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Animals Coupling: Stories

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Animals Coupling:

Stories

by

Corey Robert Millard

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

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

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Abstract

We find ourselves at a unique place in American history: language is losing its value; decency—or “political correctness”—is becoming taboo; and our future is legislated by those who feel they have been left behind. The stories in *Animals Coupling* don’t attempt to explain contemporary America, but they do attempt to demonstrate (through language, character, style, and circumstance) an expressive rendering of what it looks and feels like to live in the here and now. There is a sense of detachment threading through these works, along with absurdity, loneliness, humor and anomie. But though a minor key may ring loudest, *Animals Coupling* ultimately, is an exploration of humanity, and hope.

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Painter

Paul got home and hung up his coat. He stood in the mudroom and stared at himself in the mirror.

“There was a Cole Porter song on at the coffee shop this morning,” he said, “and the couple standing in front of me was dancing.” He undid his boots. “Not just swaying, but dancing. And when it was over, they kissed.”

Amy came from the kitchen and slipped her shoes on. “Let’s get something to eat,” she said.

“She loved his *elegance*,” said Paul, keeping his eyes still. “He never worked a day in his life.”

They went down the street to the restaurant where she sometimes liked to eat and he ordered a beer and a shot and a plate of bread and soft cheese. She drank a shot with him before switching to wine.

She nodded toward a husky man at the table by the door. He had a graying mustache and crumpled eyebrows. “He used to play basketball with my dad,” she said.

“Those guys were animals,” said Paul.

She ordered another glass of wine and dipped and pulled at the cheese with a piece of bread.

Paul sank his weight into the stool. He could feel a film stretched across his eyes. “A kid at the house we’re working at smelled like cigarettes, and he told his dad it was because I kissed him,” he said.

She breathed and put her palms flat on the bar. She looked at the chalkboard with the specials on it. “How much longer are you gonna keep at this, Paul?”

“The kid’s dad *winked* at me,” he said.

She opened her mouth. It looked like she might say something, but she drank her wine instead.

His eyes were fixed forward. “I can’t imagine that wink was because he thought the kid was telling the truth?” He waved his hand at the bartender and she came over with a fresh beer and new shot. He drank the shot and cupped the beer with his hands. After a long pause he said, “I feel like we’re finally making money.”

Paul had to move the fridge to paint behind it. His new guy, Ben, was off on a long coffee run so he went to find the winking man for help. Paul’s head was dull and heavy and a stale tang lingered in his mouth. He was sure he stunk like a hard night, but when he found the winking man he went right up to him, unashamed.

The man smelled like a men’s magazine.

“Can you help me move the fridge? My guy went to get coffee.”

“Right now?”

“Yeah. Now.”

“You can’t find something else to do until he’s back?”

“I guess,” said Paul. He shook his head and turned back to the kitchen, but spun around in the doorframe. “I didn’t kiss your kid,” he said.

The man winked again. “He’s not my kid.”

Paul put on a Jason Molina CD and when Ben finally got back they moved the refrigerator. He told Ben to paint behind it and he said to do it once and only once because no one would ever see it, and he put on Big Star, and he said, “That guy is probably texting his girlfriend about the *faggots* painting her kitchen, and kissing her kid, and listening to the Rolling Stones.”

Ben brought a drop and a brush and a bucket of paint behind the refrigerator. “It’s a mess back here,” he said.

“Leave it,” said Paul.

“I can clean it in two minutes.”

“Don’t do any favors for these people.”

Ben cocked his head. “Did he say something to you?”

“Forget it,” said Paul. “He doesn’t know any better.”

Animals

They pulled the Cavalier into Charlie's driveway at a quarter to eleven. The air was thick and hazy, the morning's mist still burning off. Eileen peeled herself from the car's fake leather. It was warm, hot even, for October. She removed her visor and gazed down towards the harbor, the little beach, the clinking boats. She stuck a cigarette between her lips.

"What do you think?" she said.

Doug made a great show of pulling himself from his seat, stretching and yawning. He insisted on checking the tires before finally coming around to stand next to her. She watched him look up the knoll at the enormous house, at the sprawling oak, and along the swath of uncut grass to the path, which zig-zagged through the woods to the beach. He shrugged. "Well," he said. He was stiff and sticky after the five-hour ride from Trenton. "I'm not complaining."

Eileen took Tina, sleeping, from the backseat, and the three of them made their way up to the house. It was a spiraled and monied looking thing—a servants' quarters in the attic and a dumb-waiter reduced to hoisting inelegant sandwiches late at night. Old money. A huge columned veranda swung around its entire front, looking down over the harbor. It was murmured that this was the smallest of a fleet of homes once belonging to Charlie's family. Eileen asked him once if they'd had anything to do with the slave trade. Charlie, an adopted fair-skinned black man, deflected: "Money's money," he'd said. "There's always guilt. And things can get complicated."

Charlie was standing behind the screen door, already in his tux, impatient. "You're late," he said.

“Well go, then.” Eileen opened the screen and went by him with Tina, avoiding the pleasantries. He smelled of too many things: soap, shampoo, cologne, hair product. “You should take another shower and start fresh,” she said. “You smell like a *lot*.”

He looked over himself, brushed off his shoulders. “I need to be in New Haven in two hours.” He paused. “Worst groomsman in history. I’ll never hear the end of it.”

Eileen ruffled Tina’s hair and let her down. She pushed her into the bathroom. “Figure it out,” she said, and looked at Charlie. “Half the time she sits on the toilet and forgets if she’s there to shit or piss.”

Doug lumbered about the front yard, inspecting things in his curious way. Eileen watched him through the window pull an axe from a stump and fumble with it.

Charlie let the dogs in. They flew and slid and slipped across the faded wooden floor, slobbering and stopping for food and water and bounding towards Eileen before fumbling back to Charlie. When he bent down they went to him. A Border Collie and brown Pit mutt. He rustled with the fur around their ears and stood and rubbed their butts, which they seemed to enjoy tremendously. “Two walks a day,” he said. “Morning and night. Otherwise they like to be out and run around. But they won’t try and run off.” He stood next to Eileen. “Two meals a day. One cup each time. No food off the table. They’ve got *some* manners and there’s a *chance* they might hang on to them.”

“So it’s Dog One and Dog Two, is that right?”

He pursed his lips and pointed at the Collie. “That’s Brad,” he said. “The other one is Eleanor.” He pressed his fingers around the flesh of Eileen’s upper arm. “Don’t be a dipshit.”

Doug came in. He looked at Brad and then at Eleanor. He shook his head. "You didn't say there'd be a Pit," he said.

Eileen rolled her eyes. She put her hand on Charlie's shoulder. "He's a little coward," she said. "We talked about this. He's kidding."

"I'm *not* kidding. You know what they're capable of."

"Myths," Charlie said. He rolled his eyes, pulled a nip from his breast pocket and drank. "It's just not true. Don't judge the sins of the few, or whatever it is."

"Tina's seven," said Eileen. "She's not a baby."

"Doug," said Charlie, reasoning, "they're just stupid, and they love *everything*. Really. Squirrels. Crows. *Tractors*. All Ellie wants is to get her butt rubbed." Eleanor wagged and waddled stupidly over to him, having heard her name.

The toilet flushed and Tina re-emerged, looking refreshed. "Had to make some room," she said, aping her father and patting her belly. She looked at the dogs, her eyes widening then narrowing. She moved behind Eileen and took firm hold of her mother's knees. Eileen looked down. Tina's eyes were fixed on Eleanor.

Charlie put on sunglasses and pulled his duffel bag off the sofa. "Thanks again for this," he said, looking first at Doug and then at Eileen. "I can't put them in the kennel anymore. It's like a detention facility. They all gang up on each other."

"We're just glad to have some time to teach Tina how proper folks live," said Eileen, only she was addressing Doug as she said it.

"Well, make yourselves at home. It's Indian summer and the fish are still going. There's beer in the fridge. Eat whatever's in there. I put a case of Rioja downstairs and gin

on the bar.” He winked at them. He looked at the dogs and at Tina and Doug and then back to Eileen. He smiled and took a small bow. “I look good,” he said.

“I’m going for bluefish,” said Doug. Eileen was sitting on the veranda with the dogs and a cigarette and a gin and tonic, shuffling lazily through a newspaper when he came through the screen door. He had on a big fishing vest, stuck with lures and covered in cartoon captions of talking fish.

“Look at you,” she said. “You’ll get yourself caught on the upholstery.”

“Me and Tina were going around in the basement,” he said. “He’s got all sort of crap down there. It’s loaded with costumes.”

“Please don’t let anybody see you in that,” she said. “And be back for cocktail hour.”

He cocked his head. “Is that a rich thing?”

“Not exclusively, no.”

He started down to the car and turned. “Tina found some old hunting manuals in the study,” he said. “She’s in there now. Don’t leave her alone too long with that dog.”

Eileen looked at the old oak tree. She made the shape of a gun with her fingers and zeroed in on the squirrels running along the sinewy branches. She closed one eye and, holding the cigarette tightly between her teeth, picked them off, one by one. “Don’t get too set on catching blue,” she called to him. “Not this late in the season.” But the engine was already sputtering. He stretched a hand out the window as he pulled out, and waved.

She finished her drink and went inside to put the jazz station on. It came across from Boston over Buzzards Bay. She swayed her hips at the sink and looked through the window at the dogs, folded up almost on top of one another.

Falmouth was dying. Everywhere the leaves had gone from the trees. The boats had been stripped of their sails and sat bobbing naked and cheerless. The grass was long and golden. It coughed a mist of dander like chaffed wheat in the limpid cast of sun.

She closed her eyes and clenched her teeth, watching the skeins of light strike against the backs of her eyelids. She ran the water, splashed it on her face to keep the day from spilling past her.

Charlie's study wasn't lavishly decorated, but it was done with the kind of restrained New-English elegance Eileen knew to expect from him. A creaky, chestnut desk, bookshelves meticulously arranged. The trim and wall and ceiling colors sister shades of Emerald Green.

Tina was on the floor, on her belly, spinning a globe around its axis. Eileen watched her body rise and fall, admired her fuzzy little face. Doug had hoped she would grow out of that fuzz, to keep at bay some of the viciousness of adolescence. Eileen, though, was ambivalent. She rather liked and wore proudly the fuzz above her own lip, which only very rarely sprouted something dark enough to warrant attention.

Eileen pushed Tina's shoulder with the ball of her foot. "Let's do something," she said.

Tina slivered her eyes. She stretched. "I was about to nap."

"So let's go," said Eileen.

Tina sat up. “These are some books about bow and arrows. And some guns. Probably Indian. Like Charlie said.”

“Charlie didn’t mean Indian like that. It’s a term about when summer lasts—” she gave up.

“Dad says it’s important for growing up, to learn these things.”

“Sometimes me and your father disagree on a lot.”

They went to the kitchen and made sandwiches. Eileen sat Tina on the counter next to her. They looked out at the dogs.

“That one’s looking at me,” said Tina. She pointed at Eleanor.

“Charlie calls her Ellie. That’s a good name, don’t you think?”

“She’s looking at me. Her neck is as big as her head.”

Eileen sipped a glass of the Rioja.

“It’s strong,” said Tina.

“She is.”

“So they’re mean *and* strong.”

“They’re not mean. She’s not mean, Tina.”

“But what if it is? Dad always says, ‘just in case.’”

“It’s good to be ready. Except dad likes to be ready for things that are never going to happen.”

“Is it since he was a boy scout?”

“That’s exactly it,” said Eileen. She pulled Tina off the counter. “It’s because Daddy’s a big goddamn boy scout.”

She sent Tina to play with the dogs. And she watched them run, sipping another glass of wine. Tina rolled in the grass with Brad. She tried to ride on him like a horse. She threw a Frisbee for him and he brought it back and wagged his tail and barked and sat and waited for another throw. When Eleanor bounded up alongside them, Tina kept her distance. Occasionally she kneeled by Brad and pet him, but what she was really doing was using the dog as a shield, and peering up and over his fur and spying on Eleanor. Eileen watched this. She watched as Tina stood up and took hold of the Frisbee, looking hard at Eleanor before buzzing the disc into her ribcage. Eileen drank and lit a smoke and she watched Eleanor shake herself out before picking the Frisbee up between her teeth and returning it to Tina, tail wagging.

“Bad dog!” Tina shouted.

Eleanor recoiled, confused, ears drawn back.

Eileen marched outside. “What is this?” she said.

“It’s looking at me!”

Eileen finished her wine. The dog trotted towards her and sat by her feet and Eileen ran her hand through the coarse brown fur.

“Why do you like it?” said Tina.

Eileen peered at her. “What’s wrong with you?” she said.

Eileen petted the dog. She could feel the muscles running along the shoulders and neck. “Go play with your brother,” she said. And the dog licked her before going back to Brad, and they peed and sniffed and bound together through the tall grass.

Eileen found her Walkman. She put on an old Bop mix and took out the John Deere to mow the lawn. She smoked cigarettes and circled the narrowing perimeter again and again, following the tire marks. Brad lazed about on his back, his legs spread wide, making chewing motions at the sky. Eleanor sat regal on the porch, eyes squinted and resilient against the sun. When Eileen was done she turned off the tractor and the Walkman. She looked over her work and called for Ellie. And as the dog approached, she nuzzled Eileen's fingers. Eileen held close the skin and fur behind the dog's neck.

It was five-thirty when Doug pulled in. "I got a Blue," he said. "You doubted me, but look." He had the fish lashed over his shoulder, spreading its slime further across the vest with every footstep.

"This is hardly cocktail behavior," said Eileen. She was drinking a vodka, rocks, and Tina was coloring on the deck by her feet.

"I'm gonna grill it," he said. "Just kind of kiss it with the heat. They say when it's this fresh you don't have to worry about undercooking." He was boyish and proud.

"That's not a grilling fish," said Eileen.

"No?"

"No."

"Well you know what?" He looked at Tina. "Me and Tina want it grilled, so I'm gonna grill it anyhow."

Tina looked up. "I do want it grilled," she said.

Doug looked at Eileen, triumphant.

"All Mommy cares about is that dog," said Tina.

Eileen blew air out her nose. “Well you and me are gonna go to the beach and get steamers. How’s that? I care about steamers.”

“What’s steamers?” said Tina.

“You cook them and drag them around in melted butter and you eat them with your hands.” She got up and began the march down to the path. “And you drink as much cold beer as you can fit in your belly.” She whistled for the dogs. Eleanor burst from the woods and went right up next to Eileen. They matched each other, stride for stride.

The fish was covered in so much mayonnaise and doused in so much lemon they could barely taste its flesh. They ate their bushel of steamers boiled with corn and drawn butter, and a big salad of romaine and garlic and Pecorino. Eileen and Doug drank cold watery beer.

They played music. *Annie Get Your Gun*. *Sweeney Todd*. Charlie had taken Eileen to see *Sweeney* on its first Broadway run. They had admired the show’s irreverence. It allowed them a respite of normalcy following a hapless kiss the previous Halloween. She’d put her hand down between his legs, and kissed him, but he said no. It was the first and last time anything approaching intimacy had occurred between them.

Doug made enormous Martinis. He drank them quick and charmless with vodka, one after the other. When the dogs came in Tina pulled Brad up onto his hind legs, holding his paws. They danced a skittered waltz before the dog pulled away and swayed over to its matted bed in the kitchen.

Eleanor sat on the sofa. She looked at all of them, and out the door, towards the oak and the water, her ears loosening, then tautening, eyes fixed on the driveway and the noiseless road beyond it.

Eileen was drunk. She took Tina's hand and pulled her, gently at first, toward the dog. "It's time we all make friends," she said. "No more of this fraidy business."

"Leen," said Doug. "Let her alone. Both of them."

"She's a good girl, Doug. I'm telling you she is."

"Maybe. Okay? Maybe. But maybe not right now."

A faint purr escaped the dog, and Eileen let go of Tina to grab her. "Two cowards," she said. "Both of you, for fuck's sake. She's a good girl." The dog licked the side of her face.

Tina was frowning. Doug picked her up and held her. "Now she's upset," he said.

Eileen looked at the dog. "What about her?"

She awoke to the earthen split and thud of axe through pine. At the window she saw Doug demonstrating how to hold the axe, small lessons in physics: the fulcrum, the wedge. She pulled open the window, laboring. It was Saturday morning. She hadn't felt so floaty and depleted for some time.

"What's this?" she called down to them. She lit a cigarette.

Doug split a log. She had imagined splinters and misses and shavings, but it fell neatly in two.

"I wish you'd stop smoking," he said. "Or at least not in the house. And not around her anyway." He nodded at Tina before setting up and splitting another log.

She took a drag. "I wish you'd stop feeding weapons to our daughter." She let the smoke out into the morning, cooler now, more seasonable than the day before.

“It’s not a weapon, Leen.” He didn’t look at her. “We ought to know how to use these things. How do people like you think stuff used to get done?”

“How do you think stuff used to get done,” she echoed, closing the window.

She went to the kitchen to make coffee. A mosquito hawk buzzed around the bag of beans. She’d been taught not to kill these things—they were the ones that killed mosquitos. But she’d learned just a few weeks ago that this wasn’t true. Its limbs were proportionally enormous. It bounced as she reached for it onto her finger, and as she drew it nearer her face, it jumped to her nose. She crossed her eyes to see, but the image blurred. “I don’t want to kill you,” she said. And it bounced away, evading her swipe.

She put the coffee on and watched and smoked out through the window above the sink. Little lizards poked out from under sticks and stems, darting every which way, across their lizard paths, in the milky morning. She watched Eleanor go after them, slicing arcs with her paws, managing, every now and then, to take a few down. Some she swallowed without chewing. Others she left to rot in the autumn sun.

Eileen took coffees outside, leaving one for Doug on the veranda, and walked toward the tree line, where the path to the water began. The blueberry bushes were skeletal. She bent down to them and breathed in their fading fragrance. Boats clinked in the harbor. Above them she could see weather approaching off Nantucket.

She went again for the John Deere and followed the lines, around and around. Eleanor came up alongside her, panting and watching. Eileen smoked and patted the seat behind her and the dog jumped up. The mowing didn’t even touch the grass. They sat there together, crossing over the lawn. Eileen with her headphones and sunglasses, smoking. The dog squinting and proud.

When she finished, Doug was coming out of the bulkhead next to the veranda, a little unsteady and wobbly from the morning's activities. He held his weight, and breathed, uncomfortably, but had about him an air of satisfaction.

She turned her music off. The dog stood by her. "You look like hell," she said. She grinned.

He coughed and shrugged. He had a bow and arrows underneath his arm. Behind him Tina was dragging an enormous target.

When Eileen saw it she said, "No." And she lit a cigarette. "*No*. No way."

"It's the same thing she'd do at summer camp," said Doug.

"Yeah, well that bow's twice her size and it's not fucking summer camp."

He shrugged again. "Maybe we'll find her a better size. See what she can do."

She smoked. "I made coffee," she said. She nodded toward the veranda. "An hour ago. It's fucking cold."

Doug gave the bow to Tina and whistled for Brad. And when the dog arrived Doug put the arrows to its jaw and Brad sunk his teeth, taking hold. "Go ahead," he told Tina. "Brad's got the arrows. I'll meet you."

"Not with the weapon," said Eileen. "Just the target. Your father holds the weapon."

"They do this in gym class for Christmas sake. *We* used to do this in ym class."

"They used to sound sirens and make us hide under desks, Doug. Maybe we ought to run *that* drill after you finish your lesson."

He moved toward Eileen. He looked at her, squinting. "Have you been drinking?"

"Not yet."

"No?"

Eileen looked at Tina. “Put that *fucking* bow on the ground.”

Tina peered back at her. She told Brad to drop, and he did. She put the bow down, and with the dog, pulled the target to the beach.

Doug pinched the side of Eileen’s stomach. “I’m gonna teach her how to shoot that bow,” he said. “Whether or not you like it.”

“Teach?” she said. She stifled a laugh. “What are you *teaching*? You can barely hold an axe.”

“I held that axe just fine.”

Eileen slivered her eyes against the breeze. “You’re way off,” she said. “You’re so far off with everything.”

“Well, *you’re* afraid of axes. And *you’re* afraid of bows and arrows.”

“*Who’s* afraid?” she said.

“That dog slinks around. And it stares, Eileen. At me *and* Tina. It growls.”

“Doug, she’s a *good* dog. She’s only been *good*.”

He went up for his coffee and sipped once before tossing it out over the lawn. They both stood, watching over the water.

Eileen turned to him. “Well,” she said, “thank God we drove all the way up here.”

Eileen drank and sat with Eleanor the rest of the morning, listening to the glide and thud of arrows into the heavy packed hay of the target board. She heard Brad bark. She listened to Tina and Doug chuckling, imagined their high fives.

When the storm came it was lighter than she expected: a stiff breeze and darkened skies, but otherwise only a shower or two. Nothing ever opened up. Doug and Brad and

Tina had gone inside, and Eileen drew her knees close, listening to them laugh at the TV. Eleanor was beside her. She looked up, shivering, and Eileen touched her hand down to the dog's head, scratching hard at the ridge of muscle running along her brow.

When the storm had passed Eileen pulled herself inside and made toast, and drank the rest of the cold coffee. She had three large glasses of water, put food in Eleanor's dish, and went up to the bath. The water was filling in around her when she heard a knock.

"I'm not apologizing," said Doug, wedging his head just so through the door.

"Just don't tell me that's how your apology starts."

"I'm not. I wasn't listening before. We're here. Tina's fine. She'll be okay. And she's a good shot. We found her a little bow—"

"Will you make supper?"

He blinked.

She put a washcloth over her eyes and sank further into the still rising water. She heard him move closer. He dipped a hand between her legs and for a moment she accepted before pushing it away. "Turn the water off," she said. "Please."

She emerged feeling somewhat renewed. The splintered evening sun groaned through the windows. Downstairs Tina sat at the television, Brad draped over her lap. Eleanor sat outside on the veranda, whimpering low, patiently waiting to be let in. "Why are we keeping the dogs separate?" said Eileen.

"She wanted to go out."

"Go get more steamers for supper."

Tina kept her eyes on the TV.

“Tina,” said Eileen. “You’ve got your whole life to watch TV.”

Tina sat, unmoving.

“Now,” said Eileen.

Tina slithered sluggish from the sofa. She patted the dog. “Come,” she said.

“Take them both.”

“I don’t want to take the other one.”

Eileen pressed her fingers to her temples.

“You don’t see it. She likes you.”

“Maybe because I don’t treat her like an asshole.” Eileen opened the door. Eleanor shuffled inside and licked at Eileen’s toes. “Go on,” she said. “All three of you. To the beach.”

She watched them as they approached the trail, and she listened. There was a rumbling somewhere not far off. Another storm perhaps. Low and indefinite.

When Doug got home she was on the veranda. He was in his vest, fishless. He carried a plastic grocery bag. “I got steak,” he said.

“I’m off beef.”

“Come on, Leen.” He went inside. She could hear him pour himself a drink. “You want one?” he said.

She laughed.

“Where is everybody?”

“I sent Tina for more steamers. She took the dogs.”

He came out to light the grill. “I’m not saying anything,”

From the veranda she could see Tina twirling through the mud with her feet, digging for the clams. She had dragged a body board from the beachside bungalow and it sat floating beside her, a small but respectable mound of steamers piled on top. Brad sniffed about, jumping occasionally backwards, frightened by a crab or periwinkle, letting out little yips and yaps. Eleanor swam, as if doing laps, graceful and poised.

Eileen made a fire in the pit and stretched out, soaking in the last of the sun, which was beginning to feel more and more like October. Doug brought out two gin and tonics and set the steaks on the grill. Eileen listened to the lap of waves and sizzle of meat and the delighted cries of her daughter, finding food for their dinner down on the beach. She raised the drink to her lips and when she set it down she closed her eyes.

She awoke to a squeal. A few yards away, Brad had stuck his head into a hole in the ground, chasing some vole or mouse. It was the rodent's desperate cries that had woken Eileen. Brad's head was stuck. He was coughing and howling, tugging desperate and yanking with all four limbs.

She could hear Doug snoring inside. The smell of grilled flesh had turned metallic, a wisp of carbon spreading through the air.

The moon rose and Eileen watched it crane against the impending darkness, fracturing the still and barely lit sky. She looked over the beach, listened for the yips and yaps, but saw nothing, heard nothing.

“Tina,” she called out.

Eileen took up her gin and tonic and began the slog down to the beach. “Doug,” she called behind her, “I’m gonna help Tina finish. The steak is fucked. Doug, you fucked the steak.”

In the woods she poked carefully with her toes before planting her feet, wary of the rocks and sticks and bushels of poisonous overgrowth. She watched the vines wrapping around the oak trees, obscuring their bark, stretching up, up. She yelled Tina’s name. She heard again and again the faint lap of wave against shore, the clink of boat rigging. She watched the slivered light escaping through the canopy above. It was darker than she’d realized and by the time she was at the bottom of the trail she could barely make her feet out from the ground. “Doug,” she called up to the veranda, her voice hoarse and stuck in her throat. “Turn on the floods.” She took her shoes off and clapped them together. The sharp sound reverberated up the hill and Doug emerged on the veranda. She could only just make out his stumbling silhouette. He dragged about the porch.

“What is it?” His voice came sailing down, an echo of itself.

“Turn on the *fucking* floods!” she wailed.

When he flipped on the lights, a pale glow painted itself over sand and bungalow and low-lying waters. It made everything beyond the beach—the harbor and the sound, the Atlantic Ocean—seem all the more shaded and unknown.

Eileen walked along the shore. She flipped her feet through the sand, sifting and searching and kicking at clumps. Along a bend, behind an outcrop of rocks, she found the body board, piled high with steamers.

Tina was sitting on a rock, holding the bow. Her eyes were open, black against the lights and sea. The dog lay unmoving, her eyes cracked just barely, tongue slooped out and covered in sand.

“I was shooting,” said Tina. “She was about to attack.”

Eileen heard Doug yelling, heard the rocks and stones and shells rolling into and thudding against one another. When he reached them he doubled over, put his hands on his knees and caught his breath. He looked up at Eileen. He coughed and cleared his throat and said, “Charlie just pulled up.”

Tina flung herself at her father. She wrapped her arms around his waist

“Show me where she bit you,” said Eileen. “Tell me how she attacked.”

“It was *about* to, Mom.”

“Where’s the arrow?”

In the strange pillowy light Tina’s eyes looked dented.

Doug crouched behind her. He held her away from Eileen. “Was she supposed to wait?” he said.

There were more sounds on the path, and Eileen watched Charlie emerge, stumbling and drunk. He was holding two bottles of champagne, one in each hand. He caught his breath. Brad trotted up next to him. And when he finally moved to rub his eyes, to help them adjust and bring things into view, he looked back and forth between the bottles of champagne, thinking seriously, it seemed, about which one to put down first.

Challengers

“Next thing you know I’ll have a chip in my head—won’t let me take a drink without the say-so of these commies in the White House.” The suited man looked around for sympathizers. There were none. The bartender had asked him for identification, his boarding pass. “I’m over fifty,” said the suited man. He pulled his lips up around his teeth with his index fingers. “Kids have teeth this yellow?” He turned his skull into the light, brushing at the grey. “Hair like this?” And after a breath: “Why the fuck do you need my flight pass? What sense is that? You do recognize me, don’t you?” And when the bartender explained it was because they were only allowed to serve alcohol before six A.M. to those on departing flights, the suited man threw his hands in the air. “What’s next?” he said. “I mean Christ. I mean. *Christ.*” But sensing the bartender’s ire, he backed off. “It’s not *you*,” said the suited man. “I’m sorry. I know it’s not *you*. But you gotta agree it’s an awfully strong fucking grip they’ve got on us.”

By the time the coach had finished his eggs and returned to the runner, who was fawning over glossy tabloid magazines at the gate, fifty meters away, the suited man had, by the coach’s count, put away six tequila sunrises. The coach wasn’t unaccustomed to counting. It was part of his job. But typically it was a stopwatch, not a grown man tossing back tequilas at five-thirty in the morning. The runner had on sweatpants. He was looking at pictures of bodies—Kim K as the centerpiece, tits falling out, a slew of lubed-up beefcakes bunched around her. At least it wasn’t the one with the champagne ejecting all over her ass, but still, the coach remembered that age, and he wished the runner would have had the good sense to wear something more boner-friendly (or would that have been *less* boner-friendly?)

It was January 28, 2016—The coach’s thirty-fifth birthday, the thirtieth anniversary of the Challenger explosion, and 51 weeks until the next American president would be sworn in. The plane had been arranged by the runner’s mother, who had gained a reputation after defending a weapons contractor accused of dumping nuclear waste in a quarry outside Nashua. Thunderstorms had delayed flights out of Logan, and her boy might have missed his race without a bit of a push. She’d pulled some strings and, like that, a Manchester to Baltimore appeared on the list of departures.

The hour-and-a-quarter long flight was typically aboard a 737. But this was a tiny regional carrier that could hold no more than twenty. Today its occupants numbered only six, including the two pilots and the flight attendant. When the suited man boarded late, just before departure, the runner, a seat ahead of the coach, turned around and said, “Can you believe this? *This* guy on *this* flight. What are the chances?” The coach shrugged and the runner said, “You’re helpless.”

Takeoff was smooth, but as soon as they reached above the clouds the weather turned on them, shattering about with rain and wind. The plane dipped and dove, struggled to level out.

“I won’t lie to you folks,” the pilot’s voice came over the speaker. “The radar I’ve got in front of me looks a bit touch-and-go at the moment. But hey, maybe it’s just my nerves talking.” There was a giggle before her voice clicked off. The plane jolted upwards and to the left before balancing out.

A different voice continued: “As my colleague was saying, we’ve been through this stuff a hundred times.” It was not a number the coach found comforting. And the co-pilot, as though sensing the coach’s unease, corrected himself: “A *thousand* times,” he said. “So you’re probably better off trusting the two of us up here than whatever kind of gut reaction you’re dealing with. It’s routine stuff.” The plane jerked. “*Smoooth* sailing to us. We’ll touch you down just fine.” More laughter before the intercom clicked off.

The flight attendant came down the aisle, clutching the seatbacks, smiling. “Let’s stay buckled on this flight,” he said, “if it’s not too much trouble.” He winked at the runner, whose belt was pulled across his lap, unlatched. “And it’s really *not* too much trouble.” The flight attendant peered steadily into the runner’s eyes before glancing down at the unfastened buckle. “I promise you.”

The coach, after smiling politely at the passing attendant, punched the runner softly in the arm. “Put the goddamn belt on,” he said.

The suited man raised his left arm, started snapping his thumb and middlefinger together. “I’m gonna need some juice.” He kept clicking. “And a little drink.”

It was only a heartbeat before the flight attendant was beside the suited man—he could walk the length of the plane in under ten seconds. “There’s not really service on this flight,” he said. “I’m very sorry, sir. Could I get you a bottle of water?”

“You can fetch me a water, you can fetch me a drink.”

The first pilot's voice came again over the speaker. "We've, ah, suspended service," she said, a small croak coming up through the low-end of her voice. "Let's all just everybody sit down and keep this just as *smoooooth* sailing as it can be."

The suited man rose from his seat. He ambled, frowning, toward the rear bathroom, and when he passed the runner, the runner turned again to the coach. "You really don't know who he is?"

The coach, who did not coach the runner individually, but coached the runner's high school team, and was only liaising this trip to Baltimore for the runner to compete in a national qualifier, ducked his head closer to the runner's seat to keep quiet. "Okay," he said. "Who is he?"

"Beck Avery," said the runner. "He's the Boeing man."

"The Boeing man?" The coach eyed the runner incredulously.

And the Boeing man, who might have been waiting for this moment, for somebody to finally recognize him, took a step backwards. He flopped down across from the runner—the turbulence exaggerating the drunk—and nearly put a knee through his own skull. "Guilty as charged, fellas." he said. "Guilty. As. Charged." He was older. Distinguished looking. A great head of hair. And slim. A nice fitting suit. The coach had, he supposed, noticed all of these things earlier, but his perceptions of them were skewed considerably by the suited man's—the Boeing man's—shitty behavior.

"So what are you doing on this flight?" said the coach. "A big deal like you."

The Boeing man pulled a toothpick from his breast pocket, stood, and put a foot on the runner's armrest before leaning down on his knee. He squinted out the window into the grey black wind and searched a moment for words. When the plane plunged he was lucky not to pass the toothpick through the back of his neck. The speaker clicked on but the plane righted itself before the pilot said a word. "Maintenance," said the Boeing man. "Maybe. Or a routine diagnostic. Or maybe," he peered down at the runner, "maybe it's important I get this runner to where he needs to be." He tweaked strangely at the lobe of the runner's ear. "Maybe I owe somebody a favor."

They say eighty-five percent of Americans knew within ten minutes what had happened. The whole thing was on the TV. Banners hung in the coach's classroom. *The Pride of Concord*. And *Happy Birthday*. He had just turned five. They threw confetti and ate the cake and sang the song, and then they watched the shuttle explode.

On his twenty-first his mother poured him a shot of Sambuca. It was a tradition, she said. "But we don't drink it with the bean because we drink tea, because we're dignified." And next she told him he'd practically grown up on Christa McAuliffe's lap. They lived right down the street, she said. You were practically inseparable.

At least half the astronauts in the crew compartment survived the initial explosion. Watching on TV you'd have sworn it was all over the moment the shuttle caught flame, but the compartment was loosed, and as many as five of those souls inside were alive until it collided with the waters of the Gulf. It was too cold. A handful of engineers had cautioned

against the launch, citing concerns about the structural strength of the O-ring seals. Had they postponed one more day everything might have been different. But the launch was already six days behind schedule. They didn't want to risk a week.

The runner was reading a novel. When he read, he read voraciously. But he happened also to be flipping from a comic book to an US magazine, and then to his laptop which was updating him each minute, on the minute, through the plane's wifi about the status of his bid on a McAuliffe tooth, which had been found, two years earlier, on a beach in Pensacola and verified very recently by a forensics specialist in Baton Rouge.

The runner lived with his parents on the Hill in Concord, where Christa, her husband, Steve, and their two children had moved in during the Blizzard of '78. The runner's parents were crazed about McAuliffe. And he thought this piece of history, this tooth, might be a fitting centerpiece framed above their mantle.

The runner was knowledgeable. He upheld a 3.8 GPA without much effort, which was, for him, a real point of pride, especially compared to all the "I-applied-to the-Ivys" who marked the top of his class. He was headed, in the fall, to Oregon, to run for U of O, and study something he hadn't decided yet, and chase after his hero.

The runner had clocked a blindingly fast 1:53 half-mile. The time was his own personal best, and the best in both the state of New Hampshire and New England so far that year, good enough to send him to Baltimore to compete against the best in the country, which included one sub-1:50 from a kid out of Billings, Montana—though the runner was

reasonably sure this time had been achieved by doping. The runner was not above doping. Certain things had to be done in this climate to keep competitive, but he was not dumb enough to take anything that might show up in a urine test.

The runner did morning runs, and workouts with the team after school, and sometimes took runs at night. He kept a strict sleep schedule, a strict eating schedule, and drank very rarely, and then only because beer had in it something called chromium, which he'd read in *Men's Life* aided in muscle recovery. The runner had his mother massage him at night, working mostly on his calves. He'd studied fast-twitch musculature, worked on his kick—the science of it—his breathing and strategy. The runner had a picture of Pre in his Oregon singlet on the ceiling over his bed, and even a laminated one in the shower.

His parents pushed him. They thought him somewhat delusional on account of the comics and magazines he read, his addiction to his phone, his inability to talk to women. They pushed him hard and they expected things out of him. But they also told him, “You’re a kid. You’re allowed to be a kid. Have a girl over. You’re too focused.” Talk of therapy loomed over him like a threat. But those threats disappeared when he did well in meets. And this season, so far, he was undefeated. He’d improved his PR in each and every race. He’d been doing V02max workouts, studying the numbers. He knew everything about his body. And he was fully expecting his own personal best in Baltimore. Maybe it was the runner himself who would dip below 1:50.

The 800, the half-mile, is not a sprint, but neither is it a run. It falls somewhere in between. The runner must assert himself at the start, carve out his place in the pack, and figure if he’s to lead or to draft. Next he’ll find his stride, and count and breathe. Always he’s

running faster than what seems sustainable for more than a lap, but if he's any good, he maintains that pace nonetheless. He considers between which passing moves will benefit him, and which might be ill-advised. The great runners keep clocks in their heads. They're unemotional. They aim to sliver time off what they know they're already capable of. But the runners better than those practice a kind of sadism. At times they blast off and maintain that lead through to the end. Other times they find a place in the sludge of the pack, positioning for a kick of the thrusters towards the finish. They revel in the embarrassment they're able to inflict between themselves and second place in only the last hundred or fifty meters of the race.

And then there are the runners who fizzle out, pushing too quickly off the line, making ill-advised passes, investing too much belief in their will to win. These are the runners who are most interesting to watch, and who are often both the most heroic, and the most tragic. Sometimes they'll enjoy a brief glimpse of victory, chests out, legs on flame and throbbing, steaming hearts clutched and tumbling forward, a stampede of footsteps giving chase. But it's usually for just a lap. Sometimes a lap and a half. On occasion these runners have even won a race. They all know that some races are more important than others. But it will never become a pattern; if they pull one out, that win will be their last.

—

Christa and Steve were lucky. New Hampshire was spared the worst of the storm in 78', but Southern New England was not. Providence, Rhode Island, where the coach's parents lived at the time, received twenty-eight inches of snow (a record that would hold for

thirty-six years). It caused nearly two billion dollars of damage and claimed at least a hundred lives on account of insufficient meteorology.

When he was a boy, the coach's parents claimed to have faced a dozen or so instances of life or death peril during the storm. But after the divorce, when the coach's mother became more dedicated in her drinking, the truth came out: they had abandoned the car on 195, loaded a sled with five cases of 'Gansett and trudged the fifteen miles to Fall River, where they embarked on a three-day drug-fueled sex odyssey with a number of friends.

After the Towers fell, the coach's father was outside shooting at squirrels with his Beretta. Everywhere everybody was acting strangely. The coach was twenty and not so seriously considering the Marines, readying himself for his last two years of undergrad at the University of New Hampshire. The afternoon was warm and blue and dry, but there were lines of sweat dripping over his father's clear, clean cheeks and catching in his mustache. He was shaving chunks of bark from the trunk and branches of the old oak that lined the property in the back. And he said to the coach, who at that time was not yet a coach, but somebody who fashioned himself a man with genuine ambition, "In '78, during the blizzard—I think about it almost every day." His lip trembled. He coughed. "I'm not even sure I didn't give my brother a poke. I can't say for certain I didn't fuck my own brother."

When the Boeing man finally emerged from the bathroom, the plane had moved through the storm and regained its composure. He patted the runner's head as he passed,

and then spun around, slinging the universal cool-guy gunshot gesture. The coach cringed. He swung around the seat and squeezed in next to the runner. “I’ll bite,” he said. “What’s this guy’s deal?”

“I don’t know, he’s like, the Marlboro man, but for flight.”

“The Marlboro man.” The coach laughed. “You don’t know who that is.”

“Good branding sticks, coach. People know who that is.”

“So how does somebody become a Boeing man?”

“Big Aviation or whatever, they brought him on to be their guy. And everybody loves him. He’s killing it. He’s like some comeback kid after something he did in the nineties.”

The coach rolled his eyes. “But *who* is he?”

“I mean, I don’t really know. I’ve seen him on TV. He’s on TV, like, all the time.”

“Great. So this *guy* is the Boeing man, and the *Boeing* man is *somebody*. And this *somebody* is kind of a *comeback* kid?”

“I don’t know. He killed somebody or something. In a car accident? Or he did time for cocaine or something. I don’t know. And then he was maybe an actor? Like he did his time and he got better? It’s a good story. People like him.” The runner thought for a second. “You know, they’re trying to dig all these old institutions out from six feet—The postal service. NASA. I don’t have to tell *you* coach. *You* know.”

“Who’s *they*?”

The runner groaned. “What is this, twenty questions?”

The coach looked over what the runner had been reading: two *US* magazines, a *Star* Magazine, *People*, plus two comic books with what looked like very large-breasted men on the

cover, and the novel he'd spied the runner reading in forty-second increments every half-hour or so. All of these things were crimped and crumpled, like they'd been *used* more than they had been read.

"Everything's visibility," the runner said. "Your generation doesn't get that, coach. You've gotta put the right face on things, you know? I mean, what's *your* fucking plan?"

The coach sat back in his chair, messed around with his feet and knees to find a comfortable position. But nothing worked. "Whose face got put on American cars?"

"Fucking American cars," the runner said. He'd been dropping these firetrucks left and right, seemed looser with himself up in the air. "Coach, American cars are fucking dead."

—

When he was in high school, the coach had given his dad Updike's *Trust Me*, and that line about learning a trade made a real impression. He made the coach find a job in contracting during the summer. He said if times ever get tough you can always fall back on a trade.

Three months after the Columbia explosion, the coach graduated UNH cum laude. The next year he started an M.A. in English at Providence College, picking up freelance work as a writer and copyeditor, taking a bathroom repaint every now and then to fill in the gaps. He finished his course requirements in August of 2008, three weeks before Lehman went under.

He was glad he had the trade to fall back on, he just wished it was carpentry instead of housepainting. Better money. More satisfying work—carpenters make things; painters cover them over.

The business took a hit in 2014 when Providence was hit with its worst blizzard since 1978. The coach couldn't move the truck for five days. Power outages made it so he couldn't spray any of the shopwork. He couldn't shower, felt like he'd freeze at night while he slept. When he got backed up, customers said they understood, sympathized even, but they left anyway.

The company folded the next year.

The coach started substitute teaching when he could find the work, took little cash paint jobs here and there—beds and baths, nothing the government would take interest in. And one day the principal told him they needed a new track coach. So there he was.

—

“If you look down,” the pilot’s voice came through the intercom, “you *won’t* see Philadelphia.” There was a brief cackle before the speaker clicked off. “We’re sorry about that.” It was the other voice, half a minute later. “Technical difficulties up here in the cabin. We *are* passing over Philadelphia, currently, but the cloud cover is unfortunately too thick to see through. What that means, though, is we’ve begun our descent and will be preparing for landing quite soon. Like I said earlier—routine stuff. We’ll touch you down just fine.” More fumbling. “And even though my co-pilot claimed *she* was the one who said we’d touch you down just fine, we talked about it and have agreed that it was, indeed, me. Anyhow, we do appreciate you flying with us. And on behalf of your pilot and I up here in the cock—” fumbling, giggling—“pit, and our lovely staff of one back there, thanks very much. And if there’s anything else we can do to make this flight more comfortable in these last few moments, let us know and we’ll do whatever we can to accommodate you.” Pause. “Radar

looks, well—congested, coming towards the finale here. But hang in there. Buckle up. Think happy thoughts. And maybe it's a *bit* premature, but welcome to Baltimore.”

The plane came again into tricky weather. It shook and spasmed and lurched as passed back into storming skies. The flight attendant, smiling through his concern, pulled himself toward his seat. He buckled and tightened his belt. The coach, clutching white knuckled at his armrests, was sure it was only a moment before the masks came down from the ceiling. He thought very briefly that he had seen the runner's magazines rise from the floor in the aisle. The overhead bins rattled. Outside the wingtips blinked red.

The Boeing man stood, businesslike and nearly undrunk. He looked back at the coach and runner, joining his arms like he was rocking a baby. “You've got to have faith in this thing. These systems. God knows I do. Then again a little prayer never hurt anybody. So you hope. And then you wait. And you position yourself to best be cradled by the arms of the Lord.”

The plane stuttered now, wedging against these strips of whipping wind. The runner turned, resting his chin on the seat's top. And as the plane made a great up-down arc, the coach watched the runner nearly bite off his tongue. Blood spilled from his mouth. He lisped a wadded string of nonsense—angry gibberish, gurgling. The coach pressed at the button above him for help. The plane jerked. The runner collected the blood in his hands, staring at it, pale and terrified. “Sit down!” said the coach. “Jesus. Put your belt on! And sit down!”

The pilot gazed ahead, caught still in the great disturbance she'd been laboring to pass through unharmed.

—

In 1985 the NEA endorsed Walter Mondale for president. The incumbent Ronald Reagan was not going to cave on education initiatives, but he wanted desperately to appear more charitable, understanding and sympathetic to the country's educators. His solution: send a teacher into space.

There was an application for the application—a twenty-five page questionnaire designed to take as many as 150 hours, and meant to weed the awestruck from the truly sincere. There were 45,000 interested applicants, 11,500 of whom completed applications.

The administration and NASA were impressed first by Christa's intelligence, and then her relatability—the “project” she proposed as part of her application, for instance, was a diary. This was in stark contrast to the rather ambitious experiments pitched by other contenders, some of which involved mice, hypothesizing, for example, limits on survivability in zero-gravity environments. They liked Christa's hair, and how she talked, and how she mothered and ran her classroom. She was an avowed democrat, but the kind of teacher, nevertheless, who could reflect well on Reagan during the election.

On April 16, 1985 Christa McAuliffe was informed she'd been chosen as one of seven state finalists from New Hampshire. And on July 19th of the same year she was formally announced, out of a national field of 79, as the first citizen who had gained entry into space.

—

In high school the coach had kept his hair long, twisty and fine, only it was black instead of the blondish orange that made the women fawn. But he lacked everything else that made Pre Pre. Instead of putting in the time—the stretching, weight training, morning runs, midday runs, evening runs, milk massages, etc., he took his very small bit of talent and stretched it wide without ever asking it to grow. He was the best freshman in the state during high school. But by senior year he'd dropped out of the top 20. At indoor meets, where the air was like a diesel-soaked rag plunged down your throat, he and his best friend, another middle-distance runner, took turns holding the shot-put over each other's ankles. Anything to get out of the race. Neither of them would ever have dropped it. But the guy on the ground, with his leg out—the coach remembered clear as day—he was begging for it.

—

The runner was finally seated, his belt buckled and taut over his lap. He chewed his bloodied mouth. The next day, tongue stitched and thick with Novocain, he might find himself rounding home, in the lead on the straightaway, when a hamstring tears loose, rippling up the backside of his leg like a cartoon windowshade. Or he might collapse on account of the mammoth amounts of creatine he'd been taking, his liver or kidneys finally giving out.

Or he might simply lose.

He might watch the field pull past him, a blur of sinewy legs reaching impossibly toward greatness.

—

The Boeing man, legs crossed, worked on a nip.

The coach listened to the singsong of static tension in his temples, gnashing together his teeth. He waited for the flashing lights, the plane to tear in two and the wind pluck them out, one by one.

And in the crew compartment, looking down at the radar, which showed weather, and more weather, and more weather after that—and none of it good—the pilot saw above her, or below, a patchy escape of blue and white, small, but within her reach.

Incidents

Hank had been in the white room, eating a donut, thinking about a muffin, looking out through the window to the factory floor, when some dope sneaked up and stapled a kick-me sign to his ass. He laughed at first, watching the guy slink back to his station. But after a moment he looked at Manny, who was standing nearby and working on an éclair, and said, “Hey, what if I’d had my colostomy bag in?”

Manny was Hank’s boss. He had an office overlooking the factory floor. But there were other offices, some of them much higher ones, than his. He looked surprised, almost heartbroken. A smear of éclair goo sagged down his chin. “Well, we couldn’t have something like that happen here, Hank,” he said. “It wouldn’t be right.”

Of course Hank was lying. He was considering slapping Manny on the shoulder, saying, “I don’t wear a shit-bag, Cap,” when Manny pointed at Hank’s crotch and said “That *is* more blood than I expected for sure.” And when Hank looked down, the blood was indeed blotting through his slacks, all the way around his upper thighs where his underwear was, and he said, “I think that little shit jammed an infected staple up my ass.”

“You can’t tell right off you’re infected,” said Manny. “It’ll take a little time.” But the wound did end up infected. The little shyster who’d done the shoving was given a wrist slap and put on a week’s paid leave while Hank sat home on comp, making little over half his weekly salary and only now ready to start walking normal again.

He’d been keeping busy. He was learning to cook, for instance. For years he’d been all about the food magazines and TV shows, and he knew about flavors, and how to eat, but for whatever the reason he’d never done it himself. It was fall and it got dark early, and as

soon as the sun went down he would go over to his neighbors' persimmon tree and take a few of the dignified fruits. He made sauce out of them. And by his twelfth time it was getting pretty good. He'd figured out the right amount of sugar, that both the juice and the zest of the lemon had a purpose, and that it needed a little salt to really sing. He'd figured out about the allspice, the ginger, the nutmeg. He even brought a jar of the sauce back to the neighbors—who he'd always labeled as very old and also very Nordic—and put it on their doorstep. The next day the jar was gone, and so he assumed they'd eaten it, which was crazy, because how did they know it hadn't been poisoned?

What he wanted to do, but on account of his ass hadn't yet been able, was to paint the cupola. It hadn't been touched in the fifteen years he'd owned the place. When he'd signed the mortgage it was already worse for the wear, and so it was really very much ready for a paint job, both for aesthetical purposes and because before long the wood would start rotting, at which point he'd have a much bigger problem on his hands. But there was his ass to think of. Plus Hank was mortified of heights. Whenever he was up, he couldn't look down without feeling an existential terror broil through him. And he was also mortified of the comp police, because they were all out to get guys collecting checks and pulling side work for cash at the same time. If he went up there he'd try to keep his eyes up, but the whole time he'd be drawn to looking down, wondering which little sedan sputter belonged to an insurance adjuster, tipped off, out to get him.

Klinsman from work, for instance, was on comp for two full years after tumbling off a step-ladder while changing a lightbulb in a filing closet. Hank used to see him out mowing his lawn all the time. And painting his house. And then he fell off a ladder while he was brushing out some trim. The insurance company called bunk and old Klinsman actually got

taken to court for fraud. He went to jail for three months. Hank was suspicious of whether or not the fraud was the real reason Klinsman got sent in, but either way, when they had a beer after he got out, Klinsman said, “What’s three months? The air’s clearer in there. Best three months of my life.”

Dale, the little Chinaman from work, stopped by around noon the week before Hank was scheduled to go back. Hank told him to come in for soup, and even though Dale looked hesitant he went in anyway. Hank made him a grilled cheese sandwich with some leftover bread and heated up some soup from the cabinet. It was two years expired, but tomato, so what difference did it make? Hank didn’t dare touch it. He noticed there was a tremendous amount of sugar in it—which was probably the thing why Dale seemed to enjoy it so much.

Hank watched him eat. He said, “I’m still recovering for Christ’s sake. You know? Did Manny send you? I mean I’m still *recovering*, here.”

“Hey. A guy from work stops by and tries to cheer a guy up—”

“So Manny’s been talking about my *cheer* levels?”

Dale wasn’t a proper Chinaman. Second or third generation at best. But he still held it all about his eyes. He worked on his soup, a bit too enthusiastically, as far as Hank was concerned. “You don’t have to chew it,” said Hank. “For the love of God it’s soup.”

“It does have a bit of *body* to it.”

Hank looked at him in disgust. He didn’t like Dale. He didn’t like very many people. Although there were worse things than having some company around for a change. “So what do you want?” he said.

“You know, Hank.” Dale picked up a napkin and ran it all around his lips and the corners of his mouth. “You take as much time out here as you need, off work. Living the good life. All this soup and some yardwork here and there or whatever it is you’re up to. It doesn’t bother *me*.” He reached into his pants pocket and took out a wrinkled and folded-up piece of paper. “But I’m wondering how you’re... *feeling* about everything.”

“Well, Dale, I’ve been cooking and listening to a lot of records. And the idea’s been to get up and paint around the cupola, but I’m always thinking of these comp police ever since Klinsman.”

“You feel well enough taken care of?”

“Would I rather be working? Sure. Sure, I’d rather be working, Dale.”

Dale pushed the folded paper across the table. “Unions, Hank, have a history in this country,” he said. “A significant one. A deep one. Of establishing a real voice at work. A solid say-so in how things go, and contracts, and *protections*.” His speech was practiced. It wasn’t bad. But it wasn’t good enough to not seem practiced. “Comp is a good thing, Hank. But a union means we’re *together*,” and he clasped his hands together, “in our pursuit for a more just and prosperous tomorrow.”

“Dale, the thing about me is I’m what you might call the last of the anti-union liberals. My father came from a long line of hard-working, blue-collar types from whom little was expected and more importantly, little was given. And they carved out a good American living for themself—”

“That’s fine, Hank. That’s a *fine* thing. Even to the extent that I agree with you. But, you know, you got lucky with that accident of yours.”

“Dale, I got a staple pushed into my ass.”

“Well, what if Klinsman broke his back when he fell off that stepladder? There’s only so much luck, Hank. You know? Unions help for guys like us to feel like more than just *a number*. Or cog. Those sorts of things. Like we *mean* enough to have a say.”

Hank stretched his eyes around from the soup on the range to the cupboards, and to the top of the refrigerator where he kept the bread. It appeared to be molding over. “I’m not sure what all that means,” he said. “For me.”

“I’m a major proponent of a thing about combining ideas, Hank. This isn’t about me. It’s about how we put all our heads *together*.” Dale finished his soup and ate the last of his sandwich and sucked the butter off his fingertips. “It’s good soup,” he said. “Family recipe?”

Hank gazed down at his hands. “My mother’s,” he said, clenching his fingers into uncommitted fists. “At what point would you expect some kind of pledge?”

“We don’t expect anything, Hank. We’re asking a favor of you, to join us.”

Hank stood. “Well, Dale, you’re welcome by for soup whenever you like.”

“I *will* need an answer, though. Which is not to rush you. But these things take time. It managed somehow, *somehow* to slip through the cracks. I mean how do we not have a union? Have you ever though about that? I mean, spent *time* thinking about it? I mean, we’re powerless, Hank, without this thing. And the longer we stall, the longer we wait on contracts and improvements. The next time you get hurt—or me, or anybody else, God forbid those white suit low-levelers out on the floor—it’s gonna be more of the same: sitting around the house, counting the hours, watching the bank account shrink. Fudging by on these meager little comp checks. Or, jeez Hank, much worse.”

“You’ll hear from me, Dale.”

“Soon, I hope.” Dale got up and brushed off his pants. Enormous crumbs fell to the rug. Hank wondered how it was a man could leave behind such destruction. “For everybody’s sake. We’d hate for so-and-so down in whatever department to get his hand caught in some...meatslicer or something, and not have anything left to lean on because old Hank was up here sitting on his hands or yanking his bean.” He made for the door.

Meatslicer? thought Hank. “I’ve got all our interests in mind,” he said. “Don’t worry about me.” Hank led Dale out onto the porch. Together they looked at the softened leaves, breathed in the crisping autumnal air.

“I should tell you, briefly,” said Dale. “That there could be a little bit of *pushback*. Historically in these things it’s happened. I feel obliged to mention it.”

“Bricks and such through my living room window?”

“I don’t know about *that*. It’s maybe just something I ought to say. A technicality, even.”

Hank ground his teeth together and grimaced. “Is there a Deli at work?” he said. “I’ve been getting into cooking, and the sandwich might not be high art, but it is art, Dale, and I wouldn’t mind having a look at what this meatslicer can do.”

“How about a drink, Hank?”

Hank grimaced again. “It’s getting late, isn’t it?”

“It’s one o’clock.”

“What kind of drink are we talking, Dale? I mean you come over a guy’s house and now it’s ‘give me a drink.’?”

“Forget it.”

“No, no. Dale.” He raised a hand. “Dale, that was rude. Let’s get you a drink. I can whip you up something special. It’s something I’ve been working on.”

Hank poured a couple of bourbons over ice. He put lime wedges into them, and spooned on top a dollop of the persimmon sauce chilling in the fridge. He set a 78 to spin—*Miles At Newport, '58*. And on the porch the two of them sat wordless, listening, enjoying the drinks and the latening afternoon, the breeze that had swept itself in through the Columbia River Gorge.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever had a cocktail like this,” said Dale.

“You have, I’m sure.”

Dale took another sip.

“My mother used to fix one for when dad got home from work. He’d get a bit punchy without a quick drink. I just added to it some of my persimmon sauce. It’s from the neighbors’ tree.” He nodded at it.

“You made this?” said Dale. “The orange stuff?” He displayed a touch of disbelief, admiration even. But after his next sip, he seemed to extract and swallow the booze before spitting a small mouthful of the sauce back into the glass.

“Oh sure,” said Hank. “The two of them would beat the shit out of each other.” He sat on the railing, in front of and above Dale, looking down. He kept the drink to his lips. “I used to watch it. But, you know, they’d *each* get a few pops in. It wasn’t one of those abusive, bloodbath-type situations.”

The wind came through more brusquely and Dale went to pull his jacket closer to his shoulders before remembering he wasn’t wearing one.

“I’ll get you something,” said Hank. “Not a problem. There’s loads of clothes around I’ve got no use for.” He went inside and a few minutes later returned with a full armload of jackets and sweaters. “Something here’ll do the trick. I swear this city’s two entirely different places between the shade and the sun.”

“I guess just the same as any place.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Hank. “Lots of cities you don’t ever notice a thing.”

Dale shuffled through the garments. “I like this one,” he said. “Herringbone.” He put the jacket on and raised his arms to check the fit. It was too big. He looked like a child. But when he began to take it off Hank stopped him. “It suits you,” said Hank. “If you knew what was good for you, you wouldn’t move a muscle.” Dale froze. He put his hands by his side and stood there looking at his near-empty glass.

Hank said, “Can I top you off?”

Over the course of a few hours he got Dale fairly drunk. They listened to the Miles record three times over before Hank switched it to Mingus. “Mingus was a real musician’s player,” explained Hank. “All these new cats out of Berklee—Ask some kid in the Village what Miles played and you’re liable to get saxophone for an answer. It’s sort of... *despicable*.” He drained his glass. “You know the one about Charlie Parker? Used to call him Bird. Didn’t eat like no bird. Nigger owes me three cheeseburgers and a diet Coke.” The line didn’t exactly land. He grabbed Dale’s glass for a refill.

But Dale, who sat limp in the rocking chair as the glow of evening crept soft beneath the treetops, grabbed for Hank’s wrist, and missed, and said, “No more for me.”

“No no,” said Hank. “Please. My mother’d spin in her grave to see me treat a guest like that. Have a drink. It’s not a request.”

Dale looked up weakly, his eyes narrow and foggy inside his skull. "I mean it, Hank," he said, going through the words slowly so as not to be misunderstood. "I've had my last." He struggled to stand, caught himself on the front railing and steadied his weight. "Your bathroom, Hank," he said. He reached down and grabbed his crotch. "For Christ's sake. I hadn't realized until I stood, but Christ I've got to piss."

"We wouldn't want an accident, that's for sure."

"Hank," pleaded Dale. "Please."

Hank took him by the hand and led him inside. Dale's skin was damp paper in Hank's grasp. He delivered him to the bottom of the stairs and pointed up. "Second door on the left," he said. "Can't miss it." He put on *Sketches* before returning with the rest of the bottle to the porch to watch the last light go from the sky.

Next door the Persimmon tree hung still heavy and plump with fruit. The Nordics ate their supper. Hank watched them through their dining room window, a mere twenty feet away. They stared forlorn into their soups, reaching occasionally for chunks of bread, and less occasionally exchanging weak smiles. Hank watched too long. The woman, her brow creased, cheeks rouged, spied him between the blinds.

The door opened and Dale emerged, an enormous wet stain reaching from his groin to the tops of his boots. "The last door on the left?" he said. His eyes were crisscrossed, his starched white shirt up at the collar and half-untucked.

"Is that what I said?" Hank drank pensively from the bottle. "No, it's just off the kitchen." He drank again. "You need a pair of pants. And I hate to say it, Dale, but a man pissing himself... That's the kind of thing that ought to stop him getting behind the wheel." He reached his hand out, palm up. "Give me your keys."

“No,” said Dale. “Jesus. No, Hank. I’ll be okay. What is this?”

Hank looked next door. The Nordics had moved on to salad. He peered in more closely. Were they pears? From the other tree in the back? And frisee? He thought he spotted bleu cheese. For a moment, he imagined the flavors, incorporating certain others of his own design: shallot, lightly crisped; bacon; a poached egg, roasted walnuts. And he snapped his fingers and waved his hand, looking back at Dale, who stood there soaked, and said, “Gimme those keys, Dale. Dale, give me those keys. I can’t have it on my conscience.”

The next week, on his big day back, Hank kept mostly to himself. When he was on break, sipping coffee in the white room, and happened to see Dale, he only smiled politely. Here and there, when their eyes met down on the factory floor, Hank would make a fist for the union, but he’d always do it subtly, as though he and Dale were the only ones who knew.

Dale looked like a sex victim, the way he avoided eye contact with Hank—sheepish and quivering. Hank wasn’t completely sure what to make of it. He had fixed Dale dinner that night, a roast chicken, gold and glistening, the moistest breasts he had yet to achieve. A side of candied carrots, dusted over with crushed herbs and pecans. And he’d done the dishes and put Dale to bed. Hank even pushed the covers in around him and kissed him on the forehead. Dale had been sweating, and the taste that lingered afterwards on Hank’s lips was both irritating and, if he was being honest, delicious.

At 11:30 Manny came out over the factory floor and said for Hank to get into his office, pronto.

“On the double, boss.” The words sailed out of Hank’s throat. And in no time he was up the grated stairs, sitting across from Manny, a pleasantly attired Mexican man with an

intensely manicured goatee. Manny was sharpening pencils, and Hank took keen interest in the way he stacked them just *so* when he finished. Manny sharpened three of them, intermittently regarding Hank, and then positioned himself by the window. He looked out between the blinds, over the factory floor, flickering from amusement, to concern, to disgust.

“There’s been a grievance filed,” he said.

“I doubt that,” said Hank.

“Hank, the problem is there *has*.”

“Well then.” Hank smoothed his shirt and pants, readying to leave. “You’ve got yourself the wrong man.”

Manny fidgeted at the blinds. He opened and closed them by twisting the dowel. “There’s been talk of people organizing,” he said. “The mid-levelers, the lower-mid-levelers—you guys. And as your,” he paused, “supervisor, I’ve been directed to keep it from becoming a problem.”

Hank shrugged.

“What ends up happening is certain people get angry with certain other people, and then everything’s just a big fuckall. Nobody gets anything done and everybody’s walking around resenting one another. It doesn’t look real good on me or anybody else, Hank. You in particular. And Dale.”

“And why’s that?” Hank was leaning to take a closer look at the pencils. They glittered in the overhead light. He slipped briefly from the chair before regaining composure.

“Don’t touch my pencils, Hank.” He got up, shielded his desk. He slapped at Hank’s hand.

“Don’t touch my *hand*, boss.”

“Can you give me a few minutes here, Hank?”

Hank clasped his fingers. He tapped his thumbs together. “I’m not sure that would be a problem at all,” he said.

“Dale filed the grievance. Something about last week at your place. It’s got me a bit worried.”

“Well, I fed him some drinks and put him to bed. He’s got something of a,” he searched for words, “*fraught* relationship with alcohol, was my observation.”

“I wouldn’t know.” He rubbed clean his glasses. He was always messing with his glasses.

“There was that Christmas party last year? When he was curled up like a cat underneath the Christmas tree? Pawing at people’s ankles? I think he was calling himself slanty-Clause—I won’t touch that one. He’s a very interesting man, Cap. It’s been tough for me to really put a finger on him.”

“Why was he over your house, Hank?”

“Now wait a minute, Cap. How’s it you’ve come to know who I might or might not, simply, be *friends* with? I resent the accusation.”

“It wasn’t an accusation.”

“Might as well *have* been. And it might work to everyone’s benefit if the bosses didn’t go around here tossing allegations all willy nilly. It leaves a sour taste. And I don’t, for one, appreciate it, as much as, say, Dale might, since he’s a very fascinating guy and there’s no telling what he might or might not be all *about*. And I wouldn’t be surprised if he was into

some pretty wild stuff, judging by last week, and the way he pissed himself out on my porch.”

“*Pissed* himself?”

“He pissed himself. What kind of a man goes around doing that? Like I said, he’s got a very interesting relationship with the bottle, and I’m not sure it should be encouraged. And then I come into work, after some mind-numbing butt-recovery, and I’m taking care of my own damn business, and here he comes, here comes the big man, big Mexican Manny to start leveling serious accusations at me.”

Manny closed his eyes. He chewed his lip.

“I’ve gotta say,” continued Hank, “I can understand the compulsion for some of these mid-levelers, as you say, to start talking about what kinds of *rights* we have. You don’t paint somebody into a corner, Cap. It’s not *civil*. And it’s damn well not American. I’ve got about the sourest taste I ever felt in my mouth. And you can’t wash that out with just anything. It takes something strong to rinse that away. And after last week with pisspants down there, I haven’t got any of that strong stuff left. So here I’ve got a loaf of wet shit stuck in my mouth and it’s set up practically like concrete. I need a fucking jackhammer to get rid of it.”

Manny blinked. “*Mexican* Manny?”

“Have you been listening to me?”

“Look, Hank. This whole thing, what everybody’s all up in arms about—”

“Is it not accurate? The Mexican thing?”

Manny squared his pencils. He separated the stacks, the sharp from the dull. “You’re an observant man, Hank. Dale filed a complaint. The two of you, meeting outside work, these grumblings—”

“Rumblings.”

“Just cut it out. Or keep it quiet. Or at least not as... *loud*. People above me have eyes on this place.”

Hank glanced at the plaque on Manny’s wall: The name of the company, its logo—three hooded figures standing over a sailboat, a balloon rising above them—carved into a piece of mahogany. On the bottom: Manuel Martinez. Hank pointed at it. “How come we don’t have a union, Cap?”

“We’re not talking about that.”

“What if we were?”

“Look.” Manny swerved away. He looked at the plaque. “I’m being considered for something.”

“Oh,” said Hank. “Perfect. Fantastic. Good for you.”

“Hank.”

Hank pressed his pointer finger down on Manny’s desk. “That shit I was talking about earlier, boss? That sour shit? I think there’s a good chance—I mean a *real* good chance—it’s spurting out your mouth right now.”

In the morning, Hank was greeted by a raised window in the living room. Were a gun to his head he’d admit that from time to time he forgot to lock the windows, but what

he never did was forget to put them down—his porch wrapped around the first story of the house and to leave a window open was like an invitation.

He had come downstairs to a chill, the drapes billowing gently in the breeze. He inspected the window, thought for a few moments about how he might take prints (he'd seen something recently on a television program about how to use tape or glue. Or was it a teakettle?), but soon abandoned the idea, thinking the perps likely too smart to have left evidence anyway. He shut the window. And locked it. And got ready for work.

All day he eyed Manny up in his office. And Manny eyed him right back, between the blinds, in his Mexican way. And when Hank went to the white room for coffee Dale paraded him up against the lockers, spilling Hank's coffee all over the floor. He held Hank by the wrist. He hissed a horrible halitosis breath into Hank's face, which made Hank gag, and said, "What did you tell him?"

"Tell what who? You smell *badly*, Dale."

"My cat was missing this morning."

Hank shook his head. He rolled his eyes. "Your cat wasn't *missing*. Have you caught a whiff of yourself? It probably ran away."

Dale breathed into his palm and smelled it. "This is *new*."

"I hope so. I think I'd have noticed a tragedy floating out a man's mouth."

Dale pushed up against him. "Don't change the subject," he coughed.

Hank shrugged away and looked in the refrigerator. The quart container of persimmon sauce he'd brought in had already disappeared. "People don't seem to have any conception of what's whose in here," he said.

Dale narrowed his eyes.

“So your cat’s gone,” said Hank. “So what? They can’t cost that much. Go get a new one.”

Dale paced the room. He poured himself a Styrofoam cup full of coffee and drank it too fast. He gagged and spit. “Dammit,” he said.

“Might burn off some of that stink,” said Hank. “I had a friend used to take boiling water to an ivy rash? It worked remarkably well.” Hank poured himself more coffee. He looked out the blinds. The belts were running, the products passing through the machines. Levers were pulled, buttons pushed by scurrying white-suited figures. Everything was operating as cleanly and efficiently as it was made to. He glanced up and saw Manny’s black eyes peering out from behind his office window. “Manny’s up to something,” he said.

“That’s what I’m *saying*.”

“You *said* your cat was missing. And I don’t see how that’s any of my business in the first place.”

“Somebody *took* my cat, Hank.”

“I don’t know why you would think anybo—”

“Did anything strange happen to you last night?”

“No.” He thought for a moment. “I had a window open. But no. Why? *What?*”

“They’re threatening us, Hank.” He went to the blinds, sipped his coffee. Again too quickly. Again he gagged. “Dammit,” he said.

“Get a *grip*, Dale. You’re acting crazy.”

“I told you they’d come after us.”

“That was *very* much in passing. *Technical*, you called it.”

“I thought they’d try and hold a paycheck, maybe. But they *killed* something, you know? Or kidnapped at—”

“*Cat-napped*,” Hank corrected.

“They stole my cat, Hank.”

“Then why would you go tell the Mexican we met to discuss it?”

“You poisoned me! HR ought to—”

“Don’t get me started on HR. I went to college with a girl in HR. Now she’s a thief and a junky and she makes six-figures, so there’s the writing on *that* wall.”

Dale was doing some sort of deep diaphragmatic exercise. “Maybe this was a mistake.”

“Nobody’s even done anything.”

“I filed paperwork.”

“Under whose approval?”

“We had a majority.”

“Not my majority.”

“I signed your name.”

Hank swallowed coffee. “I’m sure that’s illegal.”

“I’m sure it is, too.”

“Should I sue you?”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t say.”

Hank loosened his collar. He thought about his missing sauce, and Manny, and this Chinaman standing in front of him. “I guess maybe I’m not furious about it,” he said. “I do feel cheated. It’s a cock-and-nuts thing to do. But maybe I don’t hate the whole idea.”

A scream next door, cold and shrill, and Hank's eyes were open. He stood on his bed and threw open the drapes to see if anything was amiss. Sure enough she was right there, across the driveway, kneeling on her own bed, looking at him. It was only two panes of glass and a handful of power lines between them. The Nordic woman pointed down, mouthing something, and Hank threw open his window. "Is everything okay?" he said. "Is your husband dead?" And when he squinted he could make out her words: "somebody's inside."

He looked down. The drapes waved out from the open window. And the trash cans were all collapsed underneath it, as though somebody had hoisted themselves and kicked the bins over with their final thrust through.

He made a show of widening his eyes when he returned her gaze. He wished he knew her name.

Downstairs he was pleased to find everything in its place. His television sat where it sat. His collection of records. The bread was properly arranged atop the fridge. But the window was indeed ajar. He looked through it at a brand new dent on the hood of his car. And as his eyes drifted further, he noticed the side mirror had been cracked off.

There was a knock on the door. It was the Nordic, white as a cotton ball. Her hair looked like she'd been electrocuted. "Who was it?" she said. "What did they get?"

Hank regarded her. He thought for a moment before saying, "Coffee?"

It was in the kitchen that they saw the note—a bunch of letters torn out of magazines—*CHEK URSELF. BEFORE YOU WRECK URSELF MOTHERFUKER!* Hank found it vaguely menacing, except for its lack of originality, and once he'd thought

about it a little longer, he began to laugh. While it was at least nominally related to the union business, it wasn't dissimilar from something a child might slap together during arts and crafts.

"Frieda," said the woman, finally, the two of them standing over the kitchen table, considering the note. She put a hand on his shoulder. "We've never properly met."

As he heard the sound of her voice—soft and generous—she seemed a full fifteen years younger.

"It's a real pleasure to finally meet you," said Hank. "You can call me Dale."

The next morning Hank was up in the cupola, on the inside looking out. He was wondering if he could get at the woodwork that way, by craning himself through the crank-open windows, when he heard the smash beneath him, inside the house. For just a moment, he looked up and down the street—imagining a foot chase, a car chase, running somebody down.

It was a brick, sitting in the middle of the living room, draped in a speckled dust of broken glass. He went down on his hands and knees to inspect. The fingerprinting wouldn't work here, either, particularly given the porous surface of the brick. They'd never be able to lift anything off that. He inspected the window, which had shattered and come completely apart from its framing. And he inspected the room as a whole. The glass was everywhere. Were he more neurotic or paranoid, he'd probably put shoes on and hire a cleaning crew—refuse to step foot in there again until they were done. But he was confident that with a good hour or two, the cleaning would be sufficient to once again walk around in socks.

Frieda's face appeared in the window's broken opening. She was on the porch, looking in at him. Hank lurched backwards.

"We heard the crash," she said. "I didn't mean to scare you." Her hair seemed somewhat less crazy this morning. "Norris was watching his tennis. J+B and tennis. It's what he does. He enjoys the colored girls. The sisters? He was a racist once. A real one. But with everything else, and then all these other things, all of a sudden you've got these colored girls playing tennis and it's like some switch got yanked."

"What kind of name is that?" said Hank. "Frieda. And Norris. I took you two for coming over from the old country."

"I used to keep him from the scotch. But at his age."

She sounded now fifteen *more* years younger than the day prior. He was staring at her. "Something Nordic," he said. "Am I right?"

"Oh, I'm American," she said. Hank wondered what, exactly, this meant. "And Norris is some mix of the British Isles. One day it's Welsh, the next it's Scottish. It depends on how sentimental he feels."

"Isle-ish," said Hank. He stood. "Should we breakfast?"

After letting her inside he pardoned himself to brush his teeth upstairs. He stared into the mirror as he brushed, watching keenly the mechanical movements of his arm, before pulling open the cabinet and looking around the shelves for something. He ended up with a handful of aspirin. And a Benadryl. And when he heard sizzling he went out in the hallway to listen. The old woman had started cooking. "I was gonna do that," he shouted, his mouth full of paste and brush and spit.

“We ought to report something,” she yelled back. “These things don’t happen in this neighborhood.”

He wondered: *Do they NOT?*

“I’m not really one for conflict,” he screamed back, spattering the mirror.

“It’s *somebody* who’s up to all this, Dale.”

ALL this? How many things was it?

He was lumbering back down the stairs. “There’s some union business going on at work,” he said. “This little fella, Dale—a little Chinaman, he said there might be threats.”

“You have a friend named Dale?”

“That’s unusual?”

“I haven’t heard anybody named Dale in ages, and now there are two of you.”

“That’s right,” said Hank. “My name *is* Dale.” He sat down at the plate of eggs she’d put on the table. “These look,” he struggled for words, “fine.”

“The key is not to season until after. Something about the salt and how it sucks out moisture.”

He bit. They weren’t much to look at, but the taste was superb. “Wait to season,” he echoed.

“What kind of work are you in, Dale?”

“Fabrics.”

“I don’t know much about fabrics.”

“We do the strong ones. The kind they make sails and hot air balloon covers out of. It’s canvas, kind of.”

“Norris got himself caught in a union fight back when we started going together. Some poor bastard got his necktie snagged inside a gearbox. Squeezed his brain out his ears.”

“Nothing like a martyr,” said Hank, his mouth full of eggs.

She sat down and took stock of the room. “You have a very clean house, Dale.”

“That’s a nice thing to say, Frieda, but at the moment there’s glass all over my living room floor.”

“It’s a quick thing to take care of. I actually wouldn’t mind doing it myself. You’ve got to get to work, I’m sure.”

Hank chewed thoughtfully. “I can be very particular about this kind of thing. I’m not really sure how *quick* it could be.”

“How ‘bout a bet?” She pushed her left hand toward him. “I’ll prove it.”

Because, he supposed, the worst that could happen was that he’d need to clean it again, he took her hand into his.

“Just take me to the vacuum store,” she said. “We’ll start fresh. New filter.”

There was a brief conversation about divisions of labor, how something so specialized as a vacuum store couldn’t possibly exist. But Hank, because he liked her, allowed Frieda to win out. He looked at his watch. “I guess you’ll save me enough time I can take you before I go to work.”

She insisted on sitting right beside him, in the middle, which wasn’t really a seat at all. Her legs were parted and every time he shifted into second or fourth his fist came dangerously close to her vagina. She let out a small gasp each time.

After four or five such maneuvers, Hank looked at her. He'd done his part, letting her have her way without protest on account of her age and his own sense of chivalry. But it didn't make any sense. "There's a seatbelt on the passenger side," he said. "If you just scoot."

"I feel safer here," she said.

"But it's *not* safe."

She put her hand on the gearshift. She flared her nostrils and raised her eyebrows. "You hit the clutch," she said. "Just tell me when."

Dale was lying face down on the concrete at his station. Hank spotted him almost as soon as he walked in the door. There was a foul odor about the place. The machinery was all turned off, and the lights were brighter than usual.

"Smashed window," said Dale. His lips were pressed against the glossy concrete. "What's next?"

"Had a window at my place, too."

Dale turned over and lay on his back. He pulled out his billfold and tossed and caught it until it landed squarely on his nose. He made a sour face. "That's the whole world," he said. "Right there. A big pile of cash gets closer and closer and then it punches you in the nose." He turned over and sat Indian style. "There's a leak. Manny came down and everything stopped. I smell gas. We all feel like we can all smell gas or something. Do you smell gas?"

"Could be. Could be something else."

"What's worse than gas?"

“Plenty of things are worse than gas, Dale.”

“You know with gas you barely smell it and then all of sudden you go crazy.” Dale turned back onto his belly. “Next thing you know your whole family’s dead.”

“There’s a Nordic lady cleaning the glass off my living room floor,” said Hank. “And I think maybe she’s trying to escape her husband.”

Dale scratched his ass, lightly at first, and then vigorously. “I don’t know the first thing about that, Hank. Nobody in the whole world cares about *me*.”

Manny emerged from his office. He looked down suspiciously, fidgeting with his tie. He breathed on his glasses. He rubbed them clean and adjusted his hair.

“Hey there, boss!” called Hank.

Manny, startled, dropped his glasses. They shattered against the concrete. He looked down, rubbing his eyes to see.

“What’s with the delay?” Hank had his fists on his hips, his legs parted. “People think they smell gas.”

“It wasn’t gas.”

“What was it?”

“Something caught.”

“What caught?”

“We got it covered up here,” he said. He pointed to a shiny new badge on his left breast pocket. Hank couldn’t read it, but he knew exactly what it said: Upper Management.

This time it was a whole bunch of smashed up fruit. Pears. Figs. The persimmons. One or more of everything the neighborhood had to offer, sitting outside the front door.

Hank's first thought: *These sugars and oils are gonna stain the paint job.* And the second: *Of all the things. The persimmon deserves better than this.*

Hank marched over to Frieda's and knocked on the door. She answered in a negligee and knee stockings. Her hair was sprung back out like a shattered moon. He shielded his eyes. "Christ," he said. "You look like you spent the night in the microwave."

"So what if I did?"

Hank collected himself, took a breath. He looked over her shoulder at Norris, who sat there, watching the television, chewing on something. "They've attacked your tree," said Hank.

"Which tree?"

"Which tree," he echoed, almost amused. He paced around the doorstep. "The *persimmon*, Frieda. They've gone after the *persimmon*. They picked a whole bunch of it and smashed it all up on my doorstep."

"I'm sorry for that." She reached for a robe hanging on the banister. "I hope it doesn't stain anything."

"It *might*."

Her eyes addressed him steadily.

"It deserves better," said Hank. "It's not some *commoner's* fruit."

Frieda stepped beside him. She stood at the edge of her porch, looking at the tree.

"I'm not sure I noticed it before."

"It's unassuming, I guess." Hank pulled a little jam jar from his pocket. He unscrewed the cap. "Taste this," he said, handing it to her and gesturing toward the old man.

"Both of you."

Just before dusk, Hank stood out front, glancing impatiently between the persimmon and the cupola. Perhaps now was the time to finally hoard the fruit. Cook and freeze the sauce. And maybe it was time, too, to tie a rope around his waist, dip down out through the window, and finally counter that old fear, finally get that thing painted.

From down there the wood around the cupola looked dark, soaked through with rain. The space was small, maybe only three feet tall, accessed through a crawlspace in the attic. He could barely kneel inside it. How far out would the windows go? And what kind of contortionism would it require of his feebling frame?

Next door, Frieda helped Norris down the steps, clutching him by the elbow. He looked atrophied—gaunt and wobbly in the new moonlight. He wore sunglasses half the size of his head. Frieda eyed Hank. “I wanted to bring him out to see the damage,” she said.

Norris tipped his head up. His hair was dirty, gone from the top of his skull but raked back almost to his shoulders from where it still sparsely crowned.

“I’m not a horticulturist,” said Hank. “But I admire your tree.”

“He can’t hear you,” said Frieda.

“Your tree is helping me to figure out some things!” yelled Hank. “It’s got me thinking how I’ve got get up to that cupola one of these days! Otherwise a wind’s gonna whip around and yank it off—drop it on somebody’s head! It’s just I’m scared shitless to do it!”

The old man surveyed the persimmon, passed his foot weakly through the mulch piling over the flowerbed. “You ever hear about this?” he said. A strand of hair fell into his mouth and he chewed it, his eyes going off some place else. Frieda punched him in the

shoulder. “Cut one open,” he said. “One of these fruits—these persimmons. It’ll tell you *exactly* how bad the winter’s gonna be.”

The next day Norris was dead. Not killed, exactly. But dead just the same. Somebody had thrown a tree branch through the window, and when Norris sat up, according to Frieda, he put a hand on his chest, frowned, and died. She said it was peaceful, which was difficult for Hank to understand, because was there a crueler change of scenery than death?

And the neighbor across the street—his dog was gone. There was a ransom note, made with the magazine clippings like the one from a few days before. It said *CUT it OuT* and it had a picture of scissors beneath it. Hank didn’t like this neighbor, everybody knew it. Hank would sometimes piss on his rosemary bush at night. The neighbor smoked clove cigarettes and drank Mount Gay Rum out on his porch. And he listened to Jimmy Cliff. He sang along to it, but he always sang the wrong words. Hank liked to think that when this guy was, maybe, preparing a pork loin for Easter, he’d come out for a sprig of rosemary, and it would be one that Hank had pissed on, and that the finished pork, which had been marinated in that rosemary, and wine and orange juice, mustard and red onions, tasted complex, delicious even, just to make the feeling all the more jarring when somebody went for a pee, and smelling it in there in the toilet bowl, realized that deep and perplexing flavor was urine.

Hank sat now beside this man, having invited him onto his porch for a pre-noon cocktail and some Dizzy Gillespie to soften the sting of the morning’s tragedies. Hank figured on Dark and Stormies as something of an ode to the jackass sitting next to him. And

as the man started to sob, Hank reached a hesitant palm towards his shoulder. “If it’s dead—and it probably is—they couldn’t have taken too long to do it,” he said. “They’re not good people. But they’re people, you know? They’re not animals.”

The man sipped his cocktail. And that’s when Hank saw he’d made it all wrong. The ginger beer was supposed to go in first so that the rum could drape itself around it. But this was no good. A muddled mess—no balance. He sipped and it was like one of those seasick candies drowned in molasses. “I’m really sorry,” said Hank.

“I know,” said the man. His lip was trembling.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

The man fidgeted. He put one leg under the other and then rearranged himself back to how he was before. He looked amused and then angry and then sad again.

Frieda was out by her car. It almost looked like she was winking at somebody, but it was more likely she was closing an eye to keep the tears off.

Hank nudged his neighbor. “You know them?” he said. “Frieda? Lost her husband this morning. Rough. A little worse than your deal.” And when Frieda drove by, on the way to the church, the funeral parlor, the morgue, whatever it was, he waved at her. He smiled. “It wouldn’t make sense for them to keep a dog alive,” he said. “What are they gonna do? Find a rescue family?”

At work Dale was nowhere to be found. Hank stood at his station for some time. The machinery was moving again. The smell was gone.

He went up to Manny’s.

“Where’s Dale?” he said.

“What am I the goddamn babysitter?”

“You’re the goddamn *boss*.”

“I don’t know where he is, Hank.” He was behind his computer, glasses fogging up, running one hand repeatedly over his greasy hair, and the other pecking at the keyboard. “If you can’t tell, I’ve got a bit on my plate.”

“I’m gonna ask you a serious question.”

“Hank.” He looked up from the computer. “I really don’t have time.”

“Is Dale dead?”

“Excuse me?”

“Did you kill him? Are they gonna kill him?”

“For the love of fuck, Hank. What—”

“I’ve got people smashing persimmons on my doorstep. I’ve got a *dead* man next door.”

Manny paused before turning to rest his hands atop his perfect pencils. His chin was newly shaven. He was sucking at his mustache with his lower lip. “Remind me what it is you do around here, Hank.”

“I do the same as everybody else.”

“And what is that?” Manny bunched up and held the pencils, end to end, with both hands.

Hank sat down. He reached without conviction for the pencils.

Manny pulled them back. “Have you ever been on a sailboat?” he said.

Hank stood up. He swiped at the pencils. He pressed himself against the desk. “I’ve done plenty of things,” he said.

But really, the things he'd done he could count on just one hand.

Dale was in the bathroom. Hank heard him coughing and went in. It was a distinct cough. Phlegmy and high pitched, punctuated by squeaky sneezes.

“How long have you been in here?” said Hank.

“What’s it to you?”

“It’s been two hours, I haven’t seen you.”

“You’re drunk.”

“They killed Norris.”

“They gave *me* cancer. I can feel it in my lungs and I think it’s stretched into my pancreas. I ate beets last night, but how red is shit supposed to be, even for that? I wouldn’t survive stomach cancer, Hank.”

“What did they do? Why do you say I’m drunk?”

Dale lit a cigarette. “We don’t belong here,” he said.

Hank smelled his underarms. He took the cigarette from Dale and stamped it out on the heel of his boot.

“What do we even do here, Hank?”

“Manny just asked me the same thing.”

Dale looked at Hank through the mirror. He ran the faucet and resumed his coughing. He splashed water on his face. “I’m gonna kill myself,” he said.

“Don’t.” Hank thought about saying something more, but stopped himself.

“Who’s Norris?”

“My friend’s husband. They have a persimmon tree.”

“Such an elegant fruit.”

“I know.”

“You say they *killed* him?”

“Inadvertently. Maybe. But still dead. And they kidnapped my neighbor’s dog.”

“What was the dog’s name?”

“I’m not sure.”

Dale looked at Hank. His face seemed about to sloop all the way off his skull. He said, “If I had the *first* idea how to name a dog, I would have gotten one ages ago.”

Hank was in the cupola, on his hands and knees, inspecting the damage. It was small up there and worse off than he wanted to admit. He looked out through the cakey window and that’s when he saw: the entire tree, gone. The persimmon. No hole. No freshly tilled soil. It was like it had vanished. And whoever had done it had filled it and covered the spot with mulch. They raked the whole thing early enough for it to dry, for it to look just like everything else. Hank stood abruptly and knocked his head almost entirely through the roof. It was only wet-rot plywood and shingles up there so it wasn’t hard to do, and because this would probably never happen again in all his life, he pushed himself the rest of the way through. From up there, in the sky, he could see everything. He looked down without the fear. Frieda was descending the porch stairs, looking at where the tree should have been.

“Ahoy!” cried Hank.

She looked up to find him. “What are you doing up there?”

Hank shook his head and pursed his lips. He raised his eyebrows high, as though some invisible force was out to get them. “Some invisible force,” he called, “seems out to get us.”

“How invisible can it be?” It took something close to a scream for her voice to carry. She looked feeble. Whatever colors had existed in her when they first met were wiped or wiping away.

“Well *I* haven’t seen anything,” said Hank.

“They’re gonna burn Norris into a pile of dust.”

“No!” yelled Hank. “God no! We’ll get him a plot of land and a burial. Jesus! I’ll help if it’s money’s a problem. We’ll do it the right way.”

“He took up enough space when he was still breathing.”

“That’s the saddest thing I ever heard.”

“I know it is,” she said.

“Frieda.” He could feel shards of wood poking into his neck. He wondered how precarious it would be pulling his skull back inside. But he felt okay out there, even with the ground so far beneath him. “My name’s not Dale.” He tried to hang his head in shame but his chin caught on a nail. “My name’s not Dale. It’s Henry. It’s Hank.”

She considered him a moment before turning for the door.

“Let me make you dinner.” The wood around his neck seemed as though it were tightening. “Let me make you breast of duck! Rendered so slowly the fat has left behind only a coating of crispy skin! Medium-rare, Frieda! Let me make you risotto! Gooey with Grana! And porcinis in butter and salt! And onions charred with greens and dressed with lemon!”

He had closed his eyes, envisioning the foods, and he was beginning to salivate. But when he looked to find her, she had already gone inside.

Dale wasn't at work. Hank looked everywhere. He smelled for errant cigarette smoke in the janitor's closets. Checked underneath the bathroom stalls for dangling feet.

Hank went to his station and did his work. He filled in the sheets, watched the monitors, made certain the levers and buttons were pulled and pushed, the machinery propelled along its merry march. On a break he stood in the white room and sipped coffee, staring vacant at the Ping Pong table. He had never played Ping Pong in the white room, had barely taken the time to notice the table was there. And now there was nobody to play with even if he wanted to.

He went to Manny's office. The door was open but the chair was empty. Hank took a deep whiff of the air, smelling for Manny, the vapor trail of graceless malaise he dragged about wherever he went.

He closed the door and looked through the blinds the same way he'd seen Manny do so many times before. It was an odd sensation. He did not feel power. Nor did he feel regret or injustice or intrigue. He felt only a perception of flight, hanging there above everybody else, alone, the unsettling feeling dawning on him that there were more people wondering from down there about what happened in this office, than there were people in this office wondering about what happened down there. And before him employees seemed to sprout like corn stalks. Men and women suited top to bottom in white. Booties and surgical masks; headsocks and the type of easily garbaged caps surgeons wear into the O.R. Only he noticed now, as though for the first time, their faces—their eyes. It was a bristling workplace—

pistons and silos, the frequent calming press of automatic shutting doors. And all these workers doing their work.

Hank's eyes came to rest on a single, unfilled station. It wasn't unusual to call in sick, but it was very unusual not to find a replacement—yet here he was, seeing it.

The work was being made up for. Nothing slowed. The belts rolled on. One might not have noticed anything if not for the gap between these white-suited workers.

Hank shuffled back to Manny's desk. He went through a stack of papers. He clicked the computer on. He pulled out and closed each of the drawers. He didn't know what he expected to find; it might have been second nature—due diligence, checking things off a list to cover himself in the event of some catastrophe. Or he might have been looking for something. He wasn't sure.

He emerged from the office and wrapped his fingers tightly around the blue railing. "Has anyone seen the Cap?" he called down. And when nobody looked up: "Has anybody seen Manny?" this time louder, a hoarse cinch around his voice. He looked down and felt a pit in his gut, a queasiness that caused him to wobble. But he steadied himself and stepped backwards, leaning against Manny's doorframe.

"You're looking a bit touched up there." Hank heard the voice come from beneath him, just a little ways off to the left, and when he looked down through the grates, he saw Dale.

Dale, at least, was accounted for.

He came right up beneath Hank and stood, his hands and forearms statuesque, thrust in the air like a beautiful Black preacher Hank had met when he was a kid. “You look about ready to lose your equilibrium,” he said. “Why don’t you come down here, Hank?”

Hank stepped back to the railing and the queasiness fully invaded him. He smelled the factory smell. The adhesives and grease and diesel. An acrid drool of melting plastic, like singed human hair, grasping the back of his throat.

“Who’s off today?” he said. He was pushing himself now against the doorframe, his eyes closed, his breathing shallow. With one hand he clutched feebly for something to steady himself, and with the other he pointed at where he best remembered the absent worker. “C-67 or something. When did they stop showing?”

“You’re safe up there, Hank. Breathe. You’ve got the railing and everything. I know it’s like everything’s gone to hell, but you’re not gonna fall unless you jump.”

It would have been something, Hank thought, to have had the courage he did the day before, calling out to Frieda from so high up, telling her his real name and what he wanted to cook for her. And he tried for a moment to picture that meal, to smell those smells. But up there everything was different.

Hank opened his eyes and looked at Dale. He knew there was a good chance he wasn’t thinking right. But he was wondering how it looked, how it smelled, when a head got pulled through a gearbox—how far the brains might have flown. And he was wondering, too, about martyrs, as he looked across the factory to the white room, where two women played ping pong in white suits and booties, their goggles pushed off, headsocks slid back, colorful hair let down and shining.

Smelts

It was Easter and the weather was caught between seasons. There was juniper smoke in the air, and a sprinkling of rain, but occasionally, when the sun baked and tunneled and rayed out through the clouds, you could mistake it for May, or even early June, so long as the gnarled and still-dead branches remained out of view. But when the clouds and the shadows filled back in, you flipped your collar up and cowered.

The man parked in the driveway and squinted out the window. The sun was up now and the glare was almost too much for him.

“I take the sunglasses when it rains,” he said, opening the door. “Never when I need them.” And he shut the door and pushed the lock button on his keyring before the woman had a chance to get out.

His mother was standing in the doorway with an apron on. She’d gotten heavy. She had always been round, but the weight now seemed to spill off, around her hips in particular.

“Ma,” said the man.

She mirrored his posture, ape-like at the shoulders, dangling her arms by her sides. “Ma,” she said. “Ma.” She had pizza dough in her hands and she was fidgeting with it, getting ready to give it a toss. They ate pizza on Easter. They put lamb on it.

The woman unlocked the car from the inside and the alarm went echoing through the neighborhood. She got out and came up behind the man, carrying a jug of wine under each arm.

“You don’t help your wife?” said the mother. “You leave her to the heavy things like that?”

“I think she can handle it.” He went past her, placing a hand on her shoulder as though he were positioning to brush off some dandruff. He clicked the button from inside his pocket and the siren turned off.

The woman hugged the mother limply. She held up the bottles of wine.

“Lambrusco?” said the mother.

“They say it’s different from how it used to be.”

“Who says that?”

“Your son.”

“What do I know?” shouted the man. He was inside the bathroom with the door not quite closed.

It was the man’s job to cook the smelts. They were hardly an Italian family but it was a thing they did. And the woman was going to put together some raw fish dish while the mother threw the pizzas on the grill in the back underneath the birch trees the father brought in many years ago—before taking off for what the mother now referred to as “unbarren landscapes”—and which looked wildly out of place amongst the other brambles of berries and two firs and red maple that lined the fence in the back. Some other people would, in all likelihood, show up; you’d never know who until they did—sometimes an uncle, or a cousin if they were in town. The mother had said, “It’s an open invite. It might just be us. It might end up fifty.” She said this every year. But the mother did have a monstrous appetite and so did the man, and each year she hoped that the woman would be eating for two, and so she always bought food for twenty and quit thinking about it. If fifty showed she’d say “you should’ve told me you were coming,” and if they said “you told us no

announcement necessary,” she’d say “make yourself a bowl of cereal. There’s plenty of Lambrusco.” Nobody would want that. She could make all the disparaging comments she liked; she was happy the Lambrusco was there. It was the trick to a good party, in her mind: Serve one thing nobody liked, that way there was always something left to offer when the good stuff was gone.

The man poured the smelts from their plastic bag into a colander. He rinsed them under the faucet, laid them on paper towel, and patted them dry. Next he put them in a basin of buttermilk and transferred them one by one to a bowl of flour. He plunked them around for a while, getting everything all mixed and mingled together, pushing the coating underneath the gills of the fish. The woman watched him from the sofa in front of the TV where the mother had told her to sit and have a drink. The mother wouldn’t have her drinking that Lambrusco so she’d made her a proper martini, put on the television and told the woman to do the honors, which meant putting in the movie, and because the mother and her ex-husband had a strange sense of humor about holidays, the movie was *The Third Man*. So the woman sat there, silhouetted by black and white postwar Vienna, sipping her martini, which was made dirtily, and she washed down each sip with an olive just to keep from choking the drink straight back up. On the coffee table sat the rockfish, on top of a plastic cutting board, along with an exceptionally sharp knife and all sorts of herbs, a shallot, a very unripe avocado, three limes, and a nectarine, with which to assemble a fish dish she intended to call crudo, even though she lacked the skill, speed, and knowledge to do very much at all in the kitchen. Ultimately it would lose its delicateness, tautening in citrus, and end up some sort of ceviche, which was elegant enough, but could be eaten with tortilla

chips, and even though tortilla chips were not the most sophisticated food, they were important staples of the Mexican diet, and she was already feeling somewhat drunk.

She made exceptionally thin slices with the exceptionally sharp knife and, tiring of the man, began paying more attention to the film. The mother and her ex-husband were great fans of both the cinema and the holidays, and because of this the mother had decorated the whole house with cuckoo clocks, which the woman, tiring of the existential dread brought on by the black and white television screen, noticed only just now. She looked at the clocks and finished her martini and looked expectantly at the man before returning to her exceptionally thin slices of fish.

The man regarded her before taking from beneath the island where he was flouring his smelts a bottle of peach schnapps, which the woman noticed before returning to the rockfish, and regarded as something of a personal assault because the one time the man hit her was following a strange scuffle with schnapps in which he and a friend endeavored to finish a gallon of it before the sun went down on a Sunday, and when he and the woman tried to make love that night he had called her the wrong name. On account of his slurring, she hadn't been sure of what he'd called her, but when she attempted to repeat the sound she'd heard, he struck her across the cheek and said "I ought to break your face with a hockey stick," before tumbling shamefully off the bed, where his head hit the floor and he immediately fell asleep. And while he slept, all the way into the next morning, she wondered if he would wake up at all, thinking that it might be a welcome respite if he did not.

Then again it was quite possible the man had not chosen the Schnapps as a subliminal threat, but rather as a very overt one, since the woman was drinking a large gin martini of his mother's design, and every time the woman drank gin she got awfully tight and

punchy with him—the last of which she had thrown an uppercut at his chin that knocked him into the toilet, and she laughed a laugh that he could still feel echoing inside his eardrums.

They were both glaring at each other with Orson Welles in the background and the weather wavering wildly still, from a sunny calm to a sloshing grey, when the mother came in through the sliding glass door with a tray full of pizzas and a sour look on her face and said, “No no no. Not this year.”

The man said, “Not now, Ma. I’m hungry.” He said, “I don’t do spiritual awakenings with a hunger in my gut.”

“Who said anything about spiritual?” said the mother.

The woman took a piece of fish, only recently doused in lime juice, from the bowl and choked it down like a bird, barely chewing, her eyes gazing at the unmoving ceiling fan. “This has not sat long enough,” she said. “It still tastes almost exactly like fish.”

“It’s gonna taste like fish,” said the man. “It’s *fish*.”

“Not like *this*, this fish,” said the woman. “It tastes like an asshole. Come to think of it, *dear*, it tastes like *your* asshole.”

“You would know,” said the man.

“I *would* know.”

“Well, there’s no amount of salt and lime is gonna fix a fish that tastes like a grown man’s asshole.”

The mother had been looking back and forth between them during this exchange, exasperated. She dropped the tray of pizza from shoulder-height onto the countertop and proceeded to open each of the cabinet doors and kitchen drawers before darting around the

kitchen and slamming each of them shut. “That’s life in the big city!” she screamed. This was a coping mechanism the man always suspected her of having learned in post-divorce court-ordered therapy. She took a wooden spoon from the last drawer before smashing it shut and beat on the marble countertops with it before turning to the 10-quart stainless steel pot that was sitting on a back burner of the range heating the oil for the man’s smelts. She screamed and screamed, beating the pot with the spoon, splashing hot oil all over the range, all over her clenched fists, her wrists and forearms, and a few drops up onto her cheeks and nose and face. She put the wooden spoon between her teeth and bit down on it. She growled.

The man and woman lunged at her, the man grabbing her from behind and the woman wrapping her arms around from the front, nestling the mother’s head between her breasts and extracting the wooden spoon from her mouth. “All right, Ma,” said the man. “What’s going on? What’s this about?”

The mother drew her head back from the woman’s chest and removed her son’s hands from her waist before turning to address him. “Me?” she said. She took a palm and held it upside the man’s left ear and pushed his head toward the pot. She said “ugh” and she said “urgh” and “ahh.” She said, “Do what you want.”

The man cooked the smelts and the woman threw away her crudo, or ceviche, whatever it had, over the course of its brief life, become, and the mother took a bottle of gin out to the back deck and stood there staring at the birch trees. The man ate half a pizza while he dipped and fried and removed and salted batch after batch of smelts. “Why don’t you consider some moules?” he said to the woman. “If you’re gonna go and toss off the asshole fish idea we need something to replace it.”

“You’re not impressing anyone,” she said.

“I’ll give you money. Just take it out of my wallet. In my pocket. My hands are a mess.”

“The last thing I want are my hands anywhere near that filthy asshole.”

He dropped another batch of smelts into the pot of hot oil. “Come on. Some moules and frites? And a good sauce? And a loaf of bread? Come on.” He went to her, but the woman had gone back to the movie. It was the famous scene and she was spellbound. He attempted to demonstrate a pleading face, which featured a sinking of his eyes and an earnestness to the shape of his eyebrows. He turned his nostrils slightly inward, faintly pursed his lips. She didn’t see any of it. “Come on,” he said again.

She snapped upright and turned to him. “Say mussels,” she said. “Speak fucking English.”

“Mussels?”

“Say it.”

He shrugged his shoulders and went back to his workstation with his caked and gluey hands. He looked confused.

He put his last batch of smelts into the oil and washed his hands thoroughly, watching his mother, who hadn’t moved since going out to the deck. The birches swayed uneasily in the wind. He had considered for years having them taken down for her. They seemed a hazard, both physically and because they were too similar to his father—speckled, skinny and white, all gawky and fraying off in the wind.

“Mom,” he called out. “Ma, I’m sorry. We’re both of us sorry, Ma.”

She was frozen.

“I’m not sorry,” said the woman. She was now face down on the couch, her head tangled in a pillow. She had paused the movie and put on a channel that played classical music.

“How about have a *bit* of respect and play this out the stereo speakers?” said the man.

She turned to him and stuck her tongue out. “I like it this way.”

He ate a smelt and put another dusting of salt over the top of his pile.

“Have a smelt,” he said to her. “Come have a drink and a smelt.” And he called out the door to his mother, “Ma, have a smelt, Ma. Come on, you two. These smelts are all crisp and salty! Come on let’s have this thing! Come on and have a drink! Come on and let’s all have some of these smelts and we’ll eat some pizzas.” His face kept arcing downwards as he said it. His voice was going up and his face was going down. And by the end of it his head was on the counter and he was hitting the countertop limply with his fists.

The doorbell rang. The movie was back on but the woman had flipped ahead and it was ending, and the weather had finally decided what to do and a violent gasp of sun choked through the skylight and sliding doors and into the kitchen. It was four o’clock, and everything was brightly, blindingly lit, and the cuckoos came out of their holes, signaling the hour. The mother went back to watch the clocks and to see the film’s conclusion, and the woman got up from the couch to answer the door. Neither of them stopped for a smelt. Neither of them said a word to each other. And neither of them looked at the man.

And when the woman opened the door she smiled and felt both glum and amused, and she said in a hesitant voice, “I didn’t think you’d come.”

Wherever You Prefer Yourself

You were looking forward to it. It had been scheduled for months. But your parents set a last-minute closing on some rental property they're calling "retirement" ("If it's not tomorrow, it's never. Can't tell you how sorry we are"—always these emails from your mother written in the first-person plural), your sister got suckered into a meeting in Red Hook she *can not* get out of, and your brother broke up with his girlfriend (he thought she was the *one* until she told him, puke dripping down the side of her mouth, that she rubbed one out to you. And she'd said it that way—indefinitely—like she'd done it many more times than once). So vacation looks like it's off. There's a seventy-two hour cancellation policy—the deposit won't be gotten back (your mom—even though it's her fault—is bitching something fierce about this)—so at the umpteenth moment, you play the part of hero, you swoop in and reply all: "First off, we need to get one of these family getaways to stick. Pretty soon we're gonna be like strangers. I'll be lonely as hell up there, I'm sure. But I don't think I can stand by and watch that deposit money go down the drain like that. So I'll take it. I'll go up." And without much effort (and presumably very little expense, unless your mother is gonna turn around and stick you with the bill (which is not unprecedented)) you've saved the fucking day.

It's Thursday night. The rental opens tomorrow at two (give or take an hour, according to the owner, depending on when the housekeeper is able to get in there and what sort of state the last renters left it in), so you busy yourself on the phone, alerting first a small number of potential romantic companions to this opportunity that has fallen on your lap

(and theirs?) for a weekend away, alone, in the woods and the snow, with a Jacuzzi, and nobody around for miles (even though the last time you went up to a place like this, advertised in much the same way, you can remember peering through the trees and seeing some type of movement, maybe a mile or so away; you could hear (though it might have been a trick of the imagination) bad music (boat-stuff like Buffett-stuff) coming from that direction. You were out there in the blackness smoking a little joint to get away from your miserable family, which at that moment, was firing on all its miserable cylinders). And next some old friends with the prospect of a blowout—an opportunity to take a bit of LSD like the old days, or go for one of those pot-fueled food benders (Maybe Travis has mushrooms? Word is he’s been micro-dosing acid), or even a chance to stop by the Guitar Center for some janky eight-track contraption, set up a whole bunch of microphones, and finally lay down that record which has now been waiting nearly fifteen years for its chance to taste the light of day.

A handful of people pick up. Some of them humor you. Others go a little further and actually ask how you’ve been. There are even a few not-so-bad conversations, aided by the rapidly dwindling supply of bourbon nested by your side, which you started on with rocks, sipping slowly (because you “remember what happens”), but have now taken to drinking neat, gulping at least a serving’s worth at a time.

In the end nobody takes you up on the offer. No women. No friends. No sex or music. But that’s okay, because you suspect that what you might really want is this day that’s been eluding you, where nobody’s around, or wanting or expecting anything out of you. And it’s the truth—the real God’s honest truth—that these days are so tough to come by because

you get in your own way by inviting company. So maybe in this scenario, company is exactly the thing you don't want.

There had been plenty of times up north, on vacation, that you'd lagged behind, woke up late, pondering breakfast or a drink, a morning soak, but because you were expected either to ski or join the family, midday, at the slope with sandwiches, it never quite felt like the day was yours. But today, up here, finally alone, it does. It is.

You pour for yourself a little drink. You put bread in the toaster, after which you struggle some with the internet connection (your intent was to put on the Mingus Pandora station (which you have perfected, and which you find perhaps the most charmed of companions, particularly now, with the snow staring down, giving real weight to all these needled branches)), but it turns out there *is* no internet connection because why would your mother have even asked? But it's fine—you'll use data (at your core it troubles you, hurts you, even, the littlest bit; but you're able to push that aside for the sake of the moment). The toast is approaching done, which is unfortunate because you have not yet begun to even cook the eggs, nor assemble the hash which you'd been dreaming about before you'd even ordered the pot roast at the restaurant on the way up north the night before—steak and potatoes and mushrooms and bell peppers had screamed at you from the menu, not only dinner, but breakfast! You'd put the leftovers in the fridge and passed out on the couch, practically drooling over that hash, all the weekend's glowing prospects and potential stretching wide and wondrous before you.

With the timing off, you desert the breakfast—but it’s a good thing! Better to maintain the notion of what you *could* accomplish than to flounder and settle for burnt-up second-rate mush. You take your drink, and connect your music to the speaker setup (graciously, generously easy), and you send the sound outdoors, above the Jacuzzi, which you then sink into, holding your drink, in the nude. Just as you begin to doze you acknowledge that yes, there is indeed a smile appearing on your face, and yes, you do indeed have an erection, which you may or may not attend to, and the snow, yes, has indeed begun to fall; and you, in this moment, naked inside hot moving water, a slow snow falling through pale-grey sky, have found something not dissimilar to peace.

An hour later and you’re a bit drunk. And your hands are raisins, not to mention your little dick, which was never attended to and would take an unreasonable amount of time to get hard now. But where on previous trips this drunk might have spun forth a moment of anxiety, tension—calm comfort meeting the ugly obligations of a coming day—here there is none. No sandwiches to make, no dinner to prepare, nobody to impress (or perhaps, more accurately: nobody to let down). And so you rise, draping yourself in a towel, thrilled by the sting of cold, and once inside, blanketed, find yourself a television channel promising all three of the Clooney *Ocean’s* films. You have yourself two of the little opiate pills you keep around for instances like these, and watch the movies, drifting in and out of sleep, in and out of four more drinks, feeling ever restful and rejuvenated, your mantra becoming: “I’m allowed,” which gets louder each time you repeat it.

The couch is unusually comfortable. It reminds you that the leather you've mistaken most of your life for leather has not, in fact, been leather, and is instead some type of composite material which neither stays cool in the heat nor stays warm in the cold. But this leather, this brown, weathered, wonderful leather you're lying on now, half-asleep, the drool seeping from your lips like a poked bag spilling gravy— it's the real deal.

Now that you're awake: finally, the hash. A second go at it. And another pill, chased with orange juice (for the vitamins) and a large glass of water, all downed outside, by the 'cooz, having put what's left of the leftovers on the skillet, and swinging the Mingus to Monk, and smoking the first cigarette since New Year's Eve. You reach out your arm, holding horizontal the backside of your hand to the sky. You watch the snow come to rest on your flesh, gauge the pace of its falling. It's now been nearly two months off the smokes. Clean and fairly healthy—minus this unrelenting burden of orbiting friends. But because you're alone, up here a smoke is just a smoke. And so on and so forth.

Your feet, when you look at them (How long have you been out here?) are blue. They'd have turned black—your feet, unnoticed, untended. And they'll sting on their journey back to normal.

The hash again has burned; the kitchen a ghastly mass of smoke you labor to push and thrust through the windows, aided by the ceiling fan, which wobbles as it turns. When the waving work is done, as the fan clears what remains, it occurs to you it might not be the worst idea to enjoy a smoke in the warmth of the house, now that it's already deflowered,

bruised. On the couch, in your hung-open robe, smoking, you open the first of the better-than-mediocre wines you bought at the state liquor store in New Hampshire before crossing the state line. Here's what your grandmother told you: Don't ever pay less than seven bucks for a bottle of wine; don't ever pay between fourteen and eighteen, or between twenty-two and thirty-four. And if you ever want to spend more than forty dollars on a bottle of wine, make sure somebody's done their due diligence beforehand.

That last part? Who knows.

For a moment you enjoy the wine, browsing through the rest of the case—you bought a whole case (why the hell not?) and this was the crown jewel (and why *not* start with it? You fucker.). It's good. It's what you and that One not so many years ago (maybe three? Or twelve?) used to call, (as though you had even the faintest idea of what you were talking about), "subtle," by which, of course, you meant, "barely tasteable." It was usually a Pinot Noir. You preferred the expensive ones, both of you; so you established, simultaneously, a taste for the finer things, and a taste for things that had no taste at all.

Gaze through the window above the sink at large swaths of snow: this suffocating panic of largeness, dancing languid and disappearing just as soon it comes to rest. Boil the water and scatter the salt. Scatter the salt and drop the bucatini. Make for yourself three thin-sliced cloves of garlic, and melt them into olive oil and red pepper flake and a generous pat of butter. Drink for yourself that wine.

Pull the pasta. Reserve the water. Drink the wine. And finish the noodles in the oil and butter and pepper and garlic, with the water reserved, abloom with silky starch. You've earned, now, another cigarette for all this hard work. Carve for yourself a moment out back, or wherever you prefer yourself. You may find your gaze drawn toward the steam of the 'cooz, the lull of silent wood, or gentle press of snow. Or is there something else you hear?

A click of glass?

Regardless there will be, inside, a warm and nourishing, and gut-fuckingly delicious meal.

Heap Grana over noodles and shovel into mouth. Drink. Drink again. Repeat until done. Look steady through this window which watches over these woods. Do you see that light?

When the food is done, the wine finished, and day over, stand up. Leave the dishes for later, or tomorrow, or the day after that. Pull another cigarette from the pack. When you can't find the lighter or the matches, torch it over the burner. Take your jacket, your boots. Leave your scarf and gloves—it won't take long—and march yourself towards the woods. You've confirmed nothing. There's been no confirmation But you seem to have seen *something*.

The night now has finally settled. The cold fills by way of wind the spaces carved by moon. A path surely will reveal itself. The snow will not stay so deep and thick for the whole of this walk, and if it does, the whole of this walk will not, at least, be so long, because this house cannot be so far away.

Has the light from someplace revealed its glow? Some strangely pitched valley of roof?

Have they a 'cooz of their own? Grown children. Aging adults. Sipping good bourbon from bathroom cups? The ones that disintegrate when you leave them full for too long.

A bottle of Coca-Cola. Two heads? Or one?

Do you feel that tingled zap? That fuzzy creep chasing mad after warmth? The cold works tricky and treacherous once this bitter burn has passed.

Which way is north?

The snow fills around the lining of your boots, kicks up and lands on your chin and chest and sags before melting inside your shirtfront.

This is not the sort of 'late' you meant when you told yourself you could sleep until whenever you wanted. The television is on and the fire in the wood-burning stove has done more than heat the house. Its latch-door is unshut. Pinchy little embers sparkle on the carpet, singeing, twisting their colors, orange to blue and yellow, black to white. But the sliding door, the one leading to the 'cooz, in a stunningly happy little accident, was left open, and has allowed the smoke to escape the house. You dash toward the embers, hoping to save the carpet. You're naked. You feel the sting of cold air up your ass. The clutch of smoke on your balls, rising to your chin and down your throat. You drop, plucking, brushing at the carpet, burning your fingers. Ten minutes, naked, crooked eyes, and the work is done, after a wet towel and some eco-friendly cleaning agent. What remains are two burns you're

able to cut out with scissors and brush away. A small success. Your penis drawn all the way inside. Your thighs goosepimpled. And finally the crackling inside your head—towards the front, in the right—which you suspect has been there all along (and so you thank your body still, in the face of all you’ve put it through, for prioritizing) but was either pushed aside or sleeping, waiting patient on you to account for its presence. And after a quick dip in the ‘cooz and a small snifter of wine to level things out, you decide your appetite for all things fire and destruction has been either satiated or extinguished, and you head to the mountain, or maybe just to town, to see what else there is to do something to.

Your senses are crossed-up enough to put histories to these faces. In town, for instance, at the gas station/general store/grocer is the girl from high school, with that laugh, still wearing too much make-up, but hair now straightened, highlighted, and shoulder length, with her husband, who fifteen years ago you played *America* covers with because they were easy. And their friend, the rosacea face with the fine hair and goose-down maroon vest—she’s here too.

They’re waxing over wine, buying cheese. And they’re doing it like it’s some type of thing, like they’re passing carefully through the Louvre. Extra-sharp Cabot like it’s something to seriously savor. Which is not to say it’s not. It is Vermont. Cow country. Cheese country, if not syrup country—but certainly not wine country.

And they buy meats. Fawning first over this *loaf* and then that, gauging with practiced hands the value or quality of a pate; a salumi, a salami. They end up, of course, with a simple summer sausage. They stare like it’s a Monet exhibit.

You just tinker around, feeling things, dragging your fingertips over syrup bottles shaped like maple leaves, sweatshirts with the Canadian flag, hybridized sweaters: red and white—lines and stars and leaves all over.

So of course you see her. You've ventured now into Newport to seek out the Poutine which was called by a Previous "the best and most authentic she'd found or eaten," and you're on your fourth biteful, noticing increasingly that these are not curds, but in fact a Single of American cheese, and that this is not gravy, but in fact a packet of something (because of the metallic taste, and the chewy herbs, and how the salt compensates for the absence of meat) mixed with water and cornstarch and/or flour, when your eyes recognize the unmistakable outline of her strange and lovely body—long hips, short shins; skinny calves and ankles. A waist that cannot support the breasts, which are not, in and of themselves, spectacularly large, but relative to her slender frame, work a small bit of magic. You quiver and harden somewhat, against your will—these are things you've trained yourself against. But they happen nonetheless.

And she says those same three words she almost always starts her sentences with:
"No, no, no."

It's not what you wanted. But you should take it. Take it. You're always wanting for almost exactly the thing that you could never hope to expect. But wasn't this coming from a mile away? Take it. And she's got on those dumb boots and the denim coveralls, and you can't tell if she's covered with grease or cow shit or mud, but you're just as charmed as ever, and you want to punch yourself in the face, or the dick, because this isn't the way you're supposed to respond.

So you do—you punch yourself in the dick. But it only makes the thing open up, get stronger and want harder (how did you not know this would happen?).

You gesture for her to come over with her food and she does. She sits. You gesture to eat and she eats. The day is not so old. You're craving for something, but as ever, you're not sure what, or if it exists at all. But then she grabs your knee and says, "Nice meeting you," which is when you remember who she really is, or in this case: isn't.

Outside the sun blazes its last over the wilted horizon, and you've got a long way back home, and you're a bit sizzled, so you reach and put your hand over hers, and it's just another minute before she's saying, and meaning it, that's it time for you to leave.

Don't eel out that dumb grin she's expecting. How many times was she putting her clothes on when you drew it back out, and down went the bra, and off came everything else? She's standing in front of you, pointing at the door. You ought to order a sandwich: to-go, with gravy, double-meat, bacon and melted cheese. A side of onion rings. Embrace that brief misery, fat and happy.

Don't invite her. Don't drive. You can't drive. Don't ask her. But how else would you get back? Release the e-brake. Push slowly the gas. Ease the clutch. It's supposed to be second-nature by now. A dangling gasoline gun. Cigarettes. Cheaper. But not by much.

The water tastes like blood at the Apres ski. Young women in sunglasses and big hair. And so many old men with women on their arms!

Tell them to run through the snow, as you did the night before. Tell them about the house through the woods, to do snow angels in their underwear before getting back in the tub.

The place is as bad as you expect when you wake up. Bottles and spent butts all over the place. Open windows, drapery and empty chip bags and food cartons casting about. You hear music and an engine. Outside the maid is in the driveway, leaning into the backseat of her car, collecting things. And here you are, all naked and stinking. That stiff dick completely insatiable this time of day.

Look at the maid. Does she look familiar? Maybe she's the one with the white sneakers and the black hair. The one who, even when she can't afford a haircut, gets one anyway? Maybe you could offer to help. Maybe there's no reason to get all panicky about what your body's wants to do.

So when she approaches—her arms hefting a bucket of sponges and brushes and solvents—open the door and reach through the gear, and no matter what she wants, hold onto her for as long as either of you can take it.

Debbie had gone to get coffee at the usual place, giving Malcolm a few moments to wake. Too fast to rise and he was wobbly, anxious. He didn't much like the new day roaring in too fast.

And now they were on the porch, the Saturday morning routine. She read and he sipped, a book lying open and idle by his side. He never was able to bring himself to read on Saturdays, which was perhaps due to his giddiness over a weekend's worth of relaxation, but was more likely due to the fact that he had never much cared for books. When was the last time he'd finished a book? When was the last time he'd started one? He stared at the birds, at the short shiny cars parked and parking along the street. The neighborhood had recently been flooded by money and commerce and young people who had, it seemed, figured a way to avoid work; and it was now, amongst other things, quite the destination for weekend breakfasts—biscuits smothered in six-thousand calories worth of sausage gravy; smoked salmon hash and hollandaise in plate-like bowls (or bowl-like plates?) that could fit a week's worth of winter stew. He remembered a line from a bald old boss who had a serious dependence on Natural Ice, Parliaments, and bad jokes: When it comes to the hollandaise, there's no plate like chrome.

For over a month now, after each rainfall, one of them—Malcolm or Deb—had said to the other: That's it till October; and they had been, each time, wrong. Though it was true that today the arc and angle of the sun seemed somehow more sincere. Malcolm had so far remained commentless. And so had she. But the day hadn't yet reached its full potential.

He fidgeted.

“*This* is why I can’t stand nature,” he said. He was listening to the irritable squawk of a bird. “It sounds like it’s *raping* itself.”

She seemed not to listen. Instead she continued to read her National Geographic. “Great White Sharks in Wood’s Hole,” she said. “Christ. That’s where I used to kayak.”

“I’d like to meet a shark,” he said. “Just once. Not today.”

“In here they describe a man as having a New England accent. This is what it’s come to,” she said. “A journalistic broadstroking. The great unpeeling of peculiarity.”

“I might have said, ‘New *English*,’” he said. “It’s snappier.”

“Or New *Britain*-ish,” she said.

He chuckled “Maybe New United Kingdom-ish.”

She reached over and squeezed his knee, doing that smile too scrunched up to be the real thing.

A couple passed by holding hands. A dog whimpered across the street—shut in its cage, perhaps, owners breakfasting on bloodies and benedicts. Even people from the neighborhood, really *from* the neighborhood, took advantage of these new joints. And why not? Who would deny themselves such quaint pleasures (so long as they could afford them)? And who could deny the benefit of a small batch of morning booze? Malcolm himself had to admit that an early cocktail could, on occasion, be of immense importance.

He listened to the dog and realized only now that what he had earlier perceived as the creaking of a tree, or loose swinging of a fence door, had indeed been that presumably crated dog all along. One sound becoming two. Two becoming one. And now he couldn’t help but fixate on it. Where before it had been somewhat peaceful and idyllic, now it was grating, almost insufferable.

“That goddamn dog needs to get over itself,” he said, rising. “I’m gonna teach it what’s what.” Of course he didn’t go teach it anything. Instead he went inside and made eggs for Debbie. They were omelets, but because he rolled them into cylinders instead of flopping them in half, in the more traditional (American) style, she had taken to calling them egg rolls. This infuriated him. He made his with olive oil, hers with butter, which tasted better. But his cholesterol marks had been not so good. At forty he was perhaps too young to worry. But he’d heard too many stories of the heart and its potentials for failure. Plus, he was far too young to die.

He laid the tightly wrapped eggs delicately on two clay plates, plates which he’d deliberately chipped to provide a *rustic* feel: enameled grey on the outside, an occasional chip of rich red clay—cakey and mystic, and to him somehow native—peeking out from within. “Let’s see that hash place do this,” he said. “French elegance. Old school.” He ran out back to the garden where he cut chives with which to sprinkle with as garnish over the plates, along with a dusting of finishing salt and a crack of fresh black pepper.

She delighted as he emerged, her eyebrows stretching up into her forehead. She was like this, always like this. He didn’t know what to make of it anymore. And they ate in silence.

Just now another couple came up the street, a little Aryan toddler waddling between, its hair draped over its shoulders. “Look at the bamboo,” said the man. There was something off about his voice. Malcolm couldn’t quite place it. “There’s quite the debate. Invasive, yes. But beautiful.”

The child fell. The woman nodded and smiled at it before helping it up. The child whimpered. The dog across the street whimpered. Malcolm whimpered.

“I love this neighborhood,” said the man.

The woman looked at him, brushed her hair back from her ear. “What’s that?” she said.

He said, “I like this neighborhood. I *love* this neighborhood.” He increased his volume. He was wearing New Balance sneakers. Jeans. A hooded sweatshirt. His hair was casually cut, but with deliberateness, longish on top and close-cropped around the ears. The child’s whimper grew into a tepid cry.

“Don’t, punkin,” said the woman. “You’re fine.”

Deb looked at them. She made a face, pouted, sweet on something, though Malcolm couldn’t be sure if it was the child or the family—if it was out of wanting or cheer or charm. “Is that what you’re after?” he said.

“How would I know?”

“Would you like them,” he made a stabbing motion with his hand, “for dinner?”

She laughed, cocking her head and tipping up her chin, perhaps noticing something in the sway of branches. And without another sound she got up and went after them.

What Malcolm hadn’t known until it was happening was that he was going to follow.

He chased with great loping strides after a galloping Deb. She was invigorated, new. Her hair spun through and between the passing winds. She became again the child Malcolm often thought of and was increasingly glad he’d never met. And when she caught up she wrapped her arm around the man’s shoulder and murmured something into his ear. Malcolm struggled to make out the words. What he thought he heard was: “Will you come to our house for dinner?” How strange, he thought, to be on a walk and have a woman, beautiful or otherwise, run up behind you and put her arm with great gusto and boldness and

cordiality around your body, and ask you to dinner. She was a real oddball. He watched her legs. He admired the shape of her shoulders. Back in college, they'd called her Bambi. A fledgling.

The four of them stopped. The man and woman, the little child, and Deb, wordless, glancing from the split sidewalk to the overgrowth draped across their heads and on through the uninterrupted sky. Malcolm caught up and extended his hand to the man, who took it, wordless, not altogether unthreatened by whatever strange thing had begun to unfold itself—

...but neither fearful, nor entirely unsure. They all looked at each other. Deb bent down to the child and took its face into her hands. "Aren't you something," she said.

"I'm Malcolm," said Malcolm. "You'll please pardon my wife. She's a bit of a, wow. She's a bit of a goddamn *thing*."

The man crossed his arms. The breeze blew through his hair and lifted his wife's skirt and she reached down to press it to her thighs and knees. "It's a lovely neighborhood," she said. She and the man looked awkwardly at one another before laughing the same way.

"Isn't it though?" Deb straightened and put her fists on her hips, striking a pose. "You'd think that would be enough." All she was missing was the sunglasses. Audrey Hepburn, thought Malcolm. One day, maybe, perhaps, it might, or could—

"Do you own?" asked the woman.

"Oh, no. Malcolm and I are far too loose with money. We can't save it. Though you'd need yourself a little money in order to spend it in the first place, right Malcolm?"

Malcolm rubbed his eyes with his palms. He imagined lush chocolate cake, cream cheese frosting like his mother used to smother over banana bread when he was very young. “You do,” he said.

The cherry trees and bamboo shoots bristled and shimmered and waved in the wind. “Thank God for this wind,” said the woman. She put a hand to her chest, expressing, it seemed, just how very much she was thanking God.

“That was my mother’s name,” said Deb.

The woman, lady-like, covered her mouth a moment before saying, “Pardon? My mother’s name?”

“No word of a lie,” said Deb. “I was Debbie for the first part of my life and then at a point it changed to Deb. You’ve got to do away with the cutesie, childish flourishes at a point, I guess.”

“I managed, in a way.”

“High school,” said Deb.

“*Middle* school,” said Annie.

They smiled at one another.

“So it’s Annie, then,” said Deb. “It suits you.”

Annie’s eyes darted and crossed.

The men looked at each other. Malcolm extended his hand. “I’m Malcolm,” he said.

“Sometimes he gets stuck,” said Deb. “I’m sorry. We don’t know what it is.” She looked at him earnestly, but in the pit of each eye there was a kind of ember.

The man ignored her. It seemed the right thing to do. “I’m Ernesto.” It was the first time Malcolm heard the man’s voice close-up. There was a sourness to it, a skinny but—was it flat?—Italian accent, well-hewn, broken-in, and exercised. He was, thought Malcolm, an American now, but one of those Americans who would never quite be American. Ernesto shook Malcolm’s hand again, and then Deb’s, and put his palm around his wife’s shoulder. He nodded and began to pull her gently away, but then froze. So Malcolm shook Deb’s hand. And he shook Annie’s hand. And of course he shook his own hand and—

“Christ,” said Ernesto. He turned with what Malcolm interpreted as a rather Italian flourish and thrust his hands into his, *wow!*, wildly beautiful hair, where they stuck like chopsticks. His eyes bulged. “Micah!”

The child was gone. Who could say for how long? Deb had put its face into her hands. She’d held it. And how long ago was that?

“Who’s this Micah?” said Malcolm.

“He is-a our son,” said Ernesto. The accent now was more pronounced. And it was glorious the way he said it— this melodious bounce. And so Malcolm was falling, who knows, in love with this man’s voice?

“Say his name again,” said Malcolm. “My God! What a great thrill to hear you say it!”

“Good God!” said Deb.” She shivered. She shook. “Come inside and let’s all of us rinse ourselves of this horror!” It was really too much.

Annie darted up the street, zig-zagging in front of and behind parked cars, bending to look under them, shouting her son’s name. But for Malcolm, and for Deb, it was just: can’t this man, this guy, this Italian goon keep talking? Because his voice, I mean, it’s *doing* it for us.

Once Annie had found the child in the neighbor's backyard, tinkering with a swingset, a drooling basset hound circling its feet, she spoke with Ernesto. The conversation was animated. In truth it very much delivered on Malcolm's expectations, considering what he'd heard and seen and learned about foreigners. At one point he was fairly certain he heard Ernesto say, "They are-a very strange." Malcolm looked down at himself, brushed his shoulders off, sucked in his gut. Was it true? He looked at Debbie, back on the porch, waiting. Why was Malcolm still in the middle of the road?

Together Annie and Ernesto decided to decline Deb and Malcolm's invitation. "I'll be honest," said Annie. She shook her head in that damned-if-you-do way. "It sounds nice but we've got a real *day* ahead of us." And they turned to go, disallowing Deb the opportunity to protest.

Across the street, the dog again whimpered. An elderly woman stabbed up the sidewalk with a kitten on a leash. And the Aryan child dragged his feet, tethered at the waist to his mother by a leash-like contraption of his own. Malcolm followed their shapes, curious how it might feel to be walked.

And they were there, Ernesto and Annie, looking at Malcolm, all of them in the middle of the street. The boy was untethered, by Ernesto's side. Deb had gone inside it seemed. The chill again was seeping down? Annie reached toward Malcolm like she was doing that grandfatherly thing where they make like they're stealing your nose.

And then Malcolm was back in the world. "We'll have drinks," he said.

"Not today," said Ernesto. "Not this early, Mr. Malcolm."

“Say señor,” said Malcolm “I’d like for you to say: señor Malcolm. Could you do that?”

“No drinks on a Saturday,” Annie cut in. “Saturday is the day for rest.”

“Jews then,” said Malcolm.

“Not very good Jews,” said Annie. “But a day of rest is a good thing. Saturdays, in our youth, had a tendency to get a little wild.”

Ernesto smiled at her. He winked. She winked back.

“Ernesto,” said Malcolm. “Ernesto.” He repeated it again and again. “Am I wrong to think that there is something exceedingly musical about the name? The way it sounds?” He looked at his wife, who was there. And yes, they were inside. And yes, Malcolm was on the loveseat, the shades behind him drawn but unsuccessful in blocking out the steady midday glow. And yes, their three new companions were standing awkwardly, seats having gone somehow rudely unoffered. Deb was fixing a round of Manhattans at the bar in the dining room, ignoring him. He spied her through the doorway pouring the Canadian Club. His father years ago, delivering one of his lessons to Deb, had insisted it was the superior cocktail whisky. It had been Thanksgiving. Malcolm had finally brought her home and his parents had fallen almost immediately in love, and they stayed in love, even after finding her asleep, naked, splayed across the kitchen floor that night, covered in nubbins of ham and caked in the crispy ends of a baked ziti. Or maybe it was Christmas, thought Malcolm. Or the fourth of July? But who? or how? And could it even snow this time of year? And what type of dishes are ham and ziti for the summer months?

Ernesto spotted Deb pouring the drinks. “Not for me,” said Ernesto. “None for me, thanks. Not today.”

“You’ll have one,” said Deb. She came in with a tray, struggling with her chronic clumsiness. “Just the one won’t hurt. I won’t take no for an answer.”

“He doesn’t drink, hunny,” said Malcolm. “For the love of God, is there nothing deserving of respect? A man’s sobriety is on the line for Christ’s sake.”

Ernesto took the cocktail and placed it on the sidetable. “Mr. Malcolm, I appreciate a-very much your concern. I’ll nurse it. What’s the sense in being rude to your lovely wife?”

Deb gave Malcolm a look.

“Well, the least we can all goddamn do is be civilized and use a goddamn coaster,” said Malcolm. He smiled and stood and moved Ernest’s glass from the wood, where it seems already to have sweat and damaged the finish.

“Apologies,” said Ernesto.

“Mmmm,” said Malcolm, “mmmmhmmm.” He was rubbing the wood with his shirt cuff stretched up over his thumb. “Hey, we replace them weekly. You know, we replace them almost every week. Nearly almost every week they’re in need of replacement.”

Deb took Annie by the forearm and led her out back, where they walked the yard inspecting nettles and brambles of blackberry and the neatly arranged pile of fragrant juniper.

Annie: “The juniper’s scent reminds me of an adolescent’s body odor.”

Deb: *Laughter* (sexual in nature.)

Ernesto, *frazzled*:

Ernesto, *looking around*:

Ernesto, *bug-eyed*: “I’ve lost Charlie again!”

“Come come,” said Malcolm. “We’ve put him in the room. He’s fine inside of it. Only there’s nothing could possibly hurt him there.” Although, he thought, who in hell is Charlie?

Ernesto looked at him, puzzled.

“Another drink while the ladies are out back?” Malcolm said, shrinking his voice.

“What’s the room?” said Ernesto.

Malcolm could hear the women laughing in the backyard. The living room where he and Ernesto sat was becoming warm, as it always did in the afternoons once the weather had turned. It held the cool of night until the sun achieved a certain height and sneaked itself between the curtains and through the windows and began to bake the house by way of convection. Malcolm turned on the ceiling fan, opened a window to invite the cross breeze that ran endlessly through their city. He feigned exhaustion to Ernesto, tugged at his collar and slooped his tongue from his mouth, as though turning on a fan, absent such expressive displays, might have been insane.

“What eez thees room, Malcolm?” Ernesto was growing somewhat impatient. his accent... He had apparently gone to the bar and taken the bottle of Canadian Club. It sat between his feet. He pinched its cap between his thumb and forefinger.

Malcolm scratched his chin—his double chin!—and cocked his head. “It’s where we keep the cats,” he said.

The women’s arms were draped around each other when they came in. And Malcolm stood. “I won’t have lovemaking under this roof. Or even adjacently outside of it,” he said. “And there won’t be drug-taking, regardless of the therapeutic or homeopathic qualities, even if you’re finding it just out in the backyard.” He remembered nettles and nettle-tea and

his throat closing up. Some old naked hippy offering him honey. His throat closing further. “As for you,” he said, directing his gaze at Ernesto and waving his finger around like a choir conductor, “I didn’t even notice you take the bottle. I must have missed something while I was creating for us this breeze. So I now find myself adrift. And these things that are happening are happening just the same.”

Ernesto fingered the bottle, offered a weak (conciliatory?), somewhat offensive smile.

“Your wife is back inside,” said Malcolm. “Maybe you’d consider concealing the bottle.”

“Concealing *what?*” Annie was standing right beside them.

“She doesn’t care,” said Ernesto. “She is not the one with the anxiety and long family history of depression.” Malcolm noted that his voice had uncapsized itself, seemed to have found its rudder and rigging.

“That’s a relief,” said Malcolm. He took a long sip of his Manhattan and chased it with a smaller sip of the lemonade, which he then chased with just the smallest sip of the Manhattan. He tipped his head back and gurgled to clear his throat and relieve his sinuses.

“Another round?” Deb poked her head in from the kitchen. She was sniffing her fingers, wondering when she had last cooked with fish sauce, and to which/what end... Her eyes were tucked half way back in her head.

“Where’s Micah?” said Annie.

“Where *is* Charlie?” said Debbie.

“He’s in the room,” said Ernesto.

“What’s the *room?*” said Malcolm. “Who’s Micah?”

Deb raised a hand, shaking her head, the picture of calm. “Charlie. Charlie? Charlie. He’ll be fine in the room. Nothing to worry about up there.”

Annie sat next to her husband. She relieved the whole of her lungs in one sharp exhalation and put her arm around him.

“Your husband has a drinking problem,” said Malcolm, a glint of pride flashing over his cheeks, shimmering through his mustache hairs. How long had he worn this moustache? It was seconds, only. No.

“Him?” she said. “He? Ernesto? Him’s neither me nor my husband.” She took from Ernesto the bottle and put it on the carpet between her feet. Outside the sun was failing, or rather fading, or rather weakening against the impension of the clouds from the north and the east. It was not night, but apart from the clock, which Malcolm addressed with compulsive confusion, one might not have been able to tell—a child, or else an animal who had just woken from a long and/or drug-induced sleep.

“You had me fooled!” cried Deb from the kitchen. She was rifling through a stack of vinyl records next to the stereo in the dining room. “Aha!” Malcolm heard her squeal, triumphant. She waltzed into the living room and held the record up above her head with her right arm, a Revolutionary on a hill, thrusting sword, draped, bloody, silhouette of sun. “When’s it you all last heard this motherfucker?” Only who was it she was talking about in the first place? She flung it like a Frisbee at Malcolm’s head. It passed over him as he ducked and crashed through the window.

“Where is Charlie?” said Annie. Her body sunk into itself. It twirled—or something. “What is it? Ernesto. Who is this kid?”

“He’s in the room,” said Ernesto.

“The Room!” They all said it in unison, Annie included (?). And they laughed. They laughed for a full two minutes.

“Ernesto is not even Charlie’s child,” said Annie. “I barely know him.”

“Charlie? You barely know who?” said Deb.

“Whom,” said Ernesto.

“Barely know whom?” said Deb. “Micah?”

“I believe I meant Ernesto initially. But now, interstitially, it’s tough to tell,” said Annie.

Malcolm excused himself to the kitchen. There were thoughts. Some of them: Did Deb have some idea? There was a plan (!) He began sharpening knives. Meats? What was in the fridge? He sharpened the nivs, the knives (?)... fastidiously, with military-like discipline. He was proud. He ran the blades perpendicular over his thumbnails, shaving off only just the narrowest layer of keratin. These were some sharp blades! He blew with his mouth the shards away, as though pencil shavings—proud, proper, precise, precision. Precisment!

He emerged with them, one in each of his hands, and another between his teeth: a cleaver and two chef knives. “I’m ready to cook!” he announced. It was only as loudly as he good, given the kniff stuck in his mouth, his tongue all smashed up against it. He realized he’d put it in the wrong way, blade towards the back of his throat and he felt the warm iron taste trickle down inside of him and outside of him, dribbling down his chin, slowly at first, no more than a slight drip, a really only moderately leaky faucet. “What’s for dinner?” he said. “What’s the Plan? Where’s Charlie?!” The stream grew, and so too his gargly crimson mouthbrook turned a waterfalling gush before he took the knifff from between his teeth. He spat blood. He smiled and it was run up around his teeth and collected at his gums, stuck all

A doctor?—Malcolm—A dentist?

D

o you stop a wound?

/ do you tr y?

Barely afloat,

I'm still Here

Me and Barb went out to Big Sky a month or so back. She wasn't happy, and I guess the time had come to either figure it out or put the whole thing to rest between us. We did the skiing and snowshoeing, the whole thing. We got good and drunk and we ate well. Beef and elk Steaks, buffalo Steaks. But none of it worked.

She looks at me now in the basement, by the washer machine, angling her face in that way. Her father is upstairs, asleep. I can hear his croaks come through the floorboards. Outside the rain is pounding.

"I'm up to here with him too, Skip," she says, putting her hand over her head and trying to whisper. "But it's almost done. I swear to you."

"The gutters are leaking," I say. "A gutter fell on Beckman's head last year. He forgot the first twenty-seven years of his life."

The roof is on its way out. There are bugs chewing apart the walls and the foundation needs fixing. You don't hear much about whole houses coming down. But it happens. And they all say there's an earthquake coming.

"You could *do* something," she says. "You could cook him dinner or *something*."

At first she said she needed him here to *remove* herself from me. That was how she said it. She said she'd made up her mind. Bill was supposed to be here a week, boxing and helping her find a new place. I could barely handle it to start with, but then it was two weeks, and then three. And now, here, it's the third day in addition to all that.

“I could *do* something?” I say. “I’m not *bored*, Barb. If the man wants to eat, tell him to eat. We *got* eggs.” I listen to the rain and pretend to fuss with the washer. “He’s *your* father. Barb, he’s *your* dad and *you* asked for him, so I’m not so sure you get to be the one who’s fed up.”

She’s wearing her teal jump suit—on her way to spin or something over at the Y. She tried to get me to the gym after the kid next door ran me over with his bike, but two step classes and that was it for me. She looks good, though. A set of nineteen year-old twins with her ex, and she still looks good.

She twirls the drawstring of her pants. “Skip,” she says. “Can’t we do this without getting all crazy with each other?”

The Clam-man Kristoff is two weeks late on rent. He’s in the old house, the first one me and Barb owned together. And after she takes off I go check if I need to shake him down. Barb was never much for this shake down talk—she said it made me sound like a thug. But I never did anything. It was always just something I said.

Kristoff was supposed to go to the NHL but his thigh got skated over during a Thanksgiving friendly in Albany. He said it didn’t hit the artery or any nerves, but Louganis happened the year before and everybody just stood around watching. When he came to he could hear the highway through an open window. His eyes were caked shut with blood, and he started pulling them apart with his fingers. One time I told him it sounded like maybe there was an artery hit after all, and he just said, “Well, Skip, I’m still here.”

They patched him up and he recovered all right, but he was through with hockey—couldn’t get that fear of what might have happened out of his head. It took him awhile, but

he ended up with this clam gig north of Boston and it was a good fit. I've seen him get all misty-eyed about it, how in New England the clam-men head out early in the morning, swirling and plugging these steel-toothed baskets, deep down—forty, fifty feet, sometimes more, on the ends of aluminum poles. You can see their cheeks and jaws tick, their eyes going back inside their heads, combing these hard metal fingers through silt and rocks and muck, feeling for the edge of a clam. They do all right by themselves, Kristoff says. Kristoff says he did just fine. But it's long hours. And cold. And you need to really haul. The pay's nothing without a haul. It's not like some prize fish. You've really got to fill the buckets.

But now he's out here in Oregon, trying to connect with some daughter he only learned about a couple years ago. He can't hold a job. He's having trouble keeping it together.

The Clam-man's huddled around a fire beneath the carport, sipping a beer. He raises a hand. Chews his mustache. A swatch of unshaved hairs stretches from beneath the right side of his jaw to his chin. It's always there. He's blind in the right eye after getting snapped in the temple with a puck. Though it always seems to me if he's gonna blame the shaving on the blindness, it ought to be the other side of the face.

“Hey there, Skip,” he says. He flips me a beer.

“How we doin?” I say.

“Well, I'm supposed to be gettin after somethin out here, but I can't hardly half-remember *anything* anymore.”

“Can't have you with a fire under the carport, though, Kristoff.”

“Is that the truth?”

I nod at him. The rain comes down thick on the roof.

His eyes widen. “Yup.” He points at me. “I know why you’re here. What’s it, the fifth today?”

“Well, right now it’s the twelfth, Kristoff.”

“Is that *right*?”

“More’n a week past.”

The Clam-man pulls down his fly. He turns his back and relieves himself over the fire. “Josie’s over at her mom’s,” he says. “I think. The schedule gets me all mixed up. The two of them do all sorts of things. I can’t even keep up with it.”

I click open the beer.

“They go to the movies and those types of things. I’m not sure how I’m supposed to keep up with all of it.” He shakes himself and zips back up his fly. He turns to me. “Hey Skip, I can’t well enough have a fire right out in the middle of a rain storm. I need the cover, you know?”

“We might just have to skip the fire then, Clam-man.”

He bends in close to the flames.

“Wasn’t near enough piss to put it out,” I say.

“Don’t I know it.”

I sip. “Either way, I’m gonna need that rent.”

“That’s the truth.”

There’s a pile of lumber sitting in the back, under a green tarp. I point at it. “This what we talked about?”

“The kid’s ramp,” he says. “Pine, though. I can’t figure who’d use pine on something’s gotta support a seventeen year-old in a wheelchair.”

“Shoulda gone with cedar.”

“I *woulda* gone with cedar, Skip. But it all comes down through the state with the kid—the disability and everything.”

I put a hand in my pocket. Pull it out. “You know you’re late almost every month here, Kristoff.”

“I know it.”

I look again at all the lumber sitting under the tarp. “I take it, right now, this ramp’s the priority.”

“You think the pine’ll even stand up to it? I’ve got half a head to send it back and figure the difference out of pocket somehow.” He pulls his upper lip down by the whiskers.

I finish the beer and crumple the can, toss it by Kristoff’s feet. “I don’t know, Clamman. I’ve got maybe a dozen of you all to deal with. And my wife wants out. And it’s my *father-in-law*’s gonna give me the heart attack.”

Barb’s car is gone when I get home. The street is nearly empty. Bill sits in the living room on the sofa. His legs are kicked up on the coffee table, a thick glass of brown liquor resting on his belly. The rain’s let up and he’s opened the shades to draw in whatever pallid light splits through the clouds.

“Having a bit of a day,” I say.

He turns on the television. “Fuck else is there?”

“Where’s Barb?”

He flips the channels around. “I’m gonna watch some golf, Skip. It’s the Masters.”

“It’s not the Masters.”

He turns slow and stiff in his seat and looks at me.

“Bill,” I say. “It’s *not* Master’s weekend.”

He pivots back to the television and keeps flipping. He finds a basketball game, gulps from his glass.

“Hey, maybe you go up and fix the gutter in the back.” I say. “Pull a little weight. Keep everything even between everybody.”

“I don’t know, Skip. I heard about your buddy Beckman.”

“Could be a win-win for me in that case.”

“It’s *your* gutter, Skip.” He finishes his drink, eyes fixed still on the TV.

“I’m gonna make some dinner for us,” I say. “It’s not gonna be much, but—”

He laughs quietly. “Okay, Skip.”

“I think there’s a pork shoulder. It’ll need to cook down awhile.”

In the kitchen I open the fridge and consider my options. There’s the shoulder. A few onions. A bottle of Dr. Pepper.

“I maybe’ve got some folks coming by tonight,” says Bill.

“Who’s that?” I look up at him through the doorway, over the refrigerator door.

He sits stick-straight, watching the television. Long tendons jut out from his neck. He holds his underbitten jaw taut. “A few old friends from when we used to live around the block.”

A stream of water, loosed from the gutter in the back, splashes into the kitchen window. A muddy streak of leafstem and silt. “You have whoever you like,” I say. I go to the sink and angle my head to get a look at the gutter. It’s split at the joiner and spewing. The whole thing’s probably filled to the brim. I take a broom from the closet and poke at the

gutter from the landing in the back. It's stiff and heavy. The metal hangers creak with weight.

Inside I watch him. I fix myself a drink. Bill never blinks, only ever opens his mouth to speak. He finds the channel with the golf, and the camera zooms in on that little stone bridge, the azaleas and dogwood and pine. Amen Corner. It's bright and cloudless there.

"See?" he says to himself.

I turn on the oven, put the butt and onions in the pot, and pour in a load of salt, and the whole bottle of Dr. Pepper. "You'll keep an eye on this pork if I put it in?" I say.

The sofa creaks. I put the glass down by the sink. It's Vic's glass. Bill's brother. Barb's long dead uncle. Vic lived off a settlement from the city after his foot got run over by a bus. He was a drinker. Bill used to cart Barb over whenever he took a fall. She had first-aid training from a babysitter course, and a pretty steady hand. Bill used to get antsy. He always found some work to be done—a leaky faucet, a loose doorknob. He was never there to see Vic look down Barb's shirt, or touch the point of her knee while she was shining a light through his eyes.

"Careful there, Skip," says Bill. He's standing in the doorway, his big shoulders stiff and disproportionate. "Those tumblers of my brother's? They're worth something."

The hardware store is all but cleaned out. It's like there's been a run on waterproofing. But I take what I can. A few tubes of roofing cement, whatever caulk is left, a couple joiners. It's an easy repair and won't take much except a little cooperation from the weather. And then gravity can take over and everything can run smooth again, the way it's supposed to.

On my way home I stop at Pete's Bar. He gets to making the Gibson as soon as I take a seat. Barb and me used to stop in at Pete's to play card games if the weather was lousy on a Saturday. There isn't much talking without her here.

He sets the drink down and goes back to drying glasses. "How's work?" he says.

"Sometimes rent comes in on time. Other times it doesn't."

The bar was his retirement. He's only had it four years but already he hates it. "Six of one, baker's dozen of the other—." He pours himself a drink and pushes another one in front of me. "Whatever the fuck that means."

It's just after eight when I get back. The driveway's filled up and I can barely find a place on the street. Bill's got every light on in the house. Some jangly music tumbles out all over the neighborhood.

When I reach for the door it swings open. Bill stands there with an apron on and nothing else, a drink in his hand that sweats down onto his toes. He grins soggily. His eyes are thin.

"I'm surprised you're here," he says. The stiffness has gone away from him.

I drop the bag of patching gear on the deck and look over his shoulders, past his ribs, keeping my distance. The living room is scattered with older folks, gyrating harshly in their bras and underwear. They hold drinks in martini glasses that lap onto limp folds of skin. A pungent odor is about the room: a slow, secret stew of pork and onions. And the ripening of age.

“That gutter’s gonna come down in the back,” he says. “It’s emptying now, but that rain comes again you’re up a creek.” He chews on something, narrows his eyes. “But you know that.”

I pick up my gear and nudge by him. The kitchen’s littered with wine and liquor bottles. The pot of pork sits on the stovetop with six or seven forks stuck into it. It’s cooked-through but not yet ready, and they’ve eaten the soft parts off from around the edges. Two men and a woman sit at the dining room table in bathing suits and robes. The music is so loud they’ve got to scream just to whisper. They’re younger, mid to late twenties. The woman is busty and thin. Her hair and pink face are done up. One man is sinewy and black, the other stocky and white. They see me looking at them and inch further toward the middle of the table. Out back the floodlight is on and the loose stream flows thin but steady from the gutter to the window.

I join the twenty-somethings in the dining room, turn down the stereo. “I’m having a lot of difficulty figuring what’s going on in here,” I say.

They look at one another, deciding, maybe, how to explain it to me.

“I’m gonna head out back,” I say. “I’m gonna see if I can’t patch this thing up.”

Up on the ladder, I reach with the cat’s paw to wrench off the old joiner, but it’s fitted over the gutter’s lip and won’t give. I go higher, another step, just beneath the top platform. Inside the volume goes back up, louder than before. I look in over the gutter. The rain and tree muck have turned into a sludge, and the handful I pull out just gurgles and fills itself back in.

For a moment I breathe. It needs clearing and a chance to dry before anything can really be fixed. If the rain comes again the stream of water will open up and get between the clapboards, driving its moistened wedge, and start working away at things.

I go with the ladder to the far end of the house and start hoisting out fistfuls of muck. It takes work, and for some time it doesn't seem like I'm getting anything done. But I keep working, and eventually, after a couple moves of the ladder, I feel like I'm getting somewhere.

Twenty minutes into it the door swings open and the young people step out for a cigarette. They stand close together, shoulders turned up for warmth, leaning in to catch a light off the same match. I turn to tell them to try and keep it down, to shut the door and keep the smoke out the house. To make sure the match is out before tossing it. There's been all this rain but the brush under the porch is dry. And I want to tell them to snub out their smokes and throw them away—not to flick them into my yard. But headlights flash on the street and the ladder's footing tweaks. There's the thud of a car door. And instead of saying anything to these kids in bathing suits, it's Barb I'm calling for. I put my hands out to steady myself. "I'm out back," I yell at her, my voice all warbly. I reach for the gutter, and miss, and land with a thud on my back.

The bathing suits rush over in their robes and stand over me in a circle, staring.

The breath rushes out and I suck and gasp to fill it back in.

The slender black man crouches down next to me. His robe flashes open and I can see the sparkly pink thong encasing his package. "Honey," he says, his voice thick and soft. "My mother put roofs on for a living. There's an earthquake coming. And this house ain't gonna make it."

He and the woman help me up. I'm stiff and my tail-end throbs, but nothing is broken. And there's no blood to scare me off.

"Let's find you a drink," says the woman. Her eyes are the same color as her cigarette filter, and she smells like sour apple.

"My wife's got some old pills from the last time she got her knee fixed," I say. "Up in the bedroom. I think she maybe just got home."

"You're hearing things," says the stocky man. He's still smoking, inspecting the ladder, looking up at the gutter. His robe is pinched up inside his ass.

The bottle of Vicodin is emptier than I remember. I split a pill on the counter and take one half and then the other. And I take one more before giving one each to the bathing suits.

The woman plucks a bill from her top and rolls it up, and after they crush the pills they go around in a circle, snorting the dust until it's finished.

"You get a lot of calls to strip at these kinds of things?" I say.

The stocky man leans against the dresser and rests his chin in his palm. "What kinds of things?" he says.

American Beauty is on the stereo and Bill is at the pork, tearing like an animal at a kill. In the dining room the underwear people stagger to "Candyman," their arms around each other, sneaking fumbled pokes at flaps of skin. The strippers get up on the table, draping their robes over chairs. They begin to move, humping at air, slithering in space.

I make a drink, sit myself in the living room. In a few minutes the tension in my jaw will loosen. The music will change, its edges rounding, softening. I might hear the animals rustling under the porch, between the walls, under the floorboards. Maybe Barb will pull up. Maybe I'll make my case one more time.

I close my eyes and the kindnesses of the room—the glow of lamp and plush of rug, the satin sheen of coffee table finish—find agreement with one another. And when I open them, Bill is standing in front of me. The apron's gone. It's just him, hanging there. “Does this make you uncomfortable, Skip?”

“A little bit, yes.”

He laughs like he always does.

“How much longer, Bill?” I say.

“You say the word, Skipper.”

“Just tell me how much longer.”

He laughs again. I watch him go to the dining room. He slumps down into a chair, the haze of kitchen light only barely creeping onto him, and looks up at the young woman dancing there. He fusses with a mess of bills. The others are beginning to fade. Old skin now presses tired against chair leather and wood floor. Somebody's switched the record speed. It sounds all blurred, almost like old ghosts have sneaked themselves inside of it. The lanky black man sits on Bill's lap and whispers into his ear. I watch them play a bit with each other, dancing their fingertips together, chuckling.

And I'm still watching when they kiss.

Bill's nowhere when I wake up. The ache in my body is there, but dull. Barb's car is in the driveway, glinting in the fresh sun. It's washed and she's got the new sign on the front door: *Interiors by Barb*. Seven years it took her to put that sign up. But it's up. And I can't help but feel a stab of pride, even with everything going on.

The kitchen is cleaned up, spotless. I don't know if it was Barb or her father—or the strippers, or even the underwear people. But that car's there in the driveway and I call for her even though I know she's gone.

Kristoff is on his back, knees bent up, hands on his chest. He breathes with effort, winces with each ricocheted clink of hammer and nail. Tufts of lawn come up all around him.

Closer to the house, Josie is in the wheelchair, six or seven three-penny nails sticking out her mouth. Next to her's a redheaded woman on her knees, clutching a hammer inside the crook of her elbow. She wears a yellow t-shirt cut off at the shoulders. Her hair, heavy with sweat, falls from behind her ears. Each time she pushes it back, it sways again in front of her eyes.

"How we doin'?" I shout.

Kristoff labors to sit and sees me before going back to his elbows. "Getting this ramp built, Skip," he says. He breathes through the words, in and out.

"I don't know, Clam-man. Doesn't look like you're doing a damn thing."

He pushes up and breathes harder before going down again. His chest heaves.

"He's having a heart attack or something," says the redhead. "It runs in his family."

She looks at me.

Kristoff writhes around, knocking his knees back and forth. He grips at the grass and lifts his butt off the ground. He musters a laugh and coughs. “It’s not a heart attack,” he chokes. “Gimme some time. I’ll be all right.”

“Maybe we ought to think about an ambulance,” I say.

The redhead drives a nail into the pine with two strikes. “Do what you got to do. He’s not worth much in that condition.”

“You the wife?”

“Josie’s mom.” She looks at me.

“You know he’s late on the rent.”

“Right now I’m building this ramp.”

I scratch my head. “If you need help—”

“Me and Josie are fine.”

I look at Josie. Blond hair, dimpled cheeks. She looks like her dad. “I know a thing or two about these builds,” I say.

“You know about *ramps*?” says Josie.

“The architecture of it.”

“The architecture,” she repeats. “Like how to get down from one place to another?”

“You know, it’s my house so I might have to—”

“I’ve got a business,” says the redhead—the mother. “I do repairs.” She stands up. “It’s not some kind of maze to me.”

“Well you’re covering over the stairs. I’m gonna have to demo this thing when he moves out.”

“You gave approval.” She takes a step toward me. “Written approval. I saw it inside.”

“I’m just asking you see my side of it.”

“I see it.” She flips the hammer by her hip.

They’ve made headway. The ramp is more than half built. I nod at her and she gets back to it. The two of them do. Josie feeds the nails. She uses the tape measure, makes marks on the wood and puts it by the chop saw. Her mother calls out the measurements, takes the wood and makes the cuts. Josie holds the boards in place while her mother hammers and drives screws. Neither of them say much. They don’t move fast, but they keep up a good pace. No breaks, or dawdling. They both work.

Kristoff pulls a cigarette out his breast pocket and lights it. The smoke circles out from the grass. Little by little he sits up more fully and catches his breath. He still winces from time to time and it’s difficult to tell if it’s a smile or frown he wants on his face. “They don’t need me at all,” he says.

“One of these days they’ll go off and forget all about you, Kristoff.”

“I don’t know, Skip. I think it’s more I just can’t keep up.”

I join him on the grass and we watch the women work. I smoke with Kristoff. I haven’t smoked in years, but it’s something about when I used to do this kind of work that makes it feel right. Occasionally I go over and offer a hand: the first few times they decline; eventually they stop responding.

The clouds fill back in. They’re getting close—Josie and her mom. I tell them to stop. I say to finish it the next day but they move through it. The clouds get darker and I offer my help, but they ignore me, and the clouds go darker still. Cracks of light split the sky

in the West; thunder-claps push the wind through the sawdust and woodchips. It's chaos swirling all over the old yard.

But they finish.

I take another smoke from the Clam-man. "Take it off the rent," I say. "The lumber. Whatever it cost, just subtract it from next month."

"Skip," he says.

"But I need it, Kristoff."

"You'll get it."

"I've waited long enough."

Barb's car is gone. Nobody's home. The street is almost empty and the rain has come again. I walk through the fence to the back and the gutter has come apart. It dangles at the ends of the house, broken in the middle. The water attacks, punching the clapboards, splitting the plaster, reaching at the foundation.

The rain goes and goes.

And at first there's only a faint rumble.

But then it comes.