“CIVILIZATIONS WITHOUT BOATS”: STORIES

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This collection consists of a critical preface and nine short stories. Extrapolating from the work and legacy of Michel Foucault, the preface theorizes a genre of “heterotopian fiction” as constitutive of a fundamentally ethical approach to narrative creativity, distinguishing its functional and methodological characteristics from works that privilege aesthetic, thematic, or technical artistry. The stories explore spaces of madness, alterity, incomprehensibility, and liminal experience.

Collection includes the stories “Mexico,” “Civilizations without Boats,” The Widow’s Mother,” “Guys Like Us,” “Everything You’d Hoped It Would Be,” “A Concerned Friend,” “Crisis Hotline,” “Coast to Coast,” and “The Ghosts of Rich Men.”
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by

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PART I

HETEROTOPIAN FICTION: AN ETHIC OF INSPIRATION
You will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development (I have not been speaking of that today), but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.

—Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”
After my first encounter with Foucault—this was two years ago—I felt like I’d botched a handshake with somebody who puts a lot of stock in handshakes. I got another chance, of course, and many chances thereafter, but each time I walked away with the gnawing suspicion that Foucault had been thoroughly unimpressed. Not because I’d fancied myself a stranger to inadequacy, but rather because I kept getting the feeling that Foucault, on every page, was actually reading me. And not only that: each of his electric words seemed to challenge me to read myself, to interrogate the roots of my creativity, and to hold myself accountable for the ethical implications of the work I’d been inspired to do.

The first element of heterotopian fiction: it constitutes a fundamentally ethical approach to fiction writing, rather than one that privileges its thematic, technical, or aesthetic artistry. Heterotopian fiction asks what it can do and how its system of doing enters into certain relations with the external systems with which it comes into contact. Furthermore, the space of the heterotopian system is obligated to come into contact with the spaces of all other systems; it must be closed, in other words, but never isolated.

Theory and creativity, after Foucault, cannot be anything but codependent, symbiotic, and inseparable. To approach fiction writing otherwise would essentially constitute, I think, the forfeiture of my ethical responsibility as an artist, which is not, as I understand it, to create an open space of systemic entertainment or edification, but rather to create a closed space of systemic self-sufficiency, a body that inhabits the same world as the reader but only by virtue of their interaction, and only to the extent that each body is able to respond productively to the incompatibility of the other, to the radical difference of the other, and thereby to generate another pair of radically different systems—not systems whose function is to facilitate meaning, understanding, compromise, or interpretation of the other, but rather systems that witness,
accept, and testify to a certain horizon, a liminal point at which none of the above, without some
degree of co-constitutive violence, can attempt to go beyond.

Heterotopian fiction is the narrative art of horizons, liminal points, and other spaces. This
preface identifies the elements of heterotopian fiction with respect to its roots in the Foucauldian
oeuvre, locates their manifestations in several pieces of contemporary fiction, and finally offers a
heterotopian reading of the stories in this collection. Rather than offer a critical lens through
which to read my fiction, I engage the sources of my inspiration and the ethical standards obliged
therein, in order to confront the heterotopian horizons of my work.

First, I contextualize Foucault’s project with respect to its relevance for writers of
contemporary fiction. Every work of narrative art, in its very inception, necessarily engages the
presence of heterotopian space; as Foucault demonstrates, heterotopias “are formed in the very
founding of society” (“Spaces” 24). The question for fiction writers, then, concerns the degree to
which their narratives actively explore, neutrally inscribe, or violently marginalize these
spaces.

I examine a number of fictional works, both novels and short stories, to illustrate the
ethical, technical, and theoretical components of the heterotopian narrative. I argue for two
categories of heterotopian fiction, one more conducive to the novel, the other to short fiction.
Both categories constitute not a system of rigid delineation, classification, or definition, but
rather two distinct operational frames, advanced simply for the sake of expository clarity and
rhetorical rhythm, far from a state of mutual exclusion. The novel, I suggest, has more potential
for constituting a heterotopia in and of itself—Gravity’s Rainbow perhaps provides a
paradigmatic example of this—whereas the short story, or collection of stories, is more adept at
engaging the heterotopias featured within the world of their stories, and the encounters therein of
particular characters or sets of characters in search of (or pushed to) the contextual limits of their own subjectivities and subject positions.

In my critical treatment of the stories in this collection, I emphasize their ethical inequities and their disproportionate successes and failures. Some of my stories, perhaps, do not fit the bill at all, a number of which were probably never meant to. To be sure, heterotopias are contingent upon their “simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live,” and their constitutive existence depends on their “relation with all the other sites,” both real and imaginary, in any given civilization (Foucault, “Spaces” 24). It is impossible to exist perpetually on the horizon; one must return, always, carrying the effects of one horizon so that the trajectories of others might be discovered.

Nevertheless, a civilization—or a story—with many heterotopias is a place filled with spaces for the affirmation of difference and the means of escaping from authoritarianism, repression, and normalization. On the contrary, a civilization that hunts down and weeds out the different, the unknowable, and the incompatible—in other words, a civilization without boats—is a desert filled with the spaces voided by dreams, creativity, and the imagination. I can only hope that my own fiction contributes more to the health and longevity of the former than it does to its scuttling in favor of the latter.
Ships of Fools

Beginning with his *History of Madness*, Foucault inaugurates the career-long evolution of an ethical theory that would center on a plea for society to maintain its spaces of difference, mobility, and escape. In particular, Foucault’s attention to the historical modalities of the relationship between madness and the West provides a theoretical framework for conceptualizing the discursive limits of radical difference.

Unknowability, according to Foucault, circulated through the pre-Enlightenment West as a kind of everyday familiarity with the pervasive strangeness of the world, in other words a cosmic experience of madness incompatible with all systems of understanding. In medieval society, the madman fulfills the altogether symbolic role of marking the limits of the known world. He carries on his back the horizon of civilization, the object of uncritical attraction and mythical respect, its form and content existing fundamentally outside the boundaries of Western reason, discourse, and consciousness.¹

Paradigmatic images of compulsive embarkation—exemplified by Bosch’s haunting *Ship of Fools*—thus saturate the archives of the medieval imagination with their depictions of “both rigorous division and absolute Passage, serving to underline in real and imaginary terms the liminal situation of the mad” (Foucault, *Madness* 11). Water, then, and the floating spaces that navigate the unknowable reaches of its world, becomes paradoxically synonymous with exile and purification, departure and return, fear and allure. The madman sets sail, bound for another universe, civilization’s only tether to the immeasurable uncertainty of all things and the vast plane of existence whereupon all things come together in dreams and death.²

¹ See Foucault’s *History of Madness* (NY: Rutledge, 2006): 3-44.
² Ibid.
The altogether inexplicable, the radically different, and the cosmically other: these elements that came to saturate all manifestations of Western art prior to the Age of Reason had found a home at the end of the world, to and from which heterotopian fleets of brave fools functioned as a mechanism of perpetual embarkation, renewable imagination, and cosmic creativity. Before the epistemic arrival in the West of a certain taxonomic obsession with measurement and qualitative truth—from organic biology and medical psychiatry, to criminal delinquency and disciplinary reformation—the creative imagination was kept afloat by the wellspring of radical unknowability. Thus, in 1967 when Foucault introduces his notion of the heterotopia, he harkens back to *History of Madness* to identify the boat, more than anything else in Western history, as “the greatest reserve of the imagination” and “the heterotopia *par excellence* (“Spaces” 27).

The eclipse of unreason, the hunting down and cornering of heterotopian spaces, and the epistemic beginnings of the Western mission to conquer and subsume all vestiges of cosmic unknowability—the great triangle of the will to knowledge—is signaled by the arrival of far-reaching reorganizations of discursive knowledge and new modalities for governing the individual and collective comportments of society to the world. Renaissance Humanism, to be followed in succession by Enlightenment Humanism, draws the old specter of unreason into itself and subjugates its form in the body of a new madness conceived not as reason’s radical difference, but rather as “integral to it, forming either part of its secret strength, one of the moments of its manifestation, or a paradoxical form where reason becomes conscious of itself” (Foucault, *Madness* 32). The heterotopian capacities of Western art thus find their enemies in the soldiers of reason at the helm of a new order of things.
The arrival of the human sciences—or perhaps, as Foucault hyperbolically claims, the arrival of the human—effectively severs man from his own being in the great effort to place himself under a universal microscope. Unreason, unknowability, and all things inhuman thus disappear to make room for the birth of the altogether reasonable and universally knowable human. By the eighteenth century, Western experience would come to constitute a mode of being in which “man is cut off from the origin that would make him contemporaneous with his own existence … He is the opening from which time in general can be reconstituted, duration can flow, and things, at the appropriate moment, can make their appearance (Foucault, Order 332). Self-conception, informed by an acute sensitivity to notions of finitude, exists as inaccessible to (and thus uninformed by) man’s origin and, simultaneously, as without any singular originality.

Western art, especially since the nineteenth century, continues to reflect humanity’s fascination with all things in and of itself. The passage of creativity and its artistic manifestations cease to embark from the knowable shores to the mysterious beyond of the seas. Quite the opposite—art begins to chart man’s obsessive journey to and from his reflection: “The simultaneous appearance of the Double … Identity separated from itself by a distance which, in one sense, is interior to it, but, in another, constitutes it, and repetition which posits identity as a datum, but in the form of a distance, are without doubt at the heart of that modern thought…itself on the basis of itself (Foucault, Order 340). Radical difference, then, must signify man or his doubles, his self or his others. Following the constitution of man and his doubles, the forum for artistic acknowledgment of (and interaction with) closed systems of deviation, perversion, and unfamiliarity—the various human manifestations of which are thereafter chained to the logics

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governed by discursive systems of organization, classification, and circumscription—endures a period of exponential attenuation and fierce silence.

The madman’s subsequent search for his own voice, muffled by the diagnostic mouthpieces of medicine, psychiatry and positive psychology, henceforth becomes one and the same as the search for heterotopian space.\(^4\) This search, now restricted in time and space and stripped of its symbolic and mythical status, is conducted as an interior exercise by individuals—as opposed to civilization as a whole—and unfolds in specifically inscribed locations for strictly regimented allotments of time, and under the supervisory surveillance of experts, doctors, judges, and so forth. Madmen and other undesirable bodies, thus imprisoned by the various regimes charged with the creation of “complex spaces that are at once architectural, functional, and hierarchical” would in time come to forge tiny pockets of communal otherness that often functioned under non-hegemonic conditions—here the formation of de Sade’s institutional following comes to mind—and therein ultimately laid the physical, mental, and emotional groundwork for the modern heterotopia (Foucault, *Discipline* 148).

I will thus offer a broadly comparative look at the historical, philosophical, and stylistic directions that inform the body of contemporary fiction, in order to isolate the non-heterotopian efforts from the rest along way. My overview will ultimately focus on a number of novelists and short story writers whose work, held side by side, will help to clarify and distinguish

\(^4\) “The paradox of ‘positive’ psychology in the nineteenth century was to have only been possible from the moment of negativity; the psychology of the personality through an analysis of its splitting, the psychology of memory by amnesia, of language by aphasia, of intelligence by mental deficiency [and of bounded external space by unbounded internal space]. The truth of man was only spoken during the moment of its disappearance; it only showed itself when it had already become something other than itself…What was assumed was an originary alienation that constituted a sufficient determination, and therefore a continuity, and therefore an identity between the subject and himself…The madman therefore found himself in the eternally recommended dialectic of the *Same* and the *Other*” (Foucault, *Madness* 526-27).
heterotopian tendencies from those of other literary agendas, genres, and periods. Having broadly outlined the twentieth century trajectory of contemporary heterotopian fiction, I will turn once again to the nuances of Foucauldian theory with respect to their ethical and creative implications for writers of heterotopian short fiction as well as for the fiction in this collection.
The Author Function

Heterotopian fiction, continuing the long tradition of internal otherness started by many “other Victorians,” is the art of presenting to the world a closed system of radical otherness—the elements of which would, of course, be contextually defined in time, space, and discourse—that would demonstrate, either in the constitution of itself or in its narrative encounters, the limits of human knowledge. Its author, therefore, would strive to reintroduce a certain awareness of discursive horizons and to belie the openness of ostensibly universal systems. His narrative would constitute, in its own material presence or in the world of its story, a network of transitory connections, grids of moving and becoming defined by identifiable relations of proximity yet still harboring the possibility of extension, imagination, and creation: openness through closure, knowing through difference, space within place.

The traditional function of the author in Western culture has served as an ideological marker in which a given society invests its modes, manners, and measurements of knowing exactly how, when, and where to “fear the proliferation of meaning” (Foucault, “Author” 119). Foucault does not ask his readers to imagine a society in which imaginations experience unrestrained freedom—this would, in fact, be an uncharacteristically utopian demand—but he does, however, hold out hope for a future in which the author-function as we know it will disappear and allow in its wake a new set of authorial signatures and constraints to operate “in such a manner that fiction and its polysemous texts will once again function according to another mode… one that will no longer be the author but will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced” (“Author” 119).

In other words, the writer of fiction that subscribes to Foucauldian ethical standards will

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strive for nothing less than authorial anonymity. To experience a piece of fiction on its own terms and in the interactive wealth of its diverse potentiality of meanings: this is the ethical prerogative of the heterotopia and heterotopian fiction. An author, in other words, who consciously injects or calls attention to his authorial presence, whether textually or intertextually, would thus fall short of the heterotopian ethical standard. It is not difficult, then, to imagine a literary persona such as Hemingway failing here, whereas Pynchon, for instance, succeeds. The weight of authorial presence interrupts and short circuits the systemic self-sufficiency of a narrative space. Hemingway’s self-purported syntactical masculinity, obviously a literary idiosyncrasy rather than a universal principle of craft—which he displays most characteristically in the lines of a Nick Adams story such as parts one and two of “Big Two-Hearted River”—effectively limit a story’s potential freedom to participate in the proliferation of meaning. Hemingway’s stylistic stamps of self-approval—from terse syntax and sparse diction to the hyper-masculine anxieties of the characters they sketch—amount to externally prescriptive intrusions that seek to uphold, perfect, or champion the openness and universality of a particular technical system that should, wherever possible, remain radically external to individual narrative systems which, as closed spaces of self-sufficient otherness, can be ethically heterotopian only in their interactive deviance from the outside. Only then will singular experiences of the story hope to generate new systems of meaning, as opposed to the reiteration of old ones.

To prescribe an overriding system of formulaic creation, and to apply it to a narrative space prior to any experience with the singularities of its creative potential, or to defend the constitutive value or merit of any given narrative space on the space of such a system—three fundamentally ideological claims—is to border on another ethical infraction which stifles
heterotopian potential. When it comes to heterotopian narrative art, these champions of aesthetic commandments or technical injunctions may be classified in the company of the polemicist. Their interactions, creations, and relations are never constitutively external because their respective beliefs in the openness and universality of their own systemic ideologies will, every time, capsize their capacities for participating in a liminal experience, or for locating and engaging the bodies that exist on the horizon of radical difference.

Craft books, if approached by writers as instruction manuals or methodological bibles rather than radically closed systems of their own external systems, ultimately stake their ethical postures on a claim to “legitimacy that his adversary is by definition denied” (Foucault, “Polemics” 388). The ethical spaces of heterotopian fiction, by contrast, deny nothing to their adversaries except their often self-purportedly universal openness, which from the beginning can only be strategically upheld through illusion and sleight of hand.

A curious exception much less vulnerable to this common danger inherent to most craft books—Ron Carlson Writes a Story—actually does possess heterotopian potential. Carlson walks his reader through his writing process as he writes “The Governor’s Ball,” and throughout his exhibition he maintains the singularity of the logic that underpins each step, term, and decision he makes during composition. The closed system of Carlson’s writing process, constituted by his narrative articulation of a singular experience with the horizon of his creative self-awareness, constructs the space of composition as ethically heterotopian. For a reader to engage with Carlson’s creativity, or rather with these particular limits of Carlson’s ability to recreate his creativity, the reader must accept Carlson’s closure, as well as his own, in order to experience the piece on its own terms.

Carlson’s book is also fundamentally different from the meta-fiction exemplified by a
writer like John Barthes, whose stories collected *Lost in the Funhouse* often violate multiple heterotopian ethics. The first and perhaps most damning violation—of which the title story is certainly guilty—concerns its self-conscious preoccupation with keeping the reader aware of its own fundamental unreality. At first sight, of course, this style might come across as a liminal experience of fiction writing’s own artistic horizons and thereby fundamentally heterotopian. And it does, of course, at times present a fascinating and unconventional meditation on its art. It does not, however, achieve systemic closure. The openness of its commentary is sustained via the channel between creation and creator and powered by the artistic medium it ponders at length. In general, it does not acknowledge or interact with radical difference in so far as it never enters into a relationship with external systems except via the medium, channel, or circuit wherein there seems to be an invitation to join the work’s dismantling of a system that in itself constitutes a closed system: language itself, or more specifically its sub-system as written narrative. Again, this invitation rests on the illusion of openness, universality, and perfection, altogether a common triangulation of unethical space.

A fourth and final point of reference for determining what heterotopian fiction is not, before I examine its positive manifestations, is of course utopian fiction. Utopias are imaginary projections of sites that have no real spatial correspondences, no real places. The usual suspects from Huxley to Orwell write novels constitutive of “sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society … in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down” (Foucault, “Spaces” 24). They do not, however, have a functional relation to all other spaces. They cannot close around the systemic pursuit of liminal otherness because they are fundamentally unreal and based on fundamentally abstracted ideas about Society as an
analogical whole, rather than society as the sum of the digital surface external to, yet a part of, its own reality.
Horizons of Inspiration

As I mentioned above, the novel and the short story have traditionally differed in their respective methodologies and manifestations of this ethical effect. The main reason and necessity for the difference, I think, is quite simply the size of the narrative space and the amount of time allotted for its growth, articulation, and closure. The novel, therefore, often becomes a self-enclosed space of otherness in its own material presence as related to all other spaces.

A paradigm of the novelistic heterotopia would be Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, an experiment in the alchemy of incompatibility. Its narrative structure, its material length, its chapter numbers, and the logic behind its order of things—every last minute detail of Pynchon’s composition follows the paths forged through its self-enclosure around incompatible systems and their subsequent reintroduction into the real world as a self-sufficient whole that inverts, exposes, and compensates for all manner of illusions, holes, and falsehoods promised by the open systems whose self-purported universality the novel exists to belie. Numerology, Calvinist predestination, tarot symbolism, Pavlovian mind control, illuminati conspiracy culture, quantum physics and rocket science, meticulously accurate details about esoteric dates and events surrounding World War II, and not to mention the flourishing effects of sexual telepathy between certain men and V-2 rockets: these systems of incompatibility come together and close around the space of their new body, a space of radical otherness and unknowability that nevertheless retains a functional relation with every other space.

The short story, on the other hand, becomes heterotopian by virtue of its characters and the narrative spaces of radical difference, otherness, and escape that they encounter. Still another, though less fully realized, category of heterotopian short fiction consists in narratives that feature a character whose entry into a space of escape or liminal experience is denied, usually as an
effect of certain local power relations that exist in spaces constituted by their conflicted relations with one or more spaces of otherness that they both depend upon and resent. My stories “Guys Like Us” and “Everything You’d Hoped It Would Be,” neither of which, perhaps, would qualify as properly heterotopian, largely unfold in normal, real spaces but nevertheless suggest the opportunity for escape. A parallel in from Dubliners would be “Eveline,” wherein a young woman takes her world to the brink of heterotopian embarkation before changing her mind at the last minute—in an act that would become the inspiration for my Carlyle—and returns to the safety of her home space.

All three versions of the contemporary literary heterotopia nevertheless share three common features: first, they constitute for the reader an ethical experience of someone’s experience of (or denial thereof) radical otherness or the horizon of the knowable; second, this experience is written, constructed, or narrated into a space of non-hegemonic conditions that also enter into real relations with all other systems of power and knowledge; and third, the literary heterotopia must endeavor to speak on its own terms, and the reader must speak on his, and in their interactive conversation generate another pair of incompatible systems as singular frames reference—essentially as new horizons, shores, or boats.

I will now offer a list of qualifiers which have characteristically constituted a Foucauldian heterotopia, drawing with them a number of contextual connections with specific pieces of heterotopian short fiction from Dubliners and Oblivion, followed by a number of stories in this collection. In conclusion, I will then situate this general outline of a Foucauldian approach to fiction writing by offering its ethical standards not as moral prerogatives or some sort of yardstick for judging good or bad writing, but rather as a hypothetical system of creative stimulation and inspiration.
Short stories typically offer their heterotopian experiences in the form of characters and narrative spaces interacting with each other, and with the reader, at the limits of their mutual comprehension. The Joycean epiphany found at the end of each story in *Dubliners* provides a perfect example of liminal interaction. Joyce’s climaxes bring his protagonist to an encounter or a decision that reflects his or her paralysis, action, or reaction to a particular horizon of all things knowable. The crucial narrative turn is not found in a character’s arrival at a new understanding of the limits of his interactive potential, but rather in a moment of a character’s new mode of interacting with the limits of understanding itself. Whether a character understands the nature of the radically other space is unnecessary; what matters, ultimately, is a character’s capacity to act without thinking, to exist without understanding, and to force his system to the point of radical self-enclosure whereupon interaction with otherness can be productive without necessarily being communicative.

Foucault describes two main categories of heterotopia: spaces of crisis and spaces of deviation. The former, more prevalent in the so-called primitive societies, have traditionally provided a home for the compulsive rituals of sacred or forbidden becomings—the nineteenth century boarding school, for instance, or more recently the honeymoon site of consummation—which today have been replaced almost completely by heterotopias of deviation. These are the spaces of intolerable otherness and undesirable bodies, the realms of madmen and criminals, the figures of perversion that must be identified, organized, and regulated in prisons, psychiatric hospitals, and retirement homes (“Spaces” 24-5). David Foster Wallace’s “The Soul is Not a Smithy,” from his collection *Oblivion*, takes place simultaneously in a middle school classroom, wherein an act of horrific violence feels imminent, and in the space of one student’s daydream, wherein his desire to escape or to deviate from the jaws of normalization interacts with the
student’s psychic system, his social system, and the communicative terrain upon which all three are rendered mutually incomprehensible. The result is the subtle transformation of the educational apparatus—which of course is not typically rendered as a space of otherness or deviation but rather of the indoctrination of the terms of their mass prevention—but a contemporary society in which school violence has become commonplace necessitates an ethical literary posture with a mind to render it as such. Wallace’s story becomes a liminal experience with civilization’s capacity to understand its own spaces of education—perhaps, after years of believing in its inherent purity, it has become unethical to interact with the heterotopian communities hidden within the educational apparatus as understandable, controllable, and malleable bodies, as if the souls therein constituted the raw material of a cultural blacksmith.

The psychiatric silencing of certain voices, and subsequently their manipulated ventriloquism, constitutes the thematic thrust of several of my own stories, particularly the title story and “Crisis Hotline.” The narrator of the latter has allowed the language of psychiatry and psychoanalysis to universally inform his every human interaction. His ideological faith in the saving graces of this particular system, and his desire to see the world swallowed by the vacuum of its taxonomic laws and prescriptive mechanisms, causes him continuously to uphold an illusion at the expense of his relationships and ultimately his own sense of himself and his place in the world at large. “Civilizations without Boats,” the shortest story in the collection, witnesses the birth of a family and suggests that their first few moments of hope for the future will also likely constitute the only such moments they ever share. In civilizations without boats, “dreams dry up” at the hands of a restless population terrified of all things abnormal (Foucault, “Spaces” 27).

Societal changes and epistemic disruptions, however, can effectuate intra-heterotopian
reconstitution: the systemic reorganization of certain constitutive rules governing the modal expressions and manifestations of a given heterotopia. Cemeteries, for instance, throughout history have variously constituted hierarchical sites of collective de-individualization—the charnel house at the heart of the city prior to the eighteenth century—as well as sites of radical otherness for marking the individualization of singular deaths—the bourgeois cities populated by gravesites and coffins that extend indefinitely into the outskirts of the city (Foucault, “Spaces” 25).

Gabriel’s epiphany in the closing lines of “The Dead” reflects a similar reconstitution of the systems and frames of reference for interacting with the radical otherness embodied in the specter of death. Gabriel’s sudden discovery that the connection he’d moments ago felt with his wife had actually been the refracted reverberations from a radically different interaction—the unconscious one between the system of his delusional fantasy of her affections and the system of her actual affections for a dead lover—swiftly renders obsolete Gabriel’s old systems of understanding love, his wife, and the dead. As he wanders into the ghostly snowfall, he must suddenly allow himself to exist alongside the radically otherness of death, for it occupies all the same spaces as he does, speaking without communicating, being without existing.

“The Ghosts of Rich Men,” the final story in my collection, projects a vision of the cemetery as radically transformed by one such epistemic disruption. Arguably more dystopian than heterotopian, the story unfolds against the backdrop of a global cemetery populated by the living and the dead, a society whose ultimate individual achievement is the accumulation of enough personal wealth to purchase a plot of land for a tombstone. “The Widow’s Mother,” my one concerted effort to bring minimalist silences to the heterotopian ethic, centers on a mother-daughter relationship and the fundamentally different reactions of each to their respective
encounters with spaces of death. One of them ultimately finds a language for traversing her experience of grief, while the other spends the rest of her life quietly pursuing and tempting the horizon where the language of life begins to stop and that of death begins to speak.

Another feature of what a heterotopia can do—as a mechanism of its openness through closure—is simultaneously to isolate its inhabitants while also making them penetrable. Entry and exit cannot be passive; there must be, on the contrary, a performance of compulsion, purification, or ritualized passage before one can interact with its system: here Foucault locates the world of the American motel room wherein “sex is both absolutely sheltered and absolutely hidden, kept isolated without however being allowed out in the open” (“Spaces” 27). My story, “A Concerned Friend,” does its best to climax in a variation on this heterotopian theme; moreover, it constitutes my most ethically ambitious effort to narrate from the voice of a subject position radically different from my own.

Furthermore, heterotopias are “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault, “Spaces” 25). As I have shown above, one of the most extreme novelistic achievements of this combinatory closure is found in Gravity’s Rainbow. Perhaps my opening story, “Mexico,” or rather the collection’s most experimental effort—“Coast to Coast”—come closest to this kind of systemic juxtaposition of otherness. Having traditionally felt uncomfortable with ambitious stylistic experimentation, these two stories, though of course comparatively tame compared with Joyce, Pynchon, or Wallace, reflect my sincerest and most frustrating attempts to combine traditional storytelling strategies with the heterotopian sentiment that seemed always to call for the opposite. With “Coast to Coast,” especially, I experiment with a protagonist whose fragmented memories and painful childhood—coupled with an often unfiltered perceptual apparatus and the inability to
speak the overall social language—necessitated, I think, equal fragmentation in the cut-and-paste narrative of his journey. With this story I wanted to come as close as I reasonably could to a contemporary retelling of the Ship of Fools myth, as told through the eyes of a passenger. The struggle, I think, in trying to push my storytelling system toward a functional relation with radical difference—and Foucault’s command for me to reject my own comfortable narrative identity in favor of pursuing still more radical limits—as a heterotopian interaction itself, particularly in my composition of these two stories, became the constitutive force relation at work behind the scenes of my inspiration.

Perhaps the most crucial and fundamental element of the heterotopia is that its existence, location, and population must function as parts of a system that serves a particular function in relation to all other spaces and the systems constitutive thereof. The sum of all space that remains after the delineation of any given heterotopia will thus unfold, in one way or another, as the effect of these spaces of otherness.

Two extreme poles constitute the scale by which all spaces enter into this functional relation of proximity: “Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory… Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (Foucault, “Spaces” 27). Essentially, the heterotopia throws into relief all other sites of human interaction according to a degree of polar effects deployed on a scale between illusion and compensation. As the two most extreme types of heterotopia—those spaces that come closest to functioning as purely illusory or purely compensatory—Foucault suggests the brothel for the former and the colony for the latter. Both spaces constitute closed systems of self-sufficient otherness contingent upon their
successful entry into relations with the outside. Illusion exposes reality’s fraudulent claims to universal openess by constructing a system governed by its radical incompatibility with all other systems of human governance; compensation perfects reality’s fraudulence by pursuing the total and literal application of universality. On the sliding scale between the two poles, Foucault suggests that both functions may, and characteristically do, operate simultaneously within any given heterotopian system. Perhaps it is clear, then, the reason why Foucault characterizes the boat as “a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea” in light of the functional sliding and relational fluctuation of effects, and declares it the ultimate paradigm of heterotopian space (“Spaces” 27). Only the incomprehensible appearance, disappearance, and reappearance of the known world as it converges on its own mobile limits, placeless markers, and liminal experiences of the radically unknown—the oceanic vastness of all human illusion and perfection—only in this liminal pursuit of and retreat from horizons of experience does “the greatest reserve of the imagination” offer up its cargo (“Spaces” 27).

An engagement with the radical incomprehensibility of my creative inspiration—a fundamentally heterotopian phenomenon—is perhaps the best way to characterize this preface. I have extracted and offered a number of ethical standards and the literary examples through which they have been upheld. My intention with these examples, however, is not to prescribe or to condemn; on the contrary, my goal has been to explore the horizon of my inspiration by exercising thereon the functions and mechanisms of the heterotopian encounter that I have been heretofore also struggling to define—the simultaneous interaction with and performance of the productive incompatibility constitutive of the encounter between the system of my inspiration and the system of my craft.
The end result, of course, leaves me walking away dissatisfied from yet another rendezvous, yet another botched handshake. Perhaps my stories hardly embody the spirit of their inspirational source; perhaps, in the end, I’ve only discovered the extent to which the systemic language of my fiction remains radically disconnected from, and heretofore incompatible with, the voices of its systemic inspiration. If this is, in fact, the case, then I can’t be altogether too disappointed; after all, it would simply validate the creative potential latent to heterotopian experiences of the known world’s horizons: listening to the incomprehensible voices of my inspiration, embracing the mutual exclusivity of our closed systems, hearing and feeling without understanding, sharing with the languages of otherness and the murmurs of madness—what is inspiration but the stifled voice of madness?—then perhaps now I can start over, this time from the greatest reserves of my imagination.
Works Cited


Mexico

Molly woke the next morning; Jake was there; he was petting her hand; it was not his intention to make her feel like a housecat.

“Christ,” he said. “There you are.”

Then Molly said something.

After she’d stormed out of the hotel room, Jake was telling her, he’d gone searching:

“hours and hours… wandering the streets… hours… missing persons report… Spanish…”

Finally he’d given up. Gone back to the hotel. Despair. Exhaustion. Heartache. But then—there she was—in the hallway—slumped against the door: “Like a heap of laundry…”

“Do you remember anything?” Jake asked.

Molly said something else.

“Oh, okay,” he was saying, “That’s all right. We don’t have to talk about it yet.”

The hospital smelled like blue cheese.

** * * *

Jake avoided his wife’s eyes for the better part of the next three days. Hospital to hotel, hotel to embassy, embassy to airport: ticketing, customs, security, gate. On the plane, Molly slept while Jake stared at the floor. Molly: thirty-nine, petite, attractive, youthful, glossy, and once upon a time smilingly vocal. Jake: forty-one, tall, lanky, vestigially athletic, blockily defined, strict but amiable high school teacher of remedial algebra. Hair: Jake’s colorless, Molly’s dark brown with Maybelline brilliance.

They’d been airborne for an hour when Molly woke and, markedly articulate, said:

“I always knew you weren’t a man.” She squeezed Jake’s arm until he finally looked at her. “I’ve always known that,” she said. In her eyes: an absence, cold and thick. Outside: the
innards of a gutted cloud spilling like hot breath across the window, the plane’s shrieking engines, the deep night. “But now,” she said, “After this—how do I know what I am?”

Then she released him and went back to sleep.

The week before: a rare collusion of recklessness and melodrama. Hopping a plane, half expecting not to return, half expecting to return (but certainly not as man and wife) and of course zero expecting what ultimately happened. But now Molly was right, of course, about this, about Jake’s post-spat abandonment, about the question marks written by her trauma all over both their bodies. She’d gone to the beach—it was midnight in Mexico, she was alone, etcetera—and Jake had gone to the bar—margarita in hand, semi-coma in mind. *If for any reason you should feel unable or unwilling to perform the aforementioned responsibilities, please raise your hand and ask the flight attendant for another seat.* But is this not what one does, even, in most cases, without exception, immediately following the latest installment of one’s ongoing marital pugilism? Does one not drink (or, generally, consume in excess one’s preferred object of consumption)? With purpose and heavily? Does not one? Yes, Jake, of course one does.

* * *

After Mexico, Molly didn’t leave the house again until winter: a cold Tuesday in mid-February.

The walk to the mailbox: a peaceful mile of gravel under an unbroken canopy of branches whose thick and lazy fingers locked, embraced, tunneled.

At the end of the tunnel: the mailman, his gray Dodge, the row of boxes.

“Heard you guys had some trip,” he said.

Molly nodded. “Mexico,” she said. She opened their box.

“I was sorry to hear about it,” said the mailman. “Raw deal if I ever seen one.”
Molly didn’t look at him. She peered into the box.

“Bet you’re glad to be home though,” the mailman said.

Molly closed the box empty-handed and backpedaled.

“Good to see you again,” said the mailman.

“I dropped my cigarette in the ocean,” she said.

“In Mexico?” he asked.

Molly nodded.

“Probably hard to light after that, eh?”

He waited to see if it registered.

It didn’t.

“I dropped the lighter also,” Molly said. “In the ocean.”

Then she turned and walked back to the house. All along the gravel road and up the driveway, pinkish blotters converged in her wake because she hadn’t worn shoes and the gravel was a lot sharper than she remembered.

“Everything’s fine,” Jake said that evening when the mailman called.

Then Jake got online and looked up a chicken recipe that called for a mushroom sauce. While the chicken cooked, he set the table with candles and re-filled the salt and pepper shakers and placed them on the kitchen table next to the napkin dispenser, which they’d stolen from a Denny’s as item #7 on a list Molly had compiled for a scavenger hunt on their third date.

He took down the breakable plates and the crystal glasses and the good silver, and he cracked the window to let the cool breeze come in while they ate. He bought wine but they forgot about it and the crystal glasses stayed empty. The chicken was dry.

“Feeling all right?” he asked.
“How do you mean?” asked Molly. She stared at the chicken and forked a piece but didn’t eat it.

“I mean since Mexico,” Jake said.

Molly looked up: in the candlelight her eyes were gray and bright at the same time like graphite clouds and she said:

“Jake, that was weeks ago.” Then she cut a piece, dabbed the sauce, and ate. “Chicken’s dry,” she said.

“I agree,” said Jake.

“Let’s not talk about Mexico,” Molly said.

“Is that what you want?”

“Shouldn’t it be?”

“I don’t know,” Jake said.

“All right,” said Molly, taking another bite. “As long as we understand each other.”

He started taking his lunch breaks at home. It was a welcome respite from the faculty lounge: the booming voices of the football coaches with their incomprehensible conversations and their culture of Gatorade bottles and slabs of brisket wrapped in tin foil and under the table a circle of cloth shorts and pale legs with their lifelong muscle and thick hair. Jake had gotten accustomed to eating with the guidance counselors—the four of whom bore an uncanny resemblance to the cast of *The Golden Girls*—ever since his first few days of employment, during which time he’d been desperate for a social alternative to the company of the football coaches (all of whom had been drawn to Jake’s visible fear of them).
* * *

A two-bedroom one-story, thirty-two blank acres of ungrazed pasture, five screen doors, one tree swing, one storm cellar next the brown spot where the lawnmower sat poisoning the dead grass, one netless basketball hoop whose pole was vanquished long ago by hordes of chestnut-colored oxidization. After a decade, the trees surrounding the property were tall enough to block out the high school stadium’s giant lights (every Friday night they’d kept Jake up, thinking about the football coaches, about how he could never understand what they were talking about or where they were coming from). Sometimes Jake would sit under the tree for hours staring at their empty land, and after long enough he’d fall into a trance which gave him the impression that someone, a friend, perhaps, or even a parent, was sitting next to him on the swing and Jake imagined himself talking about Molly and their marriage and then after he was finished he listened to his companion talk about what he’d said and the companion would nod his head and frown and say yes, Jake, it is strange, quite strange, very strange indeed, your brand of love. But of course nobody was there: empty seat, empty field, gridlock of trees beyond. And a feeling in his chest that told him any man—provided he was a man—could walk up and take it all away, and there’d be nothing Jake could do about it.

One never knew, now did one, when something terrible might happen, and thus one must be prepared and protected, now mustn’t one, in one’s lives, in the event, in the wake, trauma.

Because: both occupied (unarguably) the elite echelons of attractive middle-agers. Forlorn suitors suffering from the pangs of mid-life libidos flocked from both sides of the gender divide—they were sent, all of them, packing—only to promptly de-flock, luckless, frustrated, astounded, scratching their heads, retracing their steps (were Jake and Molly not attractive plus unhappy plus loveless and therefore available? Perhaps so. But Jake and Molly remained
faithful. One might say inexplicably. Childless, friendless, hobby-less, secluded, traumatized: one might say (also: expect, assume, require, hope) that one day Jake and Molly would kill each other, like most couples would have years ago, out of simple boredom. Although, of course, one never knows how it is with others, and one would be skeptical upon receiving the knowledge that Jake and Molly had/will/would never slept in separate beds—of this, one might say, for instance: “only because their contractual performance of this proximity somehow connected the dots between the spaces voided by passion”—and that Jake and Molly were not, by any means (excepting after Mexico), celibate, and that neither would deny it: “we are capable of enjoying each other, sometimes even spontaneously, if for whatever reason we happen to fall to relishing a moment of blissful chaos, say, for instance, in the yard swing whereupon the agonized screeches of metal-on-metal trumpet the discord of our love, shaking to and fro like jars of ancient preserves fermented by mutual loneliness and the infrequency of her/his clutch, longing to waggle back and forth to the rhythmic rends of offbeat moments that are special (to/for us) only because they are—you already know this, of course—inauspicious.”

Year fourteen: these moments, an endangered species, these desires (even for the most coveted of sensations, such as the odd thrill of a splinter contracted mid-ecstasy), an arc slouching undeniably toward extinction.

* * *

They’d dated for six months before marrying. Neither side of the aisle contained spirited procreators—out-of-wedlock rumors were short-lived—and both clans of unassuming Baptists hand-shook, back-clapped, and sat cross-legged throughout the ceremony, brains and pockets full of all the things one carries therein to loved ones’ weddings, taking it quietly for granted that their children/cousins/nephew and niece/so forth were, quite naturally, in love. But they were not
in love; not happy; not much of what one would imagine one to be; and yes, of course, Molly was indeed pregnant. And thus they married with their lonely secret. But less than a week after the marriage was underway (neither of them had particularly wanted a honeymoon) Molly was walking to their mailbox, checking it for late gifts, introducing herself to the mailman, etcetera, something urgent happened inside her. The secret folded in on itself. It got a little bigger. And therewith, three results: (1) Molly’s noonwalk to the mailbox became her daily thing; (2) Jake bought a porch swing and hung it from an old oak in front of the house, and (3) Jake and Molly fell, more or less, as it were, one might say, in love.

* * *

Molly confined herself to the bedroom. By and large she remained mute and blankfaced, and in the rare event of attempted articulation Jake opened his ears and what he thought was his heart as best he could, but there was no shaking the oddly sure feeling he had that none of what he heard was in any way/shape/form equivalent to what was said. And to make things even less intelligible, strange, off-the-mappish, what have you: Molly had taken to spending the eveningtime (emerging as she would like clockwork from the bedroom) on the sofa watching *Seinfeld*—*Seinfeld* ran back to back on TBS every weeknight—which was not an altogether unpleasant or unwelcome turn of events (not only because *Seinfeld* was his favorite show and Molly had never wanted to watch it with him before, but also because he wanted to keep an eye on the changes in her temperament: unease, distance, forgetfulness, irritability) albeit nonetheless quite strange and prompted Jake to ask himself things like, “What next?”

One day Molly began to scream for no apparent reason—pausing only for obligatory breaths—for seven minutes until finally she revealed the cause of her distress to be the conspicuous absence of electric blankets in the hall closet (they didn’t own any electric blankets
and never had). Then she asked Jake quite calmly if he wouldn’t mind running to Wal-Mart during a commercial break for two electric blankets.

How does one (Jake) know what one does. Without friends/family to validate. How does one know. Spontaneously fluctuating atmospheric oddity: one never knows, now does one, when the room is going to im/explode and you with it. Mini-atomic splittages each day, for instance, at the more quotidian plus tolerable end of the scale (Mercalli I-ish, seismographically speaking): every week for the next month, Jake stocked their pantry with hot cocoa, green tea, trail mix, Captain Crunch cereal, and packets of Quaker oatmeal with peaches and strawberries and cinnamon (Molly’s new diet) and he brought her breakfast (plus lunch plus dinner, different TV trays respectively for each) in bed each morning, and then he stood in the doorway watching it get cold in the silence. The silence of earthquakes/volcanoes/mushroom clouds disseminating symbiotic devastation even after one presses the mute button.

There was nothing Jake could do. So what he did was devote himself to their evenings. First things first: he bought two electric blankets, one king and one queen, plus a surge protector with multiple outlets for the living room. But as it turned out, the inconvenient locations of the light sockets still required him to rearrange the furniture so the power strip would be within reach of both their blankets simultaneously. When Molly would get up to refill her coffee cup during a commercial break (she became a coffee drinker when she became a Seinfeld watcher) she was reluctant to leave her blanket behind and its cord would inevitably be jerked from the socket—sometimes it held onto the power strip as well, taking both their blankets along for the ride—and a parade of fuzzy warmth followed her to the kitchen.

Jake set out lavender candles in different patterns each night: a diamond whose corners came together atop the side tables and the shelves above the screen; a heart whose curves
encircled their heads like pillaged hilltops; shadows and daggers exploding from the coffee table like a dancing pentagram (which, Jake insisted, he hadn’t actually designed with ritualistic sacrifice in mind). And from Ikea: reproductions of famous paintings—Starry Night, Rouen Cathedral (the “full sunlight” variation), The Old Guitarist and for some reason a second Starry Night—which he hung in the living room, entryway, kitchen, and hall.

Velvet drapes replaced the Venetian blinds; surround sound speakers found ceiling perches, floor perches, and other perches whose miscellaneous locations Jake often couldn’t recall even though he’d picked them. The finishing touch, the lagniappe without which the setup might have been a complete disaster, was the fact that Kramer now sailed through his neighbor’s door in uncanny High Definition.

At the center of it all: the transparent coffee table whereon Jake nightly refreshed an assortment of sunflowers, tulips, roses, and so forth, in elaborate bouquets that stood tall and full without obstructing their view of the flatscreen mounted halfway up the wall. The only piece of ambience that Jake did not change was the sofa. It was far too comfortable to risk improvement.

Wrapped like twin kolaches at opposite ends of the long brown sofa (which, as Molly had pointed out sixteen or seventeen times, looked like a wiener dog who’d been run over and reincarnated as a piece of furniture) Jake and Molly stretched, curled, snuggled, both of them usually covered up to their chins in fuzzy yellow cocoons of electric Fahrenheit and sometimes, when the temperature was just right or when TBS surprised them with “The Soup Nazi,” “The Contest,” “The Puffy Shirt,” or the one where Judge Reinhold guest stars as the Close Talker, Jake even stopped wondering if things would ever go back to how they were before Mexico.

Sometimes Jake cooked: pork chops, Caesar salads, spaghetti and meatballs, macaroni and cheese or shells and cheese.
Sometimes he made conversation:

“The thing about Kramer is this: he never breaks character.”

Then after he said it Jake realized it was true. Jerry, Elaine, George, Newman—everybody but Kramer—have to break character because breaking character is their character. The self-awareness, the irony, the double consciousness: it’s what keeps the entire Seinfeldian performance teetering on the brink of implosion.

“But without Kramer,” Jake continued, “The whole thing would probably fall apart.”

During a Cialis commercial—Jake always wondered if these erection ads made Molly as uncomfortable as they made him—Molly put on another pot of coffee. Sometimes on Tuesday afternoons Jake would go to the vending machine for a Mr. Pibb, but this was rare. In general, Jake and caffeine were adversaries.

“Jerry’s not even acting,” Jake said over the gurgling coffee sounds. “Not even a little bit. It’s like he goes out of his way to act like he’s not acting. Which I mean I guess that’s a form of acting in itself. But Kramer’s the only one doing anything.”

Whereupon, indeed, Molly:

“You don’t have to do that.” Keeping her back turned.

Jake (again, still quite sure that anything, this no exception, that his wife said was not the same as what he heard her say) swiveled in his cushion to look at Molly’s back: loose folds of her grandmother’s old night gown, pale calves like pallid streetlights showing over the morphological yellowness of two becoming-Tweety slippers, matted hair unwashed and

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1 Molly’s mind, one imagines, was likely marching: room to room, locking doors, drawing curtains, closing blinds, latching windows, boarding windows, peeping out the windows, turning off lights, especially the garage light—she’d never understood why they needed a garage—unplugging plugs, turning off the air, room to room, marching.
gleaming like cured horse-gut sinews dipped in lacquer and hung cloudlessly under unforgiving suns.

“I don’t have to do what?” he asked.

“Your voice,” said Molly, or not.

“What don’t I have to do?”

“Nevermind.”

“No, please, Molly, tell me.”

“The Kramer thing.”

“What Kramer thing?” he asked.

“All the time, always saying what Kramer does.”

Molly let her blanket drift to the floor. Her grandmother’s gown opened slightly below the neck.

“All right then,” Jake said. “We’ll just sit quietly.”

When the commercials were over Kramer was standing in the center of a conference room. It was the one where he auditions to be an underwear model for Calvin Klein or somebody.

“He’s the only one in the whole bunch…” Jake muttered.

Kramer’s diatonic audience consisted of marketers and fashion designers and various other fleshy props supporting the convulsive antics of one zany aging hipster who, Jake thought, was more genuine than most people in the world. Behind a collective frown Kramer’s audience evaluated his stage presence, searching his figure for ad power, pinpointing the stamp of his aura, racking their eyes to uncover traces of an uncommon mien that might be extracted from his body and splashed all over their designer briefs.
“Even though he’s gyrating all over the place in nothing but whitey tighties,” Jake continued, “He’s still the only real thing happening.”

Then Molly said:

“What I really feel like doing, Jake, is burning myself on the stove. Or in the oven, maybe. I feel like firing it up, you know, and putting as much of myself onto the burners as I can fit—just me and my skin, right up there against the fire, covering all the hottest places.”

Now Jerry was onstage delivering the closing routine. Credits flashed names and jobs and roles written in white words that covered and uncovered him as he turtled back and forth in front of the audience. And that bass line. Oh, that bass line.

“But I think I’d want you to do it to me,” Molly said. “I wonder how long you could do it for. I wonder about that.”

Jake was trembling. He tried popping his knuckles but the ache wouldn’t yield.

“A long time, I bet,” she went on. “I bet you could give me a good burn. Nice and long, I bet. A good, long, slow burn.”

One waxes cosmopolitan, does one not, about aspirations targeted toward one’s romantic and surely effortless learning/understanding/speaking any number of Foreign tongues, perhaps more intensely plus genuinely in one’s youth, until of course the time-backpedaling infantilizations endured at the mercy of linguistic failure’s repeated injections of affectively viral incomprehensibility turn irreversibly pathological, at which point one must find a way to say/demand/enforce the shutting-the-hell-up of the speaker whose voice grates like aural rapture, like the acoustic horseman of agony/ecstasy. What means after all the thing about tricks, and old dogs.

“…”
“Gibberish.”

“…”

* * *

Eventually the Golden Girls flagged him down in the hall between classes and playfully plus collectively demanded, as one does with one’s friends, that Jake reveal the logic behind his lunchtime absences/whereabouts.

“Molly’s been under the weather,” he said. “So I’ve been eating at home.”

“Lord have mercy I hope she’s all right,” Dorothy said.

“Molly’s such a sweet girl,” said Rose.

“Oh course,” Blanche said, “You know we’re here for you. Anything at all, Jake.”

The girls’ company was pleasant for Jake because they didn’t expect anything from him except the occasional spout of ambiguous laughter. This had always been a particularly prominent idiosyncrasy for Jake, the way he was prone to laughing at inappropriate times, his go-to reaction when he didn’t understand something. For example: the day before, the offensive coordinator had come up behind him at the Pepsi machine, tapped him on the shoulder, and asked him whether he preferred ankle socks or athletic socks—Jake laughed, of course, and the offensive coordinator had scowled and walked away. This kind of thing happened to Jake frequently, but the Golden Girls either didn’t notice it or weren’t bothered by it. So he was relieved, in fact, at the opportunity to once again join the girls for lunch.

Later, sifting through a bag of Fritos punctuated by intermittent sips from the loop de loop straw (a birthday gift from the Golden Girls) in his Mr. Pibb, he was struck by the overwhelming desire to confess everything, and so he came clean about Molly and Mexico.

“Jake, my Word, that’s awful!” Sophia said, three variations in tow.
“And such a sweet girl,” recalled Rose.

“It’s just not right for the world to miss out on such a sweet girl,” Dorothy said.

“It sounds real nice what you did with the living room though,” Blanche said. “Very thoughtful. I’m sure she appreciates your all your love and support.”

“I can’t get enough of that Elaine,” Sophia said, chuckling through a mouthful of tuna fish. “Isn’t she just hysterical?”

“I don’t know,” Jake said. “I’m pretty sure Molly would like it better if I just vanished and never came back.” After he said this he realized it was probably true.

“That’s not true,” said Dorothy. “Don’t go saying things like that. You’ll only get yourself down and what Molly needs right now is for you to be strong.”

“I agree.”

“Strength without a doubt.”

“At the money once again, Dorothy.”

Jake looked up and felt the gazes of several coaches from the table across the room.

Ankle socks, he suddenly realized, was the answer the offensive coordinator’s odd question.

“I don’t know what to do,” Jake said. “She won’t set foot outside the house, she barely eats, she never changes out of her nightgown, and she won’t talk to me about anything.”

“Give her time,” Blanche said.

“She’s probably still in some kind of shock,” Sophia added.

“That’s right,” Rose went on, “When you get right down to it, agoraphobia is essentially a form of prolonged shock.”

“Really she ought to be talking to somebody,” Dorothy said. “You can’t fool around with PTSD after that kind of trauma.”
This was the first Jake had considered it from a psychiatric angle. He dropped his chips and rubbed his eyes. Blanche produced a pair of Advil.

“Molly won’t talk to anybody,” Jake said, downing the capsules with his Mr. Pibb. “I promise you she won’t.”

“If she doesn’t,” Rose said, “And if she keeps it all bottled up, it’s liable to get worse and worse.”

“She needs to get it out.”

“It’s the only way to release the pain.”

“One can’t keep that much hurt locked up forever. One just can’t, now can one?”

“But what if,” Jake said, “What if I can’t get her to leave the house? What if she fights me the whole way? Or something even worse?” And then all kinds of worse went galloping through his head.

“Well,” said Blanche. “Maybe you’ll just have to get creative.”

“Inside every algebra teacher there’s a starving artist waiting to be fed,” Sophia said.

“Absolutely.”

“One hundred percent right.”

“All one has to do is feed him.”

Jake brought a trembling Frito to his mouth and then checked his watch. He’d planned to call home before the bell, but it was too late.

“Don’t you worry, Jake,” Rose said.

“Stay positive.”

“We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“She’s such a sweet girl, that Molly of yours.”
“Thanks guys,” Jake said, wadding up his paper sack. “And please don’t tell anybody about this.”

“Of course not,” they chimed. “Mum’s the word.” They all pantomimed the locking of lips and the throwing away of keys.

The latter half of the day couldn’t have passed more slowly, and after the last bell Jake remembered he was due for bus duty.

He went out and stood by the curb: directing the flow of foot traffic, staring off in the distance, guessing what was going on inside all those lively and energetic heads. It wasn’t an altogether burdensome detail because there was zero decision-making. The only trouble was that the offensive coordinator had somehow managed to synchronize their schedules.

“Whaddya say, Jake?!”

After all these years, the sound of his trademark hypermasculine inflection had cultivated a Pavlovian sinking effect in Jake’s heart. And “whaddya say” was an impossible question, so of course Jake laughed. Then he said:

“Nothing.”

“Nother day, nother dollar,” said the offensive coordinator, stroking his gray mustache and sniffing the air as he came to a halt and crossed his arms.

“Yep,” Jake said.

And then:

“I just heard about Molly.”

Jake silently cursed the Golden Girls. All the way to the athletics department in the span of an afternoon—Boeing couldn’t have manufactured a more efficient gossip machine.

“Molly?” Jake said. “Molly’s all right. Just a bit under the weather.”
“Christ, Jake, you don’t have to hold back anything with me. Hell, how long have we known each other?”

“Almost sixteen years,” Jake said. He tried not to think about how that sounded.

“You’re goddamn right, sixteen years.”

“Really though,” Jake said, “Molly’s fine.”

“Okay buddy whatever you say. But you know if there’s anything I can do, you better not hesitate.”

“Thanks,” Jake said. “I won’t.”

“But let me just say this,” the offensive coordinator began, rocking back on his heels and raising his eyebrows to herald the imminent arrival of wisdom. “I may look like I’ve got it all figured out—and maybe I do—but I’m no stranger to the wintry ways of women. No sir I am surely not. A few years back, the missus went through her little rough patch—they all do, every one of them—and I’ll spare you the gruesome details, so lemme just put it this way: what she needed was a nice, relaxing vacation, and so I gave her one, and she came back saner than the day I fell in love with her.”

“Thanks,” Jake said. “But a vacation is what started the whole thing.”

The offensive coordinator laughed. “I’m not talking about Mexico,” he said. “There aint no sunburns and margaritas involved in the vacay I’m talking about. No beaches, no poolside romance, no cruise ships and no room service.”

The next wave of buses pulled through and the offensive coordinator paused to blow on his whistle.

“I’m not sure I follow,” Jake said, suppressing a wave of frustrated giggles.

“Listen,” said the offensive coordinator, polishing the spent whistle with his shirt sleeve,
“Don’t send her off right away. Take her to see somebody first. Sometimes they just need somebody to talk to. Somebody to tell them what you’ve been saying all along. Sure it doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. But since when did anything make sense with them? I mean, it aint pretty, sure. But sometimes one has to do these things. One does indeed.”

A fight had broken out aboard bus sixteen, so the offensive coordinator sprang into action while Jake and his virgin whistle ducked into the building and went AWOL.

* * *

The house was dark when he got home. He flipped on the hall light and called Molly’s name and then he ran through the house hitting the lights. When he got to the bedroom the first thing he saw was the bathroom light seeping under its closed door.

“Molly?” he said, turning the knob and finding it locked. “Molly, are you in there?”

“…”

“Why’s the door locked?” he asked.

“…”

“All right fine. You locked it. Very good.”

“It is good,” she said, followed by the sound of violent dry heaves.

“Are you sick?” Jake asked.

“…”

“Molly, please, what’s wrong? Can I drive you to the hospital?”

The toilet flushed and the light went off. Then the door swung open and Molly brushed past him to the bed. She got under the covers on his side and faced the wall. Jake went over and put his hand on her back and when she let him keep it there he scratched in gentle circles.

“Molly,” he said. “Please, you need to leave the house. What you’re doing isn’t healthy.”
“…”

“You’re making yourself sick,” Jake said.

Molly turned over on her stomach. Jake widened the circles, mixed rubs with scratches.

“Would you talk to someone? I’d go with you and we’d come right back, I promise.”

Jake sat up with her until after midnight when her breathing finally leveled off, and she commenced with the tiny pockets of whistle-snores, which had been the most endearing discovery Jake made during their first nights together.

* * *

“You guys promised me,” Jake said the next afternoon.

“What’s the matter, dear?”

“Have a seat, Jake, you’re sweating.”

“We always keep our promises, Jake, always.”

“Nobody at this table said a word.”

Jake sat down and ripped open his lunch. “Then how’d the football coaches hear about it?”

They knew the jig was up: echoes of contrition salied forth. Of course it was difficult for Jake to stay angry with the Golden Girls.

“Let us make it up to you,” Blanche said.

“How’s that?” Jake asked.

“Well,” Rose said, “We came up with a few ideas for Molly.”

“Do they all involve vacations?” Jake asked.

“Vacations?” Sophia said, wrinkling her nose. “Isn’t that how this started?”

“Just checking,” Jake said.
The Golden girls proceeded to lay out several plans, each of which culminated in a dazzling exhibition of their collective counseling virtuosity.

“And our last idea,” Rose said, “Is a bit nutty.”

“Thoroughly nutty.”

“But thoroughly creative.”

“Not to mention fun!”

“All right,” Jake said. “Let’s hear it.”

The ultimate goal of the proposal was, as long as Molly couldn’t go outside, to bring the outside in to Molly. Interacting with the world was what Molly needed. Get her to laugh, smile, interact. Get her to talk. To speak sensibly. To open up and so forth. Because the further she persisted in the absence of friendship and communication, the deeper she’d crawl into the black hole of her trauma.

“Molly knows us,” they said. “She’ll feel comfortable with us.”

It was true—Molly had always adored the girls. They’d been over for wine on countless occasions. Prior to Mexico it wasn’t out of the ordinary for Molly to invite the girls over without informing Jake: he’d get home and they’d be laughing together over full glasses and empty bottles. For a moment Jake could picture Molly’s laugh: the charming clumsiness of the way it hiccupped from her throat—emissions of genuine glee (Molly had never been a fake laugh)—but then the image was gone before he could savor it; Molly was changing in his memories just as fast as she was changing in herself.

“The basic idea,” Blanche said, “Is Seinfeld.”

“The way it brings you two together.”

“However odd it may be.”
“In a quirky kind of romantic way, of course.”

“All right,” Jake said. “I’m listening.”

“We’ll put on a play,” they all said at once.

“A Seinfeld play?” Jake said.

“That’s right,” they said.

“Original or re-run?”

“Her favorite episode,” they said.

Jake tried to picture Molly’s reaction to the Golden Girls showing up unannounced—Jerry, George, Elaine, Kramer—and parading through the living room fully immersed in their respective characters. If it was a mistake—and of course it was bound to be—it could have terrible and irreversible effects on Molly’s emotional health. Would it be just another of his betrayals? Had she at least trusted him not to be stupid enough to welcome her fears into their home? To invite them in and watch her collapse under the horror of it all?

Nevertheless, the Golden Girls’ enthusiasm—their desire to help—was infectious. How could Molly not be instantly renewed by such heart, such verve, such love? His hope of once again hearing Molly’s earnest laugh was what made up his mind.

“Let’s do it,” Jake said. “As long as I get to be Kramer.”

***

“Everybody has a favorite,” Jake insisted, touching the blanket where he could see the outline of Molly’s foot.

Elaine had once again found herself in the office of none other than Mr. J. Peterman, who at the moment was cataloguing all the reasons why, petty geopolitical foibles notwithstanding, Myanmar would, in fact, always be Burma to him. This episode, Jake thought, was certainly not
about nothing. It was different than earlier episodes, much different, mostly because of J. Peterman’s iconic presence, his overwrought masculinity and his blind appetite for world domination.

“This episode would make a decent favorite,” Jake said.

“…”

The coffee smell itself didn’t bother Jake—he hardly noticed it anymore when he was in the teacher’s lounge where olfactory alternatives to Folger’s did not exist—so much as how it covered over Molly’s smell, robbing Jake of the pocket-sized thrill of being able to smell his wife whenever he wanted.

Outside, the wind picked up. Over the canned laughter Jake heard the hobbled whine of the swing’s hinges. A flurry of lust, his first in months, whorled down his spine.

“I have something planned,” Jake said. “For you, for us. I have a surprise.”

This got Molly’s attention. She sat up and let the blanket fall to the floor. George was nodding and waving and scooting toward the door of Mr. Steinbrenner’s office as Larry David’s spasmodic rambles canted after him.

“I don’t know if I should let the cat out of the bag just yet though,” Jake said. “I don’t want to ruin it.”

Molly got up and went to the kitchen for a refill. Should he tell her? Or risk the surprise?

“Don’t,” Molly said. “…”

“I promise you’ll like it,” Jake said.

She returned to the couch, her coffee lipping over the edge, splashing the well-traveled cloth.

“Molly, you need a dose of something and this is what it’s going to be.”
“All right,” she said with a shrug and a sip.

“…”

The credits rolled, followed by three consecutive detergent commercials and the opening scene of “The Butter Shave.” Before the next commercial break, Molly went over to the sink and poured the rest of her coffee down the drain, and then she disappeared down the hall. A door slammed and didn’t reopen.

* * *

Molly’s condition grew noticeably worse over the next few weeks as Jake and the girls prepared for the show. Jake gave his wife her space and she seemed to relish the solitude. She ventured into the living room less and less every day. A great magnet of flesh had taken hold at the center of Molly’s soul and for two months its strength had drawn her inward, testing the bounds of its force, toying with the limits of Jake’s powerlessness.

For the better part of twenty-one days, Jake spent little time in his wife’s presence. He went to work, ate lunch at work, and after each day’s final bell he met the girls in the school auditorium for rehearsal.

The script, since Molly had failed to confess a favorite, was constituted by a series-spanning montage of all the scenes that had managed, according to Jake’s memory, to solicit positive responses from Molly—whether stifled laughter, stubborn smiles, or even comedically suggestive posture adjustments. The more favorable the reaction, the earlier it had occurred; Molly had been coming to the couch with less and less life every night.

Having voiced her fondness for Elaine, Sophia took up her best Julia Louis-Dreyfus and infused every Get out! and every earth-quaking Jerry-shove with the spirit of the no-nonsense buoyancy that they’d all loved about the original. Rose’s self-loathing George, Blanche’s
painfully self-ironic Jerry, and Dorothy’s deadpan delivery of every No soup for you!—each sizzled with the familiarity of their referents while also reinventing the characters according to the respective singularities of each actor’s contribution.

The icing on the cake—this was Jake’s idea—was their enlistment of Molly’s old friend the mailman to put on a pair of spectacles and stuff socks in his government-issued carrier jacket as the inimitable Newman. He agreed, of course, after Jake had explained the occasion.

Only Jake was disappointed time and again with his own interpretation of the zany aging hipster. For one thing, he’d looked everywhere but couldn’t find a suitable wig to transform his algebraic salt and pepper into an electric scalp of fridge-raiding timelessness. Eventually he would have to order it from Amazon.

After they disbanded each evening, Jake would get home well after Molly had retired. He’d be exhausted, but nevertheless he still kicked off his shoes and practiced skating through their front door with just the right alchemy of suave lightheartedness and epileptic disarray. Yet each night, witching hour and beyond, Jake crawled in next to Molly, painfully aware of his inadequacy. It recalled for his self-consciousness the intimidating gaze of the stadium lights that for so many years had left him sleepless under the face of his illuminating arbitration from afar.

After giving up each night, Jake didn’t always find Molly in bed. Sometimes he would climb in bed and reach for the form of her body and find her place empty, and behind him the bathroom light: a golden sliver underlining the locked door. The first time this happened he knocked and called her name to make sure she was all right. The second night he knocked but didn’t speak. After that he left her alone. It was always soundless on the other side—if she was vomiting then she must have gotten it of the way early—and whatever she was doing she sometimes did it all night. In the morning he would wake up and the light would still be on, the
other side still silent. Only once did he put his ear against the door and catch the trail of her soft whimpers, not complete acts of weeping exactly, but nevertheless a staccato marching forth of the strange sadness whose sights seemed irreversibly set on permanence. Therefore it was a gift when he’d reach his arm over and feel it come to rest on the warm rising and falling of Molly’s soft presence.

The week before the show, Jake and the girls spent hours trolling various market and home improvement aisles in search of the props and building blocks with which they could assemble the mise-en-scène of an altogether uncanny set design. The spine of the stage was, of course, Jake and Molly’s kitchen, the living room, and the small tile entryway that separated them. Jake would have to dismantle his recent interior design experiment in order to transform it into Jerry’s apartment, and he would have to do it right under Molly’s nose. In this respect it was fortunate that Molly had lengthened her periods of confinement, whether buried under the comforter or locked mysteriously in the restroom, and thus Jake was free to unleash his hidden creative energies through trial and error and error and error.

Only once, three days before the show, did Molly catch him in a moment of suggestive remodeling. For all Jake knew, Molly might have been standing at the precipice of the hallway for hours watching his every frenzied move. When he finally looked up, and they locked eyes for a moment, he was coming through the front door with a Jerry-sized television cradled in his arms. He almost dropped the TV when he saw her, but he managed to keep his composure and waddle it over to the table.

“…?” Molly asked.

“I figured maybe you’d want one for the bedroom,” Jake said. “You know, since you’re in there a lot now.”
Molly eyed him suspiciously, but the edge of her formerly indomitable intuition had clearly atrophied. The incident did, however, necessitate his putting the new TV in the bedroom like he’d said he would.

After Jake plugged it in and programmed the channels, they settled in for an evening of Nick at Nite reruns. During a Bunker rant from an early *All in the Family*, Molly slipped off to sleep in the crook of Jake’s arm, and Jake sat up most of the night to savor the only moment of prolonged contact they’d had in over a year.

* * *

The performance was set for Saturday morning. Late Friday night after Molly was asleep, Jake tiptoed into the room and stole away with the Jerry-sized TV. Then he sat awake in the living room and waited for the Golden Girls. Just after two, the low beams of their Buick crept up the drive. They’d planned to spend the wee hours assembling the set and polishing their deliveries. The mailman had opted instead to sleep through dress rehearsal and arrive prepared for a sunrise matinee.

Jake and the girls spoke little as they pieced together the nuances of Jerry’s life from the raw material of Jake’s. They took down the flatscreen, the artwork, and the drapes, and replaced them with the simulacra of Jerry’s bookshelves, his card table, and his computer desk. The Golden Girls had managed, through some extraordinary feat of strength, to lash Blanche’s light green futon into the incongruous hole of the Buick’s open trunk with a hodgepodge of multicolored bungee cords, and Jake lugged it the rest of the way to its perpendicular home next to the couch and the end table. They placed the magazines and the TV remote on the coffee table, carpet rug underneath. Of course, as far as the rest of the carpet went, they would just have to make due without hardwood floors. Jake did, however, decide to paint: olive door, off-white
walls, beige trim. Although Jerry’s kitchen milieu changes over the course of the show, Jake nevertheless assembled the various mainstays: blue countertops, microwave, toaster, Ginsu knives, knife block, wooden cutting board, fertile fruit bowl, electric can opener, menu-plastered fridge façade, half-eaten boxes of Chinese take-out, several bottles of variously flavored Snapple, and of course Jerry’s conspicuously comprehensive supply of brand name cereals.

“Lord have mercy,” Dorothy said after they finished.

“We must be out of our minds,” Jake said.

“Thoroughly and completely,” said Blanche.

“The mad leading the mad,” Rose said.

“But of course one does what one can.”

Jake looked at his watch—an hour till dawn—and said they’d better get into costume.

As reliably as the USPS itself, Newman arrived dressed and prepped, minutes before first light.

“Thanks for this,” Jake said.

“Glad to help,” said Newman.

After everything else had found its place, Jake applied the final touch of his heartfelt lunacy: mounted into the ceiling above the doorless frame where the narrow hallway converged on the living room, Jake had hammered a pair of steel loops from which he and Newman—after a noisy expenditure of algebraically impaired effort—eventually suspended—for the sloping discomfort of their future audience member—the two chain links of an awkwardly displaced tree swing. Coming from the bedroom, Molly would have to climb over the back of her seat before she could actually sit in it. When the stage was set, the lighting harmonized, and the horizon colored by dawn, the six cast members sat restlessly in their places and waited for the curtain.
It was half past nine when the door opened and Molly came down the hall in her nightgown. Jake’s heart stopped when she appeared: wiping away sleep, double- and triple-taking.

Jake nodded to Newman, who was crouched at the far wall next to the stereo. He pushed play: the bass line bellied forth, followed by the percussive lingua-labials and synthesized caroms of mid-range brass—each in turn spilling over the room and its occupants from every invisible locus of the carefully camouflaged surround-sound. Everyone saw neon—Restaurant—as Jake held out his hands and Molly took them both, reaching, clasping, and climbing in a single mechanical flow that landed her front and center for the opening scene.

Molly blinked and absorbed the sensory overload. After she was seated—after Jake sensed that she was taking it all in stride—he slinked back to the dim ethers of the stage. It was not yet clear to Molly what the rules were of this strange world: but was she remembering the last time she’d found herself suddenly ejected from her own universe and plopped down in someone else’s? Was she remembering the abandonment, Jake’s cruel sentencing of her to such incomprehensible violence? Was it coming back to her? Where she’d been? Who’d been there? What they’d done to her as she fell wounded and open to their every demand? Molly’s face, bewildered though it was, gave no sign of anything that might have been behind it.\(^2\) As Jake

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\(^2\) But perhaps, behind it, narration—“At midnight fifteen years into her marriage, Molly dropped her cigarette and her margarita, which landed together in the surf as she was sideswiped by two large men whose assault rifles were twirling in great big circles at the ends of their leather straps. They landed one atop the other with Molly the bottom: insufflating a torrent of spumes and gagging on a family of protozoa and then watching through salt-burnt tears as tiny leaves of tobacco taxied by at eye-level. Her resistance, they said afterward, was the reason she’d ended up with so many injuries: concussion, bruised ribs, broken collarbone, plum-colored eyes, masticated tongue. They’d dragged her up the beach by her braids while she kicked and scratched and rippled around like a noodle hitched to a toboggan and even after they got to the grass and the sidewalk and the regiment of discothèques, the men did not let go of her braids. They dragged her through the crowds, the perfumes, the libidos, the strobes lancing through the
watched her he was suddenly haunted by his own memories of Molly’s Mexico: her limp body wadded, folded, and crumpled on the ground with one cheek pressed against the door and her arms splayed to either side like discarded kindling. Jake had stumbled around the corner ready to believe anything the world could have put there. But the world hadn’t put anything there. It had put Molly. It had broken her and given her back, laid waste to her spirit and commanded her to recycle it.

Jake nodded again at Newman. The theme trailed off, the lights came up.

Blanche’s Jerry strolled into the spotlight—navy blazer, blue jeans, Nikes—armed with a plastic microphone from Dollar General. As she went through an opening routine about the arbitrariness of the middle finger—why not the toe?—as the privileged digit of offense, Jake kept his eyes on Molly: she was watching Jerry closely and—so far—calmly.

When the opening routine was over, Newman cued the theme and dimmed the lights to transition.

Jake went outside to wait for his entrance.

From season one, Jake had chosen a scene from “The Robbery” because it necessitated the conspicuous absence of several set dressings, namely Jerry’s TV, which would be easier for the cast and crew if they started out missing and then were put back later. So when the lights went back up, the front door opened and Blanche’s Jerry, arms full of luggage, strolled in only to discover that his apartment had been burglarized.

“Elaine!” Jerry shouted. (Elaine was supposed to have been keeping an eye on his place while Jerry was on tour.)

ale-colored night like spastic holograms of rainbow popsicles splashing over her body as she bounced along the concrete, and then the clubs were gone and it was dark again. Finally she stopped struggling because inside her heart something terrible had happened.”—thought Jake.
Molly was beginning to understand: her features had gone from stupefaction to rapt blankness to some kind of groping wonderment. It was the most emotive variation that she’d exhibited since the flight home from Mexico.

After the brief exchange between Jerry and Elaine, it was time for Kramer’s entrance. Jake executed it with precision: as he sailed across the entryway—spatula in hand, rush-ordered tower of fizzy curls overhead like an antenna, pasted chest hair peeking through unsnapped pearls below pigeon-bobbing chin, plaid zootsuit pants dangling over bling-polished and two-sizes-too-big bowling shoes—Molly gasped aloud (this was the first sound she’d made) and caused all six players to break their respective characters and concentrations for a moment in order to gaze after the gasp.

The verdict came back neutral, and so the show went on: Jerry yelling at Kramer for leaving his door open, letting the burglars in, and so forth, and then:

“Uh, Jer, well ya know,” Jake began, hitting all the right jitters and tics, “I was cooking and I, I uh, I came in to get this spatula—and I left the door open, cause I was gonna bring the spatula right back!”

“Wait,” Jerry said. “You left the lock open or the door open?”

Jake cowered into his best guilty Kramer and said, “The door…”

“The door⁉” Jerry moaned in faux-disbelief. “You left the door open?”

Jake concentrated on Kramer’s reality, on breathing life to the sincerity of his character’s counterpoint to the overall irony of the tone led by Blanche’s Jerry. Molly’s eyes locked onto Kramer and followed him from the door to the kitchen counter to the sofa and everywhere in between. Jake could feel her gaze as he delivered his lines.

“Well,” Kramer said, “I got caught up…watching a soap opera—“
Then Jake tried to make his voice crack with the characteristic Kramer shame as he said, “The Bold and the Beautiful—”

But the heat from Molly’s seeking eyes had unsettled him. Thus the voice that rang in his ears was not Kramer’s, but Jake’s own.

For a handful of terrifying seconds, the show went on without its performers. The air pulled tight around them. They braced for an early ending.

“Jerry!” Kramer yelled halfheartedly, “I’m gonna find your stuff. I’m gonna solve it, I’m on the case, buddy, I’m on the case!”

Jake wanted, quite simply, to cry. He’d created an airtight world, a closed system hanging in the balance of equal parts contingency and impenetrability—their whole lives, he thought, his and Molly’s, had been running on the fuel of a centripetal force that had ultimately led them here, to trauma, to failure, to this, and what can one do about this?

But then something extraordinary happened: Molly began to laugh. Jerry looked at Kramer and Kramer looked at Jerry, each verifying with the other what they’d seen, and when Molly kept on laughing—deep, genuine, sustained laughing—Jake felt a wave of gratitude pass though his chest—through Kramer’s chest—and his greatest ambition suddenly was to appear foolish for the rest of his life.

“I made a mistake,” Kramer said.

“These things happen,” said Elaine.

“I’m human,” Kramer said.

“In your way,” said Jerry.

When the scene was over Molly began to clap. She cheered, she hollered, she serenaded
the transitional darkness with her applause and approval. Jake couldn’t stop smiling. His face burned with pride.

Then the light came up again: a wide spotlight zeroing in on the far end of the kitchen counter, atop which sat a cash register—Mattel, also from Dollar General—and behind which stood Dorothy as the maître d’ from “The Chinese Restaurant.”

“5, 10 minutes,” she repeated over and over to the starving trio of Jerry, George and Elaine.

Molly laughed every time—5, 10 minutes—and the reverberations of her glee rattled the swing’s chain links above and the rotting slats of its wood beneath. The plaster surrounding the ceiling mounts sagged and flakes of white spackle snowed in chalky gusts down on Molly’s dark hair. Jake hoped it would hold. He hadn’t, of course, allowed for the possibility of such an enthusiastic audience when he’d calculated its threshold of pressure.

* * *

“Master of my domain!” Jake euphemised triumphantly during his season four contribution. Kramer was, naturally, the first of the contest’s disqualifications (Molly got quite a laugh out of this as well).

* * *

Blanche came out under the spotlight for another stand-up monologue, and then after that was the last scene of season five’s “The Puffy Shirt.”

* * *

* * *

The summer of George!

* * *

No soup for you!
Everyone was getting tired. Jake worried he’d written too long of a script.

Molly’s temperament also began to wane. But rather than fatigue she suddenly appeared ill: her skin was suddenly pale and getting paler.

And then out of nowhere, heckling: boos, hisses, and eventually full-fledged insults. She got paler and paler and louder and louder, as if she suspected them of having somehow marooned her out of earshot. She yelled—She cursed—She picked them off one by one as the homeostasis of their world began to plunge.

*Get off the stage!*

*Look at yourselves! Seriously. Look at yourselves!*

*This isn’t funny! I mean, this really is not funny at all.*

*What am I watching right now? What are you idiots doing in our living room?*

*Elaine, you bitch you cunt you cooze! You make me sick!*

*Disgusting.*

*You need help, all of you.*

*Is this supposed to cure me? Are you my friends? You hateful morons?*

The players endured the barrage as best they could. But it was taking its toll. Their spirits plummeted. Their lines flatlined. Their hearts sagged.

Then Kramer and Newman were on the front porch waiting for an entrance cue.

“What’s she doing?” the mailman asked.

Jake didn’t have an answer. It wasn’t as if Molly had retreated into her shell—this was
something new. It wasn’t fear mixed with anger. The fear was gone. This was anger pure and simple. Hurt, plain as the approaching afternoon, was tattooed all over Newman’s face. Jake figured he’d reached a point of awareness of the absurdity of the whole thing that he wouldn’t be able to turn back from. Jake didn’t know what to say. He didn’t have an explanation for Molly’s sudden hostility, nor any words of encouragement with which to deflect them.

Then the two of them were onstage: Kramer as arbiter in a classic Jerry versus Newman showdown.

Molly’s insults continued to hurtle forth like fireballs; curiously enough, however, not once did she single out Kramer as her target. Kramer, it seemed, had immunity.

The Golden Girls became disenchanted. They flinched with disappointment. Their betrayed kindness doubled back on their pride with a vengeance.

“What’s she doing?”

“Jake, should we stop?”

“No soup...”

“I don’t know if I can endure another monologue.”

Jake offered no accounting for the rubble their world was becoming. Everything Molly was doing—every boo and hiss—he understood was meant for him and him alone: forsaking all others not because of some fault of their own but rather for the sake of her uncommon devotion to him, to their silly marriage, to a love that by all accounts did not measure up. How dare he allow these outsiders to tamper with what they had together?

All of you should be ashamed of yourselves!

And then as the middle act grinded to its painful conclusion, act the third poised at the helm, Molly’s paleness peaked at a bright white and spread like an ethereal rash over the surface
of her skin; everybody stopped and stared; then she hurtled over the back of the swing and made a beeline for the bedroom. Jake hesitated only for a split second—long enough to sense in the room the outbreak of a sweeping relief that would long precede any worry or concern.

He flashed them his best apology face (which felt a lot like that of a sheepish Kramer) and then he left the five of them alone to decide how quickly they would leave.

Jake pushed open the door: in the darkness of their room, the bathroom light once again pursed through the sliver at his feet and ascended like yellow smoke sputtering from whatever flames had once again ignited on the other side.

He went over and rapped his finger on the door and was greeted with the familiar silence.

“Molly…”

Sounds of restlessness reached them from the other room, followed by a loud snap! and a dull crash: the swing’s chains tearing the mounts loose from the ceiling, hitting the floor—it was the mailman who’d sat down. His curses echoed through the house.

Then a door slammed.
Then another.
Then silence.
Jake didn’t go after them.

He tried the knob and found it unlocked: Molly was cross-legged on the floor in front of the toilet, pallid limbs clinched to the underside of the bowl. And suddenly—perhaps because it was morning—Jake opened his heart and received in one broad stroke the brutal significance of the past two months. It pinned him to his heels. Their lonely secret, nearly fifteen and a quarter years old, had returned.

“Molly,” he said, and trailed off.
And then, without looking up, Molly choked back swards patient sobs and cried out:

“…”

“Never,” he said, and then he felt its lingering truth. “I could never leave you.”

He said it again and again.

“Never,” he repeated. “I will never leave you or fail to love you, Molly. Christ, I could sit on a bathroom floor with you and be in heaven for the rest of my life.”

This is what one says. This is the script, is it not?

Later on, Jake would get up and head out to the living room and dissemble the short-lived world and put their house back together. It would cross his mind to return the toys to the Dollar Store, but ultimately he would stuff them in a garbage bag and toss it into the attic—for one of them to run across years later, after many more worlds had been built in the spaces of their wake. The Jerry-sized TV would find a home in their bedroom, the flatscreen back on its mount. The green futon and the end table would both end up sticking around; also the olive door, beige trim, and off-white walls. Perhaps they would eat Jerry’s cereal and make sandwiches on his cutting board, or find a surprising number of valid coupons pinned to their fridge, the fridge magnets of which might be on their fridge for months and years to come. Van Gogh and Monet would return to the walls, neighbors with Jerry’s bookshelf and computer desk. The downed swing would, after undue procrastination, eventually be scooted out the door and re-hug from the ancient oak whose lasting strength no ceiling could ever match. And Jake and Molly, perhaps, eventually,

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3 But did she mean—“Jake, are you going to leave me? Even after I tell you my decision (to keep the Mexican Rape Baby (MRB))? Even after you’ve thought about it tomorrow and the next day and the next? And even while you’re thinking about it outside while you’re at work and I’m here alone with what I’ve decided—then, Jake, will you leave me?”—perhaps? Would she speak? Could she? And could he love her if she did? Would her words, her every utterance, siphoning through curtains of thick and hot tears, her heart spilling forth and collecting at the root of Jake’s consciousness, come to him and stoke his love for her or merely stamp it out?
would find each other again and again under the fevered shade of its branches. Perhaps they didn’t need any of them—not the Golden Girls, not Jerry, George, Newman, Kramer, Elaine—not friends—and perhaps it would occur to Jake that Molly’s seclusion, her abject and absolute forsaking of all others, constituted the leap of faith that had always been at the core of their persistent bond. It was, perhaps, what Jake had always wanted: to have nothing and nobody in the world but Molly. And now, perhaps, she was giving it to him, now, after Mexico—indeed, because of Mexico—after Jake had sentenced her to death and shrugged at her resurrection, still she was, now, perhaps, giving it to him, still saying nothing and still not looking up as Jake kneeled beside her and gently rested his palm against the drenched back of her nightgown, tracing wide and damp circles around her back, hardly touching her at first and then softly scratching and then still more firmly pressing over the knotted arc of her back, firmer still, leaning into her stooped form with the force of his searching movements, his gentle strength, him feeling it in her breasts, in her muscles: that she would keep it, this child of his shame, and that in return she would expect him to love it with her. And perhaps he could.

“All right,” he said, feeling himself being pulled upward and backward out the door by some force into the darkness of their bedroom and down the hall and over the insanity of the displaced tree swing—the insanity of it!—and through Jerry’s living room to the green futon, where he sat and picked up the phone and dialed (from memory) the offensive coordinator, who answered gruffly and listened gruffly and probably nodded gruffly and stroked his mustache pensively plus wisely plus gruffly, as Jake told him all the details about what his crazy wife was probably going to ask him to do, and then received in turn all the details about the beachless vacation that she was probably going to have to take.

This is what one does, because one does what one can, and one can only do so much.
It was past three in the morning in late January. The windows of the hospital puffed and swilled on square mouthfuls of fog which seemed to insulate the delivery room in a silver billowing parka, obscuring the only snowfall they’d see that year, which was 1989. The room smelled fiercely of bodies and the doctors’ faces shone in the cold humid spaces between.

Sebastian’s mother and the collective imagination of America’s moviegoers were still reeling with anxiety over Dustin Hoffman’s Oscar-winning performance in *Rainman*, which had ultimately influenced her decision to abstain from anesthetics during labor—and also, in the years following Sebastian’s birth, from pursuing pregnancies with hypothetical siblings—because motherhood was her greatest ambition and she would leave no sacrifice unoffered. Having kept herself pediatrically informed, she was ready to protect her child even from the menace of his own blood. Unconditional love was not a passive affair. Neural deficiency—genetic evidence for the hereditary nature of which had grown steadily over the last decade—was undeniably present in both sides of Sebastian’s family—including an autistic cousin, an uncle with cerebral palsy, three alcoholic grandparents, and an aunt to whom the rest of the family simply referred to as “slow”—and furthermore the doctors had made sure to remind her on a regular basis of the “possibilities for non-ideal neurological divergence,” from whose latency her hypothetical pregnancy would surely risk coaxing. Thus her fears often consumed her.

Sebastian’s father by contrast was a man of spry confidence and devastating energy, blind to the limits of his will; willingly, he tolerated his wife’s disquiet in all of its escalating frequency and manifest variety—at times he even encouraged it—because his own childhood had often been a storm—of poverty, of violence, of loneliness—and if he’d learned anything from his deliverance from the former years of his live then it was an intimate knowledge of how to exploit the peculiar
power that becomes available to men who see the world as an anvil and approach it with a hammer. His wife’s weaker constitution only whittled the steel of his soul which, as a father and a husband, he’d invested with all the strength that the three of them would ever need. Gripping his wife’s trembling hand (time slowing, nearing, laughing) he dared his son to brandish every horrible weapon that his tiny life could lift. But by some trick of the mind—a trick unique and common to this civilization of ours—his father also pledged, in this very same turn of thought, never to give up on his son. And then Sebastian entered the world quietly. His newborn eyes, greasy penumbras sheathed in a wax calm, had arrived now, and everything was different now, wasn’t it now? Now: the new silence of being and the bodily suddenness of mother- and fatherhood looming over this fitful but silent gaze and the spontaneous body poised in uncanny silence to address its rapt audience:

He wouldn’t disagree that it was a very interesting place, probably, although it didn’t appear to be anything to write home about; however, he was prepared to concede, perhaps, that something important had eluded him thus far. Because thus far, this one or that one, or both ones, had a secret, did they not. About him or me, something in me more than me, did they not. Thus far, this one or that one, did they not, thus far, thus far, thus far.
The Widow’s Mother

“I woke up with the pillow over my face. That ever happen to you? For a sec I thought I was blind.”

Therese looked up from 5-across. It was her daughter Connie: robe open, eye-wiping, glaring sidelong at the coffee pot.

“So that’s why I came downstairs,” Connie said. “Yeah, that’s why I came down.”

Therese took down a second mug and filled it for her daughter. Then she went back to the breakfast nook and filled in 5-across: Kinetoscope.

It was just after dawn and the fog was coming in off the lake. The sun hacked through the grayness and spotlighted the ducks as they squeezed one by one through the back fence where slats were missing.

Connie sat under the window and watched her mother.

“I didn’t get the crossword gene,” Connie said.

“You’re probably better off,” said her mother as she filled in 19-down: Fallujah. She tapped her eraser like a gavel.

The mini-chandelier hung low, its little bulbs almost touching the salt and pepper shakers. The ceramic turkey held the napkins.

“Breakfast?” Therese asked. “These days I usually just have toast with butter. Sometimes with honey. Sometimes, sometimes, sometimes with some honey.”

“Not just now,” Connie said.

Like her daughter, Therese had aged softly. She’d retained, according to her doctor, the luster of her regal hair and the non-negotiability of her resplendent complexion. His
compliments reminded her of the suitors she’d had all through her marriage—those poor men who were not Jack and never could be. Jack used to say: “You’re so beautiful, it’s funny!”

Therese reached under the table and returned with a plastic Tom Thumb bag. She set it next to the ceramic turkey.

“Since you’re up, you get to see my portable pharmacy,” she said.

Therese lined up the bottles. She also had a tube with seven compartments, one for each day of the week. She opened the compartments and put on her glasses.

“A real mobile drugstore I am these days. I am, I am, I certainly am,” Therese said.

“What are you taking?” Connie asked.

“Blood pressure, thyroid, cholesterol, something for my veins, not sure what this does, vitamins, this one relaxes my kidneys so I pee all right (or some such thing), heart medicine, cold medicine (I have a bit of a cold, mostly my nose won’t stop running). Not sure what this one does.” She shrugged and swallowed. Some of the bottles she didn’t read.

Then the second pot was ready and Therese filled their mugs while Connie tied her robe and pulled her hair back. Connie had blonde hair. She was forty-seven, but she’d always looked fifteen years younger. She used to have freckles, tiny beige ones, but most of them had disappeared.

“You always liked coffee,” Connie said. “You and dad were always having coffee. You drank coffee and watched me get on the school bus.”

“It was your dad who got me into coffee,” said Therese. “Never drank it before I met Jack.”

She finished restocking the compartments and snapped them shut. Then she swallowed a row of pills with her coffee and returned the bag under the table.
“I had my first cup with dad,” Connie said. “I was in my room. Studying for the S.A.T or something. Anyway it was some test. I remember not feeling good about it. I was nervous probably. I always did get nervous over little things,” she said. “Always.”

“The S.A.T. isn’t a little thing, is it? Not really little. Not like making your bed in the morning,” Therese said.

“That’s what I thought. That’s what I used to think, anyway,” said Connie.

“It’s hard not to,” Therese said.

“Not really, though. I mean, you see what I’m saying?”

“Me, I never took the S.A.T. We probably pushed you a little hard. Jack did want a lot for you. He always did.”

“Anyway, dad comes in with a full pot and he sits down cross-legged on the floor. I was doing practice exams. He sat with me for a while. It must have been hours now that I think about it. Anyway, we talked awhile. I calmed down.”

“You scored well, too. If my memory’s working today,” said Therese.

“I did all right,” Connie said. “But it doesn’t mean anything. Not really.”

“It means you went to college and it means you got to be a teacher, and now it means you mean a lot to a lot of little kids. Is what it means,” said Therese.

“That’s not what I’m saying though. I didn’t mean that.”

“Speaking of school,” said Therese. She looked up over the rims of her glasses and then she swallowed some coffee and looked down again. “What are they saying about the fall?”

One of the mini-chandelier’s bulbs went out. It flickered and burned out then and a part of the table was darker. 54-across: *Serendipity*.

Connie didn’t say anything.
“I guess they’ll be wanting you back,” Therese said.

“Probably. They’ll probably be calling soon,” Connie said.

Therese folded the paper in half. It was the Sunday puzzle.

“It’s all been so easy for you,” Connie said. “For everything, I mean.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Therese said.

“Even that, what you just said. The way you said it made it sound easy to say,” Connie said.

“Join me for pot numero three?” Therese said, moving to the kitchen. “Tres, Trois, Trio, oh me oh my-o…”

“Mom, I’m not talking about coffee anymore.”

“Well I was only asking, dear.”

“All right.”

“Anyway this one’s probably my last,” Therese said.

“Yes mom I will join you. For one more,” Connie said. “Cup, I mean.”

The fog had begun to lift. The sunlight was coming through the window and falling on Connie’s hair. There were more ducks in the yard now.

“Tell me something about dad,” Connie said.

”What do you want to know?” her mother asked.

“Something new. Something I couldn’t have known growing up. You know what I mean.”

“I’ve told you the honeymoon story. I know I’ve told you that story,” said her mother.

“That’s not what I mean. That’s a nice story. They’re all funny and nice. That was the way with you two.”
“Well, that’s simple: We were very much in love and it was very nice. Connie, honey…”

“Christ Mom, that’s a hell of a tone.”

“All right, you’re right, I’m sorry.”

“I mean, what a tone that was!”

Therese nodded and apologized again and then pretended to do the word scramble. Her daughter’s face was red but not from anger. It was something else. Then Connie got quiet and didn’t say anything for a long time.

Therese knew what Connie wanted. She wanted to hear her mother talk about her father. She wanted to know—was it okay to move on? Therese felt something come alive in her heart. Then she pushed it back down.

After a while Connie started talking about William.

“When it finally happened,” Connie said, “It was like I’d watched my husband die a thousand times already.”

Therese dropped her pencil. It hit the turkey and rolled off the table.

“I swear I thought it was going to last forever,” Connie went on. “I swear to God I thought it would. One day he’d feel cured, and the next day it would get even worse. Sometimes he’d sit up in bed and say: ‘Look, this is it! I can feel it!’”

After her husband’s funeral, Connie had gone upstairs to her old room—just like she would have forty years ago after a bad day at school, and just like she’d done twenty years ago after Jack died—but this time she stayed upstairs, in bed, for three months.

“And his whole family was there,” Connie said. “Mom, dad, and brothers. I guess that’s another thing about going so early. Everybody gets to see you off. His parents watched him die. What if that was you and I was in there? What do you think that would be like?”
Therese dropped her daughter’s hand. Connie’s eyes were wide, like she really wanted an answer. It was the kind of question Jack had always answered for the both of them.

“One night, he sat up and asked me if I would slit my wrists—right there in the hospital bathroom—so he could take me with him. He was delirious, sure, but can you imagine? I mean, can you imagine hearing that?”

Therese took her daughter’s hand. She tickled her palm in soft little slow strokes with one finger, the way she’d used to. Connie had hated bedtime stories but she’d liked her palms tickled.

“The next morning I went down for breakfast. Jack said he was feeling a lot better. He didn’t remember much from the night before—he usually didn’t—and as I was leaving he told me not to pay attention to the nurses. He figured they were the reason I was upset. It was a good guess, though. I swear, they must not be paying those nurses enough, or something, because every one of them walked around with a permanent scowl. Like they were praying for their patients to hurry up and die already. Like that’s the sort of thing the nurses were into—watching people die.”

The sunlight was lancing through the glass and folding over Connie’s hair, the Times, and the table covered in faded crayon: tic-tac-toe, hangman, stick figures, mommy and daddy, rainbows, smiley faces, hearts.

“The food wasn’t as bad you’d think,” Connie went on. “But by the time I got down there, my appetite was gone. I knew I’d get sick later, but there wasn’t much I could do about it. That happened a lot—the not-eating and the nausea.”

Therese nodded.

“The stack of trays was always higher than I could reach, so I had to get one of the
servers to reach one for me. And that’s another thing, Mom, how awful it must be to work in a hospital cafeteria. Eight hours of nothing but sad people…”

Therese finished her coffee. She took a napkin from the turkey and she wiped nothing off her mouth and nothing off her hands.

Connie took a deep breath and kept going.

“That morning, there was a guy standing in the empty line by himself. He was in a track suit like something Tony Soprano would wear, and most of his hair was gone and he was fatter than he needed to be. But you could tell he didn’t care about all that. You could tell by the way he was standing and staring at the Jell-O. It was green Jell-O, I remember that—the kind with little sprinkles on the inside.”

Therese tried to remember if she’d eaten the Jell-O. Her mug drooped a little and hung by two fingers as she scratched Connie’s back and listened about the Jell-O.

“And then I went over and stood beside him. Which, you know, isn’t something I would normally do.”

Something had happened to her voice, but she didn’t let it matter.

“The way the both of us—me and Tony and the jello—just kind of checked out, said goodbye, left the hospital behind, I don’t know, I can’t explain it. It’s like we vanished for a minute. I don’t know how long we stood there for. It must have been half an hour. It’s hard to say, because, literally, I wasn’t even really standing there anymore. You know?”

Therese nodded again. Then she blinked and kept her eyes closed and kept nodding.

“I haven’t told you the worst part. Mom?”

Therese opened her eyes. The mug left her fingers and hit the cushion and wobbled and then stood upright.
“The last day snuck up on us. We’d known it was coming the whole time, but somehow, it still didn’t seem real. Christ, I can’t explain—”

And then Therese interrupted her:

“You don’t have to tell me if you’re not ready. Connie, honey, how could you be ready?”

“No,” Connie said. “It’s all right.”

Connie wasn’t crying and Therese knew it was because William had told her not to. He was always telling her not to cry.

“But Connie,” her mother said, “If you’re not ready—”

But Connie went on:

“The last day, I mean, it was like something really awful had been going on for a long time and then suddenly something worse happened, so much worse, and it just makes you feel so stupid, deep in the pit of your stomach.”

Therese felt it in her stomach and she closed her eyes again and nodded.

The she said:

“Connie, please, you don’t have to tell me if you’re not ready. After all, how could you be ready?”

“No,” Connie said. “I can. Really, I can. Mom, can’t I?”

“Don’t, honey, not if you don’t want to.”

Connie got quiet again. Therese held her daughter’s shoulder with one hand and gripped the table with the other. Then Connie kept on.

“The whole time—the whole time he was dying—all I could think about was his parents. About how he kept holding hands with them, and talking to them, and looking at them—instead
of me! That’s just sick, isn’t it? Mom? He’s dying and all I can think about is how I’m feeling? How I’m not getting enough attention?”

“No…” was all Therese could say.

“It was just one of those days, Mom, you know? Just one of those goddamn days when all you want in the world is to be looked at by him. But he’s over there dying, and I’m over here—me, his wife…”

Connie leaned in. “That’s just sick, isn’t it? Mom? I must be sick to think that way.”

Therese prolonged the hug. Connie’s arms felt strong and almost emptied of grief, filling with something else.

“No, Connie, honey, nothing you could ever do—”

Therese thought of something else to say, but then it was gone. So she said:

“You can cry, Connie. You can cry if you want to.”

“I don’t think I will,” Connie said. “Not just now.”

“But you can,” said her mother. “You can cry. It’s all right to cry if you want to.”

Then it got quiet again.

“I love you,” Connie said.

Therese was silent.

“Mom?”

“I love you too, Connie.”

Then it was quiet again and Therese felt her daughter’s muscles go limp and then suddenly her daughter was standing in the kitchen with a loaf of bread in each hand.

“Shall we feed these poor starving ducks?”

The fog was halfway up the hill and the dew was shining the way it always did. The tire
swing had survived another night wet with sparkles. Something Therese did—something she’d never tell a soul—was sit in the swing when it was soaking wet—because it was wet—and she would swing back and forth letting the wetness soak through to her skin. She would never tell anyone she sometimes did things like that.

Therese followed her daughter through the yard, tearing off crumbs as the ducks turned and came back through the fog. They circled mother and daughter like big feather pillows, flapping and circling with orange bills open wide underneath the handfuls of flying breadcrumbs. Soon they were surrounded by the rioting ducks from one end of the yard to the other. Connie was dancing now, dragging her open robe through the grass as she twirled through the clouds of feathers.

Then the fog had receded three quarters of the way up the hill. At the three quarter-mark it was still good and thick and dark. Every night it came and every morning it retreated back to the lake, never stopping anywhere for too long, which was how it was with fog and also with people.

When the bread was gone, Connie said:

“I do believe I could use some breakfast! Mom?”

“Yes,” Therese said. “Good idea.” Then she said, “Wait. Connie, wait a minute.”

Connie waited.

“I want to tell you about how your father bought us this house,” Therese said, and then she realized that, yes, she did want to tell it.

“Wasn’t it a surprise from Grandad?”

Therese chuckled. “That’s what we told everyone, sure,” she said.

“What does that mean?”
“It means, honey, that your father was a closet gambler,” said Therese, forcing a grin. “A really bad one too! Almost put us in the poor house, in fact. What with his horse races and his blackjack and everything else… Sometimes, honey, I would get so mad at him, you have no idea! My god, you just have no idea!”

Therese was laughing now.

“But he got lucky,” she went on. “Really lucky this one time. It was a horse. You wouldn’t believe how lucky! Can you imagine? He could have ruined us but instead he bought us this house! That’s the way it was with Jack, sometimes. Sometimes, sometimes, sometimes it was…”

When Therese was finished, Connie came over and touched her arm and they looked at each other for a while, and then Connie smiled and kissed her mother on the cheek. Then she went inside and Therese set off on her morning walk to the lake. Therese would stay at the lake while Connie scrambled the eggs. After a while she’d come down and glare sidelong at the breakfast until Connie got up and filled her plate. Then they would eat.

The ducks followed Therese up the hill and then vanished beneath her. She listened for each of their tiny splashes as they kicked through the heart of the fog.

The old rowboat was tethered to its post, shrouded by the fog, an invisible sound lapping the waves. When the fog pulled away, there it was: a bucket of cobwebs, damp splinters, rotten wood and memories, a crumbling tub bobbing on thick layers of algae, tapping the bank, testing its reach.

As the fog collapsed toward the middle of the pond, vanishing whisp by whisp, slowly uncovering a white mass of huddled feathers, then leaving them behind, yielding to the sun, to life, to the day, Therese knelt down and hugged herself because the light and the warmth was
making her shiver. The dock was hard on her knees. She tugged on the rope, squeezed its coarse frays, and closed her eyes.

Then she opened her eyes and got down in the boat, and then she closed them again.

First she apologized about the gambling story. It was a silly thing to say, but of course Jack understood why she’d made it up. Jack understood even if Therese didn’t.

Then she got quiet for a while.

The mist was cool on her skin. What a lovely morning, she thought, for a boat ride.

Then she said:

“I would have done it, Jack. You know I would have done anything for you.”

Then the breeze picked up and gave the boat a gentle nudge and Therese steadied herself with both hands on the bow.

“I swear, Jack,” she said. “All you had to do was ask. I mean it. I’m dead serious, Jack. I’ll do it right now if you just ask me to. Connie wouldn’t but I swear to you I surely, surely would.”

She opened her eyes, looked skyward.

“Please, Jack,” she said. “Just ask me.”

And here’s what Jack said.
Everything You’d Hoped It Would Be

She pushed her feet against the ground. Crossed her legs underneath her. Floated. Back and forth: watching a spider come in and out of focus. The porch swing: old, gray, loud, perfect. Daddy bringing the tractor. The sun almost gone. Pinks and reds and oranges on the horizon, coming straight from God.

Her brother and grandfather inside the house. Drinking their bathtub brew. It was the first time her brother had been old enough to help with the bailing: drink-deserving. Her brother was proud. All day, his fluorescent face.

Her grandmother passed away two weeks ago. (Services at Bedias First Baptist.) The whole town, barely a map-dot, came to say goodbye. After the services her grandfather invited them for juice and cookies. They all came.

Across the bail-scattered field was her grandfather’s place where he now lived alone. A battered place: sunken, musty, wrinkled, warm. She remembered her grandmother: tender, strong, paper hands, hugging strangers like it was a normal thing to do. Loved, missed, perfect for heaven.

She remembered others who lived on their road: mostly cousins, some unrelated, mostly gone now. They used to play together until Daddy yelled from the other side of the world, “Carlysle! Supper!” And she would sprint across the dirt road, up their mud-prone driveway, past the porch swing where she now sat remembering and into the house where something smelled wonderful.

But something happened to each of them. Some moved away to look for something they didn’t know existed, some died, some weren’t speaking to each other. For one reason or another, ties were broken. Love forgotten, past eroded. All too delicate not to be eaten away.
She especially remembered Joseph’s: Clay and Kristen. They used to live with their mother and daddy not three hundred yards away. They would run through the hayfields catching fireflies in glass jars. Power-efficient nightlights. Then one day Joseph’s horse that he’d raised and loved for years decided to kick Joseph in the back of the neck for no reason, and after that he wasn’t the same. Even Carlysle knew. There was something about the new blankness in his face, which she figured had something to do with why he let their baby drown in a pig trough (a cradle, she thought, of slop) and also why his wife left him and took Clay and Kristen without saying goodbye. No one talked about these things.

Now Carlysle was leaving and lately she’d been thinking about the changes more than ever. They tickled her insides when she thought about them. James told her it was nostalgia and then he made her look that word up in the dictionary. She couldn’t understand why he wouldn’t just tell her what it meant. But he was a nice boy and when she consulted the dictionary and found that she was feeling “a wistful desire to return in thought or in fact to a former time in [her] life,” she knew she was in love with him because that is exactly what she felt.

She met him two summers ago when he was staying at his grandparents’ ranch. They worked together at the diner, serving country fried steak to farmers, and since they’d fallen in love he helped her with college applications and financial aid forms and other things she’d heard about.

The dusk breeze played with her skin. Rocking, thinking, remembering: she was first drawn to the way his sandy hair fell in front of his warm green eyes that had seen more of the world than hers. He was from the city: three hours by truck, visited by Carlysle out of necessity or with her family for Daddy’s annual birthday trip (Bass Pro Shop). Daddy had warned her about boys like James who were amused by girls like her. But for two years James had been kind
to her. Kind and tender even after the excitement of something new had passed. He told her stories about the places he’d been and the ideas he had which contradicted everything she thought she knew about the world. She always wanted to hear the stories after they made love: him starting to talk before he’d caught his breath (she loved his voice when he was panting), her with closed eyes and pounding heart lying face up in his truck or the cabin that was tucked away in the woods behind her grandparents’ house, the sweat from their bodies mingling, lungs heaving, immersed in the heavy dampness of east Texas humidity.

James read her poetry and though she couldn’t hope to understand the words, their essence came through in the softness of his voice. He even wrote original poetry for her. When she was alone she’d sit on her bed under the lamplight and pour over his words until her eyes were red and stinging. Then the tears: frustrated, biting tears that squeezed themselves from her ducts as salty evidence of the fact that she wasn’t smart enough for him. When the catharsis passed the resignation set in. She would fight against it with every ounce of stubbornness she had, but it always led to sleep. Moist, disingenuous sleep. Her mother would find her passed out before the sun was all the way gone: snoring under the yellow light with a book or loose paper resting on her stomach. She put the reading material on the floor and spread the comforter over Carlyse’s clothed body. Then she turned off the lamp and poured tea (which she and her daughter had made together every night since Carlyse was six) and she prayed alone in the living room: sipping, watching the retreating sun, listening in the dark for any sound that came from the bedroom down the short hall where her daughter’s head churned through a collage of faraway sights and sounds, sometimes talking in her sleep—unintelligible groans, wheezes, murmurs, all of which fueled her mother’s worry.

In the morning Carlyse woke up energized and freshly optimistic. As the days passed she
carried around with her an arsenal of daydreams: images that showed her a life far removed from the diner and its gasoline fumes and the mildewy aroma of perspiring laborers whose orders she took with a smile while speaking gently to them in her lyrical, antebellum accent that made their stomachs churn with desire. She imagined herself putting away the familiar timecard forever and forgetting about her unkind manager whose gaping nose exhibited dangerous-looking bushes of gray hair from both nostrils. And maybe she would never again make tea with her mother, though now she hardly ever stayed awake long enough. And maybe she would never again rock herself on the porch swing, watching the men and boys work in the pastures and feeling the light wind toss her wavy auburn hair where it pleased, all the while rocking and watching and thinking and remembering.

Daddy had always wanted her to keep in mind that leaving for school was a choice, not an obligation. He wasn’t afraid to be frank with her about the money she didn’t have. “But he doesn’t know about financial aid,” James told her, and it was true, her daddy didn’t know about it. James even convinced her to explain it to them, but it only caused confusion. Skepticism.

“I just don’t want my baby getting into anything she can’t get out of.”

“Don’t worry, daddy. James knows. He knows what he’s doing.”

And she was certain that he did know. She trusted James deep in her gut and when she thought about that trust and what it meant to her, she wanted to cry for joy. To show it off to the world: the one thing she had that everyone wanted. It was the same pride her brother felt about being able to work and drink, being able to spend his energy and sweat and blood in the same arena as the grown-ups. And Carlyle knew this feeling well: the unannounced, feverish tingling in her core that vouched for the legitimacy of her being. And she was unwavering in her certainty
that James would take perfect care of her in the new world, the new existence that she was chomping at the bit to explore.

Then the day came.

Everyone was busy: Daddy with work, Mother with tomatoes, brother with fishing. She would have to go alone. To leave, to move, to see the dorm, the school, her new home, alone.

But James was meeting her there. He said he’d make sure he was there before she was. Making sure I do everything right, she thought. Mother and Daddy didn’t need to be there. James was enough. More than enough: *Better.*

She wasn’t worried as she climbed down from the Chevy Daddy had loaned her. The concrete of the campus parking lot was hard on her soles. The crowds: students walking briskly, paying her no attention, parents moving furniture and computers, expensive cars racing in and out of the lot as though stalked by a stopwatch. She felt like she was moving in slow motion: walking to the back of the truck, folding the tailgate down, hearing the rusty squeal of its cringing hinges, lugging her only suitcase across the bed, plopping it down beside her, closing the tailgate, wondering what next.

A black Mercedes screeched to a halt next to her. Simultaneous with the grinding of its gears into park, its two front doors flung open: father and daughter. The father motioned, frowning, to an attendant standing at the entrance of the dorm. A loading cart wheeled toward them.

The attendant in pressed khakis and a school-colored polo piled the girl’s things onto the cart. The father lit a cigarette, glanced down at his silver wristwatch, leaned against the car, crossed his arms, smoked. No one spoke. Carlyslie watched a computer appear from the trunk, still in its box, a colorful logo on the side. She giggled, remembering that she hadn’t known how
to use email until James showed her. She saw in her head the exasperated look that had crept onto his face as he explained it over and over again. At the time she’d thought she was being cute and that somehow her playful ignorance was making her more desirable. Maybe she was wrong; maybe she was just stupid.

She wondered if she could blend into the crowd and follow random people to where she needed to be. She thought about asking someone for help, or at least for a finger pointed in the right direction, but she changed her mind as she scanned faces, hostile faces, determined, in a hurry, educated, intelligent. *Everything is all right: just wait for James: any minute now: or maybe I should wave to one of the attendants: it looked easy enough to do.*

She climbed back into the truck. Her brain felt washed away, drowned in doubt, asphyxiated by the unknown.

This wasn’t what she’d dreamt of. It wasn’t like the poems. Not like the images they burned into her unconscious: exotic novelty, exploration, bliss. This wasn’t it; this was not James’s soft words; this was his confusing ones, the ones that made her eyes hurt and the ones that made her fall asleep before the sun was down and the ones that made her miss evening tea and feel the most intense bouts of her *nostalgia.*

A cold sweat. Wiping her hands. Looking out unwashed windows at people who knew what they were doing because they knew that they belonged here which was something they knew because they could smell her fear and by knowing her fear they could know themselves.

Looking down at rickety fingers unstable under lopsided nails—*I should have painted them, I should have painted them the school colors, for people to see and think how pretty and know how much time and effort she’d spent making them pretty and then they would know that she belonged, me*—and wobbly hands lamenting the ugliness of her fingernails, beginning to
think again about home: Mother’s face in the kitchen and the hot steam of a potato soup cycloning around her features and her short black hair in curls crowning a smile which reappeared later with everyone at the table as she anticipated Daddy’s first hungry bite (the taste warming his fatigue) her smile widening and shining as Daddy remarked quietly and humbly that it was delicious; her brother tall and awkward in his young body and the great simple joy it used to bring him when they were little and she let him find her in hide and seek without making it too easy for him; her grandmother standing next to the Lord watching, hoping, sending invisible streams of immortal love to her only granddaughter; Clay and Kristen, somewhere far from the home she used to share with them and she wondered if they cried when they thought about it and when they thought about their old home and their old father and the baby brother they’d almost gotten and whether or not they’d had to forget all of it because it was the kind of thing that was so painful it made you crazy.

She turned the key in the ignition. Hearing, loathing, loving the wails of the old reluctant engine, her thoughts turning to James, wherever he was, maybe on the other side of the parking lot looking for her, maybe not, it didn’t matter, and thinking of him in a way she never had: ambivalently, quietly, without the violent stirs of passion in her belly, without the soft, whispered words of his lyrics, without the love that killed her in the evening and renewed her in the morning, without anything but coincidental recognition.

Pulling away from campus, watching clumps of metallic buildings recede in her rear view mirrors where objects are closer than they appear, a single thought emerged above all: a thought that dwarfed all others, a thought possessing a truth that she felt was the only thing in life she could absolutely trust: Daddy would be overjoyed to see her. At about this time, the father in the parking lot was in the process of stubbing out his cigarette. When he happened to look up.
Just in time to glimpse the face of the girl in the Chevy: blank and steadfast, lost and heartbroken, tear-stained and beautiful. Then the Chevy turned and disappeared. The man’s heart cried out for her, and suddenly he found himself gripping his chest with both hands, keeling over. It burned and burned and then he said to his heart: “Be Quiet.”
Guys Like Us:

A Parable

John and I are moral beacons for our class. On the field, off the field, in the hall, in the classroom, on weekends. That’s according to Coach. We think moral authorities sounds better. Anyway it means the same thing.

Our fathers are the head chairmen of the N.W.C. (Neighborhood Watch Committee). It meets Wednesday nights after church, before dinner. Last week the meeting ran late. A family had moved into the pink house—the one that looks like the Alamo—two blocks down from mine—three blocks from John’s. These people weren’t Christians and everybody knew it. Their kids smoked pot and didn’t play sports, you know, the whole bit. And break-ins had started.

Our fathers went over to the pink Alamo house with nice smiles and nice pamphlets and they got the door slammed in their faces. There’s only so much you can do for these sorts of people. So the night after the door-slamming, John and I went around to a bunch of houses that were on the market and gathered up a bunch of realtor’s signs and stuck them all in the pink Alamo’s yard. A few mornings later there was a moving van in front of it.

John and I both lettered our freshman year. We were the only ones. Now it’s senior year and our jackets still look brand new. It’s important to take care of these things. We’ve been co-captains since our junior year and we’ve got more patches on our letter jackets than anyone else in the county. How do I know that? I’ve been to the other schools; I’ve walked their hallways, stood on their fields at dawn when no one else was around. It’s important to do these things. It’s important to see the other half, to see what they see.

A hallway lined with trophy cases leads from the locker rooms to the cafeteria. John and I are responsible for some of the trophies but most of them have been there since before we were
born. Leadership Council (L.C.) meets after practice and when it’s over John and I walk to the cafeteria and ride home together with our girlfriends. Usually we have a lot on our minds after L.C., so we take our time walking and we look at the trophies and the plaques and all the names and pictures of the young men who are now old men and we talk ourselves through things. There must be ice in the ceilings in that hallway because the air from the vents is sharp and freezing against our sweat but that’s not why we get goose bumps standing in front of our reflections in the glass cases.

* * *

Sophomore year Adam and I got elected to the Leadership Council (L.C.). Spots are usually reserved for juniors and seniors but Coach said an exception was warranted. He took us into his office and read us the Pledge and then we signed it. That was a Monday.

Now Adam and I are L.C. presidents. Three weeks ago we had an issue with a linebacker named Julius. His grades were slipping because he’d been drinking beer every weekend with the third-stringers. Most of the third-stringers skip class and smoke cigarettes in the parking lot and wear their pants down around their knees. It’s pathetic and it’s not the kind of image you want representing your team and your school. Especially a good school like ours. So Coach thought it would be best if Adam and I tried talking to Julius before real action had to be taken.

It didn’t work. He just got angry, and we had to bench him for a game. It was the right thing to do. It’s important to know right from wrong.

The next day, Julius quit the team. He didn’t even come talk to us first.

“Just let him go,” Coach said, “There’s nothing more we can do for him.

And Coach must have been right, too, because the day after that, a Wednesday, we saw
him walking to class wearing jeans with giant holes in them that looked like spider webs and a
dirty collarless shirt with some black rapper with gold teeth on the front of it.

We’d always considered Julius our friend, you know, even though he didn’t come from
the same place as us. He used to keep to himself a lot in elementary school and junior high but
we just figured it was because he never got to know his father all that well or whatever and so he
was self-conscious about his family situation. It’s an understandable thing. But understanding
can only get you so far.

Last Friday was the first district game and Julius didn’t call Adam or me or anyone else
to wish us luck. We’d all been playing sports together since before we could read or write, so
naturally it hurt our feelings that Julius would turn his back on us. But we won without him.

Adam and I wear our letter jackets every day. Even in the summer when clothes stick to
your skin like Velcro. Once every two weeks I take mine to the cleaners. I drop it off on
Saturdays after weightlifting and pick it up on Mondays after practice. Today was one of those
Mondays. I always feel naked without it.

* * *

John and I were upset about Julius but we didn’t let it distract us from our duties. “Keep
your head down and your ass in the air,” my dad always says. He was an offensive lineman.
“The periphery is irrelevant.”

Today in L.C., the coaches talked about a report they saw on the news last night about the
statewide increase in high school drug use. I’d seen the report myself but I took it with a grain of
salt, since it’s mostly the black schools in Houston you have to worry about.

“It’s nothing,” we told the coaches. “The only contact we have with them is when we’re
beating them on the field.”
The inner city districts never turn out decent teams. It’s sad, really, what they do to themselves.

After L.C. we headed to the cafeteria. John didn’t want to stay long because he had to pick up his jacket from the cleaners but he knew there were things we needed to talk about. We stopped for a bit in front of the team pictures from thirty years ago.

“I bet it was easier back then,” John said.

“How so?” I asked.

“Easier for guys like us,” he said.

“What’s changed?” I wanted to know.

“Lots of things, I guess. No rappers. Less drugs.”

“Christ, I hate rap.”

“I bet Julius listens to rap now.”

“I bet you’re right.”

I looked at our reflections in the glass, then the pictures, then back at our reflections. The faces in the pictures looked older than ours even though they were the same age as us. But I knew my eyes were playing tricks on me. Kids grow up faster nowadays.

* * *

Cheerleading practice wasn’t out yet, so Adam and I had to wait around for the girls. They knew I was in a hurry. And besides, why would cheerleading practice take longer than football practice?

The cafeteria was empty except for the dancing girls and baton twirlers on the far side under the big windows. Several of Julius’s new friends were sitting around a table close to the
hallway—the ones whose parents forgot to pick them up and the ones who missed the bus on purpose because they were afraid to go home.

They’re a funny little bunch if you think about it. They were slumped so far down in their chairs that a small breeze from the vents would have sent them sliding onto the floor. None of their clothes were pressed or even clean. The ones who wore flip-flops had feet so caked in mud you’d think walking through a car wash at a gas station wouldn’t do any good. One was pounding out a “beat” on the table with his knuckles and his palm and a pencil. Two others had headphones on. Occasionally they’d pass them around the table so the other guys could hear.

I didn’t even recognize Julius until he was passed the headphones. But sure enough there he was, looking awful like he’d just survived the Great Depression.

I nudged Adam and we walked over to the adjacent table. Julius didn’t see us until we sat down. He didn’t want us to know he’d seen us. But then we made eye contact. He was the first to look away.

Adam pulled out the Playbook, and we pretended to go over our assignments. I’m the quarterback—I don’t know if I mentioned that—and Adam’s my primary receiver. It’s a beautiful thing when we’re on the same page. If I don’t miss, Adam doesn’t drop. It used to be a beautiful thing to watch Julius read guards, too. Running backs were afraid of our defense because of him. It’s really too bad.

Cheerleading practice let out and the girls filed out of the gym in skirts with their tanned legs that made us squirm in our seats. We pretended not to notice but Julius knew we’d noticed because he’d noticed too. He knew how hard it was not to stare. In the old days he would have looked down at the table and fought the urge right along with us. But not anymore. Shame must have gone out the window with pride and discipline. He stared. He gawked. The fucking guy
was drooling for Christ’s sake. And he made sure we saw him. We made eye contact again and this time he held it, testing me, wanting me to see every last thought in his filthy head.

* * *

I could tell Julius was really getting under John’s skin.

Our girlfriends (hands-down the prettiest of the whole bunch) were standing in a group over by the coke machines, just loitering and talking about God knows what. Normally if he was in a hurry he’d cut their conversation short and we’d be on the road by now.

It was Julius’s turn with the headphones. He bobbed his head to the gibberish, not once taking his eyes off the girls and the skirts and the legs. And then—still bobbing his head like a rhythmic pigeon—he looked at John and John looked at him and they held each other there.

I stuck my hands in my pockets and waited. I could feel violence in the air, restless in the spaces between us, looking for a home.

When Julius finally did look away, he did it with a tiny smirk—it was so tiny that now I can’t be sure it had been there. Then here’s what Julius did next, believe it or not—he cleared his throat, gargled a little, and then spit on the floor—right there on the linoleum in front of God and everybody.

At the time I wasn’t sure what would happen. Now of course I understand that John and I had to do what needed to be done, and that the next moments were inevitable, like history had made sure of them before we’d gotten there, because it’s a certainty—I mean, it’s our destiny—that if we catch anyone—not only Julius, but anyone—disrespecting our school like that, then we have to stand up for what’s right and good, no matter the circumstances.

It’s important to remember these things. To look back at the past and learn from it.
Sometimes the past happens so fast that it’s impossible to think about it until after the dust settles and the blood soaks in.

John said:

“You spit on your mother’s floor, too?”

It was the first thing he’d said to Julius since he quit the team. Julius didn’t hear him—that god-awful noise in his ears was so loud it echoed across the cafeteria. But then one of his friends nudged him and he took off the headphones.

“I said,” John said, “Do you spit on your mother’s floor, too?”

“I spit where I spit. Thas all anybody need to know.”

He put the headphones back on and he cleared his throat again—louder this time—all the while keeping John in the corner of his eye.

John said:

“Sorry, I forgot. Whores don’t raise gentlemen. Silly me.”

This time I guess Julius heard him. His friends buzzed and cackled and suddenly none of them were slouching. They bounced around the table like rabid vultures, screeching insults in a slurred and butchered derivation of English that John and I, of course, couldn’t understand a word of.

Julius got up and with measured softness he placed the headphones on the table.

“One more time, John. One more time lemme hear that shit you just said.”

John said:

“Your mother’s a whore, Julius.”
* * *

You always let the first one slide, boy. That first one’s when you just turn that cheek, you heard? Pops aint never said much that’d really be worth a good goddamn to anybody, at least not as long as I knowed him, but I think that there in italics does mean something. I guess it’s one of them last things he gave me, you know, like here’s some shit you can live by, before he up and bolted. That was a Wednesday some years back. I don’t really want to forget him but I don’t wanna remember him neither. A real fuckin Catch-22 I guess. That’s right. I know what the fuck that means. Fuckin Yossarian.

I’d turned the music down a little bit already. I figured John was about to say some real shit and I was right, too, but I didn’t know how real it was gonna be until after he said it and so when I heard him I had to make him say it again. I knew he’d say it again. I wanted him to.

His girl was wandering over our way by this time. I made sure she was watching before I hit him.

I got lucky—I connected with his mouth and his nose at the same time like I needed to. Sonofabitch buckled just like Goliath. My brain was on autopilot at that point, right, like it used to be in football, like I had a nose for where the violence needed to be. And I smelled it right then and I knew Adam was coming for his buddy’s back. I guess he thought I’d go for John while he was down, see, but that aint what I do, even though some people might tell you otherwise. And so then I seen in his face that he knew he aint had the element of surprise he thought he did—that’s how I knew I was in good shape.

The hit I gave him was more off target than the one I gave John, but it still did the trick and I’m sure he’ll have some nice purple action when he wakes up in the morning. He toppled back against the table—all the tables have wheels, see, so it skated away—and he landed on his
ass right next to John, who was now on his knees and just about ready to go again. The girls were all whoopin and hollerin like they do, but I aint never let shit like that throw me off. I was ready when John lunged up from his knees and I sent him right back down again.

I don’t know what got into me after that, but I walked over to Adam (he was still holding his eye in his palm like a little bitch) and I took his jacket right off his body. At first it looked like the devil himself had jumped into his head what with the way he tried to stop me, his arms and legs flying out all over the place, but even the devil can’t do nothing if you slap him around enough times. I aint never met the devil but I’m inclined to agree with Pops—the devil can’t take a beating any better than anybody else—and so after Adam was spent and John wasn’t moving much neither, I took that ugly green and gold jacket with all its awful patches and I dropped it in one of those big gray garbage cans where it belongs.

Now you’re wondering where all the teachers been through all this. Don’t you worry though. You don’t kick the shit out of Mr. and Mrs. All-America and get away with it. I ain’t been expelled since that time in kindergarten when I ran up to that girl at the water fountain and bit her in the ass—I thought it was funny as hell at the time and I guess I still do—and I don’t mind telling you that I’m laughing right now and I guess if I can still laugh then being expelled aint gonna be all that bad.

No, it aint bad at all when I really think about it. Not when you compare it with the other shit I gotta deal with. Momma Jules for example. She aint been home much my whole life—not since Pops left—and she gotta keep food in my good-for-nothing mouth all by herself. I don’t wanna know where she been, even though I do know and I can’t get rid of knowing. It’s a damn shame too—poor John couldn’t have known what he was saying, but after I got home that night his words just kept eatin at me and grindin away in my head—even though I knew I shouldn’t
have been letting them—and when Momma Jules finally walked through the door—in that outfit
and smelling like she does at four in the morning—I was standing there waiting for her and
before she could say anything I closed my hands and hit her a few times until she was lying there
at my feet. And I swear I aint one for crying but I couldn’t help it after I saw her down there,
quiet as a confession as she watched the carpet soak up her own blood, and the whole damn time
I knew for a fact that what I was doing was wrong, and then in Momma Jules’s eyes I swear I
saw the whole rest of my life spilling out with her tears in a single spark of violence.
A Concerned Friend

First of all: Mrs. Weltman didn’t hear about her daughter’s seizure until two hours after the thing happened (although luckily her husband had been poolside when it struck, and after the lifeguard evacuated the pool and fished the ten year-old’s writhing body out of the deep end, Mr. Weltman made a cradle out of his strong arms with which to rock his daughter back and forth—the kid was, I imagine, a baby again in his mind—while the two of them waited on the shallow end’s top step for the ambulance to arrive) because, as cruel fate would have it, Mrs. Weltman had been on the massage table and, of course, cell phones were prohibited in the Barton Creek spa.

* * *

Mrs. Weltman was waiting in the foyer when I rang the bell. She was comfortable, you might say, but certainly not overweight. Older than the average age of a mother with a ten year-old—late fifties, maybe—she was one of those women whom it was easy to imagine in front of the Sunday puzzle with a bowl of Special K while waiting on a bountiful field of curlers. Sweat was hemorrhaging from her neck and collecting in a dark patch under the collar of her striped polo, which was uncharacteristically unpressed, untucked, and falling lopsided over her magenta fanny pack.

“Is it just you, Mrs. Weltman?” I said.

“Just me,” she said. “Let’s go. Just me, just me, just me.”

Back then, Weltman was a name you were supposed to know—for one thing, it was engraved across Villa number sixteen’s gold-plated welcome mat—so when the doctors drew a blank and decided to keep the Weltman girl overnight, the resort cleared its transportation schedule and placed all drivers on standby.
“Let’s go let’s go let’s go.”

The door slammed behind her. She power-walked to the van and almost beat me to it. I flung open the side door, but she ignored this and sat up front. I really didn’t like it when passengers did that.

It was dusk when I backed out and took us down Barton Creek Boulevard, an uphill tunnel of live oaks flanked on either side by Crenshaw doglegs with hidden bass colonies around both bends. We went past the circle drive where the guys were busy with a tournament valet, and then we crossed the bridge to the main road where up ahead you could see the hill country lifting over the asphalt top. The fountain’s multicolored fluorescents were coming on behind us, lighting up the marble façade of the Barton Creek sign as the beginnings of a sunset tilted over the road, spreading its own colors all down the tunnel. Natural neons coming, electric neons going—fizzing together in the rear-view alchemy of my mirrors. It was really something to see, that little road at dusk.

“The interstate’s a madhouse about now,” I said. “But there’s a back way.”

“Whatever you think,” she said. “Lord please just get me there.”

It really didn’t matter where you were during rush hour. But today I needed an excuse to drive by the old apartment. It was just one of those days.

“Everybody at the bell desk is praying for her,” I said. “I’m sure she’ll be all right.”

“How nice,” she said, as if she had no tolerance for courteous lies.

It was one of those days, like I said, because my father had called that morning and asked about Roger. Dad knew, of course, but I told him again. Sometimes he forgets things.

“No cell phones in the spa,” Mrs. Weltman was saying. “How absurd! Have you ever heard of such nonsense?”
I wasn’t sure she wanted an answer but I said no, I’d never heard of anything quite as nonsensical.

“Who should I speak to about this?” she asked.

“About the cell phone rule?”

“That’s right,” she said.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “But I can sure find out.”

“Please do,” she said.

It was quiet for a minute. We passed the offsite Fazio course. There were signs up for the seniors tournament. Then Mrs. Weltman said:

“I said, please do.”

“Oh,” I said. “You mean right now.”

“Yes, please,” she said. “Right now.”

I took out my cell phone, only briefly contemplating the irony of the whole thing, and then I dialed the bell desk. My supervisor told me to give her the phone, so I did, and then she guzzled my minutes going on and on about how long her family had been coming to Barton Creek—since before her daughter was born—and never in all her years had she once been made to feel unsafe on the premises until today. Then she hung up.

“A lot of good that will do,” she said.

A minute later my supervisor called back to remind me that it was against the rules to talk on the phone with passengers aboard. I’d been warned.

“Would it be accurate, in your opinion, to describe that man as wildly incompetent?” Mrs. Weltman asked.

“My supervisor?”
“That’s the one,” she said.

“Oh, I guess he’s all right,” I said.

“Please,” she said. “You don’t have to be political with me. I’m a mother, I’ve heard everything.”

I didn’t know what being a mother had to do with hearing everything. But then I said, “All right, you caught me. Yes, ma’am, he’s really a piece of work, that guy.”

“I knew it,” she said. “Let’s just hope he never has children.”

Soon after we exited toward Riverside, I felt Mrs. Weltman tense up and, somehow, this was the high point of my day.

* * *

The apartment complex hadn’t change much since the last time I drove by it. They’d cleared out a few trees from the front parking lot. The pool had a diving board now. A red Buick next to the front office was missing the front passenger side window, some of which was sprinkled around the vehicle but most of which would be in the seat. The Buick was parked under a streetlight—five years ago Roger had been right when he said the parking space wouldn’t matter in five years. Our third CD changer had been stolen the night before. Roger swore he’d heard it happening, heard the window getting busted. But somehow, he said, it didn’t matter.

I slowed down, giving the light time to turn red. Mrs. Weltman looked at me funny but I didn’t care. Lately I’d been missing the old group quite a bit, and I wanted to see if anybody was in the bus stop crowd. I never thought I’d mind so much about losing touch with everybody—I was sure any kind of longstanding open door invitations had expired—but that’s just the way it goes sometimes.
Sure enough, Nicky was there with her two little girls. Christ, they’d grown up since I saw them last. They were too big now to do that thing where they’d each straddle one of their mother’s legs as she walked. Also Nicky looked like she was probably too tired for that now. Then I saw the stroller—Nicky had gone and had herself a third—and right then I wanted to roll down the window and throw her my congratulations, but I couldn’t afford to jeopardize my tip in the vent of Mrs. Weltman’s disapproval. I strained my eyes to get a good look, but I couldn’t tell if it was a boy or girl. Hopefully a boy this time. I remember Nicky saying how she wanted a boy. Either way it would explain why she looked so tired.

And then Mrs. Weltman said:

“Speaking of parents who shouldn’t be.”

The bus squealed as it pulled up from behind. It took me a minute to realize who Mrs. Weltman was referring to.

“And nobody even told her to stop after two,” she went on. “Nobody thinks of the children these days. Lord, I wonder how long it’s been since the poor things had a bath.”

Nicky looked tired to me, but that was all. There was a moderately-sized knee-hole ripped in her jeans, and the Sex Pistols t-shirt she was wearing had seen better days I guess, but it wasn’t stained as far as I could tell—just faded a little from being worn, which is what clothes were for, after—and anyway what did all that have to do with Nicky’s parenting?

“Our tax dollars,” Mrs. Weltman said. “Keeping the baby machine plugged in. What we need to do is take a lesson from China, and unplug the damn thing. Nobody thinks of the children. Look at how miserable they are.”

They didn’t look miserable to me at all—Haley and Lacy looked happy, in fact, standing
with their mother at the bus stop as they passed a Sprite can back and forth with a handful of multicolored crazy straws. Whoever heard of miserable children going around with crazy straws?

Mrs. Weltman laughed. “God forgive me,” she said. “Sometimes I just can’t keep my mouth shut. One day at a time, I tell myself, just do the best you can, one day at a time. But then something like this happens to my family—a good, hardworking family—and I can’t help but think there’s something really wrong with the world. Jesus, this traffic is the worst.”

The joy drained out of my memories, and I was wishing I’d taken the interstate. Maybe I’d been selfish not to in first place. But lately, I swear, this goddamn nostalgia.

Mrs. Weltman had taken a breath, but she wasn’t finished.

“And they fill up the waiting rooms at the E.R. like some kind of cheap motel lobby,” she said. “God, I hope they didn’t make Katie wait. I would have gotten her in. I would have made them see her—please, driver, just get me there. I need to be with my baby girl.”

I tried to take into account what Mrs. Weltman was going through. Fear, mostly, I imagined. The kind of fear you can’t get anywhere else but from your children.

“By the time we get to the hospital,” Mrs. Weltman said, “The waiting room…” Then she trailed off.

It was indeed the longest red light in the whole city. Roger used to start sweating, he’d get so impatient with it. It was funny how frustration made him sweat, but never the heat. Situational sweat, I called it.

“Are you married?” Mrs. Weltman asked.

“No, ma’am,” I said.

Finally the light turned. I pressed down a little too hard on the gas and jerked us into the
intersection. I almost apologized, but I figured I didn’t need to since Mrs. Weltman probably assumed it was because I had her daughter in mind.

“Do me a favor,” she said. “Will you do me a favor?”

“What’s that?” I asked, suddenly claustrophobic.

“When you get married and have kids,” she said. “Please, please bathe them.” Then she laughed—she threw her head back and laughed; she actually slapped her knee. “I’m just awful,” she said.

I said nothing.

“But seriously,” she went on. “Promise me you’ll bathe your children regularly.”

I faked my best conspiratorial smile, but she wanted something verbal.

“Come on,” she said. “Promise me.”

“I promise,” I said.

“You promise what?”

“I promise I will bathe my children.”

“Regularly?”

“Regularly.”

* * *

When I pulled up to the E.R., Mr. Weltman was waiting at the sliding doors. He hurried over and opened the door for his wife, so I just stayed put.

Mrs. Weltman thanked me with a twenty—it came from her fanny pack as she sort of scooted/plopped/dismounted, dropping the bill in the cup holder with one hand whilst re-zipping her pack with the other—and the first thing I thought was, boy it would have been something to watch, you bet your ass, if that’d been Roger instead of me. He’d have handed that twenty right
back to the old cooze quicker than she could fall out of the van. Or maybe he’d have torn the bill to shreds, or thrown it out the window right when the bitch turned around so she’d see it and learn her lesson. That’s just the kind of person Roger was.

   Self-righteous melodrama in my opinion. Plus, I needed the money.

   Also, Roger would have never promised Mrs. Weltman that he would bathe his children, probably out of respect for the dignity of an old friend, plus pride and loyalty and so forth.

   * * *

   After I got back to the hotel and made a few airport runs and finally clocked out at midnight, the last thing I wanted to do was go back to my apartment. So I got a room at Barton Creek. I was tomorrow’s morning shift anyhow. And I could use a day without a bus ride.

   I took a shower and watched some TV, but I couldn’t get tired. I tossed around for a bit and then went down to the lobby to play Minesweeper. Eventually I ended up on Craigslist.

   I’d never been attracted to agrammatical one-liners or their authors’ dick shots. But the desert of personal ads usually offered at least one post with an endearingly tragic tone rather than a disgustingly tragic one. Tonight’s went like this:

   Hello Cyberspace, it’s me. I thought about responding to someone’s post, but then I decided to make my own. I know it’s late, but I somebody out there has to stumble across this post eventually. What do I want? I guess I want to be able to sleep. But I the next best thing would be some company. Preferably under 35. You don’t have to be a Calvin Klein model or anything, but please don’t let that dissuade you from responding if you are, in fact, a Calvin Klein model. I don’t care about race. I’ll be up, probably, all night.

   I wrote back asking for stats and pictures. It was the Calvin Klein bit that did it. I’d never been self-conscious about my looks, which was probably a shame because at one time in my life
I’d been downright attractive on a universal scale. But now I was fast approaching the universal age cutoff which, according to the mirror, was not a bit unfair.

Most of the ads are scams or bots but this time, after only ten refreshes, a genuine response popped up in my inbox. The poster called himself Ralph and said he was a student.

You could tell he’d spent some time on the photos he sent, matching the angle with the light and all that. But either way his soft brown eyes—soft despite Ralph’s best efforts at edginess or intrigue—constituted the stuff of photogenetic perfection.

I sent him my bio and several photos. There was no question that he was the better looking one, so I half expected not to hear back. But then he asked me where I wanted to meet. He couldn’t host because his roommates—and everyone else, I guessed—only knew straight Ralph.

I said I was on a business trip, so how about my hotel, but would he like to get coffee first? Sounds good, Ralph said.

I suggested this 24-hour place off Riverside where Roger and I used to go because their coffee was terrible and nobody was ever there except runaways and the homeless. Tonight the barista was asleep with her forehead on the counter. I sat in the corner and waited. When she looked up I went over and ordered a caramel latté.

When Ralph came in I could tell right away how nervous he was. I was the only other person in the whole place, but when he saw me he looked away and made a beeline for the counter. He was taller than I’d guessed from the pictures, and his hair was longer. He’d also gotten some sun recently. He was athletic, too, something I hadn’t been since high school. Come on Ralph, I thought, just look at me.
The barista was asleep again, but Ralph cleared his throat pretty good and then ordered a Fiji water. Then he went and sat in the far corner of the other room.

I made a bit of a show getting up and going over there. The performance caught the sleepy barista’s eye, invisible to Ralph’s.

“Hi there, Ralph,” I said, sitting next to him on the couch. He glanced nervously up at the barista before he looked at me. She was watching us.

“Hi,” Ralph said, extending his hand.

I shook his hand and said, “Am I going to be calling you Ralph all night?”

“Sure,” he said. “Why not?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Probably because it’s the name of a John Goodman character. Names don’t generally survive that kind of publicity.”

Ralph raised an eyebrow and glanced at the counter again. The barista had lost interest and gone back to sleep. Ralph exhaled.

“Either you’ve never seen King Ralph,” I said, “Or you expect me to believe that the name Ralph is making a comeback.”

“Never seen it,” Ralph said.

“You have Netflix?” I asked.

Ralph nodded.

“Do yourself a favor and queue up King Ralph.”

“I’ll do that,” he said, cracking a smile. The kid had a great smile. Perfect teeth, miniature dimples, the way his mouth opened with a slight tilt.

“All right then,” I said. “My name’s Ernest.”

“Nice to meet you, Ernest,” he said. We shook hands again.
“To my knowledge, John Goodman has yet to play an Ernest,” I said.

The kid’s smile came back. Then he said:

“Probably because Ernest went extinct even before Roseanne.”

I wasn’t prepared to laugh, especially with such sincerity. But I did, and it shook the poor barista from her slumber yet again. She shot us a mild glare.

“So what’s your major?” I said, trying to embody the cliché with enthusiasm. But Ralph answered with instinctive seriousness:

“International business with a minor in Spanish.”


“We’ll see,” he said.

“When do you graduate?”

“In two years, if all goes according to plan. Keep your fingers crossed.”

“I shall, Ralph. I shall.”

“I’m also building a sort of supercomputer,” he said with sudden oomph. “With one of my friends who’s a computer science major. I mean, we’re done building it, but we’re still working out the kinks and everything. But basically it’s a robot e-trader.”

I must have given him a dumb look because then he added:

“Like, of stocks. We programmed it to trade stocks for us.”

I was thoroughly impressed, of course, and couldn’t find a response except some sort of approving nod. Then his name flashed through my head—Ralph—written in gold-plated letters across Villa sixteen’s welcome mat.

“What about you?” Ralph asked. “Obviously you’re out of school, but I mean what do you do?”
In the cab on the way here I’d gone over my answer, swapping stories with myself, working out the details, visualizing. It had been difficult to come up with anything but the truth.

“Funny you ask,” I said. “Recently I’ve embarked on a bit of a transitional period.”

Deciding this was the horizon of truth, I continued, “Just this past month—this is very exciting—I sold my company.”

Ralph did a golf clap and gave me his hearty congratulations, which encouraged me to go on.

“A little chain called Ernesto’s Limos,” I said. “Look us up sometime. We’ve got a location here in town. Maybe for a Homecoming dance or something. Do universities still have Homecoming dances?”

Ralph shrugged.

“Anyway,” I said, “If you do, and you end up taking somebody, give us a call. Or rather give them a call. I’m still helping everybody get settled, showing them the ropes and all that, you know. That’s actually why I’m in town this week. But anyway, I’d certainly make sure they sent the best driver.”

“Do you have a card?” Ralph asked.

“Not on me, unfortunately.”

“Write the number down for me?” He fetched a napkin from the table and pencil from his pocket.

“Hell, they’ve changed all the numbers by now,” I said.

“Oh well,” he said. “I’ll Google you. Or them.”

I drank down the last of my coffee. Ralph had barely touched his Fiji water. When we
left, the full bottle stayed on the table next to the napkins. At the door I turned to go back for it, but then I decided it would be breaking character.

I hadn’t brought my car with me on the trip, but luckily Ralph had come in his truck, so we didn’t have to wait for a cab.

He said his father had bought him the truck new. Ralph had gotten a tuition scholarship, and his father had always been good about rewarding hard work. But Prince Ralph was still testing the waters when it came to other things.

* * *

It got quiet for most of the drive. At the coffee shop we’d forgotten—or at least I had—what we’d come there to do. The silence persisted as we exited the interstate.

I’d been giving directions as we went along, but finally Ralph asked which hotel we were going to. I should have told him from the start—of course he knew where Barton Creek was.

“My dad stayed here once when he came for a visit,” Ralph said, easing us down the main boulevard. “Beautiful golf courses out here.”

My own father frequented the driving range but never an actual course. He said he was waiting for his son to take up the game with him. He’d seemed pretty excited when I told him Roger was a golfer.

“Yeah,” I said. “Really beautiful.”

The fountain lights turned from green to orange as we crept past. I thought about describing the way the road looked during a sunset—really, though, it was more the way it felt—but then I thought better of it.

After we passed the clubhouse I pointed to the next driveway and said he should park in front of the spa.
“It’s actually closer to my room,” I explained.

There was only one bellman this late and we wouldn’t have meant anything to him in the first place, but it was just easier this way. A lot of things were just easier sometimes.

We crossed the pool area to the side entrance. I thought about the Weltman girl.

“Nice pool,” Ralph said. He was nervous again.

We got on the elevator with a woman holding a black toy poodle. Ralph stood between us. I made sure our shoulders touched, sleeve to sleeve, but it might not have registered.

We got off on the same floor as the woman and followed behind her in silence. Then we stopped at my door and she disappeared down the hall.

“Is it just me—?” Ralph began. Then his voice cracked and he had to start over in a whisper. “Is it just me, or did that poodle growl at us in the elevator?”

“I didn’t hear anything,” I said, flipping on the light. I’d made rumpled the comforter and spread two towels out on the bathroom floor to suggest use.

“Guess it was just me,” he whispered. He opened a Fiji water. Then he put it down, again without drinking.

“Feel free to use the shower or anything,” I said.

“All right,” he said, stiffening.

I walked over to the bedside table and pretending to do something. Then I emptied my pockets. Afterward I would notice my nametag among the items—Barton Creek Transportation—prominently propped up by my tattered and empty billfold.

“Maybe I’ll use the restroom,” Ralph said.

“She’s all yours,” I said.
He shut the door and made no sound on the other side. I unbuttoned my shirt and then buttoned it back. I turned on the TV—*Golden Girls* on Nick at Nite—and then turned it off. I went over to the bathroom door. I thought about asking if he was all right. Or maybe just giving a light knock or two. Part of me was genuinely concerned. Another part of me was something else.

We were nose to nose when Ralph opened the door and froze. He smelled of soap. My fingers crept up the wall to the light switch and I let them hang there for moment before deciding to leave it on.

I’d known from the beginning that this was a new experience for the kid, and part of me was really and truly touched by his bravery. He flinched when I touched him for the first time, lightly on the shoulder. He laughed and apologized but I told him not to be sorry. It’s a readymade reaction, I said, and then I tried to remember all the perfect things Roger had said to make me forget my shame.

I also knew there was a chance Ralph would snap and beat the hell out of me, so I was prepared for it when he did. But I didn’t feel much of anything because the whole time all I could think about was what Roger had said to me that first day. It was forever ago, its memory plenty gone by now, but I kept trying to remember. Pretty soon the air in my heart just sort of evaporated, like in one of those plane crash scenes where a bomb goes off, and then all the passengers get sucked out into sky. Ralph had begun to cry. I figured he had no idea what was happening or why it was happening to him—hell, I figured the kid’s whole life was likely flashing before his eyes—because this kind of thing wasn’t supposed to happen to somebody like him. In his mind, I thought, the onset of his incomprehensible violence must be like God waking up one morning and deciding to entertain himself over breakfast by hitting him with a seizure.
instead of just taking his coffee with the sports page. Yeah, I thought, that’s what Ralph was like—God.

So then I said:

“Yes,” I said, “Punish me.”

The air in my heart came back.

“Give me what I deserve.”

I looked down at my body and the bloodstained sheets and the snag of comforter clenched between my teeth. It was beautiful in its own way. Nothing this beautiful ever happens, I thought, at Barton Creek.

* * *

It occurred to me that Ralph had probably known all along what a fraud I was. It had been stupid to believe that he—son, student, golfer, entrepreneur—didn’t know every last thing there was to know about a fool like me.

Ralph dressed in a hurry. Then he said:

“It’s funny, isn’t it? In a minute I’ll be walking by the concierge or the bell desk, and maybe the way the valets are looking at me will make me wonder if they know—but probably none of them will have a clue. You know? I mean, how could they possibly have a clue about anything? Nothing like what just happened ever happens at Barton Creek.”

I wanted to beg him not to go, but then he was gone. So I dressed my wounds and watched The Honeymooners. I remember shivering pretty bad like something under my skin was trying to get loose. I turned up the heat and sweated it out, whatever it was, and after that I fell asleep for a few hours with the TV on. But what I got wasn’t sleep, not really.
The next morning, I got up and showered and went down for work. A light fog had surrounded the building overnight, and it was moving slowly out across the parking lot, spreading through the rows of bright cars and then making the quiet trek up the road to the west. Nobody asked about my bruises.

I was feeling restless, and for some reason I picked up the phone and dialed Nicky’s number. It was early, but Nicky would be up. She was always up early with the girls. It rang twice, and then a recording tried to tell me that I’d dialed the wrong number. But I knew I hadn’t.

The circle drive was quiet all morning—no weddings, no tournaments, no check-ins, nothing on the transportation books. I asked the valets about the status of the Weltman girl. No news, they said. The front desk said the same thing. The concierge, too. Nobody had heard anything from anybody. Nobody had called, nobody had come or gone, nobody was scheduled to come or go.

I parked a few cars and then walked around a little before I called the hospital. A woman with a kind voice answered. She had some kind of accent, so at first I couldn’t understand what she was saying. She wanted to know how I was related to the Weltmans, I was pretty sure about that.

So I said I was a concerned friend. Then I heard myself saying it again—this was the strangest thing, I can’t really describe it—and so I stood there listening to this person who was probably myself, and maybe it was making me feel not so alone—I don’t know who I was more scared for, me or the person talking or the Weltman girl—but at any rate, there we were, saying it again and again and again.
On a warm day in November, long before I learned to pass judgment on my family, Mother drove me to meet Aunt Jane. The person who mailed me a novel every Christmas. I’d heard her name in Mother’s whispers to her mother, and visa versa. I’d seen her name and mine scrawled illegibly on envelopes that travelled to me from Texas to Chicago, braving the nation’s breadbasket. It was silly, I thought, for us to drive all this way just to have a face to go with the name. Mother agreed about this.

“But after all,” she said, “When you think about it, I suppose she does have cancer.”

Mother talked to the dashboard. I stared out the window. Pretended to sleep. The interstate was boring. Texas was boring. The rental smelled like sausage.

I remember the impression the statue made: giant, white, holding a cane.

“That’s Mr. Houston,” Mother said. “A hero.”

He was someone I should know about, she said, even though I’d been too young to remember when we lived in the city named after him, back when Dad lived with us, also before they got back together and split up again.

“It’s difficult to answer questions while driving,” Mother said when I asked why Mr. Houston was a hero.

We exited through a forest of historical markers. I didn’t have anything against trees, much less trees with history, but I was cautious of people who lived in forests. Even historical forests protected by giant white heroes.

“I promise we’re not lost,” Mother said, reading my mind.

The road was paved with potholes and cattle guards. The farther we went, the more it deteriorated. Then it just kind of disappeared.
Mother killed the engine and got out. The ground was a mattress of leaves. It gave you this half-weightless feeling. It occurred to me that I’d been wrong about Mr. Houston—he wasn’t there to protect the forest from us. It was the other way around.

Aunt Jane, as a concept, frightened me. Now I know that’s what Mother wanted.

* * *

It’s been three weeks since you moved out. Why have I suddenly decided to tell you about my dead aunt? It will make sense, I think, if you keep reading. Please keep reading.

For my first eight years, Aunt Jane was a footnote hastily jotted in the family’s margins. For my next twenty, I worked hard to convince myself that I could keep her there. I’ve tried to believe that her memory had nothing to do with why I came back to Texas for school or with why I stayed here for my doctorate or with why I still haven’t left. When the door slammed with you on the other side, Aunt Jane leapt into my mind more vividly than ever. Her image—frail, abandoned, selfless—has been impossible to erase.

Tragedies like hers and yours are endured silently and ignored coldly—not because they manifest rarely, nor because they’re any less painful than other tragedies, but because we have expensive tastes in happiness and we’ll pay extravagant sums for it in the currency of others’ sadness. Pardon, if you will, my continuing the economic metaphor, but an illustration of the happiness market, I think, would neatly resemble a pyramid scheme: fabricated demand, false products, misleading cost-benefit analyses, ultimate profit contingent upon ultimate loss.

Thus far I’ve paid my dues on time and obediently followed Mother’s lead. Together we’ve shredded volumes of psychological evidence with more voracity than all the accountants Enron combined. Most people would sleep soundly for centuries after they made the calculated decision to let a loved one die alone in the middle of nowhere. I did for twenty years.
I knew you were about to leave. I could feel it in your gaze.

You got up before me and made breakfast. Two things you’d never done, not once that whole year. Depressed people aren’t early risers, they aren’t breakfast eaters.

At any rate, I remember thinking: is it already time? Me standing at the table letting my eggs get cold, you sitting at the table saying don’t let your eggs get cold.

“You like eggs?” I said. “I’ve never seen you eat eggs.”

And then breakfast was over. You said:

“I’m cured.” Cured. Like it’s something I wouldn’t want you to be.

“You seem certain,” I said.

“I am.”

“Please,” I said, feeling stupid. “Don’t go yet.”

“I’m leaving,” you said. “Send me a bill.”

After that I told you to get the hell out. And then you did.

I’m not sure you ever loved me but I was going to ask you to marry me. I thought I had more time.

If I send this letter, it will probably be to your parents’ house. But even if I don’t send it, at least I’ve made up my mind to write it. Hopefully I’ll finish. Lately I haven’t been good at finishing things. I’ve given up on my dissertation. I’m working full time at Crisis Hotline. It’s good. They need me. Lots of people do.

* * *

Aunt Jane’s trailer had once been blue but now it was gray. Cinder blocks between it and the earth. Splintered steps, three of them, with holes and sagging. Next to the steps, a garden:
smothered begonias, Juniper weed, vegetable vines without vegetables. Surely, I thought, my aunt didn’t belong here.

When the door opened, Aunt Jane’s face didn’t say whether she’d been expecting us or not. She certainly didn’t look like the person I’d expected. She was younger, more aware. Skin less pale, eyes greener and brighter. But her hair is what surprised me most—she shouldn’t have had any, I thought.

“Jane,” Mother said, “This is Charles. Your nephew.”

“Hello Charles,” Aunt Jane said.

“Hi,” I said.

Mother continued:

“Charles reads all the books you send.”

Which of course was a lie. I’d only read *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

“Where do you mail them?” I asked.

Mother laughed.

“The post office,” said Aunt Jane. I was glad she didn’t think I was joking.

“How far is it?”

“Charles,” Mother said, “Let’s go inside before we play twenty questions.” She went for the door.

“Pretty far, now that I think about it,” Aunt Jane said. She turned to let Mother in. “But I’d never thought about it.”

I thought we’d hug, but she turned and went inside and we didn’t even shake hands.

The living room was narrow and it backed up to a narrow kitchen and a narrow, black hallway. Hard brown carpet, linoleum tiles, brittle paneling. Boxes piled everywhere, some
labeled, most not. A TV squatting in the corner, rabbit ears pointing at me. Shelves of books lining the walls like skin. Candles and shadows. Thick purple drapes half drawn. Sunlight coming through, putting us in a dim vanilla pudding.

Mother turned on the TV: a muffled voice telling us about altar candles starting a fire and burning the church to the ground. Mother covered her mouth. Aunt Jane just stared at the TV like she knew there was something to see if she could only figure out what it was.

* * *

We were both excited when you told your parents you were tired of believing in God. Then of course they kicked you out because Leviticus says they should. Weren’t we excited?

We sat on the couch and stared at the TV after we moved your boxes. We were thinking: here we are, now what?

“This will be good,” I said.

You agreed.

“What do you want to do?” I asked.

You shrugged.

“Are you going to be happy here?”

Then you told me not to talk about being happy because that would ruin it. Then you put your head on my shoulder. Soon my shoulder was damp and getting damper but I didn’t mind—my dissertation needed dissertating badly—but I didn’t mind.

Then you slept for two months. I got you to stop seeing that doctor and save your money for college (have you applied yet?) because it’s alright to take one year off, but even sad people go to college (I should say most people who go to college are sad).

I made you stop the medicine, too, because have no idea how tricky serotonin can be. My
dissertation is (was) on serotonin. I watched you more closely after that. I knew I could make you feel better than any pill, any doctor. And I did, didn’t I?

You sat on the couch for our first session. I moved the television to the (our) bedroom so I could sit on the table in front of you. At first you couldn’t look me in the eyes, do you remember? You stared at your shoestrings or the tops of your feet (I’m sure you weren’t wearing shoes) and your finger was constantly in your ear like we were looking for something in there that didn’t want to be found.

You wanted to quit at first, you said it wouldn’t work. You went back to bed. I wasn’t giving up on you, so I agreed to have the session in bed. I asked you how you felt, you said I knew damn well how you felt. You wanted to make things difficult, you wanted to test me—that’s what patients to make sure their doctor is good enough for them. You didn’t want to be my patient. I didn’t either but we needed to try because you were sleeping sixteen hours a day.

It took a month for you to open up. You told me about your parents and your brother (I already knew about them, of course, but it was important for you to hear yourself say it). You’d been on the SSRI since you were 16. You told me about your parents’ marriage, or lack thereof, and your brother’s problems at school, him coming home and whining about how hard community college was.

Your story was less complicated than I’d thought. I didn’t tell you that because patients like to think they’re complicated. Patients don’t like to fit into formulas, either. They don’t like it when a theory applies to them, when they see themselves being fit into a box, the same box as someone else. You said you didn’t want to hear a goddamn thing about Freud or how your anger comes from having a hole where your penis should have been. I said I didn’t want to talk about
Freud either. I did, of course, and also about Jung and Lacan and Hartmann and Kristeva and Lazarus, but I didn’t mention any names.

You cried so often, I couldn’t bear to watch. You’d storm out of the apartment and disappear sprinting. I’d wait on the balcony until nightfall when you’d come back. You’d be ready to cooperate and we’d try again. Sometimes I’d block the door so you couldn’t leave. You made me a nervous that time you called the police, but by the time they showed up you were calm again, and then they left and we went back to bed.

You kept asking if I needed to be working on my own work, but I said my work was less important than your health and our sessions were basically the same thing as field hours. But I shouldn’t have neglected my work. It’s painful to think about all the people I could have helped.

* * *

For an hour we visited in almost-whispers. Then we swapped sighs for silence. The air was thick and tired. Mother and Aunt Jane whispered or murmured, mostly about me or Grandmother. Sometimes Aunt Jane spoke gibberish or just grunted. She burped. She farted. I was too terrified to laugh.

At one point Aunt Jane said:

“I don’t care about all this stuff. But Charles can have the books. If he wants.”

I nodded.

“That’s very thoughtful of you,” Mother said. “Charles appreciates that.”

I nodded.

Then Mother told me to go outside. She gave me the car keys for the radio, but songs would have been meaningless. When the door shut I put my ear to the thin wood and listened.

“Jane,” Mother said. “Jane.”
I couldn’t hear the response, if there’d been one.

“It would best,” Mother continued, “If you were a part of the family again.”

“What?” said Aunt Jane. Then she apologized for shouting.

“You didn’t shout.”

“I didn’t think I did!”

“Now you’re shouting.”

“I apologize. You’re right, I was shouting.”

“You know we love you. Mother and I both do. And Charles does.”

“I don’t want to live here anymore,” Aunt Jane said.

“That doesn’t sound like the Jane I know,” Mother said.

“I don’t sound like me?”

“Not a bit it doesn’t. I can’t remember a time when you haven’t loved it here. You never did like a lot of noise, you know. Mother and I found this place for you. We brought you here, remember? You wanted a quiet place and we brought you here.”

It got quiet for a minute and then Aunt Jane said:

“Yes, that’s right. You’re right about that.”

Then it got quiet again and all I could hear was TV static. Then Aunt Jane shouted:

“I won’t go!”

I stumbled off the porch and didn’t go back. I wandered around the property for while. Nothing but trees and leaves and squirrels. It was the loneliest place I’d ever seen.

A green hose was mounted on the side of the trailer. I took it down. It surprised me to see water come out when I turned the knob.

It was pointless, I know, but I stood there and watered that corpse of a garden for what
seemed like hours. I’d commanding a waterless hose to spout water—magic water—magical enough to resuscitate a dead garden. It broke my heart when I couldn’t.

It would be Christmas in less than a month. The first Christmas Aunt Jane would forget to put a novel in the mail. By Easter she’d be gone.

* * *

One time during an Easter sermon—this was back when your parents still thought church was the best thing for you and we weren’t living together yet—I looked over at you (our legs were touching and I thought that was great) and at that moment I’d never wanted anything as bad as I wanted to whisper in your ear how much I loved you. After we’d lived together a few months we started saying “love” instead of “I love you.” It’s strange but I can’t remember whose idea it was to start deleting the pronoun.

Your parents thought I was too old for you—I’d graduated college—but you did the right thing not listening to them. In the middle of a divorce giving relationship advice to their eighteen year-old who was more of an adult than they were anyhow. And Christ, your brother—that guy was something else—dropping out of college like that because of panic attacks and coming home and telling you to get rid of me because I had a psychology degree. He didn’t like his counselor—at a Tuscon community college for God’s sake—so I’m the antichrist for volunteering at Crisis Hotline instead of Baptist bake sales.

But I tried to win them over. It wasn’t my responsibility, you know that, but I loved you, so I wanted to try to love them. I’d shake hands with your father and hug your mother and give them sirs and ma’ams because I’d lived in this state when I was a kid and I know how much ya’ll love your sirs and ma’ams. I even ate dinner at your house like I was supposed to. All five of us at the table, you and I trying to ignore everyone— your parents as they muttered hurtful things
back and forth and your brother as he sat there hyperventilating like he needed to inflate a hot air balloon in time to take it for a spin before sunset. It was bearable, though, and worth it, but I didn’t like watching how it affected you. You didn’t deserve all that.

I never told you this—one of those times I went out for secret drinks with your brother—at one of those bars where we wouldn’t run into anyone who might recognize him—I walked into the bathroom and found him crushing up pills on the fold-out baby-changing station, not even in a stall, and when he saw me he said, “Can you believe this place has one of these?”—meaning the baby-changing station—and then the crushed up powder disappeared like it had never been there. This was a Saturday night probably, so he would have been in church the next morning like nothing had happened, sitting next to your parents—who, between hymns, would be whispering about infidelities that had happened and infidelities that were going to happen—just you wait you bitch/bastard—and at home they had the nerve to pretend you were the crazy one. It’s what they needed to believe. It’s what they needed you to believe.

* * *

I’d never seen the three of them together—Mother, Grandmother, and Aunt Jane—and I never would. I had friends whose families were close, families who kissed each other on the cheek like it was a normal thing to do and had reunions and things like that and called each other long distance twice a week—cousins, parents, grandparents, stepparents, step-grandparents—because hearing that voice on the other end of the line somehow made the day, the week, the month, a more recognizable time. Things could have been like that for us. I could have done something to help but didn’t.

Mother said, “Charles, don’t you think it would be nice if your Aunt Jane came to church with us this Sunday?”
“Yes,” I said. “I’d like that very much.”

Aunt Jane stared at me like she hadn’t heard. Then she looked at Mother and back at me.

I was smiling the whole time and probably looked like an idiot just smiling away like that. Sure, I wanted her to come to church. I also wanted to give her a hug but I’d been too afraid.

That next April we’d start going through the boxes, mostly Mother and Grandmother, me on the couch watching. Though I did on several occasions poke my head in a few nooks. That’s how I found Aunt Jane’s poetry. Thousands of verses written on loose leaf pages and stuffed in shoeboxes. I took the poems outside and sat where the garden used to be.

There lived a wretched nightmare,
If living’s fit to call her
Wandering hateful wandering
Down the phallic halls.
Round corners, round them fast!
She hears it in the distance—
The festive jubilee—
The jubilee won’t wait
For sinners or for slowpokes.
She’ll get there if it kills her,
She’ll drown their revelry;
They’d better let her in,
This black and wretched nightmare,
She’ll show them what it’s like—
These fucking happy people—
To live their lives at night.

They weren’t all like that. Some of them were autobiographical. That’s how I learned about her I.Q. being high enough for people to call her a genius, like it was a bad thing to be called; about the forest; about Sam; about how much she hated herself and didn’t know why; about how much she hated God and didn’t know why; about how she wished Jesus had never been born; about how she’d been to prison; about how my Granddad left them for his second family in Utah; about how Grandmother blamed Aunt Jane for his leaving, since Mother had
been too young for it to be her fault; about how Mother had grown up to be unhappy and quickly learned who to blame; about how she’d been married six times; about how her six sons were gone and she didn’t know where; about how she’d read a novel every day of 1980 and then stopped reading for the rest of her life; about the migraines; about the voices; about how one time she’d jumped into a cattle guard to see how it felt to break her leg; about how she’d dropped acid before each of her therapy sessions; about how an ex-senator had asked her to ghostwrite his memoirs and almost strangled her when a month later she’d handed him a two hundred page how-to essay outlining the steps for preparing the world’s best peanut butter and jelly sandwich; about how when she died she wanted to be cremated; about how some days she thought it might be a good idea to cremate herself.

Aunt Jane lived alone in the national forest for over twenty years. Her loneliness, I think, went away after the first year. That’s what I tell my callers after I read them her poems. You may think it’s a bad idea, reading these things to people who want to kill themselves—but it isn’t, not at all. They want to hear about despair, about all its shapes and sizes. They want to feel the sadness and soak it up like a morbid sponge. None of them want to kill themselves. They just want to know every last thing there is to know about despair.

Afterward they usually they ask about the author. I tell them she was lovely.

***

You and I met for the first time on the steps of your therapist’s office. He’d just finished telling you God knows what.

And he’d just finished telling me—that morning—that believe it or not there is a timeline for completing a dissertation.

Does it condemn me forever, that after talking to you I sent you to my dissertation
supervisor? That I’d planned the whole thing, our running into each other on the steps of his office building? I was so nervous that day, I felt sure you’d recognize my voice—and maybe you did, maybe you’d kept it to yourself the whole time—but were we doomed from the start because of my deception? I’d fallen in love with your voice and your story, immediately, like an awkwardly scrawled name on a manila envelope begging to be opened.

“How’s your head?” I asked, thinking I was being clever.

“I’m sorry?”


“I have to go,” you said, clearly horrified.

You ran down the steps and would have run into oncoming traffic and gotten yourself smeared all over South Congress if I hadn’t yelled for you to stop. You turned around and glared at me through tears.

“Wait,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“What do you want?” you asked. You were crying pretty hard.

“Nothing,” I said. “I don’t want anything.”

“I’m not bipolar,” you said, wiping your face.

“I know. It was stupid. Just a stupid joke. I’m stupid, really.”

“I’m depressed,” you said. “Not bipolar.”

Then you grabbed me and squeezed and suddenly we were hugging, which surprised the hell out of me. The white dome of the capitol was staring down at us. It was seventy degrees and the sun was out and we were happy together before we’d even known each other’s names. You didn’t let go.

“I’m Charles,” I said.
“I’m Sidney.” Your voice vibrated into my ribs and I asked you where you were from so I could feel it again.

“North Houston,” you said.

“Me too!” I said.

Then I told you about how my parents got divorced when I was little, about moving to Chicago with my mom, about my parents getting back together and splitting up again, and about coming to Austin to study psychology. I rambled on with my abridged life story but it was okay because you’d stopped crying.

“You want to eat lunch?” I said.

* * *

Then Mother said we’d better get going. It was past dinnertime—we hadn’t eaten anything—and oppressively dark under the helmet of forest. The trees merged with the melting night, a black quicksand sucking everything into its belly. I couldn’t see the garden as we went down the steps. Aunt Jane watched us from the doorway.

Aunt Jane stopped in the doorway and then I turned around and went back to the steps and looked her in the eyes.

“I love you,” I said.

“Okay,” she said, grinning. Like what I’d said was the most foolish piece of nonsense in the world.

Mother started the engine and turned on the headlights, bathing the decrepit trailer in its glow. Aunt Jane stood in the center of the yellow beam, one hand steadied on the doorframe. Then suddenly she stuck her foot out, hovering, feeling for where the next step might be. Her fingers stayed wrapped around the splintered doorframe until the last second when foot found the
next step and she continued forward. Mother tried to ignore what was happening. She jammed the gears into reverse, looking out the back window. I kept my eyes on Aunt Jane. She’d reached the bottom step and showed no sign of turning back.

As our car lurched in the opposite direction, carrying us away, I felt the urge to leap out the door, then to scramble to my feet and somehow put a stop to this abandonment.

Aunt Jane reached the ground and started toward us, picking up the pace. I panicked—Mother should stop, I thought, or I should make her stop. What was happening? Why were we just leaving? I didn’t have any brothers or sisters, but if I did I knew I wouldn’t have treated them like this.

Mother was still looking out the back window, finding the clearing that would take us to the road. My hand found the door handle. I curled my fingers around it, asking the ethers for strength to burst from the cabin.

Aunt Jane was reaching her arms out to us, her trembling limbs pale in the blonde haze of Mother’s high beams. We were picking up speed, taking the light with us.

Then I pulled the handle. The door lurched open: gasping air, grinding tires, crunching casserole of leaves and mulch. Before I made the jump I looked up and saw Aunt Jane: she’d fallen to her knees in the garden, rocking back and forth with two handfuls of wet dirt held up to the sky. To this day I believe she was asking God where the water had come from.

“What the hell are you doing?” Mother screeched. “Shut the goddamn door!”

“Nothing,” I said. Then I shut the door and put my seatbelt on, but not because of Mother’s yelling. I shut the door because of what I’d seen. Because it would have been too embarrassing if Mother—or anyone—found out that I’d watered the garden.
I called Mother the day you moved out. I asked her if she wanted to see me. I hadn’t been home since I started school in Austin, and I’d stopped answering Mother’s calls. But I listened to the messages: she and Dad were getting back together again. I hated them for that.

Mother said she didn’t know if she’d be able to see me.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Don’t be stupid,” she said.

“I’m not stupid. I’m a psychotherapist.”

She found this funny.

“Why do you want to see me?” she asked.

“My girlfriend left me,” I said.

“My son left me,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Your father left again too.”

I thought about hanging up but then I said, “I’m not really a psychotherapist. I quit school.”

“So what do you do?” she asked.

“I tell people not to jump.”

“Do they listen?”

“Yes,” I said.

“I’m sorry about your girlfriend,” she said, and I thanked her.

Then she offered to visit. I said I would like that very much and I told her to fly into Houston. The next day I picked her up from Intercontinental. I wasn’t prepared for how much
older eight years had made her. She wasn’t prepared for how much older eight years had made me.

In the car she asked why Houston, why not Austin?

“It’s difficult to answer questions while driving,” I said.

She was tired from the flight so she shrugged and leaned her head against the window. Pretended to sleep. I talked a little, mostly to the steering wheel, and Mother kept asking where we were going and if I was all right. Finally I told her we were going to the Sam statue. And yes I was all right. She didn’t say anything else but I could tell she was a little nervous.

I parked next to Sam’s feet and looked up: gargantuan whiteness reflecting the afternoon sun, a limestone mirror holding us like fleshy ants under a microscope. It was the first time I’d seen him since the day I found Aunt Jane’s poems. He looked different now—shorter, duller, more benign. Maybe now I could see the humor in how out of place he looked, a great chalky authority towering over a whole lot of nothing.

There was a family of four—husband, wife, brother, sister—scurrying around the base of the statue. They snapped photos of Sam’s feet, photos of each other, photos of each other next to Sam’s feet. I opened the passenger door to let Mother out. I gave her a hug. It was the first time we’d touched.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“I love you,” I said.

She laughed. “Okay,” she said with the same tone as her sister’s response.

“Tell me you love me,” I said.

“Charles,” she said. “You’re my son.”

“Please,” I begged her. “Please just tell me.”
“All right, son. I love you.”

Then I opened the trunk where I’d put one of the shoeboxes. I took one out and set it on the hood of the car. The kids were laughing in the background. I’d started to sweat a little.

I took off the lid and pulled a sheet from the top of the stack.

“What is this,” she said as I handed her the poem. “Charles, what’s going on? Why won’t you talk to me?”

“Read it,” I said.

But she let it fall to the ground and then she took my face in her hands and looked it my eyes like I was some kind of escaped convict.

“Charles,” she said. “Are you all right? I mean really all right?”

I pulled her arms down and then I went over and picked up Aunt Jane’s poem.

“Here,” I said. “Just read it. And then read the rest. There’s boxes full of them.”

When she finished I handed her another. She sat down at the base of the statue, oblivious to the family. They kept laughing and running around and snapping pictures. Mother was in the frame for some of them.

When she finished reading we drove to Austin. She stayed the night at my apartment. In the morning I took her to the airport. She’d planned on staying longer.

She didn’t break down, didn’t cry, didn’t react much in general. But at the airport she took me in her arms and asked me again if I was all right. She told me it wasn’t my fault. I knew that, of course. It should have been me holding her, me asking her if she was all right, me saying it wasn’t her fault. But she wouldn’t let me. All I could do was watch from the parking garage as her flight punched through the clouds, bridging the nation’s stomach like so many of my Christmas books.
The location of our call center is supposed to be a secret, for obvious reasons. It moved around from time to time but usually we’re answering from the communications building on Dean Keeton. Unless the film students need the space, in which case we take our two cubicles—me and this guy Dave—to a vacant room in the union. If there aren’t any vacancies in the student union, sometimes we go to Dave’s place.

We were at Dave’s the first time you called—the first time I heard your voice, the first time I fell in love. Is it possible to fall in love with a voice without a face or a name to go with it?

“I’m sorry,” was the first thing you said to me.

I knew instantly that I could help you. You learn to hear it in a caller’s voice, whether they or not you’ll be able to help, whether they want to be helped or whether they just want someone to talk to. You wanted to be helped. You wanted to be loved. I knew I could do both. And I did, didn’t I?

“I think I should kill myself,” you said.

I asked you why on Earth you’d want to do that. You said that your family wanted you to kill yourself and that killing yourself actually might not be a bad idea if you could decide on the best way to go about it. I asked you why on Earth your family would want you to do that.

“My parents are good people,” you said. “My brother is a good person. He’s in college.”

“You don’t think you’re a good person?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Lots of reasons,” you said.

“Can you give me one?”
We talked until sunset. You described your house—a nice place, it seemed, in Westlake. Your parents had money, they tithed weekly. When they started fighting, your father moved into your bedroom and you took the spare one. Your new room had a better view of the pond in the backyard, of the goldfish and the marble waterfall with the statue of Dolores watching. You’d sit at the window for hours, the sunlight moving over the water and your reflection. Mostly no one bothered you. Not until your brother came home from college and became your roommate. You didn’t understand how anyone could abandon freedom like he did. He said you wouldn’t understand the pressures of college life and as far as you could tell he was right.

“I don’t understand much of anything that happens in the world,” you said.

A few months later, your boyfriend at the time broke up with you. One day your brother found you in the backyard crying. He saw you talking to the Dolores statue and he told your parents about it. You needed to stop it, they said, and whatever other strange things you did. They said God and a good SSRI was what you needed. So they took you to church three days a week, to a doctor once a week, and once a day with breakfast you took the medicine they gave you. Back then you were still eating breakfast.

The time got away from me—the sun was setting behind the Capitol and it was beautiful. I asked if you wanted to hear a poem. You told me to read it slowly because you wanted to write it down. I imagined you by the pond writing, Dolores over your shoulder reading.

And that’s when I decided.

“I know a better doctor,” I said.

* * *

Strangers, when I tell them not to jump, are like panhandlers asking panhandlers for change. The whole thing is rotten. If it isn’t rotten, then you tell me why the world lets a guy like
me sit here and answer this phone when he knows damn well he belongs on the other end of the line.

* * *

Dave answered and he said I could tell him anything. He said I could trust him.

“It’s all right,” Dave said. “Take your time.

“I don’t know where to start,” I said.

“Most people don’t. It’s all right. Just take your time.”

“I’m trying.”

After a while I tried harder. I told him some things. When I was finished Dave asked me how I felt.

* * *

I hung up and then sat around the apartment for a while before going to campus. When he saw me, Dave’s eyes were full of tears and I didn’t know what to do.

“Thanks for calling,” Dave said. “Thanks for letting me help.”

I couldn’t speak at first. I couldn’t look at his eyes I was so embarrassed. I asked him if he might give me a hug. He said he would, but then I just stood there.

“I understand,” Dave said.

“What do you understand?”

“How hard it is, the first time.”

“The first time?”

“The first time you call.”

That hit me harder than I can tell you, him confessing like that.

“It always makes me feel better,” he said. “To call.”
And then he came over and grabbed me, like he’s been giving hugs his whole life without thinking twice about it.

Then he left and I sat down. The phone started ringing but I just sat there like I’d been punched in the face. Who knows how many times Dave had called, how many times I’d talked to him without knowing. Maybe a million, it doesn’t make a difference. Not to me it doesn’t. With all the voices, all the strangers, it doesn’t make a difference. They could all be dead, every one of them at the bottom of some lonely bridge, and it wouldn’t make a difference. And all their deaths combined couldn’t make me feel as cold as I did right then. I’d never known after a million calls what Dave had known after just one: what it feels like to recognize a friend’s voice.

I went over to the window and saw him walking across the lot and getting in his car. Traffic followed him as he drove away, the Drag gulping his blue Nissan down with suds of metallic saliva. He disappeared slowly enough to make me think he was still there a half hour later. Then every car started to look the same.

Sidney, you know what’s next for me. You’ve been there: after you’re already gone, after you’ve been gone for a long time already and then there’s that sudden realization that things have been wrong for a very long time. And that’s when it gets bad. For you the sadness is what got worse. For me it will be this coldness. It’s like I’m leaching through a shank of ice, surfing toward the center,hardening, bracing for what it might feel like to freeze while everything merges together in the horizonless tundra. The worst part is I can hardly feel the freeze coming on. I’ve already gotten used to it coming and going, freezing and thawing.

My memories, I think, have begun to write the early chapters of some dark comedy. I might have showered yesterday but most likely I didn’t. Most likely I’ve stayed in bed for the better part of the past three weeks. You can bet I smell—Christ, I smell. But you remember how
it starts to be not so bad, you know, since there’s always that morbid satisfaction. There’s always that. And when it gets out of control you might as well sit back and let go of the reins, sit back and let it make you feel important and serious and infinitely complicated. You can’t stop it. The cold comes and comes and comes, and then you stop eating breakfast.

I need you come over and knock on my door as soon as you read this. You’ve got to come get me out of bed. You’ve got to do this, but don’t do it for me. Do it for them, for anybody and everybody. I mean just look at their faces. Go outside and look at their faces and try to imagine what’s behind them.

Can you feel the weight of their sadness? Can you feel all the sadness of the world crying out for you and you alone?

Christ, I can. I can feel it. I can always feel it. It’s a curse. I can feel it as I’m writing this, coming at me from everywhere. It’s incredible. I can feel it all over my body, every second of every day.

I mean, it’s really something.

Christ, I can hardly breathe when think of all the people who need my help.
Coast to Coast

After the break, Craig continued his story. He tried to hurry through the parts about Danny and his father. In the phone booth’s glass he watched a field of whiskered goose bumps crest along the flanks of his reflected forearms.

“And all of a sudden,” he said, “There I am, lost as can be. I’d been a regular walker of those woods for quite some time, and the woods themselves aren’t even all that confusing to begin with. I mean, it’s a neighborhood. But I’d just opened my eyes—which happens sometimes—and there I was in those black woods. And of course the moonlight was nowhere to be found—but what I’m trying to say, I think, is that when the orbs came on—or exploded, or struck, or what have you, I mean, whatever it is that happened—it meant that I was going to be all right. You see? You see what I’m saying?

“I got out of the woods and I was going to be all right—all this just happened about an hour ago, so it’s all fresh in my mind—but I think it’s important to think of strange things like this as, I don’t know, I mean—in other words, the whole point of all this is, all right, let me put it to you this way: the one thing that people really ought to take away from all this is—”

* * *

Craig’s foster sister wanted him to move out. She was getting married and then she might have kids. There just wouldn’t be room for him.

Every night since the engagement, Craig had summoned the courage—after which, each time, he promptly lost it again—to beg Katie to let him stay. He’d pay rent; he’d make no noise; he’d stay in his room; he’d promise never to play her father’s records; in fact, he’d give them away if that’s what she wanted, or maybe they could sell them in a yard sale. Although some, of course, were priceless.
Katie got in touch with the realtor: they went looking, the three of them, mostly in the neighborhood.

“This is nice,” Katie said about each one. “Isn’t this nice?”

Craig agreed. “Very nice,” he said.

But Craig sensed how badly she wanted him gone. So he decided to leave Toronto.

“Leave Toronto?” Katie protested.

“It’s probably best,” Craig said. “Don’t you think?”

“No, Craig. No, I don’t.”

But her voice was flat and a week later she bought him a car—a silver hatchback—and paid for the U-Haul with a trailer hitch so it could follow along behind. He decided Nashville. Where Katie’s father was buried.

Craig hadn’t gone to the funeral although Katie had asked him to. He should have gone. Her father’s Alzheimer’s had bewildered the doctors with its speed and aggression; after six months, he’d started to forget his daughter’s name—usually at breakfast, as he tried to thank her for pouring his Corn Flakes. By lunchtime he’d remember again.

Every morning, Katie’s father would look across the table at Craig, and letting his Corn Flakes get soggy he would address Craig by name—he’d never once forgotten it—throughout torturous conversations in front of Katie that seemed never-ending. Perhaps, Craig thought, those breakfasts had something to do with why Katie hadn’t come home for so long after her father died. Only after college—and after backpacking the Indian peninsula on her inheritance, during which time she’d fallen in love with a taxi driver in Calcutta—did she finally return. Her career would ultimately keep her in Toronto—she helped emigrants and their families adapt to new lives on foreign soil—and Craig, although he’d been the night manager at a local record store for
over five years, had few practical ties to the city that could not be practically broken. His technical co-ownership of the house was, it seemed, irrelevant, even though Craig he’d looked after the place for nearly a decade by himself: cut the grass every week, shampooed the carpets every month, painted the inside and outside every year. Katie had come home the summer after her freshman year.

Craig had never let on how intensely his heart was affected on all tangible strata by each of her prolonged absences.

True to form, he would leave quietly.

* * *

Craig had few belongings; if not for his waterbed, the U-Haul wouldn’t have been necessary. Katie kept the couches, the dining table, the four bookshelves, even the Papasan chair.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “But the things in this house are all I have left of Dad.”

But she was willing to let him keep the waterbed, which had also been her father’s.

“Really, Craig, it’s yours,” she said. It was the night before his departure. “Honestly though, I don’t know how you get any sleep on that thing.”

In fact, Craig couldn’t sleep anywhere else; more precisely, the waterbed was the only place where he could dream. He’d discovered the pleasure of dreaming three weeks after Katie’s father died, after Craig had finally mustered the courage to sleep in the dead man’s bed. It was not a fear of ghosts that had delayed him—he would have embraced the apparition of his adoptive father—but he was afraid of what Katie would think if she found out. When she did, her reaction had been neutral. Still, the had shame overwhelmed him.

Watching Katie drain the mattress, he felt this shame return.

“I’ll wait out front,” Craig said, backpedaling into the hallway.
Katie looked up from the mattress. The walls and floors were bare: more ghostly now than it had been as a temporary tomb.

“It’s all right,” Katie said, taking his face in her hands. “This isn’t easy for me either. It isn’t easy at all.”

“I know,” Craig said.

He wanted to seize her and crumple to the floor and afterward to confess everything as they groped one another in a haphazard heap among the folds of the plastic bladder.

“But it’s for the best,” he said. “It was never my home anyway. Not really.”

“More than it was mine,” Katie said quietly.

Then they were silent.

“Thanks for the bed,” he said.

“No,” Katie said. “Thank you for taking it. We’re getting a Tempur-Pedic.”

* * *

The AC in the U-Haul was broken.

July.

He drove with the windows down, which also helped with the cigarette smell—the ash tray had been full when he drove it off the lot—and the wind rushing through the cabin kept him distracted from what was behind him.

Sometimes his eyes jumped to the rear view mirror expecting to catch a glimpse of the interstate: fellow travelers and the steady growth of distance. But each time there was only the gray rear of the trailer.

He’d spent time preparing himself to watch Lake Ontario disappear—his heart jumped when he looked up and saw nothing—but perhaps it was better for his heart.
Bluewater Bridge dumped him beneath the Detroit skyline.

Eerie, for another hundred miles: a steel shadow.

As he leveled off toward the gray hammock of the horizon, the first wave of lethargy took hold, blunting his thoughts. Images of death: Katie’s father, his tombstone (Craig’s imagination had built it from a monolithic slab of pink marble that faced the western sun as it slipped behind the edge of the land, its dusk spectrum trailing behind and splaying across the stone’s glossy surface where the epitaph was written across Craig’s reflection).

It was dark when he reached Cincinnati.

A cool breeze sent a plangent wave of optimism through his veins.

The road dropped into a valley lined by an endless black fence and Kentucky farmhouses ticked by as if the horizon didn’t exist.

He switched on the radio, settling into the hypnotic lullaby of A.M. white noise, the headlights lugging him further into the night. He welcomed the trance: static punctuated by strange voices, numbing, soothing his anxiety. He rolled up the windows. Vestigial vibrations jibed through his cheeks.

The only station with more voices than static featured a call-in show hosted by a man named George Noory. People were calling in from all over the world to report UFO sightings, paranormal activity, and experiences involving life after death. Craig allowed their voices, their stories, and the strange vastness of their community to leach through the cleft hollows of his consciousness.

The present topic: “orbs.” Blinding white lights from a source unknown exploding repeatedly in the sky over France, Greenland, Germany, Australia, Pennsylvania, and now Arizona.
Tom from Arizona was telling George about his windmills: the orbs had come from the clouds above the windmills. No way they were coming from an airplane, he said, because the lights were too bright and the cloud cover was too heavy.

“What do you make of it?” Tom asked.

“Well, Tom” George said, “I can’t say much for sure, except that you’re not alone on this one. Everybody’s been seeing them—twice as many this week as last week, in fact—and all I can tell you at this point is that we’re looking into it.”

Craig had never believed in the supernatural—not even the religious kind—but that was before today, before he’d left Toronto, before his malleability.

“I don’t know what to do,” Tom went on. “I mean, should I be reporting this to somebody?”

“Don’t shoot the messenger,” said George, “But most people will tell you there’s nothing to report.”

“I’m not crazy, George, and I don’t know how else to explain it—they were giant strobe lights, I mean, huge explosions coming from somewhere in the heavy cloud cover—and they didn’t make any noise, either, so it was like my whole property turned into a giant silent disco—and those windmills, George, they’ve been on this property longer than anybody I know’s been anywhere. But that didn’t matter at all because suddenly it’s midnight and all you can see is flashing white monsters dancing like some poor pagan bastard’s about to get sacrificed—”

“Tom, will you do me a favor and stay on the line a sec?” George asked. “We have to take a break, but I’ve got some literature you might be interested in.”

“Sure, George, I’ll hang on.”

“Thanks for your call, Tom,” George said. “And keep an eye out for us, bud.”
“It’s the fourth time this month,” said the next caller without introducing herself.

George was patient with the rapid-fire narrative that followed: She was a single mother living with her three daughters—4, 8, 11—in Anchorage; her husband had left her for a park ranger with whom he now shared an igloo on a floating glacier north of the Yukon.

Four times this month she’d seen the same lights that Tom had described. All four times on cloudy nights; all four nights the explosions had come from the clouds that nightly sat over the alter in her backyard where twenty years ago she and her husband had looked in each other’s eyes and taken their solemn vows.

“At first I thought I was nuts,” she said. “Gone crazy with grief.”

“No,” said George. “You’re not crazy. All right?”

“I’d like to think not,” she said. “Thank you.”

“No, thank you,” George said. “Thank you for calling.”

“Hey, George?” the woman said.

“Yes ma’am?”

“How scared should I be?”

“You shouldn’t,” said George. “I mean, as far as we know, there’s nothing to be scared of. Just make sure your kids know that. Make sure they know it’s probably just one of those strange and beautiful things about the sky, or about heaven.”

“I like the way you put that,” the woman said.

“Well, it’s the truth as far as I know,” George said.
The next caller was a meteorologist from Buffalo, a classmate of George’s from college. First he talked about last night’s thunderstorm, the one that would eventually make its way across all of New York. Then he invited George to participate in a panel discussion at a fulminology conference in September. The topic: ribbon lightning. But as a general rule these topics were flexible. He thought it would be a perfect forum to generate scientific interest in a number of phenomena recently discussed on George’s show.

“It’s in Palo Alto,” said the meteorologist. “And as I recall, your wife loves the west coast.”

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*Station Identification.*

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Craig’s heart gave an inexplicable cry of joy when George accepted his friend’s invitation. The sensation was strange enough to make him switch off the radio and ride for a while in silence.

***

Kentucky: emptiness, black and dead, opening its jaws, swallowing his heart. He was thinking about parallel dimensions when his high beams washed over a giant billboard: *Welcome to Tennessee.*

***

His new home, squatting at the end of a cul-de-sac, straddled a hill that backed up to a water tower. Staggered blue lattice work clung faded and peeling to all sides of the split level. Renovation plans stoked his tired imagination as he parked the U-Haul at the curb. Katie
had chosen the house, flown to Nashville, and then returned with the paperwork a day later. She’d calculated his price range based on information to which he’d not been privy.

A white fog huddled between the dull buttresses at the four corners of the porch. The canopy overhead sagged with pockets of warped wood where a community of hives, nests and webs had claimed their real estate. The property jutted into the forest, surrounded by a wall of pines, an isthmus in the evergreen ocean that swelled alongside it.

Craig crossed the driveway to the porch where an iron rocker, marooned by its owner, promised to do its best. He sat and watched the moon dangle over the pines: a yellow peephole in the blackness.

He rocked back and forth, considering whether he was too tired to unpack.

The waterbed, at least, he could manage.

He unlatched the trailer and parked the hatchback in the driveway. There was no garage. He lugged the components of the bed—bladder, rails, rail pads, safety lining, water pump, the two ends of the headboard followed by the heavy sternum, its midriff studded with a pear-shaped mirror—into the house.

The frayed navy carpet was black in the windowless hallway. Snowy deposits of sawdust topped the floors in the living and dining rooms. The drywall was splintered in places, hemorrhaging its foamy pink innards. The ash-strewn ledge of the fireplace held an ancient set of iron pokers. The ceiling fan’s lone blade clocked through the undisturbed air, a wagging finger thoroughly ignored.

A journey to the small bedroom and back sapped the last of his energy in the claustraphobic heat. Each room was denser and muggier than the last, and Craig discovered after
a cloying sweat had formed from chin to chest that the house also possessed a broken AC unit. He almost laughed and then he did. The prospect of labor was comforting.

He decided, as some kind of self-examination of his own fortitude, that he would leave the bed unassembled and sleep on the floor. He made a pallet of blankets and lay uncovered on his back in the dark.

Later he got up and plugged in the telephone.

Half an hour passed before it rang. He listened—another test—and after the third ring he unplugged it.

He fell into a peaceful sleep, untroubled for several hours. He opened his eyes just before dawn. His body was in mid-air—lifting up, springing forward, activating his feet—and when his agency returned he found that he was standing upright in the living room, his figure framed by the floor-to-ceiling windows whose open Venetian blinds—caked and mangled on their hooks—were open to a seamless barrage of pulsing white lights that volleyed through the room in giant blasts, lancing through the glass, waltzing over the walls and the carpet and the ashy fireplace, filling every room with its blinding transparency and its heavy, ticklish heat, hot on Craig’s skin, blazing and searing from its source within the low-hanging clouds: low and thick, wrapping like a gray crown over the pine walls where the yellow eye of the moon punched its pastel hole through the strobes of white dancing chaos.

* * *

The next morning he got up and brought the coffee maker inside. He drank three cups, rocking and watching the sun tilt over the treetops, the dream fading, its visions replaced by the morning’s glaze of smoky oranges and pinks.
After unloading the rest of his things, he took the U-Haul to Home Depot and spent the afternoon trolling the aisles for raw material. He left the store with twice the cargo volume of what he’d left Toronto with.

He planted six rosebushes under the front windows with mulch from the yard’s pine leavings and healthy Bermuda grass. A lolling cloud of gnats regarded him from the porch; beyond the cloud, an alleystripe of lawn: a narrow artery between the southern face of the house and the low thickets of poison ivy and pine scrub verging on the deep woods. He lashed a crescent-shaped trellis of interwoven wood, grapevine, and sweet peas to the graybrick siding, and diced up the noxious ivy with his new pair of sheers. As a running board of sorts to underline the latticework, he planted rhododendrons bedded with aged compost. He uprooted the eroded wooden mailbox and laid the foundation for a taller, wider, mortared one. He mowed the lawn—his mower was the push kind, since Katie had needed to keep the riding one for the much bigger yard in Toronto—and he swept the porch with a dust mop he found in the hall closet under an abandoned colony of cobwebs—and he bathed the iron rocker in a lemony coating of Pine Sol—on the west side of the house, he replaced the AC filter and re-filled its dry and wheezing oasis with fresh antifreeze: listening to the motor come to life, going inside and cranking the thermostat down to a sweat-tingling sixty, plopping down on the carpet which tomorrow he would rip out and replace along with the beaches of plywood, enjoying a glass of ice-cold lemonade.

** * * * **

A spat of rest.
Katie’s sand-dressed feet, bare and glinting as her figured ebbs along the Ontario shoreline: ghostly smile backturned and wry and beaming down from the Ghery stairwell and disappearing into the rafters of the gallery where Craig stands: head upturned and staring.

Soft arm, pale, feathery, hooked loosely through his: anchoring his soul to the Molson lawn while the distant stage lights strobe like heaven opening and closing its giant windows onto the amphitheatre where he’s huddled close to some kind of father shielding his adolescent body from roaring crowds, from the sister slowly airbrushing his frustrated heart with cataracts and confusion and the slinking harmonies of a five piece band whose players leash his ears to a sound that feels, at least for the duration of his first concert, more placeless than his own strange sense of self.

He switched on the radio and set about re-stowing the swards of pink entrails spilling from the gutted lime plaster of the living room drywall. He puttied, speckled, primed, and then sheathed the hallway in a beige tongue-and-groove wainscoting: as the sun dipped below the treeline and spilled forth a pastel horizon, this struck him as the most unnecessary project he’d ever undertaken.

Betting on the longevity of the dusklight, he mounted an extension ladder with a crate of roof shingles cradled on his forearms. He hobbled up one side of the hemisection that appeared to rise—deceptively—from the perimeter’s straightest and most manageable angle.

In his periphery the gilded speckles of the Nashville skyline leached upward at the filmy clouds.

Then he was falling: a mattress of air spreading out beneath his back for what seemed
like forever, his life condensing and lapsing by in a long instant as he watched the shingles flutter downward, turtling toward him, a buckshot of drab confetti.

His lolling elbow tagged the drainage gutter, which clattered against the side of the house and landed in the flower bed, and then he surfed through an echelon of pine branches before smacking against their trunk, spinning wildly, coming to rest face down in a bed of dry brown needles.

The air left his lungs; an insistent pain crept slowly into his arm where he’d felt a pop; the shingles rained down on his back, driving away his will to care about whatever was bound to happen next.

His awareness crawled back with the sound of a shrill voice and a pair footsteps plodding across the yard to where Craig lay sprawled with his left elbow somehow pinned under his belly.

“I’m all right,” Craig tried to say. Garbling incoherent spats of sod.

“You fell off the roof!” the kid was saying.

“Nonsense,” Craig said, not much of one for sarcasm otherwise.

“Wait!” the kid shouted. “Don’t move! I’ll call somebody. I’ll call Dad. We live just down the street. I’ll run inside and use your phone and call Dad, so you just wait here.”

The kid bolted off in the direction of the front door, hopping over the downed gutter and bounding across the cemented porch.

Craig forced his head up, catching sight of the kid’s overturned bicycle in the street as pain rocketed from his arm to the base of his neck.

“No, hold on a minute,” he grunted. “Don’t go in there. I’m just fine. Gimme a sec. Here. I’m all right.”
He rolled onto his back and leveraged himself forward in a half-crab walk with his good arm. The mule-eyed kid spun around to watch: he was about ten years old, dark-skinned, with some kind of accent. Maybe Indian, maybe Middle-Eastern, maybe not.

“Sir,” said the kid, “You don’t really look all that fine to me.”

“No, no, I’m fine,” Craig said.

“Your arm looks, I mean, it looks pretty broken to me.”

“It’s just bruised probably.”

“Yes, sir, but I think it’s broken too.”

Craig snailed over to the ladder, which was still standing, and heaved his hand to the nearest rung, not sure what he was preparing to do.

“I’m fine,” he repeated, but then he lost his grip and slumped down into the mulch. He looked up and the kid was gone. When he stepped back out, Craig hadn’t moved an inch.

“Sir, the ambulance is on the way.”

At the hospital they put Craig’s arm in a cast up to his elbow.

“See, I told you it was broken,” the kid said. Then he added, “Sir.”

The kid had ridden along in the ambulance, which was expensive and unnecessary, and now he sat watching as they wrapped him with purple gauze.

“Yeah, well, you were right,” Craig said.

“I’m Danny,” said the kid, holding out his hand and shaking the arm not being wrapped.

“Thanks for your help, Danny. I’m Craig.”

When the nurse was finished, she left the room and the two of them were left alone while they waited for the doctor.

“Do your parents know you’re here?” Craig asked.
“No, sir,” Danny said. “On Monday nights I’m supposed to be at soccer practice.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I’m supposed to be on the soccer team,” Danny said.

“But you aren’t on the soccer team?”

“No, sir.”

“Why aren’t you on the soccer team?”

“Sir, if you don’t mind, I’d rather not talk about soccer.”

Craig shrugged. “All right then.”

They were silent for a minute and then Craig asked, “But what do you do every Monday night?”

Danny stared at the floor and then let out a painful sigh. “I don’t know. Mostly ride my bike around. Nothing, really.”

The doctor, smiling down at his clipboard, strolled through the curtain and told Craig that he’d most likely suffered a concussion and would need to have X-rays.

“If you want, you can come over to my house,” Craig said. “If you need to kill some time, I mean.”

Danny thought about this for moment.

The doctor, frowning, looked up from his clipboard and waited for Danny’s answer.

“All right,” Danny said. “Dad would want me to be friendly with a new neighbor.”

“Excellent,” said the doctor, but Danny wasn’t finished:

“Can I borrow your pen?” he asked the doctor, who exhaled a gust of mock-patience and handed it over.
Craig knew what the doctor wanted to talk about and it would involve money he didn’t have, which meant it would involve Katie and probably her husband.

Danny pulled off the cap with his teeth and bent forward, a look of grave concentration stoking his features. He held Craig’s arm with his right hand; with his left, he signed his name—of which Danny must have been its American derivative—along the topside of the cast.

“Thanks,” he said, and gave the doctor back his pen.

* * *

It was dark when the cab dropped them off. Craig paid with the last of his cash. The ladder was still leaning against the house. He took it down and Danny helped him gather up the scattered shingles. They stacked them in three columns on the side of the house. Then they went inside.

Craig poured two glasses of leftover lemonade. Since there was no furniture besides the dissembled waterbed, they sat together on the graybrick ledge that protruded from the mouth of the fireplace.

Craig looked sidelong at his new friend who, Craig sensed, was not one for being looked at. He was small for his age. Craig felt a surge of compassion for the kid. He remembered, partly, what it was like to be Danny’s age: three decades ago, terrified of everything that wasn’t inside himself, memories coated with an unidentifiable shame. Then he caught his reflection in the window: smooth features, perhaps even infantile, permanent pockets of disseminated baby fat, light blonde beard in need of a trim.

“Can I ask you a question?” Danny asked.

“All right,” said Craig.

“And you promise not to get mad?”
“Do you think I’ll get mad?”

“I don’t know.”

“All right,” said Craig. “You can ask me whatever you want, but then you have to tell me why you’ve been lying to your parents about soccer.”

Danny thought about this for minute. Then he said nothing.

A few minutes later he said he had to go and he thanked Craig for the lemonade.

Then he stopped at the front door and said he would come back the next day.

* * *

It was three days before he came back. In the meantime, Craig had postponed his work on the house to rest his arm. He listened to the radio or to his records and he battled with the urge to use the phone.

He mostly sat cross-legged on the floor next to the pieces of his waterbed, sometimes resting his forehead on the cool surface of the windowpane, sometimes watching the sun rise, sometimes watching it set, half expecting the mysterious lights to return before Danny ever would.

But then on the third day, Danny’s bike rattled up the driveway followed by the meek taps of his knock.

Once inside, Danny said:

“All right, it’s a deal.”

“All right then,” said Craig. “Ask away.”

Danny leaned back against the fireplace, making a clean break from Craig’s periphery.

“Is there something, I mean, is there something wrong with you?” he asked.
“How do you mean?” asked Craig, rather than going down the list of possible answers that instantly came to mind.

“I mean in general. Anything in general.”

Craig sipped his lemonade and thought of Tom’s windmills. Then he said:

“Yes. There is. I’m an orphan.”

“Really?” Danny asked.

“Yes, really,” Craig said.

“What happened to your parents?”

“I don’t know anything about them,” Craig said. “They didn’t want me.” After he said this, Craig realized it was probably true. His inadvertent honesty was painful, but it felt good, too, the way a crisp scab feels when you peel it back for the first time.

“You want to start a fire?” Craig asked.

Danny didn’t say anything.

Craig got up and went outside. He came back with an armful of kindling and stuffed it into the mouth of the fireplace. Then he lit a match and held the flame to a clump of dry pine needles.

“I’m pretty sure my Dad doesn’t want me,” Danny said, finally looking up from his glass.

“At least not very much.”

As the flames spread through the neighborhood of needles, a train of thin billows escaped: lolling upward to the fan’s lurching finger.

“I can’t believe that,” Craig said. “Nope, I don’t believe it for a second.”

“No, sir, I probably wouldn’t either, if I were you. But it’s true all the same.”
Craig slid the rusty screen closed but something was blocking the tracks so it wouldn’t shut all the way and smoke continued to pinch through the small sliver.

“All right,” Craig said. “But what makes you think that?”

“I haven’t always thought it,” said Danny. “Only after Mom died. That was last year. She had cancer—melanoma, the kind you get from sunburns—and anyway after Mom died, Dad just got different, like there was something wrong all the time, in general, just something wrong with him all the time.”

The he narrated an abridged version of his family’s history: his mother and father had grown up in Iraqi Kurdistan, where they’d agreed never to raise their children. The Gulf Wars, though Craig knew little about them, nevertheless crossed his mind. When he asked, Danny said that his parents had prayed for a miracle and received one and emigrated to the U.S. prior to the worst of the genocide, although many of their relatives hadn’t been as fortunate. His parents had come to Nashville because it had the highest Kurdish population in America, a statistic which had been important to Danny’s father before the death of his wife.

“Me playing soccer is his latest thing,” Danny said. “It doesn’t make any sense, I know. But in his mind I guess it does. I was always closer to Mom than I was with him—I think he always felt, I mean, I think he thought we didn’t really want to include him in a lot of things—“

Craig inhaled two nostrils full of smoke and Danny paused to allow for his coughs.

“—And now that she’s gone, he wants to force me to include him in everything, because maybe he feels like if he doesn’t really know me, I mean, if he doesn’t know what kind of kid I am on the inside then he won’t be able to protect me just like he couldn’t protect Mom.”

Danny’s voice flirted with a matter-of-fact tone, but not out of indifference or cruelty or anything like that—it was simply the sound of a practiced heart’s self-rehearsal.
“That’s where I go, instead of soccer practice,” Danny said. “I ride my bike over to the cemetery. Dad never goes, but I go every week. It feels good, I mean, talking to Mom and pretending she can hear me.”

The fire whistled away the remains of the pine needles: the heat rising up their backs, warming their silences.

Then Danny left again and promised to return the next day.

Three days later, his bike appeared at the end of the driveway. Their conversation resumed as before, the three-day intermission a figment of their co-imagination.

“It sounds to me like your father loves you very much,” Craig said.

“He does, maybe,” said Danny. “But if that’s true, if he does, then it’s not the kind of love that people usually think about, or want.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, I mean, do you think your father loved you? Your real father?”

“He couldn’t have,” Craig said. “How could he have?”

“There, see, you wouldn’t understand.”

Craig couldn’t think of what to say, but he figured anything was better than nothing.

“Do you want to talk about your mother?” he asked.

“No,” Danny said. Then he said, “She was beautiful.” He said nothing for a moment and then continued, “She was everything Dad isn’t. Nice, gentle, patient, loving. All that.”

Danny paced around the room, his eyes crawling over the rows of cardboard boxes and their painstakingly specific black Sharpie labels: *Stratego, Risk, and Other Military Board Games; Compact Discs Featuring American Musicians from Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas: Last Names A-L; Compact Discs Featuring American Musicians from*
“And Mom didn’t laugh,” Danny went on, “When I told her I wanted to be a farmer when I grow up.”

“Why would she?” Craig asked.

“I don’t know,” Danny said.

“Did your father laugh?”

“No,” said Danny, and then added, “No, Dad didn’t laugh.”

They were quiet for a minute and then Craig asked if Danny wanted to help put together the waterbed.

In the bedroom they corralled the bulbous skin of the mattress from all sides with the varnished oak tressing of the heavy frame. Starting with the footplanks they took their uncoordinated time levering down each slat into the corresponding groove, after which came the mirror-encased headboard whose sternum was impossible to balance level with the proposed bolts and after much fruitless expenditure ended up getting left against the wall to await, reflection in tow, further instructions.

* * *

It was dark when Craig attached the hose; Danny had gone home; the movement of the moonlight wrapped the trees in the slow berth of its glow.
Craig was sitting on the floor: one hand on the phone, the other hand—cast-hand—piggybacking the undulations of the thick plastic, riding the fluid pulse of the current whose waves beat ceaselessly against the asylum walls of its heart.

* * *

“The man who adopted me was a songwriter,” he said. “He’s gone now, but when he was alive he wrote some of the best music you ever heard, I mean, the kind of music you can play when the world looks like it might bury you, and you can listen to his songs, and they always have a way of making you realize that life, or all the world out there, or anything else, is never really as hopeless as it may seem.”

Danny leaned forward and the moonlight coming through the mangled Venetian blinds licked across his dark face; for a moment, the fire nipping at Craig’s back turned suddenly into a weight much heavier than the sensation of its heat—a strange immaterial burden bearing down on his heart with the force of some lovely simplicity.

“Could we listen to some of it?” Danny asked.

“Absolutely we can, yeah, absolutely,” Craig said, going over to a stack of boxes near the kitchen. He sifted through the boxes, clawing off duck tape and ripping them open one by one. Then he returned to the fireplace with a record player and a stack of albums, the flamelight catching their covers: a shadowboxing luster of Stetsons, stallions, and boots. Craig spread them out on the brick surface and examined the track listings.

“Country music?” Danny asked with only a hint of contempt.

Craig smiled as he pulled a record from its sleeve: with a breath the groundsheat of dust went skimming off the vinyl surface, amassing in a brown cloud and mingling with the smoke and puffing against the hearthscreen wire.
“You betcha,” Craig said. “Nashville produces the greatest musical artists in the world. But I guess you probably knew that already.”

“Tell me you’re pulling my leg,” Danny said.

“Nope,” Craig said. “I am not, I am not.”

“You really do have a screw or two lose, don’t you?”

“O’ye of little faith!”

“You got that right.”

Before he lowered the needle, Craig launched into a multi-layered biography of the cultural significance of country and Western music in the United States, “Not the least of which stems from the fact that it combines the best of Western European music with the best of gospel and folk music in America,” he said.

He put aside Katie’s father’s work and fished out an Ed Allen album.

“Every instrument,” Craig said as Allen’s trumpet became audible, “Every last one comes from a different dot on the map.”

Now listen to this,” he said, replacing Allen’s trumpet with DeFord Bailey’s harmonica.

Craig relished his rote eloquence, repeating for Danny word for word the history lesson Katie’s father had given him every evening at his bedside after retiring his guitar, to be strummed again another day to Craig’s delight and Katie’s disgust: Katie, Craig later discovered,

1“Its earliest roots could be found in Celtic music from the eighteenth century. Their descendents settled in the southern Appalachians, and in the early twentieth century these musicians joined forces with other immigrant groups, and Appalachian string bands started popping up all over the south.

“Fiddlers from Ireland, mandolineers from Italy, guitarists from Spain, dulcimer players from Germany, banjo players from West Africa—listen here, Danny, the diversity of country music is absolutely mind-boggling, you better believe it.”

2 “Which is why, in the 1940s,” he continued, “They had to stop calling it hillbilly music, and start calling it country. It spoke for everybody, and everybody spoke for it.”
had been keeping a secret stash of cotton balls under her bed all those years, routinely plugging her ears and waiting for the day when her father’s music, her memories of the road, and the endless caravan of concerts that trumpeted the line of her childhood, would return quietly to the history it came from.

“Canada never had anything like it,” Craig went on. “Of course, I only know all this because my father-in-law was a songwriter for Eddy Arnold.”

Katie’s father had always been kind, even respectful, to the orphaned Craig. They’d met for the first time when Craig was six—he’d wandered, not remembering how or why, to the top of the CN Tower—this was when it was still the world’s tallest building—where Katie’s father found him standing alone with his tiny hands pressed against one of the massive glass windows, gazing indifferently upon the steel mosaic of the feral metropolis. “Dad,” Katie had said, “I think he’s lost.” Craig had heard the story a million times, but the only part he could remember for himself was the sound of Katie’s voice—his first experience, perhaps, of music. The memory came to him later when he was at the orphanage; feeling again the way his heart had felt—I think he’s lost—with his eyes glued to the waxy film of his breath spreading over the skyscraper’s pane and then to the smoked glass of the window adjacent to his bunk as he watched Katie and her father pull away, veer up the block, and vanish. They’d stayed in Toronto as long as they could—Arnold’s writers traveled with his band because the road, he said, offered an atmosphere conducive to their kind of writing—but Katie’s father had called early and often to check on the mysterious orphan and eventually, finally, a year and half later (because nobody could find Craig’s parents and because Katie’s father had always wanted a son) he came back for him. And then he bought a house.

Then suddenly Danny said:
“I am so *fucked.*”

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Time passed indiscriminately. Trains of thought collided in his head, exploding like the sky in a fury of blind chaos quite unfiltered and meaningless. He’d been a fool about the whole thing.

Katie.

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*Station identification.*

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He stood frozen in the doorway. There was a slight breeze. The iron rocker tilted, newly greased, polished, silent.

Danny mounted his bike and gave a few pedals. Then he coasted up the driveway.

“I’m sorry,” he said. His voice buckled. A dogged, tapered lump of innocence was lodged somewhere in his throat: the charred remains of whatever had been taken from his heart, Craig thought, at least a year too soon.

“It isn’t your fault,” Danny continued.

Craig said nothing.

“I’ve got to go. I liked the music.”

He spun the bike around.

“I’ll come back tomorrow.”

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Craig took a step forward.

Danny stopped and looked back over his shoulder.
“Are you all right?” Danny asked.

“Me?” Craig said.

“Are you going to be all right tonight?”

“I’ll be fine,” Craig said. Then he said, “Of course I’ll be fine.”

“All right then,” said Danny. Then he pedaled off.

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Danny didn’t come back. Craig imagined the worst and his imagination kept him idle. He was running out of money and needed to find a job but he couldn’t bring himself to leave the house.

A month later, his cast came off. On his way home from the hospital, he passed by Danny’s house. Danny was riding his bike up and down the driveway. He glanced up from the handlebars and made eye contact. Craig tapped the brakes and started to roll down the window, but Danny had already u-turned. Then he disappeared into the garage.

***

Craig had just gotten to sleep when several loud knocks woke him. He sat up and looked around. Light streamed through the open blinds. He’d slept in his clothes.

Craig went out to the living room and peered through the blinds. The knocking stopped. He craned his head around the doorway. Through a slit in the blinds: a pair of squinty brown eyes.

Craig opened the door: the man on his porch was obviously Danny’s father. His black hair was slicked across his forehead and parted neatly to one side. A wicker basket hung from his arm. His thin, baggy pants spattered in the breeze as he took a step back and stood up straight and looked Craig in the eye.
“This is for you,” said Danny’s father, holding out the basket. It held a carton of imported cigarettes and two Tupperware containers full of pinkish yogurt.

“I don’t smoke,” Craig said, taking the basket and setting it down in the foyer.

Danny’s father lit a cigarette and flicked the match into the flower bed. He took a long drag while he squinted at Craig, putting his weight on one leg and then the other: dancing, it seemed.

“It isn’t difficult,” said Danny’s father.

“What isn’t?” Craig asked.

“To smoke. It isn’t difficult.”

“That’s not why I don’t smoke,” Craig said.

“You’re a strange man, no?” Danny’s father said.

“Strange? I don’t know. What do you mean?”

“I think, yes, a little strange.”

“Isn’t everybody?” Craig asked.

Danny’s father laughed at this for a long time, shaking his head, swaying back and forth, raising his cigarette and resting his elbow in his hand and then taking a long drag as he came to a standstill and studied Craig’s face.

“Here,” said Danny’s father. “Give it a try.” He pulled a cigarette from his pack and offered it to Craig, who instinctively took it. Danny’s father lit a match and motioned for Craig to hold the cigarette between his lips. Craig obeyed.

“There you have it,” said Danny’s father. “Good man.”

Craig took a long pull from his cigarette, collecting the smoke in his mouth and then flushing it down to his lungs without coughing.
“Thank you,” Craig said.

“My pleasure,” Danny’s father said. “Enjoy.”

An awkward silence took over as they finished their cigarettes and watched the sun lift over the wall of giant pines.

When Danny’s father reached the filter, he crushed it on the balustrade and flicked it into the flower bed. It landed next to the spent match.

“Listen,” said Danny’s father. “You know who I am?”

Craig nodded and coughed some sort of response.

“Good,” said Danny’s father. “And you will accept the basket?”

“Yes,” Craig said, struggling with his lightheadedness. He stubbed out his cigarette on the welcome mat. “Thank you,” he said. “Thank you very much.”

“Good man,” said Danny’s father.

“I’m Craig,” he said, extending his hand.

Danny’s father waved him off. “No, no,” he said. “Not necessary. Today only.”

Craig retracted his hand and sat back on his heels.

“You accept the basket,” Danny’s father said. “And you agree to have no future contact with Darav.”

It took Craig a moment to realize that Darav was Danny.

“I don’t understand,” Craig said, taking a step back and steadying himself on the edge of the doorframe. “Did I do something wrong?”

“It isn’t relevant,” said Danny’s father. “Maybe you did, maybe you didn’t. But these are my wishes. Am I understood then?”

Craig nodded.
“Good man.” Then he turned and walked away. At the edge of the street, he turned back and said, “It will be unnecessary for me to take further action?” he asked.

“No,” Craig said. “It won’t be necessary.”

“Good man.” Then he disappeared down the street.

* * *

After it was dark he went for a walk to clear his head. He started on the street and then veered off into the forest.

He walked for hours. His mind, unhinged, carried him forth.

Sometimes all it took to break his heart on nights like this was the idea of families: the very notion of fathers and sons, neither of which he’d been nor would he ever be.

He also tried to accept the fact that he would never see Danny again. Back home he’d had no friends outside the record store. His coworkers were nice and polite. But he wasn’t about to force it.

He regretted not asking Danny to visit the cemetery with him.

* * *

The orbs came back, again and again. Each time they were more real and each time they stayed longer, sometimes for hours. It became impossible to deny their reality and he couldn’t forget them in the morning.

They stayed with him, vividly, uniquely, each one different, each one the same.

Craig watched them arrive from the front window.

Sometimes he went outside and wandered the street, looking for other witnesses. But every night, despite the brilliance of what he saw, despite the searing heat and the blinding light, all the other houses stayed silent. They seemed empty but of course they weren’t. Families lived
in them. During the day they walked the streets, checked the mail, ran errands, boarded school buses.

Would they also sleep through twin tornados ripping through the neighborhood?

He tried calling George Noory’s program. He could never get through but he kept trying.

And every night he tuned in: more and more sightings poured in from all over the world.

Eventually out of frustration he called the phone company and told them to discontinue his service. He could use the money anyway.

* * *

As they stood in the shadow of his near-empty trailer: Craig wanted her to see hard poise in his eyes. Perhaps indifference.

He wouldn’t allow himself a kiss. Their harmless kisses were what he’d miss most. Better keep the last one in a memory older than today.

* * *

When he left the house again, he didn’t recognize much.

His house, his garden, the mailbox he’d built—already he was coming unhinged, molecules of his identity careening forth, soaring undifferentiated into the horizon—and then opening its jaw, peering into its mouth, reaching, extracting, coming back into himself.

* * *

It was his first piece of mail. He turned it over in his hands, held it—under the sun if day, the orbs if night—and reading the black letters neatly traced thereon, he remembered the feel, the smell, the sight of the soft hands of its author.

It was a thick manila envelope from Katie. He opened it. Inside he found a typed letter
and a contract: Katie and her husband had decided to sell the house. They needed Craig’s signature.

He drove to the Shell station at the end of the block. There was a payphone by the curb, flanked on one side by AIR and on the other by WATER. He stepped into the booth with a pocket full of quarters and dialed Katie’s number.

“Christ, Craig!” she said. “I was worried about you. Thank God you’re all right.”

“I’m fine,” he said.

“Well thank God,” she said again.

“Why are you selling the house?” Craig asked.

“Don’t be upset,” she said. “Please, Craig?”

“But that’s our home,” he said.” That’s my home.”

“I know, I know. And you’ll get your share of it, I promise. We talked it over and we think it’s only fair.”

“Shouldn’t I have a say in this?” he asked.

“Jesus, Craig, if you wanted a say then you should have picked up your phone for God’s sake.”

“I know,” he said. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Well it’s too late now. We’re selling, Craig, and all you need to do is sign the papers and put them in the mail. I put some stamps in there. Did you find the stamps?”

“I found the stamps.”

“Good.”

“I loved you,” Craig said. He was instantly sorry he’d said it.

“Jesus, Craig.”
“I’m sorry.”

“If you loved me,” Katie said, “Then you’d sign.”

“I can’t,” he said.

“Yes, Craig, you most certainly can.”

She let out a long sigh that blasted through his ear. He held his breath. How could she do this?

Finally he said, “I’m coming back to Toronto.”

Another sigh.

“Katie, did you hear me? I’m coming home.”

“Yes, I heard you.”

It was silent for a moment, and then she said:

“Craig, I’m pregnant.”

He’d known it would happen.

“That’s why we’re moving,” she went on.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“That’s why we’re moving,” she went on.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“The schools, for one thing. They aren’t the same as when we were growing up. Please, Craig. Do this for me. For your future nephew. We need the money. And I’m sure you do, too. Have you found a job? Craig?”

“I’m coming home,” he said again.

“Wait,” Katie said. “Craig, if you don’t sign the papers, then I can’t let you have anything to do with my children. If you can’t think of my children now, then I can’t let you be their uncle in the future.”

Craig hung up.
Coins tinkered through the bowels of the machine as he exited the booth.

* * *

He opened his eyes. He was in the forest, the moonlight nearly extinguished by the ceiling of pines. He felt his way through the trees, fighting the stirs of panic’s onset. The moon: hidden behind cloud, behind pine. He was wandering from one end of a windowless room to the other and back again—ever-widening circles—because there was no difference between inside and outside and after all how could there be?

* * *

It took the rest of his cash to fill the hatchback’s tank. When he got there he would figure the rest out.

He wished Katie’s father were still alive. Craig planned on telling him that—I wish you were still alive—when he visited.

He would stop there on his way out of town. The shame, of course, would be unbearable.

* * *

The blacktop hooked around the Woodlawn chapel, a long white cross, and sidled against the curb beyond which the tombstones stretched into the graygreen country.

Craig got out and started walking.

Backpack plus duffel.

The lawn was mostly empty. Cloud cover blocked the sun and made room for a breeze. It was dark to the east and getting darker. He’d get wet, probably.

Katie’s father’s plot: a modest stone several rows from Eddy Arnold’s. The white fingers of a dogwood tree curled overhead. Craig’s heart stirred. It stirred and then it settled. Then he felt calm. He began to talk.
“Well,” he said, letting the backpack slide to the ground. He dropped to one knee. “Looks like a comfortable place.”

The eastern sky whispered something and the breeze sang out through the dogwood blossoms as white petals ticked by, some landing atop the stone. Then it thundered.

“There’s a lot to say,” Craig continued. “Mostly it’s unsayable things. But probably all the things in the world that need to be said—I mean, really need to be said—are all unsayable things.”

He didn’t bring flowers. Everybody brought flowers. Instead he brought records. But as it happened, Woodlawn Memorial was the preferred final destination for most of Nashville’s musicians. Craig was far from the first to have the records idea.

“One thing I do know,” he said, unzipping the duffel bag and taking out the vinyls, propping the first few up against the stone’s façade—*songwriter, father, Canadian hillbilly*—and fanning the rest out on the ground, “One thing I do know is that I owe you an apology. I shouldn’t have been up in that building that day. I shouldn’t have been put on you like that.”

A car hummed past, echoing, carrying the distance, followed by the aching lull of thunder.

“Forgive me for being there,” Craig said. “And when you talk to Katie, tell her for me—tell her that if I could take it all back, I would, and I never would have been there. I never would have taken you from her.”

The thin air turned heavy, moist, soft.

Craig crushed the air from the empty duffel. Zipped it shut.

“Tell me what to do,” Craig said as he got to his feet and brushed himself off. “Please.”
A chilly dampness slicked across his cheek. He shouldered the backpack and waited. But all there was to hear was the rain.

* * *

Goodbye was extenuating circumstances. Grounds for breaking the agreement. He had, however, eaten the pink yogurt.

The doorbell didn’t say anything when he pushed it. Maybe only the inside could hear it. He waited and pushed it again.

He’d have to put the boxes down to knock.

Plus he was afraid to knock.

* * *

He wasn’t sure if it was fear or relief that washed over his body when directly above his head some great and invisible sky-cannon discharged and its explosion showered the forest with the force of its light and its thunder that thrust him to his knees as though a giant palm was pressing down on his back like the broadside of a hatchet, and for a moment as he was falling forward, covering his ears, penitent under the light that rushed down and spread over the forest floor, hot and tingling where his forehead came to rest on a pallet of dry needles, he could see the world through Katie’s eyes, through a mother’s eyes, and a father’s, and suddenly he knew—although he didn’t quite understand it—why he was something to be hated plus feared plus protected from.

He stumbled forward, careful not to look directly at the light, fearing blindness, though in front of him everything was white and clear and he could see the tree line approaching where it opened onto the road. It was after midnight. The rows of houses bathed in the unforgiving illumination yet were silent, sleepy, safe.
“Craig from Toronto, you’re on Coast to Coast. What’s on your mind tonight?”


“Where to this time?” George asked.

“I’m not sure yet. I really don’t know.”

“Well,” said George, “Best of luck with the big decision.”

“Thanks.”

“What’s on your mind tonight, Craig-in-transit?”

“Lots of things,” Craig said. “Really just a ton of things are on my mind, and I don’t really have anybody to talk to about any of it.”

“All right then, Craig, let’s hear it.”

“Well, first of all,” Craig said, “I was listening to your program a few weeks ago, maybe a month ago, maybe a year—I haven’t been paying much attention to time—and you had a couple of callers—I’ll get to them in a minute—and then you and a friend of yours got to talking about this conference in California—you said your wife was fond of the West coast, I remember that—and anyhow, what I was wondering was whether or not there’s still tickets available for this conference and if so I was wondering how much they cost. Probably, see, I’m planning on coming.”

Without missing a beat, George said:
“Folks, what I believe Craig’s referring to is the fulminology conference in Palo Alto this coming September. Is that right, Craig?”

“Yes, I think so. Yeah, that’s right.”

“For listeners unacquainted with the fulminological arts and sciences—what we’re talking about here is basically the scientific study of lightning. It’s fascinating stuff, to be quite honest, and the conference—you can find all the details on our website—the conference, keep your fingers crossed, should live up to its phenomenal topic.”

“I’m really looking forward to it,” Craig said. And then he realized this was true.

“Well, so am I Craig, so am I. After your call, if you just hang tight a minute we’ll get you fixed right up.”

“That’s great George, thank you,” Craig said. “I’m really looking forward to it.”

George laughed, but not the way most people would have.

“So now then,” said George. “Tell me about the night sky in Nashville, Craig.”

Craig began at the beginning, in Toronto, because somehow it seemed relevant and even when it didn’t, George never interrupted him or requested that he get to the point. Craig narrated his drive through the top half of the States, in particular the midnight stretch of Kentucky that seemed to swallow his brain through a straw, tugging at his soul chained to the lancing forth of his high beams who were slugging him through the fencepost desert.

* * *

He set the boxes down and waited a minute. The car was in the driveway. Lights were on. The doorbell must be broken. All there was to do was knock. Maybe Danny would answer.

He didn’t. The door swung open and Danny’s father looked at him and a big smile crawled ear to ear and he put his hands on his hips.
“Hidee ho good neighbor,” he said.

“Hello,” Craig said, thinking they were suddenly friends.

“This is a pleasant surprise isn’t it?” said Danny’s father.

“Yes,” Craig said, smiling his best friendly smile, “I just wish it wasn’t to say good bye.”

“But we never said hello, did we? Did we, strange neighbor man?” Danny’s father was still beaming, now rocking back and forth on his heels and toes with the rhythm of his talking.

“It wasn’t the friendliest hello back there,” Craig said.

Still rocking and smiling:

“No, no, no, I said it wasn’t a hello. Didn’t I just now say that? Just now, three or four seconds ago?”

“Yes, sir,” Craig said. He was nervous now in a way he hadn’t expected.

“Very good,” said Danny’s father. “So strange neighbor man, you don’t stay in one place too long then? Is that how you roll, as it were?”

“Actually,” Craig said. “My sister—I’m her adopted brother—selling our house and she needs me to sign off on it—“ Craig paused as Danny’s father disappeared around the corner and then came back with cordless phone.

“I’m listening,” said Danny’s father, smiling, rocking, dialing.

“But I don’t want to sell,” Craig went on. “So I’ve got to go back there and stop it from happening.”

“Incredible,” said Danny’s father. “Simply fascinating.” He put the phone to his ear.

Craig could hear it ringing.

“Anyway,” Craig said, “I just came over to ask if I could see Danny—just for a sec—to give him a little going away present. Nothing special really.”
Craig bent down and picked up the box.

* * *

He got back in the car and kept driving. He drove west and kept driving.

At the Missouri border he pulled over at a truck stop. He bought two flags—Tennessee’s and Nashville’s. The latter was red with a blue circle and three stars. The kid at the register said the stars represented East, Middle, and West Tennessee; the blue circle was a symbol of Tennessee’s “grand divisions” united as one. On the Nashville flag, a Native American was standing beside an eagle. He’d changed his mind, of course, about Toronto.

* * *

After they let him go and the lights died down and the night returned and he was out of the trees and back home again: driving to the Shell station to use the payphone.

He set the jar of quarters on the Yellow Pages book.

Quarter after quarter. Half the jar.

He gave his name to the operator and she put him on hold: saxophone, static, cold.

Craig: tank top, pajama pants, half-full quarter jar.

* * *

“I’m terribly sorry but I’m afraid that’s impossible, dear sweet neighbor.” Danny’s father lit a cigarette, permanent smile, permanent rock, elbow resting in the crook of his arm as the ringing went on.

“I figured you’d say that,” said Craig. “So I’ll just leave the box here. It’s just a few albums and things.” He opened the flap and tipped it so Danny’s father could have a look.

“Oh no you don’t, neighbor,” Danny’s father said.

Then came the squeaks of a voice on the other end.
“First of all,” Danny’s father said into the receiver, “Let me tell you about the unpleasant length of time you kept me on hold just now. Much too unpleasant for a police station.”

“All right,” Craig said, “I guess I’ll be going.”

“Hold on a minute,” said Danny’s father. “You’re not leaving without your box.”

“It’s a gift,” Craig said.

“So, wonderful, give it to someone,” Danny’s father said. Then back into the phone: “Yes I want to report a confused and potentially violent trespasser on my property.”

“What?” Craig said.

“That’s right,” said Danny’s father. “And tell them to drive faster than you guys answer your phones. Thank you.” Then he hung up and looked at Craig.

“Were you talking about me?” Craig asked.


Then Danny appeared: stepping into the background from the stairs, facing the door from the other end of the hall.

“Danny!” Craig said, making eye contact.

Danny’s father spun around. Craig made out the side pieces of a steel glare that suddenly occupied the spaces voided by the never-ending smile. Danny looked at his father and shrank around the corner without speaking. Craig took a step forward. Danny’s father was facing him again. The smile was back.

“Why are you doing this?” Craig asked.

“Not for your understanding,” said Danny’s father.

“Please,” Craig begged him. “I want to understand.”
When the lights careened against the front windows, Craig ducked and covered his head, assuming the orbs had gotten brave enough to come out in the early evening. Danny’s father doubled over at the mercy of painful-looking sobs of laughter. Craig turned and saw the car and the two officers opening their doors and coming toward him.

“Please,” Craig said. “Accept the gift.”

“Help! Finally! Christ, what took you so long?” Danny’s father went on.

“Isn’t it against the rules of your culture not to accept gifts?” Craig asked as he backpedaled down the steps.

Danny’s father laughed again.

Then Craig sprinted across the yard. He had to pass the cop car on the way. The officers seemed a bit stunned at first, after Danny’s father shouted hysterically in favor of a chase, they sprang into pursuit.

Craig was faster. He made it home and scooted through the door and the living room to the kitchen where he found the basket: half-full pack of cigarettes, empty Tupperware, squeaky green plastic Easter grass. The cops were pounding on the door. Craig had locked it.

He pocketed the half-full pack of smokes, shouldered the basket, slipped out the back door, ducked into the woods. Like an egg hunt.

He ran through the trees and then came back out on the street. The cops shouted stop. Stop. Hey. Stop. Stop. Stop.

Danny’s father was still in the doorway laughing, but when he saw Craig all the glee went away. As Craig approached, Danny’s father backed into the house and half-closed the door. Craig pushed it open and dumped the basket and the empty Tupperware on the entryway tile.
“No deal,” Craig said.

* * *

After the break, Craig continued his story. He tried to hurry through the parts about Danny and his father.

* * *

It was dusk when he found Danny’s mother two miles east on the other side of the chapel. Her epitaph was barely visible in the rain, which came down harder and harder as the afternoon wore on.

He knelt down by her stone and opened the duffel put the backpack inside it and zipped it shut. Inside the backpack: a letter for Danny, a key to Craig’s house, the Eddy Arnold album.

_Danny—I hope you find this on a Monday at soccer practice. Take care of the house. It needs a good farmer. There’s some flowers under the front windows. Also on the side of the house. Plant anything else. Maybe I’ll come back and we’ll stand in the yard and look at your garden. Or maybe I won’t and you keep the house. Go there when you can’t go anywhere else._

—Craig

He walked back through the rain. Then he drove past the chapel to the road. In the rearview mirror: a family of mourners at the doors.

* * *

As he spoke, he felt the pieces coming together in a strange blob of coherence. In the booth’s glass he watched a field of whiskered goose bumps crest along the flanks of his reflected forearms.

“And all of a sudden,” he said, “There I am, lost as can be in those black woods. And of course the moonlight was nowhere to be found—but what I’m trying to say, I think, is that when
the lights came on—or exploded, or struck, or what have you, I mean, whatever it is that happened—it meant that I was going to be all right. You see? You see what I’m saying? I got out of the woods and I was going to be all right—all this just happened about an hour ago, so it’s all fresh in my mind—but I think it’s important to think of strange things like this as kind of, I don’t know, I mean—in other words, the whole point of all this is, I mean, all right, let me put it to you this way: the one thing that people really ought to take away from all this is—”

* * *

Emerging from the trees and starting down the road, not slowing down and not speeding up and feeling the hot whiteness strobe forth in choppy and irregular beats—its cadence struck him as linguistic—it was impressive after the initial explosion, the way the soundlessness took over.

The sounds of the forest, the mad chirps of nocturnal life: purring owls, crisply bounding families of hooves—all submitted to the collective hush, bound and gagged by the pantomimic frenzy of radiance and the floating and noiseless seizure of a schizophrenic’s chessboard.

And on both sides of the street, the ticking by of the houses: plopped, lifeless in the wind, unaware, unbidden by the strangeness of it all, necessarily heedless and calm under the wild white eyes—eyes of what?—of everything unfiltered by the normal, the sensory, the human? Of immodest molecules desirous of perpetual discharge, of science gone mad or else God or man’s dreams or Martians? Of insanity? Of madness making its rounds? Madness: from its nightly congregations above Tom’s windmills to the forlorn airflows overhanging the Alaskan altar and even to the speckled trailhead of the residential turnaround where Craig’s loafered feet stumbled day after day into the charcoal haze of summer dusks, evenings, nights, hopelessly unstowing the
sloughings of some kind of life, some kind of little parchment of Nashville, netted to the ragged evergreen sutures of a cul-de-sac at the end of the world.

Craig’s little flash of comedy.

His own little spark of madness.

His great and silly adventure underneath a strobing pageant of incomprehensible light.

And then suddenly, head upturned, he found himself standing in the street across from Danny’s house. Shielding his eyes, he stared up at the second story (he was seeing it all again) and what he saw framed in the sloping crook of the roof’s downturned V was the lone window: self-lit witness (already the road’s unchaining of his soul at the helm of his voice in siphoned garbles spangled over the A.M. fizz) fiercely sleepless under everything up there (and from there—he drove all night—his placeless flesh expanding—CST, MST, PST, EST—and rigging forthwith the confused cloth of his infinite sails freewheeling from coast to coast, coast to coast, coast to coast).

Telling George and his listeners all about it. All about the window which he sees now as if he were still standing there, which he was still standing there: in the street and still finding therein to the mixed and unmixed rendings of his heart the huddled silhouette of two figures: each clasped tightly in the shadow of the other spreading over the clear pane forever motionless beneath the high tide of a million quiet explosions in the sky.

* * *

Craig recalled Tom’s windmills, the Alaskan altar, the vows.

“What they described,” he said. “Is exactly what I’ve been seeing. I mean, exactly.”

“Craig,” George said, “That really doesn’t surprise me. There’s something out there, something in the air, because we’ve been getting more and more reports from all over the world,
and it’s starting to raise some eyebrows. I’m glad you mentioned the Palo Alto conference, Craig, because in September we’re really hoping to make some kind of collective headway on this thing. People want to know what they’re seeing up there. They know they’re seeing something, and they’re tired of being told it’s all in their heads.

“Folks, we’ve got to pause for a second, but don’t go away. We’ll be right back with Nashville’s Craig-in-Transit from Toronto.”

Craig: hatchback, radio, waterbed, miles and miles of all kinds of road.

He pulled a cigarette from the half-full pack. Stuffed it between his lips. Pop goes the lighter. (Also the weasel.) Miles and miles and miles of all kinds of road, and 6-position modular jacks with 4 conductors each copper-wired to their junction boxes, in turn each connected back to their local exchanges, being in which case RJ14 jacks, or rather (more often) in turn double-wired into single-line status whilst leaving the others unconnected, being in which case RJ11 jacks, a brain, all of them, miles of us.

* * *

Station Identification.

181
The Ghosts of Rich Men

If all the men who have ever lived had been given a tomb, sooner or later some of those sterile monuments would have been dug up in order to find land to cultivate, and it would have become necessary to stir the ashes of the dead in order to feed the living.

—Turgot

***

The headstones stretch across the landscape in every direction—miles of gray rows merging into a stone floor under the horizon. A tall fence flanked by cypress trees surrounds the cemetery. The cypresses are thin and dark. In the western sky, the sun will soon sink and spread a canvas of pinks and oranges above the hundreds of thousands who have turned out for the funeral.

A man walks through the gate, brushing the trees as he passes. The arms and legs of his suit, timeworn and discolored, dangle from his body as though tailored for a very different man. He sits in the first chair he sees, between the tombstones of a mother and her baby—a boy—both of whom, according to the epitaphs, died during childbirth three thousand years earlier.

Not long after the man sits, a woman half his age approaches and stands beside him. Her face is thin and colorless. She trembles softly in her rags, shifting her weight from one angular leg to the other as she traces with her fingertips the weathered edges of the mother’s stone, waiting for the man to see her so she can ask him his name, though she already knows it.

The man is a painter who has never sold a painting; the woman is his daughter whom he has not seen in fifteen years. The funeral is for a dead rich man that neither of them knew.
The newspapers wrote that the dead rich man wanted his funeral to be held at the Presbyterian Church where, all his life, he never missed a Sunday service. But the church, as the rich man knew well, holds only hundreds of people, not hundreds of thousands. He knew also that his burial would be just like the burial eight hundred days ago of the last man to be buried instead of cremated. He knew that the lowering of his casket would be witnessed by an audience of the countless living and the countless dead, a patchwork of cameramen and microphones, and less friends than strangers, and also that a set of aluminum bleachers would enshrine his gravesite in a forum wherein the attending celebrities and politicians may chew on warm bagels and talk quietly amongst themselves.

When land got scarce (overnight, it seemed, private property vanished underneath the global cemetery; furthermore, as we’ve seen, the battle between outward and upward will forever be won, in this particular civilization, by the former) the rich man had been settling into middle age; it is not hard, then, for one to imagine the emotional dexterity required to remodel his conception of laying loved ones, and himself, to rest. It takes a certain type of man to cling to the idea of a burial—a certain type of rich man, that is, and in the long run they will no doubt grow scarcer than the earth they crave. Although this rich man—over one hundred when he died—leaves only a distant cousin behind, many men squirm in horror and shame when they realize that having their names etched in stone is well worth sentencing a loved one to bankruptcy.

The evening sun creeps toward the frontier, followed by a shade of delicate cloud cover.

The funeral lasts three hours. It is during a eulogy given by a famous television actor, thirty minutes into the procession, that the painter recognizes the woman standing above him as his daughter. She wrests a smile and lifts her fingers in a slight wave. The painter endures the
remaining two and a half hours in anxious agony, listening but not hearing the mayor’s speech, the governor’s, the president’s, each of whom repeat what they’ve heard on television or read in the papers, their words loud and powerful, exacting, precise.

The casket vanishes into the ground; a light breeze dispels the cloud cover; the sun eases into the crust of the vista. A stain of filmy stripes runs down the woman’s cheek.

“You’ve been crying,” the painter says.

“I have not,” she says.

“You’re crying for the rich man.”

“No,” she says.

“Then why?”

“Mom told me you’re one of those people who go to all the funerals now.”

“Soon there won’t be any more funerals,” he says.

“No,” she says, “There won’t be.”

The woman takes her father’s arm and leads him down the aisle of chairs and gravestones.

“I have something to tell you,” she says.

“Then you know I’m dying,” says her father.

“I know.”

“They say they don’t know how it moves, they can’t slow it down, and I’ve got maybe a month. Or less.”

“Or less.”

“Yes,” he says. “Or less.”

“You’re in pain, then,” she says.
“Sometimes. Sometimes not.”

The first train fills to capacity before the painter and his daughter can board. They stand on the platform and stare into the frame of dusk for the second to arrive.

“I’m pregnant,” the woman says. “It’s a boy. Your grandson.”

“A boy,” says the painter. He wipes his forehead with his hand and stares at the faint outline of his reflection in a furrow next to the tracks where water has collected. His reflection stares back, sunken, tired. “A boy,” he says again.

“I want you to meet his father,” the woman says.

“I’ll die before he’s born.”

“You can meet his father,” she says. “I want you to meet his father.”

Pallid streaks of vapor from the second train appear on the horizon, followed by the swell and roll of its smoky billows. The painter watches it pull toward them, hears its brakes scream. He is overcome with the desire to embrace his daughter. As he pulls her close, he cannot control the tremors that rattle against her emaciated frame, but he feels nothing but the tug of his memory towing him further and further back in time.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“I know,” she says.

“Forgiveness seems absurd.”

“Does it?”

“It seems,” he says.


“I don’t know you,” he says.

“But I know you. I haven’t forgotten.”
“You haven’t forgotten.”

“I haven’t.”

“You haven’t forgotten I’m insane.”

“Tell me,” she says, “How could such a word possibly still mean anything?”

The second train pulls away before the painter or his daughter notices the exodus of passengers, the thinning of the platform. The painter turns away. His eyes scan the rows of graves, of names and of ghosts, and for a moment he pretends he is dead and he sees his name in newspapers, on television screens, and on the gravestone under which all these people have come to honor his passing. The fantasy fades as fast as it usually does, dismissing him before he has time to acknowledge its implications, almost on impulse, because over the years his doctors have succeeded in convincing him of his unimportance, his insignificance, his banality—the only defense mechanism against the delusions of grandeur latent in his unconscious.

“I wish you and your mother hadn’t left,” he says.

“We shouldn’t have left,” says his daughter.

“I never expected to see you again,” he says.

“I’m here now,” she says. “I’ve brought you a grandson. I’m here now and I’ve brought him for you.”

The doors to the third train open. The painter’s daughter leads him into the compartment: cramped, sticky, pungent with the overripe mingling of the smells of their class—riders of trains, allergic to wealth, destined for jars of ashes because all the land is gone and only the richest men in the world can afford to be buried.
“I’ll be dead in a month,” the painter says. “And you’ll die, too, you know. And he’ll die. My grandson. He’ll die, too, eventually. But not those names.” He points at the wall of the train where, if the train had windows, there might have been a window that faced the cemetery.

“Tell me you still have the painting,” his daughter says.

He looks at her and nods. “I still have the painting,” he says.

“It’s all you have.”

“It’s all I have,” he says.

“But it’s a lot,” she says. Isn’t it? I know it’s a lot.”

“You have no idea.”

“It must feel nice. Being rich.”

“Yes,” he says, “It feels nice.”

“Like having a son. It feels nice. Or a grandson.”

“I’ve always been a rich man,” the painter says. “Always.”

* * *

They trudge through the overgrown yard and climb the steps of the front porch that overlooks the burial grounds where there used to be acres of farmland. The painter follows his daughter through the screen door and into the small house. From the far corner of the pale room, a single lamp casts its shadows on the walls of the narrow entryway. The house seems larger than because of its emptiness—its stark, severe bareness. The living room connects with a small kitchen on one side and the hallway on the opposite side.

The painter’s daughter does not stop to inspect her childhood home, the ways it has changed, the ways it has stayed how she remembers it. She goes straight to the corner of the wall where it meets the hallway, and there she stops and her father stops with her, because there it is,
indeed, exactly how she remembers it, the radiant light from its thick impasto colors lighting the inside of the dim, slender hallway with a more brilliant glow than any product of electricity. The surreal landscape, perched, innocent, unassuming, returns their stares as quickly as it invites them, and for a brief moment of shared humility the painter and his daughter admire its simple beauty. Its artist, whose name anyone would recognize, has been dead—and buried—for centuries.

The painter breaks the silence with a gasp when he senses—in the doorway of his daughter’s old bedroom—the presence of a stranger, a man wearing a baseball cap. The stranger’s face, whittled yet callow in its youth, looms blackly in its profile against the naked walls.

“This is who I wanted you to meet,” says the painter’s daughter. She pulls her father’s hand toward the profile of the stranger, who extends his own.

“It’s a beautiful picture,” the stranger says.

“I do think so,” says the painter.

“You’re an artist yourself, yeah?” the stranger asks.

“I whitewash walls,” says the painter.

“Not what I was told.”

“It’s not what I tell myself, either.”

“I’d love to see some of your work,” says the stranger.

“You’d love to see some of my work.”

“I would.”

The painter leaves his daughter and takes the young man around the back of the house to a shed that, long ago, was a pristine white before its paint began to peel and chip and turn to
snowflakes. He slides open the door and the remnants of the dusk light reveal hundreds of canvases, sculptures, and neglected tools. The young man takes a cautious step into the shed and gazes at the tiny warehouse of forgotten labor and violent creativity. Against the far wall of the shed: several imitations of the famous landscape in the living room, each a meticulous replication of the swirling purples, oranges, and grays, and the creamy churns of the coolly desolate mountains in the original.

“You’re the father of my future grandson,” the painter says.

“Yes,” the stranger says.

“I guess you love my daughter,” says the painter.

“I guess I do. Yes.”

“And the painting. You know how much it’s worth.”

“I guess I have an idea,” says the stranger.

There is a softness in the young man’s eyes that the painter could not ignore if he tried, and this trait stands out to him as more indicative of his character, his worth, than his tattered clothes, the sordid creases that outline his perpetual scowl, or the instant smell that reminds the painter of the train full of people who will never be buried.

“I guess you probably know my daughter better than I do,” the painter says.

“I guess I probably might,” says the young man.

“I’m sure she’s said things.”

“She’s said things. Sure.”

“I’m sure you know all about a lot of things,” the painter says. He takes a step into the shed and looks sternly into the young man’s eyes. “I’m supposed to be dead in a month. Or less.”

“Sometimes doctors are wrong,” says the stranger.
“Most of the time they aren’t,” the painter says.

“No. I guess mostly they aren’t.”

“All the things I’m sure you know,” the painter says, “After I’m gone you can’t let any of those things happen to my grandson.”

“I know I can’t,” the stranger says.

“He won’t have my name,” says the painter. “But in a sense he will.”

“Yes. In a sense.”

“You’ll stay here if you want. You and her.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Unless you’ve got somewhere else you can go.”

“No,” says the stranger. “No, I guess we don’t.”

“All right then you can stay. Until.”

“Yes. Until.”

When the painter and his daughter’s boyfriend return to the house, the television is on and a reporter is in the middle of a story about the death of a famous pianist who has purchased a full funeral. The painter listens carefully to the cost of the funeral, and he cannot stop himself from thinking about the value of the picture hanging in his hallway, and its bronze border, and the swirling purple hills, and the black sun, and the lavender moon, and the stars made of fire, and about how it could buy him a funeral like the rich man and the pianist.

* * *

Weeks later, when the painter’s legs give out and he can no longer walk, his daughter steals a wheelchair from the grocery store at the end of the street, and she rolls it home to her father, so he can to move from his bed to the living room where he can watch the news. The
painter hates the wheelchair because it serves as one more weapon brandished against him, his
life, and his place in time.

He leaves the house less often than he used to, but it is nice having his daughter and her
boyfriend to keep him company. The only problem, which begins as a small problem, is having
to pretend to ignore the bruises appearing on his daughter’s arms and neck, because when she is
in the same room with him he does little else but stare and speculate. If her boyfriend senses her
father’s awareness, then he hides it well, but the painter suspects that the more likely, more
sinister scenario, is that he senses it and does not regard it as a threat. When the painter confronts
him about the bruises, the young man claims to know nothing about their origin and promises to
investigate the conditions surrounding his daughter’s physical safety. The painter, at least
ostensibly, lets himself be satisfied with the young man’s answers because, after all, the constant
fear of death is plenty to worry about on its own.

His daughter’s visitors become the bigger problem, the one that grates on his nerves,
because the painter can tell just by looking at them that they care more about things like drugs
than anything else in life—even though life is so short, so incredibly short, and he knows from
experience that there is not enough time to fail to appreciate the things that really matter.
Whatever they may be. And so in his head the painter returns more frequently to the past, to his
own mistakes, to his sins, to his paternal inadequacies. When he is alone, mostly at dusk when
the sky reminds him of the painting he wishes he had the talent to create, he lets his tears crawl
from his face for hours until his lap and his chair are soaked. Afterward, after the tears, after each
catharsis, he always feels a little better. There is a limit to how long a person can regret not
loving the people who tried to love him; after that, the regret just kind of goes away for a while.

He remembers specific reasons he should ask the universe for forgiveness, those times he
knew he had the power to choose to care about his wife, about his daughter, and had neglected them. He remembers a particular week when, several months after one of his many stints in the hospital, all the doctors had agreed that this time, maybe, finally, he would surely be all right. Even his wife had begun to trust his mind again. This was saying something, since she was usually the last one gullible enough to buy into his latest spell of stability. Nevertheless, she left the house for a week to visit her sister, hundreds of miles away, leaving their daughter alone under her husband’s sole supervision—a parental task he had never shouldered on his own. His descent, his new relapse into old madness, was immediate and severe, and he locked himself in his bedroom for all seven days. All the while, his five year-old daughter sat in the living room, starving and listening to her father’s screams and praying for her mother to return. When her mother finally did return, she fed, clothed, and comforted her daughter first, before clenching her fists, tightening her jaw, and kicking, once, twice, three times, with great effort, the bedroom door until it gave way, and there he was: naked and bloodied, writhing madly between polar states of consciousness, the room caked in a grotesque rainbow of wasted paint. This day would become synonymous with the beginning of the end, though it was not until years later, after his daughter had reached her teenage years, that his wife would decide to leave with her. From then on, he never asked to see his daughter, and she never asked to see him.

But now, here she is—back at home, back with her father, waiting patiently for him to die so she can get on with her life, with her child, with her father’s grandson. When the painter saw her at the rich man’s funeral, he nearly collapsed from joy, amazed that the estrangement could suddenly end without warning.

He notices, however, that his unbridled exhilaration begins to wane with the days. He cannot stand the visitors, these friends of his daughter’s and their unannounced, unasked,
uninvited sojourns that sometimes last for a week, or more, with no explanation. When he catches one of them snooping around in his work shed, the painter loses himself in his anger, his brain summoning from hibernation a certain schism, an old confusion, and he fetches his shotgun from the closet. When he returns, the stranger is gone, luckily, for the painter considers himself to be a rich man—richer than most—and rich men will only tolerate so much audacity.

The painter feels that his daughter, too, is beginning to avoid him. For most days, and even more nights, she stays away from the house. The reasons he prefers not to guess, but his suspicions demand attention.

When she does come home, however infrequently, the painter follows her every move, his vigilant eyes plastered anxiously on this unfortunate bearer of his legacy—a daughter whom he barely knows, a daughter whom he cannot fully trust. He shudders to think that still, after a month of wheeling himself at her heels—he has not been able to detect any evidence that she is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, with child. He has already exceeded the life expectancy predicted by his doctors and, moreover, since the deterioration of his leg muscles and his confinement to a wheelchair, his condition has not shown a single sign of worsening. He tries to read his daughter’s face; when he cannot, he gives his fear and his anger the benefit of the doubt.

As the weeks pass, the painter devotes his afternoons to exploring the yard, or to staying in shape. For exercise, he pilots through the rows of headstones in the cemetery, or practices the jump from his chair to the ground and back again, faster and faster, or invents a fellow handicapped companion against whom he can race down the street in an imaginary wheelchair rally.

His daughter and her boyfriend observe him from the porch or the window, whispering to themselves with worried looks. There are shouts, too, along with the mysterious bruises that
refuse to go away. But the painter does not remember feeling better in his life; only when he
notices on his daughter a new bruise, or when recalls an old one, does the proximity of his
mortality return to his awareness and oppress his newfound levity. Even so—the recent silence
of his enigmatic disease and the decelerated erosion of his body, the doctors assure him, indicate
nothing but a temporary reprieve. No reason to get his hopes up. He will die soon, they keep
saying. Just wait. Soon, soon, soon, you will die.

Try to imagine, then, his doctors’ bewilderment as, on a cold morning that might have
been his last, he laughs suddenly and rises from his wheelchair, announcing that (on account of
his being a rich man) his rare mortal illness has vanished miraculously, as though it had never
been there, as though it had all been a dream, as though it had never almost killed him.

* * *

The young man goes missing, is nowhere to be found for days, and during a walk through
the cemetery with his daughter, the painter notices that her bruises have all but faded. He holds
his daughter’s hand as they walk, studying her face, and when she lights a cigarette she offers
him one and he smokes with her.

“One cigarette,” his daughter says.

“It can’t hurt,” he says.

“I doubt it could.”

The painter and his daughter stroll in and out of the gray rows. He smokes deeply. His
breaths crack and heave. His daughter trails behind him to read the epitaphs as they pass.

“You’re feeling much better, then?” she asks.

“Much better,” says the painter.
The painter’s daughter stops and takes her father’s hands in hers and presses them to her brown cheek. In the eastern distance, an elderly woman lays yellow roses at the foot of her husband’s grave.

“When I was little—”

“That’s all right,” he says. “Don’t say it.”

“You used to say you’d be a rich man if it weren’t for us,” she says. “If it weren’t for Mom and me.”

“I want you to stay here,” the painter says.

“Yes,” says his daughter. “I’ll stay here with you. What about him?”

On the horizon, the loping figure of the young man appears, scarred and bruised and drunk with the sun behind him like a giant gold stage curtain.

“He doesn’t love you,” says the painter. “Where’s he been?”

“Some of the same places where you used to go,” his daughter says. “If I had to guess.”

The painter watches as his daughter’s boyfriend approaches; he already knows that he will let him back into his home, despite everything, because the painter feels, somehow, a kinship with the young man, and he tricks himself into believing that his grandson—if he exists—will be better off with a crazy father than no father at all.

* * *

After the crashing noise wakes him, he sits up and squints into the darkness. He reaches for the lamp on his bedside table, but the lamp is missing. Dangling his legs over the bed, he reaches for the wall, finds it, and throws himself against it. He gropes along the wall for the doorknob, cold under his fingers. He cracks open the door—pale gold light peeks through the
crack. A man’s voice gliding down the hall. A hushed whisper, strained and broken under the weight of effort.

He presses the door closed and slides along the wall to the closet. He drops to the floor, opens the closet, crawls into its space, patting, feeling the grainy carpet. At the back corner of the closet, his fingers curl around the hard double barrel of a shotgun, which he extracts from its hiding place under a forgotten pile of laundry.

He opens the chamber and finds two shells ready, waiting. He snaps it shut. Sweat pours from his bare scalp. He hopes he is just paranoid, but deep down he knows that sad people hate to see a sick man get healthy.

He opens the door. Again, the muffled whisper. Louder. And footsteps, dull thuds, soft thuds. He peers around the corner at the spare bedroom where his daughter sleeps. Her door is shut. Soundless.

A familiar weakness creeps back into his legs as, slowly, he pulls himself into the hallway. The handle of the shotgun scrapes the corner of the door. His muscles tighten and the roar of his heartbeat echoes in the darkness. He pauses to catch his breath and continues his crawl, one elbow buried in the carpet for support, the other raised as a shelf for his weapon.

He quickens his pace when he hears the front door creak open and creak closed.

Then silence.

He nears the end of the hallway and lifts himself to his knees and walks on his kneecaps. He tightens his grip on the shotgun. The front door comes into view. The couches, the kitchen, the television. The rooms seem empty, but he stops and holds his breath, surveying the quiet darkness, humid, airless, sad. He forces himself to look at the wall where, instead of art, there is only the pallid bruise of its absence.
He expects it to be gone, but still, his hands and fingers quiver, his grip on the shotgun weakens. He stands paralyzed for a few moments, seconds passing, one minute, more, before he notices the baseball cap on the kitchen table. He picks it up, turns it over in his hands, trying to remember the last time he wore a baseball cap and, when he cannot remember, he puts this one on and sits at the kitchen table where he will be hidden behind the front door when it opens.

He curls his index finger around the trigger of the shotgun and waits for the young man to return for the cap.

It startles him when the door opens. A dark figure steps into view, the young man, followed by another figure, leaner, a woman, the painter’s daughter.

He levels the shotgun and stares down its barrel. “Close the door,” he says.

The young man closes the door. “Don’t shoot,” he says.

“Put down the gun,” says the painter’s daughter.

“Move to the couch,” the painter says. He motions with the gun. They sit. “Where is it?” he asks them.

“Outside,” his daughter says.

“Bring it back in.”

His daughter leaves out the front door and returns moments later, cradling the creamy purple hills.

“Put it back on the wall.”

She does as she is told and returns to the couch. The painter stares at his daughter and her boyfriend. They cannot see the feral rage in his eyes because the bill of the baseball cap casts a black shadow over his face.

“Think of your grandson,” his daughter says.
“You tried to steal from me,” says the painter.

“Think of your grandson,” she says again.

“I am thinking of him.”

“Then you’ll put down the gun, Dad, all right. Put down the gun.”

“I think I’ll keep it for now.”

“Please,” she says.

“I said I think I’ll keep it for now. Prove he exists.”

The young man sits in silence, listening, his head in his hands, calm and resigned. He knows the threat of death well, and it has never scared him. He has never thought about his life or his family or what will happen to either of them if he ceased to exist. He only thinks: the old painter looks funny in his baseball cap.

“I’ll go to the doctor tomorrow. I want you to come with me. Come with me,” says the painter’s daughter.

Her father laughs and walks to the couch and rubs the bottom of her chin with the nose of the shotgun. “No,” he says.

“You’re not crazy,” says his daughter. “Really. You’re not crazy.”

“Only a crazy man would let his daughter turn out like you,” the painter says.

“All right,” she says.

The painter puts his hand on his daughter’s stomach. He grips the shotgun tightly in his other hand. “I’m not going to the doctor with you,” he says.

“All right,” she says.

The painter keeps his hand on her stomach.

“What are you doing?” she asks.
“You’d better hope he moves.”

“It’s too soon for that,” she says.

“Let’s hope not.”

“If he doesn’t?”

“Then he doesn’t exist,” the painter says.

“And then you’ll keep the painting,” says his daughter. “To buy your funeral.”

“Rich men have funerals,” he says.

“Yes,” she says. “But they also have families.”

“You’re my family.”

“Isn’t it pretty to think so?”

“No,” he says. “It is not pretty.”

“Your grandson, my son—he will ride the trains when we’re poor,” his daughter says.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says.

“Why not?”

“I’ll be dead and it won’t matter because I’ll be dead.”

“I understand,” she says.

“No,” says the painter, “You don’t.”

“I think I do.”

“Rich men have funerals,” he says. “That’s all that matters.”

“To die a rich man.”

“Yes, to die a rich man. What we do in life…”

“You aren’t dying anymore.”

“Sure I am.”
“Then so am I.”

“Fair enough.”

Time passes like this, slowly through their staccato nonsense—then the three of them sit in silence, the painter’s hand on his daughter’s stomach, the young man’s head in his hands, dying, the hours rolling on, slowly, taking them into the misty darkness of the next morning.

They all know how it will end. Time has already carved out a place for their ending, long ago, and they know very well that they have been moving toward it their whole lives—they know very well that the next step is to follow, to keep following until the earth has room for dead men only, to keep following until even the ocean is filled to the brim with their ashes.

At last, under the shy beams of dawn, a hopeful mother dares to break the trembling silence:

“Did you feel that?” she asks. She wants to flex her stomach muscles, for effect, but she thinks better of it, because she knows that less is more when it comes to the art of lying.

The painter’s eyes meet his daughter’s—he knows, of course, that there is, was, nothing to feel, nothing at all, and that his daughter has now become a liar as well as a thief. He closes his eyes and tries to imagine himself dead. Thoughtless, soulless, nothingness, deadness. Will it matter who lives and who dies—his daughter, his grandson, his name, his life? Or does existence exist as a whole, indiscriminately, the way the headstones merge together, nameless, and become a giant cold stone floor at the edge of the world? Nothing has mattered, nothing matters, nothing will ever matter—everything happens once, and once it happens it ceases to matter because it has already happened and no longer exists. If he returns, he wonders, in a thousand years, in a million years, will any of this matter?

“My grandson,” he says.
“You felt him,” says his daughter.

“Yes,” the painter says, “I did.”

“I knew you would,” she says, smiling proudly, “I knew you would.” Her heart races and she shifts in her seat because she knows her father has chosen her.

“You’ll raise him to be a rich man,” says the painter.

“Yes,” she says.

“It would have been better for you if I’d never been there,” he says. “From the beginning. It would have been better if it was just you and your mother.”

“It might have been,” says his daughter.

“Then you understand,” he says.

“I guess I might.”

“You understand that this man can’t just go away,” the painter says. “Because he’ll always come back.”

His daughter shifts in her seat and looks at the young man, then back to her father, then back to her boyfriend, who still does not raise his head. She gets to her feet and walks to the painting, stares at the tide of clashing colors, the waves of melting earth, and she notices, perhaps for the first time, the tiny form of a small boy crouched under a canopy of disintegrating cypress trees.

“Yes,” she says. “He’ll come back. No one can really leave a rich man.”

“You couldn’t,” the painter says.

“No,” she says, “I couldn’t. Here I am.”

“All right,” says the painter. “All right. You understand.”
His daughter drops to the floor, her back against the wall under the purple hills, and she covers her colorless face with her hands, shivering.

“Listen,” the painter says. “You’ll make my grandson a man people will remember.” He touches a cold coin through the fabric of his pocket.

“Yes,” says his daughter. “They’ll remember him.”

“Because if you don’t, I swear to God I’ll come back from the dead and make you wish you had.”

“Yes.”

“You know I’ll come back,” the painter says. “I swear I’ll come back if you don’t.”

“Yes.” She begins to cry because she knows her father is crazy, and there is no way to tell whether she is crazy, too.

“All right,” the painter says. “It’s done then. When you get on the train tonight, remember that it’s last time you’re ever going to take the train. Take it as far to the other side of the world as you can and don’t look back. Remember it’s the last time.”

His daughter nods.

“All right then.”

The young man on the couch never looks up. He does not watch the sudden coin toss, does not protest, does not care. Even when the mother of his child takes their fortune and leaves him alone there with the painter, not saying a word to either of them as she leaves, the young man looks as though he has been oblivious to the proceedings, ignorant of the verdict. His head rests, softly abandoned, in the canopy of his palms. When the shot is fired, it seems not to pique his interest in the least, though he has little time to take notice of the deafening blast, of the
spark, of the lightning that illuminates the bright red flecks of his blood that soar, suspended in
mid air in the heavy dawn, onto the walls and the door and the kitchen table.

* * *

It is not difficult to find a buyer. After careful deliberation, she chooses one and makes
enough money to live comfortably forever.

She buys a house in the mountains on the other side of the world, and there she waits
there for her father’s grandson to come.

Her nights are mostly sleepless. The house is too big for one person, so she keeps
constant visitors. She fills the rooms with strangers, nomads, drifters, the homeless. She fills her
bed with men that remind her of her father and the man her father murdered. She tells them it’s
all right if they give her bruises. Sometimes she asks for them.

During her time of insomnia, she sometimes thinks she can hear her father cleaning the
blood away—she pretends that she stayed there to watch him run water over the towels and then
scrub and scrub, working to erase the existence of a man. The towel scratches against the walls
and carpet like sandpaper. The blood smears and vanishes under his scrubs, violent and incessant
under the soundless black of night, the sound that drowns out the drunken snores roaring from
every couch, floor, and bed; and then, above the scrubbing, she hears the echoes of her father’s
words, his menacing promise that stirs a great fear in her heart.

Sometimes she pretends her father is dead. Sometimes that he is alive. Sometimes that the
neighbors heard the shot and called the police. She will never see her father again, and for the
rest of her life she will play these guessing games. But in these early days it is the most painful,
and her insomnia is relentless.
Early one morning, a little after dawn, she feels her father’s grandson kick, and suddenly she becomes aware of the cure for her sleeplessness.

On this particular morning, she must pretend that her father is dead.

She sits upright and tosses aside the comforter. Someone lying beside her groans and turns over. She climbs out of bed, cringing because her stomach feels like it has been hit with the butt of a shotgun.

She dresses quickly and leaves the house without making a sound. She climbs into her car and smiles because she thinks she has won. She turns the key in the ignition, and as she pulls away from her new home, she gleans a strange satisfaction from the sound of gravel crunching under her tires, and when she turns on the radio, a song springs from the speakers, shattering the lonely silence of dawn. She feels like she will live forever.

The car flies along the mountain road, circling, winding, constricting the mountain like a snake wrapped in a spiral leading the way to town. The car does not tremble, does not groan, does not quiver, because it is brand new and it glides as though on ice. But the driver, the rich girl, cannot stop from shuddering, violently, humanly, her skin crawling because she can feel the frost of what she knows is her dead father’s breath on her neck. She tilts the rear view mirror and raises her frightened eyes to it—she knows he is in the car with her, back just like he said he would be, and since ghosts can read our minds he must already know the terrible thing she’s about to do.