her fingers. "Charmed," he said.

Maybe it was the surprise of the whole thing. Maybe Mrs. Paige was just so damn lonely that her resistance was all used up that first night. After all, none of us blamed Mr. Hill for what had happened to Kevin. Probably been quite a while since a man had acted that way over her. Her face and arms filled with pink. "Why Mr. Hill, that's very flattering," she said. "But I've

only come to borrow a filter for my air conditioner." I wanted to bust out laughing. The last thing she was going to do was walk down the steps with a big, blue air filter under her arm, though I'd have given my right arm to see it. I wished to God I'd had one handy, make her stand there and talk to Billy Hill with an air filter in her hands. Christ Almighty, that would have been a *sight*!

"And I'm not quite the Victorian relic you seem to think I am, Mr. Hill," she said. "I've lived in the United States for thirty years and I'm quite modern. Even in England, you know, it's 1959. Same year all over the world."

"Of course," he said. "I didn't mean to offend."

"You didn't," she said and smiled. Jesus, I thought. Here we go.

Mr. Hill came to my apartment two or three times a week for a month and took tea with the old lady. They met up here, like a drawing room or something, and used the kitchen table. Rose told them to use the good china with the blue diamond patterns, baby blue handles on the cups. Mrs. Paige brought Earl Grey in small containers and made the tea as Billy Hill pulled up in that Lincoln. She served the cups and hot water on a silver tray. I didn't mind a bit – it's never a bad idea to have a friend with some pull, you know. Sometimes, they drove to New York City in his black Lincoln to catch a play or see an exhibit at the Met. Real fancy, the both of them. Billy Hill would wait outside and talk to his driver, just like a regular guy, while Mrs. Paige dressed. Enlisted man, you know. GI through and through.

One afternoon the two of them came walking up the sidewalk, arm in arm, laughing and carrying on. I thought to myself: 'I'm about to lose a tenant.' I'd have to paint Mrs. Paige's apartment and change the carpet too. She'd been there for years. I thought Billy Hill might cover an extra month after she moved out. He seemed like a decent sort of guy.

One afternoon, I saw Billy Hill and his driver waiting on the sidewalk. Mrs. Paige had stepped inside her apartment for something before they went on their way. I walked over and shook their hands.

"This place always looks great, Oscar," Mr. Hill said.

"No vacancies, Mr. Hill. Sorry."

"Well, then," he said and laughed, "what if I buy the whole place, lock, stock and barrel?"

"Are you putting me on?"

"Cash on the spot," he said. "You'll be all set. Give you time to think of your next adventure."

"If *you* want to buy this place," I said, "maybe I should go buy *another* one." He and the driver laughed. My sister Sylvia came out of our apartment and started down the stairs. Mr. Hill and his driver stopped laughing and watched. Sylvia wore a skirt so short I thought she looked like a whore, and I was embarrassed to tell Billy Hill she was related to me. Sylvia couldn't settle on a husband because she liked to shop around. She came by more often after Kevin fell down the steps, like she needed to watch over me. I think Rose put her up to it. They gave Rose a lot of hell about letting me take care of the kid while she went back to work, you know. Wasn't common in those days. She knew I could do it. I told her I could. What the hell, it wasn't rocket science. Then here comes Sylvia after the accident, riding in like Custer. I told I didn't need her supervision, but she kept coming anyway. She didn't pay any attention. Once women get something in their heads, you know.

Billy Hill and his driver, they were spellbound, the both of them.

"That‘s my sister," I said none too quietly. The driver looked away fast and turned a little red, but Billy Hill kept right on watching like a damn peep show. Rich people are a queer bunch.

"Oscar, you left the burner going under the water again," Sylvia said as she came down. "Do I have to come in the morning and make your coffee too? You‘re helpless."

"I get blamed for everything around here," I said to Billy Hill. "If it‘s not Rose, it‘s this one. Sis, get down here and meet the publisher of the *Binghamton Sun*."

"What?" she said. She was something to look at, I admit. Her long black hair caught a breeze and she flashed that accepting, forgiving smile that would have made her one hell of a popular priest if women were cut out for that sort of thing. But she got attention from the wrong men the way she dressed. Bums, she went out with.

Sylvia would think it was a lark to meet somebody like Billy Hill, I knew. She held a cheap bag around her arm that swung as she came down the steps, not so much a purse as a small canvas sack with brown rings around it and a brass decal on the handle. It looked like hell. I always tried to tell her, you never know who you‘re going to meet.

"I‘ll be damned!" she said. "The *Sun*, eh? That‘s some rag!"

"Sylvia, come on now." I couldn‘t believe we were from the same family. She paused on the bottom step. Billy Hill came around the car to meet her.

"My name is Billy Hill," he said and shook her hand. No kissing. He knew I wouldn‘t go for that kind of stuff. Right on my own property? I didn‘t give a shit who he was.

"I‘m Sylvia Venefro," she said. "That‘s a great car."

"Thank you," he said. "Bernard keeps it up for me. It‘s more his than mine actually, with the work he‘s put into it."

“I bet,” Sylvia said. I knew what was coming next. “Bernard, you take off in that car sometime and see how long it stays more yours than his, huh? Ha, ha!”

“I don‘t want to pay for the gas,” Bernard said. Then he and Mr. Hill yukked it up and Sylvia stood there trying to think of what to say next.

“Guess they got you there, Sis, huh?” I said. Billy Hill tried to compose himself, tugging his ear and holding his head to the side as if he were about to tell Sylvia something serious, the meaning of the whole episode, maybe, when Mrs. Paige appeared between us all like someone dropped her from a B-52.

“Seems I missed something,” she said. She was carrying that crazy lamp, the one with the crystal teardrops around the shade. I noticed the glass had an oily film in the sun.

“Don‘t worry honey, there‘s not much to miss with a bunch like this,” Sylvia said. “They‘re not too subtle.” She had a big mouth.

“Finally getting rid of that damn thing, Mrs. Paige?” I said and pointed to the lamp.

“It‘s being cleaned. Mr. Hill is taking it to an professional restoration man in Deposit. Watch your language. I hope you‘re more careful with your speech around Kevin.” She walked past me and stood near the Lincoln, waiting for Bernard or Billy Hill or maybe even me to open the door for her.

“Don‘t you worry about that, Mrs. Paige,” I says. “We do just fine.” Sometimes she could get a little snotty, you know? I wasn‘t afraid to put her in her place.

Things went to hell after that, which is why I‘m always telling Rose she ought to mind her own business and not meddle in other people‘s affairs. If she didn‘t have to make friends with everybody in the building, I‘d have taken that check from Billy Hill the day after Kevin fell down the steps, and been done with the whole damn thing.

Billy Hill began avoiding Mrs. Paige, sending a cab for Sylvia to take her wherever they were meeting. Then I knew he was giving her money when she stopped asking me for it all the time. My sister was Billy Hill‘s private whore. How do you like that?

Mrs. Paige saw the cabs, and she wasn‘t stupid. Sylvia had always walked Chenango Street, coming or going. But now she arrived in a taxi, made the driver wait out front while she checked on Kevin–as if I needed her to do that–and piled some salami and cheese on a few sandwiches for me. Then she zipped away in the yellow air-conditioned Fairmont, the best cab in town. I told Sylvia that I expected her to pay back what she owed me and Rose now that she had some income. She said it was enough that she came in and watched Kevin for a while. I told her that was a load of shit, and that when she had her own family, she‘d understand how money comes in handy. I figured Billy Hill would give it to her, so she wasn‘t going to go hungry or anything. Hell, it looked to me like she was *putting on* a few pounds.

The way Billy Hill dropped Mrs. Paige was terrible, just like an old sack.

End of September, we didn‘t see Mrs. Paige for several days. Then, on the first of October, she didn‘t make the rent, like it‘s my fault that Billy Hill went for my sister. I didn‘t say anything that first day, but this was the one thing we all agreed on, me and the tenants: I keep the place up nice, stay on call around the clock, and they pay rent on the first, rain or shine. That or they were *out*.

On the third day, I knocked at her door around four o‘clock. It was October 3: Kevin‘s birthday. I wanted to settle this before Rose came home, but there wasn‘t going to be any argument about it. Either she paid that night or she was out in the morning, no matter what. See, I‘d have the place rented again inside a week, so there was no point in negotiating. Like I say, the apartment needed a makeover anyhow, and it was turning cooler. Sometimes you only get a few

weeks of decent Fall weather in that godforsaken place, and my time was running out. This town has fewer days of sunshine per year than anywhere in the United States.

"Mrs. Paige, open this door and we can talk about whatever the problem is," I said. "Is it the rats, Mrs. Paige? I'll get up there and change out those traps if you open the door for me. C'mon now and don't cause no trouble, huh?"

I heard a thud like a book hitting the floor flat, the air rushing out to cushion the sound, right by the door.

"Mrs. Paige, Kevin is asking about you," I said. "He looks up at me and says 'Pay-pay?' You know how he says it. C'mon now, I don't want to use my key and come into your apartment, Mrs. Paige. It's Kevin's birthday, you know? Why don't you come up and say happy birthday to him?"

"Birthday?" she said. Then: "You leave me alone or I'll call the police." Can you beat that? *She's* gonna call the police on *me*.

I was out there still when Rose came home. I beat on the door until my fist turned red.

"What's the matter with you?" Rose said."—Leave her alone, for heaven's sake, Oscar. Are you crazy?" These women: every one of them was nuts.

"You stay out of this, honey."

"Don't honey me," she said. "Come upstairs right now. How long since you looked at Kevin?"

"What, this one don't owe me any more goddamned rent because my sister starts whoring around with the millionaire? What the hell's the matter with you people?"

I never saw anything like it. I was about to blow my damn stack.

Next day there was no answer again, no talking at all. Rose got worried, but I thought Mrs. Paige wanted Billy Hill to come talk her out. Rose took a tea service down on the good china figuring no proper Englishwoman would ignore that. Now, understand, Rose is taking the day off from work, so I'm losing money left and right. And I figured Mrs. Paige wasn't as proper as Rose thought. Wouldn't have surprised me if the old lady didn't tell Rose to shove that tea service right up her ass. But Mrs. Paige never said a word, and Rose came back and asked me to use the master key. I don't like going in their apartments like that. I never had to do it before.

"You got Billy Hill's number?" I said and nodded toward her purse. Rose dug around and came out with a piece a scrap paper. Billy Hill answered the phone himself.

"I can't get Mrs. Paige to pay her rent, and we could use it," I said. "I don't own any newspapers, you know."

"I'll send a check over with Bernard first thing in the morning," he said.

"She's never been late with the rent."

"You tell her I've paid the rent. She'll be indignant as hell." It goes to show, having money doesn't make you a good judge of people.

The way Mrs. Paige laughed when I said Billy Hill had paid her rent sent shivers down my forearm, like she was choking on the laughs. She wasn't right. I fumbled for the master key and went in.

Her maple dining table was overturned and glossy magazine pages fluttered in the corners, torn apart and rattling in the stiff breeze from a pair of blue box fans going full blast. I unfolded one of the photographs, a picture of the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, the only bridge over the Arno to survive the war. A pond of milk and orange juice shimmered on the kitchen

linoleum, a few greenbacks floating in the soup, and I noticed other bills around the floor, in the sink, and the red cloth recliner.

We found her in the bedroom. She sat on her tall captain‘s bed holding the stem of a rose in her fingers, waving her left arm up and down and brushing the side of her head so that a shock of red hair hung over her ear.

“You'll apologize to Kevin for my missing his birthday.”

“He‘s two years old, Mrs. Paige. He don‘t know the difference.”

Rose came in and sat beside her. She held Mrs. Paige‘s arm still. “Get the car,” she said. “I think she‘s had a stroke.”

On my way out I saw the old lamp she‘d opened on a cherrywood end table. Mrs. Paige had removed the lampshade frame and bulb stem to take the plastic rose from inside. I carried the bowl to the kitchen and dropped it on the linoleum where, with a splash of juice and milk, it shattered into a hundred pieces around the gray and black quail, two plastic gardenias, and one remaining rose.

“Oscar, you all right?”

“I slipped. I‘m trying to clear a path for us.” I‘d have a new lamp in there before she got back.

“Mind the glass,” Mrs. Paige said when we took her to the car.

Wilson Memorial admitted her for a stroke. Billy Hill showed up with Sylvia and slipped into Mrs. Paige‘s room alone.

“He‘s paying for the private room, you know,” Sylvia said. “He really thinks a lot of her.”

"What the hell's the matter with you, showing up here," I said. "Don't you have any class at all?"

"Shut up, Oscar," Sylvia said. "Look who's lecturing me on class."

Billy Hill took me by the arm when he came out and walked us away from the women. His black shoes squeaked on the tile. The corridor smelled of antiseptic, Borax, like I used in the apartments. Like I say, none of my places stayed vacant for long. I saw to that. "I'm taking care of things until her children come through," he said.

"Jeez, Mr. Hill, that's awfully decent of you. She's got a lease runs through the winter, you know."

"That's no problem at all. I'd like to see about renting her apartment for Sylvia."

"For Sylvia? Christ, Mr. Hill, the old lady might be out of the hospital in a few weeks," I said. How would we explain where "Pay-pay" had gone?

"I'm afraid that's not going to be the case," he said. "Now, I know the apartment needs some work, and I'll pay the rent while it's made over, in addition to paying for all the materials *and* your labor. I'd like to talk to you about renovating it into more of a luxury style apartment– all at your discretion of course." He was building a feather nest for his favorite bird, this one.

"I don't know, Mr. Hill. I've got other apartments to take care of, and a son, you know? That sounds like a hell of a lot of work. I'm no carpenter."

"I know a firm'll do a fine job. You supervise everything."

"Place like that's worth more than a normal place. I don't think Sylvia can afford it, Mr. Hill."

"I'll pay the rent, Oscar." He checked his watch. "It will increase the value of your property to have such a unit, of course."

"Well, I hate to say it, Mr. Hill," I said. "But it's going to cost you."

Two weeks later, our family lawyer, Judge Raino, died. God, Raino was a hell of a guy. He loved to see Kevin when I took him with me to Raino's office in Endicott. Drew up a new will for us free of charge after Kevin was born. That's just the kind of guy he was. I'd planned to see him about this business with Mrs. Paige's apartment and Billy Hill, but kept putting it off and now he was gone.

Freezing rain fell the night of Raino's funeral. Chenango Street sloped down near the Susquehanna River, with a steep left turn uphill to the funeral home. Windshields glazed with ice sparkled from both sides of the road. Kevin wiggled in his car seat and reached for the rain spreading on the glass. People stay home the night of a first ice. It's hard to get your bearings.

"I don't think we're going to make it," I said to Rose. I was trying to get us up that hill. The Mercury slid back down, first to the right, then to the left, headlights sweeping across the housefronts like a paintbrush. We came to a stop at the bottom of
the hill. I held the steering wheel with both hands.

"Let's visit Mrs. Paige," Rose said. "She'd love to see Kevin."

The nurses said visiting hours were over. I took hold of Rose's elbow to lead us back to the elevator, and my fingertips felt cold and rough on her olive skin.

"Wait," she said. "I'm her daughter and this is her grandson. It's not safe to drive out there so we may have to stay all night."

"Well, she's probably asleep," the head nurse said. "The medicine she's on is quite potent."

Rose held Kevin to her chest until we were inside the room. "Pay-pay!" he said and startled Mrs. Paige awake.

"Damn it, Rose," I said.

Mrs. Paige looked us over, our clothes soaked with rain and our faces shriveled from the icy wind that sailed through the valley in those days. We must have seemed like a pathetic crew to a sick old woman like that. Some comfort we were.

"Language please," she said and nodded to Kevin. "They hear everything you say." She turned to the dark frozen window. "Awful night for a visit." Kevin buried his head in Rose's yellow blouse, almost as if he'd picked up on the strange new slur of Mrs. Paige's speech.

"Judge Raino died, Mrs. Paige," I said. "Tonight is his funeral, but we couldn't make it up the hill to go."

"Well, you shouldn't have even tried," she said. She tucked loose hair between her head and the blue pillow case with her right arm. On the night stand was a pitcher of water and the rose she'd brought from her apartment.

"I know. But, Christ, it's *something* not going to Raino's funeral," I said. I couldn't get over it.

"He'd understand, Oscar. He wouldn't want you to risk it with the baby." She was right, you know. Mrs. Paige always told me straight what she thought I should do. Not everybody will do that, you know. You notice when it's missing.

Besides, I thought, Raino won't know if we're there or not.

The Nine Ideas for a Happier Whole

I come on these trips because Patty hates needles. She cannot, she claims, pierce her own skin with a syringe filled with thick, clear insulin. Apparently it's not as easy as shoplifting. At home, her mother drives across Dallas twice daily to give her the shots. They switch spots each time, so as not to bruise the skin, covering each upper arm within a few days then using her ass for a while until the arms are good again. When Patty and I go to Oklahoma, we're out well past dinner, and she needs insulin after she eats. I ask her where she's been taking her shots lately.

We're in her car, going about ninety miles per hour.

She used to give me a mock laugh. Now, she looks away and lifts her sleeve. "My arm is fine," she says. It's not funny anymore, I can tell. That's my fault.

I give her the shot and dab her arm with a thin alcohol swab. An orange safety cap locks over the needle and I store the used syringe and insulin vial in the hard-plastic tacklebox Patty uses for this stuff. The safety cap is narrow, and replacing it over the needle is tricky business in a moving car, a bad idea for me, since I'm liable to jab myself in the thumb or index finger. I pull my book out from the tan pouch under the door handle. I've just finished reading <u>The Nine Ideas for a Happier Whole</u>, but still I'm sitting in the passenger seat of Patty's '57 Chevy Bellaire, hoping nobody saw her swipe a six-pack at the Allsup's Pit Stop in Frederick.

On my agenda: making it through the year without being accused of sexual harassment at work, but Patty doesn't set goals like that. She likes to steal Shiner Bock in Oklahoma and buy super-unleaded in Texas. Her wide brown eyes flutter between the windshield and the rearview mirror. She's careful, watching her speed, changing lanes with the clunky old turnlamps: click-clack, click-clack. Patty Mullins is an engineer, you see, crazy as a moonrock, and I wonder if I'll ever find a self-improvement program to let me keep her.

The Eighth Idea: Find Your Hiding Place. Everyone has a special place where they can think, laugh or cry most easily. Find it: near a lake, in a park, or a hidden corner of the library. Never tell another soul.

"Want a beer?" she asks.

"No thanks. Did you pay for them?"

She laughs. "Of course not. I don't have a cent on me."

"Beer throws off your blood sugar," I say. "You shouldn't drink beer." The road snakes around midget hills and patches of green winter wheat interrupt faded pasture. We're a striking sight on the prairie, a bubbly old car, two-tone electric blue and white, defiant fins parading over the trunk. Then the stunning moon-faced driver with yellow curls. We're a cartoon against that drab, drought-dead background of cold yellows and flat orange, a tropical fish on wheels. The gas gauge, as always, reads well past "F," as far as it will go. Fuller than full.

The gauge is broken, but Patty never runs out of gas.

I think about the Nine Ideas, these simple suggestions to live by. I make a note to tell Samantha, my personal coach, to read the book and help me incorporate the lessons into my life. I've never actually seen Samantha. I only talk to her on the telephone.

"I have to start paying more attention to what I consume," I say to Patty. "Not just what I eat, but everything: emotion, energy, even information." I raise my eyebrows at this last item. I want her to know that I'll be watching the way she frames reality from now on. Patty the mythmaker.

"Here," she says and holds a brown bottle in front of me. "Drink the evidence."

“You don‘t listen to me,” I say. She banks a curve at almost eighty. The tires whine. Her hair slides across her neck and shoulders. She has tiny ears–you have to brush back the curls to see them.

“I listen, Thomas.” She checks the side mirrors. “Sometimes you say so much.”

You have to know this about her: Patty is a brittle diabetic. When her blood sugar level drops from too much insulin, her brain starves for fuel. Sugar is the only brain food. Strange things happen then. Too much sugar and she can have a stroke. She makes it worse by eating and drinking whatever she likes, ignoring the prescribed diet, disregarding her own program. “It‘s hard to find a program that *doesn‘t* work,” Samantha tells me on the telephone. “It‘s harder to find a person who does. You have to be a sticker.” Samantha is a graduate of Coach U, an internet-based institution cranking out personal coaches by the bushel, energetic men and women ready to guide the lost or lonely for a nominal fee.

I feel good about the Nine Ideas. They‘re practical solutions. They just might work.

Patty drives into a curtain of dark rain. Lightning flashes from the storm tower overhead and the wind blows water on us, spraying Patty‘s Bellaire head-on. If anyone saw Patty grab that beer, and watched her run out the door, they‘d never forget this gorgeous blue and white car, the silver side mirrors like flashy chrome earrings. I can see Patty wearing them, taming them with her willful style. People might snicker, make room for her embarrassment, but she'd lean into them with that slapstick smile: “What, you don‘t like them?” Yeah, this thing is an *automobile*.

Patty said hiring Samantha was ridiculous, planning my financial and professional future with a stranger on the telephone. And it was my third session with Samantha when she said *Patty* had to go. I listen for a hitch in Samantha‘s voice after I detail what Patty and I are up to lately. There‘s an intolerance on the other end of the line, brittle and distorted like static.

It‘s all very thin, what Samantha tells me, reciting her generic advice from prepared scripts. She sits in a call center like the one I manage for a living, with hundreds of people around her wearing headsets and watching the clock, chained to the phone line. Rows and rows of cubicles with blue cloth sides. Like I say, it‘s all very tinny, but even crass commercialism can‘t blunt old-fashioned, objective wisdom. The species has gathered so much of it; all you have to do is call. Operators are standing by.

Samantha insists Patty is my Failure Point, or represents that concept. It‘s a psychological trick knee, and a habit or substance or person can fill that space. Getting rid of the incarnation doesn‘t necessarily dismiss the flaw. The way Samantha explains it, Patty and I might have an entirely different and healthy relationship under a new and distant set of circumstances. Dismissing Patty will uncover the problem. I tell Samantha that I‘ll always want to get Patty in bed. She‘s a knockout. Samantha acts as if I‘m not co-operating. I tell her she‘s not dealing with reality.

The Second Idea: Dietary Discretion. Garbage in; garbage out. You know what I‘m talking about. If you‘re not ready to make this change, put the book back, please.

I drink the beer. “I wish you‘d slow down,” I say. “The roads are wet.” Patty fixes her eyes on the windshield.

“You‘re right,” she says and smiles. My knees draw as if to buckle.

“Let‘s stay in the rain as long as we can,” I say, “or until the sun goes down.” Patty leans over and looks up to the ragged gray base of the storm. Red needles wobble inside the silver-

rimmed gauges of the instrument panel. Her eyes are quick, the calculating engineer, the sexiest damn thing I've ever seen.

"The storm may not follow the road," she says. "It doesn't have to, you know."

"This is farm country," I tell her. "There's all kinds of little roads." I reach in the back for The Roads of Oklahoma, a detailed map with an entire county on each two-page spread, and every US interstate, state highway, county road, farm to market, gravel trail, and dirt path clearly marked. It's invaluable when we leave the state in some unorthodox manner, which is nearly every time we come. We'll roll down the windows and howl like wolves when we cross back over the Texas line. The Red River is stone-shallow like a creek these days, as though the distant heart of the thing beats softer and softer. The rain will do us all good.

The day I met Patty I saw the car first, then the pretty girl inside. She didn't smile, but there was a glow from her and the car together, the combination more radiant than either element apart. Samantha wasn't interested when I told her how Patty looked as if she'd been born in there, as though the car had grown around her like some neon
metallic hairdo.

"Gotta watch the time," Samantha said.

My friends told me it was just that old car, but I disagreed. Patty *likes* people, and you can tell. She's a good lover, strong but soft and obliging, and the first time she said she loved me there was a bitter look, as if I'd forced it from her. Now I'm in that car with her and we're driving fast.

"How's work?" she asks. Patty thinks what I do is exciting, managing a room full of people. She's a mechanical engineer, and draws blueprints for gas pump parts. The debit card revolutionized the gas pump industry: every station needs new ones. People won't stop at the

old ones anymore, Patty says. They want to use their debit cards. Patty designed a pump that plays CNN while you fill the tank. Times are good, I tell her, when people can afford enough gas to watch the news while they pump.

I‘ve got a smaller office than any department head in the building. As a result, we have space for vending machines in a large break room, with fried apple pies and steaming coffee. On Sunday mornings, a few employees come early and cook bacon and scrambled eggs in the microwave, fill clear plastic cups with orange juice and make other breakfast sounds: warm, tired voices and small laughter. Hell, it sounds like someone‘s kitchen. Of course they say nasty things about me behind my back–that‘s human nature–but I know where they‘d line up in a fistfight. You have those in big companies. No blood, just words and emails, poison memos and trips to the Human Resources Department. None of ours transfer out. I see a new request to transfer *in* every day from some brave soul in another area. Their boss sees it, too.

We have our own entrance and exit, and we lock the glass door to the rest of the building to keep them out. When my boss visits from the executive suite, security calls and I buzz him in. The rest of them stop at the door and stare through the glass. My people wave and smile.

“It‘s *good*,” I tell Patty. “We‘re making it a good place for people to work.”

Wind blows rain back and forth across the road. Clouds to our west glow green with hail, but I don‘t mention it since she‘s going plenty fast already. Still, it would be a shame if we drive this old bird under the rocks.

The Seventh Idea: Write Glowing Reviews of Yourself. Write about your goals, and what you did today to draw nearer to them.

“A good place to work as in the boss doesn‘t try to talk girls into storage closets with him?” Patty says things like that, like I‘m some predator. The girl in question had felt comfortable enough to roll her eyes and say, “In your dreams.” She quit a month later and sued the company for sexual harassment. The women in our building are feisty. It‘s hard to help myself.

“You should come work for us. You‘d see for yourself.”

“I‘d cut your dick off and microwave it,” Patty says. “You should be reading self-castration books if you want to improve yourself.” She laughs out loud. She hadn‘t laughed when it happened though, mainly because there‘d been a similar problem the year before, another case of poor judgement: the wrong quip to the wrong person. It was the end for Patty and me, that second time.

“Criminal,” Patty had said then. “Sex fiend.”

”My God, Patty,” I say, wondering how far she might be from considering something like that. If we were married? One never knows another person completely.

A white pickup with a flashing red light over the driver‘s side appears behind us.

“What‘s the next east road?” Patty says.

“I don‘t know, let‘s ask this cop.”

“Find the next east road. Please.”

“East is a bad idea, Patty. There‘s hail moving this way.”

I learned about Patty‘s diabetes in college while we were dating. Someone approached me in a topless bar and said I had an emergency phone call. A naïve stripper named Diamond was sitting with me. I‘d seen Diamond come in wearing too high heels, and watched her stumble around: her first day, and I was talking her out of the career choice when they said

Patty was unconscious in the drunk tank. An hour later she was comatose, white as linen, like the blood had drained from every cell. I couldn‘t believe she wasn‘t dead.

The First Idea: Exercise. Tap the natural spring. You don‘t require Siberian, Korean or any other communist ginseng. Your body has all the energy you need.

We‘re out of the Arbuckle Mountains now, emerging onto the flatland like a circus tent in the desert. The storm swallows the reddening western sky, closing on us.

“The next east road is a gravel trail,” I say. “We‘ll get stuck.” Patty doesn‘t need me to explain traction. “Then we‘ll get hailed on. We need to get south of the storm or turn around and stay north of the hail. We‘re running out of options.” The police truck follows at a distance, light flashing dimly in the rain, waiting for us to decide.

“I‘m all for not stopping,” she says. “Not until they send the helicopters.” When her sugar drops, Patty‘s brain closes systems one by one, the real gas-guzzlers first: higher functions like reason and delicate motor skills. Most diabetics grow tired and lay down until they can eat. Patty runs from the police, riding a 455 horsepower Chevy engine through the Red River Valley like the last Apache just out of rifle range.

The best thing Patty could do now is drink a beer.

Because I know Patty‘s disease, I‘m not surprised that she keeps driving and talks about helicopters. Stress chews up glucose fast, and we haven‘t eaten since breakfast. Her eyes are blank, the brain-drain unfolding like a play, and I imagine her floating out of the car, through the window maybe, head-first, snaking through the opening and up up up into the storm, leaving a

serene pet Patty down here with me, the one she thinks I want, the one she thinks I‘m looking for in books. Her perfume smells like the first fall day when wet leaves clump together on the grass.

The police truck closes in, a few yards from our bumper. I lift the Nine Ideas from the door pouch. The cover is that slick, soft paper, cool to the touch.

I read aloud: “The Sixth Idea: Identify all negative agents in your world and eradicate them. Celebrate their banishment.” Thunder rolls like we‘re in the crawl space beneath a bowling alley.

“Wow,” she says. “I‘m so glad you reminded me.” She smiles and shakes her head. She‘s entertaining herself. “Thomas, Thomas. So much time learning how to live. Call me when you figure it out.”

“I‘m improving myself. It‘s possible you know. You can roll up your sleeves and do it.”

“You can accept circumstances or waste time,” Patty says. “Like you.” She‘ll only talk to me about this when she‘s having an insulin reaction. It‘s how I know it‘s in there. “You waste time.”

If I go to jail in Oklahoma, I could be late for work on Monday, or miss it all together. I see sunlight approaching at the storm‘s edge. Then we‘re out from under the cloud, and the brightness makes us squint. I turn to Patty. “Now they‘ve got us.”

“Optimist,” snarling. She rolls her head around, going downhill fast. The engine sputters once, and again, and Patty floors the accelerator and pounds the big brown steering wheel with both hands. When she exhausts herself and we‘re barely moving, I pull the wheel towards me to guide the car to the shoulder where we roll to a stop.

I‘m amazed. She looks from the instruments to me to my book.

I turn in my seat as the policeman approaches. Patty rolls down the window before he gets to there.

"The gauge is broke!" she shouts. The policeman stops.

"How's that?" he says.

"The gauge is broke. You didn't catch me–I ran out of gas." He walks to the window now, peels off his silver sunglasses. "Shit," she says to him. Like he's cheated.

"People tell me everyday about their broken speedometers," he says, looking at me. I nod to agree. Black letters on his silver nametag spell "Godwin." "You'd think not one of them came out of the factory working," he says, "so many broken out here." Now he looks at Patty. "Right here on this highway." He tugs his red moustache. "But nobody ever said they pulled over because they ran out of gas." He looks in the backseat. "Heard you forgot to pay for some beer."

"Yeah," Patty says. She taps the speedometer glass with a clear fingernail. "It's never worked right." She tries to start the car again.

"Whoa now," Godwin says and steps back. He lifts the leather strap on his holster. I pull the keys out of the ignition. Patty glares at me. I go into the routine.

"She's a diabetic, officer. She's having an insulin reaction right now."

"Is that right?" The outlines of hills press through the rain to our north. We're in the sunlight, and a broad, bright rainbow parades overhead. I feel like we should be drinking champagne. Godwin moves closer to the window. He's chewing gum.

"She needs a candy bar or some orange juice," I say.

"And a new gas gauge," Godwin adds.

"Right."

"Feeling faint there, little lady?" he asks. I clench my jaw.

"I'm not your lady," Patty says sweetly, as though he's mistaken her for his mother. She turns to face him. "I'm a real bitch." Deputy Godwin laughs from the belly and tells her to get out of the car. While he adjusts the silver handcuffs around her wrists, Patty says that he stinks like a milk cow, and that her uncle could use someone like him out at the Dairy. They count the breedings every day, she explains. There's plenty of action for him. Godwin pours a gallon of gas into the empty tank and tells me to follow him back to Frederick. Patty is going to jail and we won't know bail until he finds the judge.

The Ninth Idea: Occupy all the Universe. Bring the Ideas together, and honor the potential of every action. The power of all creation becomes yours.

The Western Union office is closed, but the clerk arrives ten minutes after I pull in the parking lot. She's gray from head to toe and thin as a rail. She knows the whole story, no doubt.

"Got some trouble?" she asks. She walks to the door and fumbles through her keys.

"It's always something," I say.

"Don't I know it?"

I write out the wire order and wait with her. We sit on stools and talk across the scratched wooden counter. A ceiling fan turns above us. I tell her about the Nine Ideas, and she shakes her head and waits patiently for me to finish. She tells me about the Bible, and the story of the Baby Jesus, who had so many ideas that four guys wrote four versions of his story, each with different ideas than the others. A self-improvement extravaganza like no other, I tell her. She nods and says she never thought of it that way, but she supposes that's exactly what it is. I

tell her I‘m a person who has to work on a few ideas at a time. Like Gerald Ford, I say, and she laughs a sweet, quiet laugh as we wait together for Patty‘s bail money.

We‘d run into the wrong cop. Back at the sheriff‘s office, Godwin fishes a few coins from his pocket and drops them into a vending machine. The bottles are stacked vertically and the glass door swings open like a refrigerator. Even the “Enjoy Coca-Cola” in flaking red paint is a classic design.

Patty‘s Chevy ran out of magic on us, as if there were a gauge for that sort of thing and it was broken too, and we‘d been taking our chances with it, or had forgotten how to measure what was left and get home before we ran out. Godwin tosses a bottle to me with the key to her cell. Patty presses her face to the bars, singing badly.

“Make her drink that and don‘t let her take so much insulin,” Godwin says. “Cook your brain that way or crack up that shiny car. Wouldn‘t that be a crime?” I nod my head. There‘s no question but that it would be.

“I don‘t think she‘ll drink it,” I say. “She‘s belligerent.” I‘m off the script. Cops had always let us go, happy to do without the potential coma in their jail.

Deputy Godwin smiles. “Thomas, you let me know, and I‘ll call the medics to bring some glucagon. We‘ll give her a shot of that stuff if she can‘t drink the pop. Fix her up good as new.” Glucagon was the instant cure: pure glucose. Patty stops singing.

I bail her out and drive us back to Corsicana, Texas in her Chevy. I tell her we shouldn‘t see each other for a while. I leave my book wedged in Patty‘s sun visor over the driver‘s side.

"I'm sick of your New Age crap anyway," she says. "I'm sure Samantha can find you somebody for the right price. Someone who's been successfully treated." Patty's not the type to cry. A week later, she won't return my calls, and I phone the County Attorney in Frederick for the trial date. I drive to Oklahoma alone.

The Third Idea: Direct your Energy. Focus on one or two primary goals. Feel the power moving through your hands; you're sculpting a new life for yourself.

My silver Chrysler blows chilled air and has a first-class sound system. Stock ponds near the road are still and dark. Children fish from the knobby docks. I cross the Red River knowing Patty needs confrontation, someone to stand up in court and tell the truth. She needs me to show how much I loved her that way.

She's somewhere on this same road, checking her rearview mirror for me. She's suspicious of that broken gauge now.

I'll sing like a canary. That's the right way to do it, the cleanest break. She'll know my intentions, but fold and go home anyway, I'm convinced. I imagine her dabbing cherry lipstick inside the car, the scent like ice cream.

I call Samantha on the cell phone and tell her my plan. She's quiet, and I hear the lightest clack of keys as she types a word into her database. "Confrontation," probably.

"No, no," I say. "This is not about that at all. Not like confronting an alcoholic. This is revelation, public confession. Don't you see?"

"Now let me think this over, Thomas." More typing, louder this time.

"Listen to me. Stop typing. I'll show her I love her and leave. This is my going away present." Samantha sighs. "I want to know what you think!" I say. I've never told Samantha about my problems at work. It didn't seem important, the past. Misunderstandings.

"I just think – I think you need to do your own thing, Thomas. Stop following Patty around."

The Fourth Idea: Love Yourself First. You're the most important person in the world.

I sit in the back row with my hands wrapped around a black umbrella. The place is packed with traffic tickets and alcoholic misdemeanors. Three rows of ceiling fans stretch across the top of the room. All the chairs and benches are dark cedar. The benches are like pews, with wooden pockets on the back of each seat, a selection of magazines facing everyone through the long wait. There are no windows.

When Patty's trial begins, the County Attorney introduces the owner of Allsup's Pit Stop. On the stand, he recounts how Patty took the beer and beat it out the door. He describes her car like a connoisseur, enjoying himself, as if the jury needs to know about the silver body striping and how you can't help but notice something gleaming like that in a gravel parking lot. The judge yawns, exposing her enormous teeth.

Patty represents herself against the advice of the bench. She's an elegance in the courtroom, striding to the jurybox like a powerful swimmer. Their faces are rapt at her approach, as if the document in her hand tells how all this will end. It's the doctor's letter describing her condition and erratic behavior. The medical explanation. Disgusting, Samantha

had said when I told her that Patty kept the letter in the glove box for emergencies. Patty reads it to us. She slides it back into the envelope and faces the jury.

"I'm a mechanical engineer and I've worked hard to get where I am. There are not many women doing what I do," she says. "I make more than enough to pay for my beer. Normally I don't drink beer. Normally I don't take things without paying for them. I'm no shoplifter. I'm a good person." Her voice thins. She hates to cry. Hates it.

The Fifth Idea: Love your Family and Friends. Don't expect love in return and see what happens.

I stand fast and straighten my tie, ready to tell all. I'd known her for years, and I knew her diabetes better than anyone. I saw her insulin reactions from their first moment, a tilt of her head, the slowing smile as her thinking distorted like the pebble's first ripple on a still pond. The discomfort in losing control. Patty spins to face me, her eyes round as the bottom of a beer glass.

Before I can speak, the County Attorney stands and expresses his sincere regret for the circumstances. "The State of Oklahoma drops all charges," he says with a broad smile, as if looking down a long table at his entire family.

The judge cracks the gavel on her desk. "You're free to go, Miss Mullins. But let me say something to you. Deputy Godwin is a diabetic himself. He tells me he doesn't believe you were suffering from, what is it?" She reads the word from a document: "Hypoglycemia…at the time of your arrest. The deputy is no doctor, certainly." She takes off her glasses. Patty folds her arms in front of her.

The court reporter taps his keys to catch up.

“We don‘t have engineers here,” the judge says. “This is a farm town. The town supports farmers, Miss Mullins.” I hang the curved handle of the umbrella from my front pocket. I hold my arms down by my side, palms outward, trying to embrace the weight of the words. “I don‘t want to see you here again,” the judge says. “You‘re just a thief and you‘re dismissed.”

Patty walks alone down the aisle. She‘s wearing a handsome suit, and her white shoes tap a charming rhythm on the wooden floor. Deputy Godwin sits two rows ahead of me and turns to watch her leave, disappointment on his face as if he‘d have enjoyed her company a little longer, her grace a rarity. I step out of the row and follow her through the front door and down a flight of concrete steps. She crosses the street. The wind blows her hair back and I can see her small ears. Then she climbs in the old Chevy and starts the engine. The electric blue bleeds through the sunlight and we‘re a cartoon again. I want animated lips so I can stretch them fifty feet and kiss her on the forehead. I jog across the road.

She rolls down the window. “What a loser,” she says. “—Not you. Him.” She jabs her index finger toward the courthouse. “The *prosecutor*. He didn‘t even *try* to fight it out, that fatboy chickenshit.”

“Jesus, Patty. He cut you a break.” She leans back to see around me, watching people coming down the steps.

“Samantha should have kept you away from here,” she says. “You should fire her ass.” Her eyes are on the courthouse. I smell potato soup and fresh bread from the diner behind us. There‘s a line forming at the door. “But then you haven‘t seen *her* ass yet have you? Maybe you should ask her office hours.” She looks up when I don‘t reply. “You were going to tell them. That‘s why you stood up. I would have *never* spoken to you again.”

She spots the County Attorney. “Hey!” she yells.

"That," I say, "might be the best thing for both of us." She glances up to me, shakes her head and looks back at him.

She cups her hands over her mouth. "Fatboy chickenshit!" I back away from the window. "You fat ass!" she says.

The County Attorney puts his briefcase down and points to us. "Now you look here," he shouts. "You just hold it a minute." He looks at Godwin and points to us again. Godwin jogs down the steps, his arms bent at his side like a sneaking ghost.

The tires spin, whitewalls clean enough to disguise rotation until they conjure white smoke the scent burns my nostrils. A streak of electric blue and white, with a dash of red in back, those tall taillights pointed like a church steeple. The yellow curls are in there, too, and I imagine the front half of the car leaping forward like a slinky, nearly across the state line while the back tires still spin in place, dusting my black shoes like the Road Runner revving up until the last second and screeching away when Wily Coyote appears. Godwin stops in the road and watches her leave.

"What is the *matter* with that woman?" he says to me. He wipes his hands on his trousers.

"She's a diabetic," I say. "She's sick."

The Chevy stops with a screech. A book flies out her window, the white pages flapping like the wings of a doomed bird.

"Son of a bitch," Godwin says and runs for his truck. He'll arrest her for littering. He has no choice after such a flagrant violation before everyone crossing the square for lunch.

She'll laugh about it later, how my book slid out from above the visor when she floored it and smacked her somewhere, in the head probably, scaring the shit out of her. She'll yell and

scream and laugh until those tiny ears are bright red. If I‘m there, that is. I want to be there for that. These days, those are the things I want to see. I run for my Chrysler. I wait for Godwin to pull away and I fall in behind him, heading north towards Lawton, all of us driving *away* from Texas and the river. I bet Patty doesn‘t even know she‘s going the wrong direction.

All the Stupid Things I Said

After we sat down, Sharon and I both looked around for something to talk about. We were in Austin and I had a necklace in my pocket, a gold chain with a tiny tabla drum as a pendant. I planned to give it to Sharon on the steps of the Texas Capital, about a mile down Congress Avenue. This was in December.

"C'mon, Danny," she said. "Chopsticks are easy to use. Hold one still by wedging it between your thumb and forefinger, then manipulate the other like a pencil." She demonstrated with a flurry of her trimmed, uncolored fingernails, and I remembered when they had been red and wet. Her hands were darker now, as if the glow of her skin had faded from competition with the gold wedding band. My name on her lips sounded as if it held all the things that had been good for us–the edges she'd learned to sharpen in the word were smoothed–as if the past held no further consequence. In that way, it was something less than it had been, idealized and artificial. I was already thinking about these things, before we'd even ordered drinks. With her chopsticks she lifted a packet of sweetener from a small box and dropped it on the table. Then she lifted the entire box with her sticks and turned it upside down, dumping all the red packets. She smiled and we replaced them in the box together, not trying very hard to avoid touching fingers.

"I never use them," I said.

"Did you ever try?"

"I don't think so. I like to spear my food."

"Danny, do you think you could help us out–me and Patrick? We're in a real spot."

"Wow. That's very forward of you, Mrs. Flanery."

"It's no joke, Danny. We could lose the house next month. He was so sick." She squeezed both chopsticks in her fist. "Oh, I'm sorry. Christ, I shouldn't have asked that. I mean,

I have to, but let‘s talk about something else first. For now. Let‘s catch up. Where have you traveled?”

“Well, I *did* bring you a gift,” I said. “But I don‘t think it will cover the mortgage.” I smiled wide and her shoulders shimmied a little in a muted laugh. “We‘ll talk tonight,” I said. “We‘ll talk about it when you want to.”

“Not now.” She waved her hand. “I had to get it out, that‘s all. It would have spoiled my night. You know, I can‘t do all bottled up for long. And with all this going on at the same time. Danny, sometimes I think I‘m coming apart. I always thought I was stitched so tight, you know?”

“You still look like you have it together,” I said. But I didn‘t know. I didn‘t know where she was.

It was a Japanese place with long, rectangular tables. People edged around brightly-lit buffet tables selecting cuts of salmon or spiced tuna tied to rice cakes with narrow black seaweed ribbon. We waited to give our drink orders. Sharon sat on the opposite side of the table.

I ordered iced tea and Sharon ordered hot tea. “C‘mon,” she said and started walking toward the buffet. I‘d flown to Austin as soon as I heard about Patrick, not because I knew or cared about the guy – neither was the case – but because I thought it might do Sharon some good. Like most of our friends, we were in our early thirties, when news of heart problems travels fast. Sharon didn‘t walk as casually as I remembered. She hesitated around the sushi bar and seemed unsure of herself. She was heavier and her face had filled out some.

We had met five years earlier in San Francisco. I played tabla with a drum circle in Golden Gate Park, wearing old jeans and a white shirt, my tabla strapped around my chest. Every Sunday it didn‘t rain, people sat on the grassy slope and watched ten or fifteen of us play. We

passed joints with orange embers while girls danced nearby waving red and white streamers as they twirled. Bare-chested guys with bandanas juggled flaming torches in groups of three or four. Tourists shuffled their feet like they were tap dancing in secret. Sharon was in the city with friends. She managed to keep her camera aimed in my direction that first day, and I was never one to pass up an opportunity.

The truth was I'd learned to attract girls with the drum years before, and I liked to think I could target the ones I wanted.

I worked on the crew of a Bay tour ferry that sailed under Golden Gate Bridge then circled Alcatraz before returning to pier alongside the slick, caterwauling sea lions. Sharon rode free with some passes I'd stolen for her. There were few tourists in the mornings, dense fog making it tough to sightsee. For those who rode, the red bridge appeared like a mountain from the fog, depending on the thickness of the soup and our distance from the massive girders and endless cables when they emerged, and the people standing with their cameras in hand would lean back until they fell into their metal chairs, or on the deck if they had been standing ready in the aisle.

"I can't imagine myself at the head of a long table with kids and grandkids on either side," I told Sharon once as we pulled away from shore. The morning smelled like algae and sea lion. "I think it's why I choke up at scenes like that in movies," I said. The outlines of pelicans took shape above us one by one, stretching their silver wings to hover close over the helm.

"Because you don't want it?" The fog shone blue in Sharon's sunglasses, swirling strands of sky.

"I don't think it will ever happen," I said. "I just don't see it."

"You don't *see* it? What does that mean, you don't *see* it?"

A few teenagers leaned over the stern to glimpse the craggy shores and steel towers of Alcatraz prison. I knocked on the rail and pointed at their seats.

“People ride this boat because it *doesn‘t* stop there,” Sharon said and nodded toward The Rock. “They don‘t want to *land* on the island. They only want to look. Golden Gate Bridge they‘re not afraid of.”

From the water, the parallel streets of San Francisco sloped high into the city.

Sharon pointed out her favorite sushi, the smoked salmon and octopus. I took two slices of a California Roll and some yellowfish. Try whatever looked right, she said. Chefs worked in the center of an octagon bar. They sliced fish with silver knives as rice cakes dropped from a stainless steel machine in perfect, square blocks. They added cucumber slices, sesame seeds, and crabmeat to the rolls and wrapped them with a bamboo mat.

At the table, Sharon took a deep breath. “Pat‘s heart problem,” she said. “It almost killed him, but now he‘s fine because they implanted a glass valve. He‘ll take blood thinner forever and he has a special identification card. The government keeps track of all implant patients for the rest of their lives. Did you know that?

“He had a tooth infection and the bacteria spread to his heart. I‘m sure you know all that and I don‘t want you to think I can‘t talk about it,” she said. “People act like it‘s the plague.” She took a long drink of tea like she‘d swallowed a pill.

“I heard it,” I said. “I‘m glad he‘s going to be all right.”

“He‘s fine. Thank you for not apologizing. Everyone says how sorry they are when there‘s nothing to be sorry about.”

“No,” I said. “It‘s a hell of a thing though.”

Sharon looked up at me over her teacup. For a moment I realized how the gold necklace in my pocket was out of place at a dinner with such a strained context. I didn‘t know what the tabla could do for me now.

“I told him to go to the dentist,” she said. “You guys. There must be something wrong in your fucking heads. Then the pain ended, and the bacteria swam straight for the heart muscle. Big connection between the gums and the heart, Danny. You didn‘t know that, I guarantee it.” I nodded that I hadn‘t and sipped my tea. “Patrick lived a year with two holes growing in his heart muscle. We didn‘t realize there was something terribly wrong until he couldn‘t make stairs anymore,” she said. “He thought he was just tired from work.” She drummed her fingers on the table. Her eyes narrowed and tightened the skin on her cheeks and temples. “If he‘d gone to the doctor early, we could have been spared all of it. So fucking stupid!”

I mixed the green wasabi with soy to make a sauce for my fish. I wanted to see her eyes while she told this, see how deeply it cut, but she would have known what I was looking for, and she would have been surprised again at how I struggled against reality.

“The kids are learning about their bodies and that‘s a good thing,” she said. Patrick had brought two boys from his previous marriage. “We didn‘t lie about it. They‘re at that age where it‘s hard to know.”

“I went to the Top of the Mark Lounge last time I was in San Francisco,” I said. “I went to Sunday Brunch. Forty-five bucks and every breakfast food you can think of plus a guy in a tux playing piano. They had sushi out and some of this stuff.” I lifted the bowl of wasabi. “I thought it was guacamole,” I said. Sharon giggled. “Now I know why the waiter was smiling when he poured my coffee.”

“Did you stay at the Mark Hopkins? There at the hotel, I mean?”

"A few days," I said. "It was real wasabi, Sharon. Not horseradish with food coloring, like this. Man, oh man."

"The Mark Hopkins is very swank," she said. Sharon booked travel for a living and the Internet was putting her out of business. She'd laid off the three ladies who'd worked with her. She sat in the agency alone now. I'd driven past earlier that morning and saw the panels she'd left standing to give the impression several agents still worked there. I thought of her pacing from cubicle to cubicle, wringing her hands through the empty maze like the blood in Patrick Flanery's heart had found unexpected paths to travel. Sharon was a pacer, and I could easily imagine that.

"Who's booking your travel these days, flyboy?"

"Expedia dot com," I said and shrugged.

"Don't tell me that, Danny. Tell me someone like you has the class to use an agent." Then she said, "What about climbing California Street back to your room?"

"It was tough," I said.

"You took cabs," she said. "You never climbed it."

Small bells like wind chimes played through the quiet conversations around the bar.

"Not all the way. It's very steep."

"It's Nob Hill. What did you expect? A travel agent–a good one–would have told you about that hike."

"The cable car runs up and down California Street–stops right outside the hotel. I jumped on when I couldn't keep going."

"I know that, Danny," she said. "I know where the cable cars are."

When we were together in San Francisco, Sharon had booked hotel rooms over the phone and hated it. Face to face, she told me, she could always sell more than over the phone. Their eyes told her which pictures to show. "It's spiritual," she said. "It's the secret that separates good travel agents from the rest. People don't want vacations. They want pilgrimages–they want to connect. They *settle* for vacations." She could tell the lonely ones from those who wanted to have a good time.

In January, seven months after we met, at the peak of the rainy season, Sharon accepted a job with Carnival Cruise Lines in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. She told me with her suitcases open and empty on the bed. The wooden floors creaked as she walked back and forth from the closet. It was an old house with a tall ceiling and a fan that turned uselessly. She packed her nightgown, folding the pearly silk fabric into a small square. I thought maybe she was lonely for the tourists. She might have taken their offer without thinking about the sun on the Bay in a few months, or the shadows across the steep, winding trail of Oakland Street. I should have asked her why she was rushing into the arms of the corporate travel industry she professed to hate – Fort Lauderdale the beating heart of the monster–with so much more to learn about our own strange, upside-down city, but instead I said this:

"It's good." I wagged my finger. "It's unexpected. Unexpected things are jolts to keep us awake. Reminds us we're alive."

"Right. I never expected to stay, though. So it's not unexpected for me," she said. "I wasn't planning to stay forever. I just didn't *see* it." Then she softened a little. "They have boats out there, too. You're welcome to come. I have to make some real money, Danny, if I'm going to start my own shop. I can't afford to start here. Can't rent a closet out here, and I don't want to be a website. I want to be real."

"You've made up your mind then," I said. She stared a moment, a pair of Reeboks in her left hand, the white t-shirt waving freely beneath her chest. "About the job." I tried to keep my senses.

"Fishing boats!" I said. "That's what they have in Florida, Sharon. Jesus! What do I know about fishing boats? Marlin fight you for hours. Rip your fucking arms right off. Now that's *real* work." The street under our bedroom window sloped out of sight as if the house sat on the edge of the ocean. "I should get out," I said. "Before the next earthquake. Before a real earthquake. They have quakes in South Florida?"

"There's Cubans and retired Jews from New York. Old New York Jews don't retire where there's a chance of city-swallowing fissures," she said. "Too biblical. You'd be out of danger." She rolled her shirts and lined them along the bottom of her suitcase, military style.

"It's settled then," I said and clapped my hands together. "Good."

"No," she said. She shook her head. There was the hint of lemon from the clean clothes. "You won't do it. You'll go everywhere but there."

"What do you mean?"

"Shut up, Danny. Help me pack."

Sharon left California on a Greyhound Bus, though Carnival had offered a moving service and one-way airfare. Some people ride the bus to get to their ship, she said. They make a compromise in order to cruise.

Four months and a handful of phone calls later, she met Patrick, a software installation supervisor with a tan and two bright-eyed boys. Patrick owned a small boat with an outboard motor and a cabin. His wife had died two years earlier. Sharon was so inconsolably in love that

she thought I would greet the news with nothing but happiness for her, as if our relationship so paled in comparison that I would certainly recognize the difference.

"No killer Marlin so far," she wrote on a postcard of Biscayne Bay. "Patrick still has both arms attached."

I lived in San Francisco three years and never realized the Mark Hopkins Intercontinental Hotel sat atop Nob Hill. Who goes up there? Horses used to fall over trying to climb it. They'd roll back down the hill, dragging their carriage and passengers behind. It's why they invented the cable car, so rich people could build mansions at the top.

We walked Congress Avenue after dinner, streetlights stretching over the gentle slope like a ribbon of stars, the red granite Texas capitol building at the end. It was a cold December night in Austin, rare and beautiful with the traffic under lampposts wrapped with colored Christmas lights. We watched our breath pause in the air.

Sharon wasn't about to leave Patrick for all the money I could imagine, or the trinket in my pocket. She took root when she found good ground. She loved travelers, but she didn't want to marry one, probably because she knew most of them never arrive at their destinations. I was looking for a small victory with the tabla, a little incursion from which I could retreat, or perhaps I would hold the ground. It was up to her.

"You don't work anymore." Sharon said. She knew I'd inherited money.

"I want to travel," I said. "It's not a secret. I love Florence."

"Florence," she said and threw her hand in the air. Red and green lights caught the diamond on her finger. "Hey, Mom and Dad bought an RV!"

"Yeah?"

“I talked them into it. They‘re driving to Tennessee next week to watch the race. You know how he is about NASCAR.” Sharon‘s father Eric had been the President of the Austin Realtor‘s Association in the 1980s when Texas real estate went bust. They‘d lost everything and started over again. They‘d had a lot to lose.

“Isn‘t it funny? Dad wouldn‘t go to Florence if he could. If he had all the money in the world,” Sharon said, “he‘d still want to drive an RV to Nashville. He might buy a bigger RV.”

“Danny, listen.” Sharon stopped walking. She looked cold and I thought I should give her my jacket. I started to take it off and she held out her palm to decline.

“Do you know why I called you?” I said.

“I don‘t want to guess.”

“I wanted to tell you I‘m sorry for not being good enough. And now I‘m telling you I‘m still not. It‘s still the same tonight.”

“For God‘s sake, Danny. None of us are any good most of the time. We have to pick the moments to remember one another by. We have to choose carefully.”

“Is that what you‘ve done, Mrs. Flanery?”

“There‘d be no shame if I had.”

“I have something I want you to see. Something to give you.”

“Your gift!” she said and put her hands on my shoulders. We stopped near a corner, behind the dark plastic covering on a bus stop. She looked behind me and at that moment I felt sorry for Patrick, not for the bacteria in his heart, but because he wasn‘t there to see how Sharon watched people take that last, precarious step from the D-Line bus, as if their hands were in hers until they were safely on the walk, ready for the rest of their journey.

“I‘m sorry. I almost forgot,” she said.

“Don‘t worry. I was waiting until we got to the capital. I think you‘re going to like it.”

We walked the rest of the way and climbed the short steps of the Texas capitol. There were marble and granite statues of great Texans throughout the manicured grounds, and a taller figure, the Goddess of Liberty, at the top of the dome. I pointed to a stone bench on the next landing. Headlights coming down Congress veered away on 11th Street just before the Capital entrance, following the traffic circle around the complex.

“What can I do to help you guys out some, Sharon? I want to.” It was a tragedy, no question about it – a freak thing. I couldn‘t wish it on anyone. Holes in the heart.

“I hate it. I hate to ask.”

“Don‘t,” I said. “You‘re fighting for your family.”

“Anything you can spare,” she said, looking down the long avenue. “I‘ll be so grateful.”

I gave Sharon a check, and we listened to the crickets whistle in nearby shrubs. She folded the check neatly in half and slid it into her pocket. I knew then I should have waited to give her the money, waited until the very end of the night to ask what I could do for her now. She crossed her legs and tapped her left foot in the air.

“I have something else for you,” I said.

“The gift. Danny, I couldn‘t. Really. I‘m sorry. I can‘t take another thing.”

”That‘s just a loan,” I said. “C‘mon. Won‘t you even look at it?”

She looked up at me and glanced away. She turned back and nodded. I pulled the

box from my jacket and opened it. Sharon stared at the tabla pendant, a silver replica with detail such that you could see the strands supporting the sheep-skin head pulled tight at the sides, keys around the edge being the only way to tune the instrument.

She brushed her hair behind her ear. She lifted the necklace and held it in the air between us so that the tabla swung back and forth. "Danny," she said. "This. I just can't, you know. But it's–it's so many things."

"You don't have to wear it," I said. "I just want you to *have* it." I watched the thin gold strand hang from the tips of her fingers, as if the chain were weightless.

"I have to go home," she said. She opened my hand and lowered the gold thread down so it looped in my fingers and palm. Then she closed her hand over mine.

"What you've done for us–for me–tonight, I'll never forget. It's an act of grace. You were wrong about yourself."

"There was a time–"

"Don't," she said.

I closed the box and held it with both hands. It seemed as though the image of the shining tabla lingered in the air between us, as if the vapor had crystallized around it, and Sharon and I could sit in the chill and consider the shining drum, then melt it with the heat of our breath.

Flooded Timber

Lost in the Virgo cluster again, searching for the dusty speck of a pinwheel galaxy called M84, Florida Barnes kicked red clay dirt at the aluminum legs of her telescope. Virgo, the Heartbreak Ridge of the Messier Marathon, where wizened amateurs and professionals alike grew confused, panicked, checking their watches as the eastern horizon raced to blot out their quarry. Florida turned to the blinking city lights a few miles away, the milky glow that contaminated her star field, washed out the entire southern night sky like a soft shade drawn over a window.

For months she‘d practiced the visible sections of the list, her husband Otis helping to assemble the heavy telescope, staying with her most nights; but as the sessions grew longer and more distant, he began driving his own truck, leaving her with a quiet kiss on the cheek when Florida fell silent to concentrate on the more elusive stars, or when she plopped into a lawn chair and said brightly, —Gotta wait a few hours for them to turn the planet.“ Florida knew she would have to learn to set up the scope herself. It was too much to ask poor Otis–lanky, grumpy Otis–to go with her further and further from home, later into the thickening blackness each night, deeper into the loveless void of space.

Florida was a marathoner, a follower of the 18th century French comet hunter Charles Messier, who, while intending to catalog those objects which were *not* comets, spent his lifetime compiling Messier‘s List: one hundred ten stars, galaxies, and nebulae that flickered like a forgotten name in the crude telescopes of the day. Later, hundreds of years after his death, astronomers brought these distant objects to life with superior lenses and optics, and even amateurs could see that the comet hunter‘s list included the most beautiful sights in the “deep sky.” More remarkably, they learned that in a single, grueling March night, with speed and rare

skill, you could see every one of them. Florida was training for the next Marathon, ten months away, when hundreds of amateurs would gather at the Ft. Davis observatory high in the mountains of West Texas.

She pulled the sequence list from her pocket, squinting to read by red penlight. She called home.

"Ready?" Otis said.

"It's no good, Otis. Too much light still."

"Oh, honey."

"I'll wait for the weekend," she said. "I'll practice on weekends." She knew it wouldn't be enough, but she was too tired to argue with Otis. Bewildered Otis. Kicking himself, she suspected, for having bought the Astroscan 20" telescope so that they could see the rings of Saturn. Florida loved the scope, and plunged into amateur astronomy magazines and books, but she said they should wait for Saturn, avoid the solar system's most colorful neighbor until they had their own place, and a child. They could wait until their child was three or four, then look together, share the instant every amateur stargazer remembers: the first time they see the ice rings and milky sphere with their own eyes. Otis said he didn't believe in holding back happiness, but if that's what she wanted. Since then Florida had cruised the solar system in a single night several times–a common milestone for new amateurs–but always skipped the ringed planet, saving Saturn.

Otis arrived and began packing the scope. "I made potato salad for you to take in tomorrow," he said. A co-worker's husband had died.

"Oh, I forgot…I forgot," she said.

"I know, baby."

The secret to the Marathon, Florida knew, was technique. Memorizing star charts helped, but like at sea, maps are useless without a skilled pilot. Humidity diffused the sky with haze, blurring galaxies. The end of the sequence was a dash, difficult targets in growing twilight, some objects arcing over the horizon for only minutes. There was no time to waste in Virgo, where too many bright galaxies formed a disorienting sea of unimaginably distant places.

"I hope you won't forget to take it in, Flo. The salad."

"Of course not."

"I'll remind you then."

"Whatever you like," she said.

In the morning, well-wishers and the curious milled around the new widow's cubicle, talking into their coffee cups about life after partners, salvation in a child's acceptance, and God's mercy for the righteous. Florida stood in the adjoining room and listened. She'd whispered good morning or nodded politely to the widow, named Becky, each day for three years, but beyond their employer, Hope Trucking and Transport, the two women had little else in common. Becky dressed like the narrow, wood-paneled halls were lighted Milan runways, an affectation Florida never understood. A married woman, after all. Now Becky was into a sizable life insurance payout, people said, and had her eye on a two-story Gothic Mansion in Gainesville. Florida knew the house. Certainly more room than a widow with one young daughter needed. Perhaps another guest, a permanent resident, would arrive shortly. Florida thought that it wasn't any of *her* business, whatever the case. She waited for a moment of quiet to approach Becky's desk.

"I'm Florida Barnes."

“You‘re Otis Barnes‘ wife,” Becky said.

“I am. I didn‘t know we‘d met. I‘m sorry to have forgotten.”

“We haven‘t met,” Becky said. “Until now, anyway. But don‘t feel badly. I don‘t know half the people I met this morning. They didn‘t introduce themselves either, like it doesn‘t matter on a day like this. Isn‘t that funny?” Becky wore her long black hair tied in back, a few strands spry from the clip, and she rolled her wedding ring back and forth on her finger with the pad of her thumb. On her desk, Polaroid pictures of a young girl with thin blonde hair and prying eyes stood propped against a file cabinet. There was a poster of an eighteen wheeler framed in gold leaf on the wall behind her. The two women listened to the rat-a-tat of Becky‘s supervisor working the adding machine, each flurry of keystrokes punctuated by a sound like the return of an old typewriter.

“I‘d like to know their names, you know? I need to meet new people.”

Rumor was Becky wanted $10,000 more than she and her husband had paid in ”79 for their small house and three wooded acres near the lake: a steal considering property values since Dallas suburbanites began paying cash for any patch of trees or prairie grass in the area. Florida sat beside her.

“Your little girl?” Florida motioned to the pictures. Becky couldn‘t have been more than forty, a few years younger than Florida. The pictures shined with the impatient grin of a five-year-old.

“Anna,” Becky said. “My daughter. She doesn‘t understand it – all the people and the food. Loves Tex-Mex casseroles with taco beef. I got three of those. I thought about a sign,” she said and lifted her hands as if showing a placard, “’*No longer accepting Mexican casseroles*.’ I think it seems like a party to Anna, except people cry once in a while.”

Florida glanced back at the pictures, the splashy eyes and prominent jaw. “I see.”

“She doesn‘t know that her Daddy isn‘t coming back. Doesn‘t register. I‘ll sit with her in a few days when everything settles. You know how children are.” She perched a cigarette between her lips and offered the pack.

“No thanks,” Florida said. She hadn‘t mentioned the idea of buying Becky‘s house to Otis yet. He‘d driven them over gravel roads through cross timbers country for years, talking about when *they* would build, a log home perhaps, what it would be like with the smell of dew in the morning, a chill from the lake, forest sounds in the black night. They‘d tried hard to change the way things were, to have children, but now Otis seemed to take comfort in the rigidity with which their lives resisted change. He hardly spoke of the forest anymore.

“Anna‘s tough like her Daddy,” Becky said. “She‘ll bounce back.” The widow‘s manner betrayed what Florida imagined had been a fitful, irretrievable marriage. It was as if she‘d finally moved a worthless nephew out of the house.

“We don‘t have children. But I want to talk about your house.” Florida leaned over and put her hands on Becky‘s knees. “I heard you want to sell it. I don‘t mean to be forward, but I don‘t want to miss the boat.”

“Oh, the house. Yes, let‘s talk about it.” Becky adjusted her white silk blouse as if a meeting had commenced. “I want to. You know, Otis did some welding for us. He talked about getting a place outside town back then, too. By the lake is what he wants, right?” Florida nodded. “Well, we‘ve only got three acres, you know,” Becky said. “And you can‘t see the water from there now with the lake so low.”

“Three acres sounds good. I have to be realistic,” Florida said. “He‘s always wanted to live in the country. Like you say, he even tells strangers about it.” Becky crushed her cigarette in

a white plastic ashtray. "I'm looking for what we can afford. If Otis agrees, we could make a down payment next week. Maybe Friday this week, depending on the price. Is that fast enough?"

"Snakes," Otis said on the phone. "And not the chickenshit snakes like you get up north. Copperheads. Water moccasins out of the lake. All those damn trees, Flo. Trees and water."

"Snakes?" she said. "You're talking about snakes?"

"Well, that's out on Blackjack Road, right?" His voice faded, spinning into a small metallic warble as Florida drove away from the cell phone tower. It had been a mistake to call him from the road. She wanted this conversation in person.

"Just wait until we get home," she said.

"You won't see the stars out there, Flo. You got no sky with those trees. Tall as hell." The telescope was the repository of all their hopes from the high-wattage days of in-vitro fertilization, evenings they planned unrecognizable lives over meatloaf and macaroni with cheese. Florida would watch Otis' face all night by the pallid mercury lighting of the parking lot, the same lamps that hid the stars from sight. He *looked* like someone's father. Wrinkles tempered the hard fight of youth, gentle strength a child would seek before a last kiss goodnight, the promise of safety and love. Only Mars pierced the sickly glow that hovered over their apartment, a dim, bloodshot sparkle in late June, the balance of the universe washed away.

Florida and Otis would drive to the state park on cold nights when the stars were sharp as pins. There they made the pact to see Saturn from their child's backyard, the three of them together.

“I can drive down the road, Otis,” she said, not knowing if he could still hear her. “Away from the trees.”

She told herself she would have understood if he‘d left in those days. She gave him the space to make such a decision, but he came in closer, held her around the shoulder when their backs were damp with dewy night grass, Orion flickering overhead. He could have filed for divorce, or they could have adopted, but Otis chose her, the two of them together, and for months Florida struggled with that small victory over a child who‘d never been conceived. She had begun to feel as though she possessed a very dear and rare freedom.

Inside the apartment, a brown and white tapestry hung over the couch: a ranch home with three head of cattle in the yard and a collie glaring fiercely at the animals, his sleek head turned to an escape path in the event of a stampede. The room smelled like Swisher Sweet Cigars.

Otis arrived an hour later and hung his tweed driving cap on the maple hat rack by the door. She kissed his forehead. He pulled her in by the small of her back and kissed her on the lips.

“What are you setting me up for, woman?” He brushed her hair with callused fingertips. The interstate rumbled beneath the wet sound of their kisses.

“Let‘s get out of here, baby,” she said. “Let‘s get out of here while we‘re still fit to take care of some land and a few dogs.” Otis pulled away and folded his right arm in front of his body, held his hand over his mouth. “We‘ll put up a tin shed for an observatory. Cut a hole in the roof.”

“Dogs?” he said. “What about when we‘re not fit to take care of *ourselves*, Flo? What about when we‘re too old to be out there by ourselves?”

"My parents lived in the country their whole lives. There's lots of old folks out in the country. What are we talking about, Otis?"

His face was wide, features separated like a map of West Texas. Florida could still watch him for hours, twitches like the first warmth in a spring rain, some gentle suggestion. He hated to break things apart. He was inclined to avoid decisions like this one. Florida could imagine another twenty years passing in their two bedroom apartment and suddenly she was afraid for them: that after everything, they might not make it after all. She wouldn't stay.

Florida insisted they look at the place. Otis met her at the office one afternoon and they drove out, exploring the property on foot before Becky arrived. Otis pulled Florida from the path of a small scorpion clamoring over the dried leaves at their feet. The little ones hurt the worst, he said. In the morning they made an offer on the house.

They planned to move that first weekend in June, but postponed when it rained for two days. Florida sat by the window and listened to the metallic rattle on the awning. A swarm of black beetles settled over the parking lot, battling each other for space and food, scratching at the windows until they flipped onto their hard-shelled backs and flailed to right themselves. She spread papers from work over the coffee table. Florida was a dispatcher at the trucking firm, responsible for the location and route of hundreds of trucks across the Midwest. Some carried the US Mail, cargo even police could not open–not the governor himself–only badged postal inspectors. Postmasters lectured the staff on the gravity of their duties, the history behind uninterrupted service. Eight months earlier, company mechanics had tucked thin GPS transmitters in the corner of every dashboard, creating an endless ribbon of information for Florida and the other dispatchers. She chose which drivers to audit. As contradictions between signed log sheets and computer printouts mounted, the drivers rebelled. They poured coffee on

the transmitters, wrapped them in foil, or sealed them in Mason jars and hurled them from bridges, so that, for a day or two, a few trucks appeared to have abandoned the highway to follow the sleepy meandering of the Mississippi River.

The weekend they moved out of the apartment was hot and dry, and it would not rain again for months, a withering procession of bone-bleaching sun that raised abandoned railroad bridges and pale, flooded timber from the evaporating man-made lake. For astronomers, an atmosphere without moisture is as vivid as bluebonnets seen through the first open window of early Spring.

The yellow house sat on a clearing cut out of the forest, a triangle-shaped plot, skinny post oak all around like a field of sticks. Gophers ravaged the backyard so that every step caved another tunnel. Like walking on the beach, Florida said, but Otis was not amused, and he torched the tunnels at night. He poured fuel down the hole and dropped a match. Fire bubbled from the opening and collapsed again, Otis‘ face caught in the blue and white flash.

When he finished, the angry scent of gasoline trailed through the house behind him.

Florida cleaned the outdoor shed and carport, piling discarded dolls and empty ammunition boxes in old metal barrels, their jagged rims cracked with rust. Otis complained about the trash Becky had left: a stack of faded Better Homes and Gardens in the attic, her husband‘s tan overcoat, and two pairs of gray workpants in the master bedroom closet, the same size Otis wore. Perfectly good pants, but he wouldn‘t touch them. A dead man‘s clothes, he said. Who am I anyway? Florida found three pictures of Becky‘s daughter Anna in the pantry, propped against the corner and sides like a display: Anna waving from a tree; Anna hugging a young Oak, her head peering from behind; and finally, Anna and her mother in a recliner, the girl‘s head on Becky‘s shoulder, tired eyes still curious for the unseen photographer.

Florida showed Otis. “Look at this one. Doesn‘t she have a wanderlust?”

“She‘s a firecracker,” he said. “These were in the pantry? That damn woman.”

“You‘ve met her?” Florida flipped through the photos again.

“We bought this place from her, didn‘t we?”

“No, the baby, stupid.”

“I met her when I worked a job with Floyd, if you can *meet* a two year old, or whatever she was then. She was a live wire.”

Otis wrung the towel he‘d used to wash the bottom of the refrigerator. He stood over the sink, his long frame bent at the waist. Sweat around his mouth glistened in the kitchen light.

“Well, I‘m sure she still is,” Florida said and slid the pictures into her pocket.

“We‘ll give those back,” he said.

In a week, Becky brought some papers for Otis to sign and Anna was with her. Green ribbons fluttered from the girl‘s hair as she ran circles around the house. It was humid, and low clouds stretched across the treetops. Florida thought it might rain. Anna ran and ran, bare legs blurred beneath her skirt, as if she could possess the house by surrounding it with joy. Florida watched her collapse finally to the grass and dirt, roll onto her back and stare into the bare treetops. Dried leaves settled around her shoulders and caught in the strands of her hair.

“You‘ll get your nice dress dirty,” Florida said.

“No I‘m not.” Anna jumped to her feet and brushed herself off. “See?”

“Well, you‘re sure a smart little girl.”

“I‘m in the first grade,” Anna said solemnly. “My Daddy used to live here with us.”

“I know he did. My husband Otis and me are taking good care of your house. We‘re fixing it up.”

“It wasn‘t broken,” Anna said and sat down. She pulled off her red sneakers and shook out pebbles and stems. “Daddy‘s in heaven,” she said matter-of-factly. “Did you fix my room?”

“We painted it white. We‘re going to use your room to write letters and keep our books and other nice things. We don‘t have any pretty little girls like you. But you can visit whenever you want.”

“I like to read.”

“So do I,” Florida said.

“Can I look at your books when the paint dries?”

Florida laughed and Anna jumped up and down, laughing with her, then running, leaves flying behind her, tracing the random scribbles of childhood in the air, scattering sun and shadow.

Two gravel roads intersected not far from the house. The critical view northwest was imperfect but acceptable. In the corner of this crossing, Florida set up her telescope and chased a spiral galaxy in Virgo. Otis stayed with her the first several nights, warning of the rare oncoming car so she could shut her eyes tight and look away, hand over her face as if someone had just kicked sand at her. “She‘s fine,” Otis yelled when drivers slowed and rolled down their windows. “Thank you!” Florida added over her shoulder, waving at them to keep moving. She didn‘t care how it looked. People searching for distant star clusters know how long it *really* takes to recover night vision. She made notes in her journal:

M74: Think I got it. Saw elongated object many times. Still humid so everything diffuse. Otis meeting the neighbors in the road.

M77: Never a problem with this one. Bright oval w/ Astroscan 28mm w. 2.5X

M31: Pretty sure about this one. Dust lanes near companion 32. Could have been the other way around.

M53: Thank God I‘m out of Virgo. Astroscan 15mm 30X. Diffuse, pulsing. I should make Otis go home and get some sleep. He trudges to the eyepiece if I get excited enough, but he‘s not up there with me.

At work, Florida brought the GPS Average Speed Reports to Becky‘s desk personally. Becky worked in Accounting. Florida asked about Anna and the new house. She volunteered to look after the girl if Becky should want some time to herself, or a chance to go out with friends. If it‘s all right with Otis, Becky said. Men are funny about kids.

Becky did Florida a favor by ignoring the GPS reports in her quarterly fuel write-ups. The drivers were going too fast, all of them, using more gas than necessary. Dispatch had known this long before transmitters, but the satellites digitized the news: trucks a day early at their destination, parked outside a residence rather than a motel. Florida‘s Rolodex bulged with mistresses‘ phone numbers. She had to be able to reach the drivers. Becky kept quiet, and Florida was grateful.

“You don‘t want to get too close to Anna or that woman,” Otis said. “She‘s liable to move them off somewhere and then where will you be, all caught up in that little girl?”

“For heaven‘s sake, Otis. Where‘s she going? She didn‘t win the lottery, you know. She just bought a house.”

In August, the temperature perched near one hundred degrees late into the afternoon, and Otis complained of insomnia. His doctor prescribed a candy-green liquid barbiturate called Butisol that smelled like Peppermint Schnapps. Otis poured more and more gasoline in the gopher holes. The flames leaped like a torch. The skin around his face and eyes darkened and Florida couldn‘t remember the last time it had rained. Becky brought Anna to stay with them on Saturdays and sometimes the girl would spend the night. Florida bought a tall captain‘s bed for

Anna‘s room before Otis could object. He said they should put some things on the walls to cover the bright, bare whiteness.

Anna clutched Florida‘s hand on the porch while the county Fire Marshal explained the burn ban. His wore a short-sleeved shirt and his arms and hands were dirty. There were swaths of clean skin across his face as if he‘d wiped himself with a towel. They‘d have to haul their trash to Gainesville and use the landfill, he said. The whole place was a tinderbox. He drove a blue Dodge pickup, and the dust behind him hovered over Blackjack Road like a patient fog.

That night, Otis reclined on a canvas cot he‘d strung between two oaks. Anna charged into the heat like a mirage, thriving in the parched air that Otis and Florida could never seem to catch in their lungs. Dry as a concrete foundation, the nights cooled for relief. Otis said the gophers would have to try another yard. Anna leaped from tunnel to tunnel like a jackhammer, one hundred pounds per square inch with each stride. He laughed as she ran and stomped the fragile burrows under the dust and leaves.

Florida thought it would be hard for the girl to sit still during a telescope practice, so they watched “The Wizard of Oz” on videotape over and over. Anna called the Munchkins “little people” and said her name was Dorothy Gayle. Florida had never remembered Dorothy‘s last name. After the movie, they walked through the woods behind the property line. Coyotes cried in the distance and dogs howled to answer, then the rustling trees, and coyotes crying at the dogs. Anna howled with them, a long, sunny bay that made Florida‘s hair stand. Florida kneeled beside her, held the back of her head lightly to fix her gaze in the right direction, and pointed out the Seven Sisters of the northwest sky, framed by a gap in the trees like a family portrait.

Anna sang to Otis in his cot until he propped his eyes open and smiled, his face weighted from the heavy sleep of the medicine.

“Jackrabbit,” he whispered to her. “A wild hare.”

Then a crash in the kitchen darkness, their bedroom pitch black with the curtains over the moon, and the sound of glass playing on linoleum, the tinkling of shards. “Oh God, Otis,” Florida said and shook him once. She jumped from the bed while Otis waved his arms in a narcotic haze. Florida grabbed her flashlight and ran down the hall. There was the kitchen floor and a leg twitching and Anna face down on the bottom rack of the open dishwasher. Florida lifted her by the chest and waist. The room smelled like candy. Peppermint breaths slipped between Anna‘s lips and Florida screamed her name.

Asleep, Dr. Bolt told them on the phone. Sound asleep, for certain. Nothing more. Otis told him to come out anyway. He estimated how much Butisol had remained in the bottle. Florida stroked Anna‘s hair with her fingers, pushed it gently from the scalp in small tufts, looking for bruises or cuts. Otis called Becky without asking for the number, as though he‘d known it his entire life.

“She got into my medicine,” he said. “She fell into the dishwasher. Bolt said she‘s fine. He‘s coming out here.”

There was a long silence.

“How the hell did I know she could find it? For God‘s sake, Becky. You think I‘d leave it up there if I thought she‘d get in it? What the hell‘s the matter with you?” Then he whispered things Florida could not hear.

When he finished, he sat down at the kitchen table and stared at the girl.

“You didn‘t ask me for Becky‘s phone number,” Florida said. “How is that, Otis?”

“Because I know the goddamn number, Flo.”

Dr. Bolt cleared Anna to leave with her mother. She‘d tied one on, he said. They should do a better job with those caps. Dry leaves swirled around the porch, piling in the corner and fluttering against the door. Anna was a clever girl, Florida said. Dr. Bolt wrote Otis another prescription. Then Becky and her daughter were gone.

By nightfall there was still no word. Florida sat by the phone and pulled a black address book from her purse, pinching the leather cover in her fingers.

“If there‘s something wrong with that baby”“ Otis said and took the receiver from her hand, “Becky will call.” He hung up the phone. “She‘ll call *me*,” he said. The screen door rattled softly.

“Is that right?” Florida said. They watched each other until Otis lowered his eyes and looked back toward the kitchen as if more chores waited there. A trace of smoke sifted through the open window in Anna‘s room. Florida stood.

“You smell it too?”

“A fire,” Florida said with something like relief.

“I can‘t hardly tell. My smell is shot. C‘mon,” he said and found his keys.

They drove south to the lake‘s edge, stopping every mile to let Florida draw another fix by scent. Tall bois d arc trees and brush lined the road and blocked view of the houses. Then they saw fire through the tree line, flames shooting from a blackened barrel. A circle of children danced around the blaze, moving evenly so the light revealed them one by one as they passed behind the barrel, teeth and skin under an orange glow like little Halloween pumpkins. They laughed and kicked at the dust as smoke lifted from the flame like a thief, wisps of darkness visible only by the stars they hid.

“Damn fools,” Otis said. “Showing their kids how stupid they are. Whole place could go up.”

“She‘s *your* little girl isn‘t she?” Florida said. “Anna is your daughter. You should be there, Otis. You should stay with her until she wakes up.” She looked out the window.

“Florida, I don‘t know that sometimes you ought to be a little more selfish.” He dimmed the headlights. “For your own good, you know?”

“It isn‘t my own good. I want someone to watch that baby, somebody with more sense than an old whore who threw a party when her husband died.” A strip of clear sky lay over the road before them, the three dimensional blackness of space, and a waxing, crescent moon. The children sang “Ring Around the Rosy” in crystal voices.

“Becky is the baby‘s mother,” Otis said. “Anna‘s mother. And who should watch her? The ones who let her into a bottle of sleep medicine?”

“I didn‘t let her, Otis!” Florida shouted. “You‘ve been an old liar for so long. Who ever asked you to be a liar, Otis? Who asked you? Did I ask you to do that?”

“Just be quiet, Flo. Just please be quiet.” The singing stopped, and three men walked toward the truck. Otis pulled away and they drove the perimeter of the lake to the south shore, roads they‘d never used. They passed an old cemetery not much larger than a baseball infield with dark, broken stones and open space.

“There‘s a clearing,” Florida whispered. “There‘s a good clearing there in the cemetery.”

Otis leaned over to look. “Sure,” he said. “See nearly the whole sky from there. I don‘t imagine folks would mind.”

They parked and Florida walked around the fence. "Anna shouldn't come back out to our house," she said. "I don't want to see her again. The closer she gets to you, the sooner she'll make the connection. She'll figure it out. She doesn't need to deal with that for a long time."

Otis whispered over her shoulder: "Becky wanted me to divorce you and she was going to leave Floyd. All that commotion to raise a baby and she thought it would *peaceful*. All I ever knew about that child I heard from people, Flo. I never got involved."

She gripped the top rail of the fence with both hands. "And *that's* what you're proud of?"

On Monday morning, Florida used her wheeled desk chair to roll the telescope outside. She heaved the lens and base into the trunk, then slid the chair in the back seat. After work, she stopped at a diner to eat Mexican food and drank margaritas until sunset. She smiled at a young waiter with blonde curls. She would flirt with men again, think about them on top of her, the breathing, and recognize that it would indeed be possible, that now she was completely free, and with the vigor of a woman who'd never paid the emotional toll of motherhood.

She drove to the cemetery and assembled her telescope from the manual. She mounted the lens, tightening the bolts with a screwdriver from the toolkit Otis had insisted she keep in the car.

She knew Saturn was one of the brightest points in the sky, Jupiter's neighbor. She could have had it anytime she liked. She whispered a prayer of thanks for the good fortune with which Anna had landed on the dishwasher rack, that there had been no deep cuts, that the rusting metal prongs hadn't grazed her eyes or scratched her soft face. Florida jogged into the woods beyond

the edge of the graveyard, squatted over crackling leaves and urinated until the sweat was cool on her brow.

When she came back into the clearing, Otis was there, standing beside the telescope with their Astronomy book. “This might be handy,” he said. “I‘d like to take a look, too, if it‘s all right.”

“Looks like you‘ve invited yourself.”

“We always talked about seeing Saturn together,” Otis said. “I see you already built the thing. Don‘t know what there‘s left for me to do now.” Otis pulled a red penlight from his shirt pocket. His hands smelled like gasoline.

“You need to give *me* space now, Otis,” she said. “I need the same room I gave you.”

He glanced at her and the book. He crouched level with the viewfinder.

“Sometimes space ain‘t the best idea,” he said.

“A baby needs two parents.” She pointed to the star atlas. “I don‘t need this anymore.”

“Parents die, Florida. It‘s natural. It‘s more natural than all this mess.” Otis turned the silver dial on the base. He glanced up at the sky, leaned back into the scope.

“It‘s not Anna‘s fault that her real Daddy is a coward,” Florida said. “She needs a father.”

He stood straight and turned to her. “And what would you know about it, Florida Barnes? What do you know about it to lecture *me*?” She put her hand to her mouth as if the air were rushing from her lungs. “Now, look,” he said. “I…I‘ve found it.” He pointed to the scope. “I‘ve found it here.” He leaned into the machine again. “My God.”

When Otis moved away, Florida looked.

”It‘s so clear tonight,” Otis said. “Like the sky been stripped away.”

”That means the air is dry.” Florida closed her left eye tight. “Means it won‘t rain for a long while.”

She felt the heat of his arm near her face as he turned the dial, and tiny Saturn and the rings of colored ice slid into the frame. Otis turned the dial slowly enough to keep the planet almost stationary in the center, following their path around the sun and across the night sky of Earth.

“Stop it,” she said. “I want to see it move.”

The truth of it stole her breath, fragile rings around a planet you could see with only a lens to catch the light from space, and she thought of the invisible metal satellites, circling so much nearer, hidden in close, whispering secrets people kept: the places they could be found. She was glad they didn‘t speak to her now. A thin cirrus cloud passed through her view, and the tiny planet's light seemed to freeze like ice.

“Isn‘t it just like a little jewel?” Otis said. “A little jewel hanging in space.” She hated him for the words. She thought that she would take them from him, that she would bring Anna to the graveyard before autumn rain grayed the night sky, and show her how the ringed planet swept through space without a sound. Then they would move on from Saturn, leaving Otis behind, using each shimmer of blue-white gas as a landmark for the next leg of their journey, star-hopping. They would not rush away. No stopwatches, or sequences to complete before galaxies rose and fell in silent, sudden arcs over the horizon. Before they left Saturn, Florida would turn the small brass dial so Anna could watch as long as she liked. Florida would ask her if it wasn‘t like a little jewel, and she imagined the girl would want to stay for hours and hours.