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Time Spent Away

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Time Spent Away

by

Andrew Mitin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

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Abstract

After the death of his father, Joshua Klein drops out of college and moves to Chicago. Alone in the city and with nothing of consequence to do, he attempts to justify to himself the ways of God, the sense of an early death and what is the good to do in life.

In this excerpt of *Time Spent Away*, Joshua seeks out the hidden aspects of the city and his spirit. Guided by his father's Bible and the formative texts of his undergraduate coursework, he sets out to complete his own education. During a tour of The Auditorium Building Joshua meets Felix Servo, a preserver of historic landmarks and an architectural enthusiast, who will show Joshua the city heights in a new way. When he explores the depths, Joshua meets Roland Charles, a self-proclaimed actor whose true use of time eludes Joshua and will jeopardize his peaceful search for meaning.

Told from the perspective of a timid though curious young man, *Time Spent Away* engages with architecture, literature and love; Louis Sullivan, the Western Cannon and the person of Jesus Christ; preservation, destruction and the fine line between both to present a heart-felt account of self-discovery.

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PART ONE

After Dad died I sold the farm and moved to Chicago. I had worked the land four months and I couldn't any longer. The corn was doing well and a neighbor had agreed to take it off for me, the chickens in their silver ark were fed and producing as they always had and the machines were well-cared for. The buyers were a young family who wanted to relocate back to Huron County and raise their children and some hogs. I gladly yielded.

My friends had remained in various college towns celebrating their final summer as students and I asked Mr. Weurtzel to drive me to Bad Axe where I picked up a small rental truck. It was too big for the little I would take away with me, but it was all they offered for a one-way trip. Mr. Weurtzel offered to stay and help me load, but I told him I could manage.

"I wouldn't mind staying a bit longer, Joshua."

We carried twelve boxes of books, five for the kitchen, three suitcases of clothes, the leather chair and ottoman, two bookshelves and Mom's ironing board from the garage. We only spoke about our grips, watching our step and the surprising weight of the novels. I brought the door down and locked it, then gave him the keys to the house.

“It’s hard to think about a new family living here,” he said looking at the white two story home where he and his friend had shared theirs with one another.

“They seem like good people,” I said. “The mother’s excited to garden and pick the cherries. She’s going to use the old canning room again.”

“We’re going to miss you, Joshua.” He held me in a long embrace before slapping my back.

“If you need anything at all, Karen and I are always here for you. Always.”

Mr. Weurtzel drove away and I stood beside the truck in the silence of the front yard. The July heat stilled the air. Nothing moved and I lingered in that moment trying to remember and feel all I had experienced there, knowing I would never have it again. Of course it was impossible, and anyway I was too excited thinking of my future to properly grieve my loss.

I watched the farmhouse and out-buildings in the side view mirrors until they were obscured by the green-standing fields then hidden by distance and woods. It was difficult to think of other voices filling our rooms and other hands opening doors and drawers. I imagined the loneliness of the painted walls and the carpeted stairs at my leaving and the fireplace stones’ bewilderment at the stark living room as they wondered what had happened to Dad and I. I thought then about the windows that had watched me run around the house and swing from the vines of the weeping willow and disappear into and out of the chicken house and the barn and I saw them well up and furrow in dismay. I saw them see Dad trekking toward

the sheds to sharpen blades or wire new time clocks, then emerge later to stand near the road looking across the fields and into the darkening evening before coming inside to have dinner with me.

Not two miles from home and I had to pull over until it passed.

I drove upon those cemetery roads in silence, alternately overcome with heartache and anticipation; by turns afraid yet eager to have a few years to myself in which to discover the rest of my life, its capacity, both in terms of my ability and how much I could fill it with. Then there were times I didn't think about anything at all. I passed through familiar towns and made turns by rote without witnessing them and when I entered the freeway heading south ten mile markers would pass in a moment. But however quick the distance separated me from my past and however grandiose I imagined my future in Chicago those windows remained, staring dark and empty in the stillness.

I first saw a glimpse of the skyline at 95th Street. It poked above the horizon in a small cluster of dark rectangles and I wondered if it would be big enough for my dreams. Then, as I-90 took me further west then north, the city opened up. What before had been an insignificant blot on the windshield now rose ominous around me. I was awed beneath it. Taken together the steel and glass, the concrete and ornamentation proved too much to take in. The history and the intentionality that pointed to their being man-made did not hinder my impression that these obelisks

had always been and always would be keeping watch on the shore. I was approaching an understanding of the city on par with those Dutch explorers landing on Easter Island or with those who stumbled upon Stonehenge years after its meaning had been lost.

A warning blast brought me out of this reverie and I jerked the truck back within the limits of my lane. All around me were semi-trailers and speeding mid-size sedans, construction barrels and detour warnings, pick-ups and SUVs changing lanes and accelerating then breaking, causing me to react too strenuously then struggling to regain the communal speed again. In the chaos of the freeway I forgot about the cityscape. I had wanted to ease upon it, to take each change of perspective as it came and to chart the sun's reflection off the glass and ask if it would acquiesce to me and my intentions. Instead, I was pressed on all sides by speeding metal and the vulgar blatting of car horns. I glimpsed the Ohio Street exit sign above white knuckles. I mumbled a prayer and checked my side view. I pressed the blinker stalk but it wouldn't move and I panicked before realizing it had been on for some time. Traffic was not going to let me in without insistence and I decided to press my will. I nosed in behind an F-150 and a semi, whose company name and logo *MS Carriers: We deliver your future* seemed a portent of calamity.

I was driving inside the city and it was completely obscured. Concrete walls rose up on either side and the broad shoulders I had read about had to be retrieved from memory. I sped into and out of sunlight as first Halsted then Hubbard passed

overhead and while I was marveling at the concrete pillars and the grooved under carriage of top-side routes, the exit curve demanded deceleration, which I noticed in time to avoid rear ending a slow-moving Mazda. Traffic was slowed to a drifting pace and I crossed the Chicago River for the first time. I made out a brown sliver of water before the Northwestern Railway Bridge, with its zig-zag iron work pointing toward the sky as if in preparation for an ariel raid or else in the collection of celestial data, interrupted the view. Then the whole of it vanished behind condominiums.

I turned onto LaSalle toward Division. The four blocks to State, though bewildering to me then, would quickly become as familiar to me as the two main streets of my small home town, one of which was dominated by the municipal parking lot and the other by the grain elevator. Here there were multi-purpose buildings of brown brick with ten foot panes of glass that allowed natural light to illuminate rental spaces. Colorful awnings spread the above darkened entrances of bars and people were sitting at sidewalk rails drinking in the middle of the day. American flags, green shamrocks, Mother's heart marquee, FedEx, US Bank and, at State Street, two stories of grey orioles ornamented with diamonds and pin wheels and designed to appear like the shuttle used in the pneumatic tubes at Thumb National Bank, where Dad's legacy rested.

Restaurants lined the shaded side of the street and I parked outside Canterbury Court Apartments. The heat wasn't so different from what I had left only six hours earlier and I stood beside the truck, stretched my back in the sun and looked.

The narrow facade began as smoothed, dense concrete and seemed like a vault through which a large chisel had scored lines for window placements. The Southeast corner appeared to have been sliced off and windows were revealed there as well. The building's growth was amended at the third floor by an abundance of tan bricks and the whole structure seemed to taper against the blue sky that was affixed to the affluent neighborhood.

Inside, a disinterested man looked my name up on his computer. He checked my ID against the leasee's name and confirmed that I had paid the first month's rent plus deposit.

He opened a box mounted on the wall and took out a small key ring.

"Yours will be 702; that's on the seventh floor. Laundry is through there. You'll pick up your mail here. Bring your ID for the first week or so until my staff recognizes you. You got furniture you need to move in? Take your vehicle to the end of the block, turn left, left again down the alley. I'll have a guy meet you."

There was a mere foot on either side of me in the narrow lane and because of the truck's height I had to steer away from fire escapes while keeping an eye on the corner bumpers to avoid hitting refuse and recycling containers. When I saw brick that resembled the front of my new home, I stopped. The truck's door couldn't open fully and I squeezed out. A maintenance man appeared with a dolly and showed me the freight elevator. I thanked him, but he had already seen to me and continued with his day.

When I opened the overhead door and saw that everything was where Mr. Weurtzel and I had put it, I felt the pang of heartache. It had given me some comfort that he knew where those boxes were and that he could conjure up my place within the truck and on the road. But when I removed my boxes to the dolly, the boxes Mr. Weurtel had last touched and that Dad had not seen me pack, I felt the beginnings of what it means to be alone.

The doors opened on Seven and I wheeled my first load of boxes down the dim hallway. It was quiet on the floor and smelled of carpet cleaner. My door was at the far end and opened into a small hall leading to the bathroom. On the right was a built-in closet and drawers, natural light from the left laid across the grey carpet. I pulled the dolly into the single room. It was long and narrow with a double mattress that could be used as a couch; the kitchenette was built into a clothes closet and shared a wall with the bathroom and a desk was situated beneath the middle window. When I saw I had a corner apartment the sadness I had carried with me dissipated. I was filled with optimism as I remembered what I had come here to do.

I opened an unscreened window and leaned out, extending my arms to embrace all of State Street, from Lincoln Park to Trump Tower, the parking garage opposite my building, the green ash trees below me, the Gold Coast as far as Lake Michigan, and all the possibilities my future could birth, before collapsing onto the bed in a fit of tears.

My the size of my apartment — my cell — appealed to the aesthete in me and though I had never heard of Le Corbusier or his golden ratio, I had stumbled upon him in one of the many deserted aisles of the Harold Washington Library and felt I couldn't have lived anywhere else. Not that my cell had any architectural affinity with *Saint Marie de la Tourette*, but I used the space in similar ways.

I awoke while it was still dark and in the silence of my space I hummed a hymn from my youth and read from the Psalms; I looked at a passage from the gospels before turning to one of Paul's letters, which was Romans at the time of my arrival in Chicago and is perhaps the most difficult book in the New Testament, not because its subject matter is so mystifying, but because it takes the believer to the very beginning of faith, as if, were the message of that letter not realized and adhered to by a Christian's life, it could be said not to have even begun. I followed these readings with a litany of thanksgiving; with intercessions, both for my old community and my new one; and for the wisdom to live a good life. I would often put music on then, either Berlioz or Mozart, Dvorjak or Hayden, though sometimes Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* or *Bitches Brew*, and disappear into the world of a novel. I sat content in those quiet mornings in my leather chair and wonder at how perfect it all was. I had a comfortable bed, a solid writing desk with a view I couldn't believe I would weary of, drawers full of notebooks filled and eager to be filled and bookshelves loaded down with odes to my enthusiasm for literary work.

I had only a vague idea about what a literary life looked like, but I dedicated my time to writing stories and whatever followed from that would make such a life clear. I submitted my work to and was rejected by innumerable literary magazines, college reviews and writing contests, both print and on-line. Anonymity gave me confidence and I reveled in the freedom to experiment that assured dismissal promised; and my indifference toward being published, feigned early on except in moments of optimism that accompanied me on lengthy walks, allowed my writing an element of play. I wanted only to send my little birds out and if one should return with an olive branch, so much the better. I amassed a healthy portfolio of rejection letters, all of the form variety, neither condemning my work nor encouraging it. The tone suited me.

When the noise from the street became too much to ignore and I had finished with the day's pages, I took up my weatherworn satchel and stepped out. I had an idea of which streets I wanted to walk that would take me to a new museum or a different bookstore or another stately example of architecture, or at least where one had once stood in Chicago, but most days I didn't care. I simply walked; inevitably I would stumble upon something.

Proponents of the walk may object to my choice of wilderness. They may wonder why I left my country and its miles of rugged terrain, its lakeside and the stone quarry, to meander through the urban labyrinth of civilization and culture, the very aspects of our humanity early enthusiasts of the walk had sought to escape.

Those men and women declaimed such vulgar apparitions and instead, ensconced in a serene environment, they looked inward for unadulterated impressions of meaning and truth. Well, the city has triumphed and enough time has passed that we are better equipped to stave off the noise and speed of modern life than our forefathers.

When I wrote that I saunter through the city, I had a specific idea in mind that I meditated on while I wandered. Some time ago in France, beggars would seek alms claiming they were going to the Holy Land, or *sainte-terrer*. It was a ruse for sure, more elegant and ironic than our beggars' stories today, but it betrays a time in history when we really did aspire to have peace with God, or spiritual fulfillment. The saunterer walks to the Holy Land and I took great pleasure in the idea that my life would be a perpetual pilgrimage. Though, strictly speaking, I was not trekking across swaths of dangerous terrain with hundreds of other devotees to reach a city packed with religious meaning, nevertheless I felt I was on a spiritual quest. I had taken shelter in the city; I was waiting for fellowship.

I awoke at six my first morning in Chicago. It was a clean fifty-nine degrees and there was a promise of sun in the clear dawn sky. I made coffee and sat down with some Psalms accredited to King David and Proverbs 8 that is accredited to his son. I positioned my leather chair in such a way as to see Hancock Tower through one window and the impression of Willis Tower in the other. The lights of each were aglow in the early between-time and I raised my cup to the tireless sentinels. After a time of meditation and a quick prayer I ate a banana and watched Rush

Street separate from State, the divorce having been commemorated with the planting of trees in the Viagra Triangle. I tied on my running shoes and was on the pavement before the newspaper kiosks had opened their shutters.

By the time I was in the midst of the Magnificent Mile, I was out of breath and clutching my side, spitting foul mocha-stained phlegm near the entrances of Burberry and Cartier and Crate and Barrel. I had to stop again on DuSable Bridge, compelled equally by the frailty of my lungs and the beauty I saw from there. It was as though the wind had planed the steel and glass and, through a millennium of insistence, created a unique landscape, like the Wave in Arizona or the entrance to Keya Cave Island. I walked beneath the monoliths to North Wabash then lingered on Irv Kupciner Bridge. The sun had risen over the lake and its light played upon the stone walls of the Wrigley Building. Below me lolled the Chicago River, inland; understanding, beauty and artistic expression beckoned all around me. The fact of the city, its enormity and influence, took my breath away. I leaned over the rail inhaling the air of the metropolis, the scent of the river and the hum of roused activity. How different from a land suffused with acres of green and where the nearest light illuminates a yard one mile away. I had felt that I would be in for a painful assimilation; that the difference between the two environments would necessitate a kind of decompression chamber where my blood could calm down and my mind acclimate to the glut and speed of sensory perceptions. However, I found I could live in that state

of excitement with some ease and that I could ignore the city's impulsiveness for substantial parts of the day, if only by reading the slow lines of a novel.

So I was encouraged to make my way and Wordsworth spoke of my time:

Dear Liberty! Days of sweet leisure, taxed with patient thought.

I would stroll beneath the old oak trees that lined the streets of the Gold Coast. I walked in concentric circles, first around my block, then in ever increasing orbits until all the streets enveloped by the latitude lines of Division and North Avenue and the longitude lines of LaSalle Drive and Lakefront Trail became my new county. There was not a street I didn't grow to appreciate for its hidden qualities, made more precious by a general lack of attention; that a few of them were named after poets delighted me and I read those signposts from the Great Tradition as light from the winking heavens.

After three weeks of living alone in Chicago I was still understanding how deep a grief could be. I was walking around the river at night admiring Wacker Drive and the dark water that forever washed against its retaining walls. I descended the ornate steps to the river's edge looking for a place that would allow me to lay hands in the eternal stream. None existed and I was left to imagine what the water would feel like if I grazed my palm upon it. I felt its cool wet lapping at the tips of my fingers and gently washing over my knuckles in a tease of submersion. I

sat against the wall and listened to the traffic above me. I stretched my legs and looked for constellations through the city's incandescent veneer. Andromeda, Cassiopeia, Perseus; but there weren't enough stars in the firmament to connect the images. I attempted to outline my own story in the deep dark, but the earth-bound illuminators obscured their awesome forebears and I was no closer to understanding the Why.

Across the river a Wendella sightseeing boat was waiting to disembark. Awed chatter carried across the water and I saw camera flashes going off in passengers' hands. What they were pointing at and exclaiming about I had made a point to see every day since arriving in Chicago. Modern obelisks of varying shades of gray, together with glassed steel frames rose behind a cream, concave stone spotted with squares of blue that reflected the sky's demeanor. I could see it without looking and while families laughed and captured one of their unforgettable moments with each other, I saw it.

Soon the tourists disappeared around the South bend, and about the time they would become enthralled with the sheer wall of Insull's Civic Opera House, which had given me the impression of approaching Petra, I climbed away from the Riverwalk. I was crossing DuSable Bridge when a white light like a horseshoe or *omega* caught my eye. I was drawn to it because I had to see if it announced a more fortunate day or the end of all days. Before I reached Pioneer Plaza I realized it

wouldn't be either of these. Instead it was J. Seward Johnson's larger-than-life installation of Grant Wood's *American Gothic*. Tourists mingled around the plaza taking pictures and consulting maps, asking other sight-seers if they would take their picture and asking how to get to Oak Street, was it far or should they get a taxi and how much would that cost. I said I didn't know, but if they caught the lights and didn't stop along the Mile it would be a fifteen minute walk.

When I finally had space to myself I was standing across from the father's shins. I looked up at his long face, his dead eyes and thin spectacles. The expressions on the face of the farmer and his daughter were exact, at least from what I could remember from the original painting, but what the painting may have concealed and what was now present was the daughter's suitcase resting beside her muddy clogs. It was plastered with Southeast Asian hotel labels and still the eyes of the farmer and his daughter were disheartened, as though not even escape to the other side of the world could alleviate the pain of existence. Their hands, omitted by the original artist, were represented by the travails of fieldwork. They were rough and scratched and scarred over; dirt was embedded beneath the fingernails, which were shorn and asymmetrical; the daughter's were close to wringing.

I thought, If the demands of a motherless farm had rescued the daughter from Eve's curse, she could not escape Adam's. The vibrancy of youth had been drained from her by the monotonous labor required to maintain healthy lands. A quiet fury hid within the tightness of her chin and her blue eyes refused to

acknowledge the silver tines of her father's pitchfork. Instead, she would glare at the steel wall raised above Wacker Drive for as long as the installation would last.

In leaving my farm for the city I was determined to avoid both curses. That is not to say that either curse is without its own pleasures or peculiar fulfillments. Technological improvements assured that I did not suffer the same toiling with the land that Adam did. I enjoyed steering the plow on a spring afternoon beneath a warm sun, watching the damp earth spilling off the plow behind me, folding over itself, becoming a fertile maroon beneath a high blue sky. I often put my hands into the soft earth afterwards. There was no resistance in the soil; what before was cracked and caked had become light and rich. I pulled up fistfuls of healthy, wriggling worms coated with dark flecks. These worms, turned out of their winter homes by my steel blades, would surface to the delight of waiting seagulls that dove down upon them like a white sheet thrown over a bed. Those flocks mirrored then the sporadic clouds that laze between heaven and earth. I would lean against the large tractor tire and look at the clouds and eat my lunch and be happy with my life; that I knew it and that I would not fail in it.

To some degree I knew I was the manifestation of the second curse. Though medical advancements have made labor more comfortable since our first mother cried out, not all of the suffering has been taken out of childbirth. And death, the fact of life that makes Mankind's labors futile, has yet to be staunched by laboratory science. I would have been my mother's pain had she not slipped into a coma before I

was quickly taken out of her. As it was, I believe, the fact of life's ultimate horror was delayed in her consciousness; she fell asleep believing her doctor would be able to keep her and I attached and that, one lovely day in the not distant future, she would swaddle me and sing to me and take great delight in me.

Through scattered conversations with Mrs. Weurtzel over time, and one especially enlightening dialogue during my Senior year that occurred on a cold February evening accompanied by fat flakes of snow that floated past her kitchen window, I learned that during the last month of her pregnancy my mother was diagnosed with pre-eclampsia and was relegated to a hospital room bed until I had come to term. Dad worked the farm during the day and was with her in the evenings, staying well past visiting hours.

"What little sleep he got in the ill-fitting hospital room chair was sporadic and fitful, but he simply couldn't stay in that big old house by himself, let alone sleep in it," she said. "I can't imagine living in that drafty old thing by myself. I know how dark it gets out there, Joshua; oh, I know it gets dark here too, but it's a different kind of dark. We have the woods around us and that helps me, but where you are with all those empty fields for miles around would just unsettle me. I imagine it unsettled your father too, because he never wanted to leave the hospital. He only wanted to be with her and they would talk some, but mostly she rested and he watched *Jeopardy* and the *Wheel* on mute. Just him awake, alone in the TV's blue light, listening to the room's beeps and sighs. And he would never clean up before

coming either. He'd just come clomping in through the waiting area wearing those big ugly boots of his all caked with dirt and snow, and poop probably; but she didn't mind him smelling that way. She never did. That was her man and that's how he provided for you guys. Then I or another nurse on duty would have to tell him to go home and he would kiss her on the forehead and squeeze her foot and stay over her a moment longer before returning to that big empty house. I don't know what he did there nights."

Mrs. Weurtzel was a small woman who had kept her black hair in a perm since the late-80s. Her job at the hospital gave her a certain authority in the town, as nearly everyone has either had to ask her about their loved ones or been cared for, to some degree, by her.

"If he'd done then what he's done every night since I can remember, he stayed out in the farm half the night."

"I don't doubt it, Joshua; but your father... You know he loves you."

"I do."

"That's good. It was just so difficult for him. And it was hard to watch him go through it. We helped all we could. Everyone did."

"I know and if I was at all aware of what was happening, I'd have thanked you then."

“You did thank us then. We all just loved you. But somehow, our all being together only made her absence more painful. I really missed her and it was hard being with your father. He lost a chunk of his personality then. He never smiled the same and he was once so funny, teasing her; and he had all these voices he’d do for us. I say for us, but everything he did was for her. Without her he didn’t see the point.”

“I’ve enjoyed these talks with you about her.”

She took my hand and squeezed it. “They do me good, too, Joshua. I just can’t believe she’s been gone so long.”

I squeezed back as she reached into her pocket for a tissue.

Shortly after lunch on what my extended family would celebrate as my birthday, she said my mother began to convulse and her blood pressure spiked. The doctor took appropriate measures to stabilize her, but the episode had occurred too quickly and he ordered Mrs. Klein to be delivered. A nurse called the house, but our telephone’s insistent rings went unanswered. Mrs. Weurtzel knew this would be the case. She abandoned her post at the nurse’s station and raced to our farm. Dad remembered seeing the cloud of dust rising off the gravel road while he was planting corn.

“I cursed the maniac who would be speeding by the house. I looked toward the Reynold’s farm, but I couldn’t tell if she was in the front yard with her kids or not and I thought then, if he ever drives by our house again like that, and he’s outside;

and then what if I ever saw his car at the hardware store or the football game or at church even, what I would do and let my mind go thinking about that and I waited for him to clear the house so I could get a good look at the make and model, but he never did; and then I wondered what business does he have pulling into the drive; maybe he put it in the ditch, I thought. And then I saw that small woman dressed in blinding white and racing across the upturned soil and falling between the planted rows and I knew she had taken a terrible turn. I don't remember thinking anything after thinking that; stopping the planter and getting out of the cab, whether I climbed down or jumped; and then she saw me coming and she stopped and said, oh Daniel, hurry. I left her lying there between the rows and then I was the one spitting out gravel and dust and when I saw the road into town was clear I didn't stop for the sign, couldn't stop saying God in Your mercy have mercy."

And while Dad was numbly offering his prayers nurses were pulling me free of my mother's belly. When he saw I was clear the doctor pressed her chest with the paddles, once twice. They determined the time of death occurred at 2:08 PM, and because no one had thought to look in all the chaos, they took off a few minutes when my time of birth was recorded on April 26th, 1987.

Commencing especially restless moments, both before and after his own passing, I imagined Dad returning to the house that evening. He's quiet and I can hear the steady *ohm* of the Chevette engine beneath the whooshing of wind through the cracked windows. He hasn't eaten all day and his belly rumbles, he sniffs and

downshifts. Pulling into the driveway I can hear the crackle of rubber depressing pea stone. Then there is darkness. The engine idles in the garage. He can't persuade himself to turn the key, a movement whose action precipitates another action, and he can't think about that small future because the significant one has been yanked away. The awed father in dumb wonder, holding his wife's hand and marveling at their infant son warmly sleeping in the car seat, became a squalling, needy thing in the presence of deep wails and the lamentations of a disappointed saint. I imagined distraught hands pulling the red-faced boy from the tight straps and carrying the burden into the silent house, taking him into the prepared room and laying him in the crib, suddenly at a loss as to what the child should eat. I imagined him responding to my inevitable cries in the night, waking him from oblivion to the terrible reminder, again and again, that there was none to revel with him in the play of childrearing. He comforted me as best he could while he himself was desperate and in the throes of fear and I've often wondered what it meant that our first conversations were ones of wailing and tears.

Dad's parents lived down the road from us and they helped when they could. Grandma reminded everyone just what joy a newborn could be. She made a big deal of me and encouraged my serious face, delighting in the spasms that were beginning to pull at my limbs and voice; she was constantly smelling my head and baiting my hands with her finger, kissing the tips of my fingers waiting for me to need changing. While Dad worked in the fields and picked the eggs and repaired equipment, or

while he simply wandered around the property in a slow daze, Grandma swept the floors and dusted the furniture and prepared his lunch, which Dad took on the porch and studied without touching it before returning to work. I imagined him alone in the small cab of the tractor weeping and cursing, sometimes violently so; but if a car were to pass on its way into town or on a Sunday tour of the fields, they would only see the green planter rumbling over the earth at a leisurely pace, a flock of seagulls spread behind it like the train of a wedding dress.

I hadn't thought about being lonely in the city. However, without any substantial duty or responsibility, besides providing my own rigor toward becoming a writer, I often went days without speaking to anyone. I took my notebooks and novels to coffee shops, not only because I hadn't yet discovered the peace of writing alone in my room, but because I began to crave interaction, however scripted and trite. Those moments casually speaking with a barista, and the hours I spent scribbling and reading there and watching other students do the same, gave me a sense of community. But when I had finished my work and stepped back into the city, the illusion of meaningful fellowship was broken and I was just another body in the crowd.

To satisfy this longing I sought out places where I might meet people. I attended a few churches, but they were either too small and I felt too much under an

interrogation lamp, or else too large and I couldn't get anyone to acknowledge my presence. I found myself leaving more frustrated and aware of my strangeness in the city than when I had arrived and eventually left off going altogether.

So I attended sermons of a different sort. I rode the Metra system and the CTA to lecterns scattered across the city eager to learn about an array of topics that would be helpful filling the gaps of my aborted formal education. On one such evening I listened to a professor discuss the history of the White City generally and Louis Sullivan's impact upon it specifically. He lingered on the Golden Doorway of the Transportation Building and suggested this was a tall, broad, brightly colored middle finger to the Neo-Classicism advocated by the World Exposition organizers. Sullivan was also paying homage to the elegance of the Medici Palace and this curious relationship of old and new revealed hidden aspects of each.

I was left with curiosity for Sullivan and determined to learn about his work, which was then unknown to me, but that populated Chicago to an astounding degree. When I learned the Auditorium Theater was Sullivan's, I reserved a ticket for the next tour.

The guide was a whirlwind of information, anecdotes and personal asides that to have remembered them all would be akin to knowing each ornamental plate in the place, which Felix Servo, no doubt, did. He was a small man with thinning hair; his nose was slightly big for his slender face and he wore dark glasses, whose arms he continually tucked behind his ears. I wrote down whatever I could catch,

but the torrents were merciless and it was easier to simply go limp in the rising flood.

Mr. Servo ushered his charges around the Auditorium with such swift dexterity. He led us into a row of beige cushioned seats and talked about the golden megaphone design “for which Dankmar Adler walked the length and breadth of Europe searching for the secrets of perfect acoustics;” then up narrow leaning staircases to the box seats that Sullivan was “pressed to install, but who loathed the idea classes. It was the very antithesis of what Sullivan was attempting with his architecture. He believed the funders merely wanted to be seen, to be heard and to be applauded for their generosity. The best seats are, of course, center row, among the people, and only those not interested in the performance itself would sit here. And they did;” up still more staircases, making sure to mention the fireplace, the air conditioning system that accommodated Victorian fashions of the late nineteenth century, and lamenting those city functionaries whose job was to make everything safe and well-lit, but who made “accurately representing the Auditorium as it was then impossible. It was the first electrified theater and the light bulbs of that time had exposed filament. Sullivan wanted to showcase that ornament as often as he could. And he did so approximately 3,500 times. Today only a few of those bulbs remain on display the rest are these blasphemous LED fixtures made to look like Sullivan’s original intent;” still climbing stairs to what would be the ninth floor and without a hint of exertion upon him, he delayed upon a landing for our benefit to say, “the elevator, too, was installed as a modern convenience. It seems our population cannot endure such a climb, even with so

many lovely spots laid out to refresh ourselves in. But our forefathers did quite well. The seats are fairly narrow up here too, as we'll see." The view of the stage was incredible, and I saw more clearly the kin-ship between it and the Golden Doorway. While Mr. Servo answered questions, I pulled down a seat to keep myself from falling forward into him. He seemed used to such reactions for he smiled and clasped the iron railing behind him with both hands. "It can be a dizzying place, can't it? If anyone would like more information about Sullivan or the Auditorium I can recommend some books, for either the novice or the scholar. Of course, those texts will lead to others that will lead to others and suddenly you'll find your life has been well-spent." His crooked smile belied the seriousness with which he was speaking and while the tour participants gathered their things I asked him about his books.

I found two titles at the Harold Washington Library and was sitting at a high table inside Intelligentsia leafing through them. Occasionally I looked up at the men and women in line or out the large windows at people hailing cabs and striding across the frame, engaged with cell phones and the transporting of packages back to hotels and the confused desires of their children, which changed depending on what they heard and saw and smelled, each wriggle a veritable chaos and a bane to their parents, who were just as inflamed by the city's possibilities as their children were, as I was.

When I looked up from the introduction to think about the author's premise, and also to consider using the restroom, I saw Mr. Servo ordering at the counter. He

spoke softly, but in such a peculiar tone and with remarkable authority that I was instantly curious about what he was saying. I watched the barista's facial expressions and gestures, which seemed genuine, not to hasten the story's end and keep the line moving, but with sincere interest. Mr. Servo's hands fluttered about him and when they landed, either on the counter or beneath his arms when he crossed them, his fingers remained actively tapping and rolling and balling up.

I returned from the men's room in a far more comfortable state to read and to think and to watch, when I saw Mr. Servo handling the book I used to reserve my seat. "Mr. Servo?" I extended my hand to indicate that the book was mine, and he took it in his own. "I enjoyed the tour you gave earlier."

"It's not a good idea to leave your valuables unattended."

"It was only for a moment."

"More than enough time for someone to relieve you of Professor Twombly's good work."

"I don't think too many would be interested in it." I took my seat and offered him the one opposite. He was engrossed in the weight of the pages, remembering his younger self when its impact was new. The book was large, unusually rectangular and thick from pages of architectural photographs, not easily concealed beneath an arm or stuffed into a satchel. "I'll be more careful."

He pulled out a chair and we sat down together.

“I saw you had abandoned it for a greater calling and decided to watch over it for you. There are always folks around who will graciously keep an eye things for you.”

“I feel awkward asking.”

“It’s one of those odd, unforeseen consequences to the life of study. When you’re not home, that is. The body feels neglected, of course, and throws its tantrums. And we must listen. But the library won’t care about such problems and will charge you an exorbitant fee for losing this.”

He flipped through the pages, laying first the back cover, then the front, upon the table to keep the spine tight, inhaling the musty odors as if it were incense and mumbling something — either the captions or a prayer, maybe — before happening upon an example of Sullivan’s use of correspondence, nodding to himself, that tacit agreement between a man’s thought and his experience, before finally closing the book. He kept his soft pink hand on the cover, blessing it or himself or me.

“The wonderful thing about this book is the care Dr. Twombly takes in presenting Sullivan’s artistic temperament. Do you know he died a poor man; obscure? Yet this city is nothing without his presence.”

“I didn’t know that. The Wainwright Building is a big deal, I guess.”

“Yes, but that one is in St. Louis and of little importance for our purposes here. How closely are you reading, Mr. Klein?”

I was struck by his remembrance of my name. That initial shock gave way to the other, of my name and the name of my father being uttered at Intelligentsia on Jackson in Chicago, Illinois.

“I’ve only just started,” I said.

“There are only a few years given to us on earth and only a few hours in each day with which to do in them what we will; and you choose to waste them on a subject you have no interest in.”

“I’ve been skimming it before diving in.”

Felix turned *The Poetry of Architecture* around to look at it again. He seemed appeased, but then he was never really accusatory; his earnest condemnation was comical, but he was sincere. He closed the book and ran his hand around the cover, lightly fingering the spine. He sipped his coffee, loudly.

While Felix was familiar with the city’s past and took great care to know its present, he didn’t neglect the future. I would learn he had many friends stashed around the city’s cultural centers and even organized an artist’s colony in Dearborn Park, through which he was made aware of new artistic movements. He never said so, but I believe many of these directions had their origins in Felix’s mind. Through conversations with him, one could be persuaded into certain ideas that one thought were one’s own. He wrote reviews of his artist’s works for neighborhood magazines and avant-garde art houses and he acted as mediator between the artist and buyer, which more and more included the city’s elite. This held him in good stead when he

confronted zoning committees in judicial hearings, defending Chicago's great forgotten buildings. In a brown suit, dated in the cut, too long in the sleeve and wide in the shoulders, Felix would canvas the city's consent of recent decisions effecting historical landmarks or changes in policies that no longer benefited preservation efforts and gathering signatures with other grass roots devotees.

"When do you plan on diving in?" he said.

"As soon as I get home."

"I remember when I was beginning my own studies," he said. He looked up at me and smiled. "You're in an enviable position."

"I've had some college."

"Some? Not all of it?"

"I didn't graduate, if that's what you mean."

"Did you study architecture there?"

"I didn't. I declared English, with a Philosophy cognate."

"Then you're at the beginning again; though the humanities do speak to one another quite easily. I remember when I first jumped in." Felix paused to take a drink. "I'm still on the look out for new takes on Sullivan's life and work, but it's not the same as that first flush of enthusiasm. I suppose it never can be."

I nodded my assent, both because I believed I was feeling that flush and knew what he was talking about, and because I had no other recourse for confronting another's sadness of time passing.

“Did you begin with Twombly?” I pointed at the book between us to indicate the man.

“Of course not.” Felix grasped the edge of the wooden table to pull himself forward, but he didn’t budge. He seemed to stretch his leg out to the floor and having failed to in that, he slid off the high chair and moved it to a more comfortable distance from me. “This was published, oh not ten years ago now, and I’ve been at Sullivan for close to forty. Since the Seventies. He actually began with Lloyd Wright. Twombly, that is.”

“Do you give other tours around the city?”

“I don’t even give the Auditorium tour. Today was a favor for a friend who had to tend to a personal matter, but I don’t ever mind talking about Sullivan. Are you a Chicago native?”

“I just moved from Michigan.”

“Without a degree?” He leaned away in the low-backed chair and reached inside his outer jacket pocket. “And what have you found to do?”

“I’ve decided to do this for now,” I gestured at the table, taking in my satchel, the book and our conversation.

“I don’t know what that means.” Mr. Servo took a pen and a business card out of his inner pocket and scribbled two titles that would further my knowledge of Chicago’s architectural history, in general. He believed everyone in the city should

have a shared understanding of where they lived and since I was calling Chicago my home now, I was no different.

“I’m using this time to finish my education,” I said and took the card. “My dad passed away recently so I had to leave school to take care of the land. When I could finally go back, I found I didn’t want to. I still have a desire to learn, but I feel the courses I’ve taken have prepared me enough to read and think critically about any number of things. That’s what I’m going to do.”

I saw that his handwriting was small, tight and legible and the titles were among those he had recommended at the Auditorium. His phone number was circled.

“I’m sorry about your father.”

“Thank you. It caught us by surprise.”

“Yes, your mother. Is she here with you?”

“No. No, she passed years ago. I don’t remember her.”

Felix nodded.

“Thank you for the help,” I said holding up his card before slipping it between Twombly’s pages.

I had put him in an awkward spot and he continued to nod. “You’re welcome. Yes, I’ve highlighted my number so if you’d like to meet again to discuss Sullivan or Chicago. I’ve lived here since before Willis Tower was completed so, do take advantage.”

He smiled and rose from his chair.

I watched him exit and turn east toward Millennium Park, then stop, start again, mumble into his hands as he blew on them and about face into a three-piece suit's elbow, which was cocked out on a phone call. Felix reached for his face, bowed slightly, then stood still, gazing up, I presumed, at the elevated tracks as the Green Line crackled toward Cottage Grove. Felix checked his palm, then vanished outside the frame of the window and out of sight.

I read the entirety of Twombly's essay that evening. The following morning I read Narciso G. Menocal's accompanying piece and walked around the Auditorium before boarding the train to Hyde Park. I found Felix's recommendations at the Seminary Co-op Bookstore and began them with a flourish. I kept his business card as a bookmark and after I had finished a treatise on the Chicago School, I dialed his number. He was amiable and we met for lunch.

After another evening of study, I walked the length of Rush Street and found myself at the river again. There was a small plaza between the buildings and I leaned against the railing and watched the buildings. When the earth had finally turned its cheek from the sun, I left my rail and sauntered beneath the Wrigley Building. Soft yellow lights burned overhead and painted the thick, concrete walls orange. Shadows stretched across the buried stanchions and collected in hidden

corners. The wind blew angry through the subterranean enclave. I thought of God's Spirit racing across the expanse of the deep, before there was light, thinking of what he could create. I thought of Wisdom by his side, suggesting ideas, arguing her point and considering his counter-point. Then I thought of those intimate corners he created on this earth for us to discover, many remaining unseen and unfelt for thousands of years such as the ocean floor, the top of Everest, the Appalachian caves, or the moon, for instance; and I thought of the many thousands more yet to be seen, both near and far, right under our noses and at the very edge of the known universe, whose discovery would make us even more, God's confidante. Even though the moon turned out to be a bust, it had fulfilled our quest for knowledge and increased our capacity for wonder.

I was thinking these things and making my way toward a far staircase lit by a streetlight, wondering if I would become an oceanographer or a park ranger, perhaps a travel writer or a monk, and having a private moment of wonder at the breadth of options available to me, when I was stopped by a signal. After the traffic cleared, but before I could step into the street, I felt a pressure on my back and heard a rough voice demand my wallet.

"Who carries a wallet anymore?" I said.

I was too taken by pleasant thoughts to understand the peril I was in.

"Give me the cash then."

"That's even more of a stretch, sir."

The pressure on my back softened, and I imagined my assailant was scratching his temple with the nose of his gun.

“I guess it’d be just as useless to take your credit cards?”

“I’d only cancel them once you’d gone.”

“So then I’ll take your phone, too.”

“I don’t carry one with me.”

“What do you do in case of emergencies?”

“What’s the likelihood of one of those?”

The pressure disappeared and I turned and saw the man had pocketed his weapon. He was a shorter than I was and thin, but filled out. He wore a tailored grey suit with a silver tie bar that caught every glance of light below ground. He removed his fedora and rubbed a long white hand across his bald head. His eyes were aquamarine, liquid though sharp and sparkling with youth and playfulness in Chicago catacombs. He could very well have been in legitimate finance and I thought for a moment that I would look behind him and see his fellow stockbrokers laughing it up in a parked car somewhere, or leering from behind one of the pillars, but we were alone and each of us were at a loss how to proceed.

“Should I hit you? Knock you out for a bit?”

“What would be the point?” I said. “You haven’t taken anything you would need time to escape with.”

“There’d be no purpose to it. You’re right.”

He rubbed his chin, wondering if those were all his options, considering if I had anything at all worth the hassle.

“No, this ain’t right. It doesn’t leave me with the feeling I was hoping for.”

“That’s probably my fault.”

“No, everything you said would’ve been true whether you gave up your cards or not. It was never about the money anyway. What are you walking around down here for anyway? Don’t you know how dangerous it is?”

He relaxed his shoulders and put his hand in his pocket.

“It’s not so bad,” I said.

“You’re not convinced?” The man’s jaw stiffened and he raised a fist.

“I am.”

He smiled and patted me on the shoulder. “It was never about the money.”

“I believe you,” I said.

“Let me get you a beer. Come on,” he put his arm around my shoulders and started walking. “I feel bad for putting you through this mess.”

We went to the Billy Goat Tavern and Roland Charles bought me a beer. We touched glasses to our health and I asked him what he did, since his life of crime seemed like an empty venture.

“That’s presumptuous, Joshua.” He leaned back in his green vinyl chair, which must have been original to the place. “I didn’t pull it off tonight. Who knows? I might make good on my threats after all. Leave you unconscious in a dark corner.

Take your shoes, maybe your jacket. Then I could max out your credit cards. Maybe come back; finish the job. Dump you in the river. It hasn't given up a body in long time." He leaned forward and the table wobbled beneath his elbows. "It's a disgrace, really. This city used to be tough."

He was smiling through it all, clearly enjoying himself by enumerating the possibilities.

"Damn it. Why didn't I follow through?"

"Next time."

"You talked me out of it. That's what happened. You smooth son-of-a-bitch."

"If I'd known you were serious, I wouldn't have found any words to say."

He slapped the table. "My heart wasn't really in it anyway."

He took a long swallow of ale.

"You don't seem the criminal type, Roland. Why do you do it?"

"I'm nothing of the sort."

His smile playfully refuted this, but it didn't matter to me if he was or not. I was in Chicago and opening myself up to all the peculiarities of the world, and anyway, the odds of seeing him again were slim at best.

"I was passing through when I saw you looking around all clueless, not seeing where you were going, stumbling along the sidewalk and talking to yourself. So many of my days are exactly alike. Nothing separates them, Joshua. And if my days are all alike, what if my thoughts and emotions are just memories of yesterday's

thoughts and emotions and I really haven't had an original thought or emotion in years?" He pointed a long finger in the air and nodded. "That's not living; that's habit. So I exploded my habitual evening. Spur of the moment, honest to god. If I took your money, cool. If you resisted with some hostility, I'd have gotten my knuckles bloodied. And if you really wanted to keep your shit, then we'd have had it out in a big way. Either way it would have been an evening to remember of all the evenings, and I was prepared for all of it. Except, I didn't figure you'd talk me out of it."

"No one would have figured that."

We had taken a seat beside the wall. Above our table was a poster of a movie I'd never heard of, or maybe it was a playbill from the 1970s.

"If you want a memorable day, try submerging yourself in the river," I said.

"Have you?"

"No. I thought about it though, and the thought alone made that day stand out."

"How so?"

"I think the unreality of it. I imagined it, but it was like a real baptism. When I came up, figuratively speaking, I wasn't any more able to see beyond this material world, but I believed I was near the place where the veil is thinnest."

"Baptism? You're some kind of religious nut, aren't you?"

"A nut? I don't think so."

“I guess we’ll see.”

“There are so many ways to think about the world and interpret it. I was raised in the church, sure, but I find the idea of God going through the trouble to do all this more compelling than coincidence.”

“What about tonight? Us being here, the way all that went down, that’s not a part of some kind of divine plan.”

“Maybe not. But then...”

“Of all the marks bumbling through the city.” He finished his beer in one long swallow. “I’m getting us another round.”

I had only drunk half of mine, but I didn’t argue. He stood and worked his middle jacket button through the eye, then pulled at his shirt cuffs. There wasn’t much to recommend the place except the collective memory of that old skit. Formica tables gleamed beneath fluorescent lighting and resembled a cafeteria in their arrangement. One wall was papered over with Who’s Who in a newspaper style. Another was painted in horizontal bars to resemble a rainbow overlaid with a large red goat in mid-leap. The bar resembled a diner from the soda fountain and paper hat days, rather than the gritty dive its location promised.

“Quit staring and finish it already,” yelled Roland while the barman poured.

I lifted the pint and swallowed it down as Roland slapped the bar top in time.

He returned with two mugs and said, “Might be a dumb question, Joshua, but you got a girl?”

When I didn't answer right away he said, "How long you been here?"

"Four months."

"So you know a few."

"I don't know any."

"Work taking up too much time?"

"Not at all."

"No? Why not, what do you do?"

"I'm not doing anything at the moment."

"You're not working?"

"Not in the conventional sense."

"So what, you got properties you're renting out? Residual income and all that?"

"I came into an inheritance."

"Rich uncle or something?"

"No."

"Fine, don't tell me. It's not important anyway. You got a problem with women?"

"Of course not."

"You queer? It's okay if you are."

"Thank you, no."

“Then I don’t get it, man. You’re living in the world. Your body’s craving the same things as any man’s, right? So. What are you doing? Time and money and,” he threw up his hands.

I was not prepared to have this discussion. I hadn’t given my sexual instinct much thought, except for those occasions when it screamed for my attention. Maybe this is what men talk about, I thought. Maybe it devolves to this, and quickly, when they sit down for a beer together. I certainly couldn’t imagine Dad and his friends discussing such things. I thought about what Rainer Marie Rilke would say or Thomas Merton, or even Jesus Christ. I looked at the table and fidgeted. Those men were of no help to me with Roland Charles at the Billy Goat Tavern.

“It’s not something that interests me.”

“What ‘it’? We’re talking about spending time with them. Drinks and laughs; romantic walks by the lake.”

Again, the smile refuted the sincerity of his speech.

“No, we’re not,” I said.

“Then what are you talking about?”

“I’m gonna go.”

“No, you’re not. Sit down. You have this whole other beer, which I bought you rather than crack your head open outside. Now you have to accommodate me. That’s how this works.” His gold ring tapped against the table and I sat down. Roland studied my face, as if something about its make-up might be the key to solving

something. "It's eight-thirty on a weekday and you're out walking around underground with a book bag and," he paused to lean over and get a view, "sneakers?" He sighed and shook his head. "Clearly you're not after women; and we don't have to talk about that, fuck 'em. But then what are you doing with here?"

It wasn't a question asked of me. After a moment, Roland leaned forward and extended a long finger over the ketchup bottle.

"You're hoping life will find you. And judging by where you've chosen to put yourself tonight, it's life outside these restrictions of yours you're looking for."

"What restrictions?"

"How should I know?" He was jovial, sure he had hit upon the truth. "Clearly you deny yourself certain things. You spend all your time alone, reading probably, yeah? and you're getting tired of it. You need a little adventure. Why else did you come here?" He gestured at the tavern. "Do something with your anonymity."

"I'll think about it."

"If you don't, makes no difference to me."

"What do you do, then? Maybe I could take a cue from you?"

Roland snorted and folded his arms. He considered me.

"I'm an actor," he said. "Training in artifice. Making people believe in things that are not as though they were."

"And when you're not in class?"

"When I'm not in class I wait tables."

“Where?”

Roland was staring down the cook, who was wiping a hand on the front of his apron while hamburger meat sizzled and smoked.

“It’s all quite bohemian,” he said. “Except I have a full stomach, good health and a cheerful disposition toward life.”

As he spoke, his opened hand hovered above the table. When he grasped the mug, his long fingers wrapped around the thick glass and I thought how easily he could have choked the life out of me earlier.

“And a small caliber handgun.” I took the mug handle and tipped the ale down.

Roland put his mug down and licked his lips. “I like this brewery, Joshua. If you get the chance you should check them out. Half Acre Beer Company.” He winked and turned his mug so the handle was facing me.

“Then what was it?”

He smiled. “It was what you say it is.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“No, but you believed what your imagination and probability deduced it to be. It was a gun, then. That’s all that matters. It could be a simple prop, too, I suppose. A fake gun, like on movie sets. Or a small piece of pipe, or a bit of plastic. It doesn’t matter really, does it?”

“So you walk around all day with a piece of pipe in your suit coat?”

“Tell me about the first time you got laid and I’ll show you what I have.”

I had never had it put so bluntly to me before. In high school it was a given among my peers that I had no experience and it never came up like this in college; probably because I kept mostly to myself. I shook my head thinking about how to answer because I only thought how Mr. Weurtzel would have handled this situation, which was also of no help.

“That’s okay, Joshua, it was a trick question. I know you have to have a first time in order to tell somebody about it.” He laughed, “You look so relieved. Why? You have, you haven’t, who cares? Own your life, man; whatever it is. Proclaim it!”

I nodded and drank my beer, trying to recapture my ease.

“Now, if you were me you could have bullshit your way to a convincing answer; if you wanted to. That kind of thing comes naturally to me. I suppose that’s why I gravitated toward the stage.”

I had drunk more and quicker than I had thought. “What plays have you been in?”

“We call them ‘productions,’ Joshua. It all can get quite pretentious sometimes. I played a spurned lover in a kabuki performance, that’s a Japanese dancing drama with some sword play. I was all made up in white face paint with this bald wig and I chanted and threatened my rival, but the great thing about that genre is how it invites the audience to call out during the scenes. So my friends went nuts when I appeared. And then they started flirting with the line of decorum; then they

delicately crossed it; then they profaned it and were asked to leave at intermission. When I'm in character I don't hear anything outside the set, so I didn't realize it until after the show. I did remember the auditorium bursting with applause while I was reviewing the next scene, though. Not all the good lines are said by actors."

Two middle-aged couples came down the stairs, big-eyed and wearing Eastern Michigan sweatshirts. They mimicked three times the famous line and I saw the cook didn't flinch; he'd heard it so many times it'd become like white noise.

"How many productions have you been in?"

"We rehearse for a few months and put one on at the end of the semester. I've been in a few."

"Where do you go?"

"Where do I study?" He smiled over the rim of his upturned mug. "At Roosevelt. Just down the Mile, there."

"I had a University, too. But I quit all that after..."

"After you got your inheritance, sure. Who needs a piece of paper says you're trainable to employers when your bills are covered for a while."

I briefly sketched what I had been doing there and what I planned to do here with a love for the written word and a burgeoning interest in architecture.

"Best of luck to you," he said. "Not what I would do if I had the time, but it sounds better than serving people at Ditka's."

We finished our beers and after a few minutes of sporadic conversation I said, "Are you ready?"

"You faded quick on me," he said sliding his chair out. "Not much of a drinker are you?"

I opened the door at the top of the stairs and grasped my shoulder and told me we needed to do this again.

"I like you, Joshua. I think we can benefit from knowing one another. And we have a great 'how we met' story."

His grip reminded me of the galvanized pipe.

We walked to a bus stop on Michigan Avenue and shook hands. He gave me his number and said I should call him.

"I will," I said, but I had no intention of doing so.

"I'll be seeing you then."

Roland boarded the #26 Bus and I walked home thinking about the evening's events and wondering if anyone back home could ever believe such a thing, when a new phenomenon appeared on the Mile. It was only a trickle at first, due to the side streets diverting people to their hotels or CTA stations, or into cafes and bars, but the closer I walked to the source the more those delicate pink bags proliferated.

Then I saw the crowd.

Victoria's Secret was celebrating its Grand Opening on the Magnificent Mile. Men and women were taking pictures of their friends and loved ones and beloved

ones, who posed in various mock-ups of angel's wings. Men were sliding into them; elementary kids as well, two at a time; joy surrounded those little stands as if those wire frames clothed over and feathered were the very essence of such an emotion. It was all smiles and whimsy outside, but inside the store itself, or what I could see of it through the windows as I passed, emblazoned with large canvases of women's sensual shadows draped in hues of maroon and mustard and emerald, hundreds of shoppers intently picked through tables of white silk and pink lace and wandered aimlessly through the crush. The whole scene had something comical to it, as if there was a disconnect between the thing celebrated and the celebrants. Certainly we were not aflutter from the presence of another retail space; certainly we were accustomed to the incitement of effervescent pop-beats from Bose-powered PA systems to be so influenced by it; and certainly we had not been days or weeks without the thrill of sexual adventure, or at least its representation in any myriad form, to be so roused. But of course it was all these things, but only as silken veils obscuring the physical act kept deep in the shadows despite such ostentatious marketing. Still, only the most veteran aesthete would forgo such incitement and thrill.

I passed through the throng of laughter and camera flashes, careful not to run into oncoming pedestrian traffic, which was occupied with more pressing matters than whether they bumped into one another.

Inevitably I thought of my own sexuality. Its peculiarity was exposed to me by my agrarian peers, and even my own religious cohort confessed their apprehension toward and fear of accomplishing abstinence until marriage. I wasn't even thinking about marriage. I simply had other interests that consumed my time that I may otherwise have devoted to thinking about physical relationships with co-eds. Perhaps working the land exhausted me from thinking romantically about women; or maybe, because Dad and I lived rather spartan existences and he hadn't been convinced of the necessity of cable television or even internet access, my curiosity, when it was aroused, had no recourse to further titillation beyond my tepid imagination; it could just as easily be that I had no imagination for such things, that I was predisposed to this kind of non-behavior; or it could be there is already a kind of eroticism in what I choose to do, one that fulfills my needs in the way a copulation might for other men; or maybe, because I grew up without a mother, I lacked an essential balance in my person and had grown too used to a solitary life that precluded marital bliss, thinking, sub-consciously, that the eroticism of such a presence would only distract me from achieving what I had found truly worthy of my time. Away from the banal distractions of such a coupling, not to mention the euphoric distractions, I found myself with the time and peace required for me to conduct a well-lived day.

However, behind these hypothesis may lie the real reason for my celibacy.

The sidewalk maintained its weekend density and I turned at Pearson Street. While the Near North had a feeling of release, I felt I was being called back to work. The sensations evoked by my nearness to the secrets had translated themselves into desires for other hidden glories. At Rush Street I ordered a hot drink at Argo Tea and sat outside. I had stuffed a Penguin Great Ideas paperback in my jacket pocket and I took it out. The air was cool and I put the book down to intentionally be aware of the moment. I watched the bustle of Loyola students loitering outside the library, smoking their cigarettes and filling the sidewalks with their chatter about professors and parents, old friends and lovers, and milling beside garbage bins, sidewalk benches, sleek placards and other outdoor furniture. Each snippet I caught elided another and I got in the sense, but in a pleasant way, like reading an erasure of a treasured text in which the subtext becomes emboldened. I wondered just how many meanings a finite work could conceal.

The following week I had finished a monograph on the Beaux Arts style and I met Felix again. He was intent on showing me Sullivan's Chicago, what had come before and after the great man, and I followed his lead on many occasions. The resulting conversations would constitute a friendship I was delighted to have found and on Labor Day, with the hot sun obscured by fast moving clouds and the trees ablaze in foliage, he took me to Graceland Cemetery.

“Now this is what we think about when we think about cemeteries,” Felix said, spreading his arms across the green park as we followed the footpath. “But this was a grand departure from those usual squalid plots for the dearly departed. It was Queen Victoria who reimagined ‘grave yards’ as just the opposite. She wanted to reserve the best parcels of land to accommodate mausoleums and ornate headstones with paths winding throughout, as you can see, and areas where mourners could picnic. We don’t think to have light meals in such a place today, but back then it was a matter of course. Ponds and hills, manicured and well-cared for, break up the landscape and make finding particular memorials easier.”

And this was what we were here for. Not only was Louis Sullivan buried at Graceland, but a number of important memorials were designed by him. Felix was intent on showing me the Getty Tomb, which marked the beginning of Sullivan’s involvement in the Chicago School style.

“But that phrase suggests an agreed upon aesthetic, which Chicago as a whole didn’t have. It’s also known as the Commercial style, which consists of three tiers. In office buildings, the base, or ground floor, is ornamented and designed for retail and restaurants; the middle floors are offices and have little decoration besides the repetition of windows, or *oriels*, which are specific to Chicago, those three sided designs allow for optimum light and provide ventilation; and then the attic, topped by a cornice and heavily ornamented, houses the physical plant of the building. Where have you seen these before?”

“I’ve seen the Chicago Building. The Rookery and the...Monadnock?”

I wasn’t questioning the style, but the pronunciation, which I must have spoken truly because Felix didn’t correct me.

“And now you’re seeing the Getty Tomb.”

I looked and saw a terra cotta mausoleum. Wide, flat stones dominated the height of the entrance and culminated in highly ornamented bronze doors, which gave way to an arched design that seemed to represent a rising or declining illumination, depending on one’s perspective. The top was capped by a sepulchral slab with a thin line of decoration at the bottom. The colorful exterior, the green doors and the bright sun, deepened the sense of finality lying within the darkness.

I walked around the mausoleum, pressing my palm against the smooth stones and feeling the ornamentation of a side window, its repeated columns and bronze lattice work.

“It’s simple,” I said when I had passed around it. “It’s elegant, too. I think the tight form lends itself to such descriptions. And despite its horrible truth, it’s peaceful.”

We considered the mausoleum a few moments more before continuing our tour beneath oak trees and maples. Daniel Burnham’s island and the sparkle of Lake Willowmere could be seen through the ebullient boughs. Then John Holmes and Edith Rockefeller McCormick; Charles Wacker and Potter Palmer; the Williams, Goodman and Kimball. Finally, we approached a modest headstone embedded in the

dry lawn. A six-pointed design of Sullivan's own making blazed from the slab and we performed a moment of silence: Felix for Sullivan, myself for Dad.

The morning after his funeral, when it was too early to be up and I was alone and at odds with the searing change that had been created, I walked through the silent farmhouse. I haunted the kitchen and floated down the hall into the den, and to the threshold of Dad's bedroom. I crept into the basement canning rooms, which were first my mother's domain and then ours, then mine alone before I signed it out of our lives forever. He had kept my mother's culinary habits as best he could, but we never disregarded making apple sauce. That had been a lunch box staple for me and as I outgrew my colorful tin and thermos, I never lost the taste for it. The ceremony of in picking the apples, coring them, peeling and then boiling the apples, adding the cinnamon and finally forcing the sweet slurry through a sieve, happened to be one Dad and I could do together, to honor my mother I supposed, though neither of us said so outright.

I wished he would have spoken to me about her then. We spent hours in the basement, he hunched over the smoothed and worn wooden table and me standing on a crate or sitting on a high stool, a trash can filling with useless cores, the mound of apple peels piling higher. He spoke vaguely about her, as I suppose only a man should about his son's young mother, but I wanted him to tell me more about her and reveal to me, even more than the photographs and the old home movies did, just

how beautiful she was. But we performed the rituals silently in the communal acknowledgment that we believed the same things about her.

I took a Mag light into the brown shed and emptied the wooden drawers of his workbench onto the ground. I hoped to find some kind of treasure comparable to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls; riches that would deepen my understanding of him before she passed and validate what I had come to believe about him and what his grief had hindered. Maybe he had a manila envelope stashed away and stuffed with pages of his handwriting, or a collection of their letters to one another, if they ever found letter writing to be necessary, or even a final letter to me. However, he only left behind the tractors and plows, the bearings and the chains and the belts that efficiently moved chicken feed down the hundred yard stretch of chicken house; he left rusty hammer heads, dulled phillips screw-drivers, and a multitude of wrenches that had lost the sharpness of their cries and slipped easily off bolt heads; he left his soiled coveralls and ratty t-shirts, and two sagging pairs of high-topped work boots.

When I had searched through all the sheds and scoured the barn, when I had sifted through all the drawers in the house and emptied all the closets, I crossed the threshold. I seldom went into his bedroom and when I did he was always with me. We never had to spend time in there because we were always together outside that space. If he were ever sick, and I don't recall but a few times when this was the case,

he rested in his room while I was away at school, but remained on the couch when I was home.

I stood in the middle of the room, the backs of my knees pressing against the foot of their queen bed. The thin curtains were closed and the spring light that filtered through them cast a timeless aura throughout the room. For the first time, I noticed the smell; there was none. Neither was there a sound, above or below me, and I believed I would never be as alone as I was that moment. I went through his desk; I opened his dresser and felt among his t-shirts and socks, I touched his cufflinks and tie pins; I opened the bottom drawers and found them empty; I went into his closet. What I saw convinced me it was still their closet, it always had been. There was his suits and ties and his collared shirts and polos. On the other side were her things that he could not bring himself to throw away. A wedding gown in a sealed bag; cream, red and green dresses, polka-dots, striped and paisley. Her shoes stood upright and were covered by a coat of dust. I don't know what ever happened with her jewelry.

I closed their closet door, then I closed his bedroom door. I had hoped to find something out about him, something hidden that, when revealed, would lessen my pity for him. I had come to believe that his life occurred without him; that the circumstances which had shaped it never relinquished their influence and I saw him, resigned and limp, floating in the consequences of cursed fate.

I went into the living room and sat down in his recliner. I felt the frayed threads of his arm rests and turned my nose into the headrest. When I rose to go do something, anything, I looked over the side, between the chair and the wall, and saw his Bible, atop of which were the glasses he needed to read it. These were the artifacts of his longing and fulfillment, and I couldn't understand what they were for him. We were faithful every Sunday and most mornings when I was passing through my routine I would catch a glimpse of him reading in his chair, but we never discussed religious matters, not even in the car after church or at a diner after church, where we would sometimes go with other families and I would chatter with my friends before spending the afternoon watching football and taking naps or else finishing up chores around the house.

So I reached out for his Bible.

I had never looked through it before and the act of carefully lifting the hard cover that was tearing away from the spine, of touching the thin pages, of seeing his small script in the margins of columned verses, had brought the fact of his death into my real life in a way the funeral hadn't. I struggled to read those lines he had underlined because of the unruly markings slashing the letters and the hot tears that blurred my vision. Here were the phrases he paused over; here were the words that gave him hope, that kept vibrant the sensitive dream of seeing my mother again and that sustained his love for God despite the poor life he had lived since her passing. In these pages I saw what he would have said to me had he been able. I began to

read it in that way and in doing so, the Bible became a source of joy for me; a text wherein my father's breath whispered hope and favor and I knew I was deeply loved, still.

"It was good of his friends to do this for him," said Felix after a while. "Even if his buildings are more than enough memorial, it does me good to remember him here."

That evening I rested in my leather chair, unmoving except for the rhythmic turning of pages and the spastic marking with a pencil. I had given my hand free rein to pick from whatever shelf whatever I saw fit. I thrilled over obscure titles I happened upon at the library or The Seminary Co-Op: *The Sickness Unto Death*, *The Alcoholic Republic*, *Entertaining Satan*, *Zong!*, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*, *Information for Foreigners*, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, *Grave Robbing and the Search for Genius*. I sat with these texts both in my apartment and at random tables throughout the city. I sat in restaurants surrounded by men in tailored suits and women who offered their soft shoulders to the evening glow, bowing across small plates and sipping from glasses awash in brown, gold, pink and blue accents; I sat in cafes and coffeehouses lured by the aroma of baked bread and sweet glaze; I sat in museums and considered brush strokes, lines of marble, the arrangement of fabrics through the centuries; I sat on curbs and benches and leaned against storefronts; I walked this way and that. And I wrote about these things. And the sun that had risen from behind the lake had made its gallop across the firmament and took its

meal of dry prairie grass before retiring yet again, leaving we citizens to provide our own light, whether from a Bic, a novel or our own virtue.

At the time I was excited by a Chinese pastor who had been imprisoned after the 1949 Revolution and had spent his career thinking and writing about the person of Jesus Christ. I had discovered him on Dad's shelf while boxing up his books that I would donate to our church or else throw away. I saw the title and though it was innocuous I was compelled to read the first lines, then the first chapter. I had never read anything quite like it. The author had set out to elucidate *A Normal Christian Life*, but had destroyed such a culturally prescribed notion in the first paragraph. What I actually held in my hands was a treatment of The New Testament I had grown up with, but written from the normal Christian's position "in Christ." That many believers had never heard of such a position reinforced Nee's impression that Christianity is "a queer business."

As a child I was told about the blood shed for my sins; I was told each sin I committed was akin to crucifying Christ again, and again and again; I was told the blood covered me, but that I needed to live a life worthy of keeping my salvation; I was told when the allure of sin captivated me to think about Christ on the cross, to hear his agony, to see his body broken and bruised, to see the blood drip from his limbs and pool among the stones, staining the earth maroon, and feel, if I could imagine such a thing, the searing pain he felt when he lifted his body upon the nails, a torment required to continue breathing. Of course, I couldn't imagine any of this.

While the gruesome details of crucifixion captivated me, I could not reconcile that moment with the peculiar hostilities of my life that made such an execution necessary.

The Chinese pastor's remarkable idea was that the blood of Christ, however important to men's salvation, is not meant for them. Instead, the blood is primarily for God. It is not for me to look at the bloodied Christ and cease my sinful ways, but for God to see his blood upon me, as it were, and reconcile me to himself. It is for me to trust God's valuation. In fact, I am not meant to see the blood at all. The first Passover in Egypt required the captive Jews to mark their doorposts and lintels with lamb's blood. While the families were inside, the Spirit of Death hovered over the city heeding those homes with outward marks. That blood became the first instance of national atonement; it came before the Law and its attendant ceremonies, the performance of which would constitute righteousness before God for hundreds of years. Christ put an end to performance. Like those ancient Jews, my only act was to accept the blood's redemptive character, to brush the lintels, and rest inside.

I was coming into something special then. I believed a corner of the veil was being pulled back. I traversed some difficult terrain that had required me to abandon childish ideas and I was nearing a moment of revelation. But just as light from behind the veil was beginning to crawl across the Temple floor, I heard a knock at a door. I ignored it and followed the spreading light; angels were leaning over the balcony; I was closing in...

...and someone pounded on my door.

“Joshua. Man, open up.”

The veil fell heavy from its drawing back and the temple floor became my own carpeted space. The only illumination came, not from holy candelabras, but from Hancock inside my window frame. I put down my texts and crept toward my door. I leaned into the peephole.

“If you’re home man you gotta let me in,” said Roland.

I looked again. He was pressing his palms against the door frame, head bowed. He raised it and I saw him smile at the small circle in my door.

“Joshua. Let me in.”

Had he seen my shadow beneath the door, my breath through the glass, my spirit against the wood? I struggled with his presence there. I couldn’t rationalize how he’d found me, and not just my neighborhood either, but my street, then my building, the floor and now my door. That was too much for his intuition and I didn’t know anyone in the city who would tell him. When good sense told me to remain still, curiosity would let me think of nothing but how he came to be here. I spun the dead bolt back.

Roland was beaming and rubbing gloved hands together.

“You’re not going to try that criminal thing again are you?” I said.

“I have something new to mark my days. Come with me.”

I considered this a moment.

“You got something better to do?”

Of course I did. There was hard work being done in my cell; there were tenuous attempts to get at the ephemeral realities of this world; there were revelations waiting for one who would only look for them, and not in the usual way, but in the way a star or a galaxy, the Pleiades for instance, looks brighter and becomes more substantial when your eye is trained upon another spot, that dark nothing between it and the next reflective rock. It was these revelations that I hoped would give me a clearer picture of who Christ was; of who I was in him.

I moved aside and Roland walked passed me into my apartment. I followed him down the small hallway, passed my closet. He glanced into the bathroom and nodded at my living space.

“Your place sucks.”

He didn't see what I saw, or vise versa.

“Get dressed,” he said.

“Yeah, right.” He raised his eyebrows. “What for?”

“I'm taking you out. I owe you for that pipe in the back.”

“How did you even find me?”

“Never mind, I found you. I've been feeling bad for days about what I did. It's tearing me up. You're a good sport and if I'd known you were that sort I never would've pressed you.”

“That's all fine, but...”

“I know it is. Now get ready.”

“This is just a little too odd, Roland. Did you follow me home?”

“How much time do you think I have on my hands? It’s a new age for keeping track of people, Joshua. I typed your name and got your address.”

“I didn’t tell you my last name though.”

Roland frowned.

“Yeah, okay. You’re right. But don’t think I’m some kind of nut, okay? So after I got on the bus it just sat there. I could see the driver on her CB and shaking her head. Must have been some mechanical problem or else a delay at the next stop. I thought, maybe the bus ahead of us got hi-jacked or the driver was assaulted. It happens; had just happened, actually. I heard about it. Some guy was beaten and stabbed by two men who were furious their bus was late. No one bothered to stop it.”

Roland sat down in my chair. He rubbed the leather and fingered the gold rivets. He looked out the window.

“One passenger took out his phone and videotaped the whole thing, though. I suppose he’s a hero, I don’t know. So I got bored just sitting there. I can’t be sitting still when there’s so much to do. There’s too much going on, Joshua. Everywhere you look is something and if I’m sitting I’m losing, getting further and further behind. I have to be moving. Movement is progress. So I got off and skipped over a few blocks. I had so much energy that must have come with thinking about what I

had tried out on you and how that ended and then how we got on so well and I just felt so good, man. I think I scared a bunch of tourists laughing like I was. And then I saw you, or thought I did. I was just hoping, you know? It wasn't intentional, but since I had nothing else going on I followed him, which turned to be you, here. Honestly, I didn't know it would be you until you opened the door."

"And if I hadn't of answered?"

"I would've figured it wasn't your place or that you'd gone out. I'd have probably waited downstairs at the Zebra or McFadden's and tried again in a few hours. You really need to get a place with a better doorman."

"I'm thinking about it."

"And get yourself another apartment. At least have the place furnished properly. You got nothing but bookshelves."

"It suits me."

"Whatever, man." Roland slapped his hands on the arm rests. He looked and saw the paperback, my Bible. He picked up my notebook and squinted at my handwriting before dropping it on the carpet. He stood up. "You got dough. Live a little. Flaunt yourself a bit. Hell, man, you got a double bed."

I was beginning to see my life from another perspective. What had seemed a glorious space moments before had become sparse and a little ridiculous.

"Payback starts now." He pulled a cigar from his jacket pocket. "Let's go to the park."

“Pass.”

“You gotta get up early or something? You gotta deadline you’re up against? No. You got nothing. I got a whole hamper of dirty laundry needs tending to, but I make time.”

He rolled the cigar in his fingers, smelled the wrapper; he smiled.

“For you I make time.”

“Don’t do me any favors,” I said.

Roland put his arm around me.

“We’re becoming fast friends, I can tell. Hell, I’ll humor you about whatever you want to talk about, even if it’s this God stuff, I’ll look interested, like I give a shit, maybe ask some questions even. It’ll be good practice for my career.”

I slouched out from under his arm.

I tried to make sense of it all; how I could be one moment on the cusp and the next be swept away.

“It’s all a bit of a shock, I know,” he said. “In your place, not knowing what I know, I would react the same way. Fortunately, I’m in my place and I know what I know, and when this evening is over you’ll shake your head at how stubborn you’re being right now.”

I thought about escorting Roland out; of closing my door and being left alone in my studio, quiet and still, to pray for experiences that would prove my stake in

the divine nature. However, an opposite desire was revealing itself. I was coming to realize I was lonely and ached for community.

“Do you know how difficult this was for me to get?”

“Of course not,” I said. “It may have been the easiest thing you’ve done all day.” I made a pretense of considering. “Let me grab a jacket.”

“I knew it was a good idea to come here tonight,” he said.

Outside the wind coming off the lake was hampered by stone and glass. It was a warm evening and men lingered on the sidewalk in front of the bars smoking and chatting about work and women, discussing how much they would drink, whether they could use a sick day tomorrow. Taxis crept by hoping to be flagged down before accelerating through yellows toward the next intersection.

We walked down Dearborn to Washington Park. I was surprised to see a few people had sought refuge on the benches at such a late hour, but otherwise we were alone. The Newberry Library was lit behind us and I looked at the century old steps of Connecticut granite beneath the concrete arches. Saul Bellow had worked there and I looked for his shadow leaping into the marvelous, with which he was so concerned. I had taken the tour because I learned he had worked there. At the time I was overwhelmed with the knowledge that he had thought of things both wonderful and mundane in the space I was then thinking in. The history of America’s families were hidden deep inside it. Birth records and death notices, the purchase of acres and the transfer of deeds. Imaginative maps from the 1600s that misrepresented

the North American continent gave the space a relevance only in so far as a chronology of error. They were correct in broad scopes, but the subtleties of the inlets and peninsulas and the too-severe rounding of Michigan's northwestern coast created another world, an alternate reality that exposed the misfires of scientific measurements, and reflected the familiar in a fun-house mirror.

"I suppose that's what people do who have nothing better to do," said Roland playfully. "This is where my ancestors raised hell. Come all the way over from Ireland, risking what they risked to come here, and they get it stuck to them worse than they had. God bless the Anarchists," he intoned. "I come from good stock."

He pointed to a bench furthest away from any company and we sat down and quietly exchanged draws off the diminishing Corona Grande. I exhaled and watched the luxurious smoke, rich and deep in complexity, corkscrew around itself, taking long swimmer's strokes into the stillness above the park. We were shielded from any breeze that may have found its way down East Delaware and from any passing eye by a row of shrubbery. I felt the freedom of such seclusion, as though the idea were complicit with us, and an inkling of the marvelous and the grotesque steadily grew more pronounced with each draw from Roland's cigar. Each park feature manifested itself in these sensations: the cool of the earth rising, caressing my stretched legs, the city lights morphing into a swirl of confused astrological signs and the words cascading off my tongue, spilling down my shirtfront in hyperbolic

nonsense and crazed confessions that fractured my surface self and exposed the heart of the matter.

“It’s the blood, you see? It’s rest from works. But so many people, when they ever think of that blood, Roland; most people only think of it coming from his wrists and ankles, spilling down the wood and dripping from the into the dust. But wouldn’t it also have spilled out from the lashes on his back as well? They whipped him thirty-nine times. Because forty would have killed him, they say. So what about that blood?”

“What about it?”

“Well, that was shed for us, too. When Jesus was strapped to the block and his arms were stretched and the flesh of his back was pulled tight and then, ah, those bits of bone and iron tied like lures lashed around his ribs and ripped the skin from his bones. The blood then, too. Not just at the cross, Roland, but there as well.”

“It’s sure something.”

“And all that was after.”

“After what?”

“Huh?”

“All that was after what?”

“After the garden. The blood from the garden he sweat out. That blood, too. So much blood. The man must’ve been seven feet tall with an unbelievable wingspan, don’t you think? The Romans had to nail extensions on the crossbar, don’t you think? To have all that blood cover us?”

“Surely.”

“So he was not a small Jew, but a sprawling one. Even now he extends from thousands of years away to influence.”

“He sure does.”

Roland was chuckling and he put his arm around me. I noticed I’d been holding the cigar and I had the impression I’d been doing so for some time. I offered it, but Roland waved it away and I drew on it and watched the smoke.

I was living in the strange aspects of a Mannerist painting and I was both frightened and exhilarated. I thought perhaps the aged map makers had returned to prove they had not been mistaken; that they had indeed represented what truly was and it was myself, my time, that had distorted everything. I looked and saw waves rolling across Roland’s face. His grin pulsed white, like a lighthouse beacon over an angry sea, and I swam for it.

“Take it easy Joshua,” he said holding me up. “You’re gonna be okay. Listen to me. I hand-rolled this cigar with tobacco leaves and etcetera to induce the effects you’re feeling. This is normal and you’re okay.”

“I’m saying things I maybe shouldn’t.”

“Of course you are. But that doesn’t mean you should stop.”

I stared at the diminished cigar and said, “How did you manage it, Roland? I thought you’d need some kinda machine to get it so tight or else some kinda expert...to unroll the...coverings, they’re called?...and roll everything back up again what’d you say is in this?”

“Tobacco and other things.”

“Other?”

“Just rest, Joshua. Here’s how it is,” and he talked about the process of making the cigar, the rolling and bonding and heating and I must have enjoyed the repetition, the way the words sounded coming from him, their cadence or tone, because he repeating himself over and over, or else I asked him to say over and over and I didn’t want the rhythm to stop. His voice was soothing and somehow hearing about how such things were done consoled me. It made me think about the artistic methods that induced my delirium, not unlike those framed works of art or those volumes bound by paper and glue. There was no label on the cigar that I could see or remember having seen and I abandoned myself to the good nature of Roland’s nimble hands.

The aroma from the cigar mingled with its milk-like vapor and dissipated in the evening boughs. The light from the city crashed into those same limbs and softened Roland’s features. Everything became dulled and less sure of itself. My fingers grew light and I tried to clench my fists to keep my fingers from floating off my

palms. The fist wouldn't take, however, and I resigned myself to becoming ethereal, bit-by-bit, as if in a piecemeal rapture. I thought how wonderful it would be to live forever between the illuminated leaves and pungent air. I thought perhaps that was my soul's longing and I tried to meditate on the life inside that space and I thought, It must be infinite! and I thought, Man's thought tends toward guilt, first of others toward himself until maturity and its incumbent relationships with others compels him to believe the unthinkable: that he is guilty too; and with this guilt comes the prospect of punishment, either from another's hand, if we are profligate in the city's laws or, if we have transgressed a moral one that the civil code deems unworthy of sentence, adultery say, or lying, if such a lie is not professed as true while under oath, palm splayed across the Word, then punishment in the guise of divine wrath, righteous judgment or the natural tide of cause and effect, a kind of confused karma that reveals our neighbors to be just what we suspected all along. And this is our first introduction to the divine: guilt and fear. It is through these that the church, God's ambassador in the world, his emissary of good news, proclaims our standing before God and it is by explicating this relationship in these terms and finding within it such force to control an immature congregation that these spiritual leaders rarely dwell far afield from such common human feelings. There is no revelation here. Anyone who takes breath and has lived at least ten years knows what these are and begins to wriggle and squirm away from it. Why is the church here then? To make known our release from guilt and fear. To teach the glory that will be

gained through good standing with God, in his son. It is these glories in which we are now living, the glory longed for by the Prophets who were writing for us, we who have seen these glories, and loved by the angels who share God's delight in humanity, in us, and who marvel at the fact of salvation because they cannot fathom God's sacrifice, the blood of Jesus Christ, as a guarantor of peace and celebration. For what is man that God is mindful of him and of what intrinsic value do we have to be called God's sons, co-heirs with Christ, in one brotherhood? Will we see the angel's amazement? Will we share in the longing they have? The veil is parted, if only by the slightest breeze, the most fragile of breaths, to reveal a little of that to us despite the frailty of our senses and the limits of our units of measurement. The first glory is this justification of man so that we should be sons who share in God's divine nature. Oh, to be a son of God, to know peace and celebration with him; to see him as the father of the prodigal son, hoisting his robes off the earth, hitching his skirts as it were, and running (how unbecoming!) toward us; we, who decided to return to his house, in guilt and fear and in the guise of a servant, to offer our labor for water and fresh bread and vegetables, maybe a bit of cooked meat. Yet, before we can offer ourselves, our work, the father embraces us. He hugs us so hard we do not have the breath to speak our plan of return to our father's house as servants, that we will work for our entry. He has wrapped us up in himself and has kept nothing of his kingdom from us. What does guilt and fear have with such a father? Where is it in

this story? It is only in the prodigal's understanding of his relationship with his father. It is absent in the father's understanding. And this is our father. In the gospels Jesus spoke always of "my Father" or "the Father," but then his resurrection and it is suddenly "our Father." In this resurrection life is the brotherhood established and our true parentage is revealed and this not from our plan or our ability to work our way back; it is the glory of God's grace, through Jesus Christ who hikes up his robes and runs to us, delighting in us, to see us this way. Ah, the glory of seeing ourselves through the eyes of God Almighty!

"Forget about all that," said Roland, who was enduring my runaway theology.

"When not profaned the name of Christ embarrasses men."

"Jesus, I know I said I would humor you, but you're all over the place with this nonsense. Is this what I took you away from? This what you get up to all alone in your cramped apartment for hours on end? No wonder you spill your shit. Like a busted sewer main, you are."

I thought I had been peacefully marinating in spiritual matters and I was surprised to learn that Roland had heard the whole thing, or some facsimile of what I remembered of that night's monologue.

"Tell me something good, Joshua."

"I haven't been?"

“Why do you live like this? You got no job, yet you live in the Gold Coast. Cheaply, I will say, even poorly. Still, even living cheap requires no small sum. What do you pay for your place?”

“A grand, thereabouts.”

“And no debt?”

“None.” I drew on the cigar and felt like a master of the universe.

“And no bills to speak of. How much do you spend on food and entertainment, would you say? I’m serious. I want to know.”

“Why? What difference does it make?”

“Because you’re a strange case, Joshua. Because I’m curious.”

I told him a number I thought sounded right, but he wasn’t satisfied until I gave it some thought.

“Five hundred,” I said.

“So eighteen a month.”

I shrugged and watched the shadows of the trees expand and contract across the surface of the Newberry Library.

“I looked up what a guy could get for an acre of farmland. And you said you sold how many acres?”

“My dad’s farm was one hundred and fifty.”

I was slightly concerned by his smile. It had the effect of tracing a chill down my spine, of hinting at something formidable that had been set in motion and that I could not stop.

“Twenty years. You could live like this for twenty-some odd years.”

A breeze began to throw the boughs across the Library.

“And you aren’t doing anything with it.”

“I’m learning how to spend the time,” I said. “The old Greeks have some good things to say about it so that’s where I’m starting.”

Roland shook his head. He seemed put out by something.

“And what do they say?”

“Just that leisure isn’t watching television or some other such waste of time. That one’s leisure should be used to investigate, to explore, to challenge the mind in a deep way. It’s a love for understanding that is seldom bequeathed by a college degree.”

“How do you get a hold of it?”

“Understanding is a process, like building a house. There’s a lot of work before the foundation is poured, but it’s important work. Day by day and a little at a time that one day exposes itself as a wisdom.”

“Your money, Joshua. How do you get it?”

“It’s in a fund I withdraw from every month.”

“The same amount each time? Can you change it up?”

"I assume so. Spinoza says..."

"Sure he does, but your fund: IRA, 401K, mutual fund, stock options?"

"One of those, I think."

"You don't even know. All this nonsense you're all about it, and the one thing of any value that you have, you neglect. Angels don't long to look into these things? I bet if that Bible of yours said so, you'd tell them all there was to know about it."

"Maybe it does. I haven't read it all yet."

"I'd love to hear about that when you do."

I put the cigar in my mouth and scribbled a note to myself in my pocket book.

"You let it sit too long. It won't draw now," said Roland.

I handed it to him and he tossed it over his shoulder.

"You ready? I got an appointment to keep."

I woke late the next morning and though I couldn't remember exactly what I had said I didn't have any regrets. Whatever Roland had packed inside those tobacco leaves had influenced my speech, at times jubilant, at others doleful, and left me feeling depleted the whole day. I laid about with the shades down and my eyes closed. I was fatigued in a strange way and I kept my books closed and enjoyed the languid pace of my mind, the spiritless pose in which I spent the day. In fact, I felt a strange relief, as if everything I was thinking about had been released. My spirit was lightened by such disclosures and I was happy to have someone know at least some

little thing about me in the city. If I thought I hadn't missed such intimacy, I was lying to myself. I too had the primal urge to make myself heard, to proclaim and bark, to howl even.

Later, when I roused myself for a walk, I felt the notebook in my jacket *re: Rlnd and angl \$\$ wht it is & how its spnt* and I wondered why I had written it and what it meant.

I was reading in my cell and drinking wine when I suddenly had to get out.

I tore free of my t-shirt and leaped out of my sweat pants. I had purchased three suits soon after arriving in Chicago and I chose the navy blue. While I could have afforded to go to Ralph Lauren or Richard Bennett or Nicholas Joseph and have tape stretched across my shoulders and around hips, the infamous inseam and the wingspan, such tailoring, I felt, was fit for a tycoon or a socialite or a magnate and I didn't trust myself to perform such roles. I was not so used to nice things that I could start with these. I walked with too much distraction; I ate hurriedly and without care how or where, which did not suit such fine caliber clothing meant to be seen at Gibson's and Alinea and Tru, where I would be sure to drip aioli on the lapels or spill caviar down my front; and I was not mindful of preserving my fabrics, besides running them through the cold cycle once a week. But neither would I go to

Mens' Warehouse or Joseph A Banks. Somewhere in the middle and with moderation, still pulling off the rack but grasping much finer material. I found suitable retailers on the Mile and because I opened a credit account at the register I walked away feeling victorious. I spent the difference on the complete works of W. G. Sebald (in English) and Nabokov's novels from his American years. Somehow each fit the feel of my soul.

McFadden's was wired that evening. I gave the bouncer my license while white light, orange light, red and green light scored the dark glass; while men holered and laughed and tried to catch a glimpse of feminine allure in the tinted windows of a stopped Lexus, an Escalade; while taxis prowled for fares down State Street. He regarded my face and dismissed me inside.

I found an empty stool at the bar and squeezed in. Televisions were showing the Bull's post-game show until a manager found ESPN and switched over. I ordered a vodka tonic. I drank and watched and listened and thought about my life, the great things yet to be made of it and the visions awaiting my receptive spirit, the glories it would find. In and around these thoughts, behind me, was an easy closeness between the sexes, a palpable affability and comfort with one another and one's self. To speak and know your words will find a fertile audience is the magic of such places.

And I felt like talking, too. A waitress had stretched her arms across the well station beside me, holding a tray being loaded with an array of amber towers and

neon kiosks. Her tawny shoulders showed pink straps beneath a thin black tank and she smiled at something the bartender was saying. When the bartender had turned her back however, the waitress scowled and bent her knees beneath the weight.

“Did the Cubs win?” I said to a man spinning the ice in his drink.

“Yeah.”

“Do you know the score?”

He shook his head.

I finished my drink and ordered another. I watched the television, waiting, then saw that Zambrano had thrown a two hit shut-out and drove in two as well. They beat Lincecum’s Giants 3-0. I lifted my glass to their victory. A bartender scooping ice at my well asked if I wanted another and I was surprised that I did.

“With something other than tonic,” I shouted.

“Like what?” She was pouring liquor into a shaker, turning the bottles over with quick twist of her wrists, drop-stopping them then picking up fruit to be squeezed.

“I don’t know.”

“Moscow Mule. White Russian. I can make a Salty Dog.”

She looked past me at the crowd. I glanced at the mirror behind the bar and saw them shaking and jocular, drink orders on the tips of their tongues. My white Oxford collar was luminous in the dim. I straightened my back and tugged the cuffs free of my jacket. The bartender’s wrists danced beside her ear, the soft bounce of

her bar tee. She was waiting on me and I forgot what I wanted. I said the last thing I heard. "With Absolute," I said. She nodded, poured the cocktail and presented it to a gentleman. I followed her humming bird movements behind the bar, reaching for the vodka, pulling down the glass, pausing mid-stretch while a bartender passed. She took juice from the grapefruit and my eyes lost focus. I closed my eyes and believed I was collapsing toward the bar. I must have over-corrected because a firm hand announced itself on the small of my back. With my palms squarely on the bar top I turned to see who had kept me from falling to the ground.

"Someone's having a good night," she said.

"It's caught me off guard, for sure."

I stared at the young woman's face. Her chin was pointed and she had cut her black hair short, like a boy's. Her lovely teeth gleamed, despite their apprehension toward the novice who nearly collapsed onto her. She had expectant eyes.

"I know you, don't I?" I said.

"You should."

I thought where to place her.

"Michigan State. Malkim's class."

"He got it. I'm Liz."

Her hand was my shoulder. I guessed because she wasn't confident I could remain upright. "I'm Joshua."

"I recognized you and wanted to say hello."

“And now we’re in Chicago. At McFadden’s of all places.”

“Yes, McFadden’s.”

“Do you not come here?”

“Rarely. I’m with friends tonight and they dragged me here. I had to get away from our table, though. A bunch of guys are getting annoying. My friends too, for that matter. Not just one specifically trying to get with one of my friends, but all the guys. In a group effort. They converged on us like something out of prehistoric times. And they’re being encouraged.”

“Like a war party.”

“Except none of them knows what to say. It was embarrassing. But I have a friend who’s willing to play along tonight. So, is this your place?”

Liz looked around the bar as if she were just now noticing where she was.

“No. I usually don’t come out like this, either.”

“What’s the occasion then?”

“I don’t recall exactly. It seemed like a good idea an hour ago. Something about my energy? I was feeling confident, maybe; hopeful, I think.”

“Spur of the moment. I get it.”

“And I live just upstairs, so I didn’t have time to change my mind before I sat down.”

“Upstairs, sure. Why not? It’s convenient.”

“You finished graduate school?”

“In May. Nobody’s hiring a Master of Philosophy, though. Surprise, surprise.” Liz squeezed beside me and put her purse on the bar. “The Dean handed me the diploma, this blank piece of paper rolled up and tied with pretty green and white ribbons, and I walked off stage and into the waiting arms of my debt collectors. At their insistence I got a job working at a bank. And I’m living at home so it’s everything I imagined it would be when I set off seven years ago.”

“You don’t want to teach?”

She was sipping her drink and her eyebrows jumped. “I’d love to teach. Are there Philosophy Departments hiring?” She rolled her eyes and said, “There aren’t. Not that I’ve found anyway. And I’ve been looking for months.”

“I’m sorry.”

She shrugged off my condolence.

“I knew there was a good chance of that when I started. And I may have been able to find a job had I been willing to move. But I like this city too much. I can always go back for my PhD, too.”

“But you don’t want to.”

“No, I don’t want to. I told my dad if he ever hears me talking about that to hit me over the head with a two-by-four. We all think we’re so smart, but it’s got to be one of the dumbest things to get an advanced degree in the humanities. But it might just be the thing to do. Get me out of my old bedroom, defer the loans yet again, give my daily life some actual meaning. And I’d be able to study again. This

nine to five really wears me out. I don't have any energy except to argue with my mom. And reading makes me sad these days."

"Sad? How come?"

"Because I remember all the other days of reading that have only led me here. I thought I was using my time well. All my favorite thinkers told me I was. My professors thought I was, too. My classmates and I all agreed we were being good stewards of our time. Now look at me. So intent on ethics and rightly understanding self-interest that I've completely ignored how to support my intellectual life. I'm useless to the consumer economy and nobody wants to hear about caves or magic rings unless you're talking about Peter Jackson. Whatever enjoyment I got out of reading is ruined now by its false promises."

It was upsetting to hear this. That Liz could become disheartened by such facts that she quit laboring under them terrified me. I had the luxury of not thinking about my endeavors in this way yet, and I wondered what other dark surprises lied in wait for one with aspirations like mine.

"But this is depressing conversation for a Friday night," she said. "What are you doing in the city? Must be something worthwhile, living in the Gold Coast."

I faltered. When I was alone with my books and pens and zipping around Chicago on the El or in taxi cabs, discovering new authors and wondering about canvases or attempting to grasp the foreign language of architecture, I had no problem

rationalizing the primacy of literature to myself. I had given myself a special warrant to live my life according to such a belief. However, when I was asked to present that warrant to skeptical eyes, it became loosed from my hands and dissolved in the wind.

“I’m still studying,” I said.

“Graduate school?”

“No.”

“Did you transfer, then?”

“No, I dropped out. I decided to go about my own program.”

“Good for you. I envy that right now. I haven’t found the discipline to work full-time and still study toward any great project. In a few years though, when you have to get a real job and you only have your GED, you’ll be fucked. But for now? No, good for you.”

We were laughing, but I detected a partial note of sincerity from her.

“Where do you work to afford you’re lovely sabbatical?”

“I don’t.”

“How are you managing that?”

I told her about my inheritance, the sliver lining enveloping the dark cloud.

“I’m so sorry, Joshua. I didn’t know.”

Her hand rested on my forearm. I covered it with mine. “It’s all right.”

“Here you are.” I looked and saw the Salty Dog. “You have a tab started?”

“Yes.”

“Is that what you’re drinking?” said Liz.

“The last name,” said the bartender.

“Klein,” I said.

I suffered a moment of anxiety saying his name, as though that quick syllable, packed with so much meaning and obligation for me, would prick the ear of someone in this crowded scene who would report my inebriation back home and I would be considered a fraud, a tourist in the literary world. I took out the red straws, shook them and laid them on the bar. I sipped. Liz pulled back, as though the drink had some inherent propensity to come spewing out of my mouth rather than being enjoyed. It certainly had grapefruit juice in it.

Liz laughed at my face.

“Here,” she took the glass away from me, “get rid of that. Hey!” She slapped the bar and caught the eye of the bartender, who was pouring beers. “This is no good. Fix him a... what do you like?”

I shrugged. “What do you have?”

“I’m a whiskey girl. Want a taste?”

It was delicious.

“Put two more of these on his tab,” she said. “You would have offered to buy me a drink eventually.”

The man beside me put a twenty on the bar and left. I managed to put my palm upon the vacated seat before an eager fellow fell into it. While he argued that I had no right to it I slid over, gesturing to Liz to take mine. He continued to argue, swaying a bit and losing focus, and when he saw I had been sitting there all along he apologized, offered to buy me a drink, then faded back into the crowd.

“That was smooth,” said Liz getting comfortable at the bar.

We toasted to having discovered one another again and while she sipped I remembered how lovely I thought she was two years ago in Michigan.

“I grew up in Wicker Park,” she said when I asked about her. “My parents moved there from Oak Park to be closer to the city. They bought the house from a World War Two veteran, who was moving in with his daughter after his wife died. My parents gave their condolences then bought the place cheap. Apparently he wanted to be rid of it and after the first month my parents knew why and wondered if they’d made a mistake.”

“What happened?”

“Their neighbors gave them some trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“It was all long before I was born and I don’t think it was ever as bad as they like to believe. They just tell stories to give themselves a bit of an edge, you know? To remind me and probably themselves that they weren’t always so domesticated and middle class.”

“Tell me one.”

“Tell you a story?” She looked behind the bar and I saw the frantic hustle and heard the orders and laughter and shouts that had all blended into rushing wind while we were speaking.

“Unless you don’t want to shout it.”

“There isn’t just one story, though. It’s more like a collage of little events. My mom getting harassed at the corner market and Dad changing tires, gone flat from knife punctures. Broken windows and cars driving slow passed our house. But they were harmless threats.”

“I bet he didn’t think so then.”

“Dad laughs about it now. A small price to pay then for the value of our home now, he says. The neighborhood was changing because the city wanted to invest in it, mostly because the El and Milwaukee lead straight to the Loop. And then the JFK, too. They enforced building codes and raised taxes so that businesses closed and long-time residents were forced out. Hundreds of properties were burned to the ground for the insurance money, then. Drugs became prevalent. Pimps and gangs. And then somebody got the great idea to transform the abandoned factories into loft spaces. Then the artists came. Then the businesses catering to that lifestyle and, for good or worse, it became a yuppie’s paradise. Trendy boutiques, artisan cheeses, inventive cocktails, IT guys, music venues, and European cafes. Well, you’ve been there?”

“It’s nice.”

“Dad gets a kick out of it all. Every year our property value increases. We go for walks sometimes and he laughs about it. He likes to shop at these places just to keep them in business, then he’ll make fun of his purchase at home, ask Mom if she’s ever thought she needed something as ridiculous as a horse shoe for the wall or a mannequin’s hand to display her rings.”

“What does he do?”

“He’s a defense lawyer in the Loop. Do you know the Monadnock Building?”

“I do. A friend of mine took me around there.”

“I grew up in that place,” she said as the decibel level rose. She leaned in and I turned my ear. “In the summer, Mom would take me downtown to shop or go to museums. We’d meet Dad at his office and have lunch somewhere, but sometimes he’d skip work and take me to the Cub’s game. He’s always been the one most in love with the life. Full of energy and ideas. Wanting to go go go. It’s probably because he spends so much time cooped up in his office. I’d see him bent over his desk, writing quickly and muttering to himself, shuffling through stacks of papers looking for that lost document. He’s too tall for that kind of work, Joshua. He’s in his element when he’s striding.”

“What about your mom?”

She sipped her drink and she shook her head. “I’ve been talking too much. Tell me about where you grew up.”

“My dad and I were alone on our farm. The nearest neighbor was a mile away and that was my grandparents. When the corn came off in the fall, I could see their yard light across the field, like Venus low on the horizon. We worked mostly. Real busy in summer. Lots of down time in winter. I didn’t mind it. I had friends I spent time with. Dad did, too. But mostly we worked and rested from working. We weren’t that interested in being social, I guess.”

“I can’t imagine that. We were always with other people, always busy. Growing up I had a lot of friends who lived near me and that I played with. By then the neighborhood had begun catering to a different demographic. I was always in other kids’ houses. Classmates and neighborhood kids. Church friends. I became so used to it that when I had vacations from school I didn’t know what to do with myself. I got bored and dreaded the holidays, if you can believe it.”

I understood the holidays, but, “Bored? In this city. Liz?”

“Even in Chicago life can feel worn out and monotonous.”

The bartender put down napkins and set two heavy tumblers of whiskey on them.

“I don’t believe it,” I said shaking the straws. “I’m taking you on a tour of your city. I’m going to show you the wonders of Chicago. Have you been to the Auditorium?”

“Which one?”

I nearly choked on my drink. “There’s only Sullivan’s.”

“Sorry. I probably have, but I don’t remember it.”

“I’ve been walking all around Chicago. At all times of the day and night. My favorite time is early in the morning. Four o’clock. I’ll get up and wander around the Mile just to have a look at the deserted place.”

“Why?”

“Because even though the city is the same from a physical standpoint, its spirit is much different in the pre-dawn. There are still people about, working or returning home from the clubs or they’re homeless or just enduring insomnia, but they’re quiet and slow, like they’re trying not to wake the city up. As if the city itself needed rest from supporting all our pursuits. And then I can stop and stare at whatever catches my eye. During the day that’s difficult to do. Any rounded stone or pane of glass, any shuttered kiosk or lighted lobby, even the slow meander of the Chicago River. All those still scenes... it’s like looking at a photograph.”

“I’ll take your word on that.”

I laughed at her teasing face. “Come with me one day. I’ll show you.”

I finished my drink and pointed at her half-full glass. She shook her head, but I wasn’t sure which offer she was shaking away.

She said, “When you’re done playing city-boy, what are you going to do? Your money won’t last forever, will it?”

“Not forever, but not any time soon either.”

I raised my empty glass and the bartender nodded.

“So...?”

“I’m going to be here for a while, I think. I’m not coming to any definite conclusions yet, but they’re out there, with a little time and pressure, waiting for me. And who knows who I’ll be when I reach them? Who can say what profit comes with pursuing an artist’s life? Because there is profit, even if it can’t be monetized. So I do the work I think will prepare me to receive those conclusions and let whatever importance it has for my future reveal itself then.”

“That’s really all you do, isn’t it?”

“You don’t think that’s bad, do you?”

Liz brushed back the hair falling around her ear. She mussed what she’d arranged and a silver ring winked in the bar light.

“As much as I like the idea of what you’re doing, I know it’s impossible to maintain that kind of concentration. For me, anyway,” she said.

“Because you’re accustomed to a broader social life?”

“Sure, that. And then I never enjoyed those thinkers so much that I’d devote my time solely to them. I used their thought to help me think about environmental ethics and how to think about just and unjust laws, or how much of an individual’s life society should expect to use. If I had to read those books every day and related them only to my life now? I don’t know, Joshua. It seems like a closed system.”

Liz stirred her drink and sipped. She turned and looked at her friend’s table.

“I don’t think I’m being selfish in this,” I said. “There are a lot of examples of people leaving life for a while to learn something great. There are countless monks and philosophers who thought there was more to life than the predictable plot markers. Kierkegaard broke off an engagement for the freedom to work out his salvation; Schopenhauer decided misery was the normal state of being for men and women and he went out of his way to avoid illusions of happiness like spouses, children, fulfilling work; even the apostle Paul left his society for a fourteen years to be taught by the Holy Spirit. And then they returned with something beneficial for society. The philosophers with their books and ideas that, without having eschewed a community, could never have been written and Paul with his revelations about our position in Christ and Christ’s position at God’s right hand.”

“Then you have thought about life after?”

The bartender presented my drink.

“I want to return with something of value for myself first, then other people, if they’ll have it.”

“You want to write something like the Bible, or *The Seducer’s Diary*?”

“Why not? I have the precious gift of freedom; I have the time and the inclination; and I have a strong work ethic. I’ve been taught and I have seen and been convinced that hard work is rewarded. I have such expectations now.”

“What is your grand idea, then?”

“I don’t have one yet, but I’ve been thinking about God lately, what he thinks of Man and how a relationship with him is possible. And I’m still working out my dad’s life — what he taught me and what he believed — with his death. So many of the verses in Proverbs talk about long life being the reward for a righteous man and there’s an unspoken expectation for all Christians that they will die of old age, peacefully in their sleep. So then if this isn’t the case, if there is suffering or if there’s a quick end, even violent, the man or woman must have had a secret sin that warranted their brutal end; something only God saw and judged. I believed that for a long time. I don’t believe it anymore. But then what is righteousness in God’s eyes? Can Man aspire toward it? Is it possible to obtain?”

“And you think this is what people want you to bring back?”

“It’s what I’ll have. And who can say how long I’ll be seeking? Maybe after so much time people will be curious of my answers. The world just needs a few people to think about these things.”

Liz nodded and glanced toward her friend’s table.

I was happy that Liz was there and I could speak aloud my intentions. I felt that, because she heard my plans and had assented to them, they had somehow been given a legitimacy in the world; either that or else the house music was hitting its stride and everyone was sharing in a moment of optimism.

“You said you were alone with your dad. Can I ask where your mom was?”

Everything stopped. I understood what Liz had asked, but given our surroundings and the joy I was then feeling, however artificially produced by the alcohol and the music and by Liz herself, I was at a loss how to answer her.

“We can talk about something else.”

I shook my head. “I wasn’t expecting to talk about her,” I said. “I don’t know why.”

“I’m sorry I said anything.”

“My mom died giving birth to me, so I never knew her. Except the stories I was told as a child and then the facts of her life and death when I grew older. Dad never remarried. He never even pursued other women. I think because the town was so small? Because it would have looked bad, I think he thought. Because then he would have had to integrate that relationship into a community already used to him, either as a widower or as Valerie’s husband; probably both. Laughing with a new woman would have seemed disrespectful maybe, like his love for Valerie wasn’t real? I don’t know. But then, being a widower meant that his friends dropped off. They had spouses and friends with spouses and they did things as couples. Having him around reminded them of his sorrow and misery, of how much they missed my mom, and more so, I think, of their own vows and the knowledge that death will part them from their lover as well. And who wants that reminder sitting in the corner,

nibbling on a cheese plate and smiling at the party, but not enjoying it? Then there was the hassle of a sitter.”

“How old was she?”

“Twenty-three. A little older than I am now.”

Liz put her hand on my arm. Her drink was finished and I swallowed mine.

“It’s always felt normal to have one parent,” I said. “But only in the way someone born without an arm or a leg feels normal without it, I imagine.”

Her eyes were soft and the kaleidoscopic lights of the bar were stilled in them.

A loud roar ascended from the crowd and I saw Liz look over my shoulder and gasp. I turned and saw a young woman walking atop the bar. She wore white knee socks with two green stripes at the top, shorts and a tank top. Another woman similarly dressed was being helped up. Our bartender lifted two bottles. They each took one and proceeded to pour shots directly into the mouths of waiting men.

“I can’t believe this,” said Liz readying herself to leave. I tried to move my chair over so she could squeeze out, but the crowd had become thicker, actively pressing in on us.

“Lizzy,” shouted a man. “Where’d you go?”

“We bought the table a round and you were gone. Alexa had to take your shot.”

“Never mind. We’ll get you this one coming.”

“What’s Alexa’s story? She got a boyfriend?”

I managed to get out of my seat and behind Liz’s chair. The shot girl was leaning out over the crowd and pouring from her bottle.

“Another time fellas. We’re just heading outside,” I said.

I pulled out Liz’s chair and when she stood one of the men hopped in. The other scrambled for mine, forgetting Liz altogether, but another man had already taken it.

Liz took my hand and I pushed our way through the swarm, around the booths and toward the exit. The bouncer was watching the show, smiling. There was a huddle of men smoking on the sidewalk and yelling at one another in amiable camaraderie.

“That’s why I don’t come here. It feels too much like a college bar,” said Liz.

“Is there another place you’d like to go?”

“There is.” Liz opened her purse and took out her phone. While she was texting, “Most of Division is like this, but Rush has some places that will make a proper drink for us.”

“Have you ever been to the Zebra Lounge?” I said.

“No. Where is that?”

I took Liz’s hand and we walked toward Canterbury Court. I opened the front door for her.

“Is this where you live?”

“It is.”

I showed my ID at the bar’s entrance. Inside the entertainer was thundering on the piano and the crowd was singing along to Elton John’s “Saturday Night’s Alright (For Fighting).” The large brandy snifter was stuffed with crumpled bills and we had to fight our way to the bar. Liz found a crease in the crush and squeezed my hand.

“I’ll keep this spot for us.”

“What do want to drink?”

“An Old Fashioned, please.”

I held her smooth wrist that I instinctively brought to my lips. “You’re so polite.”

“If they have Four Roses, get that. Otherwise bartender’s choice.”

“Bartender’s choice?”

“Of whiskey, darling.”

After some time of watching the bartender’s work I ordered two drinks.

Then I watched Liz watch the bar. She swayed to the music and chatted up the people around her. She laughed and pushed her hair behind her ear before mussing it up again. In dark designer jeans and yellow heels she had an elegance I had not noticed in the classroom, a way of being that was casual and light, an ease with the world like water, and I grew anxious and excited. I began to have an inclination of what was happening, or what could happen, and I hoped the drinks would not arrive

too soon. Whatever instinct I had for this kind of evening would be tempered by understanding and conflicting desires.

Within such a consciousness I sobered up.

“Two Old Fashioneds,” said the bartender and I gave him my card.

“Did they have Four Roses?” said Liz.

“I think so. I asked for it and the guy made these.”

“Then here’s to meeting old friends,” she said.

The whiskey kept getting better as the night went on.

“This is a real nice suit, by the way.”

Liz felt the soft material of my jacket, then of my Oxford, the back pocket of my slacks. In the dark bar, surrounded by indifferent people and encouraging music, I kissed Liz. We kissed again and I brought her close, my hand resting on the small of her back. I was drunk again, as if physical intimacy were an accelerant, and I had trouble doing anything except smile.

Conversation became easy and all-important. We laughed and grew serious in quick succession, or else we lingered on each for longer than I was able to register. When it was time to order another drink, I suggested going to my place where, I said, the view was incredible and we could finish the ouzo.

Liz took my hand and we walked out of the bar and into my foyer. I buzzed the doorman, who welcomed me home.

I pulled the cage of the elevator and told Liz my floor. The doors closed and we were alone and inseparable.

Inside my apartment, Liz appreciated the closeness of Hancock and the symmetry of Willis in my other window. The lights from the city lit my room in a soft blue that I didn't disturb. Liz sat on my bed while I filled two glasses with anise liqueur. She had kicked off her shoes and was leaning back on her elbows, rubbing her magenta-toenailed feet across my carpet. I handed her the glass and touched her hair like I'd seen in films and television. She sat up. I moved to sit beside her.

Later she said, "Is that all?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"Yes."

Later I said, "I'm sorry there wasn't more."

"I didn't say you should be."

"That's as much as I've ever allowed myself."

"It was wonderful."

"Will we regret it?"

"I won't."

Then:

"Was it really all right?"

"You can do that whenever you want."

"I want to," I said.

Still, I couldn't. We lied together in the dark, holding one another until it got too hot and we separated in the night. I woke first and made coffee. My head ached and while I tried to open a book I couldn't grasp anything that was being said. I was having trouble justifying my evening with Liz, of coming to terms with sexual intimacy without any kind of commitment. Mostly, I was afraid of what she would think of me and the liberties I'd taken; more than that, I feared what she would think of my failure to perform. I sat in my leather chair sipping coffee and anxiously waiting for Liz to stir.

"Good morning," I said as casually as I could. "Do you take coffee in the morning?"

"In a minute." She stretched beneath the covers and I heard her running her arms across the bed sheet, feeling for her clothes with her feet.

"I'll just be in the bathroom," I said.

When I thought enough time had passed I washed my hands. Liz was dressed and looking out the window, holding a coffee cup.

"I couldn't find any cream or sugar."

"I drink it black."

"A bachelor with no sugar in his house. You must ask all the ladies if you can borrow some."

I was devastated. Faltering for something to say, wondering if she were being cruel and if I deserved it, I simply shook my head and yawned.

“Joshua, I’m feeling self-conscious, too. And a little embarrassed. I don’t often wake up confused about where my underwear is.”

“I’m sorry about that. I’ve never…”

“You’re not going to be weird about this are you?”

“Probably.”

Liz swirled her cup and sipped.

“Can I see you again?” I said.

“Yes.”

I walked toward her not knowing if I should show some affection. I hesitated at the bed and smoothed out the sheet, adjusted the comforter. I didn’t know if I should embrace her or sit there on the bed or return to my chair, and so I did all three in a way that seemed like a calf newly born. Liz breeched the gap and kissed my cheek.

“Do you have a pen?”

“On my desk there.”

She scribbled her number and left her coffee.

“I do hope you’ll call, Joshua. We can talk about whether we want to do this again or not.”

“Okay.”

Liz shook her head. “I have a lot of questions.”

After so long dealing with questions I was happy to provide some answers.

I walked Liz to the elevator where she said she could find her way out; that I should get to my studies. But she knew I would have difficulty with those things. Her furtive smirk had given her away and I knew then that she knew what her affect was on me. I told myself to be careful, that maybe I could still extricate myself from this...whatever it was. The ways of a man with a woman have always confused me; now more so than ever.

* * * * *

After a day of recovery and emotional self-flagellation, I took the Red Line to Lake. The sun warmed the city streets, which were flowered in brightly colored apparel and easy smiles of Chicagoans. I stood in the shine of State and Madison looking at the rounded corner of the Sullivan Center. Originally the Carson Pirie Scott building, it opened in 1899, twenty-eight years after the Great Fire but looks as though it had survived it. The first twenty feet seemed to be sooted metal, as though the fire sweeping through the street had charred it to a point, leaving only the shadow of disaster. This building was the realization of a Mid-Western poet's dream. A monument to Louis Sullivan's belief in man's goodness, the Art Nouveau ornamentation was a "garment of poetic imagery" that spoke to our shared benevolent natures and the struggle to keep that other side under our thumbs.

I stood beside a street lamp and watched the movement of the designs. The spiraling and leafing of the iron left me with a sense of permanence and I understood that in the essence of change was return; that while my spirit was struggling with two persuasive desires, I would decide which prevailed and peace would be restored, either in solitude or with Liz. I approached the revolving doors and felt the softness of the corner as a man may well have done 110 years ago, amidst trolleys and gaslights, on the first day of business, the evening of which saw Carson put the last line through his ledger, drink a glass of Scotch with his Board, and turn out the light. Those thousands of doilies and baubles for sale then would soon be forgotten through myriad replacements, but their creation, manufacture, and distribution funded the erection of this and so many other behemoths, strong and gleaming throughout the country. One could nearly see through the Sullivan Center, could gaze into the window down the corridors through the office and out onto Wabash. It must have given folks comfort that the light of day would be forever illuminating the place of business, that the golden eye of nature would be keeping watch over its darker side.

The only tenant of the structure was the Art School and I decided not to enter. I stood against the building beneath the awning on State and watched the world pass through the intersection. I heard a shout rise above the din and through the crush of traffic I saw an outstretched arm holding still in the sun. The glowing hand lowered in salute and I recognized Roland's smiling face. He was leaning on the roof

of a taxicab and he waved me over. I crossed the street and was surprised when Roland embraced me.

“Where are you going, Joshua? Let me give you a lift.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Looking how best to put a dent in your golden pile? My advice? Don’t be hanging around down here with the tourists at Macy’s or Target or whatever else they got. Stay near where you live.” He showed me his fingers, grabbing each one in quick succession, “Prada. Barney’s. Hermes. Vera Wang, if you know someone needs something there? Graff Diamonds. You won’t get much for quantity, but for quality,” he kissed the tips of his fingers and shook the small cluster in the space between us, “you can’t go wrong. And your pile will diminish for sure.”

“I’m actually on my way to the library.”

“What for?”

“Passing the time.”

Roland looked at my satchel and smirked.

“Just browsing, then? You eat ideas like a fat man eats brats. Then you’ll throw them up all over people, as if they thought about the same things and were just as curious about transubstantiation and which blood spilled where was best to drink. You went on and on the other night; I couldn’t stop you.”

“I think your tobacco was a motivating factor.”

“The least I could do. Besides, you did say some fascinating things.”

A low chuckle came from inside the cab and I noticed a man reclining in the driver's seat, his thick arms folded across a barrel chest, chewing on a cigar. The meter wasn't running.

I felt the weight off my shoulder and I flinched at the thought that someone was steal my books and pens.

"That thing must weigh twenty pounds," said Roland who was laughing at my skittishness. "You care more about losing that thing than your own life. Mikhail, did I ever tell you how I met this guy?"

The cab driver seemed used to Roland's rhetorical style. He didn't attempt to answer or if he had it was in such a subtle way that I didn't notice; maybe he just didn't care.

"I'll tell you another time, then."

I didn't know why Roland would be on a first name basis with a cab driver and or how much this large man knew about me. I couldn't remember how much of my life's circumstances I had told Roland.

"Since you're not doing anything worthwhile at the moment, why don't you have lunch with us?"

"I really do have to get to the library."

"I'm sure whatever books you want will be there in two hours. I got class then anyway. Come on, the place is just around the block. Across from the museum."

I must have looked a pathetic sight while I hesitated.

“You can’t resist seeing some place new,” and he opened the cab door.

The cab was well kept, its engine ran clean and powerful and it was skillfully driven by Mikhail, who dropped Roland and I off at Russian Tea Time. It was busier than I would have guessed and occupied by a much younger demographic than I expected. A few large tables were taken by a group of coeds dressed according to their school colors. A solitary man sat in the rear corner holding a fragile teacup and looking over an orchestral score.

Burgundy and cream dominated the decor and fine woodwork squared the wall space above the booths, which were lit by gold chandeliers. Ceramic vases, running over with red, white and yellow daisies, reflected off the mirrors and gave certain booths the impression of being in a garden. A man in a black vest stood in the back, shelving glasses behind the bar and counting the remaining bottles. Service people dressed in black slacks and collared shirts stood near him looking at their respective tables, sizing up the new customers.

The hostess walked us to a table in the middle of the room, but Roland insisted we sit in a half-moon booth. The young woman demurred, but he told her it would be all right; he knew the owner. He slid in first and sat where he could watch the door. She gave us menus and told us Anna would be by shortly.

“Anna’s who you want here,” he told me after she’d left us. “Over there we’d have gotten that old guy. I don’t know his name. Had him once thought and that

was enough of that. Something just don't feel right getting served tea and little sandwiches by someone who smells like Ben Gay, you know?"

I said I didn't then, "What's the story about the cab?"

"That's just something I use once in a while. What are you having to drink?"

"I don't drink a lot of tea," I said.

"Try the Black Russian and we'll share the service."

I read the menu, which explicitly prohibited this. We were also an hour early for it.

"I don't think we can."

"We can do whatever we want, Joshua."

Anna approached with a dour expression and asked if we knew what we wanted. She had an accent that validated the tea house's foreignness and I thought if I were an ambassador's assistant I would eat in places like this, with minarets on the skyline or a bazaar around the corner. Anna had a nearly too-full face and clear skin. Her blond hair was pulled back in a pony tail and dark eyes aided in her severity. I wondered if she was from Odessa or St. Petersburg; maybe she knew some of my long lost family who were now making their lives beside the Volga beneath Putin's thumb, in the wake of Chernobyl, the terror of the Stalin years; perhaps she had taken a train across the steppes and seen the telegraph poles Chekov wrote about or maybe she had escaped across the Ural Mountains for the chance to be an

American wife of a wealthy businessman whose circle would approve of a Russian bride, or not care one bit.

“No class today?” said Roland.

“Not today. What would you like?”

“I’ll have the tea service and we’ll both have the black currant tea.”

“We don’t begin the service until two-thirty.”

Roland looked into her stony eyes.

“But you have all the savories made,” he said. “All the sweets are back there.”

“But we don’t...”

“Just tell Michael it’s for me.” He held out the menus. After a moment Anna took them. I attempted to say something to her in Russian, but Anna only frowned and left with our order.

“I must have gotten it wrong,” I said.

Roland was watching her leave. “If you got it at all. Were those even words?”

“I thought I was thanking her.”

“You just have to open your mouth to turn them off,” he laughed. “You can’t blame a woman’s first instinct, Joshua.”

“I won’t pursue her then,” I said.

“Nonsense. I’ll put in a good word for you. She was in a class with me last semester and I’ve known her for a year or so.”

“Is she an actor, too?”

“Costume designer. I’m interested in all facets of the theater, not just the acting. More than performance goes into perfecting the illusion. Stage design, lighting; especially the clothes. Even the venue the play takes place in, how the two-dimensional environment looks against the backdrop of the actual theater, goes a long way toward revealing character. More of the truth is said in non-verbal moments than when a man’s mouth is open.”

“So what about this place? What’s revealed about you by being here now?”

“Absolutely nothing. Mikhail’s family is connected to this place, in one way or another; I can’t remember how. I’ve been here too many times to count and everyone here knows me, including the lovely Anna, who’s worth coming back for. Golden hair, dark complexion, great body. ”

“Angry eyes.”

“All part of her charm.”

“Did you have any other classes with her?”

“‘Naturalism in the Theater.’ I think she was in ‘The Theories of Stanislavski,’ too. We worked from memories to convey emotions. Most of those kids weren’t old enough to have any memories. At least nothing they could use to depict *artistic truth*. Professor loved that phrase; said it all the time. I love it because it draws its own lines within truth itself and marks off its own boundaries so that it can easily be a lie.”

“Isn’t most of theater that?”

“Of course.”

“I suppose when I go to an opera I know that what’s being played on the stage isn’t really happening. Only a fool would try to light a fire to warm Mimi, or march down the aisle to bring her some soup.”

“Or someone who wanted to be fooled. But that’s just what Stanislavski was trying to eliminate: the illusion. He designed these three-dimensional sets and used simple language and did away with Hamlet’s father. We studied a few plays, but the only one I remember is *A Doll’s House* because we got to slam a door. I don’t think that sound had ever been heard from the stage until Ibsen wrote it.”

“As significant as Aristophanes’ hiccups.”

“Why not? Anna there got to slam the door. She was good and I teased her that old Stan was her great uncle and that she was a natural born Naturalist. Didn’t I?”

Anna was setting two miniature beer steins and a kettle between Roland and I.

“He was quite oppressive,” said Anna.

“Oh, come on,” said Roland in mock defense. “A woman from the Eastern Bloc can’t throw that word around. Not with Putin always leering over your shoulder.”

“Always he is like this?” Anna’s question was tired and short. Whether she was annoyed before our arrival or if our presence precipitated her mood, I couldn’t say.

“The best part about that class, though,” he said after Anna had gone, “was the hysterics some of those kids worked themselves into. Big emotions, loud voices, arms flailing. It was ridiculous and completely contrary to the Naturalist method. Now, since I have had some experiences — some agreeable, others not so much — I was able to contain myself and give a powerful performance. At least that’s what my instructors tell me.”

“What are you going to do with this degree?”

I was curious about this because even though he was taking classes and spoke about them as if they had a high level of importance for his future, as if he believed he was being trained to make valuable contributions to our country’s economic growth as well as his own financial well-being, Roland was also savvy enough to see behind the charade of higher education. It had its benefits, but mostly it was just something one did, like stopping at red lights or buying groceries when the refrigerator was empty. But of course, there are always other motivations.

“I’m taking them for my own self-improvement. Like you.” Roland poured the tea into a silver mug and handed it to me. “And one never knows when an emotion, portrayed at just the right moment, can sway a situation in one’s favor.”

“You’re taking the stage into the street?”

“Of course. You’re not writing for academics, are you? You’re writing for real people.”

“I haven’t thought about an audience yet.”

“You’d better. Otherwise you won’t be studying for long.” He held his stein up to his mouth. “I’m sorry, of course you will be and for quite some time.”

“How do you see the real world application to Stanislowski?”

“I’m glad you asked.” Roland put down his stein and scooted closer to me.

“For example: a married man is at home fucking a strange woman on the couch. The front door opens and his wife cries out. She drops grocery bags on the threshold, spilling milk, cracking eggs, the whole clichéd scene. The woman caught in adultery lifts herself off the man and runs into the kitchen with an arm covering her breasts. The man is caught, defeated. He will lose his wife and pay out the ass in court.”

“Kids?”

The tea was hot and had some flavor, but I felt I had either drunk it too soon or else Roland had ordered the wrong type because it tasted like lack.

“Who cares? It doesn’t matter. All is lost, we think. But is it really?”

“I imagine not, though I can’t see how.”

With the joy of a conductor before the symphony begins, Roland lifted his hands. “With the appearance of calm, because he isn’t calm; because only a second earlier he was in the throes, right? full of forgetting and disoriented by his mistress’s breath on his neck, the feel of her ass in his hands, her soft rise and fall

and now he is chilled with terror similar to being caught by your mother in a similar throe, or worse, like being caught with the bloody knife you had thought you cleaned. He's ridiculously naked on the couch, hands suddenly empty, mind racing to regain its hold on his life, now bereft of the erotic charge he had worked so hard to achieve. His old lady is berating him, screaming at him. She's unsure whether to pummel him or chase after the whore and in that uncertainty she stands rooted to the threshold, disbelieving what she has just interrupted. Calmly, the man gets up. He doesn't cover himself. His movements are controlled, affecting her perceptions, making her think he isn't moving at all, as if his deliberateness now makes his earlier spasms a dream. He goes into the bedroom. The wife is still cursing him out, sobbing, grabbing at her hair."

"Hysterical."

Roland laughed and slapped the table, jostling the kettle and his mug, rattling the silverware and bringing a familiar silence to the place.

"Exactly." He shifted in his seat and leaned into the center of the table. "The man comes out of their bedroom wearing jeans and a t-shirt. He walks past his wife, who has never stopped cursing him, is still screaming and demanding an explanation. Her eyes are darting all over the place, maybe looking for a weapon or way to return to when she didn't know, to when she had never seen him with that other woman; condemning him to the hell of the life he has chosen with that tart who had

escaped out the back door and was then running through neighbor's yards, struggling to put on her dress or find cover for her nakedness."

"Really?"

"Why not? How the hell do I know? Anyway, she's not the main focus here. You can follow her later if you want to. So the man arranges the couch cushions that had become disheveled in his enthusiasm and he sits down in his recliner. He picks up a newspaper and starts reading. The wife eventually tires out from all her hollering. She's panting and exasperated and in the ringing silence he puts the paper down, looks up at her bulging eyes and tear-stained cheeks and says, 'Hello honey, I didn't hear you come in.'"

Roland threw himself back against the booth and laughed. I looked and saw Anna scowl toward the manager, who was deciding whether or not to say something to us. I felt then that Roland had been warned before, that this space, though familiar to him, was not so welcoming as he made me believe.

Hopeful I said, "That's it?"

"Oh no. Not by a long shot."

"So what happened?"

"The wife is adamant; he looks perplexed. She tells him she caught him redpricked with some other woman. That she saw her bare ass run out the back. That she watched him go put clothes on and come back. That she's going to call a lawyer or her father; she's going to call both, in fact. But I've been sitting her all evening,

dear; I fixed myself a tuna sandwich with carrots and apple sauce because I know we're trying to eat better; I've been reading the news because you want to have better conversations with me; I've been waiting for you to get home to ask, How was work? and, Was Mrs. Lewis impressed with your presentation? Now the wife's incensed. How dare you lie to me, Earl Whatever-the-fuck-name, I saw you. You just got changed. You just sat back down. You only started reading just now. Honey, you're talking crazy, he says. There's nobody here. Aren't you hungry? Can I make you something? Come here, and he motions for her to sit on his lap. She is irate. She refuses. He stands up, Follow me, he says. He goes into the kitchen, Look. There's no one back here. There's no one running away through our back yard. Everything is peaceful outside: the birds are chirping away, the sun is shining, there aren't any neighbors shrieking that some naked woman is disturbing the peace. Everything is all right. Now, do you want ciabatta or plain bread for your sandwich? She goes outside and sees he's right. The neighborhood is still. He's getting out the mayo. The ciabatta is toasting. Do you want iced tea? Earl says. Okay, she says, but she's still suspicious. He sees she can be convinced though, and he laughs at her tantrums. He hugs her and kisses her cheek. He convinces his wife that she's imagined the whole thing; suggests the stress of her job has made her nervous and the anxiety has manifested itself into a hallucination of a woman straddling him on their couch. Sure we have problems, he tells her, but they're no different from what our neighbors are getting up to. Then in a stroke of good thinking she looks around the sofa,

behind the cushions, feeling the cushions for dampness, under the coffee table looking for panties or a purse or a bracelet; praying, Dear God at least let there be a condom, anything that may have been tossed aside and forgotten. Earl chuckles at her there on all fours swinging her arm under the couch, rifling through the magazines on the coffee table, picking through the long strands of shag for the back of an earring or the thin strand of blond hair. Earl isn't sweating now, nor is he breathing hard. He's actually unconcerned about his wife's allegations, or even if she believes his lie. He believes it. She's on her knees muttering to herself in the middle of the living room. She's trying to remember if she actually saw what she believes she had seen. She wants to believe her husband. Wants more than anything to keep her life on an even keel. She's afraid of what she truly saw and of no longer being loved, of divorce and of starting over and anyway she still loves him. Like a good man Earl picks up the broken bags of groceries, saves the food that can be saved and mops up the yolks and the milk. He kisses his wife on the top of her head and tells her to relax, that he'll bring her a sandwich; that she should turn on a program she might enjoy."

"Unbelievable."

"Acting, Joshua."

"And in your story, she bought it?"

"Apparently. I haven't heard any different."

"Are you that good?"

“We’ll see when I get the test.”

Anna brought a silver tower of small sandwiches and cakes to the table.

“Perfect timing, Anna,” said Roland. “You’re getting better at hitting your mark.”

“Do you need me to explain or do you remember?” she said.

“Better give us the layout. Joshua’s new to the experience.”

Anna pointed to the savories and the sweets laid out on a four tiered tower. Salmon and cream cheese bites, potato piroshky bites, assorted quiches, crunchy crepes in a peanut sauce; napoleon tarts, apricot plum strudel, rugalah and lemon cakes, some cookies. The morsels were laid out on white lace doilies and as Anna described them her palm hovered in the air directly above them. I got lost in her accent, prolonged in its describing, and thought that outside was not Chicago and my search for a literary career of some sort, and across the lake was not the farm I had abandoned in favor of such vague hopes, but an exotic country, perhaps a small fishing town on the Black Sea or a cozy neighborhood in the fields of Eastern Europe, and I wondered if such sensations could be fashioned into a novel; if they had the meat to satisfy large appetites, or if they were merely small bites to tide one over until the main course. Anna pushed a gold bracelet further up her right arm, powder blue nails tracked down her arm and rested on her hip, disappeared behind her apron.

“It looks delicious,” I said. “Thank you for serving it early to us.”

“Enjoy,” she said, though I doubted her sincerity.

Roland took a quiche off the tower.

“What have you been doing since last time?”

I thought of my time in terms of pages written and books read. I had to think what had filled my days since Newberry Park.

“Don’t hold back on my account. I know you get up to some unusual ideas.”

I chose the salmon. “You won’t think I’m vomiting on you.”

“Don’t be mad. I was giving you a hard time.” Roland wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin. “Look, if I didn’t want to hear your nonsense I wouldn’t keep coming around.”

I didn’t have many interlocutors and I was beginning to come to some conclusions, so I said, “How a man should live, Roland? What are the best desires of his soul and how is the best to satisfy them? I guess I want to know, what is the good to do with life? I don’t think these answers can be found behind ivy-covered walls, though I was under the impression that the university would be the place to find them in. And maybe it was, years ago, when it was the safe haven for men and women who wanted to ask questions many assumed already had answers. But now it doesn’t seem interested in questions.”

Roland had popped the quiche whole into his mouth and I watched his jaw work it down. He was looking at me and I said, “Now, they push us through a four-year program, which actually requires five, because most of us haven’t a clue what

we want to do or even what we should want to do. If all we're expected to learn is a specialized skill that makes us marketable, then why bother with the first two years studying Aborigine culture or deforestation? What's the point of knowing who Jane Addams was? And even if you do know the point then good luck finding someone else who does and then further luck if they're keen on discussing them.

“And the students, Roland. The one chance Culture has to get at these kids, the fleeting moment between the adolescence of high school and the banality of the looming nine to five, and it cowers before the strength of culture, ever-changing, always looking for relief from the violence of fate and satisfied with artificial paradises. Those four years shouldn't be wasted that way. But the ones who are earnestly seeking an education get lampooned while those who wile away the years, declaring their fifth major in their third year, then applying to graduate school to delay the inevitable unemployment — a comforting option when compared to beginning to pay back student loans — are lifted up as having the model college experience.”

Roland cleared his throat to say something, but I kept going.

“I can see the benefit of forgetting life and yelling nonsense in a back alley, talking shit to passing groups and flirting with another guy's girl. It's good to feel one's power, to howl and strut; but that for a time. We grow up to become fifty-year-olds who go to the bars to forget their jobs and families and wish to God they could go back to where it started to go wrong. But they can't see when that moment

occurred and they don't understand how doing what was expected of them should bring such unhappiness. Those college years might be a good place to start. Little attention is paid to the powerful influence of habit, Roland. And a lot of bad ones are condoned under the watchful eye of Education."

Roland leaned back with a lemon cake.

I didn't realize I'd been talking loudly. The students around us were looking over, rolling their eyes at me.

"What're the options?" he said.

"Immediate employment in a dead end job because you're not qualified for anything else. Or a two-year trade school where they don't have the pretentious illusion of giving their students anything but a qualification."

"Is that where you see yourself? Entering a skilled trade?"

"Why not? To love what you do is an illusion as deep in our culture as having to go to college to have a good life. Only a small few love their work. I'm thinking about life from a different point of view; life from my leisure rather than my occupation. I want to use my job, whatever that may be, to sustain that time before nine and after five. That's where life resides, Roland, outside the chasm of duty, and if I use those hours wisely then I believe I'll love my job, I'm guessing."

"Using hours wisely? How do you see that?"

"Studying the soul. Attempting to answer that all-important question; the summum bonum. A Great Books tour: Saint Aquinas' happiness, Flaubert's *bon mot*,

Mann's theory of Culture, Tolstoy's praise of the farmer, Proust and the motivations of Albertine, Dostoevsky's noble sinners. Large, challenging books that believe in one thing to the exclusion of all others. Kierkegaard's purity of heart. Literature that makes value judgments, because we all make judgements, every one of us judges everyone else. Every decision we make is a refutation of its opposite. The thing to be refused is condemning the decisions I would not make. I can think someone is living poorly without chucking stones at them or brow-beating them in some published rant."

"Okay."

I hesitated. I looked to see if the coeds were preoccupied with their own conversations, if Anna was still absent-mindedly twirling a pen near the hostess stand.

"What do you think?" I said.

"I think you should do what you do."

"No, about using time wisely."

"I'm all for it."

"What do you think is the good we should do?"

"This is your thing, Joshua. I don't think about it. I go after mine so I don't have to struggle so much, so Melanie can rely on me, so my neighborhood will respect me. It's really not that complicated."

I wondered if it could be so simple. Perhaps uniting my life with another, a path I had not until recently considered, was as valid an answer as any.

Roland reached for the last salmon bite and folded his arms upon the table.

“Tell me what you think,” he said.

“I think we’re here simply to die well.”

Roland dropped his head and moaned. “What the hell does that mean?”

He was a good sport and I said, “I’m not sure, but I think courage and moderation are important to it. Moderation because in order to discover the good life, all lives may have to be tried. That’s the lesson of Ecclesiastes, anyway. And moderation may be the remedy for condemnation.”

“And courage?”

“Courage is necessary for attempting moderation.”

“Thought of that all on your own?”

“Not all, but most. Sixty-thousand well spent.”

“And do you still have that debt?”

“I took care of that with my dad’s life insurance.”

“You haven’t touched the acreage money?”

His mention of these funds took me aback. “Not so far.”

“Or from the house?”

I was reticent. I shook my head.

“Looks like you’re paying for the tea service,” he said and beckoned with the tea stein. “Then we’ll discuss business.”

Anna came to our table, hands folded behind her back, head bent for our order.

“See Joshua, now you’re in my domain. Gesture eliciting response. Solid cause and effect rather than your abstract...whatever. Yes, Anna, we would like two glasses of Russian Standard, please. Neat. Three glasses if you’re going on break in five minutes.”

Anna smirked and said, “I’ll put that in for you.”

“I wouldn’t need any help, Anna.”

She seemed not to have heard and I wondered if she were used to Roland’s harassment or if such things were understood to occur in the service industry; or maybe Roland had a special dispensation.

“Mikhail turned me on to this place. It’s nice, right?”

“It is. What business do we have to talk about?”

“Let’s wait for our drinks.”

Anna was holding a tray supporting two glasses. She turned her right hip toward our table and, back straight, bent her knees and set our vodkas in front of us.

“Your break is later, then?” said Roland. “We may be here awhile, Joshua.”

He shook his head at the missed opportunity and raised his shot. “To women who know better,” he said. The glass was heavy and flared at the rim and the vodka was sharp, yet smooth.

"It's the only place in the city to get a proper vodka. I mean, it's the same vodka you'd get anywhere else, but the atmosphere, being among vodka's appropriate *milieu*, gives it a special flavor. You see, Joshua? Much depends on setting."

"Now will you ask me what you want to ask me," I said.

"All the time in the world and none for enjoying the finer things."

That the business he had to discuss came up in relation to my inheritance made me anxious. I was too concerned with what I had told him to notice the vodka's charm, nor was I in a state of repose to consider the *milieu*.

"Fine. I simply want to know if you'd come to a basketball game with me."

"A what?"

"Friday. At Crane. There's a future star you need to see."

"A basketball game?"

Roland waved Anna over and ordered another round and began talking about the star athlete.

"The papers are all over him. There're scouts at every game. I swear, it's as if ESPN were doing a red carpet show, you know? All these celebrity coaches, former Chicago stars coming back to pitch their alma maters, the talking heads of the sports world, and the agents and business reps. It's a crazy show, Joshua. And the Kid is right in the center of it, the eye of the hurricane. And that's what he is, too. He's the calm center of the chaos and mischief swirling around him. The recruiters and boosters and various other interested parties are all colliding just outside of the

Kid's circle, and their 'associates' are one remove away from them. They're the ones getting their hands dirty and playing rough, talking with folks from Nike and Reebok, Adidas and Puma. Even the futbol world is tracking the Kid, ear-marking significant sums with the hope of securing a foothold in the basketball world. They all believe he's a 'can't miss.' I believe it, too."

"Great percentage shooter, is he? Good mid-range game?"

"Don't be so skeptical, Joshua. It doesn't suit you. Everyone's riding the wave of optimism. And with what Rose did at the United Center last year and the expectations for him this year, all of that hometown euphoria is mixing with the Kid's fortune. There's an overwhelming wave of prosperity coming to the South Side and everyone wants it to crash into their homes. I can see it coming, too, but I'm not losing my head to grandiose visions of trickle-down economics, nor am I so fond of the Kid that to be a part of his entourage would fulfill my life's dreams. But that doesn't mean I don't have my own plans. I'm not a schemer, Joshua, but I've put myself in a position to profit from his natural talent."

"And his hard work and his sacrifice."

"And what's wrong with that? How many people invested in Microsoft who don't know what a circuit board is? It's the same thing."

Anna set our drinks down and Roland took no notice of her.

"I've been working my ass off, running around town making deals, taking meetings and all with an eye to a future pay-off. I've even been in some scraps with

rival parties, who are all doing the same things I'm doing and doing them in the same place and at the same time. But I've been putting in the time; making the rounds at the Kid's AAU game, shaking his uncle's hands, asking after his little cousins. I kiss his aunts on the cheek whenever I see them. I've been in his life for some time now, since he was eleven years old in fact, right before his growth spurt that launched his notoriety; when he went from handling the point to muscling in the paint. Muscling hard, Joshua, hurting some kids even. But only because he was learning the force and power of his new body. And now both skills have united in his 6'8" frame to create one of the fiercest ballers in the country. And I've been with him from the beginning. On the sidelines mostly, but I aim to change all that."

He took a cookie from the silver tower.

"But that's just one of the things I got going on right now, Joshua."

He was looking over my shoulder, eyeing the bar.

"While you're wasting your days with books by dead Jewish priests and old French guys, I'm working toward a bold bright tomorrow, collecting accolades and favors from all kinds of people, getting my name out there, doing jobs with gusto and expertise so that when the time comes for me to reap what I've been sewing these last six years my sack won't be nearly big enough."

Roland raised his vodka.

"All from a high school student?" I said. He took that as a toast and swallowed his drink. I took mine as well.

“You spend all your time thinking about life, but you don’t have the least idea what goes on in it. Your teachers are old guys who locked themselves in their rooms, pining after the elusive meaning of it all. Let me save you the trouble: get yours. Get yours. Nobody cares one way or the other about you unless you hit it big or destroy yourself getting big. That middle ground is full of the dead, Joshua. The cowards, the passive, the good men, Joshua. Good men lie in the mass grave of the good life. And that’s what you’re studying about. Don’t you see? You’re just lying down. The things I’d get up to if I had your life, man. If I had your time; your dough? I’d be unstoppable.”

For all his candor about my own life being lived in the clouds, I was certain Roland had a palace next door to mine. Though we were sitting inside Russian Tea Time and Anna was bringing us the next round, he was lost in thought, looking toward that palace, white and gleaming in the City Beautiful, surrounded by shade trees and verdant lawns, while the sun’s golden beams radiated into Arcadian fields where his flocks thrived and his crops yielded magnificence.

We were not so different. Each of us were using the materials at hand to procure a meaningful life in the future. He had a knack for intrigues and a schemer’s enthusiasm, the energy to move about in the world with confidence and a love for people that comes from ulterior motives. But maybe that’s not right. Perhaps his love was simply that of an actor in character toward other characters, reciting lines that progress the play to its eventual denouement. He carried himself like a stage actor,

too, as if he knew the outcome of his actions, good and bad, but that he would not suffer from them if he could get off the stage in time.

I was not so comfortable on the streets. While Roland acted, I considered. The consequences of any and all actions I could think of doing kept me in my chair. I saw the ill I could perpetrate and the evil that could befall me and chose to remain in my cell, collecting the sayings of wise men and attempting moral life safely secluded from any conflict that could challenge my self-perception. I knew this about myself and so I was not eager to be rid of Roland's influence. Or Liz's, for that matter.

"Where is it and what time should I be there?"

"Meet us on your corner at six. Are you going to have anymore?"

I looked at our tower that had been picked clean except for the sweets. Roland laid some bills on the table and slid out of the booth. I paid my share and followed him to the revolving doors.

"I owe you a drink next time, Anna," he said.

She waved us away and as I stepped into my segment of the door I heard her comment how well it went this time.

Outside, Roland was on his phone. The sun illuminated the Art Institute. Its glare warmed my face even as I buttoned my jacket against the dark wind rushing down Adams.

"Mikhail's going to pick us up at the Palmer House," he said.

We walked the block to Monroe and lingered near the valets standing beneath heat lamps in their rolled sleeves and red vests. Two business men came out of the hotel and a valet stepped off the curb, whistle in mouth.

“I have a couple of errands to run before my class,” said Roland. “I could drop you wherever you need to be right now. Or, you could save me the time and see how I choose to spend it.”

“Where do you have to go?”

“I’ve got some business on the South Side. Have you been?”

He knew the answer to this question, just like he knew I wouldn’t refuse being taken on a tour.

A taxi pulled up to us and while one business man tipped the valet, the other opened the door.

“Hold on, sir. This one’s mine,” said Roland.

“The hell it is.”

“Is that right?” Roland shoved the lapels of the man’s trench coat. He stumbled back and beseeched the valets with panicked eyes, but the scuffle had been too quick to be registered by anyone. His friend stood still. “Get your own fucking cab.”

“Sir, these men were here...”

“Oh, were they? Were they here?”

Mikhail had gotten out and was staring the valet down, who removed the whistle from between his lips and gestured at the businessman.

“Let’s go, Joshua.”

I hunched through a strong tobacco aroma and slid over. The businessman stepped back and even the valets knew this was not a taxi in the sense they understood them in.

“And I thought we were about to have a moment,” said Roland.

Mikhail waited until Roland shut his door before getting behind the wheel. As we pulled away I watched the men try to explain what had happened to one another.

Roland patted Mikhail on the shoulder, who grumbled some surly Slavic syllables in response while putting his cigar out. “I know. I’m all riled up, too. Damn, I thought they would push back more.”

Roland smiled in the rearview mirror and slid back.

“There’s a seat belt if you want,” he said.

Mikhail accelerated from the curb with merely a show-glance into his mirrors and I pulled at the strap. We sped through the first light at Wabash. At Michigan Mikhail slammed the steering wheel and cursed at the town car in front of us. He laid on the horn when his first language wasn’t enough. Behind us a driver was giving him the finger and his jaw was dancing and lurching forward.

“This is the Bolshoi,” cried Roland over the sudden riot of the street, clearly enjoying himself. “It’s good theater being here.”

“Does Mikhail always drive this angry?”

“He’d be useless if he didn’t,” Roland smiled. “Hey, Mikhail, can’t you get around these assholes?”

Hard gutturals, like a shovel stabbed into a pile of rocks, attacked the windshield accompanied by more wheel slamming and horn blowing.

“Mikhail isn’t one of God’s patient creatures. Look at him. What’s he going to do? He can’t go anywhere. But he gets all riled up anyway. I love it. All those years spent with the Gulag back in Siberia, eh, Mikhail? These close spaces remind you of unpleasant things?”

Mikhail took out his cigar to better wrap his tongue around discordant consonants. He wildly gesticulated with it, like a conductor’s baton during “O Fortuna,” trailing bits of loose ash and relying on other drivers to keep us safe. There was nothing to hold onto and the buckle wouldn’t catch.

“Your belt is broken.”

“I know.”

“This cab is a death trap,” I shouted as Mikhail jerked the cab onto Michigan.

Roland gave me a thumb’s up. “And it’s all mine,” he said. “Got it for next to nothing, can you believe it?” Roland was greatly amused by my expression. He clapped his hands and howled and said, “How did such a young man scrape together the means to purchase his own cab and driver? Of what use could it possibly have for that young man? Oh, Joshua, you can buy anything with cash and connections. A lesson you should learn quick. I don’t have time to be wasting it in crowds

waiting for trains and buses and all that public bullshit. Do you know how many screaming kids and senile people ride those things? All of 'em. Every single one of them. I made the mistake first of getting some flashy wheels. Look the part, you know? Impress the high-ups, and of course the ladies. Let the whole city hear me coming."

We were stopped again at Jackson and Mikhail was trying to wedge his way into the left lane, creeping closer to the bumper of an Escalade, putting my face a foot from the passenger in a Lexus who mouthed an epithet. I shrugged and frowned. Roland put down his window and the sounds of the city rushed in.

"But I found out quick," he continued. "When such a magnificent vehicle as that was driven like I used to drive it, and especially the way Mikhail here drives it, we would spend all our time waiting for Chicago's finest to run our plates and write us tickets. Then afternoons in court contesting them, wasting money on fees and being looked for on a regular basis. With no leniency. But in a taxicab? When was the last time you saw one pulled over by the cops? And if we take a corner too quick or accelerate off the line too fast or stop too abruptly? So long as no one gets killed and we don't ride up on the sidewalk, eh Mikhail? Never again, right?"

Mikhail nosed his way into the left lane and sped up. He braked then blasted the horn, speeding forward again to retake the right lane, then turned onto Congress and sped through a gap in the traffic, ripping around a garbage truck, roaring beneath the elevated tracks and coming to rest at State.

Roland smacked the metal roof with his opened palm and caterwauled at two women pushing a stroller outside Panera Bread. One bent to comfort the child while the other blazed contempt. Roland laughed more heartily and yelled out the window.

I pulled the seat belt across my chest and held it next to my pocket. The familiar constriction gave me some comfort.

“First you get used to it, then you enjoy it,” said Roland.

“I don’t think I’ll be alive long enough for that.”

We were off again and I was pressed back against the seats. We flew into and out of the reflected light that sliced through the interior, cutting across Roland’s face, diving into the floor mats and scanning the yellow cab like a bar code. We tore through the city like an impossibility. Impressions of gold glass stoned gray blurred in a swirl outside the window frame. Trash became disorganized in our wake and we caught the slightest air flying above the LaSalle Street Station. Mikhail took the ramp from 290 onto 90 at max speed and Roland put his hands on me to keep from being laid down.

We were shooting south on the Dan Ryan and Roland regained his posture.

“Good Lord! Has Mikhail ever killed anyone?” I said.

“Nothing confirmed,” said Roland. “Where did you get your training, Mikhail?”

“KGB,” he said, or at least that’s what it sounded like to me.

“Putin wants you guys driving like this?”

“Sometimes is necessary.”

“Not here though, Mikhail. Not in America?”

“Whatever Mr. Roland wants.”

“What did you mean, *confirmed*?” I said.

“Mikhail’s chauffeured me around this city for two years, now. There isn’t a street he doesn’t know, an alley he hasn’t been down, a straightaway that he hasn’t timed the changing of the lights. He hits every green without decelerating. The guy’s a genius. On ice and in rain, in the wind and fog, and never a scratch on her. Plenty of close calls, though. ”

I looked for an alternate buckle to clip into.

“Do I seem like a guy who hates life?” said Roland, seeing me scramble for some kind of safety restraint. How much dark mischief can one smile conceal?

Mikhail got off on 35th and drove inside the shadow cast by US Cellular Field. We passed Armour Square Park and I was learning how to take the jerking speed. I was even beginning to find the beautiful rhythms inherent in Mikhail’s Ukrainian, or Slovenian or Georgian or Czechnyan, vulgarity. It helped that traffic had thinned out.

We parked beside a vacant lot and Roland slapped my knee. “Hang tight.”

He walked behind the cab and opened the trunk. When I saw him again he was carrying a small Adidas duffle bag down the sidewalk. I heard the snap of Mikhail's lighter and the buzz of the blue flame. Roland jogged across the vacant street and disappeared into the courtyard of an apartment complex.

"How long is he usually?" I said.

Mikhail spritzed the windshield and ran the wipers. If he didn't understand me he made no effort to try. I sat in the strange silence that follows from an ignored question and watched the smoke fill the space between us, then mingle among us. I rolled my window down. Outside the sun was shining in a cloudless sky. A green tarpaulin was stretched across a chain-link fence that surrounded a vacant lot. It had been sliced with knives and hung limp beside the chatter of robins.

"Do you know what they're building here?"

If he did, he wouldn't say.

I thought about when the knives come out and wished I had been a better consumer of the metro news. However, that wouldn't have mattered then. Besides being on the South Side, I didn't know where we were and so any homicide I would have read about could have been committed here as anywhere else. My life was in Roland's hands and I looked to see that no one was on the street behind us.

To calm myself, or at least give Mikhail the appearance of unconcern or total trust, I took out September's *Poetry* and read "At Thomas Merton's Grave." There

are some words that strike me, regardless of where I am or how I got there, and become the tender memory that bathes the actual in a warm light. I read the poem again and stared out at the desolate landscape, wondering about Roland and about the knives, but thinking with the voice of the wood thrush, "I am marvelous alone!" Without the comma after marvelous, I did not read "alone" as signifying the Whitmanesque ego, but rather as a celebration of solitude. I read in it a validation of my chosen life and the positive possibilities inherent in such monkish ways. Despite being in a taxi with a stranger waiting for another stranger, a man who had attempted to steal from me, to be finished with some shady task, I began to see something of what my life is; that there was something important about my being alone. And then I thought about the disciples' reaction to Jesus, saying that if this is the situation, It's better not to be married; and Jesus replying, Not everyone can accept this word and, The one who can accept it should accept it. I supposed the one who can accept it is the one who does not burn with passion, as Paul writes. For him, it is the burning that compels a man to marry. Today, that burning seems mollified by less radical solutions. I infrequently burn in this way and I wondered what Liz would say about that. Then I remembered, "light, / more new light, always arrives" and it is this light that I truly burn for; and so I am never alone in my ludicrous beliefs.

In that moment and swaddled in those thoughts, Roland fell in beside me.

"See Joshua, owning this cab saved me fifty bucks. Plus I don't have to be hassled with questions from the driver."

He wadded up the duffel bag and stuffed it beneath the front passenger seat, wedging it deeper with his foot.

“What were you doing out there?”

Roland leaned forward to straighten his jacket. He leaned back and felt inside the pocket, his mind considering what his fingers were playing with.

“Let’s go.”

Mikhail turned onto 31st. He was driving slowly and had even used his turn signal. Two and three story brick buildings lined the street. The front doors were barred with metal gates and many of their windows were covered on the inside with brown paper. What windows did allow me to see inside revealed empty hair salons and bare-shelved convenient stores.

“Is this where you grew up?” I said.

“Home sweet home.”

Roland went into numerous apartment buildings and single family homes. Each time he took the duffel bag, which didn’t seem to carry any weight either before he left or when he returned. He kept it close to him though, and when we were driving from place to place he treated it with feigned disregard. Whatever it was was too much on his mind for him to act as though it wasn’t.

Finally, Mikhail came to a stop at Wells. I began to get nervous about Roland’s jacket pocket. He was staring at the Shell station on the corner, trying to see around the head rest and the cab’s frame.

“What are we doing here?” I said.

“We’re almost finished.” He was intent on the Shell station. “Are you not having a good time, Joshua? Have I not been giving you the grand tour of Chicago?”

Mikhail by-passed the gas pumps and parked in a space near the Shell’s front door. Roland leaned back and closed his eyes. I watched him inhale and exhale with intent.

“Just a little fund raising,” he said. “All on the up and up, Joshua. And quite dull. That’s why I got this cab. That’s why I met you the way I did. Can you imagine doing this all day without breaking a few laws? I need something to keep the heart rate up. For what you paid for the experience it’s a real value.”

“We’ll talk about value if I end up in traction.”

“You won’t end up in traction.”

“You’re right, I probably won’t survive.”

“If I have it my way, you certainly will.”

Roland opened his door and stood in the parking lot. He felt inside his pocket again and closed the door with a quiet click. I heard the bell above the gas station’s door jingle and he disappeared behind an aisle of chip bags.

“Alone again,” I said.

Mikhail chewed his cigar. One hand wrapped tight around the wheel, the other was gripping his leg.

I couldn't concentrate on any poem or essay, not "And A Look and On," neither "So Goddam Glorious."

Fifteen minutes later the bell jingled and Roland was beside me and we were heading downtown.

"Last stop: Columbia College. We'll take Roosevelt to State, Mikhail. You can take the Red back north from there."

"That'll be fine."

"Did you have fun today?"

"Hard to say."

"We'll have a good time Friday."

Mikhail stopped in the middle of traffic at Harrison and Roland handed me my satchel.

"Be careful getting home. Your corner. Six sharp. Don't make me come up after you."

I stood on the sidewalk and watched the cab disappear into traffic. That Mikhail had disregarded the turn toward Columbia did not escape my notice.