

AFTERSHOCKS



TITO CARR

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These stories are dedicated to FJH and TLH, two outstanding speakers of the American language, for their years of friendship, and to the old band and new bandmates—JAAP, RS, DY, DR, SD, RS—for all the music.

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OMAR'S RASH

Soaping himself in the shower one morning, Omar noticed a crescent of small red spots on his right forearm. He wondered what they were, tracing their raised, rough surface with the fingertips of his left hand. Bumps. When he held them under the water they stung slightly. When he looked at them they itched, and when he looked away they didn't. A half-dozen bumps, midway between his elbow and his wrist, almost like little bruises. He wasn't quite awake yet, he noted. Light was just showing in the sky outside his bathroom window. The hot water felt good. Then he remembered the rash. He made a quick check of torso, crotch, and legs. Nothing. Had he scratched his arm? He looked at the rash again with a vague suspicion. Welts in a line, like bed bugs. He processed the implications slowly, but there was no point jumping to conclusions. After all, he wasn't really sure, and there was nothing he could do about it at the moment. He had to get to work.

At his desk, when no one was looking, he rolled and unrolled his sleeve to see if the rash was spreading. But it was there each time just as before, a line of dots. It didn't sting, or burn, or itch. He Googled rashes. The possibilities were daunting. He searched and examined his skin, but no blisters appeared, no pustules or fissures. Just red bumps in a slight curve. Bed bugs were not news, he knew. Everyone had a bed bug story. And he had been in Cleveland two weeks ago on business, in a nice hotel. That, of course, didn't matter. Bed bugs were just a sign of the times, he supposed, like identity theft or mass shootings.

The thought of tiny creatures feeding on his blood while he slept was not pleasant. When Omar got home from work he stripped his bed and bagged the bedclothes. Then he took a large kitchen knife and eviscerated the mattress. He looked for the telltale signs he had read about, but found nothing. He did the same with the

box spring. Again nothing. He looked at his arm. The bumps were unchanged. His wife, a patient woman, was aghast when she saw the carnage in the bedroom.

“I think we have bed bugs,” he said, showing her the rash.

She looked at it closely. “I don’t know,” she said. “Those could be scratches.”

“I didn’t scrape my arm,” he said, though in truth he wasn’t sure.

“Well, / don’t have any rashes,” she said. “Shouldn’t I have bites if we have bed bugs?”

Omar hadn’t thought of that. Maybe he should have asked her before ripping up the mattress. Her common sense was commendable.

“It could be early. Maybe we found them before they spread.”

“Did you find any?” asked his wife, looking at the mattress.

“I found this,” said Omar, pointing to tiny dots inside the frame of the box spring. His wife kneeled on the floor and looked closer. She wiped them with her finger.

“That’s dust,” she said.

He wasn’t so sure.

“It’s dust,” she insisted.

They reassembled the bed as best they could. Omar could not bring himself to sleep there, so he spent the night on the sofa in the living room. He rose early, before the kids came down—not wanting to suggest any friction between their parents—and called the exterminators first thing.

The exterminators were prompt and courteous. “Don’t worry. If they’re here, we’ll find them,” they said. They swept the bedrooms with dogs and lasers, but found nothing. “Could be scabies,” said the crew chief, a man of authority and experience. “Wash all your clothes and sheets in hot water. Maybe you should see a doctor.”

As soon as the exterminators were gone, Omar went to the bathroom and examined the rash with his wife’s magnifying glass. The sight startled him. The little bumps revealed their contours, scales and scabs and bruises, like a miniature landscape as seen from the air, with hair shafts the size of tree trunks and pores like manholes. It was hard to believe it was his own flesh. It began to itch, fearfully. He scratched until he tore the skin and oozed a drop of blood. He washed the bumps with soap and water, then with hand sanitizer, covered them with an antibiotic ointment and

bandaged them. They itched under the bandage. And now his other arm began to itch, too. Without thinking he scratched deeply, before looking. When he looked there was no rash, just streaks of red made by his fingernails. Suspicious, he sniffed the streaks. They smelled of soap. He washed his sheets and pillowcases with bleach and threw out his pajamas.

“If it’s scabies, how come *I* don’t have anything?” asked his wife, using the same logic as before. “Maybe you *should* see a doctor.” Omar preferred to wait and see if the rash went away by itself. He felt better already, knowing there were no bed bugs. The itching improved, but not the red bumps. After a week of waiting he called a dermatologist. They could see him in three months. He called his family doctor who could see him in a week. That night the itching returned so intense he couldn’t sleep. He resisted the temptation to scratch, telling himself it would only make matters worse. After an hour he couldn’t stand it anymore, and yielded to the deep pleasure of scratching till his arm was raw. When the itching returned, even worse, with a burning sensation that went up his arm, he slipped out of bed and dressed quietly, quite alarmed, informing his wife that he was going to the emergency room to get it “checked out”. He sat in the waiting room for two hours before he was led to an isolated cubicle in the back of the ER. The aide who roomed him wore gloves and a long paper gown. After taking his vital signs she carefully shed her gloves and scrubbed her hands. After an hour alone in the exam room, the itching became tolerable and he left.

On his return from the hospital, Omar woke his wife with a disturbing thought. “What if it’s not something from outside? What if it’s not a bite or something that got on my skin? What if it’s from inside? Something that’s going through my body?” The thought of something unknown, invisible, coursing through his body and coming out in his skin terrified him. If it came out in his skin, it could come out anywhere—in his heart or his brain, or his...No, there was no reason to suspect his wife of anything. Now he wished it were only bed bugs. “Then why did you leave the ER?” she asked, and turned over to go back to sleep.

They bought a new mattress, expensive but much more comfortable than their old one. Omar covered his rash each day with an allergy cream and the itching

gradually subsided. By the time he saw his doctor the next week the rash was almost gone. The doctor prescribed a stronger cream to use if the itching came back, but Omar didn't feel any need for it. He cancelled his appointment with the dermatologist. Things went back to normal. He liked his new bed and his new pajamas. The scratches healed. His mood was good, and things at work—his sales—were going well. But two months later, feeling a tingling in his arm as he soaped himself in the shower, he noted a familiar line of small red bumps in the same place on his right forearm.

“Your skin must be coming into contact with something,” said his wife, sensibly enough. “You need to figure out what it is.” Omar tried to think of something that his arm was touching—at work, in the car, sitting at home—his right arm in particular, he being right-handed, but came up blank. He was now leaning toward the alternate hypothesis, that it was something inside his body, and made another appointment with a dermatologist. In the meantime he applied his previous remedy, but this time the rash did not improve and the itching returned, mild but constant. At times, when distracted, he didn't notice, but when he focused his attention on the sensations in his arm the itching was always there, like tiny creatures squiggling under the bumps. The wait to see the dermatologist was interminable. He went back to the Internet and this time convinced himself it was something in the blood. A disease of the bone marrow. Leukemia, perhaps. He wished he'd waited to be seen in the ER that night. He wished his doctor had run some blood tests. He checked his tongue and felt his glands, examined his fingernails and eyeballs. A new fatigue set in. He cancelled his appointment with the dermatologist and made one with a hematologist who, much to Omar's relief, could see him in a matter of weeks.

“Your white count is normal,” said the hematologist, quite dapper in his bow tie and lab coat. “In fact, all your tests are normal. I'm not sure what it is, but it's not leukemia. I'm referring you to a dermatologist. You may need a biopsy.” Omar got the first available appointment, in three months. His relief at not having leukemia was offset by his fear of the rash's unknown cause. It weighed on him at work, and his work began to suffer. He forgot appointments and was distracted in meetings. It affected his marriage, too. He was afraid to have sex for fear of passing something to his wife, and

the more she assured him it was all right the less desire he had for her. Her frustration was apparent. In bed one night she took his arm and rubbed the rash on her breast. He was shocked. He also thought, for good reason, she was mocking him. What could he do? He was a man in need of a biopsy, a man beyond arousal. But her lack of regard for her own health was what appalled him the most.

The dermatologist flew into the exam room and mumbled a greeting as she grabbed his arm. “Do you have any kids?” she asked, adjusting her designer eyewear as if about to read his fortune.

“Yes,” said Omar.

“Do any of them have cold sores?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Did they bite you recently?”

“Bite me? They’re teenagers.”

“Then it’s probably nothing.”

Those were not the words he expected to hear. “What do you mean? It’s been there for months. It itches.”

“I mean it’s just a little local irritation. Have you been scratching much?”

Omar felt embarrassed, and blushed. “Not really,” he stammered. “Once in a while. I try not to.” Then immediately changing the subject, “The hematologist said I might need a biopsy.”

The dermatologist glanced at his rash once more. “Sure,” she said, to his relief and alarm. “What the heck, why not?”

Without further ado, she numbed a spot on the rash and removed a small circle of flesh by twisting a sharp little instrument back and forth as if she were cutting cookie dough. “We’ll have the results in a couple of days,” she said, shaking the specimen into a jar of fluid. Omar caught a brief whiff of formaldehyde. “Our office will call to let you know. Press here.” She placed his index finger on the gauze pad that covered his wound. With that she was out the door.

The following night, as he was passing the TV room, Omar heard the words ‘Dad’s rash’, and the kids’ quiet snickering. He paused out of sight by the door and

listened. There was one last suppressed giggle—it sounded like it came from his daughter—and nothing more, just the sound of the TV. That was when he realized the rash had been on his mind every day, from morning till night, for months. He felt ashamed. He wished he hadn't bothered his family about it, but talking about it made him feel better. At least the biopsy should settle the matter, he reasoned, one way or another.

Two days later Omar was in a sales meeting when he felt the phone vibrate in his pocket. He peeked under the table and saw that the dermatologist's office was calling. He suppressed an impulse to bolt from the room and waited, feigning attention as best he could, until the meeting ended. He returned the call as soon as he was in the hallway outside the conference room. After several minutes he managed to make his way through the dermatologist's phone tree and speak to the nurse who had called.

"I left a message with your results," she said. "Do you have any questions?"

Omar hadn't checked the message. "I didn't check the message," he said. "I just called straight back."

"Oh," said the nurse. "OK. Hold on a minute." Omar held while the nurse pulled up the report. "Here it is. Let's see... Non-specific inflammation," she announced.

Omar paused to consider what that meant. "What does that mean?" he finally asked.

"It means there's something irritating your skin," she said.

"No kidding," said Omar. "You can't tell me anything more?"

"Well, it's not cancer," said the nurse. "And it's not an infection."

"That's all good," said Omar. "So what's causing it?"

"It could be lots of things. It's non-specific. The doctor sent a prescription to your pharmacy. It's nothing to worry about."

"I want to know what's causing it," said Omar, trying not to raise his voice. "That's why I got the biopsy."

"Then you'll have to speak with the doctor. I'll leave her a message," said the nurse. "And please don't raise your voice at me. I'm just giving you the report," she added.

In the weeks that followed, Omar became preoccupied with skin in general. He observed the complexions of people in the street. There was such variety. Dry and oily, smooth and bumpy, blotchy, wrinkled. Hues from ghost-white to midnight blue, wheat-colored, olive, and ruddy. He appreciated its layers. He compared the texture of the faces, the necks, and the hands of his co-workers. The skin of his children, still developing, fascinated him. Not just a covering, but a hard-working organ. Keeping all that water in. Keeping all that other stuff out. Who knew? And it was complicated—no wonder so much could go wrong. But there was hope. It could repair itself too, up to a point. A delicate balance between attack and defense.

“Have a seat, Omar,” said his boss, a serious young woman still new to the company. Omar had just walked into her office. Looking about, he noted the difference a window made in lighting a room. “I want to talk to you about your numbers,” she said. “They’re not any better, you know.”

“I know,” said Omar. He flushed, though had been expecting this conversation.

“What happened to our improvement plan?” Her displeasure was obvious. “You said you’d be on target by now. I thought we had an understanding.”

“We did,” said Omar.

“This can’t go on,” she said. “It’s affecting everyone.” She sighed, emphasizing her disappointment.

“I think it’s...” he mumbled.

“You what?” asked his boss, her disappointment giving way to impatience.

“I’m having some health problems,” said Omar.

“Health problems? Like what? No, I can’t ask that,” she corrected herself. “How serious?” Omar, fidgeting, granted her that question would fly.

“Serious enough to affect my work.”

His boss sat back in her chair. It was clear she was concerned about Omar—about his sales goals, and a possible medical leave.

“You have disability insurance, don’t you?” she asked, meaning his own policy. Thinking next steps, noted Omar. Planning for contingencies was one of his boss’s strengths.

“No,” said Omar.

“That’s not good, Omar,” she said. “Poor planning on your part.”

“I know.”

“But back to your numbers. What do you want to do?”

“Get them up.”

“Right. And you think you’re up to it? With your health problem and all?”

“Yes.”

“OK. I’ll give you another month. I think that’s generous. But that’s it. We have to be fair to the rest of the team.” Omar thought that was tough, but fair. Who could blame her? His rash was not her concern. He would try his best. He would also get his résumé in order.

The next day bumps appeared on his left arm, small and red, a little itchy, though their distribution seemed more random than on his right. Omar began to scratch them lightly at first, then hard. He scratched until they were gone, until there were a dozen little nicks in his skin where the bumps used to be, lined up within the abrasions scraped by his nails. They bled. Then he did the same to his right arm. When he finished he held up his arms and looked. They were an ugly mess. He washed and covered them with gauze wrap, thinking: in a long-sleeved shirt who can tell? The scratching, the abrading, the gouging made all the difference. His arms felt pleasantly numb. He found he could ignore them. He didn’t have to talk about his rash at the dinner table. He could make love to his wife with the gauze wraps on. He got his sales numbers up, too. The little ulcers healed slowly and the scratch marks went away. But in the places where the little craters had been cut into his skin there gradually appeared flat, red spots. And the flat, red spots grew to raised, red bumps that began to itch like crazy once again.

At his wife’s insistence—she was only doing her job—Omar got a second opinion and a second biopsy from a second dermatologist. This time the specimen was sent to a nationally renowned lab with a nationally renowned dermato-pathologist. The description was much longer, more detailed, in line with the cost, but the implications were much the same. After discussing the report, his second dermatologist asked. “Do you ever scratch so hard you break the skin?”

“I try not to,” said Omar.

“In your sleep maybe?” asked the dermatologist.

“I don’t know,” said Omar. “Could be.”

“I’m going to prescribe something for the itching,” said the dermatologist. “Just use it at night.”

Omar had had enough of creams and lotions. “What about a skin transplant?” he blurted out.

The doctor laughed, promptly checked himself and answered calmly, “No, not necessary. Besides, the rash could come back just as easily on transplanted skin. And insurance won’t cover it.” Omar was not entirely convinced. He considered going to a plastic surgeon in Costa Rica or Colombia, but the cost was still more than he was willing to pay. And after careful consideration he didn’t want cadaver skin, and was leery of having his own skin “harvested.”

A few days after meeting with the second dermatologist, Omar stood at the bathroom sink. Staring at his reflection he made a long, determined face in the mirror. Then he held up his arms, and while still watching them in the mirror, began to scratch, deep and hard, and scratched until he scraped away all the bumps. He gently washed the blood from his raw flesh and covered the new pink ulcerations with gauze wrap. His arms felt much better. That evening he ate a hearty dinner, and made love to his wife that night. And so he outfitted himself with gauze wrap and long-sleeved shirts, all year round. He had no need for creams or lotions or doctors. Once a month he scratched his arms clean and wrapped them up again. There was no need for anyone to see them, ever, anyway.

THE MAN WHO ATE WOOD

Lisa hated to be the bearer of bad news. “I’m sorry, Maury, you have to shut it down.” Especially to Maury, such a sad guy. An overachiever. A sad guy but a nice guy. He just tried too hard, like last Saturday at the faculty party when he cornered the postdocs’ husbands and couldn’t stop yakking about his research. Those poor schmucks can’t just turn a deaf ear and walk away like tenured faculty. Maury, always so earnest. And so damn awkward. A little on the spectrum, though that was the norm in her department. A whole department that wasn’t big on social cues.

“I know. I got the notice. But why? We know it works,” said Maury.

Lisa spotted her opening. She’d been looking for some way to reframe this whole unpleasant business as a compliment. Emotional IQ. That was her special thing, her leadership edge, one of her strengths as department chair.

“That’s the problem,” she said.

“And it’s safe,” said Maury, spotting her next objection. He was starting to flap his arms now, tight little circles close to his body, his way to keep from hyperventilating. She hoped to god he wouldn’t tear up. That would piss her off. People were always coming to her office in tears.

“So far,” she said. “How long has it been, really?”

“Three months. The mice are fine. No metabolic problems. No tumors. Healthy as can be.”

“Well, that’s part of the problem too, Maury. What if the gene gets into the wild?”

Maury’s arms stopped moving. His eyes rolled back in his head, like he was going through a quick mental checklist or about to seize. Tongue blade? wondered

Lisa, just in case. After a moment his eyes rolled back to their normal position. “But it can’t,” he said, as if he had settled the issue once and for all. “Too many safeguards.”

“Low probability, high risk,” said Lisa. “Huge risk, actually. Nothing’s a hundred percent, so not good enough. Sorry, Maury. This isn’t coming from me. This is from the IACUC. The IACUC and the USDA. They’re pulling the plug on the funding. Even the NIH weighed in.”

Maury hung his head. He looked like Lisa’s four year-old son when he reached the limit of his screen time. “You know it could work in humans,” he said.

That remark irritated her. “No, we don’t know that,” she said. She was willing to be sympathetic, but as Chair of the department she could not support overblown claims. And Maury had a tendency to do that. It’s not that he was cocky, he was just, what was the word? Wishful. Wishful thinking.

As if reading her thoughts, Maury said, “This is not pie in the sky, Lisa. It’s proven science. And we have the technology.”

“The world is not ready for human trials.”

“But Jesus, think what’s at stake.”

“Please Maury, don’t get ahead of yourself.” Not that she could blame him for grasping at straws. “Nobody’s going to lose their job.”

“Are you joking?” Maury was showing some emotion here. That was appropriate, though not necessarily a good sign. “Because that’s the least of my concerns. My concern here is doing something real about food insecurity. Kids are dying.” His bottom lip quivered with conviction.

Lisa wished he would just shut up and sulk like any normal loser. Go get drunk. See his therapist. She did not want to insult him, even if he was trying to buck her authority once again. But why did he have to spout this shit? She reached for her calm inner voice, the voice she always found when she was tempted to spank her kids. “There are other ways to do that. More natural ways.”

“More natural ways? Like modifying crops, you mean. If that’s so natural, why not modify animals? What’s the difference? We’re going about it backwards.”

“Human subjects, Maury. There’s a big difference.”

“Not genetically.”

“Ethically.”

“And trying to end malnutrition is not ethical?”

“Bravo,” said Lisa. “A noble goal. But not this way. It’s over.” She could be blunt, another one of her strengths as Chair.

Maury stepped to the window of his tiny office and looked down at the quad in front of the building. “Bastards. I know where all this is coming from. Professional jealousy. The IACUC can’t believe such a big idea came from my little lab. Simple and powerful, like all great ideas. And the USDA can’t believe we do big science here in the middle of nowhere. As for the NIH, everybody knows they’re all a bunch of snotty Ivy League pricks.” Lisa cocked her head at a menacing angle. “Sorry, Lisa.” Maury softened his tone. “Present company excepted. But you should be defending me. As department chair you should be sticking up for your faculty.”

He was tearing up now, as she had feared. But she couldn’t hold that against him, even with his dig at her leadership. He had a right to be upset. Poor Maury, he’d put years into this project. He was pathetic, but he wasn’t a bad guy. She’d known worse. In fact, most of the department was worse. She put a hand on his shoulder. “So how do I say this Maury? We’ve been colleagues for a long time. Friends, I’d like to say. It’s just that it’s all a bit....grandiose?”

Maury shrugged, still staring down at the quad. It was a cold day on the campus. A few students were scurrying to class across the frozen lawn.

“I have a budget meeting,” said Lisa. “Come by tomorrow and we’ll go over things. Maybe you should take some time off.”

The next day Maury had recovered his composure. He looked chipper, in fact. Lisa was puzzled, and a bit concerned. Drugs, she wondered? Couldn’t be SSRI’s, too quick. Amphetamines maybe. A lot of that going around the grad students. She shuffled through some papers on her desk. His mood didn’t make things any easier. If anything it made things kind of creepy. And he was wearing a tie. She couldn’t recall him ever wearing a tie. He’d always been a black t-shirt, flat-affect kind of guy and here he was in an old button down shirt with some ridiculous paisley tie, grinning like a salesman who’d just practiced his pitch in front of a mirror. “You think you can do it?”

she said. Underneath her calm chairperson-like demeanor she was actually quite tense. The Feds had come down hard. The whole freaking university could be sanctioned if this wasn't handled right. More than her reputation was on the line. It was her ass.

"Sure, no problem. It should only take a week, ten days tops. I'll make sure the mice are disposed of properly. And the gene, the vector, everything. All by the book. The controls can go to whoever wants them. And a leave of absence would be nice. I'd like to request ... a month maybe?"

For a moment Lisa thought he'd said, 'leave of absinthe,' which would also be appropriate. It made her chuckle. That was good. This whole business had gotten far too serious. "Okay, we can handle that. I'll find someone to cover your classes." She almost said 'asses'.

"The TA's know what they're doing. They can handle most of it. Just give them some backup."

"No problem. Some backup and a little supervision. Consider it done."

"And my postdoc?" he asked.

"Mae? I can take her in my lab. We can arrange that, it's only fair. Unless she wants to transfer, of course."

"I think that's about it."

"So what are you going to do with your month? Travel?"

Maury slipped down in his chair and flipped up the end of his silly tie.

"I don't know. Relax. Move on. Work on some research ideas. I might find a beach somewhere."

"Sounds good, Maury. I know this is tough. Thanks for taking it so well. Nothing personal, you know."

"I know. What can you do, right? I thought the risk was worth it. Chickenshit regulators, that's all."

"Well, you never know which way the wind will blow. If it changes, you're our guy." She cocked a finger in his direction.

"Nice of you to say so. But don't worry, I'll be okay." He stood up to take his leave.

“Oh, just one more thing,” said Lisa, rising from her desk a bit annoyed with him now despite their display of camaraderie. It was disrespectful, just a tad, this starting to leave before she dismissed him, though she was about to. And she knew there was the social cue issue. Still, it was disrespectful. “The controls. The controls have to go, too. As a precaution. It’s in the directive.”

Maury’s smile faded. He began to look like his old self. “No shit. Really? The controls? That’s a pure a waste of resources.”

“I know. Just do it.”

“Sounds a little paranoid to me. Where’s this coming from?”

This was more like the old Maury, she thought. A little oppositional, a little self-righteous. Digging his heels in over something trivial. He could be such a jerk. When he wasn’t being a nice guy. “Maury, just do it. Okay?”

Maury stood brooding for a moment over the fate of the controls. Then his little fit of pique seemed to lift. His smile returned and he gave a casual shrug. “Okay. No big deal.”

They reached over her desk and shook hands. That was good, she thought. Overall, a good discussion. Smoother than expected. But she still had her doubts. Something was off. It was Maury’s normality. How did he suddenly know how to act so normal? Normal for the department, anyway. She’d have to appoint someone super strict to oversee the decommissioning process. Keep a sharp eye on the whole deal. Trust, but verify the crap out of it. She began to mentally compose her progress report to the IACUC. And she would phone her contact at the USDA to personally assure him that their directives were being carried out expeditiously, to the letter. She didn’t want some dead-end associate professor jeopardizing her funding streams. Maury could take down the whole damn department.

When Maury was hungry he devoted a great deal of thought to recipe design. Stew design in particular. Stews, he thought, were the best bet for his experiment. Some of this, a little of that. So many options with a stew. Consistency was key. Texture, maybe the most important factor. Finding the right softeners, the right solvents, the right tenderizers so to speak. He imagined stews of his own invention

created for the world's hungry masses, nourishing untold billions. And while he was stewing on his LOA, he did some sample calculations in his head waiting at the gate for his flight to Puerto Vallarta: calories, nitrogen content, oils, minerals, trace metals, alkaloids, phenols, you name it, by percent and molecular weight. Easy stuff. Grandiose, Lisa? Just solid science. Grunt work science. Grinding-it-out science. Tedious, painstaking science. Until the end. Until you get to the payoff. To a very awesome and glorious payoff. To a mind-blowing payoff that would leave the timid and the skeptical in the dustbin of nutrient history. Maury pumped his fist in the air and immediately shrank back in his chair, afraid he was making a spectacle of himself. He looked around at his fellow passengers. Nope, everything was fine. Just people with earphones staring at their screens. He took a deep breath, more like a big sigh. He was composed now. Lisa didn't get it. Poor Lisa, she'd become an apparatchik. Lost her sense of wonder. He liked her as a person, he had to admit. Kind of like the sister you'd have a crush on if she weren't your sister. There were worse chairs. But still, she was the enemy. He couldn't help that. Sure, he'd shut it down. Wouldn't want to ignore a directive, would we? Not from a forward-thinking body like the USDA or those fucking geniuses at the NIH. Boarding was about to begin. Maury queued up. He felt like pumping his fist again.

So, needless to say, Maury crossed the line. Crossed way over to the far side of his personal little Rubicon. Sprinted right across it at top speed, courtesy of a viral vector that took the gene in question straight to the point of no return, i.e. his pancreatic tissue. Like the early pioneers of medicine, he wasn't afraid to put his body where his mouth was. Injected the vector himself in his own bathroom just before leaving for the airport, sitting on the toilet like some jonesing nerd-junkie. Watched it fill his vein with the same thrill. Felt it tingle. Like those early pioneers who had the courage, and even more important the kind consideration, to experiment on themselves before trying to dupe others into risking their bodies. Not like today's PI's, those gutless clowns. Unethical? I don't think so, Madame Chairperson. Quite the opposite. Rash it might be, but hardly unethical. Meanwhile, the final inventory from his decommissioned lab showed one mutant mouse and one control mouse unaccounted

for, along with a small quantity of the retrovirus vector. Lisa was furious. They searched the postdoc's apartment while she was away. Nothing there. And Maury was in Mexico, incommunicado.

At first Maury felt nothing. Two, three days, and not a thing. Normal appetite, normal sleep, normal bowel habits. No, it couldn't be that easy. Or else it didn't take. He fretted, he obsessed. Should he try another dose? Should he try to test the result? It was tough having to wing it on his own like this, with no lab to back him up. Uncertainty was not his strong suit. On the fourth day he was going about his business as usual, about to eat shrimp tacos at a beachside cafe, when he felt a sudden chill. He feared a stomach bug coming on. Something from last night's Caesar salad. Or something he picked up on the plane? It was flu season, after all. But he'd worn a mask and gloves the whole flight. He'd sanitized his tray and armrest with bleach wipes. Then wham — headache, fever, a sharp pain shooting to the middle of his back. He made it to his room and collapsed in bed. His bones hurt like he'd been run over by a truck. A day later and no diarrhea, no cough. So it was the gene most likely. That was good. A little inflammation in his pancreas perhaps, a touch of pancreatitis. At least he knew the gene had been inserted. But what if his pancreas was blowing up? Damn. It never messed up his mice like this. He wished he'd had the chance to try it in primates like he'd planned. Oh well, that wasn't in the cards. He lay in bed too weak to do much but take a sip or two of bottled water before drifting into delirium.

The next day was worse. If anything, the fever was higher. Maury thought he was at home lying in his own bed, dreaming he was down in Mexico with a raging fever, writhing in bed in a room by the beach. Then dreaming he was back in the lab running his old experiments. He kicked off the sheets, pointing his finger at the ceiling. Simplest idea in the world, Lisa. Cellulose. Woody plants as carbohydrate reserves. In practical terms, unlimited reserves. Cellulase, get it? GET IT? One more little enzyme. Amylase, lipase, protease, and now cellulase. Thank you. No big deal. Except. Uh oh. Hold the phone. USDA. HOLD THE PHONE. AGRI-BIZ. Hit man from Monsanto, Bayer, someone. I should have known. Poisoned the vector? Could they? Cellulase. There goes their rice bowl. Their tazón para el arroz. Poof! Shoved it right up their ass. Tazón

para el. Ha, ha. Seriously folks, why no enzyme in herbivores? Answer me that. ANSWER ME THAT you NIH geniuses. He had visions of ruminants galloping through his room, foregut fermenters and hindgut fermenters, odd-toed and even-toed ungulates, a marsupial or two, all chewing, burping, passing flatus at his bedside as he thrashed about in his febrile hallucination. He laughed again. Good question. I don't know the answer. I said, I DON'T KNOW THE ANSWER. In other words, WHY BOTHER WITH THIS SYMBIOSIS BULLSHIT? God, it's so messy. All those stomachs, those little middlemen — bacteria, protozoa, fungi, yeast. YUCK! All those poor animals spitting up, chewing their cud, swallowing again, regurgitating, back and forth, back and forth, when all you need is another enzyme or two. Why? It's so gross. So inefficient. So...INELEGANT! WHY, WHY, WHY? He pounded his head. What had evolution missed? An endless supply of food and no enzyme to digest it? It makes no fucking sense. Why no gene when the survival advantage is immense? A mere oversight? So mother nature is like, "Whoops, forgot about cellulase. Sorry, dudes. Give me a break, I've been busy. Give me some time here." Time? What about the last half billion years? THIS IS JUST MORE BULLSHIT!!! He thrashed about on his mattress. He could see the faces of the IACUC floating on the far wall, the faces of Lisa and the Dean. Oh god. He sat bolt upright, naked, wet and pink as a newborn, prickly with fever. There must be a catch. He heard a voice. "Nature doesn't screw up." It was the Dean. "People screw up." Shit, man.

In his dream Maury was not sure if he was really martyr material. Not for the advancement of science certainly, even for the abolition of world hunger. But no worries. The fever broke. After a week the worst was over. His strength returned, his mind cleared. He felt hugely elated, like he'd survived some terrible accident unscathed. Which he had, except maybe the unscathed part. And he was ravenous. Did he dare try one of his stew designs? No, better not. Nothing rich, nothing spicy. Just keep it simple. He would go for the raw food, in very small quantities. Just a taste. A few spoonfuls of sawdust. This would require the utmost care. He decided on palm wood. Coconut palm would be perfect. A local, commercial tree. He cut strips and put them in the blender. Nope, snapped the blade right off. He tried a cheese grater. That worked. Then he ran it through a pepper mill. He held up a teaspoonful for inspection.

It was a fine powder, golden-brown, like something you could snort, which was definitely not the point. Well, this was it. He was ready. Down the hatch. But his arm froze with the powder an inch from his lips. What was it? Something from his dream, something vaguely remembered. Should he really do this? Had he thought it through correctly? Because the world was about to change, big time. He damn well better be okay with it. He closed his eyes. He thought long and hard. What the fuck. Yes, he was. But wait a minute. One more thing. He put the spoon down and squeezed a few drops of lime juice on the powder. That was better. He lifted the spoon to his mouth and licked it clean. A little oily, a little nutty, as expected, but with some tang. Nice touch, the lime. He washed it down with a gulp of Tecate. He didn't like beer especially. He would have liked to go with a decent white Burgundy. But years from now, when his story was told, he liked the fact it would be said he washed it down with a beer.

Mae Li, Dr. Li, Maury's postdoc, told Lisa—she didn't call her Lisa, of course, she called her Dr. Parisi, just as she called her boss Dr. Sheldon—that she would be honored to join Lisa's, that is Dr. Parisi's, lab. She thanked Lisa warmly, without appearing too effusive, for offering her the opportunity to work with such a distinguished scientist at the cutting edge of their field. Lisa was happy the postdoc situation had gone well, all things considered, requiring only minor sleight of hand with the budget. And Mae assured her the decommissioning process was on schedule and proceeding according to plan. So Lisa had no problem granting Mae a brief leave of absence after the closure of Maury's lab.

“So what are you going to do?” asked Lisa.

Mae, always self-conscious when asked questions about herself, looked down at her hands folded tightly in her lap. “I don't know,” she said, avoiding eye contact. “Read. Just for fun. I haven't read a novel in a long time. Go to the movies. I might even find a beach somewhere.”

“Sounds good. Thanks so much for taking care of the lab, Mae. I know this whole business must be quite a shock. You'd done such great work with Dr. Sheldon.”

“Thank you, Dr. Parisi.”

The Chinese, thought Lisa, what great postdocs. What a pleasure they were, even if they could do a little better in the social cues department. Like, what's with all that Hello Kitty crap? And sometimes she wished they'd kick up a little fuss, though this would not be a good time for it.

Mae's 'beach' turned out to be a lab bench at the Genomic Institute of Chongqing University of Agricultural Sciences. Or maybe she had said, 'bench,' and Lisa had not heard her correctly. Or maybe she meant a metaphorical beach. In any case, Mae arrived in China with reams of data on her computer to find — surprise! — a well-equipped lab and a new faculty appointment waiting for her. She was soon joined by two little friends from America, lab mice who arrived in Chongqing special delivery via diplomatic pouch. While she appreciated the university's generous support, her grand plan was to move to Hong Kong first chance she got to form her own biotech startup. It was only a matter of months before she had some serious investors lined up, both state and private, and some names for the new company. Cellu-Zyme Nutrition Systems. She pictured it listed — with some modest pride she would have to admit, self-consciously — as CZNS on the NASDAQ. Or maybe Cellu-Lite Genomic Solutions? She wasn't sure. She had another meeting scheduled with marketing to nail this thing down.

Maury returned from his leave quite refreshed. Like totally refreshed. Invigorated, in fact. He was a new man. A man emboldened by success and an entire new source of nutrients. He was not yet aware of the indictment rumors swirling about the department, nor would he have cared. The weather was a little warmer, almost springlike. It made him feel even more buoyant and relaxed as he walked across the quad to meet with Lisa. She sprang up from her desk to greet him at the door to her office. "Welcome back, Maury." She held out her hand. Maury gave her a fist bump. "Come in, come in. Have a seat. How was your trip?"

"Awesome," said Maury. " Beautiful. Love the ocean. Love the palm trees."

"I see you got some color. And maybe put on a little weight, eh?"

"Could be. Mexico. Great food. Great people."

“So.” She hesitated. She couldn’t say quite why, but she didn’t like what she was seeing. “So, ready to get back to work?” Then she got it. It was the sight of Maury acting perky. Very disturbing. Suspicious, actually. Things had become so bizarre.

“Of course,” said Maury.

“Great,” said Lisa. “But there are a few things we have to take care of first. Some housekeeping matters.”

“Like.”

“Like missing items from the lab.”

“Give me a break. Check it again.” Maury looked down, directing his attention to his tie, flicking the end back and forth.

“We did.”

“That’s crazy. I went over everything with Mae.”

“Mae’s gone. She left right after you did.”

“She’s not in your lab?”

“No, she went back to China.”

“China? That’s weird. She told me she wanted to work with you. There must be some mistake.”

“Afraid not, Maury. USDA called in the FBI. This is no joke.”

“Whoa, the G-men. Elliott Ness. Okay. Just give me a list and I’ll get it straightened out.”

“That’s what I was hoping to hear. And one more thing. The Dean wants to see you right away.”

Frederick ‘Bud’ Baxter, Dean of the School of Agricultural Sciences, was known to tenured faculty far and wide as a total dick. The younger faculty were too scared of him to make any judgments of their own. Lisa, for her part, had the research chops to keep him at bay, as long as she didn’t run her budget into the ground. But god forbid he found someone to discipline. Maury had been to his office only once, as a faceless member of a faculty committee presenting some complaint. After ten minutes the committee had filed out, apologizing for their presumption. He had never seen raw power wielded so surgically. At the time it had scared the shit out of him. So Baxter’s

office would ordinarily be the last place on the planet he wanted to be, but today he waited unfazed in the Dean's outer office.

"Dr. Baxter will see you now." Baxter's administrative assistant hardly bothered to glance his way as she pointed to the door. It all seemed so amusing to him. Maury sauntered in, more curious than timid. He was, after all, a new man.

"Dr. Sheldon, have a seat," said the Dean, all business, about to come straight to the point. Baxter flew around his desk pointing to a sofa in the corner of the room and dropped into an armchair across from it, surprisingly quick for such a large man. "There seems to be a bit of a flap over your lab." Maury knew precisely why a dean at a cow college in the middle of farm country, a man who grew up in Oklahoma and had a doctorate from the University of Missouri, would try to project a certain Britishness in his speech. Because he was a dick. "I'm sure you'd like to get this rather odd business straightened out as quickly as possible."

"That depends on the business, old sport," said Maury.

Baxter gave him an icy smile, icy like his ice-blue eyes, a smile that seemed to have wisps of vapor escaping from its edges. "Oh, I assure you. You will want to get this business straightened out as quickly as possible." Like dry ice, or maybe liquid nitrogen.

"In that case, Bud, clue me in." Maury attempted a sly smile in return, but it was lopsided and rather goofy.

"It seems that your research assistant has absconded with university property. Intellectual property of some interest to the government. A gene with potential application to humans, I understand. A gene that could be very dangerous. Are you with me?"

"Not really, old chap."

"Cut the crap, Sheldon." Baxter's accent was now distinctly American. "Parisi told you about the lab. We're talking grand larceny here. In your case, conspiracy to commit grand larceny. A Class C felony, old chap. Serious jail time. Are you with me now?"

Maury blinked. He blinked again, still with his goofy smile. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Baxter took a deep breath and lowered his voice, leaning toward Maury with a gentler look. “She’s in China, Sheldon. China. With your gene,” he said, almost pleading in a good-cop kind of way. “We’re objecting through channels, of course. But you know how they are over there. Not much to stop her from going straight to human trials. Think of the potential consequences. Do you want that on your conscience?”

“I wouldn’t worry,” said Maury. “We’re way ahead of her. And it works just fine. Hand me that pencil over there, would you? Thanks. Now watch this, old sport.”

It was late February in Ulyanovsk Oblast and, as they say of that season, a bright sun was already melting the snow from the rooftops. Two distinguished-looking men, of unequal height but with near-identical goatees, hurried up the steps of the administration building of the Ulyanovsk Agrarian Research Institute with their heavy coats unbuttoned, flapping behind them.

“You think they’re Federal Security Service?” asked Professor Kutsik, the shorter of the two.

“No. Foreign Intelligence,” replied Professor Karetnikov.

“That’s better, I should think,” said Kutsik.

“I wouldn’t be so sure, Misha” said Karetnikov.

Two agents were waiting for them in the Institute’s secure inner conference room, both of them puffing on cigarettes in front of the ‘No Smoking’ sign. “Good afternoon, gentlemen,” said the older man at the head of the table. “Sit down please. We’re here to have nice little chat.” The two gentlemen in question sat down without taking off their coats. “I’m Colonel Abilev. This is Lieutenant Stolpovsky. From SVR Directorate X, Scientific and Technical Intelligence.” Abilev was quite pale, with serious bags under his eyes. Stolpovsky’s eyes were bloodshot and half-closed. Both looked like they needed sleep badly, heavy-jowled men who snored themselves into sleep apnea. They flashed ID of some kind. “Professor Karetnikov, I believe we’ve met. We appreciate the work you’ve done for us.” Karetnikov nodded. Abilev continued. “We have interesting information to discuss with you, Professors. But first, please hand your mobile phones to Lieutenant Stolpovsky here. For safe keeping, of course.”

Stolpovsky crushed out his cigarette on the floor and signaled the professors to stand. He patted them down, collected their phones and passed them to a man standing guard outside the door. "Don't worry," he said. "Just routine precaution. You'll get them back, with all your nude photographs. Some very nice, by the way. Don't worry, we don't tell wives. Usually."

Abilev turned his laptop toward them. "Do you know this man?"

The two professors looked closely at the screen. "No, I don't think so," said Karetnikov. "How about you, Misha?"

"Yes. Maybe. An American?"

"Correct," said Stolpovsky.

"And his name?"

"Sheldon," said Abilev. "Dr. Maurice Sheldon."

"I remember. I met him in Prague a few years ago," said Kutsik. "At international conference."

"What kind of international conference?"

"Let me see...Agriculture and forestry conference."

"Correct. Just checking. We know all this. Did he talk about his work?"

"Of course. That's all he talked about. Blah, blah, blah. Very boring man. Starting work on cellulase gene. That got my attention, naturally. He was excited, and very naïve."

"Do you remember what you discussed?"

"Sure. Retrovirus, mouse pancreas. He'd read all our papers."

"How far along do you think he was?"

"From what I could tell, not very. He was still looking for funding. I tried to discourage him."

"And how did he react to that?"

"Not well. He thought I was jealous. I wish I could have told him what we already knew."

"Quite right," said Karetnikov. "State secrets, all our cellulase research."

"Quite right," said Colonel Abilev.

“Still, I tried to tell him it was stupid idea and waste of time. It’s not stupid, of course. Just crazy. He seemed like very stubborn man. Very determined.”

“Then let me share some information with you,” said Abilev, “about this Dr. Sheldon. After your little talk it didn’t take him long to make progress on cellulase gene. As you said, he was very determined. He succeeded with mouse model. Then government bureaucrats closed his lab when they finally got clue about risks. Nice try by government bureaucrat guys, but too late. He tested gene on himself.”

“No,” said Kutsik, slapping his forehead.

“Idiot,” said Karetnikov.

“Yes. He was in Mexico four weeks, eating wood.”

“This is very bad thing.”

“Wait. It gets worse. His postdoc smuggled cellulase gene and vector to China. To start human trials.”

“My god,” said Kutsik. “This is huge disaster. Potential disaster of epic proportions. Where is he now?”

“In Atlanta. CDC has him quarantined. CDC and FBI. I would say, in like prison quarantine.”

“Too late,” said Karetnikov.

“What do you mean, too late?” said Abilev.

“Mexico. He was shedding virus for weeks after insertion. Mice don’t shed, but humans do. So do dogs. We knew all this ten years ago. You must check Mexico for wood-eating dogs. God knows what other species have it by now.”

“Check Mexico and do what?” asked Stolpovsky.

“Start containment, of course,” said Kutsik.

“From what I understand you have firsthand experience with containment?” said Stolpovsky.

“That’s right. I developed containment techniques applied in Urals,” said Kutsik.

“Ah yes. Techniques for your little problem in Urals. Very blunt instruments from what I heard.”

“Blunt instruments you heard?” said Kutsik. “Who cares blunt instruments you heard. Blunt instruments solved problem.”

“And what about Chinese trials?” asked Karetnikov,

“When we found out about them we shared your classified findings with Chinese intelligence,” said Abilev. “Selectively, of course. We didn’t mention containment.”

“Very good. And?”

“Not so good, actually. They thought it was trick to hold them back. We think several hundred people had gene inserted. Our satellites show newly denuded forest in Sichuan.”

“Then we’re all fucked.”

“That’s what we thought. Cigarette?”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you.”

RUTHLESS

Joanne held conflicting impulses as far back as she could remember. They were usually the simple binary kind. Like wanting to have the biggest doll collection in the world yet feeling she should give her dolls away to friends. Or getting married and living in a big house in the country with lots of kids versus the bachelorette life in New York. So it was no surprise when she had the impulse to jump in and solve her daughter-in-law's problem, along with the impulse to do everything in her power to avoid it. Which one would it be? Clayton said no-brainer, choose avoid. But after ten years off and on with Clayton, it was clear he didn't have much credibility in that department. Avoidance he could do no problem, involvement was a stretch. Then there was her friend Alice. Alice nursed orphan rabbit babies until they were big enough to hop off and eat the cilantro in her herb garden. Is that a 'solve'? So Joanne had each buttock stuck on the pointy horns of the dilemma once again. But it wasn't her daughter-in-law she was worried about, it was the grandkids.

I guess it's normal, thought Joanne, pondering yet another paradox whose brazen stare was making her blink. Warring hemispheres? Not really. It wasn't a right brain/left brain kind of thing as she understood it. The scales always seemed evenly balanced, rationally or otherwise. Why wasn't there an internal judge or referee who could make the right call, or at least some kind of psychogenic Lotto to choose a winner? It seemed more like damned if you do, damned if you don't. Unintended consequences either way, at least that was her experience. Intended consequences too, which was sometimes the problem, So what was a grandmother to do? Nothing? Nope. Nothing might be the right thing, but that was still doing something. If only some other power would step in and straighten things out. No matter if it was higher or lower, just get her off the hook. Yet somehow, deep down, she was convinced everything

would be all right. That everything was, in fact, all right. In a way. Something that was hard to explain. Clayton didn't quite buy it. Clayton just danced along the surface of life. He wasn't a bad sort, just a little gun shy about things like commitment. We all have our issues. And our strengths, she reminded herself. And hers was? Her uncanny ability to see both sides of a question. That's what people said, anyway. She knew there was nothing uncanny about it. She was fair-minded, that's all. And a good listener. But give her another glass of wine or a decent Margarita and she was as good a talker as anyone. Just ask Clayton.

My baby does the hanky panky. That's what Clayton liked to tell her when she seemed too abstracted. It was cute the first few times, but now it mostly annoyed her. That and his handlebar mustache, which he rarely groomed despite the trimmer she gave him for his birthday. He told her when they first met she was 'a pretty little girl sitting all alone'. It was the Christmas party at the Elks Lodge. She was fifty-seven years old and Clayton was drunk. She had gone with Alice and another girlfriend to celebrate Alice's election as the Lodge's first lady Elk, so she was hardly alone. She was sitting down because her high heels were killing her and she had to get off them for a minute. But there weren't many other men out there calling her a pretty little girl. It was kind of insulting, and you could take it as demeaning if you wanted to, but the way he said it, or rather sang it, was so plaintive and pathetic that it was hard to take offense. And why should she? She still had a little hanky-panky left in her. Now her daughter-in-law, that was another story. If anyone needed to lighten up it was Francesca. A serious girl—serious woman, rather. Pretty maybe, but nobody'd thought of Francesca as a girl in a long time. Or little. A driven woman, you'd have to say, which was half the problem. Too clever by half, and you never knew which half it was going to be. The other half was circumstances beyond her control, though that doesn't mean they weren't of her own making. It was a harsh way to look at it, Joanne confessed, however true it might be. People had to deal with the consequences of their own actions, as Clayton liked to say—other people, that is. And her daughter-in-law usually did, or tried to. She was not one to ask for help. Quite the opposite. A help rejector. And she was not asking for help this time either, which was a big part of the problem as far as Joanne was concerned. If Joanne did decide to jump in, it might cause

resentment even if she succeeded—another double bind waiting for her at the end of that slippery limb branching out from the original double bind. So maybe Clayton wasn't so dumb after all. Don't-just-do-something-stand-there Clayton. Of course resentment might be waiting for her at the end of the other limb as well, for refusing to step up in time of need. No win. What can you say? My baby does the hanky panky. Or, I'll drink to that. Clayton might say either, or both. In other words, appreciate the paradox. At least accept it. Because, what choice do you have? Joanne had a strong desire to smoke at times like this, though she hadn't had a cigarette in thirty years. Zumba would have to do. She changed into her gym clothes and was about to stream a class when she changed her mind and stepped outside for a walk instead. She was in a contemplative mood. No loud music. The sounds of nature. Nature always restored her balance.

It was not an inspiring day weather-wise. Heavy clouds threatened rain that never came. Not a leaf stirred. The air was dead. She felt it as she strolled down the sidewalk, a sense of suspension like a woman past term. The more subtle side of nature. There must be a message there. She looked, she listened, she smelled the earth. Rich and musty. The earth she was a part of. The wholeness she was a part of. That boded well. An encouraging start. As she walked she listened to her gut. The gut knew its mind, so to speak. What could it tell her? The gut was not complicated, not divided against itself. But was it really independent in its appraisal of her options? Was it the judge, the referee she was looking for? Or was it merely reactive, a reflexion of her mind. Maybe her mind could answer that question. Ha! It was so exasperating. An endless loop—mind to body, body to mind. Her gut didn't have much to say at the moment, but her knees were sore. Plus her legs ached from the varicose veins that bulged so serpentine and unsightly when she didn't wear support hose, which was most of the time because—despite or due to her doctor's exhortations—she hated them. She stopped to rest and found herself admiring a tree across the street. An oak, standing tall and proud, It did not seem worried. A mighty oak. Rooted in the same place for what, a hundred years? There must be a message there, too. It came to her. STOP IT! That was all. GIVE YOURSELF A BREAK. Nature's message. It's as if the tree had winked at her. You can't take this family stuff too seriously, it said. Or yourself. Or

trees, for that matter. Seriously. She returned home with a new bounce in her step. She couldn't wait to tell Clayton. She burst into the house. He was in the living room, watching the golf channel. What was she thinking? This would not be news. She had to give him credit for an insight he lived by all these years that had somehow eluded her. Still, she couldn't help but feel she now understood it at a deeper level, in a more connected way, with a tree rather than a six pack to help her get there.

She and Francesca had more in common than just the two kids. More in common than most in-laws. Both of them had lost husbands—Joanne's husband Raymond from a cancer that had nothing to do with his life style, and she was proud of the fact she never cursed God for His role in that piece of misfortune, and Francesca's husband Brent, Joanne's son, healthy as could be, in a car accident, hit by a senior citizen asleep at the wheel of a two ton Buick from half a tab of Benadryl. Widowhood, a deep bond that bridged a host of differences. Though who used the word 'widow' anymore except for certain spiders who were not exactly kind to their mates. Not an image either of them wanted to cultivate, any more than the image of kyphotic women dressed in black with mustaches they refused to pluck, or lace-draped dowagers who could afford electrolysis. Even the idea of a merry widow seemed suspect. You needed both the merry and the money, and neither of them had both. Joanne pulled up to the entrance of Francesca's gated community and punched in her daughter-in-law's number on the key pad. She waved to the camera and made her happy 'grandma's here' face when the red light winked. The gate swung wide, simulating a gesture that was far too grandiose for Joanne's money. She didn't know how people could put up with that nonsense day in and day out. Inside there was not one street that proceeded in a straight line. Men speaking Spanish were busy at work on the lawns and garden beds, their pick-up trucks lining the curb. A thin young woman in tights and tank top, walking a shih tzu on the other side of the street, yelled at her to slow down. Joanne gave her the finger more out of habit than insult. Then she looked down at the speedometer. After an hour and a half on the interstate she hadn't realized how fast she was going. It almost made her feel bad about the finger business. Hell, thought Joanne, I got a lot on my mind. And the woman deserved it for that prissy little mutt.

Anyway, that's what happens when you're distracted. And she was plenty distracted as she pulled into Francesca's driveway. The house always intimidated her, made her uncharacteristically bashful, but also gave her a sense of pride in what her son and his family had achieved. The two story portico, the Palladian windows, the high-ceilinged entrance hall, the sweeping staircase. Plenty of space for the kids, plenty of room for visiting relatives. The kind of thing you'd expect from drug company executives. She always came armed with a homemade dessert. It eased her discomfort to have something to show for herself and gently assert her rightful grandmotherly status. Clayton wouldn't visit. He said those homes were an eyesore and a blight on the land. He'd grown up in a three bedroom ranch, and said it was all the room a family ever needed to be safe and happy.

Francesca was tall with the fine posture you don't always see in tall women, plus trim and fit from her many years of daily work-outs. With her ebony complexion and tendency not to smile, it added up to a stately bearing, and despite being dressed in an old tee shirt, gym shorts and sneakers, a commanding presence. She bent over to give Joanne an air kiss and a hug, made awkward by the dessert dish Joanne was holding.

'Hi honey, how are you?'

'I'm well. How are you?'

'Just fine. Where are the babies?' Joanne looked for them to come bounding down the stairs.

'They'll be home soon. Devon's at his piano lesson and Breanna's at dance class. Come on in. Can I get you something?' Francesca was too reserved to enthuse, but was hospitable for the most part.

'I brought a little something for them,' said Joanne, holding up the dish.

'How sweet. What is it this time?'

'A peanut butter chocolate chip zucchini cake.' Joanne's specialty was shoofly pie, an old family recipe, but lately she'd been trying things she hoped would appeal to the kids' sweet tooth while acknowledging Francesca's emphasis on a healthy plant-based diet. Her shoofly pies were mostly for Clayton's benefit these days.

They took coffee in the breakfast area off the showcase kitchen, a sunny semi-circular space with large windows looking out on the backyard. Joanne noticed the

kitchen was spotless—no surprise given that Francesca lost her enthusiasm for cooking after Brent’s death. With the kids away it seemed as good a time as any to ask Francesca about her plans.

‘So you have this offer?’ Joanne sensed a flicker of discomfort in her daughter-in-law’s expression, and a slight hesitation before she answered.

‘Well, yes. An offer. A generous one, actually. Only...’ She knit her brow at the seriousness of it and looked out the window as if something in the yard had caught her attention.

‘Only what,’ said Joanne.

‘Only...it’s in Copenhagen.’

‘Oh,’ said Joanne. ‘Copenhagen...And where is that exactly?’ She was a little fuzzy on Copenhagen. Geography was not her strong point.

‘Denmark. You know. Europe. Scandinavia.’

‘Oh. I see. Like way over there someplace.’ Joanne gave her hand a dismissive wave.

Francesca nodded.

‘One of those cold, gloomy little countries,’ Joanne added, forming a vague picture of Scandinavia.

‘Not as cold as it used to be, from what I hear. Or as gloomy.’

‘Oh.’ Joanne had no idea what else to say. She didn’t know much about Denmark one way or the other, nor did she care. All she could envision was her grandkids at the far ends of the earth where she would never see them again, and the end of that bond, always tenuous at best, between a mother and daughter-in-law.

‘There’s a lot to consider,’ Francesca added, as if noting Joanne’s train of thought. ‘I haven’t made any decisions at this point.’

At this point. Joanne didn’t have to be a mind reader to know what that meant. The situation began to sink in, with all its implications. So this was really happening—probably. Just what she’d feared. Only she thought the move might be to Texas or California. Or back near Francesca’s people in Oklahoma, though job prospects there at Francesca’s level in the industry were slim. She couldn’t help but conclude there was a man involved. So much for her grandkids, so much for her daughter-in-law, so much

for her son's legacy. Half brothers and sisters for Devon and Breanna before you knew it. The unfairness of it all. But Denmark, that came out of left field. She was blindsided by that one. That really pissed her off. Unless there was something she could do about it.

'I thought you liked your job.'

'I do,' said Francesca. 'For the most part.'

That sealed it. That one small qualification added in an off-handed way. Francesca's bags might as well be packed and lining the hallway. But if it wasn't a man—which was doubtful, because in her experience women didn't just pull up stakes and move on their own—they must be offering her big bucks. She was making top dollar as it was, plus all the insurance payouts from Brent's death. No, it can't be about money. There was something else going on. Absolutely. Hard to convince someone not to do something when you don't know what the deal is. Or if you should even try.

A few days later Joanne got a call asking if she could take care of the kids for the weekend. That was unusual. Those things were usually planned weeks if not months in advance. Francesca had to be out of town and her regular sitter wasn't available on such short notice. Out of town for what she didn't say. That didn't sit well with Clayton. He twirled the ends of his moustache to signal his displeasure. He and Joanne had a date night planned.

'The least she could do is drop them off here,' he said.

'I know. But they have their lessons and what-not.'

'To hell with their lessons. You're the one doing her a favor. You have a job too. It's not like you're sitting around eating bonbons.'

'You could come with me,' said Joanne. 'We could take the kids bowling or miniature golf maybe. I think they'd like that.' A cagey proposition. Two things Clayton liked as well.

'Forget it,' said Clayton. 'I feel sick just pulling up to that gate. What are all those people afraid of? If the kids come here, fine. Otherwise you're on your own.'

They both knew from the start there was no question Joanne would heed the call, however short the notice, and Clayton wouldn't. It was just a discussion that had

to take place, like kabuki theater without the makeup. Clayton, for his part, made only half-hearted attempts to compete with the grandkids. If push came to shove, Joanne left no doubt what her priorities were. And it wasn't as if Clayton disliked the kids, it's just that his store of available energy had its limits.

This time Joanne was careful with her speed when she drove past the entrance gate. Francesca had given her a heads-up after the last visit. The homeowners association had its share of vigilantes on the governing board. Their eyes were everywhere, and Francesca and the kids got more attention than most. Joanne's middle finger had been duly noted. She didn't have time to bake something new or fancy for this visit, so not to arrive empty-handed she brought a leftover shoofly pie that was sitting in the fridge. If Francesca objected that was her problem. Molasses came from plants last time she'd checked, even if it wasn't full of anti-oxidants, or maybe it was for all she knew. This time the kids came bounding down the stairway to greet her.

'Grandma!' They wrapped their arms around her from either side. That in itself was enough to make the visit worthwhile, whatever Clayton had to say.

When the greetings subsided, Francesca ushered Joanne to the kitchen to review the instructions she'd posted on the refrigerator—lessons, clothes, meals, screen time, friend time, bed time. A spreadsheet of emergency numbers for doctor and dentist, Devon's therapist, ER, the pharmacy, electrician, plumber, HVAC service, a handyman/carpenter, and two different attorneys who were family friends. Not a minute unscheduled. All in 18 point type, large enough for Joanne to read without her glasses.

'I hope this helps,' said Francesca. 'I want to make things easy for you.'

As Francesca was rolling her suitcase out to the garage Joanne finally asked, 'Where you going?'

'A meeting in New York.' Francesca tossed her bag in the back seat. 'You know how much I appreciate your helping out at the last minute like this. I wouldn't have asked if it wasn't important.'

'Sure. No problem,' said Joanne. 'Have a good trip and don't worry about a thing. We'll be fine.'

'OK. Love you. Call me anytime.'

‘No problem. Love you too.’

Joanne and the kids waved from the garage as the car backed out of the driveway, waving until it disappeared down the street. She turned to the house with an empty feeling, like a tech worker who knows she’s training the very people who will replace her from somewhere on the other side of the planet. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t. Maybe she hadn’t heard that oak tree right. This family stuff seemed dead serious at the moment. Maybe that wink was a grimace. She turned to the kids.

‘Who wants to go bowling?’

She would have blown off all their so-called enrichment activities and gone straight to the lanes if they were open yet. She’d have to wait and take them later. It was tough being alone after she dropped them off for their music lessons. She kicked off her shoes. Her feet swelled up after long car rides, but this time her left calf was swollen as well. She figured it must be from the way her jeans bunched up around her crotch in the driver’s seat. She undid the button and the zipper. That felt better. She didn’t know what to do rattling around that big house by herself. The emptiness seemed a harbinger of things to come, an emptiness and constriction at the same time, a future that squeezed the emptiness creeping into her heart. But still she knew it was Francesca’s life that was the issue, not hers. She’d done what she could with her own. The rest was out of her hands, as it should be. That thought didn’t stop the tears from welling up. She reached for her phone to call Clayton, then thought the better of it. Just let them flow, she told herself. Let it all flow. But damn. Damn Francesca’s job. Damn Brent’s accident. Damn nature’s messages. Damn it all.

Joanne never knew exactly what it was that drew Brent to science. His interest started at an early age and never stopped. No one in her family had ever set foot in college, let alone gone on to get an advanced degree. True, people in his father’s family had mechanical ability. Her late husband was good at fixing things around the house. Some teachers encouraged Brent along the way. And she herself had a natural curiosity—the ability to understand, for instance, how animals, even insects, behaved. She felt she could have been a scientist of nature, whatever that’s called, and a good

one, if given the chance. But laboratory research was a different matter, something intriguing and exotic, as foreign to her as one of Scheherazade's tales. The fact that her son developed new drugs, 'life-saving new drugs' as she liked to call them, was astounding to her, and then to have his life snuffed out like that. What a loss not just to her and his family, but to the world at large. Who knows what miracle cures he might have discovered? She tried to get him to explain his work to her, with little success. He kept telling her it was too boring and technical, but she didn't think it was boring whether she understood it or not.

Brent met Francesca soon after they started work at their pharmaceutical firm. Both were go-getters, highly recruited and eager to make their way in the world. Francesca was on the business side, a numbers person. She'd grown up in Tulsa. Her family moved from Trinidad to Oklahoma when she was a baby for her father to study chemical engineering. He stayed to work for an oil company. Her mother was a social worker, so Francesca's family was well-educated Joanne would have to say—one of the reasons they didn't had much in common. They were nice enough folks, but too proper for Joanne to feel at ease around them. And Francesca, for some reason, wasn't all that close to them. It had something to do with religion. One of many things Joanne didn't understand and didn't delve into. The two grandkids were smart as whips, real fire crackers. It scared her at times, how much they knew and the things they could do with computers and even on their phones. The bowling alley was different, though. That was home turf. She could teach them a thing or two in that venue. The kids were having a good time, even with the occasional gutter ball. After her first strike and a rum and coke she was feeling better. Devon seemed happier these days. Maybe it was his therapist, maybe it was just the passing of time. He was the one who had trouble right off the bat after his father's death. Joanne suspected Breanna felt it just as bad or worse, but knew how to keep it bottled up by trying to be perfect in everything she did. You could see the strain if you looked hard enough. Joanne was afraid one of these days she'd just burst. How would a big move to a foreign country help either of them? Dragging them away from their friends, their home, from everything familiar. Francesca wasn't thinking clearly, at least when it came to what was best for the kids. That's what Joanne told Clayton when she heard about the

job offer in Copenhagen. Was that being too harsh? But truth be told, Francesca always played her cards so close to the vest you never really knew what she was thinking about anything. Joanne just wanted to hang on to the status quo. Stability, was that too much to ask? Maybe she was being selfish. She didn't think so, not entirely. Maybe a little, and so what. She had a right to. She'd had her share of losses, more than most. No, that was wrong. You can't compare losses. What can you do?

When they got back from the bowling alley Joanne wasn't feeling good. Not just the pain and swelling in her leg, but listless. She still managed to heat up the dinner Francesca left them, serve her pie a la mode with the chocolate ice cream they picked up on the way home, and get the kids settled for the evening. But when she started feeling short of breath she figured she'd better call Clayton.

'OK, I'm coming,' he said. Simple as that, without being asked. Bless him, all she had to do was say she wasn't feeling well and he was on the way.

Joanne felt the gentle pressure of Clayton's hand on her wrist as she began the gurney ride to her CT scan. Two hours earlier he had taken one look at her and dialed 911.

'No,' she said. 'Don't do that. I think it's a panic attack. An ambulance ride will make it worse.'

She was also thinking of the expense. So he bundled her and the kids into the cab of his truck and carted them all off to the hospital. Saturday night is not the slowest time in an ER. After Clayton finally shouted 'She can't breathe' a few times they took her to an exam room. Next thing she knew she had an IV running and was on her way to the CT. She'd had panic attacks before, but despite her protestations she knew this was different from the get-go. She wasn't just short of breath, it was hard to breathe. And as far as she knew, legs don't get panicky and swell up. Soon after Raymond's death she'd gone to the hospital once with a genuine panic attack thinking it was her heart. That was twelve years ago and she hadn't had one since. The CT tech was nice, but sliding into the machine made her feel like a piece of meat on a slab. And a failure. Grandma to the rescue, what a joke. She blew it. So much for her nurturing presence. It was her fault. Now she was a burden. Worse than that, a danger. The poor

kids, having to witness all this after the trauma they've been through. And they'd had such a nice day up till then. Clayton phoned Francesca and filled her in, told her she needn't hurry back. Things were under control, he'd stay with the kids. She thanked him and said she'd come right away. He assured her the kids were fine and Joanne would be too, so why rush around in the middle of the night? She finally agreed to leave first thing in the morning. When she got to the hospital the next day she found Joanne in bed with oxygen running, getting a blood thinner for the clots in her leg and lungs. Joanne didn't want to talk about her condition. It embarrassed her.

'I'm so sorry,' were the first words out of her mouth.

'My god,' said Francesca. 'It's not your fault.'

'How was your meeting?' Joanne didn't want to talk about her clots. There were more important things.

'We can talk about that some other time. Right now your job is to get well.'

It didn't take long. Joanne was out of the hospital the next day. On the drive home she said, 'I should've worn my compression stockings.'

'Yeah, but you hate those things,' said Clayton.

'Unfortunately that's a fact,' said Joanne. 'I truly do. They make me feel like an old lady.'

'You're no spring chicken, you know.'

'Compared to what?' Joanne was about to give him a thump on the head to straighten out his thinking, but figured it was best to hold off while he was driving. 'I'll out hanky-panky you any day of the week.'

'You just try,' he said. 'But not for a while yet.'

A few weeks later things were pretty much back to normal, except Joanne had to be extra careful not to fall or bump her head. Even with her health insurance, the out-of-pocket expenses were a shock. Francesca offered to cover them, but Joanne would have nothing to do with anything that smacked of charity. Clayton told her she was being too prideful. That burned her good. They had a nice argument over it. Then Francesca said she wanted to come over for 'a little talk'.

'This is it,' said Joanne. 'It's finally happening. I know it.'

'Know what?' said Clayton. 'Maybe it's about the medical expenses.'

‘Nope. The other shoe is about to drop. I can feel it coming.’

The next day Francesca arrived in her new SUV. It took up most of Joanne’s driveway.

‘I think I’ll excuse myself and let you girls talk,’ said Clayton as he grabbed his jacket and slipped out the back door. When he came back the big car was gone and Joanne was sitting by herself in the living room. She’d closed the front window curtains and left the lights off.

‘Well?’

‘It’s Copenhagen,’ said Joanne.

‘No shit,’ said Clayton. He unzipped his jacket and dropped in a chair. ‘I can’t believe it.’

‘Chance of a lifetime. That’s how she put it. A biotech start-up or something. Just what she always wanted.’

‘I’m sorry, hon.’

‘There’s more, though.’ Joanne paused and brushed a piece of lint from her lap. ‘Seems like it’s not just the job.’

Clayton nodded. ‘A man, is it? You suspected as much.’

‘And I still suspect it. But that’s not what she said. She said she wants to get out of the country—meaning the good old U.S. of A. She’s worried about the kids. You know, all this stuff on the news. The shootings, the killings. In the schools. The police. They’ll be teenagers soon. She doesn’t think it’s safe.’

‘Bullshit. Sounds like an excuse to me,’ said Clayton.

‘Maybe,’ said Joanne. ‘Maybe there’s something to it. How do we know what it’s like for her? Or the kids?’

‘She never thought of herself as American much anyway.’

‘C’mon, Clayton. We don’t know that.’

‘The kids, now. That’s different. They’re pretty darn American. Jesus H. Christ. Moving to a socialist country to boot.’

She knew he was working up his indignation for her benefit. She appreciated it, but it wasn’t necessary.

‘Clayton,’ she said. ‘...is it something I did?’

'What? Something you did? Of course not. Get that idea out of your head.'

'I hope you're right.'

'I know I'm right. I might be wrong about a lot of things, but not that. Those kids are damn lucky they got you for a grandma. And she knows it.'

They sat there in the darkened room for a minute, watching motes of dust float in the light that filtered under the curtains. Joanne let out a big sigh that ended more like a moan.

'You OK?' said Clayton.

'No.'

'Tell you what, then. I always wanted to see where those Vikings come from. We'll just have to hop on a plane and go visit every chance we get. Just be sure to wear your compression hose.'

Which she did.

PARTS PER TRILLION

So here's what happened...The town went totally nuts...really batshit...as you'd expect...why wouldn't they?...not the usual small town stuff...road paving and liquor licenses...building permits...Jesus H...PFAS?...in the middle school?...WTF!!!...that explains a lot, not just my kids...haha...more on that later...in the library?...NO NO NO...not the library!... borderline levels...not DWAL...had to re-test it...everyone was notified...bottled water...all the homes at the 'actionable level'...'forever chemicals'...in parts per trillion...that's right, ppt...in everything...candy wrappers...cookware...clothes...pizza boxes...F'ING PIZZA BOXES?...since when?...in fire fighting foam...aha!...so MB the fire department...AFFF's...no records...no big deal twenty-five years ago...training exercises...just dump it in back...downstream...cognitive development...high cholesterol...cancer...infertility...cue the lawyers...OMG...easy pickin's...crows on roadkill...can you imagine?...reporters too...sure...who do they think they are, Erin what's-her-face?...they'll all dine out on this one...the clean up...Fed funds....taxes...property values down the drain...in the toilet...and the town just did a ten year assessment...their taxes went up!...with PFAS in their wells!...Fucking A!...death threats...they want to string someone up...can't blame them...who?,,the fire department???...their neighbors, volunteers?...sure, why not...property values, a very emotional topic...as we all know from, ah-hem, history...try dodging that one...70 ppt worse than a whole bus load of 'those people'...still don't know the source...the home owners association suing everyone...health director...sanitarian...first selectman...board of selectmen...building inspector...tax collector...dog catcher...you name it...shyster law firm on contingency...licking their chops...can't drink the water, that's for sure...guy's been living there 30 years...drinking PFAS for what, 20-25?...family with thyroid problems...fibroids...herpes...ADD...you think he's scared?...filtration systems, who's gonna pay?...the town attorney is sweating his balls off...sorry, her...checking

with the insurance carrier...MB some kind of trust fund...who's got the deep pockets?...DEP has to complete its investigation first...could take years...BTW, Trish says she's not running for re-election...looks worn out...she's a mess...real depressed...and its only her first term as first selectman...first select-person...is the town liable?...when it's a volunteer fire department?...but on town property...spokesmen for the HOA's a state police captain...huge guy...says they might as well bulldoze the homes on the south side of the street...pokes his fat finger in her face...who's gonna pay?...Trish is like intimidated...who wouldn't be?...he's an ogre...she's not cut out for this...you can tell...on edge...nervous wreck...afraid of her own shadow...and some of those homeowners...driving Escalades, Porsches...the tattoos...arms, legs, necks...the men too...where'd they get their money?...don't ask...oh shit, oh shit...DEP, DPH, covering their asses...more BS...giving us the run around...what do you expect... more government crap...two years...blowing smoke... only town in the state...so far...and an army base somewhere...why us?...what saps... come out here for country living...country squires on the cheap...\$80,000 pick-up trucks...leather seats...boat at the marina...now they want a bail-out...they have a point but give me a break...same ones who hate government handouts...no reparations for YOU people...what's done is done...suck it up...the nerve...why should I have to pay?...I didn't do nothing...now it's WAH WAH my well's contaminated!...WAH WAH make me whole!...it's only fair!...I'm owed!...entitled!... everyone's a jerk when it comes to their own rice bowl...some bigger than others... some yuuge...me too...hypocrites...doesn't mean they're wrong here...a wailing and gnashing of teeth...almost biblical...

That meeting at the fire house...information session, open to the public...a bold move if you ask me...wouldn't want to be in Trish's shoes...she was there, bless her... in the hot seat...give her credit...I think that did her in...but why should she care?... she's bailing out...let someone else deal with this caca...not how she wanted end her term...tough shit, babe...you're holding the bag...the guy from the Chamber...former president...the insurance broker...skulking around...playing both sides...why?...sees a political opportunity?...maneuvering between factions...little weasel...Gerry...Gerry the Weasel...sucking up to the HOA...their war council's prowling around the fire

engines...looking for dirt...out for blood...had their own little problems...like some little uh, wife swapping incidents...non-paternity issues...who gets the house?...doesn't matter...worth bupkis anyway...screw anybody you want...doesn't matter whose kid comes out...everyone's screwed...

DEP wasn't coming for me...too far out of the red zone...half a mile...but still...aquifers, who the hell knows where they go...I had to foot the bill for my own well testing...and?...no PFAS!...great!...but wait...WTF...uranium???...what a great town...PFAS... COVID...Lyme...Babesia...Anaplasma...West Nile...Eastern Equine...ticks...mosquitos...pizza boxes...AFFF's...now this?...a 1950s sci-fi horror B-movie?...FUCK ME!...URANIUM!...all natural!...nobody to sue!...but not to worry...no mutations, no cancer...heavy metal...just your kidneys...what are they hiding?...Cold War stuff...Aircraft Nuclear Propulsion...1950s...nuclear powered planes...seriously...we're not talking sci-fi here...nuclear everything...our friend the atom...they really tried that crazy shit...Russians too...had to dump it somewhere when they canned the program...our tax dollars at work...try suing the Air Force...uranium...like slide rules...so last century...it's PFAS now...a million varieties...designed by A.I....that's the thing...and tattoos...and Escalades...and a little roll in the hay with your neighbor after church...just kidding...an old tradition...never goes out of style...like better living through chemistry...everyone's quip when they're snorting a few lines...

...Then things got rough...rumors started...the town knew about it for years...secret experiments...industrial accidents...Coast Guard waste...Trident subs...the deep state...the town dump...gigantic coverup...now everyone wants their wells tested...at the town's expense...or the state's...anyone's but their own...protests at town hall...mobbed...got a little emotional...smashing windows...slashing tires...Trish stopped going to work...wouldn't take phone calls...wouldn't answer her emails...resigned...then her suicide attempt...nobody wants the job...panic at the Chamber of Commerce...the Rotary Club...the Lions...more B-movie shit...fear and money...money and fear...my wife says SELL THE HOUSE STUPID...NOW...let's get out of Dodge...PFAS in the schools...hello, what more do you want?...hold on...not so fast...nice try kid, but...no real estate agent will touch us...we're toxic,,,Love Canal...you a-holes...my well doesn't even have the stuff...doesn't matter...we're all stuck...

trapped...a leper colony...right here in River City...I mean...Hansen's disease community...

I volunteered...don't ask me why...a weak moment...my brain wasn't working ... PFAS, obviously...at town hall... a citizen's committee...to develop an 'action plan'... I'm made Chair...why not?...I'm not going anywhere...Trish is no help...she's staying home...out of sight...shades drawn...catatonic...someone whispered ECT...I don't think so...who knows...we could all use a little juice now and then...so the 'action plan'...rational sampling...allay people's fears...empower the homeowners who had high levels...get them involved...inform the rest of us...turn them into advocates... trouble is they're over the edge...every imaginable symptom...headaches... menopause...chest pain...ED...hallucinations...half are in Florida...Florida?...I tell them they'd be safer here...they don't think that's funny...they don't think anything's funny... they're still swapping wives in Florida but it's not so much fun anymore...a DUI here, a restraining order there...one's charged with slashing Trisha's tires...I look at these folks and think there's gotta be a meth lab in somebody's basement...Breaking Bad, Sopranos wannabes...there's a town meeting...I try to speak...the real estate agents are sloshed...falling off their chairs... why are they even there?...must be money around somewhere...coming or going...I have to figure out which...later...so I try to speak...someone throws condoms at me...condoms?...like it's the 80's...HIV...it's Gerry!...the insurance broker...he's off his nut...of course...he brokered the homeowner's policies!...safe sex for the wife swappers...the police captain's sitting behind him...out on disability...he smacks Gerry with a pizza box...brought it for a prop...an 'action plan'!...I'm telling them we're going to develop an 'action plan'!... bring the community together...neighbors helping neighbors...all I want to do is sell my house and get the fuck out of there...away from these bozos...

The action plan?...there was an action plan all right...action for somebody...not 'the community'...not me...I was the beard...cover for guess who?...Trish and Gerry the Weasel...going at it like bonobos...and we thought she was strung out from PFAS...no, no, no...Perc's...from her dentist, her orthopedist, her gynecologist, her yoga instructor...and Gerry...surveillance video...sent to his wife...anonymously...Trish and Gerry doing it in the emergency operations center at town hall...really hot stuff...

blackmail...sender threatens to post it on a porn site...this all came out later...after Gerry's indictment for insurance fraud...took in premiums and kept the money...a little online gambling problem...uninsured homeowners...bad timing with the PFAS...doesn't matter...insurance never would've paid anyway...what a racket...

My kids think it's funny...my seventh grade son...only cares about video games and his hard-ons, in that order...PFAS no help with either...you'd wish...makes kids hornier if you ask me...and with the shit he eats...doesn't make much difference...parts per trillion...like dad, who's gonna notice?...my older daughter thinks we're all stupid...she has her friends, her phone, her dance routines...climate change, identity theft, China, PFAS...get over it, dad...my younger daughter draws pictures of mutant animals in class...she makes them into cartoons...they say things in thought balloons like 'this secret elixir has given me the power to grow new limbs'...spider cats...ant dogs...when I confront her she says, 'you guys need to lighten up'...maybe she needs to change therapists...PFAS in the middle school...no shit...it's not just me...I hear the same thing from other parents...that explains what happened to their kids...ten, twenty years later...so part of our 'action plan' was going to be a study of divorce rates and bankruptcies...adults who attended the middle school in the past twenty-five years...the health department laughed...we said OK dirtbags, how about cancer?...diabetes?...multiple sclerosis?...schizophrenia?...gingivitis?...you like that shit?...gingivitis?...now they're not laughing...gum disease is no joke...they snicker...do you know how hard it is to do that kind of study?...like the old cartoon...you want it when?...haha...but they'll keep an eye on things...to see if any 'clusters' appear...sure, about the time they retire...hey dirtbags, the 'clusters' are in the middle school right now...oh...sorry to disturb you...that's all right...go back to your coffee...it's 4:02?...you're working late...maybe you need a vacation...

The health director had a little accident...going home from the town meeting...someone in a black Yukon ran her off the road...into a ditch...didn't get the license plate...broken ribs...bruised sternum...totaled her Subaru...out on medical leave...could she still give me some input on the 'action plan'?...no dice...trouble concentrating...who's minding the store?...Trish is gone...no health director...no one's paying taxes...the school teachers union is suing...and now the weasel from the

Chamber's running for first selectman?...fishy...only a saint or...masochist or...idiot or...follow the money...

I had to look deeper into this PFAS business...I mean from the chemical point of view...per and polyfluoroalkyl substances...fluoropolymers...an accidental discovery... from Freon...white powder...chance favors the greedy mind...now if I was a PFAS molecule, what would I do?...where would I go?...what would I be thinking?...I'd be a slick bastard...a slippery character...a teflon don...I could take the heat...yuk yuk...I could go on...but enough of that...I want to tell you what really happened...right here in River City...no bullshit...when the heavy hitters showed up...the big guns...the sharks...blood in the water...personal injury lawyers from across the Styx...smelling a payday...corporate attorneys...the town's insurance company says take a hike...they're not on the hook...it's criminal negligence on the town's part...the town attorney is way over her head...she does real estate...wills...eldercare...so she outsources to a white shoe defense firm...shake hands everyone...come out fighting...may the best dirt ball win...blows below the belt?... be my guest...ball busters...nut crackers...all of them...white shoe, brown shoe...men and women...all in suits...P.I's snooping around...PSYOP...dirty tricks...a buried load of pizza boxes?...the vice-president of the HOA owns a string of pizza joints...what about that, eh?...mere coincidence?... meanwhile...needless to say...no one is interested in a community 'action plan'...as a liability dodge it's a bust...those who can afford it dump their homes for peanuts and split...others stop paying the mortgage and wait for eviction...drag it out as long as they can...trash the house...pocket the savings...it's something at least...I didn't have the balls...my FICO score...I check it every month...it's a sickness...

The litigation dragged on...battle royal...plaintiffs dying off...OD's...MI's... ovarian cancer...PFAS?...they all had other risk factors...drinkers, smokers, unsafe sex...causation?...constant conjunction?...if it goes on long enough...you get the picture...kick sand...until you see the writing on the wall...legal fees...hostile judges... sympathetic juries...negotiate and settle...which is what happens...naturally...no actual 'wrong doing'...it's business...just Benjamins...the insurance company and the town each pony up a piece...lawyers rake off their cut...homeowners pocket what

cash is left and move to Florida, the Carolinas, Arizona...golf year round...Corvettes...
new neighbors to screw around with...in the time they have left...

Up go our taxes to pay for this freak show...new mill rate...on our worthless
houses...plus an emergency levy...can't bake sale your way out of this shit...out come
the pitchforks...baseball bats...gasoline canisters...hunting knives...AR-15's...
taxpayers revolt...we're not paying MF's!!!...up your bureaucratic ass!...come and get
it cocksuckers!...more lawsuits...the mill fate, the levy...not in the town charter!...
unconstitutional...revenue?...forget it...can't pay teachers' salaries...roads a mess,
potholes...businesses fold...tax collector, building inspector, town clerk all resign...
town declares bankruptcy...our new 'action plan'...last one to leave turn out the
lights...PFAS...parts per trillion...

THE CHIEF OF SERVICE

It was a no-brainer. Boring, in fact. Physicians screw up in just so many ways. Sherman ended the hearing with a hint of sympathy so feigned it didn't elicit the slightest hope in the poor bastard across the table. Sympathy was not Dr. Sherman's strong suit. Besides, he was hungry. He suppressed a yawn and dropped his studied look of fairness, if there is such a look, nodding to his fellow committee members—the administrative judge, the state's attorney, and the administrator who would be writing up the proceedings for his signature—as the plaintiff and his lawyer filed out of the room. It was important to keep up cordial relations with his colleagues, whatever his private opinions of them. Everyone had their uses. This idiot they'd just reviewed had screwed himself so bad he'd be lucky to ever get his license back. Was he really that dumb? Not just professional ethics here, the breach of standards of care, but criminal acts looking at jail time. Leave that to the DA. Same old story—sex and money, drugs and alcohol, so sloppy it seemed like the clueless dopes don't even care if they get caught. Sherman had nothing but contempt for sloppiness. He missed the exactness of surgery, the drama of an open chest under his knife, but what could he do? He had his medical condition, and there was a different yet very real pleasure from the power invested in him by the state to discipline doctors. No money in it of course, but so what. It was not like he needed the money. Far from it. There were other compensations, like the refined ambience of oak-paneled conference rooms where hearings for the Board for Professional Medical Conduct were held, even if there were no anesthetized patients on operating tables inside, waiting for him to perform. It all seemed so...Patrician? Brahmin? There was even a blue-blooded smell to the furnishings. Something from a bygone era of noblesse oblige, of public-spirited WASPs and Patroons, when nobody of consequence minded if you put some real money into a

public building because public buildings weren't for the hoi polloi, they were for those who policed the hoi polloi or, in his case, those who policed the professional masses, and so deserved to be well-appointed. What really interested him was an upcoming case from which he had recused himself. Not that his influence wouldn't be felt. He would make sure of that. In fact, he already had. He looked at the time. He had to hurry if he was going to make his dinner appointment uptown.

The administrative judge, a woman with an Ivy League degree, a Labrador retriever, two teenage children, and a husband on Wall Street, had stopped in the doorway and turned toward him. "Going anywhere for the holidays, David?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact," said Sherman, shuffling his papers. "Out west for some skiing."

"If you're still around, we're having a party next week. We'd love to have you over."

"Sorry Donna, I won't be here. But thanks for the invitation."

"Have a good trip then. See you next month."

"Right, next month. Happy holidays."

"Happy holidays."

Sherman looked forward to next month thinking, as he stuffed the hearing documents in his briefcase and felt his stomach growling, the sooner the holidays were over the better. What an aggravation. He'd sent a nice gift to his daughter and her mother in Arizona, which was the only obligation he had other than, to his mind anyway, the child support which was the price he paid for that little mistake. He couldn't help but admit he'd been taken, he of all people, if not to the cleaners, at least for a large chunk of change, by assuming he was in charge of the whole business when what-do-you-know, the pregnancy came along—quite the news flash considering her so-called birth control—and turned the relationship's power vectors on their head. A young woman, his resident, no dummy obviously, good-looking enough though, stroking his ego. Admiration is almost as seductive as power. A drug for the middle-aged. Lesson learned. He tried his best to hush the whole thing up, but good luck with that pipe dream. It was the buzz of the department for months, grist for the hospital gossip mill from the OR to the cafeteria to the executive suite. But so what? Let them

talk. What could that do to him, really? He wasn't the first man to have a brat by the kitchen maid. Or his 'niece'. A needless expense though. That rankled. A mistake. He hated mistakes. Which was why he was looking forward to that next case after the holidays to address another little complication that never should have happened. Better late than never he reminded himself, anticipating the pleasure of payback as the tap of his designer heels echoed across the marble hallway on his way to the elevators, recalling a winter day just weeks before his mysterious medical condition appeared, a day only a few years back that he wanted erased from the books.

I'm going to nail that little son of a bitch, Sherman told himself, sitting in the back seat of his limousine as he waited for his driver to come around and hold the door. He stepped out and paused for a moment in the bright cone of light that covered the hospital entrance, feeling a shock of frigid air. He liked the sting of cold just before dawn, the rawness of that hour, the way it sharpened his senses—sharpened them even more, since he didn't drink or drug. He smiled, thinking again of the nailing he was going to give that son of a bitch. Not that dishing it out was anything new. You don't get where he was without busting a few heads—figuratively speaking of course, being the respected surgeon he was—but the dirty little secret of the world, once you put aside all the moral platitudes and other bullshit, was you had to keep your boot on the other guy's neck or he'd put his boot on yours, always careful in his line of work to do it with a certain finesse. Although maybe in special cases, every now and then, with just a touch of brute force for old times' sake. He preferred, however, that it look like his boot was applied for the other guy's own good or, if that was too big a stretch, for some higher good, even if that did happen to coincide quite nicely with his own interests. And he had done very well on that score as his limo, his penthouse, his ranch in Colorado, his oceanfront Florida estate, and his box at the opera where he hosted a parade of well-chosen, well-heeled guests, all attested. Though he had made his fortune not through the drudgery of high-volume surgery, however remunerative that piecework might seem to any ordinary schmo, but by wheeling and dealing in commodities, then real estate. Surgery was just for fun and the cachet and, silly as it might sound, because his mother always wanted him to be a doctor. Gazing about at

the high walls of plate glass, the massive overhanging portico, the early morning trickle of staff moving through the revolving doors, enjoying the little drama of his daily appearance in the limo, he could feel the power in that factory-like building, a hospital in the heart of the city, the array of technology, personnel, and capital at his finger tips, the way he felt the power of his body, for he was still powerfully built—years past his prime, but impressive in his bulk if nothing else. He knows it's coming too, he thought, Abrams the little bastard, looking into the frosted windows that reflected Sherman's looming image, his dark thinning hair and eyebrows flecked with grey, his round almost boyish cheeks, knowing he was not especially good-looking, rather that he had, he was told, a striking presence which served him well enough. The little bastard won't go down without a fight, but he'll go down. There was a deep pleasure in this game, one that Sherman had played many times the way he'd played his many games on a football field, grunting and banging it out on the offensive line without the glamor of the prestige positions, knowing exactly where he was going on each play whatever game he was in for the rest of his life, starting with the athletic scholarship that launched him into medical school. He'd seen more than one fair-haired quarterback wiped out by drugs and alcohol, and running backs end up in jail. Dumb fucks, all of them. The white vapor of Sherman's breath swirled away in the wind. Though he was wrapped tight in a long winter coat and scarf, his massive head was bare. Surgery rounds were about to begin and, as Chair of the department, he was eager to skewer a resident or two before nailing his esteemed colleague at M&M, the morning's mortality and morbidity conference. In other words, it was a day much like any other.

Sherman pushed through the entrance's revolving door into the sudden warmth of the hospital lobby, past the daily greeting of the night shift security guard, with a momentary feeling—where did that come from?—of coming off the street into the warmth of his fourth floor walkup's kitchen when he was a kid, his fingers and toes numb from the cold and his mother fussing with something in the oven, bread or a pie maybe, waiting for his father, the journeyman prize-fighter, to get home from the gym. She knew that if her husband had a fight coming up he wouldn't be drunk when he got home, knew he would start clowning around to show he wasn't worried about the other guy—guinea, mick, nigger, spic, whatever he was, just bring him on he'd say, they were

all the same to him. His father would cuff him and they'd horse around, banging into the furniture until his mother would tell them to stop. If his father was drunk Sherman would just stay out of his way, as would his mother unless she really needed some money and then all hell broke loose. Don't need that, he thought. He liked the bread and the pie and the warmth but you could get that anywhere and with less cost. His mother was a weak woman, he had to admit. She didn't respect herself. But so what. That was her problem. Why was he thinking about her? He didn't have time for it. He went straight to his office where the chief residents were waiting to give morning report.

True, Dr. Abrams was small—many triathletes are, short and slim—but he would be offended if someone called him little. On the other hand he would have no problem being called a son of a bitch under the right circumstances, like in his divorce proceedings or getting his way in the OR, while with patients and their families he was a pussycat, and with colleagues, at least those who made surgical referrals, a gentleman so old-school he seemed almost European. Quite dapper and, if not conventionally handsome, at least wealthy enough to be considered 'an attractive older man'. No surprise, he had a lucrative practice long before Sherman was brought in to chair the department. Sherman's job was to grow the surgical pie, which he was only too happy to do as long as he had dibs on the biggest slice. And with his hand everywhere, in the emergency room, surgical consultations, the OR schedule, and with chief residents as his eyes and ears giving him the lowdown on every surgical case in the house, he had no trouble snatching it from the competition. It was not about the money, least of all the need for money. He had so much money sloshing around from his real estate deals that he invested in sports teams and race cars. It was about the scorecard. Or maybe it was about the money, too. In any case, Abrams had to be brought down a notch, put in his place, shown who's boss, have his wings clipped, etc., purely on principle if for no other reason, and with the exception of rumor and innuendo, nothing would do the job better than having his skinny little triathlete European-like butt kicked before the entire surgery department at M&M. Now that was satisfying.

Sherman grabbed his white lab coat and strode from his office to the surgical floor. He was itching to start rounds, get the ball rolling, stir up the early morning crowd before his big performance later that day. Once he would have taken the stairs two at a time, striding ahead of the residents. Now he felt a twinge in his knee that reminded him why he didn't, though he still felt he could take any of the young Turks one-on-one if they were crouched across from him on the line of scrimmage. The elevator door opened on a throng gathered at the nurse's station awaiting his appearance, and he soon had a trail of residents and medical students in tow. Two students, he noted. Always an inconvenience. Slowed you down. Oh well. At least they gave the interns a little sport—someone they could boss around, someone they could dump on, since nurses wouldn't take shit from anyone below the chiefs. He looked at his watch. He had one operation scheduled before M&M. He was on-time, but there was no time to spare. While everyone bunched in the hallway before the open door of a patient room, one of the junior residents presented a recent case admitted for syncope. The patient, an old man wrinkled more from care than age, had fainted when he jumped out of bed in the middle of the night, rushing to the bathroom before his bladder burst from the effects of his new diuretic, and was now wondering why on earth he was still in the hospital with a tube in his penis when he felt just fine, except for the tube. Sherman led the team to the bedside, towering sober and grave over the skinny supine half-naked figure, constructing as best he could what might be called an air of sympathy, reading the questions in the old man's face, the mounting worry as, one by one, he had the residents and students slap their stethoscopes on the poor guy's wrinkled neck.

“What did you hear?” Sherman barked at the nearest student.

The student, tall and thin, a budding psychiatrist, shrank back for a moment, as if cursing his bad luck at having to perform for this scrum so early in the morning, and searching not so much for the right answer as for the right way to say it. Sherman had no patience for hesitation. This morning especially he was not in the mood for delay. “Time's up. No answer is the wrong answer. You!” he said, pointing a thick index finger at the other student. “What did you hear?”

“Umm...kind of like...kind of like a whooshing sound? Very soft though,” she said.

“A whooshing sound? What are you, a plumber?” said the chief resident.

“I mean...a bruit...?” said the student,

“And what is a bruit?” Sherman asked.

“Turbulent flow in...a narrowed artery.”

Sherman whirled back to the first student. “And what is the significance of a bruit in the carotid artery?”

“That depends,” said the first student.

Sherman sensed a smart-ass. “Depends on what?”

“Whether the patient is symptomatic, and the degree of the stenosis.”

Definitely a smart-ass, thought Sherman. He loved fucking with smart-asses. Especially nerdy little smart-asses going into internal medicine, even if this nerdy one was tall as he was. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Evans,” said the student. Sherman made a mental note to tweak this Evans’ evaluation down a notch or two at the end of the rotation.

“What are you going into, Evans?”

“I’m not sure. Psychiatry, probably.”

“Psychiatry? What’s wrong, can’t stand the sight of blood?” Sherman turned to the sniggering residents. “Okay. Let’s have a look at the angiogram.”

They retreated to a conference room and put up the films. Sherman had the intern trace the tortuous course of the artery in question. “What do you see?”

“Well, it’s. It’s...It’s a little narrow here...and here...,” said the intern, squinting as he pointed at the wavy white image on the view box.

“It’s kinked, “ said Sherman.

“Kinked,” said the intern.

“But is syncope...?”, began the student, Evans, piping up from the back of the swarm clustered around the illuminated anatomy. “It’s not...” The resident gave him a sharp elbow to pipe him down.

“Ah yes, Dr. Freud. You have a question?” said Sherman.

“No, sir,” said Evans, thinking the better of it.

“I thought I heard you say something about syncope. Maybe you think the patient passed out from his Oedipal conflict? Maybe his carotid artery just needs a little psychotherapy? Some ECT?”

“No, sir,” said Evans.

“Then, if it’s all right with you, we’ll operate.”

The group tramped back to the patient’s room to give the old man the results of his angiogram.

“Your carotid artery is kinked,” said Sherman, bowing his head in a display of the utmost gravity.

“Kinked?” said the patient. “What’s kinked? What does that mean?”

“That means if we don’t operate right away you could have a stroke. Or die. The sooner we take care of it the better.”

The old man was struck dumb. When he finally found words, he asked, “How soon?”

“If we get moving, maybe this afternoon.” Sherman put a large paw-like hand on the man’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, this operation saves lives. You’re lucky you got here in time.”

Sherman sent his resident to book the case ASAP. As they hurried down the hall the second student, a young woman leaning toward a career in pediatrics, pulled the intern aside and whispered, “Is a kinked artery actually an indication for surgery?”

The intern was too tired to answer. He gave her a weary shrug and trotted faster to keep up with his chief.

Mortality and morbidity conference started strictly on the hour. The room was filled—Dr. Sherman had no tolerance for stragglers. He stood over the podium with his considerable bulk still in green scrubs and surgical cap, coming directly from his first operation of the day with barely time to throw on a lab coat again. “Good morning and welcome to M&M.” he said softly, adjusting the long gooseneck microphone closer to his mouth. Time to kick things off. He took a good look at the faces in front of him, satisfied with the turnout. They would not be disappointed. “Before we start, let me briefly review the ground rules. These sessions are meant to be educational. Their goal

is to improve patient care. To accomplish that, they must be open, honest, and blame free.” There were a few coughs from the back of the room. Sherman continued. “Please refrain from directing personal blame or criticism towards your colleagues. All feedback should be fair, constructive, and useful. Let me remind you that the material presented here is strictly confidential, and is not discoverable in a court of law. We have three cases to review today, so let’s get started.”

Sherman took the empty seat in the front row reserved for him, feeling the familiar calm and confidence that always possessed him once play began. One of the chief residents stepped up and presented the first case in the no-nonsense style of the surgeon-scientist. And while Sherman maintained his sense of command, he couldn’t help but notice a subtle challenge. What was Abrams doing at the other end of the front row? Looking so relaxed? Didn’t the little bastard have a clue what was coming? His Armani suit wasn’t going to protect him. When one of your cases comes before M&M it’s safe to assume someone fucked-up big-time, thought Sherman, whatever the current crap about root causes and system issues, PAcE and SEIPS and PDSA and SBAR and the whole array of asinine consultant-contrived acronyms. He glanced at Abrams. What good was it if the little son of a bitch didn’t squirm a little? Or maybe he just doesn’t know what’s coming. But no, that would be too naïve. While Sherman puzzled a bit, the first two cases went smoothly. Diagnoses questioned, judgment impugned, decisions second-guessed, technique challenged. The radiologist weighed in, the pathologist made her call. A festival of hindsight all going according to plan. He had saved Abrams’ case for last, and was savoring the wait. Yet something still didn’t sit right. What had he missed? There was Abrams, cool as could be. Sherman’s suspicions, never lax for long, told him to keep on his toes until he figured out what was up. Stay the course, he told himself. Don’t let your guard down. Finish the play.

After the resident presented Abram’s case and the pathologist her post-mortem, Sherman rose slowly to take full charge of the room. He kept his comments brief and to the point. It would be a business-like dismemberment and, of course, an educational one. The surgical indication was questionable. There was no need to rush to the OR. The patient was not adequately stabilized. The approach was wrong. The blood loss was excessive. He did not go on, nor did he need to. Mission accomplished. A dummy

could connect the dots, if any dots were left. The old saw—just because the patient’s dying doesn’t mean you have to kill him. He sat down and crossed his legs, at ease, a man who had simply done his job, watching Abrams out of the corner of his eye as he waited for a response. The room was silent. Then the murmuring began. The names of patients and doctors were never given at M&M, but half the room knew the case and the people involved, and the other half could find out easily enough. Still it stunned the audience when Abrams stood up and said, rather casually, addressing Dr. Sherman, “As you know, that was my case.” He pulled a journal article from his suit pocket, turned to face the room and waved it high over his head. “And since this is an educational conference, as Dr. Sherman points out, I’d like to draw attention to a study from the literature that is quite pertinent here. An interesting report from the *Journal of Thoracic Surgery*.” He looked again at Sherman. “It describes a series of patients similar to mine, who, like mine, all went to surgery, and recommends the same approach that I chose. Unfortunately, as you all know, mortality runs high in these cases, with this approach or any other. And my patient was taking aspirin, unlike those in the case series, so the bleeding was not a surprise. The operation was certainly high-risk, but at the very least the patient deserved a chance. So given the same situation, despite Dr. Sherman’s comments, I would do the same thing again. It seems that Dr. Sherman has changed his mind on the subject, since he was one of the authors of the study.”

Sherman rose again, not so slowly this time, to halt the whispering that swept across the room. Were his residents actually smirking? Yes, no denying it, he was one of the co-authors of the article, written years ago during his research year as a surgery resident. The study was old, and its findings suspect in light of newer, better data that he was familiar with and could have quoted. But it didn’t matter, the damage was done. Repudiate his own research? “Thank you for such a thorough search of the literature, Dr. Abrams,” he said. Despite his sneer, he was aware that he appeared defensive. An unpardonable hint of weakness on his part, compounding an unpardonable oversight. Sherman went on. “In light of the patient’s unplanned return to the OR and subsequent death, the case has been referred to Risk Management, and will be sent to the QI Department for root cause analysis.” Few heard the announcement, a vain attempt at

recovery, as most people were making for the exit. "I'm afraid we've run out of time. Thank you for your attention. The meeting is adjourned." Game Abrams, thought Sherman, but not set, let alone match. Yet small as it was it was still a blemish, a tiny crack in the shell he had been elaborating all his life. He retreated to the OR, focusing his outrage that afternoon on the kink in the old man's carotid.

A month later Dr. Sherman's medical condition seemed to appear out of the blue, like space debris or a mysterious spell. There was nothing unusual about that particular day. No premonitions, no portents, no fitful sleep the night before. He was riding to work in his limousine, reviewing his plans for the next M&M conference. The temperature outside was seasonal, with dirty patches of snow in the gutters. Traffic was light and he made good time. But as he approached the hospital, the street around him seemed to tilt just slightly. Weird he thought, like a boat rocking. Then his head felt funny, as if it was stuffed with cotton, and he had the strange notion he might pass out. His first instinct was to feel for his pulse. He counted. A bit slow. A skipped beat. Thready? His own heart? He concentrated on sensations in his chest. Something wasn't right there. He couldn't say what exactly. It wasn't pain or pressure, not even a discomfort really. Just a something. Maybe something he ate. Then a tingling, prickly feeling ran through him, a jolt that left him slightly numb. The buildings out the window looked unfamiliar, though it was the same route he took every day. This thing, whatever it was, was not good. Like the feeling he had years ago when his bell was rung on the football field from a hit he didn't see coming, the trouble he had forming thoughts and focusing his attention. He never told anyone about it at the time of course, no one would have back then, and was sent in the game for the next set of downs, a series that turned into a fiasco for him. The confusion of being benched for missed assignments, a penalty he couldn't recall but later saw on the game films. He, of all people, dressed down for sloppiness. The humiliation lasted far longer than the headaches. He hadn't thought of that in years, but it came back to him now, a part of the dizzy feeling in the back seat of the limousine in which he traveled, he said, not for ostentation but for a place to work on his way to the hospital. Remembered how his grades dipped so that by the end of the semester his scholarship was in trouble, and

the next season he had to work twice as hard to wrestle his old position back. Wrestle his old position back? The light-headedness lifted as quickly as it appeared. When his limo dropped him at the hospital entrance he felt drained, as if he'd been in a fist fight. He barely made it halfway through his first operation and had to leave the chief resident to finish on his own. He needed to be careful now. This was no time for fuzzy thinking. There were lots of people who'd be happy to make him look bad. There was Abrams. There was the female resident who had just resigned, and the rumors she was sexually harassed or worse, assaulted. He had to quash those right away. His lawyer was working on it. People told him he didn't look well. What could he do?

Time off at his Florida estate didn't help. The empty ocean outside his windows, the pounding of the surf, were hardly soothing. What good came from sitting by the pool for hours on end? If anything, Sherman was more tired when he got back. How could he handle emergencies in his condition? He really had no choice but to stop operating, he said. His mysterious cardiologist across town had insisted. A heart condition? Colleagues at the hospital scratched their heads and speculated. What kind of 'heart condition'? He soon saw what kind of friends he had in the hospital CEO and the Chair of Surgery from the medical school. Those back-stabbers were always glad to join him at his box at the opera, but when a chance came along to cut a fat salary, or slide one of their cronies into an empty slot, they turned quick enough. A conspiracy? But what would you expect. Abrams had friends on the Board of Directors. The hyenas were circling the wounded lion. Hanging onto his position hobbled as he was, unable to operate, was not in the cards. He got an undisclosed sum, and a posh but sparsely attended reception, when he resigned. He became just a wealthy investor, a former surgeon, a tired man with a lot of time on his hands. Yes, the game had changed. But he had a few tricks left, and knew where to place his boot.

The holidays were finally over. Sherman returned from his ski trip tanned and relaxed. The Abrams case was coming before the Board. There had been numerous complaints, from different quarters, of misconduct on the part of this Dr. Abrams—fraudulent billing, improper prescribing, unwanted touching, and worse. Sherman was shocked, shocked and saddened, that one of his old department members, a

respected colleague, was in such a fix. How could he have done any of those things? Well, who really knows what goes on in any man's mind, what pressures he's under, what dark secrets, what demons are hiding under a guise of respectability? The Office had investigated. The charges were found credible enough for a hearing. Sherman had followed the investigation closely, informally of course, off the record. He wouldn't want to do anything improper. Maybe they could, you know, Sherman hinted discreetly, cut his old colleague some slack? Weigh his transgressions against all the lives he'd saved. There must be mitigating circumstances. After all, the man was a pillar of the community. But no, Sherman was politely rebuffed. We understand your concern, he was told, we respect your sense of solidarity, but you can't be objective here and we have to do our job by the book. If anything, he forced the investigators to dig deeper than usual, to cast a wider net, in order to avoid the slightest hint of favoritism. Well, so be it. He had tried. There was nothing to do now but stand back and wait for the Board's determination.

Sherman just happened to drop by the Office of Professional Medical Conduct late in the day of the Abrams hearing. His driver waited outside while he ran up to rummage through some old files and sign a few documents. He was still puttering around when a fellow board member appeared with word of the committee's determination. After their review of the evidence, and testimony by the plaintiff, only one of the charges was sustained—a single instance of failure to keep a proper medical record for a prescription Abrams gave to a 'social acquaintance'. The committee acknowledged it was not an uncommon thing for doctors to do, but it technically violated standards of practice. They also found testimony from the complainants 'saturated with inconsistencies and exaggerations', some of which 'defied logic'. The committee recommended Dr. Abrams receive an administrative warning, but the administrative law judge informed them such a determination was not authorized by statute. The committee was forced, against its wishes, to issue a formal reprimand.

"Huh," said Sherman, as he took in the news. His tan seemed to fade a bit. He turned to a window, looking down at the street and his limousine idling at the curb. A light snow had begun to fall, muting the hum of rush hour traffic below.

“I wouldn’t be upset, Dave,” said the board member, a retired nephrologist from upstate. “Not a bad outcome for your old colleague.”

“My old what? Not a bad...? Oh, right,” said Sherman, “not bad. Unusual though, don’t you think?”

“Very unusual. Strange, even. Flimsy cases aren’t supposed to make it this far.”

“A reprimand, eh?” said Sherman, turning from the window. “In the public record.”

“Of course. And a public record of the allegations.”

“Doesn’t seem fair, does it.”

“What can I say? It’s the law.”

“I know,” said Sherman. “Still it doesn’t seem fair making unsustained allegations public.”

“That’s not for me to say.”

“It could have been worse, I guess. It’s not like he lost his license or anything.”

“Right. Could have been a lot worse,” said the nephrologist.

“Well, I’m off.”

“Good news though, for Abrams. Overall.”

“I guess.”

Dr. Sherman’s car returned him home at a snail’s pace, crawling through the clogged city streets already brightly lit for the evening. Snowflakes drifted across the streetlights’ glare and melted on the sidewalk. It was quiet in the back seat. He felt sealed off from the outside world, which was exactly where he wanted to be. Maybe this was a win, he thought. He wasn’t sure. In fact, he didn’t know what to make of it. He had once been a man used to winning, a man used to being sure. Now he was a man going home to an early dinner. Maybe he would review the proceedings of the Abrams hearing. Maybe he would make a point of questioning his colleagues on the hearing committee. Maybe he would go to his ranch in Colorado, or take a trip to Greece. And maybe he wouldn’t.

MY HOMETOWN

*B*ob woke up in the middle of the night. His eyelids rose like curtains in a theater and there he was, gazing at the vague surface of his bedroom wall turned ninety degrees. There was nothing unusual in that. He'd been waking up in the middle of the night for years now. But this time was different. What was it, he wondered? The only light in the room was a yellow glow from the house phone. Why did he still have a house phone? He wondered about that too. He heard the house settle, fatigued, creaking like his bad knees. He was too tired to get up and too awake to go back to sleep. Three o'clock in the morning, just lie there and wait. Pointless thoughts rolled through his head—a gaffe from the past, a bill he forgot to pay—recycling scraps from a mental wastebasket that hadn't been emptied. Then it was four, five o'clock. He turned over a dozen times, kidding himself, as if finding the right position made any difference. He chased dream fragments out of boredom before they flitted away, but this was not dreamland. These were ordinary thoughts clearer than the content of dreams, concrete and specific, symbolizing nothing, some with affect and some without. And that affect would be? Anxiety, mainly. But a false, empty worry, merely the residue of neurons resetting in their daily cycle. A re-balancing of humors, with a natural undercurrent of tension at a time he couldn't do anything about the qualms that surfaced in his brain as he lay there staring at the ceiling then the back of his eyelids. And often enough there was no worry at all, just the random play of thoughts on a neutral field. That's why Bob hated being awake in the middle of the night. It served no purpose. He knew come daylight the angst, if any, would be gone. But not this time.

He slept well when he was younger, in hindsight maybe too much. You couldn't wake him with a brass band he liked to say. Dead to the world. Like breathing or indoor plumbing, he took a good night's sleep for granted. It was his reliable escape, peaceful

and comforting, but those days were long gone. And he was not depressed. His was not the 'early morning awakening' of psychiatry. He went about his days easily enough, got his work done, laughed when things were funny, enjoyed the company of friends and family. So the night in question he lay awake with an undercurrent of anxiety about some distant faux pas that popped out of the wastebasket or, who knows, maybe an imagined data breach, or just as likely he was not anxious at all and simply dwelling on the college football rankings or his plans for lawn care, trying not to check the hour since that would not be proper sleep hygiene as advised by his doctor. A Motown hit kept looping through his brain, verse after verse, chorus after chorus, beat after beat, like it played on a broken machine. Not unpleasant, really. He liked the song, it just wouldn't turn off. Finally thinking what the heck, might as well go to the bathroom. He didn't really need to, but the last thing he wanted was to finally all asleep and have his bladder wake him. So he got up. As he passed the bathroom mirror something felt different, like a shadow passed across his image, or a distant glimmer of something. He was still sleepy and his eyes weren't quite focused. He looked closer, turned his head to the side, yawned, rubbed his eyes. What was it? The same brown eyes, the same long nose, the same hair sticking up around his bald spot. It wasn't so much he looked different, he just felt different about the way he looked, like the way impressions get distorted when you're tired and things stuck deep in your brain start poking out around the edges. Maybe that was it. He went back to bed but couldn't sleep. Poor sleep hygiene. He should have gotten up and watched TV, or checked his email.

There were moments in his life when Bob felt he was outside his body looking down at himself. He'd come to realize there was nothing strange about that. Most people have. So when Bob was awake at three in the morning he'd see himself lying in bed, as if looking from a camera in the ceiling fan. Then he'd see a boy lying on the grass in his backyard with his hands behind his head, staring up at the sky, his face shadowed by the brim of a baseball cap. Why the heck was he awake? Why was his mind cruising on auto-pilot, a mind that was usually placid—not stupid or dull, just rather tame—a mind whose view of the world was often blurry, which he had learned to accept, and despite which he had managed to go about his business readily enough. Some people saw the world more clearly, he knew—poets, soldiers, grandmothers. All

too clearly. Lesbians of color, too. To lesbians of color the workings of the world were crystal clear. How did they do that, he wondered? There was something in the news about that. Protests or something. There was always something. It was three o'clock in the morning now, though for once he followed his doctor's advice and didn't look at the clock.

Bob had no clue what happened that night, at least not right away. But where did it come from he wondered at the time, whatever it was? Stress, maybe? After all, he had just moved from Houston and started a new job. And it had been only a year since his wife died. Or maybe he was under a threat of some kind, but as far as he knew he had no enemies. He didn't go around offending people, or wishing anyone harm. He tried to be a decent guy, in his own way, and to most people he probably was. True he was widowed and childless, but cared about his aging parents, his brothers and sisters, his nieces and nephews, his work, his church, and even his town. He was convinced of that and, to his credit, he was probably right. And being as objective as possible he'd have to say his features hadn't really changed. So he wondered if there might have been some change on the inside. Inside, being a decent guy, Bob cultivated lots of decent ideas, which can be tricky. They're meant to help, but like some medication they come with the risk of side effects that change perception, dreams, even sense of self, in unpredictable ways. So in Bob's defense, maybe he was not aware. But these are "facts that make his conduct fit the definition of the offense". And his intent? His intent was clear. It was purposeful. As for his defense, take your pick: mental disorder, intoxication, mistake of fact, lesser harm. When he passed the bathroom mirror early that morning it was clear that something had changed in a puzzling way. He felt that he looked different, or rather felt different about the way he looked. And he felt or looked different, or both, until from that time on there was no difference between the two.

In the days following the event in question Bob first was curious. What was it? But as the feeling lasted he became annoyed. Then he grew angry out of frustration, and as the days passed his anger only got worse. He was angry that this thing, whatever it was, had happened to him, angry that he didn't know why, angry that, whatever it was, he was sure he didn't deserve it. Some subtle neurological disorder,

perhaps. Yet he kept it to himself. His behavior didn't change. His life and the rest of the world went on as they always had.

Bob's sister Kate had no trouble sleeping and, for the most part, loved her dreams. Especially her shopping dreams. Sometimes she would simply be shopping for a house or a new car, but her favorite dream was finding herself in a department store filled with merchandise—clothes, furniture, housewares, appliances—where she could just load up a cart with anything she wanted and walk out the door. She always woke refreshed, and started her day in the confident mood of a woman with a brand new wardrobe. It was after one such dream, a few weeks after his event, that Bob went to watch her daughter's soccer game. He was anxious for some familiar company. Kate was always the sister he could confide in, though he didn't know what there was to confide. He spotted her in the top row of the bleachers cheering her daughter on, and made his way to her side, wary for no particular reason, careful to note her expression as she turned to greet him, the way he tried to note his own image in the mirror.

"Hi Bob," said Kate. "Beautiful day for a game." She smiled maternally. Below them the girls romped around the field like frisky colts, harangued by the shouts of coaches and hyped-up parents.

"Yep," said Bob. Kate's face registered nothing unusual that he could see. "Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay," he added.

Something about Bob's speech seemed a bit odd, though. It was too effusive, given his usual reserve. Kate could not help glancing at him from time to time as they watched the girls battle for the ball. Finally she said, "Bob, is anything wrong?"

"No," said Bob, a touch more emphatic than was necessary. "Why would there be?"

"I don't know. You just seem a bit different, that's all."

"Do I look different?"

"No, not really. You just seem a little different."

"Like what?"

Kate shrugged and looked back at her daughter loping down the field. "Then it's probably nothing."

Bob was glad to get off the subject. He realized he wasn't feeling himself, exactly.

"I told Mom and Dad you'd come by around six. Bring your swimsuit if you want."

"Sure," said Bob. "No problem."

After the game they took Kate's daughter and two of her teammates for ice cream at the Dairy Barn. It was a warm afternoon and the line outside snaked into the sunshine of the parking lot. Bob looked at the faces strung out before him, and those behind, and felt there was something different about them too, though by their expressions whatever it was didn't seem to bother them. One after another they left the serving window happy, or so it seemed, happy to be spooning up sundaes and licking their sprinkle-covered cones. Probably his imagination.

"I love lactose," said his niece, and she giggled with her teammates.

After his wife died, Bob realized there was not much holding him to the Houston suburb where he'd lived for a dozen years. He had no ties there save his job, and now he had no wife tied to hers. Despite his grief, which was genuine, and a touch of guilt, he found it liberating to think he was now free to move anywhere, and reassuring to know that most places his job skills were in demand. He thought about a quiet cabin in the mountains—near Reno maybe, or Boulder, or even Vermont—but in the end decided to move back near family. So he was glad to return to his old hometown, only wishing he had more sense than to buy a big house instead of a snug little condo. Still, there were compensations. He had cookouts in the backyard that he surrounded with an invisible dog fence for the his new rescue pup. He had an attic and garage to store all his wife's belongings that he didn't have the heart to throw out.

It was Kate's turn to host a family get-together the evening of the soccer game. When Bob asked what he could bring, she said, "Beer and parents," as if from her checklist. Easy enough. Their parents, aging in place, still lived in the house where he grew up. Like Bob, they now had more room than they could possibly use, though they'd been talking about down-sizing for years. After picking them up Bob realized that, running late from chasing the dog around the yard and struggling to get her

settled in the garage, he had left the beer in his refrigerator. He was trying to decide whether to turn around and retrieve it or drive to the nearest supermarket, while wondering if there was, in fact, something different about his parents since the last time he saw them, when he coasted through a stop sign just as a police car was coming the other way. He was mortified when he looked in the rearview mirror and saw the squad car turn on its flashers and make a quick u-turn.

“Geez Bob, what’s wrong with you,” said his father. “Didn’t you see the sign?” His father had been more caustic than usual since retirement seven years ago.

“Let’s not get upset,” said his mother. “It’s not like we had an accident or anything.”

“Pure luck,” said his father.

“Sorry,” said Bob. He pulled over to the side of the road as the police car came up behind him.

“License and registration,” said the officer, bending down by the driver’s side window to get a good look in the car. Bob’s parents smiled at him politely.

“You know what you did back there?” asked the policeman.

“Yes, officer,” said Bob, fumbling in the glove compartment for his documents. When he turned back to the policeman he could already see his insurance rates rising. “I think I ran a stop sign. Sorry, I just didn’t see it. My parents were...”

“These are your parents?”

“Yes. We’re going to my sister’s house for dinner.”

The officer, a diligent public servant, stood stone-faced. He seemed to listen for slurred words, to note the hue of eyeballs, to study the floor of the car, front and back. Then he looked over Bob’s parents again. They smiled and nodded.

“Bob grew up here. He just moved back from Texas,” said Bob’s mother.

The officer took Bob’s papers and retreated to his car.

“Good thing we didn’t have that beer,” said Bob’s father.

“If I’d had that beer I wouldn’t have run the stop sign,” said Bob.

“I don’t see how that follows,” said his mother, “but let’s not argue.”

After running his check on Bob, finding no priors or outstanding warrants, his vehicle insured and duly registered, the officer returned looking less severe. “Okay, I’m

giving you a warning.” He handed Bob an official-looking piece of paper. “Keep your mind on the road. You don’t want your parents getting hurt. And, believe me, you don’t want any kind of problem around here,” he said, pointing to the neighborhood. Then bending forward, tipping his hat to the passengers and pointing at Bob, “Don’t let it happen again.”

“Yessir,” said Bob. His parents waved as the officer sped away.

“You’re a lucky bastard,” said Bob’s father. ‘If you were twenty years younger that would have been a ticket.’

“The policeman was very nice,” said his mother. “I don’t think Bob’s age made any difference. I bet he’s like that with everyone. You should write his chief a thank-you note.”

“He must have already made his quota for the month,” said Bob’s father.

Bob didn’t care why the officer didn’t give him a ticket, he was just relieved. He stopped at a supermarket on the way to pick up a case of Budweiser. As he drove the last mile to his sister’s house, he mulled over the hostility he had felt toward police since he was a teenager. Maybe he had the wrong idea all those years. Maybe the police had changed. In any event the warning came as a welcome surprise, and assured Bob his old hometown was not such a bad place to live.

Kate’s family had recently moved to a new house on the edge of town. It was a large white colonial with front porch columns reaching past the second floor, a three car garage, a lawn neat as any country club fairway, and a host of well-tended flower beds circling the foundation. Her husband must be doing well, thought Bob as he drove past the Japanese maples lining the circular drive. Or they were heavily leveraged. Or both. The maples’ rust-colored leaves contrasted tastefully with the green of the smaller shrubs. Everything, in fact, was tasteful. His sister’s touch, no doubt. He dropped off his parents by the front portico where his brother-in-law appeared in an old tee shirt and cargo shorts, waving from the doorway.

“You can park on the grass,” he shouted, hands cupped around his mouth for emphasis.

Four other cars lined the side of the drive. Bob pulled in front. His sedan was the only American make among them. He identified each vehicle in turn: his brother's, his other brother's, his other brother's daughter, and one he didn't recognize. As he took his case of beer from the trunk he caught the faint smell of fresh cut grass that always recalled his summer vacations as a kid. The September air was clear, and the early evening light cast long, sharp shadows across the lawn. He could hear a faint pulse of music from the backyard as he made his way around the side of the house. He couldn't quite make out the song's lyrics, a rap chorus chanting a phrase that sounded like 'man's real', but for some reason the phrase *mens rea* stuck in his head. The yard was festive, with balloons strung along the swimming pool and a fire pit blazing away. It was a fine afternoon, a bit too cool for swimming, but no matter. Bob was no swimmer. The pool was a handsome feature though, reflecting oak trees and beeches—the few native species left by the bulldozers and chain saws that had cleared the property—towering over the new ornamental plantings. His nieces and nephews were on the back lawn playing croquet with some friends. Kate, slim in her jeans and a tank top, circled the patio arranging flowers on a large metal table filled with hors d'oeuvres, chatting with their brothers' wives.

"Where do you want the beer?" asked Bob, slightly out of breath, setting the case on the table with a jolt that shook the guacamole.

"Over there." Kate pointed to a cooler off to the side as she turned to greet her parents emerging from the kitchen.

"Sorry we're late, dear," said her mother.

"We'd have been here sooner if it wasn't for Bob," said her father.

Bob slipped the beer bottles in a bed of ice and plopped into a deck chair.

"So Bob, what's it like being back, old buddy?" Kate's husband, Graham, handed him a Bud from the cooler and they clinked bottles. Graham was a small nervous man who tried to assume a big man's heartiness, much the same way that, being prim at heart, he made a point of dressing casually. He worked in 'financial services'.

“So far so good,” said Bob. “Still getting settled. I really like your new place.” Bob looked around the yard. The pool lights had come on, turning the water green, and the fire in the pit burned brighter as the sun went down.

“We love it,” said Graham. “The house was a steal. Got an awesome mortgage rate. The bank was practically throwing money at us. That’s all nice you know, but we did it for the kids.”

”Sure,” said Bob. “The pool and all.”

“Not even. The pool is nice, but I mean the neighborhood.”

“No kidding,” said Bob. “What was wrong with the old one?”

“Schools dude, the schools,” said Graham. “That’s the difference. The ones here are best in the district. We were going to send Sara and Justin to private school before we moved. The town has changed, Bob. It’s not like it was when you grew up.”

The town was bigger, to be sure. More houses, more apartment buildings, more restaurants, more shopping plazas. More traffic. It didn’t seem that bad to Bob, but then he didn’t have kids.

“Not much you can do about it,” said Bob.

“You do what you have to do,” said Graham. “C’mon, keep me company while I grill the steaks.”

“I hear the high schools have hockey teams now,” said Bob.

“Hockey’s big these days,” said Graham. “And lacrosse.”

As he watched Graham sear the steaks, Bob recalled the years before there were hockey and lacrosse teams in town when he played high school sports. Football as a second stringer, a bench warmer, but that never bothered him. His father played football too, in the days before face guards, and had his front teeth knocked out. Bob got concussed, twice, in practice. And now his nieces and nephews played soccer. To love playing football you had to love smashing into people, Bob figured. Unlike his father, he was never crazy about that. And maybe what really made it fun, at least for his father, was the feeling you got when, after all that smashing, you crushed the crap out of the other team, or else some weird pleasure when your own ass got kicked. But win or lose, Bob thought sports built character. And he liked to think one of the great things about sports was that the same rules applied to everyone, and the games made

everyone a part of the same thing. Team, school, conference, state, country — one of those nice ideas he carried around with him like medicine.

“How’s the Bobster?” called his brother Ned as he emerged from the pool, wrapping himself in a towel-sheet as he joined Bob by the grill. Ned owned a small insurance agency in town. He was a tall, lanky man with an end-of-summer tan, and a big swimmer, especially in other people’s pools.

How was he? Good question, thought Bob. He realized he wasn’t quite sure. It wasn’t the beer. Allergies, maybe? It was hay fever season. He had never suffered from hay fever, but you never know. His eyes felt a little watery and he had sneezed once in the car.

“Great,” said Bob.

Ned looked at him sympathetically nonetheless. “Glad to hear it. Still, it must be kind of lonely these days.”

“Not really,” said Bob. “Well, sometimes. But now I have Dolly. She keeps me busy. And you guys.”

Ned moved closer and lowered his voice. “You haven’t started dating, have you?”

Bob almost blushed. “God no. I wouldn’t know where to start.”

Ned grinned. “Online, doofus, like everybody else. But then there’s the old-fashioned way. Linda has a friend who’s really nice. She thinks you two would hit it off. Why not come over for a drink and I’ll introduce you?”

“I don’t think I’m ready,” said Bob. “But thanks anyway.”

“All right, bro. No harm asking.” Ned winked and went in the house to change, leaving a trail of water on Kate’s Mexican kitchen tile. Bob watched him go, assured that Ned had not changed a bit since Bob’s years in Houston.

The kids came up to the patio when the steaks were done. Bob didn’t like the way his nephews’ shorts sagged. Did they really want to show their butt cracks? And did they have to play that hip-hop at a family event? So loud? With their grandparents there? It’s not even music, he thought, just a bunch of words. Now Motown—that had both. But he was careful not to say anything. He knew the kids would never think he

was their cool uncle, but he didn't want to be like his father, carping every chance he got about the vulgarity that was ruining the country. Not that he didn't think some things had changed for the worse. A little more civility would be nice. Nowadays everyone had to be outrageous, or outraged. But people were just people the way they'd always been, more or less, and old folks would always think the world was going to the dogs. He did feel kind of old, though.

"How do you like your new job?" asked Kate, sitting across from him on the patio table.

"Okay, I suppose," said Bob. "Just takes a little getting used to."

"I can imagine," said Graham. "Not like the private sector, eh."

"It's a trade-off," said Bob.

"How did you get that job, anyway?" said his nephew. "I thought the town only hired minorities." The cousins snorted and the conversation paused. There was the scrape of silverware, chewing sounds, someone pouring a drink.

Bob shrugged. "CPA's are still in demand, I guess." He was about to say more but stopped in mid-thought. Something here felt strangely familiar, like when he woke in the middle of the night chasing fragments of his dreams. His sister changed the subject, and before he knew it the last light of day was gone and he was eating dessert. The mosquitoes had come out and his parents wanted to get home. As he said good-bye, Kate asked if he was 'all right'. He thought he was, at least until then. Then he was simply annoyed.

"Kate, you already asked me that once today," he said. "What's your problem?"

"Nothing," said Kate. "It's just that Mom told me you ran a stop sign."

Bob rolled his eyes. "For god's sake. Mom always makes a big deal out of everything. I couldn't see the sign. It was behind a bush or something."

"Well, she was like really scared. Maybe she didn't let on. And you know, it wasn't in the best part of town. If you'd had an accident or something..."

"Or something what?"

"You know what I mean."

"Don't worry. I'll be careful."

“Maybe you should drive back a different way. Just to be on the safe side. Mom wanted me to ask you. Okay, Bob? Bob?”

For a moment Bob was standing outside himself again, looking down at the bald spot of a man on the back patio of a large white house. “Yeah, okay,” he said. “No problem.”

“How about a cup of coffee before you go?”

Bob swigged the last of his beer. “No thanks. I’m fine.”

Bob’s parents did not say a word the whole way home, careful not to distract him from his driving. It took a good ten minutes longer, but to make them happy he took a different route and made sure not run any stop signs. When they pulled in the driveway, his mother said, “Bob, I have something for you. Come in the house for a minute.” He followed her to the living room and waited while she rummaged through a cabinet.

“I can come back, Mom,” he said.

“No, it’s right here. I’ve been meaning to give this to you.” She handed him a large leather-bound photo album. “I put it together a while back, then with June’s death and all. Anyway, here it is. Go on, take a look.”

Bob thumbed through the cellophane-covered pages. Baby pictures, school photos, family vacations, graduations. All were of him, from infancy through college. Early ones in black and white, then color Polaroids. The blond hair that gradually darkened to light brown, the freckles now gone, the blue eyes. A steady chronological progression. Little Bobby in a cowboy hat, Bobby in a little league uniform, Bob in a football helmet, Robert in a cap and gown. Bob with his brothers and sister, with teammates, standing in a tuxedo in front of their house with a girl in a prom dress. Holding the hands of his mother and father when they were young parents, younger than he was now. He’d seen most of the photos before at different times over the years, scattered in different places, but there were new ones here as well. His perspective shifted another notch. He couldn’t help but smile.

“Amazing. Thanks, Mom.”

His mother looked at him fondly. “This is your special album. I made one for each of you.”

“Don’t get a swelled head,” said his father. He looked stern but Bob knew he was fond, too. Fond and depressed.

“I’m going to take a good look at these tonight,” said Bob. He took his leave with the album tucked under his arm.

“Drive safe,” said his father.

“Drive safe,” said his mother.

He drove home thinking there was something to the phrase ‘chip off the old block’, though in his case he was not sure which block or quite how.

When Bob got home he let Dolly out the backyard and scooped up the puppy poop from the garage floor. Then he changed into his pajamas. It wasn’t late, but he was tired. Family, he admitted, could wear you out. He was going straight to bed when he remembered he had left the photo album in the car. I’ll get it in the morning, he thought, it’s not going anywhere. He turned out the light and slipped under the covers. He lay there listening to the sounds of the house, the yard, the street. It was a bit lonely, he confessed. Maybe he’d be ready to date one of these days. Then he thought about his sister and her questions, and the policeman who had given him the warning. Tired as he was he couldn’t fall asleep, which was strange. Falling asleep was not his problem. He turned on the TV that sat on his dresser across the room and flipped through the channels. Nothing interested him. Something was wrong, but what? He needed a distraction. Finally he got up and went to the garage for the photo album. He took it to the living room and settled on the sofa for a good look. His mother had labeled it ‘Memories for Bob’. Her personal version of his life, selected from the available record. He heard the puppy whining. She knew he was awake. He was tempted to let her in so she could curl up next to him on the couch but he knew she would only want to play. He went back to the album. He thought about the pictures that weren’t there. So many more of those, crowding to get in, things from his childhood that couldn’t be captured in class photographs or family Christmas cards. The puppy started yapping. He’d never get to sleep with that racket. He brought her a

treat and went back to the couch. He remembered a song his parents like to play when he was a kid, some old jazz piece by a trumpet player they said was never a drug addict. He had no idea why they said that, but the trumpet player was damn good. He thought about his sister, and his younger brothers, and wondered what was in their albums. The pup was quiet now. He slipped the album next to a dictionary on his bookshelf and went back to bed. He closed his eyes and this time fell right asleep.

When Bob woke as usual in the middle of the night he was disoriented for a moment. Then he recognized the yellow glow from the house phone and knew where he was, yet still wasn't sure if he had just awakened from a dream or was in a memory from his photo album. There was a boy lying on the grass in someone's backyard, with a baseball cap shading his eyes. A photo? No, it was really him, in the present. He remembered reading something about that. A coping mechanism of some kind. A temporary un-personing. Of the past? How can you un-person someone? How do you? It's nothing personal, of course. The voice sounded like his father. Or impersonal. That sounded like him. The auto-pilot was running at a good clip, re-balancing his humors. He lay on his side trying to ease himself back to sleep, consciously relaxing first his legs, then his belly, his chest, his arms, his neck, his face, his scalp, hoping it would reach his brain. As usual it was no use. He was awake. He buried his head in his pillow. He kicked off the covers, then pulled them up. He decided, what the heck, might as well go to the bathroom. When he passed the bathroom mirror something felt different. Or did it? He stopped and looked closer. Maybe it was his imagination. His eyes focused. No, it was there, and now he could see what it was. The un-personing. Staring back at him was this face. Some white guy, from his hometown.

WHO WERE THEY KIDDING?

*S*uch a phony. Anyone could see that. Who was she kidding? It hit Debbie like a newsflash, though deep down she'd known it for a while. Like forever. She was shivering. Shivering? No, she wasn't. It just felt like it. Faking shaking. That's *really* pathetic. Self-deception, she thought, smacking me in the face. You're not special, said a voice that sounded like her friend Taylor. I get it, she answered. I totally get it. Not awesome. Definitely not amazing. Why did she think she was? It wasn't being not-special that made her pathetic, it's thinking she wasn't not special. She looked around the room. There were Derek, Rob, Caroline, Gordon, Taylor, relaxed, clever. Not her. She was not witty. Lost her wits. Witless. Say, that's not bad. Could she work that into the conversation somewhere? But who was she kidding? She could hardly talk. Everything she said sounded stupid. When she said, "I like this song," it sounded stupid. *Of course* she liked this song. *Everyone* liked this song. Even the tone of her voice sounded stupid. *Stupid, stupid.* She jumped. A car's headlights raked the windows, lighting the ceiling above her for an instant as it turned down the street. Whew, it wasn't the police. Her heart rate slowed as her thoughts raced on. I'm trying too hard, she told herself, to be interesting. Sorry, Derek. Poseur, c'est moi. So why does he put up with me? Je ne sais pas. Ha Ha. Some kind of joke? Because that's what I am. Why shouldn't they make fun of me? I make fun of myself. I can do that. Deb, she told herself, unable to follow the game action on a TV screen that took up half the wall, try to chill. Take a deep breath. Do not hyperventilate. God, think how pathetic you'd look huffing into a paper bag. If you're a fake, then fake it. Not really. Why not? Because duh, they can see right through you. If they bothered, that is. At the moment they're ignoring you. Of course they are, because I'm not interesting. I admit it. So Deborah thought of crawling away to find a nice safe space where she could be her

dull authentic self, like to the bathroom. Hello, where's this coming from? said her father's voice. You or the weed? Her father fancied himself an experienced cannabis hand because he smoked reefer back in the day when it took a good-sized spliff to get a decent buzz, a former stoner morphed into a merlot-sipping middle-school principal. Those are artificial thoughts, he pointed out. Like totally drug-induced. Or like the drug-induced thoughts are the real me? she answered. He was about to contradict her but went silent, as if puffing on a pipe while he considered her point. This is not pleasure, people. Paranoia is not pleasant. Knowing it's paranoia doesn't make it easier. Worse maybe. What was she trying to prove? Exactly. That's what's so pathetic, trying to prove something. Oh god, she took another toke. Because Derek passed her the pen. Put it right in her hand. Because her mind was floating out the door. She was going to cough. Damn, that vape shit is hot. Hold it. Hold it in. The burning in her throat eased. That's better. Maybe she would curl up in the corner for a while. Fall asleep and no one would notice her in fetal position? Please get the fuck out of here, she pleaded with herself, so you can stop making an ass of yourself. A bigger ass, that is. No, wait. Don't make a scene. Calm down. Be like, inscrutable. Then who would know you're such a phony? That your new boyfriend thinks you're boring. That your own thoughts are out to get you. That you don't deserve shit in this world. That your life is nothing but a black hole. *Stop it. Stop it, goddam it.* What kind of crazy self-talk is this? Have some frozen yogurt and get a freaking grip, etc, etc.

Debbie made it home safe and got a decent night's sleep. And the next day she was back at school teaching her third grade class. She felt okay. Not awesome, but okay. And her kids looked at her with a certain trust, and a certain hope. Halloween was just past. It was time to redecorate the classroom. She liked that part of the holidays.

Derek was engaged in a little game as he drove to work. No, not yet, he told himself. Hold on. It's going to change. Steady, don't brake. The intersection came up fast. Okay, slow down. Not worth it. The traffic light changed to green just as he tapped the breaks. Damn! He could've kept going. He knew he judged it right. A game his dad used to play. Helps with gas mileage his father said, saves wear and tear on the

brakes. Scared the shit out of him when he was a kid though. That time the light didn't change and the other car coming through the intersection skidded off the road into a mailbox. It happened so fast. Wow, the way the airbag popped out, and the guy was pinned in the driver's seat like he was dead or something. His dad pulled over to see if the guy was okay, which he must have been because he had no trouble threatening a lawsuit with some crazy curse words. The sky was getting darker. There was a raindrop, then another, just like the forecast said. Derek held off on the windshield wipers. Oh no, not a loser cruiser. He was already running late. The yellow hulk of a school bus lumbered out of a side street in front of him, unhurried as a moo cow, and slowed to a halt with its lights flashing. Crap. Just his luck. Going to stop at every driveway. Kid waiting there with mom or dad. Can't even wait by themselves. Waiting at the end of the drive in a car, like they'd melt if they got rained on. The bus turned off on the next block. Derek breathed a sigh of relief and sped up, gauging his speed exactly five miles an hour over the posted speed limit. He wondered if any of the kids in that bus were Debbie's. Better keep his mouth shut about freaking school buses and driveways. Why Deb was so quiet last night he had no idea. Did he say something wrong? Because he tended to do that. Not that he tried to. Not that he meant to. Like the time he said, "There's something in your nose," very matter-of-fact because there actually was a little speck of something in it and he was trying to be helpful and objective like it was no big deal and could happen to anyone, being a considerate guy so she wouldn't be embarrassed when the hostess showed them to their table at the Olive Garden. But she took it the wrong way. Didn't say a word the whole ride home that night either. Maybe, he conjectured, you can't say that kind of thing until you've been married like a few years? It would be just like him to blow it. And if that's the end? He'd pack up and leave town. That's it. No more heartache for this dude. Move to Hawaii or maybe trek through the Andes. By himself. A solitary figure. A mysterious solitary figure tramping the Inca trail with his walking stick and a pouch of coca leaves. The lost gringo, with his shaggy beard. Every once in a while she'd ask, "Have you heard from Derek?" Because now he's an interesting guy. The tales he could tell. Down the slope into the rain forest, and then. He felt he had to pee soon. A tributary of the Amazon spread before him. The entrance ramp. He accelerated to highway speed and

merged onto the interstate. Or maybe there was ayahuasca in his pouch. That would be even more interesting. Derek the shaman. Women fall for shamans. It was raining harder now. He settled back, turned on the wipers and the radio. Morning news. Nope, change the station. Fast food commercial, turn it off. Fall color had faded from the trees along the road, the few remaining leaves turned a mushy yellow and brown. Winter's slush was just round the corner. The winter of his discontent maybe? If you broke the word apart into 'dis' and 'content' it would mean, in a certain vernacular, a particular content right here. Ha. Words were a bit like Legos, he thought, in the way they fit together. More pressure in his bladder. He could hold it long enough to get to work. What was it she said when he dropped her off? "I'm so sorry." Sorry for what? That she decided she was wrong about him? After it seemed they hit it off so well? Three good months, and now she was backing off? Sorry, not sorry. Fuck. Like maybe he wasn't romantic enough. He felt romantic, it was just hard to operationalize it. Like he thought he should be his authentic self from the get-go and that being so real, so not-guarded, would impress the shit out of her. But maybe that's not what she wanted. Because at first you were supposed to be enigmatic? Slightly aloof, but with a hint of vulnerability. No problem with vulnerable. If she wanted vulnerable he could do that. His exit was coming up. A car pulled in front of him, cutting him off. Asshole. He'd better keep his eyes on the road. Assholes everywhere. Like last night. Gordon and Taylor, what a pair. They never shut up. Think they're so freaking funny. And he had to join in. No wonder Deb was turned off. I'd be turned off too, listening to myself, he thought. Pathetic. Yes, he was showing off. So sue me. Trouble was, she could spot a phony a mile away. He liked that about her—one of many things. Her kids must love her, too. The adorable Miss Lee. He almost wished he was a kid in her class. Miss Lee, look at the pony I drew. Miss Lee, look at my new baseball glove. They get her every day, five days a week. He liked his own third grade teacher, Mrs. Porter. She was like a mom but prettier. Not pretty like Miss Moran in fourth, that was different. She was hot. Wow, with that Mississippi accent? He hadn't even started puberty yet and slow down, exit coming up, get in line. A few minutes later Derek was at work staffing the Tech Posse at Digital Warehouse. He'd saved enough money to move out of his parents'

house, but was not in any rush. What would be the point, unless they started charging rent?

Derek's mom opened the refrigerator door and paused. The new girlfriend. What was her name? Rebecca? Judith? She took out a milk carton and shook it. There was just enough milk left for her coffee. Was she Jewish? She wanted to meet her. Even more, she wanted her sister-in-law, Mindy, to meet her. Mindy was amazing. Mindy could always tell if a couple were right for each other. No horoscopes, no Tarot cards, no questions. Just intuition and connections to the higher planes of existence. All the way up to The Goddess, actually. Worth a shot. When it came to girlfriends Derek's judgment was a little, how would she put it, suspect? She cinched her bathrobe tighter and sat on a stool by the kitchen island chin-in-hand, took her first sip of coffee and sighed. Like the one he brought home for Thanksgiving his junior year. Lillian. The one who was majoring in art history and nutrition. What was he thinking? She was way too much for him. And what's this thing with Jewish girls? They like smarts of course, and whatever else you might say about Derek, he's got smarts. In some things. Or was she Catholic? Maybe she was getting her confused with Elizabeth. There was definitely a Saint Elizabeth. Not that girl though, she was no saint. So hoity-toity with her phony laugh and fancy plans like she was doing me a favor by being nice to me. A Saint Lillian? Not sure. Father Richard would know. She took another sip and the day began to brighten. Who knows, maybe this new one was all right. Derek was showing signs of maturity. He took out the garbage yesterday without being asked. He had a debit card. The last parts of his brain were definitely developing. Someday who knew, he might have his own phone account. Which reminded her, he still owed for his share of last month's family plan. She looked out the window at the leaves littering the lawn. The cycles of nature. There was something awesome about that but kind of depressing too with the bare trees and all. Reminds you of death, the dreariness but also the peace of it. Which was deceptive. There was still a lot going on in those trees. Maybe death was like that too. Father Richard would have something to say about it. The last time she saw him was in the hospital elevator the day she told him her mother was on the seventh floor and said Mom would appreciate a visit from him and, such a good man,

he went up right away and blessed her and she died that night. A chance meeting in an elevator? No Derek, things happen for a reason. She was a religious person even if she didn't go to church much anymore. She prayed of course, most days. That counted, don't you think? Not for worldly stuff of course, for things like the right girl for her son. The doctor said if her mother didn't have the amputation she'd die, then she had the amputation and died. She guessed they did the right thing. And before she left the hospital that night she said, 'I love you, Mom'. That was weird, because they weren't a family that said that kind of thing. It just like came out of her. And her mom said, 'I love you, too,' which was even weirder because when she came back from the operating room she was so loopy she didn't have a clue who anyone was, even her own daughter. See? She sipped thoughtfully. The cycles of nature, the cycles of life. There's something out there. Higher planes. She tells Derek that. He just laughs but she says, 'Who came first, God or science?' Then he laughs a little but he shuts up. Her caffeine lift got her moving, ready to face the day, a little buzz that lasted an hour or so and then it was time for another mug of coffee, but the effect wasn't the same and after lunch, as she contemplated going down the basement to clean Derek's room, the prospects for the rest of the day looked rather grim. Why would any decent girl want to have anything to do with such a slob? That was her failure as a mother. One of them. She traced it back to the anti-anxiety medicine she'd taken in her first trimester, before she even knew she was pregnant—was that her fault? And then her asthma meds, which the doctor said was not a problem. She wasn't so sure. But you have to breathe right? And then two weeks before she delivered she was so startled and scared when the toast caught fire, she lost control and peed on the kitchen floor. Maybe she was lucky it wasn't worse, like having a baby born with flippers like the kids she saw in the Shriner ads. That makes her cry and their poor mothers, she can't even imagine. Those kids looked happy though, strange to say. And when Derek was just taking his first steps and she was so thrilled and happy for about thirty seconds before he whacked his head on the edge of the coffee table and had to get the gash glued shut in the ER. That was on her. Just a second's inattention. No wonder he was insecure. How can you make up for those things, for your screwups? Maybe if she'd sent him to Europe on one of those high school summer tours he would have come out of his shell a little. But

the money? They could have borrowed, and given him fencing lessons too or sent him to chess camp. It's hard to juggle all these things, especially when you're going through a divorce. Of course, it wasn't like having a kid with Downs. She didn't know how Mindy did it. But then at least you know what you're dealing with. Your expectations are, how you say, more limited? Derek had the smarts, thank god. And his brain was still developing. He could get even smarter. Maybe this girl was all right. Though she would be half-tempted to clue her in. Tell her what she was in for. Full disclosure so she wouldn't have that on her conscience. Then Rachel or Judith or whatever her name was could make an 'informed choice' and what happened after that was on her. Like choosing your cancer treatment. Ha! I love you Derek, she thought. Why do you make me so crazy? It was evening now. She was on her second glass of wine before starting dinner. You have to live with the consequences of your actions, she told herself. That's what adults do. That's what she tells her husband, Nelson, who just grunts and rolls his eyes and says what are you thinking, this is America. That's what she lives by, anyway. She heard Derek's car pulling in the driveway. She would say 'I love you' before she went to bed, because they were a family that said that kind of thing now. She'd also like to ask him to forgive her, kind of a blanket forgiveness for parenting errors, but they weren't quite there yet. And she wasn't sure she deserved it. How nice it would be though, to go forward with a clean slate. If and when that day ever came, she hoped Derek in turn would ask her to forgive all the shit he had done, which of course she already had. She took her wine glass into the kitchen and thought of pouring herself a third, but decided no, that would be a problem, stoppered the bottle tight and set it back in the refrigerator.

Actually Deborah had zero interest in meeting Derek's parents, meaning Derek's mother and Nelson, his stepfather. His 'real' father was in South Carolina? Arizona? Someplace warm and a long plane ride away though Derek was in constant touch with him on-line, a sort of virtual parent and tech buddy. His father was an early adopter Derek told her, which made his father seem a bit ridiculous, like the mid-life crisis guy who buys the little red sports car, but Derek was proud to be a geek in his image. So that's cool. It was tough having divorced parents, she knew, and more power to his

dad, but that was not the issue at hand, which was meeting his mother—a good sign for the relationship, which she was sure was on life support after the night she got stoned out of her gourd (note to self: when possible, avoid drug-induced psychosis) but maybe she wasn't ready to go this fast. Play it safe. Because she could still see potential for The Big Disappointment here once again, and had learned it best to cushion The Blow. So limit The Expectations. No entanglements with family and, god forbid, their judgments and obligations heaped on top of your own shit. But you have to be polite, right? She pressed the remote to unlock her car door as she entered the school's parking lot and saw the tail lights flash on her Toyota. Leaving behind the paper turkeys and pumpkins, the stalks of Indian corn pinned all over her classroom, she was on her way to Derek's house. Heading into darkness. Short days getting shorter still. Well, at least it wasn't Thanksgiving dinner. For that depressing scene she was going to her own parents' place a two-hour drive away. Thanksgiving and the Christmas holidays just when she was getting really bummed about her weight gain, which she blamed on her new birth control though she didn't understand how that worked. She hardly ate a thing yet her once-firm thighs were getting jiggy. Her butt still looked good though, she thought, but her legs were too chunky and there was this new fullness under her chin. Her mother and an aunt had always been obese so maybe there was a genetic thing or a gland problem on top of her hormone shots? No breakfast, a salad for lunch at school with maybe some chicken (without the skin), a diet Pepsi. Then dinner when she got home, that was it. Making fat out of thin air? How does that happen? Her GYN said she should exercise more. Easy for her to say. Like anorexic tri-athlete mother of two Dr. High Achiever can do it all. Deborah didn't have the energy to exercise after a day in the classroom. The emotional drain. Kids with trauma written in their eyes and underwear. She would be better off as a social worker. What good was she doing, really? The ones who learned would learn no matter what, and the ones who didn't were hopeless. Sad and hopeless. There were so many dumb kids out there, she opined, I can't even. She wished she could make them smarter. If she could just teach them to read, even a little. A hundred years ago everybody could read. People taught themselves to read, for god's sake. There weren't many other options for entertainment back then. Forget the Bible, a guy in a shack out in the

middle of nowhere was thrilled to read last year's newspaper ads. Some days it seemed that all she was doing was drawing a paycheck, going through the motions. Just didn't have the right stuff for her job. A total failure. Not a noble failure either, a common garden-variety can't-hack-it failure. What else could she do? Too late to change careers now with all her loans to pay back. Here was his house. She pulled in the drive and sat in the car for a moment, wondering what her life would have been like as a nurse say, on a cruise ship. When she looked up Derek was knocking at the car window. "You okay?" he mouthed. She realized the engine was still on, killed it and got out. It was a chill, humid night, smelling of wet leaves yet to be raked, a sky with a halo of mist around a three-quarter moon and silver light filtering through the branches where leaves used to be. Definitely not moonbeams on the South Seas. "Fine," she yelled back. He held the door for her as if she had arrived at valet parking. "Come on in. Don't worry, Mom's nice. And don't worry about Nelson, either. You can ignore him."

As Debbie walked to the front door she noticed a streak of orange marker on the front of her skirt. Great, she thought, what else? There's probably something in my nose too. She gave it a quick rub with the palm of her hand just for the hell of it, the way she would straighten her skirt before entering a room just to be sure everything was squared away. It had felt perfectly fine, but now it seemed like a speck of crud was in there. And if there was? Perfect, that's all I need, she reckoned. Everyone would try to look as if they weren't glancing at it, or it would seem that way to her even if they weren't. If, in fact, there was something. She rubbed it again and gave a good sniff as she went in the house, thinking what's wrong with Derek? Didn't he have the courtesy to give her an all-clear or at least a heads-up so she could take care of any dicey nasal situation that might arise before she was face to face with his mother? It was almost enough to make her admit she cared about making a good impression.

"Debbie, this is my mom," said Derek.

"Hello, Mrs. Park," said Debbie. "Nice to meet you."

"Call me Sharon," said Derek's mother, extending her hand. She was a small woman, even shorter than Deborah had pictured her. Derek was the same height as Deb and Deb was pretty short. "We're so happy you could drop by. Please, come in and make yourself at home."

Debbie's nose began to itch. She gave it a discrete flick as Mrs. Park led her to the living room to introduce her to Nelson, who grunted something unintelligible, shook her hand and returned to the couch where he crossed his legs to resume bouncing his foot in little jerks. As the minutes ticked away, nibbling hors d'oeuvres, she and Derek's mom with their wine, Derek and his stepfather with their beer, it seemed to Deborah that Nelson was glaring at her while Derek's mother made a discrete but thorough examination of her nose as they talked. Yet Deb couldn't quite bring herself to go to the bathroom for a definitive check on the situation so soon after arriving. Finally Sharon gave her a polite smile and said, "Are you Jewish?", the way you'd ask a guest if they liked skiing or tennis. "No," said Debbie. "May I like use your bathroom?" Once inside, facing the mirror with the door locked, she used the light from her cell phone for a thorough exam of each nostril. Nothing. False alarm. What a paranoid idiot. She heard a faint ring from the doorbell in the front room, a scuffle of footsteps and someone being greeted. When she emerged, less self-conscious but still puzzled over the Jewish question, Derek's mom introduced her to a well-dressed woman in high heels and chunky jewelry, her sister-in-law Mindy, who looked at Deb with a warm intensity that startled her.

"Aunt Mindy...", said Derek.

Derek was so glad to be out of there. He'd been on eggshells the whole time. Hallelujah. He was relieved it had gone so well and now they could look forward to an evening of cannabis and gaming with friends. "What's with that Jewish thing?" Deb snapped as they drove away. "Is your mother some kind of anti-Semite?" She kept her eyes fixed straight ahead and a tight grip on the steering wheel. The temperature outside was dropping fast and it had started to rain, a chill November drizzle that soaked the leaf-strewn asphalt, making the streetlights reflect dull yellow in the road. My mom, Derek wondered? Was she kidding? His mom didn't mean anything by it. "No, just the opposite," he said. Debbie shook her head. "It's kind of weird to get a question like that right off the bat." So evidently she did not share his sense of relief. She did not look happy. That meant maybe he'd screwed up again? "Yeah, I guess," he said. "That's my mom. Her filters aren't the best. It's embarrassing sometimes." The

tires whined as they sped along the slick pavement. Deb took a hand off the steering wheel and ran it through her hair as if trying to order thoughts that were starting to run away. “And your Aunt Mindy? What’s with her? Was she like, from the FBI or something?” Derek slumped down in the passenger seat, staring at the roof of the car as if it might help guide him through this conversation. Aunt Mindy? Everybody liked Mindy. He sensed a paranoid vibe in the air, and realized it wasn’t the first time. “I didn’t know she was coming,” he said. “Honest. They blind-sided me on that. Don’t worry, she’s harmless.” Deb shook her head to show she didn’t quite buy it. “It’s like she carries her spa around with her,” she said. “I know,” said Derek. “A real New-Ager. Big time.” They sat quietly for a moment. Derek closed his eyes and saw himself trekking through the Andes again, or rather his avatar trekking through the Andes, an avatar who spoke fluent Quechua and Aymara and had an encyclopedic knowledge of healing herbs. “And Nelson?” said Debbie. “What planet is he on? He thinks public school teachers are the devil or something. Like our pensions are ruining the country.” Derek nodded absently. Nelson, in fact, was quite paranoid. Visualizing the rain forest from above, Derek’s avatar looked down on a vast green canopy and tributaries of the Amazon snaking toward a horizon so flat and boundless you could see the earth curve away in the tropical haze. They pulled into a parking spot at the Olive Garden, sitting for a moment with the engine running. “He’s a little out there.” Derek was referring to Nelson but thinking of himself as well. “A little?” said Debbie. They both got out and continued their conversation over the roof of the car. “Right, Derek. I’d love to meet your parents, said no one ever.” Authentically enigmatic. Or enigmatically authentic. With a shaggy beard and his walking stick. They trudged to the restaurant entrance, Derek following behind. “So why did you say it was okay?” he asked. “You didn’t have to meet them.” “Because I’m stupid, that’s why,” she said. “No, you were being nice. I’m the stupid one,” said Derek. “I should know better. My family’s a little weird.” He held the door for her and Deborah entered the lobby. “A little? I don’t think this is working out, Derek.”

As soon as the young couple left, Derek’s mother busied herself clearing the coffee table while Nelson raced outside for a cigarette. She already had her own

impression but wasn't going to rush Mindy. And after all, she thought, wherever this relationship led, it wasn't her life. What could she do? People had to find their own happiness. It's about time Derek moved out though, girl or no girl. That was her fault. A motherly fault. There were worse sins. Like kicking your son out? Mindy followed her into the kitchen and faced her by the sink. Sharon steeled herself for the verdict. "She's the one, Shar," said Mindy. Holy shit, just like that. No beating around the bush. Sharon almost dropped the tray she was holding "Really?" she said, doing an excited little hop. "She did seem nice. A little insecure maybe." Actually she thought Deborah was on the weird side and, though she would definitely keep this to herself, that Deborah looked on the Jewish side as well but maybe it was Italian or Greek. Something Mediterranean anyway. She didn't want to get her hopes up but had a lot of faith in Mindy. "Doesn't matter," said Mindy. "They're a good match. I can tell by their auras. Sure she was nervous, who wouldn't be? But deep down that Debbie is a strong woman. She's good for Derek. Girls like that don't grow on trees." Sharon felt a tremendous surge of hope, an exhilaration, a renewed faith in the power of prayer. "If you say so," she said. "With his, you know, quirks and all. There were times I thought a normal girl wouldn't want anything to do with him. I know that's a terrible thing to say, but it's true. This is so amazing. I can't thank you enough, Mindy. You're always there for me. I'll tell him not to blow it. I'll say Derek, you idiot, don't blow it! Ha! Oh my God, you think this might work out?" Mindy gave a little pursed-lip smile, checking her lipstick in the hall mirror as she put on her coat to leave. "Don't worry, Shar. If it's meant to be, it'll be. I gotta run." Derek's mother saw Mindy to the door, quite pleased with the outcome of the evening, yet despairing that, try as she might, she would never have as beautiful an essence as her sister-in-law.

THE LOVESICK IGUANA

Every day we could see our lovesick iguana on the roof of the cage. He wasn't ours of course, we just lived in the same neighborhood. The cage was tall and wide, part of a private zoo or 'bio-park' as they called it. There was room inside for large tree limbs and branches, a shady hut and a pool of water, able to house a dozen or so iguanas of all sizes comfortably enough. First thing in the morning we'd look down from our balcony and there he'd be. In the evening, he was still right there. He had eyes, it seemed, for a female in the cage. Had a nose for her might be a more accurate way to describe it. And not just for any female mind you—there were plenty of them in the wild, draped in the trees around him—but for one female in particular, one who was in captivity. He was there each day in the same spot above her to show himself off, parading around, shaking his dewlap. Or he would stand perfectly still with his spiky head held high, posing like a male model for her benefit. At times he crawled in circles and made threatening displays to the captive males below, which they returned, bobbing and spitting up at him from the safety of the cage. She watched him closely and obviously knew what he wanted. Was she flattered? At times she seemed to encourage him, and then would lose interest and flirt with the other males. That really burned him. Because of the cage between them, it was nothing but theater.

He was a handsome lizard too, or so he seemed to us. Good-sized, with a classic green head, intelligent eyes, a little smile at the corners of his thin mouth, skin like a tapestry of finely colored beadwork, a beautiful crest of spines down the length of his back, striking orange and black rings on his graceful tail. A real specimen. But he seemed to grow thinner, more haggard every day. As time went on his displays lost their swagger. He spent more time just lying in the sun.

He could have said screw this of course and climbed down a tree, end of story. There was nothing to stop him but his own devotion. He had every advantage of being free, while his would-be mate was trapped for life. It was perfectly romantic, and sad. For some reason she was the only one for him. So all day long he pined away, day after day. It was pathetic and stupid, too. Hey dude, get real, you wanted to say, it was not going to happen. It's hardly as if there weren't other potential girlfriends nearby. But for some reason that didn't matter. True love, you'd have to say. What difference did it make if the whole little drama was only the result of pheromones? Because there had to be something extraordinary in her pheromones, at least for him, to make him forsake everything—his safety, health, sanity—to pursue this doomed courtship. It's as if his message to her was: because you're a prisoner, I'll prove my love by making myself one too. Just chemical? After all, pheromones affect the chemistry of the brain, and how great a leap is it from the reptilian brain to the reptilian mind? Not far certainly, and but a short step to the heart. Or do all creatures want most what they can never have?

Like most females she seemed to know exactly what the score was. She was pleased by the attention. It got the other males riled up and interested in her. But she knew that, really guy, this was not going anywhere. Like face reality here. She was in the cage, forever, and he was not. She had to choose a mate where she could. I'm sure she envied him out there, and maybe even despised him as well for not appreciating his freedom. That would make him a dope. Why would she choose a dope for a mate? Dopiness would not be a good trait for the survival advantage of her offspring. It was a real double-bind for our lovesick iguana. Plus, every day, the torture of watching her belly grow fatter with eggs that weren't his doing. We left before the end of the story. I hope he finally got a clue, or that the pheromones wore off, climbed down a tree and moved on. He was easy prey for any predator up there. It's just possible, though, he keeled over on top of the cage one day after a last flick of his dewlap, as true a lover as you will ever find.

THE WAGON OF COMPIÈGNE

*A*fter he guided his Prius into a parking space, careful as always to center it equidistant from the two stripes on either side, Harlan reclined in the driver's seat for an even quieter moment. His eyebrows, blond and thin, were knit tight, making a v-shape on his lower forehead. Hitler's what? He released the seatbelt strapped over his small paunch and stretched his wiry legs. Funny thread, he told himself, lying back against the headrest. Hitler's joy. It was the thread Harlan had been nursing, on and off, since breakfast. No doubt about it, he thought. There was pure joy in Hitler's smile as he stood outside that railway car in Compiègne while the armistice was being signed. Re-negotiated one might say, twenty-two years later, with new terms. Sunlight pouring through the trees. Light banter with his cronies no doubt. Congratulations all around. Sheer delight, like a kid who just scored the winning goal, or so it seemed from the documentary he watched last night. Although the film's narrator said nothing about joy or delight, just told the story of Hitler's little jig—British propagandists with their doctored photos. The Brits and their humor. Haha. But it was joy that Harlan saw. And why not? Why wouldn't it be? You don't hear much about the Führer's happy moments these days. Harlan had a fondness for WW II movies and documentaries, a little quirk left over from adolescence. He roused himself and grabbed his backpack from the passenger seat. Time to get going. He had a presentation to make. A proposal. Of course Hitler was a monster, but still. Emotions were emotions. Maybe that was the point. It was a beautiful day he noted, pausing to stretch and take a deep breath in the middle of the parking lot. Warm, clear sky, much like that day in June 1940. Interesting coincidence. A nice day for a quick surrender, then a few bottles of the good stuff after dinner *en plein air*. The French. *Mon dieu!* Not that Harlan had much interest in wine.

Best not to mention all this to anyone who might take it the wrong way, which would be everyone at work. Like Sarah at the reception desk. He fumbled with the keypad at the staff entrance and entered with his genial smile. As a pediatrician he was a bit ashamed, he had to admit, that Hitler's smile intrigued him.

"Hi Sarah."

"Good morning, Dr. Grady."

Sarah was way too serious for a receptionist, thought Grady. Efficient yes, but too serious. Gave the wrong impression. Parents want efficiency of course, but a little warmth too. And a little forgiveness for the parenting failures that bring them to a pediatrician. Failures that were inevitable—a fact that never made anyone feel any better. How did she end up there? She'd be much better off in a back office. Oh well, not his doing. He wasn't the office manager. Harlan—Dr. Grady—strolled past the reception desk toward his office. Background music played through the speakers overhead. It was, he noted, as insipid as ever. Why did they pay good money for that pabulum? Insipid did not equal soothing. Oh well, not his doing either. But no big deal. Maybe someone liked it. He wore his usual white button-down shirt and striped bow tie. He liked the look of bow ties— a touch patrician with a kindly quality, geeky but classic and, he would have to admit, slightly comic. Plus kiddies couldn't grab them. Hitler peaked too early, he thought as he hung up his coat. That was his problem. Aside from the holocaust, of course. Success too lightly earned. Mel Brooks could do something with that. If you were Jewish you could get away with it. Grady grabbed a sheaf of questionnaires and headed to the conference room. Time to get his mind on work.

Harlan Grady was not just an advocate for children—every pediatrician was an advocate for children—but for social justice as well. Not only social justice, but global health. The two were inseparable, he would argue. Not that he was political. He didn't take sides. And sure he was Catholic, kind of, but it wasn't that either. It was just what he did. Trying to help babies, kids, teens, families, i.e. people, though he'd admit that old people scared him with their medical laundry lists and tendency to die. Which was why he went beyond merely up-to-date all the way to the cutting edge, bringing 'best practices' and more to his partners, if not the rest of the medical community. He was

too gracious to preach or demand ‘continuous quality improvement’, he just went about it, pointing the way. He was happy to find the resources and do the training himself. Sure there was some grumbling. Some foot dragging. People are slow to change, nothing new there. And every once in a while Laura, Dr. Pereira, the newest member of the practice, would question him on the evidence. Which was strange because she was young and you’d think she’d be onboard with new things. But Laura was a skeptic, even cynical at times, with a touch of postpartum depression maybe or fatigue at any rate—two kids in diapers. But when you have the responsibility to act, Harlan reminded himself when she challenged his initiatives, when your goal is to make a difference, you have to take the ball and run with it. The more help you provide, and the more thoroughly you go about it, the better. Some people called him an idealist. The way he looked at it, he was just doing his job. Laura should really get herself evaluated for her own good. He’d hinted at that—nothing you could say outright. She used to be such a go-getter, a little dynamo, as energetic as the kids she was taking care of. What was her problem?

Grady was the first to arrive in the tiny conference room, a white-walled box with a grease board at one end and a rubber plant in a corner by the window. He checked his watch and glanced at the scrubby trees ringing the parking lot. Yes, Hitler’s delight. There was his smile outside the dining car of course, filmed for all the world to see, but imagine him alone the night after the armistice was signed. Harlan shuffled his papers and waited for his partners. The Führer’s euphoria as he lay in bed giddy no doubt, sleepless, replaying the moment again and again. No, it’s impossible to imagine. Harlan shook his head as the familiar SUV’s of his partners began to arrive. A common soldier wounded in the Great War? A stab-in-the-back believer who becomes Chancellor of Germany? A man from nowhere who avenges the humiliation of the Versailles treaty, and stage manages the surrender of the French in the very same wagon-lit in which the Armistice of 1918 was signed? Freaking incredible! For god’s sake, when Caesar ransacked Gaul he had nothing to avenge. Alexander was heir to a throne. And here was this art school reject making Napoleon turn over in his grave. How sweet it must have been to erase the words “Here, on 11 November, the criminal pride of the German empire was vanquished by the free peoples it had sought to enslave.” A truly

monumental achievement. No wonder he thought he was infallible. Wouldn't you? Think of yourself as some kind of superman?

One by one they trickled in: Catherine, Jon, Mitch, and finally Laura. She looked so tired. They couldn't actually force her to take a leave, especially with her student loans and all. Plus it would be hard to handle her patients. They were overloaded as if was. And it was about time they got serious about mood disorders. There was such an epidemic out there it would take everyone's best effort. Kids were suffering. Families were suffering. Hard to know if things were getting worse, or if the problem was finally getting the attention it deserved. Harlan was keen on a new screening questionnaire: PANIC—Pediatric Anxiety and Neuro-Indicator Checklist.

'Why PANIC? Why not SCARED?' asked Catherine.

'Better parent-child agreement.'

'But Harlan, ten minutes for another questionnaire?' said Laura. 'How much time do you think patients have?'

'They can do it online. Or they can mail it in before their visit.'

'Along with the depression screen, the autism screen, the domestic violence screen, the home safety screen, and the ADD checklist?'

'I don't see a problem,' said Harlan.

'And what are we going to do with the results?' asked Laura.

It seemed like a strange question. Harlan's eyebrows knit their v-shape once again. 'What we always do,' he said.

'Treat the ones we can, refer the ones we can't,' said Jon, glancing up from his phone screen for a moment.

'Kids are going to get over-diagnosed and over-medicated,' said Laura.

'Not if we follow the guidelines,' said Harlan.

'Especially if we follow the guidelines.'

Again her cynicism, her challenges. Right on cue and so predictable. What was she trying to prove? Harlan almost blurted out they should start screening pediatricians for Oppositional Defiant Disorder. Where did that impulse come from? It was not like him to react that way. He felt a bit guilty. But it wasn't only *his* issue. What did his

reaction say about *Laura's* behavior, he wondered? He quickly composed his thoughts. 'We haven't heard from Catherine and Mitch,' said Harlan. 'Catherine?'

'I'm okay with it, I suppose.' Catherine rarely opposed anything. Someone Harlan could count on.

'Mitch?'

'Sure,' said Mitch. 'As long as the nurses do the scoring.' Mitch's main goal was to finish his work on time. Which he usually did.

So Harlan's practice added PANIC to their protocol for Well Child visits. The nursing staff shook their heads but complied. After all, it was Dr Grady's doing and he was up on the latest stuff. Kids liked him—or at least they weren't terrified of him—and parents loved him. The staff wanted to get it right, but really it seemed like a lot of work. Just keeping all the shots straight was hard enough. The protocols accreted one by one, and it wasn't as if any went away. Then again, maybe more was better? If you couldn't trust Dr. Grady, who could you trust? A few months later Grady got a call from a child psychologist about a patient he'd referred, one of the first to be PANIC screened.

'I think Dylan needs medication,' she said. 'He'd engage with therapy better if he were calmer.'

'I'll start him on something,' said Grady.

So little Dylan was started on one, then two new meds, along with his medication for ADD, and a few months later he was little Dylan no more. Dylan got his cholesterol and blood sugar checked, and after careful consideration of his longterm disease risk (grandfather with a heart attack, grandmother with a stroke), he was started on more medication. His PANIC scores went steadily down, with only a transient bump or two in the new school year, but over the holidays they shot up again. It was Dr. Pereira who saw him while Grady was on his Christmas break. She told the family that Dylan was taking too many pills, pointing out that the risks, and even the benefits, of all those drugs for a kid his age were not well known. Dr. Grady was not happy when he got back. He would gently reprove and correct his young colleague first chance he got. Feedback delayed was feedback denied.

‘Dylan’s mother said she didn’t think the medication was working,’ said Laura, when Harlan raised the issue.

‘Why didn’t you try upping the dose?’ said Harlan. He didn’t know why he felt he even had to defend his treatment plan. He was following the guidelines.

‘He’s getting too many side effects as it is. His mother was fine with tapering.’

No surprise, really. Grady had expected some kind of resistance and this would be par for the course. After all, she’d been breast feeding for the past few years. Of course she was concerned about side effects. That was understandable, even if she exaggerated. It wasn’t paranoia, exactly. He would cut her some slack and try a different tack.

‘He’s falling behind in school.’

‘Then what he needs is tutoring,’ said Laura, too sharply for a purely clinical discussion. Or so it seemed to Grady.

‘I’m sure he does.’ Harlan kept his cool. He was not going to be provoked. ‘And neuro-regulation.’

‘Neuro-regulation?’ The way she said it, crossing her arms and tilting her head back, make it almost sound like something bad. ‘Neuro-regulation that works.’

‘Then you could’ve requested a consultation,’ said Harlan, trying not to sound too critical.

‘From who, child psychiatry? Twenty miles away? With a three month wait for an appointment?’

‘Right. So the sooner the better.’

‘Fine,’ said Laura. ‘Your patient.’

‘Our patient,’ said Grady. ‘We’re on the same team here.’

Laura stared into his eyes for a moment as if she were trying to look straight through them. It was unnerving and a little creepy, as if she were trying to examine the workings of his brain. As his supportive smile gradually faded, Harlan reminded himself that his reaction to this weird display was an important clue to what was wrong with his young colleague. You can’t take these things personally. She must be the one having creepy thoughts. Something going on at home maybe. He wanted her to be happy with her work, but he couldn’t control her personal life. All he could do was try to set an

example. Neuro-regulation was so important for these kids. For everyone. Think what happens when things go haywire, like outside that railway car. Hitler's dopamine, serotonin, norepinephrine must have been off the charts. Who wouldn't feel manic? Who wouldn't dance a little jig? Not that he actually did. A thigh slap—nothing outrageous for a hero, for Germany's champion, for the master of Europe. Modest in fact, when you think about it. Especially these days when everyone's supposed to pump their fists and scream when they win a video game. But that was before...

'Are we?'

'Are we what?' Harlan was still musing on the armistice.

'On the same team.'

'Of course we are.'

'Then why don't I feel listened to?'

An issue, Harlan concluded, that must go back to her childhood. Because everyone knew he was a good listener.

Harlan felt Laura pushing back in subtle ways. Or was it his imagination? Maybe he was being too suspicious, but there was a pattern here. A therapeutic nihilism when it came to behavioral problems. Looking back, he saw her reluctance to medicate her patients for a variety of problems, starting with ADD. She resisted the diagnosis of bipolar disorder in young children, and didn't like starting adolescents on antidepressants. She didn't even consider Asperger's a problem.

'My father was an actuary,' she said. 'I grew up around actuaries. Asperger's seems perfectly normal to me. Who doesn't like Spock?'

It was shocking. All her talk of 'normal variation'. Autism spectrum was nothing to make light of. These kids needed intervention, the sooner the better. Behind his back Laura was heard to say, 'Harlan never met a questionnaire he didn't like.' That was unfair. He'd never use a questionnaire that wasn't validated. Things finally came to a head when Grady proposed they screen all parents for anxiety and depression.

'You can't parent well with a mood disorder,' he said, though it was something so obvious it needed no explanation. He was way ahead of practice guidelines here. Leading the way, he liked to think.

'Anxiety goes with parenting,' was Laura's response. 'And sometimes it's depressing.'

'That doesn't mean parents won't benefit from treatment,' said Harlan. 'It can only help.'

'What do you want us to do, find them a nanny?'

Harlan thought it best to ignore her. Sarcasm was out of place at a staff meeting. 'Mitch, what do you think?' he asked.

'It does seem like a lot more work,' said Mitch. 'Can we get reimbursed for it?'

Harlan shrugged. 'I don't know. Catherine?'

'I don't have a problem with it.'

Laura tried to quit the next day, but Harlan talked her out of it. After all, colleagues need as much compassion as patients. Who knew what she was suffering? Doctors are human, they have moods. Doctors benefit from medication just like everyone else. He wished he could tell her that. Instead he suggested she take some time off.

'Just because I disagree with you doesn't mean I have problems,' was her answer.

It's her loans, thought Harlan. Undergrad and med school, as much as a mortgage on a new house. A big new house. Poor Laura, displacing her anger. But he couldn't let that affect the way she treated patients.

'But why do you object to screening parents?' he asked.

'Postpartum moms, okay,' said Laura. 'That's where I draw the line.'

'But it only takes two questions.'

'To begin. That's not where it stops. Parents aren't our patients, they have their own doctors. Besides, what gives us the right to be sticking our nose in their lives like that?'

'We're responsible for their kids.'

'No, parents are responsible for their kids. As long as the kids are doing okay, why should we bother?'

'Prevention,' said Harlan. 'C'mon, Laura. Just give it a try,' He gave her an encouraging smile, his one-for-the-Gipper look. She was so stubborn. He was about to

give her a brotherly pat on the knee for good measure, but stopped short just in time. Can't be too careful, he reminded himself. Anything that could be taken the wrong way would be. And, he would have to admit, thinking of himself as her big brother was a bit too patronizing.

'OK, but I'm not happy about this,' said Laura. 'And while we're at it, have you seen the new studies on fluoride varnish? Why are we spending time on crap that doesn't work? Why did we start doing it in the first place? Just because it seemed like a good idea at the time? To who?'

Yes, it seemed like a good idea to him. It still did. 'Caries is a problem,' he said. Harlan felt more hurt than insulted.

On her way out Laura muttered something like 'save your good intentions', or maybe it was 'paved with good intentions'. Either way, watching her leave his office in a huff, he knew the knee pat was a not a good idea. Thank god he didn't do it. She wasn't always so touchy. What happened? She needed a trip to Haiti or Burundi to get things in perspective. Go work somewhere without electricity half the day. He almost felt embarrassed by all the resources at his command, though the town could use a good pedodontist or two. And, despite what Laura thought, he wasn't convinced by those fluoride studies. Too counter-intuitive. He'd seen too much baby bottle caries. Poor kids. Those rotten nubs were so awful.

Uh oh, thought Grady, scrolling through his phone messages, better be careful with this one. He was exhausted at the end of another busy day. Plus he hadn't slept well the night before. How could revenue be down, he wondered, lying in bed awake, when they were working harder than ever? He hated thinking about money. And now there was this angry mom whose kid he hadn't seen in over a year. A nice salaried position, he thought as he dialed, was looking better and better. A clinic somewhere. Regular hours, with some teaching maybe. More time for his family. He felt his stomach churn. Don't get defensive, he told himself as the phone began to ring. Apologies cost nothing. Not that there was anything to apologize for, just getting ready for the conversation. Show concern. And of course he was concerned, but he wanted to get this over with ASAP and get home.

'Hello, Mrs. Sykes? This is Doctor Grady.'

The voice on the other end exploded. 'It's about time you called,' she screamed. 'I've been waiting all afternoon. My child is out of control and it takes four hours to get a call back from her doctor?'

'I see your daughter had a visit with Dr. Pereira this morning,' said Grady.

'That woman? She's a doctor?' The screaming on the other end continued. 'She doesn't know her ass from her elbow. Does she even have a license?'

'I'm sorry, Mrs. Sykes,' said Grady softly. He was reviewing Laura's note on the computer screen as he spoke. Defending his colleague, he knew, would be a waste of time here. 'Please tell me what the problem is.'

'Don't you keep records?' shouted the mom.

'Of course,' said Grady. 'I have them in front of me. I just wanted to know if anything had changed.'

'Nothing has changed, that's the fucking problem! I told that stupid doctor what we needed. She didn't do a damn thing. She said she wanted to talk to Stephanie alone. Well, that wasn't going to happen. Not with my daughter, not behind my back. She's twelve years old for god's sake. Anything she can say to a doctor she can say to me. I'm her mother, I know what she needs. Something to make her shut up and listen. Something to make her do what she's told for a change. I'm sick and tired of her back talk. I can't take it anymore. She's out of control.'

'It looks like Dr. Pereira wanted to call the crisis team.'

'Are you kidding?' There was an incredulous silence, then some spluttering on the other end. Harlan didn't know quite what to say. 'That's such bullshit,' Stephanie's mom continued, finding the right words. 'Stephanie doesn't need any fucking crisis team. She needs a good dose of something to change her attitude, that's all.'

'And she suggested counseling.'

'Counseling? I don't have time for that crap. I have two other kids. I have a job. Can't you just call something to the pharmacy?'

'I understand your distress,' said Grady, trying to keep the fatigue from his voice. 'I want to make sure I prescribe the right thing. Can you bring Stephanie to see me

tomorrow morning?’ He thought the offer was more than reasonable. He had a full schedule, but would gladly make time for her.

The phone on the other end banged down hard.

Damn, thought Grady, that was weird.

He stared at the computer screen. What did he do wrong? What could he have done differently? He tried calling back, but no one picked up. He tried again, still no answer. A lousy way to end the day. It took him a few minutes to settle down. First World problems, he concluded after time to reflect. And some people are angry no matter what. Can’t take it personally. It’s tough out there, but why is it okay to be so rude? Maybe he was the one who needed a trip to Haiti. Somewhere people didn’t take doctors for granted. But it was getting late, time to stop thinking about work. He had tried to do the right thing. He’d have the twenty minute drive home to get it out of his system. At least it was June, his favorite time of year.

Harlan finished his last note and stepped out of the office. A light breeze brushed his cheek. He stopped and looked up at the sky. Long days still bright and clear, with tiger lilies in bloom along the side of the road and hydrangeas like puffs of cotton candy. No screaming moms. But Laura had to go, loans or no loans. She’d caused him enough trouble. They weren’t running a charity operation. No, stop it. That’s thinking about work. You’re tired, he reiterated, that’s all. No more patients, no more problems till tomorrow. Get your mind on something else. Vacation? His kids had just gotten out of school. Two weeks in the mountains again, peace and quiet. He’d like to take them to Europe one of these years. Paris, Rome, Moscow. He always wanted to see Russia if he could. The churches, the rivers, the steppes, the Russian people. He’d just seen a documentary on Operation Barbarossa. WW II—always a good escape, like an epic fantasy. How could anything that crazy really happen? The Eastern Front. Stalingrad. Hitler’s grandiosity, his rage. His doctor doping him up like he was Elvis or Michael Jackson. It was all downhill after Compiègne. The Führer blew it. Couldn’t quit while he was ahead. How could he? But for a while, what an incredible high it must have been. Grady shuffled through the parking lot, the heels of his Oxfords tapping lightly on the asphalt. Mitch’s car was long gone. Getting in nine holes on his way home no doubt. Mitch was efficient, Grady had to admit. Of course there might’ve

been a genetic component to his madness. Hitler's, that is. Most likely there was. Consanguinity? Maybe. That was an intriguing possibility, as was the Jewish grandfather angle. Grady slid into his Prius, checked the overhead mirror and fastened his seat belt. It had been a trying day. At least his carbon footprint was getting smaller. He backed out cautiously and turned into the street. Where was he? Ah yes, genetics. Too bad there was no antenatal testing back then—for the genocide gene. Ha! But then what? A eugenic solution? How fitting would that be. Harlan laughed, then sighed. No, it would have to be non-directive. Let the parents decide. Up to Alois and Klara. A little dicey though, with Klara being Catholic and all. But the paterfamilias wasn't. Lapsed, anyway. Alois Hitler, Adolf's father, born Schicklgruber. Adolf Schicklgruber? Would a different last name have changed history? So much for genetics. Heil Schicklgruber! Haha. Jews could get away with it, like a Marx brothers movie. Brits too, maybe. Chaplin. But leaving that question aside, what would have happened if little Adolf's pediatrician had the choice of psychoactive drugs we have now? Or if his mom and dad had been taught different parenting skills? Or if the measles vaccine had been around for his brother Edmund? Then he might never have had that moment outside the railway car. A moment none of us will ever have. Adolf Hitler, the happiest man on earth.

Scott J. Kozar, RDR/CRR
Official Court Reporter
Cuyahoga County, Ohio

PROCEEDINGS

DET. BONELLI: Good morning, Anthony. Do they call you Anthony or Tony?

WARE: Either one. Tony is fine.

DET. BONELLI: OK, Tony. Are you tired? Would you like a cup of coffee before we get started?

WARE: No, I'm good.

DET. BONELLI: We already advised you of your rights. Do you have any questions?

WARE: No. I know my rights.

DET. BONELLI: Are you feeling comfortable?

WARE: I (inaudible), I guess.

DET. BONELLI: Tony, again for the record. I'm Detective Bonelli, Philip Bonelli. You can call me Phil, OK? This is Detective Dawkins and Sergeant Rivera.

DET. DAWKINS: Tony, how are you? I'm Rachelle.

SGT. RIVERA: Hi Tony, I'm Keith.

DET. BONELLI: We're from the sex crimes unit. We want to talk to you about a woman made an allegation against you.

WARE: Against me?

DET. BONELLI: Yes.

WARE: So that's why I'm here?

DET. BONELLI: Yeah. Like I said, there have been allegations. You can help us clarify what happened.

WARE: This is too weird. What allegations?

DET. BONELLI: We'll get to that. We're not saying they're true, but we want to talk to you about them.

WARE: Who is this woman?

DET. BONELLI: We'll get to that, too. She said it happened last week. You remember what happened last week?

WARE: Remember what? The only woman I had anything to do with was my wife.

DET. BONELLI: Are you sure?

WARE: Of course I'm sure.

DET. DAWKINS: There weren't any others?

WARE: What others?

DET. BONELLI: Did anything happen with her?

WARE: With who?

DET. BONELLI: With your wife.

WARE: No.

DET. BONELLI: You didn't have any problems or anything? Nothing going on at home?

WARE: No. Just the usual.

DET. BONELLI: What's the usual, Tony?

WARE: Nothing much. Work, the kids, bills. That's all.

DET. BONELLI: Didn't you have an argument?

WARE: Like (inaudible), like maybe. We argue sometimes. I don't remember.

DET. BONELLI: Maybe you argued about what?

WARE: I don't know. The kids, money.

DET. BONELLI: You sure it wasn't about something else?

WARE: Like what? What's this got to do with my wife?

DET. BONELLI: We'll get back to that. First we just want to establish the facts. Are you with us?

WARE: Sure.

DET. DAWKINS: So what kind of person would you say you are?

WARE: Me? That's a strange question.

DET. BONELLI: Just answer it, please.

WARE: What kind of a person? I don't know. Normal, I'd say. A regular guy.

DET. DAWKINS: A regular guy. And what is that?

WARE: A regular guy, that's all. What else is there to say?

DET. BONELLI: That's what we're asking. Why don't you tell us.

WARE: You know, nothing weird. I grew up around here. Hung out with my friends. Played baseball in high school. Went away to college. Got married, had kids. Things like that. Then I got a job in Cleveland. Normal stuff.

SGT RIVERA: A nice job, Tony?

WARE: Nice enough.

SGT RIVERA: So you think that's normal?

WARE: Sure I do.

DET. DAWKINS: Have you ever said, 'People are pretty much the same.'? Or 'I see everyone as an individual.'? Things like that.

WARE: I could have. What's that got to do with anything?

DET. DAWKINS: So you think most people are like you?

WARE: Yeah, basically.

DET. BONELLI: That's not what your wife said. She said you think most people should be like you.

WARE: You talked to my wife?

DET. DAWKINS: That's our job. When there are allegations, we talk to people.

WARE: Well you got it wrong. Maybe they would be like me, if we all played by the same rules.

DET. BONELLI: Right. We'll get back to that.

DET. DAWKINS: This woman said you made threats.

WARE: That's crazy. What woman? What threats?

DET. DAWKINS: You tried to force her, didn't you Anthony. That's your game, right? Your rules.

WARE: What game? What rules? C'mon, I didn't force anybody to do anything.

DET. DAWKINS: That's not the way she tells it. Maybe you're not such a regular guy after all.

WARE: You lost me. Now who the hell are you talking about?

DET. BONELLI: We'll ask the questions, Tony. All we want is the truth. Just man up and be straight with us.

WARE: I am. I'm trying to help you here. But you're saying I'm not a regular guy? What's that even mean? I didn't do anything.

DET. BONELLI: Then don't worry. All you have to do is tell us the truth. Now about your wife. How long have you known her?

WARE: What difference does that make?

DET. BONELLI: Just answer the question.

WARE: We've been married twenty years.

DET. DAWKINS: And where did you meet?

WARE: In college, my senior year.

DET. DAWKINS: What does she do?

WARE: She's a risk analyst. She works for an insurance company.

DET. DAWKINS: Is she a woman of color?

WARE: I guess you could say that, yeah. What does that have to do with anything?

DET. BONELLI: So you don't see her as a woman of color?

WARE: She's my wife. She's my kids' mother. That's how I see her. What's this 'woman of color' crap?

DET. DAWKINS: There you go, Tony. That makes you angry, doesn't it? You lose your temper a lot? You get mad when people talk about their color?

WARE: No, I just don't like bullshit. I don't like you putting words in my mouth.

DET. BONELLI: Nobody's putting words in your mouth.

DET. DAWKINS: You get mad at your wife, Tony? You don't like her putting words in your mouth?

WARE: (no verbal response)

DET. DAWKINS: Do you?

WARE: (inaudible) Sure I get mad at my wife sometimes. Sometimes she gets mad at me. Sometimes it's not pretty. We argue, big deal. I told you that. Did you put her through this same bullshit?

SGT. RIVERA: I have to ask you to calm down.

WARE: Then tell me what the fuck this is all about. Am I under arrest or something?

SGT. RIVERA: I said calm down. I won't say it again.

DET. BONELLI: We're treating you with respect, Tony. Can you give us some respect here? 'Cause this is not bullshit. There are some serious allegations against you. You can do yourself a big favor. Just tell us what really happened.

WARE: That's what I'm telling you.

SGT. RIVERA: Dude, you think we're stupid? Stop playing games with us. We have a good idea what happened, but we weren't there. You were. We want to hear it from you.

WARE: I'm not playing games. Why the hell do you think I am?

DET. DAWKINS: Because you said you're a regular guy. We know that's bullshit.

WARE: Bullshit? You think you know what I am?

DET. DAWKINS: Yeah, I think I know what you are.

WARE: And what's that?

DET DAWKINS: A white (inaudible). Got that, Anthony?

WARE: (inaudible)

SGT. RIVERA: What?

WARE: Like I said.

SGT. RIVERA: Stop jerking us around, man.

DET DAWKINS: If we asked your wife would she say you're a regular guy?

WARE: Sure she would.

DET. BONELLI: Sorry Tony, that's not what she says. Now be straight with us. Tell us about the argument. It wasn't about the kids. Tell us what really happened that night.

WARE: I can't. I don't know what really happened.

DET. BONELLI: Of course you do. Just tell us. Let's clear this whole thing up.

WARE: I said I don't fucking know.

DET. BONELLI: Work with us, Tony. That's all we're asking. Things will go better for you.

DET. DAWKINS: So what happened? You argued. You got mad. You lost control.

WARE: Yeah, I was mad. So what? So was she.

DET. DAWKINS: You made threats.

WARE: She told me to get out. I told her she could get out. It's my house. I'm not leaving my house. If she was so unhappy she could just get out.

DET. BONELLI: Why did she want you to leave? Was she afraid of you?

WARE: You guys are so smart, clue me in.

DET. BONELLI: We have an idea. But we want to know from you.

WARE: After twenty years she wakes up one day and sees her husband is a white guy?
Is that your idea?

DET. BONELLI: That's right, Tony. That's the way it went down.

DET. DAWKINS: When she sees that she's shocked. That's not so hard to understand.
She's wondering, how the hell did that happen?

WARE: And now you're saying it's my fault? When she finally realizes?

DET. BONELLI: Is that what you think?

WARE: I think she wants me out. She wants me to pack my things and go. Just like
that. For what?

DET. BONELLI: Don't play dumb with us, Tony. There's more to it than that. But you
don't go, do you.

WARE: Of course not. Why should I? Just because I'm white all of a sudden? Yeah,
you got that part right. But why now, I don't know. Maybe you can tell me.

DET. BONELLI: It happens when it happens. You seem to have a problem with that.

WARE: (inaudible)

DET. BONELLI: You got a problem with that?

WARE: You bet I do. I'm pissed.

DET. DAWKINS: You're pissed? At what? Because she got tired of trying to be what
you wanted her to be.

WARE: That's her problem.

DET. BONELLI: Tired of you trying to control her.

WARE: Me? Control her? Get serious.

DET. DAWKINS: Coercing her. Making her something she's not, something she doesn't
want to be, just to please you? Maybe she doesn't like your game, Tony.

WARE: Yeah. And what about me? Maybe I couldn't be what she wanted me to be. Did
you ever think of that? Maybe I just wanted what I thought was best.

DET. DAWKINS: And what was that?

WARE: As if you don't know. You guys who think you know everything. I'm done here. I
want to see a lawyer.

DET. BONELLI: Sergeant, you can take him.

SGT. RIVERA: Stand up. Hold out your hands.

WARE: This is all bullshit.

DET. DAWKINS: (inaudible)...Get him out of here.

JOEL'S INK BLOT

*W*e were all thieves. We stole steadily, stealthily, a bit at a time. We pilfered. Some of us stole time or money, but I stole books. We all convinced ourselves we deserved what we took. Except Oz. Stealing was no thrill or obligation for him, it was just what you did. It was the early seventies. The Age of Aquarius was fading, its residue already the stuff of nostalgia, though scattered remnants of counter culture hung on. Pop music turned from acid rock to glam as surely as cocaine replaced LSD. To stay with the times we did not rip off books, or liberate them. We just stole—because we wanted things.

We worked at Joel's Ink Blot, a bookstore named by the owner after himself. It did brisk business thanks to a great location on a street with heavy foot traffic near the University of Michigan campus in Ann Arbor. Large chains hadn't taken over the market yet, let alone on-line sales. You might think the chains muscled out independent stores like Joel's with their purchasing power and economies of scale, but I think their employees robbed the independents out of business. The Ink Blot's interior was a large, functional, open rectangular space with cinderblock walls, monotonous aisles, and slick linoleum laid over a concrete slab that wore down the knees of anyone who spent the day walking on it. The walls were lined from top to bottom with paperbacks, hardbacks covered the counters, bestsellers sat in displays. The registers fronted a wall of windows that viewed a constant parade of students and street people on the sidewalk. It was my first day of work and my mind had already begun to wander as I glimpsed the scene outside while Cab, the store manager, and Joel, the owner, were orienting me to my duties.

“Larry, right?” said Joel. He seemed dubious. I’d come to realize I don’t look like a Larry. Larrys were supposed to be willowy and quick. I’m the opposite. We were interrupted by someone screaming from the back of the store, “Science is pornography!” Joel listened intently. I turned and saw a young man’s head poke out the stockroom door, stare at the customers, and disappear. It was Todd, a clerk who soon became my companion in crime.

“I thought you were going to talk to him about that,” said Joel to Cab. He seemed more puzzled than angry.

“I did,” said Cab. “That’s why I put him in the stockroom.”

Joel was a mid-forties family man, paunchy and bald, with mutton chop sideburns and a dark bushy mustache. His large glasses and corduroy sports coat were meant to project a scholarly look. He had a genuine reverence for great books that can only come from someone who never reads them. His instincts made him cheap, the result of growing up with scarcity. He was also kind, trusting, and pompous. We made fun of him and took advantage of his good nature. He, in turn, paid us peanuts. He preached platitudes for our benefit every chance he got, while finding reasons to dock our pay. He’d done two years at Eastern Michigan and liked to hire college grads, though sixth graders could do the work. But he took on blue-collar types too, like Janice, the bookkeeper, and Oz, because it made him feel like a good liberal, and because he identified with them. He hired Oz over Cab’s misgivings. We had barely resumed my indoctrination when Todd reappeared and shouted, “Eat the dead poets!” Customers pricked up their ears.

Joel turned to me. “Is that a quote?”

I shrugged. “Not that I know of.” I looked at Cab, who shook his head in disgust. Cab was a Michigan grad, a disillusioned hippie, the only one who—as far as we knew—didn’t steal from the store. He ran the place for Joel, who liked to spend most of his time at his other Ink Blot near home in Ypsilanti. Like me, Cab wore his hair long. While I let mine hang loose, brushing it behind my ears when it fell in my eyes, he parted his in the middle and pulled it back in a tight ponytail over the waxy shine of his face like a spinster librarian from the last

century. In his weary eyes you could see hurt and contempt for the world. His basic management principle was to deny us the shifts we wanted. A few months after I started work, he announced he had given away all his worldly possessions and moved into an ashram. He ate a bowl of raw garlic every morning before work on the instructions of his guru. If you got too close, his breath burned the lining of your nose. I saw astonished salesmen wiping tears from their eyes while they took orders from him.

“Who’s this guy?” Todd thumbed over his shoulder as Oz walked past with a heavy stack of books to shelve. Todd was an art student, a surrealist by nature and design. Short and wiry like a gymnast, he had neat wavy hair combed straight back. His long, curved, graceful nose gave him the handsome-comic look of a fourth Marx brother. He commuted to Ann Arbor from Canton where he lived with his mother, a psychiatric social worker. Todd was wary of newcomers. Oz could sense it and came straight at him.

“Today’s my first day,” said Oz. “Maybe you could show me the ropes.”

Oz didn’t try to physically intimidate Todd, but he towered over him nonetheless. Oz was street reality. His knit shirts clung skin-tight to his lean tall build. His snug, flared jeans, and leather boots were all street style. But his features were regular, pleasing, even a bit refined. They hinted at something beside the street. Todd looked at him suspiciously. He’d been bullied by the Oz’s of the world all his life.

“I’m busy,” he said. “Maybe some other time.” Oz shrugged and went on with his work.

Todd turned to me and whispered, “Can you be-*lieve* this?” It was his favorite phrase—simple, handy, clearly expressing that he both marveled at, and doubted, his own experience. It expanded easily into “Can you be-*lieve* this guy?” or “Can you be-*lieve* this shit?” as the occasion warranted. He doubted Oz could actually read. It went on that way for weeks, Todd watching suspiciously and Oz going about his business. Eventually they managed enough small talk while passing each other in the aisles for Todd to ascertain that Oz

had a legitimate connection to the bookstore. While we were boosting Breton and Durrell from their alphabetical slots on the shelves, Oz cultivated his own little carousel of science fantasy. Poul Anderson, Jack Vance. Oz read everything they ever wrote.

It was a period in my life when I was happy—happy not to be drafted. I had a low draft number, but my allergies made me 1-Y, which meant the Army could take me any time they wanted, but they weren't that hard up yet even with all the madness going on in Southeast Asia. I had dropped out of school and was trying to be an actor. The Ink Blot was supposed to be my day job. Then it finally dawned on me—despite some minor success in college productions—that I had neither the talent nor the ambition for acting. I just liked thinking about being an actor. It was deflating. My world shrank to a basement studio apartment and a box-shaped retail store. Getting through each day became a constant effort, as if the air were heavy and thick. I slept most of the time. When I showered I stared at the bath tiles, unwilling to move until the hot water ran out and I started shivering. If I'd had a phone, I wouldn't have answered it. My mind was a field of stalks and stubble. For consolation, I read. Todd introduced me to Dada and Artaud. I tanked up on instant coffee and skimmed the first books he pilfered for me. For brief moments I forgot I was aimless.

Stealing turned out to be way too easy. When we worked the evening shift we simply closed down the store, turned off the lights, and walked the line of shelves bagging whatever caught our fancy. It was like picking fruit. There were some rules. Steal at intervals so you don't leave gaps on the shelf, and try to take a book with several copies so there would be some left in stock. After a while, though, it added up. Every one of Faulkner's novels. Jung in paperback. Cocteau's screenplays. We even special ordered books just so we could filch them. Hard cover art books. Stendhal's private diaries. We relished the anticipation of unpacking each haul at home, the tactile pleasure of hefting books from our shopping bags and running our fingers over their soft covers in the dim light of our rooms. It was exhilarating. It went on like that for months.

Then Oz stopped showing up for work. Didn't phone in sick. Didn't have a phone. We missed him, talked about him, but no one had a clue where he was. We thought he'd simply moved on, like street folks do. I was surprised to find people in the store when I arrived early one morning to open up. I heard Joel's muffled voice in the back office, then Oz's, and a voice I couldn't place.

"I hope you learned something important here," said Joel.

"Yes sir," said Oz.

"You have to get yourself straightened out." Joel's voice again.

"He'll pay it off, too. All of it. I'll make sure of that," interjected the hoarse voice I didn't recognize.

"Hard work pays off. That's what got me where I am," said Joel.

"I know. Thank you for giving me another chance," said Oz. He didn't even sound phony.

"Well, don't blow it. You're a good kid, Oz. You're a smart kid. You can make something of yourself."

"He *is* a good kid. But he messed up good this time." The man with the hoarse voice coughed and sounded like he was about to spit.

"I'll get back in the program. I need help," said Oz.

Joel concluded the discussion. "OK. You do that, you can start work next week." I imagined handshakes all around.

When the door opened, Oz and Joel emerged with an older man in a blue auto mechanic's uniform with the name "Vic" sewn on the shirt in red thread—Oz's uncle I later learned. Oz looked sick, like he'd aged twenty years. He was thinner. His face was puffy and there were black circles under his eyes. His clothes were rumpled and he looked like he hadn't shaved or showered for days. He'd been on a heroin run with his old street buddies. The night before they'd broken into the store and robbed the cash box, spent it all on dope. After they shot up, Oz went to his uncle. They figured the smart thing was to confess and pre-empt Joel before the trail lead back to Oz. They were right. Joel never did call the police.

Most of the time he'd been working with us, Oz had been on methadone. I don't know if that calmed him or if he was naturally calm. With no further need to conceal his addiction, he confided in us. He told us stories from the methadone clinic--ways to fake clean urine, ways to sell your methadone. Some junkies just ran outside and spit their dose straight into the mouth of a waiting customer. He pointed out addict professors walking by the store window, privileged clients who took their doses home once a week so they wouldn't have to line up with the riffraff every morning at the clinic.

With Oz back in the flow of work, we upped our thieving. He told us that Janice, the bookkeeper, was embezzling. He hooked us up with clerks from the record store down the street so we could barter books for albums in the back alley. He arranged for us to buy clothes off the truck from guys who delivered food to the diner next door. And of course we still plucked books from the trees. Todd was awed by Oz's street smarts. Awe mixed with suspicion and fear. We were still middle class kids, however bohemian we tried to be. I think Oz liked us despite the fact that, to him, we were just naïve and pretentious. Naïve we would have argued, but pretentious we worked hard at. He became a mentor, our Artful Dodger, though he was our own age. He taught me how to ring up fake sales and slip the cash in my pocket when I closed out the register--something you can't do now with barcode scanners and video cameras everywhere. The first time I succeeded I was so excited I ran over to him like I'd landed my first trout. He told me to chill out before I drew attention to myself. He seemed amused though, even proud. It was joyful looting and there was no end in sight, until Cab announced the annual inventory was coming. The joy skidded to a sudden halt and anxiety settled over our work. As the time for the inventory grew nearer, we feared quitting would draw suspicion. We saw search warrants in our future. It was just books, we imagined ourselves pleading, is it a crime to love books? Cab was acting strangely content. He smirked and hummed as he walked around the store. He held long conferences with Joel. Oz would be the prime suspect, of course. But Oz knew all about us. What reason did he have not to point the finger if it would get him off?

The day before the inventory started, Joel called us together for a staff meeting. He sat on the counter by the registers, legs crossed like he was leading a graduate seminar while we gathered around expecting to hear how our little spree would come to an end. We felt sick. Joel cleared his throat.

“I can’t tell you how important this inventory is,” he began. “It’s important for the health of our store, and I know you care about this place as much as I do. It’s so humbling to look down the shelves and think of all the great minds gathered in these books.” He paused and lowered his head to peer at us over his glasses. “I know you feel the same way. That’s why you work here. It’s not for the money—you could all make more money someplace else. But money’s worthless compared to the masterpieces we have at our fingertips every day. So I want you to know I think of you as family.” He spread his arms high and wide as if about to hug the air. “Families depend on each other, and I know I can depend on you. That’s why I want to personally be the one to tell you how it works. The store will be closed for two days. Everyone gets a printout by publisher. You’ll go through every shelf and every aisle, and mark down whether the book is in stock, and if so how many copies. Cab here will be supervising. If you have any questions, ask him. I can’t pay overtime, so get the job done on schedule. Doughnuts are on me. Questions?” He gave us a benign smile, thinking how motivated we must now be.

Todd and I looked at each other. My knees were weak and I realized I was grinning foolishly. I didn’t care. It was incredible luck—Joel’s cheapness had saved us. He was such a skinflint, he wouldn’t hire outside people. For the next two days we skipped down the aisles and shelves making marks on our clipboards for books we’d lifted months before. The night we finished, Todd and I went off to the diner where his girlfriend waited tables to drink coffee until her shift was over.

“Can you be-*lieve* it?” Todd sighed as we eased into our booth. I couldn’t. I was exhausted.

“That was too close.” I groaned.

Marcie, Todd's girlfriend, set down our coffee. She was an illustrator—petite, diminutive, almost a miniature, with a porcelain complexion and a wide harelip scar running from her nose to her upper lip. She looked good in her yellow checked blouse and white apron.

Todd lowered his voice, though Marcie was the only one within earshot. "Maybe we should cool it for a while."

"Or maybe just bag it altogether," I said, feeling sincere. "I have enough books to last a lifetime."

"Me too."

Marcie just shook her head. "You guys were out of control. You're into big bucks here. This isn't shoplifting." We both stared into our cups.

We held off for a good two weeks. The first week was easy. But the feel and smell of new books, their endless promise of pleasure, the ease of swiping them, coupled with our pitiful wages, were finally too much. We were like starving squirrels storing up nuts after finding ourselves awash in acorns. We took things on the off chance we'd read them in twenty years. We had stacks filling our bedrooms, layers stuffed under our beds, piles serving as coffee tables. We gave them out as birthday presents and wedding gifts. They became fungible as cash. It was currency, wealth. We were on the book standard.

"Damn it, Janice. You were supposed to prepay these orders." We could all hear Cab yelling in the back office. Janice's reply was too soft to catch, or maybe she was stunned by Cab's spicy blast. She wasn't very articulate, anyway.

"How can you be so stupid!" Cab was putting on weight and the circles under his eyes had darkened. He seemed to sense everyone knew what was going on but him. Maybe he needed another bowl of garlic, because it wasn't cleansing the toxins from his system. I was stocking shelves next to Oz when we heard the rant. I could sense Oz stiffen and seethe. He balled his hands into fists.

“Easy,” I said. Oz knew that Cab looked down on him, but it rolled off his back. He was feeling protective of Janice, who had trouble defending herself. Janice teased and nurtured Oz like a big sister. Maybe it was their rapport, a rapport that excluded him, that bothered Cab, or maybe Cab had a secret crush on her. She wasn’t pretty, but she had thick red hair and wide hips that I liked.

“Janice can take care of herself.” I said, without conviction.

“It’s not a fair fight.” Oz grabbed an armful of books that swayed off center and crashed to the floor. I could tell it took all his self-control not to run to the back of the store and stomp Cab to a bloody pulp. Foregoing his instincts put him in a strange new place. He kept balling his hands into fists for hours. The constrained atmosphere of the bookstore pained him more than I ever knew.

Janice made a point of being good to us because Oz said we were okay. She was a quiet accomplice whose simple presence comforted us. No one ever said a word, but she knew that we knew she embezzled, and we knew that she knew we pilfered. Her workspace was in the back, next to Cab, and she could overhear everything that went on in his office. She always gave us the heads up when he was sniffing around. One Saturday afternoon some of Cab’s friends came by with a six-pack and yakked with him in the back room for a while before heading out to a movie. When they had gone she frantically waved us into her office.

“You won’t believe what I just heard. Do you know what Cab’s real name is?” she asked. We’d never really thought about it. He was Cab. It fit him.

“Cabot?” Todd ventured.

“Cabell?” I asked, thinking of Calloway.

Janice shook her head and burst out laughing. “It’s Percy.”

OK, we nodded. It’s Percy, so what. She burst out laughing again. “Do you know why they call him Cab?” We shrugged.

“Him and his friends used to drop acid in college. When they were tripping they gave themselves vegetable names. Guess which one was Cab’s?” That was it. She had her revenge. Cabbage. It all made sense. The garlic, the

ashram, the pained look of a man who knew he would never enjoy sex, who would get more pleasure at a desk pouring over invoices than he would from his own dick. I felt bad for him, knowing how sad he really was. Still, I had to watch myself when he was within earshot so I didn't snicker when I said his name. A simple "Hi Cab," became a minefield.

Oz and I got close for a time. We went for beers after work. One mild October afternoon we took our break together in the alley behind the store. The smell of garbage from the dumpster next door mixed with the scent of damp leaves blowing all the way from the Arboretum. I lit up a joint and passed it to him, but he declined with a curt wave.

"You know, Larry," he reflected, as I drifted off into my quiet meditation, "I didn't grow up that far from here." I took another drag and his voice became distant but distinct. He pointed off toward Detroit's West Side. "We had this gang called the Park Boys. It was just kids from the block, cousins, like that. We thought we were tough. We got in fights with gangs from the other side of the park. Some robbery, selling drugs. Nothing big." He folded his arms comfortably as he leaned back against the brick wall and looked up at the sky. His voice sounded old and oddly at peace.

"You ever want to get out of there?" I asked.

"Why do you think I'm here?" he said. He knew he was so much smarter than his old gangster friends and shooting buddies.

"So what do you want to do?" I asked, thinking of myself perhaps. Looking down, I was struck by the fullness of the veins on the back of my hands.

"Write," he said. He told me his dream was to get published in magazines like *Startling Stories* and *Weird Tales*. He loved Poe and H. P. Lovecraft.

"I'd like to read your stories," I said. "And you should talk to Todd about Poe." Then he asked me about myself. I rambled on for a while about my aborted acting career. He was curious and amused. For once it didn't seem so pathetic.

When a few weeks later I told Oz I was going to be out of town for the weekend, he asked if he could use my place. He didn't care that it was short on sunlight and hot water. He needed privacy. There was this girl. How could I refuse? I came home late Sunday night expecting the room to be empty. Instead I found Oz and his girlfriend, high as kites. She was a tall black woman a good ten years older than Oz, with strong smooth features like Little Richard and the tightest jeans I had ever seen in my life. They'd met in rehab. A spoon and syringe were on the floor. They were both flopped on my bed fully clothed. She was running her long fingers, ringed like a gypsy, through his hair as if he were a child.

"Hey, little brother. Meet Rose," said Oz. He laughed to himself. His lids were half closed. He had never called me little brother.

I nodded. "Hi Rose." She continued running her fingers through his hair.

"I love this white boy," she said, looking at me dreamily. Her voice was girlish sweet, as if it there was someone else, a little sister, speaking from inside her mature woman's body. She fixed me in her gaze for a moment. "And you're a cute white boy, too."

Oz laughed louder. "Yeah, he is a cute white boy." Then they both closed their eyes and lay back on the bed as if I wasn't there. I stood not knowing what to do, getting pissed. Finally I said I had to get to work in the morning. Oz opened his eyes.

"Yeah, get some sleep." He motioned at the floor piled wall to wall with stacks of books so thick there wasn't room to kneel. "Sorry about this, man. We'd let you have your place back, but we can't stand up. You know." He closed his eyes again and rolled on top of Rose. That was it for me. As I left for the bookstore I could hear them snoring—slow, shallow breathes of different timbre falling in unison. Despite feeling repulsed and unnerved by their junkie ways, I was envious of that moment of serenity, however false, they had captured together. I slept on a chair in the stockroom until dawn. When I went back to my place they were gone. They'd tidied up the bed before leaving. I took a shower and went back to work.

New workers came and went. We were obsessed with getting them in on the action, even though we knew full well it was careless. Pratha—long legged, longhaired, clear skinned, a grad student in cell biology who looked like a model. Todd would just stare up at her. He was speechless. He couldn't work when she was in sight. He wanted to sculpt her. He wanted to smear her with mangos and crazy glue from head to toe. Her boyfriend was a surgery resident at the university hospital. She was way out of our league. And Julian, studying conducting in the music school. He made it clear his aesthetic sensibilities were superior to ours. He complained about having to study swing tunes and listen to all those awful saxophones. Pratha was a tough sell. She had scruples. We finally got her to cop a copy of *The Bell Jar* in hardcover, but that was it. Julian, on the other hand, was ripe. We knew his weakness—art books. Large, heavy, baroque, expensive art books. He jumped in deep. It felt good to have company. Oz was working fewer hours with the new people around. He'd pocket some money from fake sales two or three shifts a week and disappear. No more time for beers. I asked him if he was busy writing. He said he was, and had some great stuff that he'd show me just as soon as it was done. He grew a beard. It helped hide the new gauntness of his face.

One day in late February an auditor showed up and went over the books. Janice overheard him tell Joel the store should be making much more money than it was. She freaked. Things looked like they could unravel. But even then we kept hauling loot out the door. A psychologist might say we wanted to get caught, but that's bullshit. We just wanted more books. When we weren't taking them we felt nervous and empty. When we saw our stash grow we felt good. We read faster, stayed up reading all night, drank coffee all day, skipped meals, looked over our shoulders at Cab watching us with a weird new vigilance, watched Joel emerge stone-faced from his meetings with the auditor. The more we read, the more we had to acquire. My mind was so full of other people's ideas and scenes from other places that I lost track of my surroundings. Phrases, sentences, whole paragraphs I didn't recognize popped into my head

day and night. I couldn't tell what thoughts were mine. Todd wanted to slow down, but I couldn't. Oz dismissed us when we asked him for advice. "What did you think was going to happen?" was all he said. He was calm as ever. He seemed to have lost interest in books, like he'd read his fill.

The store was packed with Friday evening customers. It was March and we were still in the grip of winter. Behind the front windows, streetlights bathed the sidewalk in a strange brightness and the people walking under them seemed on display. Todd and I were at the registers with our backs to the scene. Joel was having a late night session at the other end of the store with Cab and the auditor. Todd slowly cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted over the line of customers in front of him. "All writing is garbage!" Then leaning in my direction, stage whispered, "I'm quitting. I already told Cab."

I wasn't surprised. "What did he say?" I asked.

"What does he always say?" Todd liked to quiz me.

"Nothing that makes any sense. Are you worried?"

"No," he said. "Yes. I wanted to punch his face in and set the place on fire." He cupped his hands again and howled at the ceiling, "I love garbage!" We kept ringing up sales.

"So he didn't ask you to stay."

"No."

"He shrugged and gave you a pissy look."

"Of course."

"Did he say anything?"

"Yeah, he said, 'Good. Then I don't have to fire you.'"

"I don't have a good feeling here, Todd."

"Maybe we got carried away."

We had just turned back to the registers and begun mulling over our predicament when Janice came flying in the front door, bumping customers out of the way without an apology. I had never seen her at the store in the evening. "Have you seen Oz?" she blurted out as soon as she reached the front counter.

She was panting and looked frantic. “Did he come in here?” Her hair was mussed and her pupils were blown wide like she was doing belladonna. Customers stared and edged away.

“No,” I said. “He hasn’t been here all day. Cab hardly gives him any hours.”

“Oh god,” she answered, and kept repeating “Oh god” while we stood there unable to think of the right word or gesture.

Finally Todd thought clearly enough to ask, “Is Oz in trouble?”

Janice burst into tears and started to run out when we heard a loud banging at the back of the store, like someone slamming their fist into the metal door. There was a brief pause and then another loud bang. We saw Joel and Cab rush from the office, and a moment later heard men’s loud angry voices from behind the partition that separated the main store from the stockroom.

From what I gathered later, there was nothing extraordinary about what happened. Predictable, some would say. At around 5:30 that afternoon, two hours before Janice showed up at the Ink Blot, Oz and Rose walked into a convenience store on Washtenaw Avenue. Rose tried her best to stand without swaying. She positioned herself by the entrance, leaning on a wall, and surveyed the street while Oz walked up to the counter and asked for a pack of Newports. At her signal, Oz pulled an unloaded .22 from under his jacket and told the cashier to empty the register. The cashier, an 18-year-old junior college student, had the good sense to quickly comply. Oz thanked her and escorted Rose out the door. The cashier wasted no time calling the cops. Oz and Rose wasted no time copping and shooting up, and it occurred to them they needed a place to crash. When they got to the alley behind the Ink Blot, Rose collapsed. Joel and Cab were the last people Oz expected to see when the back door opened. He carried Rose in and set her on the floor. By that time we were chasing customers out and locking the front. When we got to the stockroom Oz, pensive and glassy eyed, was on his knees beside Rose, oblivious to Janice trembling next to him and a speechless Joel above him at a loss for homilies. Cab had just called the police. The auditor was gone. Todd was holding his hands on top of his head in

disbelief. I didn't know how to act. Oz looked up at me for an instant. "Hey, little brother," he mumbled. The moment my eyes met his pinpoint pupils I finally knew he never had a chance, not a real chance, and that I did. We did. I think he knew it too. Now I think that's what he had always been telling me. I can't say if I deserved it or not, but I had it. The others can vouch for themselves. "Hey, big brother," I whispered back.

The police and the ambulance arrived at the same time. Two cops stood Oz up, searched him and found the .22, still unloaded, four small glassine bags of heroin, his works, a Bic lighter, a pack of Newports, forty-five dollars in cash, a pair of glasses and a brand new copy of Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. They handcuffed him while the paramedics fitted Rose with an oxygen mask and lifted her onto a stretcher.

"You know this guy?" The third cop had a notebook out and was questioning Joel.

"He used to work for me."

"You notice anything missing lately? Merchandise, cash?" asked the cop. Cab was about to chime in but Joel waved him off.

"Could be."

"Cause these junkies, they'll steal anything."

"Once a junkie, always a junkie," said Joel. I didn't agree. There are always circumstances. Some are more transient than others. I kept my mouth shut.

Todd and I saw it was time to beat it. Janice took the cue. Our time at Joel's had expired. As we backed quietly out of the room, I had brief images of a future that seemed likely to me. Todd and Marcie moving to New York where I'd never see them or their performance art. Janice having kids and a better job. Cab with an MBA and his hair cut, making an executive salary at a bookstore chain. Joel retiring to a cozy lakefront community, with all the time in the world to listen to great books on tape. I still had no clear image of my own future, but I figured I had one. And I knew I was done reading for a long time.

Joel considered justice served by Oz's arrest. Despite being burned, he was content to chalk up his losses to the demons of drug addiction. Cab had a strong suspicion there was more to it, but we were out of there. Oz never ratted on us. He did not get a sympathetic judge. The Ink Blot in Ypsi kept Joel afloat while he tightened his accounting and inventory controls, and a year later the Ann Arbor store was making money hand over fist. I had enough books. I went home and packed their enormous weight in large boxes that were too heavy for one person to carry, and with other people's help have taken them with me every time I moved, from city to city and state to state, my old talismans, waiting until I was ready to start reading again. Now I buy books on-line. I pay my credit cards off every month. I don't feel compelled to read that much, though. I just like having books lined up on my shelves. I'm pretty busy and besides, I prefer my own thoughts.

That late winter evening in Ann Arbor, we finished backpedaling from the stockroom and turned to leave. The last thing we saw, through the plywood shelves piled high with overstock, over unopened boxes of shipments stacked publisher by publisher, was the cops dragging Oz away from Rose's stretcher. As they pushed him toward the door, he looked at the paramedic taking her blood pressure and his eyes flashed clear for an instant. "She got a pulse?" he asked, his voice steady. The paramedic grunted. "Yeah, she got a pulse."