

ECHOES FROM SOME FAR OFF WAKE |

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PROLOGUE

A Dead Mouse Inside A Tied Plastic Grocery Bag Inside An Antique Wooden Birdcage Hanging From A 60-Year-Old Japanese Maple Tree In Our Backyard

My hands were slicked with bacon grease, and the congealing fat was smeared on the outside of the garbage bag that I lugged into the moonless night beyond the breakfast room's sliding glass door. I'd gotten it there, on the garbage bag. A few minutes before—near the end of an argument with my wife—I gestured into the side of an open jar of various used & sequestered cooking oils that was looming late-post-dinner on the kitchen counter, knocking a hefty dollop of its contents onto the also-just-liberated-from-its-container garbage bag that leaned beneath the counter's edge.

Now I was quick-stepping the semi-lubricated bag out the open sliding door. A few strides into the lightless yard my face met the wooden vertical stripes of an empty antique birdcage that hung from our Japanese maple—a pitch-black & sudden smushing of my lips & nose & cheeks against its tiny, twig-like prison bars. I

swatted my free hand in the dark and the cage bounced back into my face one more time before I figured to grab it with my oily paw.

As I made my way across the grass—holding out at arm's length the awkward bag, like a fishing pole with its slippery prize reeled all the way up to its far end & dangling uncomfortably—I heard the urgent patter of cat feet pull up alongside me. We paired step-for-step to the garbage bin waiting outside the garage door. The bin had its own destination tonight: the street-curb below at the end of our long, steep driveway. I released my catch into the murky container, flipped down the lid, tipped it toward me onto its wheels, and started the descent.

When I reached the curb, I glimpsed the headlights of a slowly tottering pick-up truck illuminating a stretch of pavement not far up the street. I peered back at my trailing cat, Theo—lit now too by the orange glow of the streetlamp—and finally saw what he proudly gripped in his jaws: a limp brown field mouse. The rodent's tiny tail dangled & bobbed below Theo's chin as he trotted down the concrete, and I tugged the tall, grey, unevenly-weighted bin into a flat spot at the edge of the street.

Theo met me at the bottom of the driveway and I reached down for him—hoping to maybe snag his prey and deposit the corpse in the bin—but Theo scurried backward, then darted into the

street. The pick-up was close enough now that the white of its headlights washed over the cat, the mouse, the bin & me. I waved my hands frantically toward the driver, held my breath. Theo was a blur across the pavement and the pick-up didn't even hesitate, but the truck couldn't reach the cat before he made it to the other side.

While the vehicle sauntered on, I scolded my feline, briefly yelling across the road, standing at the curb under the streetlamp. Then I shuffled back up the driveway, relieved and calling for Theo to follow me, which he did. As I walked beside the garage & toward the yard, I felt the cat brush quickly past my leg in the now-again dark. And when I reached the sliding door, Theo stood there impatiently, staring up at the handle—his mouth now empty and the dead mouse laid victoriously in front of the door.

I slid the broad pane of glass along its rail and Theo leapt into the house. I reached inside, pulled open the junk drawer beside the door, snatched a plastic grocery bag, closed the drawer and quickly slid the door shut. Wincing, I reached down toward the lifeless creature with my bag-covered hand, grabbed the rodent, inverted the bag, and tied its handles together. That grey bin down the far end of the driveway, at that moment, seemed a long ways away, and the freshly-empty kitchen garbage can was clearly out of the question. I set the plastic bag

down in the grass, then thought better of it—imagining Theo finding it in the morning, trying to tear it open, and possibly inhaling the tiniest flap of plastic, just enough to make his airway a sudden internal sarcophagus. In my earliest days as a father I'd been warned about the dangers of a toddler accidentally inhaling & being asphyxiated by some rogue piece of plastic dispersed into their airway by a too-close-to-the-face unexpected balloon-popping.

I picked up the mouse-heavy bag and took a few steps toward the antique wooden birdcage hanging from the maple. With greasy fingers, I slid up the wooden dollhouse jail door, stuffed the bag through its miniature opening, and slid the door back down.

As I slipped into the house, Theo strode back outside. When he found his loot now missing, he wailed in a subdued but painful way—then he started to scour the yard, scurrying from corner-to-corner, sometimes squeezing out another tortured call. A little later, I laid in bed awake for nearly an hour, hearing occasionally his sad cries through the open window. Each time I heard him, I had the urge to reach across the sheets and comfort my wife in some way—to stroke her hair or caress her cheek. But instead of touching her, I simply laid there and thought about doing it. Eventually I fell asleep, and I'm not sure how long Theo kept on mawing at the darkness. ~

I.

Beginnings

There were two other people in the car with Carolyn. They had taken a lot of money that wasn't theirs. Technically, it was the other two who had taken the money: Calvin and Ray. Carolyn had just sat in the car waiting while the two guys scrambled into the filthy alley and crept up to the driverless rusting Chrysler, broke the window, reached in through the shards, then snatched the paper-bagged stash of two thousand and some odd dollars.

She had sweated fiercely in the car while she waited, even though it wasn't that hot. Carolyn thought it would've been warmer in San Francisco in July – being California and summer and all – but it was cool and windy where she waited on one side of Mission Street, running the engine until the boys came back with the money. And when they reached the Golden Gate Bridge in their Civic, there was so much fog they couldn't see anything but the road. Even the massive, red, jagged-rising towers of the bridge disappeared into the mist above.

"Easy," Ray said from the back seat behind Carolyn, who drove. "There's nothin' to hurry for now."

"Just do what you're doing," added Calvin, who sat beside Ray in the back.

They'd both hopped into the car through the back door when they came running out of the alley. Carolyn said one of them should get in the front, but they closed the door and told her to move it. She thought it looked stupid with the two of them sitting in back like a taxi, like they'd just robbed a bank.

Ray rolled down his window a little and wiggled his fingers in the air outside. Carolyn wanted to light a cigarette but thought it was too cold to open her window and didn't want the smoke in the car.

"We should have a gun," said Ray.

"Yeah?" said Calvin.

"What'll you do with a gun? You're so fuckin' retarded," Carolyn said. "You just wanna spend the money. We shouldn't spend it, yet. I wouldn't let you shoot anything anyway."

"He didn't say we were shootin' anything," Calvin said.

Ray tapped his hands feverishly on the top of Carolyn's seat, making it rumble beneath her back. "Fuck it," he said. "I'm gonna shoot all kinda things in Alaska. I'll get shotgun and a rifle, after I lose you jokers."

"Fuck you," said Calvin. "I shot two deer last year that weekend when you fags were playing football. What'd you ever shoot?"

"Bullshit, you just shot one. You're always makin' up something else," Ray sneered.

"I fuckin' shot two, but I just bagged the one. The big one. The little one wasn't worth it, but I pegged it good. Whole leg went red in the snow, it was shot. You never even been out with a gun."

"You're just a lyin' injun, all the same. All those cousins of yours are thieves, wannabes. I knew you were full of that same shit," Ray laughed. "I knew you'd steal that fuckin' money. Easy, like leadin' an Indian to water."

Calvin was half Cherokee and lived among that side of his family in their small town in central Nebraska. It was the same town that all three of them were from – where they had been going to high school and where they'd just left four days ago. Calvin and Ray hung out because they smoked meth together at parties and in the mornings before school, and Carolyn had dated Ray for a long time, although she didn't think they were a couple anymore.

"You're all talk," Calvin said. "You take it in the ass with your football fags."

Ray lunged at Calvin and shoved his forearm against his neck, slamming Calvin's head

against the window of the door. Calvin had thick, overgrown black hair that usually fell onto his forehead and covered the tops of his shoulders – now it hung in a mess in front of his face while his olive skin began to turn red.

"Fucker," Calvin said and then kicked Ray away from him.

"Whose stupid idea was this?" Carolyn yelled. "Assholes! I'll crash us, you think I care?"

Carolyn swerved their car into the right lane as they drove uphill and entered a long tunnel. Horns blared behind them and the angry sounds echoed in the concave space. The boys halted their struggle and Ray stomped hard with one foot on the floor of the car.

It was quiet for a short while. Carolyn drove with one hand on the wheel and one hand on the pack of cigarettes that she twirled in the empty passenger seat. She thought about how far Alaska seemed. It almost seemed as far away from her now as it had in Nebraska. She saw Ray in the rear view mirror; he turned to face Calvin.

"I don't even—" Ray said. "You're the stupidest Indian I ever met. I could steal from you and you wouldn't even know."

"Enough," said Carolyn. "Enough. I could just stop here. You two could take the asshole bus. I don't even want the fucking money. I'll stop

right here. I'll work at that Denny's. It's exactly what I should do."

For a moment she thought that's exactly what she would do. The night before, in Reno, Ray had clumsily coaxed her into sex, and she knew it wouldn't be the last time. Which hadn't seemed so bad before they stole the money, but now seemed like the kind of thing that would only be followed by worse things.

Carolyn didn't want to go along with taking the money – except that the guy was black and wearing a red bandana, which was definitely a gang thing, and she figured they were doing those kinds of things to each other all the time. She didn't really know any black people in Nebraska. There were some Mexicans and Indians, and a few Chinese kids that she'd see around—and they were annoying, but mostly harmless. She thought some of their accents were stupid and couldn't understand them half the time, but they weren't shooting each other, and all the neighborhoods back there were too dull to be scary. It was nothing like the way it felt when they drove through Oakland and past Treasure Island into San Francisco.

When they'd gotten off the Bay Bridge and down to the streets she'd seen homeless people cluttered on the corners and smelled waves of urine when they'd accidentally turned into an abandoned parking lot cluttered with cardboard

tents & shopping carts. They'd just been looking for some more meth, but after they found a guy and he took their cash then pointed to a skinny kid huddled in a vestibule, Ray saw the guy hustle the money down the alley and stash it in the Chrysler before taking up his spot again on the sidewalk. Ray figured all they needed to do was pull around to the other side of the block—then *smash, grab & go, baby*. While he shook the skinny kid's hand and palmed the meth, he felt like he was stealing candy. Back in the car he told Carolyn he was a cowboy and she said he meant outlaw.

She thought the guy must've been stupid to be robbed by a loser like Ray. Anybody that dumb deserved it. She didn't feel sorry for him at all; the guy had probably shot lots of people.

In the back seat Calvin and Ray burned some meth on a corner of tin foil while Carolyn followed the signs north along Highway 101.

"What way is this? Where's the water?" asked Ray.

"This ain't the coast. What you know wouldn't fill my pocket," Calvin said.

"It's California, man. Get your kicks, 'cause we're outta here. Adios, gonads!" Ray said the last part with a cigarette in his mouth. He rolled down the window and cupped his hand to light

the Marlboro with a green Bic that he'd peeled the label off of.

"You'll be leavin' me up in Anchorage when we get there. I'll just tell you now. I know somebody in Anchorage," Calvin said.

"Uh-huh. Daddy's boy. I know why you're along for the ride. Why d'ya think I asked you, stupid? You hate those injuns much as I do – leaches and drunks. Bet your daddy's just an Eskimo anyway." Ray sucked a drag from his cigarette.

"Least I got reasons. You don't even have an explanation," Calvin said.

"For what?" asked Ray. "What I need an explanation for? You injuns don't understand cowboys, that's why we kicked your ass."

"Your daddy never even taught you to shoot a gun. You wouldn't make a fuckin' cowboy."

"I'd kill 'im with these bare hands if he ever came to me with a gun. Motherfucker. I'd find a knife and slice him. You pissed your pants when we broke that window. Hee-haw!" Ray tossed his cigarette out onto the highway.

"I'm hungry," said Carolyn. "We gonna eat today?"

"Bet I kill somebody before either of you. Even without a goddamn gun. In fact, fuck you both, find me a Wal-Mart. I want a gun," Ray said.

"Did you see those fags in San Fran? I saw two fags, right away."

"Shit, I saw fags in Nebraska. You're blind. We should leave you in Seattle. You can play with your shotgun like Kurt Cobain," Calvin said and then flicked at his lighter, ready to smoke more meth.

"Fuck that sissy. I'm shady. Shay-dee! Fuck Seattle." Ray lit another cigarette. "We're ghosts in Alaska, man. I'm leavin' you and all your Eskimo shit in Anchorage. Carolyn and I won't need your shit ever again. We're doin' you a favor and you're a fuckin' dick."

"When you're sleepin' man, and you won't even know." Calvin opened his window and tapped the ashes from the foil.

Carolyn thought she might decide to stay with Calvin in Anchorage. She figured there would be jobs because of all the fish and the boats. She imagined a mountain skyline and evergreens.

At the next exit, they found a place where they could eat. Ray insisted on taking the bag of money in with him and Carolyn kept the car keys deep in her pocket. Calvin sat next to Ray in the booth and he made Ray set the bag of money between them on the floor under the table. Carolyn was so hungry that she ordered two plates of food; Ray said she should order as much as she wanted.

When they were done, the waitress dropped the check in the middle of the table and Carolyn pushed the paper in Ray's direction. He didn't look down at it, but just stared out at the other tables.

"Look at 'em all. Just a bunch of the damnedest," Ray said.

"What?" asked Calvin. "You're blind."

"Why do you keep sayin' that? Haven't you shut up already?" Ray asked.

Carolyn pointed her finger like a gun and clicked her thumb down twice—once at each of the boys. She decided that in Anchorage she would tell everyone they were from 'Frisco, and maybe after Anchorage she would go somewhere else. She stared out the window beside the booth, her stomach hurt. ~

Foreign Body

On the western coast of Samar, tangled in the heart of the Philippines, you can look across the water and believe it's the beginning of an open ocean. What you cannot see, however, are the dozens of land masses, the broad detritus of archipelago, that lie between you and where the uncluttered water commences. Ipao was a place like this. A few miles south of Calbayog City on Samar's west edge, Ipao peered from its shore toward the dense interior of a jungle country.

Little Tigre was born there, 1939, just before the war came. Although, to him he might as well have been born during the war, since that's as far back as he can remember time beginning. No one calls him Tigre now; his name is Francisco or sometimes Frank. In his American life, Frank is only reminded of Tigre when he saves something from the water – like once with his family on a beach in Maryland, when he'd picked up a butterfly stuck in the wet sand and made his children happy by helping it to dry its wings in the air and fly away. Tigre was his nickname for a short time when he was young – a flattering, ironically-intended moniker that

captured his tiny, ferocious spirit. Little Tiger. It was always his favorite.

Tigre lived in Ipao until he was nine, when the family moved to Cebu, which was practically cosmopolitan compared to his whisp of a village. Ipao, itself, was also a nickname. Tigre liked it much better than the long version: San Policarpo. To him, San Policarpo sounded too adult, too pretend, and not enough like home. Ipao sounded like somewhere that had just one church and one marketplace and only three streets, connected like the letter H.

Ipao's simple, heavy-walled chapel sat next door to Tigre's home, a thatched hut above stilts that stood like a spider on the sand trying not to get its belly wet. Both structures were backed-up by the shore, which is essentially to say that they were built in the water. In a place like Ipao, it's a mistake to believe that the shore is part of the land. It's part of the water. In truth, any thin slice of earth that deceptively buttresses an edge of the oncoming sea belongs entirely to the water. Typhoons have proven this.

And it was typhoons that first brought Tigre into the service of his God. Before they were ever old enough to become altar boys, Tigre and his two brothers were assigned the crucial task of evacuating sacred icons from the local sanctuary in the event of typhoon. As neighbors of the church, it was their job to hurriedly carry

Jesus on his cross, the statue of Virgin Mary, and other valuables to higher ground when winter storms flooded Ipao's streets in a mess of reclaiming ocean.

His first duty on behalf of Christ came at the age of five. Tigre's big brothers had already performed such evacuations twice before he was old enough to join them. But four days after his fifth birthday, when Sister Carla came to their door drenched from storm, she motioned for Tigre to join his brothers at her side.

"You can come with us now too, Little Tigre," she said, a wide smile spreading across her rain-splattered face. "Now God can see what you will do for Him. The Lord will bless those who help to do His work."

"Has God seen me?" asked Marco, one of Tigre's brothers. Marco, who had chubby brown hands and a wide frame, was the biggest of the three, although not the oldest.

"God sees everything, stupid," said June, the oldest boy, thin and wiry strong.

The Sister pointed a stern look at June, "You should be glad your father doesn't hear you speak like that. God has been watching you, Marco, and I know He is grateful. And I am too." Her face warmed up again and she put a damp

hand on Marco's black hair. "So, Tigre, it's time to hurry. Do you think you are big enough now?" She leaned back as if she needed more space to take in Tigre's full visage. "It seems to me that you're growing every day lately."

Tigre giggled at the Sister's flattery. All of the attention made him giddy. He turned to his mother behind him and caught her eye as she fastened a back door against the wind. She nodded to him.

"I am getting big now, don't you think?" Tigre asked the Sister.

"I think so. Should we go?" she asked.

June leaned over and whispered so that only Tigre could hear him, "It will help you with salvation. I can tell you later."

So he agreed. Although Tigre only carried two small things that day, he felt God would understand he wasn't big enough yet to do much more. And when the typhoon had passed and the water receded, he took one end of the heavy cross and helped Marco bring it down the hillside, all the way to the altar. In between his two good deeds, while they waited out the flood, June explained salvation to him. But Tigre didn't really understand what it meant to be saved, except in the literal sense, and so he thought he'd earned a chance to be rescued by

God – not in another life, but in this one, the one that he knew.

His misperception of salvation was only reinforced a few months after the performance of his first typhoon-duty. A skirmish between Japanese and American soldiers had spilled out from the nearby mountains, leading to a sudden and ferocious firefight just outside of Ipao. That same afternoon, Tigre and his brothers had joined a group of other boys, sneaking away after school to track down a broken Jeep that one of them had located at the jungle's edge. The minor battle caught some of the boys in the crossfire and a few grenades had gone off near the massive, root-splaying tree where Tigre and his brothers had taken shelter in a panic.

In the moment, Tigre was overcome by terror and gave no thought to God or the salvation that he had earned. When he felt the flesh of his back begin to burn with the heat from a tiny piece of shrapnel, Tigre figured he was dying. But when he awoke in his bed later on – still drowsy from an injection of something that he hadn't remembered receiving – and learned that only he and his brothers had survived their encounter with the war, Tigre believed that God had saved them. As far as he had known, none of the four boys who died had ever done any service in the name of the Lord. Tigre was sure that this is why he and his brothers had been saved.

He tried to explain this to Sister Carla, his mother and the two men who stood at his bedside when he awoke. One of the men was white with a dark beard, and Tigre wondered for a moment if he might be Jesus and if maybe only he could see him.

"God saw me, and He saved me. He did see us, June and me and Marco, and He knew. We got salvation," Tigre said, directing his comments to the white man.

"That sounds good. Sounds good to me. So, how else do you feel?" The white man leaned over to Tigre as he asked the question. He had an American accent and Tigre realized that he wasn't Jesus, that he was a soldier, maybe a doctor.

"Sister," Tigre started again, "Was this my only salvation? If I do more, will I have others?" He wondered when there might be another typhoon. He thought that if he'd never gone out to see the Jeep, he wouldn't have used this one already.

"God will always look over you, Tigre. And you will always do His work, as long as you choose," she said.

"But you'll have to help Him," said the other man at Tigre's bedside, who he now realized was his uncle. "You'll have to stay away from

dangerous places. And your brother will have to do a better job too." He shook his head and looked back at June, who sat sorting through a bag of marbles in the corner of the room.

"I'm sorry about this, fellow." It was the white man again, but this time he spoke with a different tone, a lower one that made the boy feel relaxed, like all this was behind him now. "I'm sorry about your friends. I wish we hadn't been here at all." He ran his hand over the gauze that wrapped around Tigre's back and stomach. "You're gonna feel a little stiff. So pretend like you're new, don't do things too fast, like you wanna stay new awhile. Okay? In a couple weeks, you'll be just as good."

"Did you do something to me?" Tigre asked.

"Just fixed you up some. A couple little pieces of metal were in your back, behind your tummy. We took most of it out and then fixed you up. There was one little piece we couldn't reach, but it won't do you any harm and you probably won't even feel it. So you can pretend it isn't even there. I only told you because I figured you might think it was interesting. Do you think it's interesting?"

Tigre did think it was interesting, and the way the man said it had made him feel special.

"Sure. Do you?"

"I think so. I think you're pretty brave. Although, don't always feel like you have to be. Now, does anything hurt too much?"

"Not too much. But I must be okay. Sister, am I okay?"

The Sister smiled and nodded. His mother leaned down and held his hand while the white man stood and took his uncle aside.

"Please, Little Tigre, sleep. All you need now is rest," said his mother.

Tigre closed his eyes, and when he opened them again it was morning already. He heard a rooster's siren wail somewhere outside and saw that he was now alone in their home, except for Marco, who was still asleep in the bed that he shared with June. As soon as he tried to sit up, he realized that the white doctor was right; his body did feel new – stiff and unpracticed, as if it would take him a little time to learn how to use it again. But in a few days he felt better and in a few more days better still, until eventually he didn't even think about the metal piece, except to wonder occasionally if it was really there at all.

There wasn't another typhoon for a long time. At least it seemed like a long time to Tigre. While he waited, he never bothered the Sister with questions about his salvation. He thought

it was ungrateful to ask after he'd already been saved once. But in the evenings, before dinner and when no one would notice that he was gone, Tigre sneaked to the shore by himself and looked at the skies, hoping to see something dark and ominous looming on the horizon. Sometimes the clouds were so heavy in the distance that he thought a volcano had spewed on another island somewhere. And there were heavy storms, but an entire rainy season went by without a real, nasty, empty-the-church typhoon. He began to forget about worrying over salvation. The war had ended, his father had returned home, and for a while there was no danger at all in Tigre's life. Other children occasionally pointed to the scar on his back, reminding him of his debt, but he'd never seen the marks himself. By the time the next rainy season arrived, he had even stopped his vigil for bad weather.

But there is always another typhoon on Samar's west edge. When the next one came – again a few days after Tigre's birthday, this one his seventh – it arrived without much expectation. As the brunt of the storm hit, Tigre's father was pulling in his fishing boat south of Ipao, down the coast, and his mother was shuttered inside a chapel in Calbayog City, having walked there to bring pastries in the morning before any sign of real trouble.

Tigre was playing marbles and thinking about tossing a firecracker on the other side of town – the mountain side – with some other boys. The wind had been getting bad and the sky dark and his friend's mother shooed him away, telling him to go home, but Tigre dawdled on the far side of town. He didn't expect the gales to start howling like they did, before he'd even made his way up the street to the cross in the H. The rain fell in a heavy noise from the sky.

When Tigre turned the corner and faced in the direction of the shore, the wind struck him first. While he tried to gain his balance, a loose palm branch rushed over his head and he ducked, then slipped – landing his stomach on the muddy road. He paused on the ground, under the wind, and thought about the church. Through the fast-falling rain he could see the water already crashing hard and deep onto the shore. The ocean could be in the streets any minute and Tigre knew it. He imagined Sister Carla alone at the altar as the water rushed in, her hands grasping at the icons while they floated by.

Tigre pushed himself up from the mud and started, head down, into the wind, angling along the street to his right, trying to cut the corner toward the church. A few people ran under the rain, some chasing animals – pigs and chickens and one goat. Everything was mud and puddles, and everything splashed. There had

already been days of heavy rain; the ground was full of it.

At the next corner, he faced north, turning up the street toward the church. He saw someone, maybe the Sister, running out its front doors and heading toward the hill. He called out, but felt his meek voice die in the wind only a few feet from his mouth. Tigre put down his head again, pointed himself toward the crashing ocean, and ran to the front of the church—fumbling up the wet steps to its entrance.

He took a moment getting a grip with his small hands on the brass handle, opened the door open with a shove and stepped into the dim church. Fuzzy light glowed through the tall windows, casting a bare illumination on the space. Tigre could hear the sound of waves crashing hard on the shore-side wall and water squeezed underneath the back doors, soaking the floor. After lingering inside the entrance for a few extra moments, he darted to the altar in a burst, like he was trying to outrun ghosts.

From the altar he could see that the cross had already been taken down, but many of the other icons remained in place. Even the Virgin Mary statue still sat unmoved. The statue was heavy, and the last time June had barely been able to carry it alone, but Tigre didn't think it would be right to leave Mary behind. He wanted to wait

for someone else, but it scared him to be alone in the dark chapel. Tigre listened to the waves crash for a few more seconds and then reached up over the edge of the tall pedestal, wrapping his arms around her legs, gripping his triceps where the statue tapered above her feet. The weight of it pressed against his chest as he backed away from the pedestal with the statue firmly in his arms, her head rising above his.

The door was tricky, but he used his foot to prop it open and carried the statue out into the blustering, flooding street. He headed slowly north, angling inland toward the hillside. The wind pushed hard from all directions and the waves were now washing up beyond the shore and into the town. Tigre struggled to keep his bare feet even and steady on the muddy ground. With each crash more water swelled past his ankles, sometimes beyond his calves.

He took a step to avoid a big rock he hadn't seen and then lost his balance. The statue splashed into a swell of water and drew away from the hillside. Tigre scampered on his hands and knees and watched another flush of ocean pull Mary further from him, toward the edge of a gulch. From where he was, he could see water splashing up from the gulch and knew it must be flooded. It was something he'd seen happen more than once before, looking down from the hill.

He could find no one else around him, so he rose to his feet again and dashed for the icon, hoping to gather it before the water snatched it away. The boy slowed down near the gulch's edge – careful not to slip in – and crept close to the statue. But through the wind he heard something other than the rain and the water, a noise that stood out as familiar, but wrong for right now. He swiveled his head and shielded his eyes from the rain, looking for the noise in the storm. Then he saw it. A small pig, a young one, clawing at the edge of the gulch, further up toward the hill. The creature was making a fierce sound as its legs struggled in the mud below the edge, above the percolating water.

The pig was in the opposite direction of Mary, and Tigre turned his attention back to her, reaching down to gather the statue. It slipped from his forearms on his first try, but he gathered it again and managed to carry it along the gulch's edge as he approached the pig.

When he arrived beside it, the animal seemed to squeal not just desperately into the air, but to him. It seemed to turn its head in his direction, to notice him, and to be calling out to him. He could not ignore it. He carefully bent his knees and rested the statue in the puddling mud behind him. A wave shoved water across the face of the icon as Tigre turned back to the pig.

He kneeled at the edge of the gulch and reached down sideways, angling his arms toward the

pig's flailing front legs. Its small pink face twitched wildly with every squeaking wail, and its snout pattered up and down in quick, reflexive breaths. Tigre stretched his arms toward the pig, but was afraid to get his hands battered by the kicking feet. He turned back to check on Mary. She was gone. He swung his head around and peered toward the water. Nothing he saw looked anything like the statue.

The pig's cries continued uninterrupted. Tigre shuffled his knees along the edge of the gulch, closer to the animal's struggling limbs, and leaned down toward the pig again. This time he grabbed cleanly its front legs, one in each of his hands. He tightened his grip and felt the pig's flesh squeeze beneath his palms. With one backward thrust, he pulled the pig up over the gulch's edge. The creature was small – almost half the boy's size – and as soon as it got on its feet a rushing swell flopped it on its side, shoving the pig away from him. Tigre's legs were tight from the crouch and he staggered through the wind, approaching the animal as it flailed fishlike on a muddy deck. He lifted the pig and embraced it with his small arms—it was like holding a squirming baby, he thought, but a fat, filthy one.

With the animal in his arms, he struggled back toward the center of town. He was too tired to carry the pig very far and the water in the street was now up to his knees. Soon it would easily

reach his waist. He wanted to stop at the first place that seemed safe for both of them. By the time he reached the corner again, the boy was walking with slow, weak legs. He didn't see anywhere to set the pig down.

So Tigre carried the pig all the way through the rising water to the other side of town and found the lowest patch of ground that wasn't knee-deep in swells, which was a shallow rise at the base of a tall concave ledge of earth. Tigre wedged his feet into a thick snare of large roots that jutted from the dirt and secured the creature on his lap. After some time, the pig even calmed down and rested its chin for a while on Tigre's knee.

It wasn't long before he heard his uncle calling him through the storm. He yelled back, but later his uncle said that it was actually the pig he'd heard squealing first. After the typhoon passed, the pig's owner thanked Tigre and told him that two other piglets had been lost in the flood. But as he listened, all he could think of was Sister Carla and what he would tell her about the statue of Mary.

At first he thought it was best that no one had seen what happened. But then he thought that God must've been watching, and that He would be watching now, to see if he would tell. So he went to the church to explain to Sister Carla what he had tried to do, how the statue had

disappeared into the ocean. But when he arrived and looked up at the altar, he saw that Mary stood silently on her pedestal, half covered in shadow.

He told the Sister his whole story: how he hadn't listened to his friend's mother, how no one had been at the church, how the pig cried to him. And she told him that someone had found Mary on the shore a mile away.

"Does this mean I have earned another salvation? Or does the salvation go to the person who found it? Did God see me save the pig?" Tigre asked.

"Everyone knows what you did for the pig. You're a hero!" She rested her hand on his shoulder. "But I think you misunderstand salvation. This world is our journey toward it, everything we do."

"But wasn't I saved already? Can it happen again?"

"It was God who chose to keep you here, and now you've saved the pig. So you're on the right track. Do you think that's enough for you?"

He heard the front door open behind him and Sister Carla looked up. She waved over Tigre's shoulder, in the direction of a heavy man who entered slowly.

"Did Marco help with the cross? I forgot to ask him," Tigre said, trying to draw her attention back to him.

"Then you should ask him. I'm sure he'd like to tell his own stories." She looked up again at the man and spoke to him. "You didn't think you'd be back so soon, did you?"

"Of course," said the man and he huffed a short laugh.

"Okay, Tigre," she said and looked down. "I'm happy you are such a diligent boy. And if you don't know, you should find what that means. Diligent." The Sister smiled.

Tigre repeated the word to himself and nodded. Then he spun and tore toward the entrance, scooting past the man's outstretched hand. When he reached the doors, he heard the man huff again and then heard some words that he couldn't make out as he bolted into the street.

He wasn't sure if he'd earned another salvation or not, but he thought his chances were good or at least things were in his favor. He didn't ask the Sister about it again, and he wasn't in the village during the only other typhoon that hit before his family moved. There was, in fact, just

one other time that he thought about going to the Sister to ask about the rules of salvation.

A few months after he saved the pig, Tigre saw its owner walking the animal on a rope out of town toward Calbayog. The man trailed a mule-drawn cart that shook in the road, rattling the chicken cages stacked on its wood bed. Tigre was standing near the steps of the church. He knew it was the pig he had saved and he knew that bad things were destined for it in Calbayog. He almost ran inside to ask if he could use his salvation for the animal, if the Sister knew about such things. But instead he chased after the man and tried to explain how he had done service for God and that this earned him a chance to be saved.

"You already saved this pig," said the man, not stopping his march north while he spoke.

Tigre followed along, and pleaded. "Yes, but that's why."

The man did not look back; he shook his head. The cart hit a bump and the birds cackled.

"Can I walk with you, at least? I walk here all the time."

"It is not my job to watch you, Tigre. Go home."

"I won't even talk."

But the man kept walking, trailing the cart along the ruts in the road, and Tigre did not think he should follow him. He wanted the pig to turn back and look, but didn't see its face again. ~

Panic

Arthur was dreaming of mechanical bulls. Not figuratively, and not the kind in *Electric Cowboy*. The bulls were two-horned, mechanically-realized, lumbering and steely behemoths that charged at him in his sleep—like the dystopian nightmare of a cyborg's Pamplona. They snuffed cold steam out their wide black nostrils. In his dream, Arthur froze in terror; he had the sensation of being trampled and then burst awake. He breathed heavily, blinked his eyes and had barely made sense of where he was when the plane jarred violently over a bump in the air.

He was on his way there, to Pamplona. Thus, he assumed, the dream. But he wasn't going to see the bulls. Arthur was on his way to a 3M plant that produced electrical components for telecommunications equipment. They were implementing a new software system and the home office in the States wanted to send a management consultant (Arthur) along with the IT team to oversee "front office and system integration issues." So that was that and Arthur was on his way.

Although, it hadn't been quite so simple. The consulting firm that the company normally brought in for these matters had been forced to bail at the very last minute and so recommended

Arthur—who was old friends with one of the firm's partners—as a solid, dependable replacement. He was also available at a moment's notice, which was really the central reason the firm had chosen to recommend him. In fact, Arthur had been anything but solid and dependable in the last few years of his professional life, and although he'd configured his résumé to disguise it, the truth was that he really hadn't possessed much of a professional life at all during that time. This was the result of what he ironically described to friends as an extended period of "soul-searching" (something that might easily be tabbed a mid-life crisis, except that he was only 33 now and had already started sensing his internal distress when he was just 29). He considered the description ironic because Arthur didn't believe in a soul or anything like it. So, to him, it was more of an extended period of questioning his intentions in the world, of doubting whatever premises had become central to his life: professional ambition, commitment to bachelorhood, firm belief in the ideals of Libertarianism, so forth. Indeed, he suspected and hoped that his search would reveal something much less contrived than a soul, something real and determinant, although maybe just as unknowable.

Arthur's efforts to plot out a revisionist path for his life had led him into dire straits—both generally speaking and financially—and, given the impulsive, chancy nature of his new

mindset, this predicament was not entirely unforeseeable. Most of his peers first figured he was a little off-his-rocker when he chose to leave behind a steady, impressive, six-figure income, but Arthur's most rash decision was probably the one he'd made after suddenly quitting his cushy spot at an old-school Philadelphia-based consulting firm, Talmot/House, three years ago. At the time he didn't feel that dropping out of the daily professional grind was a clean enough break. He felt that such an action expressed too little risk or too minor a commitment to real change; after all, people left their jobs all the time and often thought of it as merely another in a series of regular transitions throughout life.

No, simply quitting his job wouldn't do. So Arthur chose to donate a large portion of his significant investments and savings to a variety of children's charities, and then took the remainder of his nest egg and sunk it into a failing but amiable dude ranch in Wyoming that one of his mother's cousins had owned and that Arthur agreed to make his. Not that he knew much about ranches or horses or anything associated with such things, but he was looking for something pastoral and physical and dedicated to the pleasure of others, and McKinney's Famous Stables seemed to fit the bill just fine. It was also easy to come by, didn't require much due diligence (he'd learned of the ranch's business realities while providing its owners with some in-family pro bono

consulting years earlier), and resided among enough isolation for him to go about his new existence without much hassle from other people. In hindsight, Arthur could see that it was a desperate and stupid thing to do with the remainder of his finances—the kind of thing he would have advised strongly against in his previous life as a sane citizen. But its outrageousness was, indeed, a large part of the appeal and it satisfied his desire to submit to a decision that would clearly mark his new condition.

The ranch sank and failed within eight months of Arthur's purchase. Before he'd even taken over as proprietor, the institution was obviously on its last leg, but Arthur's one area of insurmountable confidence was his business acumen. He was certain that a reasonable restructuring of the ranch's finances, combined with his own infusion of capital and a more aggressive business strategy would at least keep the place afloat, and maybe even goose profits nicely after a brief turnaround period. This was not the case. Arthur's expectations turned out to be wildly optimistic and he spent too much money too quickly, leaving him no choice but to sell it all in a hurry before the debts grew unmanageable. When everything was said and done, the dude ranch fiasco had essentially drained him of any notion of financial security. The relatives who sold him the place felt terrible about how things turned out, but Arthur

assured them that he knew the risks and was glad for the experience even despite the failure. Which was true, but didn't change the fact that it had left him broke and without much idea what he'd do next.

What he did was move back to Pennsylvania, not Philadelphia, but Shamokin, a small, depressed former coal-mining town where Arthur had been born and raised. He no longer had any family living there (his father was long-dead and his mother, who now had dementia, had moved into a nursing home near the south-Florida condo that Arthur had bought for her when the money seemed like an endless river) but after everything had been stripped away from him, Shamokin felt like the only safe place to regroup and try starting again. He'd spent the last two years working the kinds of jobs that he once imagined would fill his early post-college life, but that he'd been able to avoid by quickly snagging an entry-level position at Talmot/ House. He started out his adult tenure in Shamokin as a gas station attendant, but quit after the establishment was robbed one night by a teenager with a hunting rifle (not during his shift, but it still spooked him enough to figure the minimum wage wasn't worth it).

After that he'd spent some time as a bartender, which was never as fun as he hoped it would be. The job simply forced him to be friendly with too many people that he had no desire to be

around, and it ultimately cemented one of the primary premises for his new life: to seek out a good measure of genuine solitude. So he left the bar and began delivering papers to rural addresses in the hills around town, waking at 3:30 every morning to load his used Taurus with copies of the Shamokin News Item and make his trek through the dark, finishing up just past dawn.

All this, of course, did nothing to improve his financial situation, and after ten months of delivering newspapers to strangers while they slept, he'd found himself not only poor and lonely, but certifiably depressed. Arthur's new existence had not been what he was looking for. It had reached the point, in fact, where all possible options for his future seemed dreary and untenable. He did not want his old life — one of the few things he'd become certain of during his period of wandering. He could not imagine being asked to care again about all those things that he'd so gleefully left behind.

Arthur believed that unless you can translate the notion of financial gains (whether it be your own or that of your client) into an abstract kind of goodness, an ideal of pleasure that requires no context outside of itself, it eventually becomes impossible to happily, passionately work within the corporate world. Although it was difficult for him to say that he'd actually enjoyed any of the work he'd done since leaving

Philadelphia, he at least liked the concept that he was working at a level in society that he thought of as *direct distribution*. Somebody needed something, he gave it to them. End of story.

In the corporate world, as far as Arthur had experienced, *somebody* is always at least a dozen steps down the line from you. You plan, you counsel, you strategize and reposition, you take a head count, you assess relative synergies, you project growth and revise estimates. All of this goes on endlessly. And there is likely a number somewhere—a number that expresses something, is the result of some important calculation—and this number is what you will rely on to gauge your success. The value of the number (sometimes not its absolute value, but its value in relationship to others of its kind or in comparison to the expectation of what its value would be) represents the sum total worth of your efforts. To Arthur, it eventually began to feel like he was trying to ring up the high score in *Space Invaders*. He didn't know what the hell somebody was being handed in the end or whether they were happy to get it or if they'd even asked for it in the first place. But he did know that without people like him, the world wouldn't go around. He knew that what he did was somehow necessary, that he was contributing to the dull-but-required deeply internal machinations of capitalism — something akin to managing a small but vital

gland in the human body. The important work of such a gland is undoubtedly complicated and detailed: it must obtain the proper components from all far flung reaches of the body, send out and receive myriad communications through chemical and electrical means, determine and calibrate its output in highly precise increments, and it must do all this while maintaining a near-perfect balance with the body's other innumerable and equally vital functionaries.

The problem for Arthur, in the end, was that he realized he had no interest in contributing to the work of a gland. It seemed only natural that, given the choice, one would choose to work for an organ that has actual contact with the outside universe: the skin, the eyes, even the hair—which, he thought, is really only a ghost of things that were once alive, but at least is given a brief wake out in the great unfettered air of the rest of the world. Sometimes sacrifices must be made along the journey to the outside; on this matter, Arthur was becoming an expert.

His own growing list of personal sacrifices had made him more desperate than ever, finally bringing him around to the idea of briefly returning to his previous professional arena — just until he got back on his feet, he thought. This was a more difficult task than he had originally anticipated and required some fancy explanations for his disappearance from the

corporate radar, most of which made frequent, vague use of the word *sabbatical*. Nobody paid much attention to the inquiries he made and most of his former colleagues seemed too disinterested to even accept a lunch invitation. He had become less than old news, he was positively invisible. But someone else's desperation would prove to be the salve for Arthur's.

An old college friend, Carter Peasley, was in the middle of a nasty conference call with a couple of 3M execs and their in-house counsel when they put Carter on the spot and insisted he provide an immediate resolution or face some rather unpleasant breach of contract proceedings. Carter had spent the morning in his high-rise, lake-view Chicago offices working on a serviceable solution but was unable to find a competent party available to replace him on such short notice. He'd thought the 3M folks would be willing to accept his request for a few more days to sort everything out, but they weren't in an accommodating mood. With no other tricks in his bag, Carter blurted out Arthur's name and rambled off some of his previous qualifications, which sound impressive as long as you don't tack on the parts about McKinney's Famous Stables or the Shamokin News Item. Arthur had made a couple of calls to Carter and sent him an e-mail the month before, and Carter had ignored them all. But from them he knew that Arthur was

desperate, and in the face of his own dire need, Carter saw their dilemmas as the perfect match.

Arthur accepted the offer within hours of his name being blurted over the speakerphone, even though the exact kind of management consulting that 3M needed wasn't an area that he had much experience in. Luckily, consulting is an ambiguously defined business in which résumés can be molded to resemble any number of similar but really quite diverse career paths. It also, of course, helped that everyone involved with the equation was frantic for any kind of passable solution to their different but now intertwined problems. So Arthur's current journey to Pamplona was preceded by the kind of decision-making that typically concludes with one of the many corporate phrases that all ultimately translate into: whatever, just do it.

The company had arranged everything for his immediate six-week assignment abroad: air travel, commuter car, furnished comfy one-bedroom rental, and full expense account offerings that included a generous per diem stipend. All of this was in addition to his sizeable consulting fee, which easily exceeded the sum total of all his earnings as a driver for the News Item. After everything he'd struggled through in his last three years, Arthur at first couldn't believe his luck. This would be just what he needed, he thought, a little cash on hand that could buy him some more time to

figure out where he really wanted to take things next.

But when he'd stepped onto the plane destined for Spain—lugging his aging laptop in the worn leather computer bag with a too-narrow shoulder strap and dragging his wheeled, small-but-heavy, carry-on suitcase—and flashed a weary, familiar smile at the slight, brunette flight attendant, Arthur began to get a very bad feeling. It was a powerful pang of dread. It was the kind of dread he'd once conjured during college in the months before the Persian Gulf War, when he'd worried it might all someday lead to another draft and Arthur tried imagining what it might feel like for that card to arrive in the mail—the rest of your life suddenly tied up and bound by the nefarious interests of far away others. Arthur believed that one of life's cruel tricks is to introduce such dread slowly and harmlessly, disguising the fears of existence as phantom pain early on, thus leading to a false sense of safety that is ultimately blown bit-by-bit into oblivion and replaced with first-hand knowledge of the world's imminent, roiling dangers. So even though the dread hadn't bitten back on previous occasions, it didn't mean that this wasn't finally the genuine article bubbling up inside him. To Arthur, the perfect example of this was death itself. In youth, one's fear of the reaper can be allayed by the knowledge that the big final event is likely a long ways down the road—hovering

in the distance like anxiety over a Ph.D. dissertation in the mind of an ambitious undergrad during his first days on campus. But no matter what you do to hide the fear at first, death only grows closer, more palpable, tangibly inescapable. In Arthur's mind, dread was never truly counterfeit; it was, at best, only too early in its arrival.

He'd tried to shake off his suffocating uneasiness with a couple of Scotches, neat and quickly downed, but he hadn't drunk any hard liquor since quitting his bar gig, and the alcohol only served to give him a minor headache. When he awoke from his dream—either because of the charging, metallic bulls or the plane's violent rumbling—Arthur felt the remnants of a tiny hangover in his head and tasted a lingering memory of Scotch in his mouth. He looked up and saw that the overhead seatbelt icon was illuminated. The plane bounced raucously again and the cabin shook fiercely.

"How long has this been going on?" Arthur asked, turning to face the woman seated next him in business class and trying not to appear too concerned.

"What?" she asked. "The turbulence?" She was about Arthur's age—a petite woman with a short, boardroom haircut that neatly framed her pretty, elfish face.

"Yeah." The plane dipped slightly and then

rumbled upward in a quick jolt. "That," he said.

The woman gripped the armrest between them with one of her delicate hands and braced the other on the wall below the oval window. Arthur could see that she wasn't wearing any rings. The woman's thin, well-outlined lips stretched into a quick, nervous smile and then returned to a taut sternness.

"They announced something," she said. "I was in the bathroom, they said to stay in our seats."

"Right. This would be my luck," he said and then regretted saying it. He'd jumped ahead of her in the fear game, already making uncomfortable remarks that alluded to the possibility of a horrible crash, which seemed to him a little alarmist and unnecessary and would probably put him in a bad light.

"Mine too," she said and smiled again, this time longer and with more warmth. She'd gone ahead and joined in with Arthur's fear, which he thought was better than her taking on a consoling role and trying to downplay his concern. This way, at least, he felt they were sharing some common ground as fellow humans and it now made him glad that he'd revealed himself.

"Arthur, by the way," he extended his hand to her.

"Lana," she said and shook his hand. Arthur felt a slight erotic charge from the intimacy of their physical contact amidst the mutual dread.

Her hand was yanked from his grip as the plane took a sharp, powerful dive forward. The cabin jarred wickedly side-to-side as the enormous vehicle dove, then rose, then dove again. Arthur could hear a bold whining sound tearing through the air outside the plane. The two of them shared a quick frightened glance and he grabbed her hand again, almost reflexively. Lana squeezed Arthur's fingers and then intertwined hers between his, pressing their palms together and locking their arms at the elbow.

The plane now seemed pitched at a permanent downward angle, and combined with the cacophonous sounds of chaos and the weight of sheer force, the whole scene felt to Arthur like something from a movie. Things even felt as if they were slowing down, as they do in the movies, like time was actually malleable and a single moment could bear the presence of an almost infinite number of thoughts. Arthur wondered if the plane's predicament was merely a result of tempestuous weather or if a pre-existing mechanical flaw had been exacerbated by the conditions and maybe would have done them in even if they hadn't encountered a storm. He thought of the flat tire his Taurus had suffered early one morning along Bear Valley

Road outside Shamokin several months before. In some ways it had been the height of his frustration since embarking on a new life. It had happened just half way through his route and he knew that people would soon be calling the offices to ask where their papers were. The spare in the trunk was no good, something the previous owner had warned him about when he bought it but that he hadn't been able to afford to rectify. And in the weeks leading up to the incident, he'd noticed that the rear left tire—the one that had gone flat—seemed to lose pressure more quickly than the others. So as Arthur stepped out of his car and onto the gravelly shoulder, he was sure that his inaction had been the cause of his dilemma. When he leaned in closer, however, to peer at the misshapen circle of rubber, shining a flashlight through the pre-dawn darkness, he realized that the offending party was a thick, long, metal nail—something he'd probably driven over just that morning. Since he knew he couldn't afford the services of a tow-truck in addition to the necessary new tire, Arthur chose to pull the nail, re-inflate the injured Goodyear with a foot pump from his car kit and hope the air would last the ten minute ride into town. Along the drive back, he tried to keep a close eye on the tire in his side mirror and wondered if maybe the hole was growing larger as he drove, the torn rubber giving way one millimeter at a time until possibly reaching critical mass and blowing out with a violent pop. He didn't know if he should drive faster,

trying to arrive before such a disaster could occur, or slower, in an attempt to reduce the pressure that might result from some unique aerodynamic property induced by speed and weight. Then he wondered if how he drove mattered at all, if the tire's destiny had already been determined by the initial nature of the puncture and his fateful decision to re-inflate. But when he arrived unharmed at a 24-hour gas station in Shamokin (the one he'd worked for, actually) Arthur was surprised to discover that the relief he felt was not really because he'd made it back safely. He realized, instead, that he was mostly glad the flat hadn't actually been a result of his negligence, that it was, in fact, just a random spot of bad luck. At the time he thought it was strange that he should feel that way, and didn't know why it was that he did, but for some reason was amused by it and pleased that he'd had such an unexpected reaction. And now, as the plane plummeted determinedly earthward, he found similar satisfaction in the thought that this thing going down was in no way something he could've been responsible for.

Arthur imagined the 3M execs phoning Carter's office. He knew that his disappearance was going to cost somebody some money somewhere, but the loss would be easily, almost unnoticeably absorbed, shifted from one column to another until all evidence of it had been swallowed into a series of anonymous accounting maneuvers. There would also be

some unresolved income tax issues, missed rent and unpaid utility bills that would all eventually vanish in the same fashion. In a brief time, Arthur's presence in the great capitalist body would be completely erased. Like a drop of liquid from some viscous fluid, he would gently be removed from the whole and afterward, the space where he left would seal itself up again, returning to its previous shape, entirely indifferent to his absence.

Arthur closed his eyes. It would be better that way, he thought, then wondered why it should matter. The plane shook again, then suddenly, their momentum changed; the weight against his chest shifted forward, and upward. It took nearly a minute for him to believe it, but when the panic finally burnt itself out, he realized it was true: the plane had steadied. Lana loosened her grip, but didn't move her hand. He opened his eyes and looked at their fingers, together, intertwined. In his mind, Arthur saw himself running again with the mechanical bulls. In his heart, he was terrified. ~

II.

Which Way To The End

Joey waited until they reached the crosswalk: the tall one laughing & waving his arms, and the short, tubby one—who'd thrown the hot dog wrapper into the basket—shaking his head. And when the light across the street snapped green & lit its little white, handless, footless man, Joey reached into the basket and snatched the wrapper.

The headlights from the passing cars flickered between & beneath the street-side parked ones, their shines veering rhythmically through the darkness around Joey, the monotonous tires rolling endlessly along the blacktop. He pawed at the foil gently, feeling for some spongy weight inside, hoping.

Joey squeezed everything before unwrapping it. He wanted to know first, to have some suspicion, be prepared. This is the way you did things, he thought, when everything you ever opened tried to fuck you in the face.

Joey knew it sounded like he was talking about sucking a dick, which he didn't mean specifically & exclusively. Although, when he was 13, his mouth had actually been pried by that stiff unwanted flesh.

Nothin' you open wants to fuck you in face more than a priest's robe. That's what his roommate, Thomas,

had said to him on Joey's first night at the detention center, after he told Thomas why he'd been dumped there. Joey stuck to the truth, didn't embellish his memory: Father Jerry trying to shove that fat cock in his face, and Joey driving his fist into the old man's head & neck enough times to make them swell & bulge until together they looked like a bloody stem of broccoli.

It was actually the second time that the Father had tried his luck with Joey. Of course, he didn't tell Thomas about the first time, when—out of sheer terror & confusion—Joey acquiesced, then spent the rest of the night throwing up in the shower and vowed that if Father Jerry ever tried it again, he'd kill him. And although he didn't succeed, he tried.

He'd seen his dad beat a man to death outside of Footie's Town Tap one night when he was seven, which also terrified him—until his dad tossed Joey into the car and sped off, tearing across the poorly-lit & buckling asphalt of their tiny, dying Michigan town in that ancient, awesome Camaro. That part thrilled Joey.

And as Joey slugged away at the Father, smearing a little more blood on his hand with each thud, he thought about his dad slamming his fist into the other man's face under the streetlight. He remembered how he could see the spatters of sweat & blood explode from the man's head & onto the concrete. Joey would've killed the Father too, but he just wasn't strong enough. ~

The Man

I keep trying to start the story somewhere else, but the only place to begin is the square of light on the side of the building—this epic square of light. A hundred foot square of amber fading sunlight broadcast onto the towering, windowless, gray-inflected granite wall of the building across the parkway. You had caught view of it from your seat at the hotel bar, in the silence while Andy smoked a Marlboro Light and you drank the free vodka from Happy Hour. This happened at the end, after the man had already gotten up and left. You were sitting there thinking about it when you saw the square of light out the atrium window; the whole sky behind the other building was dark.

The man had been talking to a friend, and they both lived in the apartments at the hotel—guys in their sixties, never married, professional. Drinkers, the type. The other guy was the heavier kind—more sturdy than fat—bald and wearing a yellow golf shirt. The man was thin, a dead-ringer for George Carlin, and smoking the cigarette. His friend had the cigar. The man was telling his friend about the cancer, that he was a goner. He was four or five bloody marys into the evening, and you couldn't tell if it was the liquor or the dying in his voice. But he was completely straight about it.

“No funeral. I want a five-thousand dollar drunk. And I mean *drunk*. A five-thousand dollar drunk. And I want to be cremated. No funeral. This is it. I've gotta make plans.” And his friend, he was almost like he was trying to talk him out of it, the dying. Everyone always wants to talk about surviving.

But the man wasn't having any of it. This was it and he knew it, that's what he said. And he kept saying the other parts over again. The part about the five-thousand dollar drunk, about the cremating. At one point he gave instructions about where he wanted the ashes to be scattered—some places in the mountains nearby, a forest he mentioned by name. By now his friend was feeling stunned and the man was starting to get more sentimental. His arms looked skinny and pale in the gray t-shirt, and after his friend walked away the man started crying. You could hear it behind your shoulder, but you didn't look. In a moment, he stood up and left. Later you told Andy that you didn't know if you should have said anything, that you thought about it. Sometime afterwards, it got quiet and you turned your head toward the atrium's wall of windows and saw the square of light. ~

The Dream Of The Monongahela River

It was a simple thing, to be bled. The General knew this, and he didn't fear it. And he was sure that it was the first thing Dr. Craik would order, so he didn't hesitate to summon one of the estate's overseers, Albin Rawlins, before dawn and request that he aid him in beginning this final engagement at first light. When he arrived at the General's bedside—hours before the doctor would find his way through the cold Virginia morning to see it for himself—Rawlins observed the obvious: death inhabited the room, and it made his pale hands rattle as he held the metal lancet above the great man's heavy, weary arm. The General eyed him calmly and smiled. "Don't be afraid." A thing he'd told thousands of men, but he'd never before meant it in exactly this way. He nodded at Rawlins and offered his arm again. Breath choked in the General's throat, its swollen passage constricted, succumbing. It wouldn't be long—he was certain of it.

He knew this territory intimately. He'd watched men hunted by disease. As a boy he saw his father taken down. Ten years later, he accompanied his older brother, Lawrence, as he was stalked by tuberculosis. They'd tried to run from it, together, to Barbados—for some reason that had never been clear to him until now. In his own final hours it was obvious that the chapel of St. George's high up on the Barbados hill had been his brother's lancet.

And it was, in fact, Lawrence who had been on his mind that morning, even before the trickle of earthen red began to pour from the vein in his thick forearm. It was Lawrence whom the General wished he could speak to one last time—if only to experience a simple narcissistic satisfaction that had never been possible during his epic ascent: to astound someone whom he cared to astound. He wanted to call him into the room, clear it of everyone else, and then see his expression when he said it: *Lawrence, while it was that you were dead, I became the first leader of a new Republic—I am the Alpha of some new history. They're building a city on the Potomac, brother, a city with our name.* His thoughts of the long-dead Lawrence rode with him into a patch of deep unconsciousness that followed the first bleeding. Nearly a pint was gone. But even as he laid there, seemingly at rest, the General's breathing grew steadily worse and everyone was certain more bleeding would need to be done.

It was then, for the last time, that he had the dream—the one that followed him everywhere, the dream of the Monongahela River. Although the dream suggested otherwise, in the vile, terrifying chaos of that late afternoon along the Monongahela, the young someday-General had been too naïve to believe that he was going to die there. The hellishness had come down on them like a storm: the Ottawans, Hurons, Shawnee, all of them, more, raining a savage death through the trees and from all directions into the clearing where hundreds of the Americans and British fell. Nothing can horrify like the screams of men when they are dying together in a confined space, even under a perfect July sky. Soldiers killed each other accidentally among delirious clouds of gun smoke and bedlam. In the midst of the human inferno, as the young Virginian pushed himself up from the dirt—his second horse felled and the carnage near its peak—it struck him that it was all madness and without purpose, and yet it would undoubtedly produce some outcomes, *consequences*, that were desired somewhere. This was the domain of men, raw and unadorned; he was its witness.

Whenever the General dreamed about that afternoon, however, it wasn't the battle that he relived, but the fording of the river as they retreated. In the dreams, although surrounded by the cries of men, he fights the water alone. And the river—almost torrential by the time he nears its center—always washes him away, draws him helplessly downstream before he can reach the other side. There is never anyone there to save him, and in the dreams he knows this, so he doesn't holler or call out for help. He just drifts down the raging Monongahela, on his way to some falls or lake or gulf or ocean, some destination in water at which he never arrives. ~

III.

Beneath

This is a funny story. In the same way it's funny to know we're all doomed in one fashion or another; the end is all but here. It was the beginning of the millennium, and everyone was writing about it. They all mentioned the same things. Tanner had no interest in this, but he wrote about it anyway. Although, that's not quite accurate. To tell the truth, he had all the interest in it, but didn't want to be perceived as such. To hide this fact, he privately told people that he cared for none of it and wrote only for the money. He lied. And so he spent his days burying words into the stories that he said he didn't want to write.

Today he was feigning sickness over the phone with his editor so that he could excuse himself for this afternoon's meeting to talk about his latest collection. The stories were going well—all darkness and introspection feeding on a collection of disenchanting narrators. Matter-of-factly existential. People loved it, or loved bemoaning it—good news all around. Two of the shorter stories were slated to appear in national magazines before the year was out. The hype would be on and he would spend the spring making appearances, talking smartly on NPR. People would say how very down to earth he was, and still so young. A solid guy for a drink.

But this afternoon he was bored. And there was nothing he wanted to do less than suffer traffic on the bridge for an hour of dull conversation, rehearsed praise and some stern down-to-brass-tacks talk about deadlines. So he coughed a little and graveled his voice to affect the proper demeanor when explaining how he hadn't been able to sleep much. "It's been such a pain in the ass."

Voice mail would have been best, but no luck. So he made his excuses live—unaware that he risked his last words being lies. In a minute he was back on the couch, doing nothing. That's what stood out to him, later, upon recollection. He remembered how complete nothingness preceded everything: the monumental crashing noise, the shaking coffee table, the cracking and crumbling of walls into slabs and chunks and dust. When the earth opened up its new crevice like a massive wound that the ocean spilled into as blood, he was on his couch reaching for the paper.

And although we have already arrived at this point in the story securely enough, without arousing any suspicion as to the legitimacy of Tanner's pre-apocalyptic life, it seems necessary to point out that almost none of this is true. Not in fact, at least. It is true that he joyfully wrote stories about the beginning of the millennium. But no one had published any of it. And although the earth shook along the coast in the

days before the chaos erupted, his place in that story was still uncertain. But that's how he told it anyway.

The way he had figured it, once the end of the world arrived there was no need to remain true to actual histories. He could be whomever he wanted—and who would know the difference if they couldn't seem to remember the alleged career of some obscure but famous short story writer whose voice was praised by the critics of his day? Some people even said they'd remembered reading his work. Of course, all evidence of the world as they knew it had been destroyed. Everyone simply took everyone at their word. It was ideal for Tanner.

It is also true that he remembered the days before the apocalypse for their notable nothingness. And so, figuratively speaking, you could say he had been calmly sitting on his couch reaching for the paper when the end arrived. The rest was entirely conjured, but he told the story faithfully and with great ease of conviction. The beauty was in the details: that he'd called in sick only moments before, that he'd been hoping to reach the voice mail instead. And that the details were unnecessary, yet somehow took on great significance in their meaninglessness compared to what followed—that was the clincher. No one questioned him after such a somber display of remembering.

It was like a revelation, his new life. Among the tumbled skyscrapers and the gone-dead phones, he was every man he had ever wanted to be. He was pure genius: speaking unfathomable truths in such a way that it moved the survivors to tears in their everyday lives. He made the most impenetrable thoughts unfold into beauty as simply as dandelions unclenched in the early light. And the new world was filled with dandelions—and cockroaches, of course. The heartiest things were all that was left. It was a tornado-swept earth, overrun by slinking alligators, comatose turtles, hard-scrabble bugs, weeds and all the most insidious vines. And humans too, sparse and trunk-strong collections of humans wandered with their perpetual sunburns across the wide spans of nothing. Dotting the nothing with torturous rarity were unexpected meadows of gorgeous unspeakable greens. It was Tanner's world, and he led his nomads between each oasis on spirit and genius alone.

This went on—the wandering, the moving forth, the collecting of the living like fish in a net—for, well, what is time in a world past its end? It went on for as long as one might imagine. Until one particular night, a night when Tanner was beyond tired—exhausted nearly to death—and he found himself collapsed at a water's edge, where the river roared in magnificent sounds. The beauty of the world was still the same, this he knew and said

aloud. Even without all that was, there was still all that happened to be. The sky was dark and the stars rose out in it. It was his solace, in these strange days, that the night looked very much like night. It was evidence, in fact, that the earth's own Armageddon had apparently gone unnoticed by things like stars and wind, which happened the way they always had. He laid beneath the dark. It was his proof: this place would go on, absolutely, regardless.

This was a thought of central importance to Tanner, that the world would go on. It was his true destination, as it were, since in fact he had not wandered between any oases with any group of nomads. He had not led anyone anywhere. For, in reality, the world of the apocalypse was as horrible and desolate as one might imagine. There were few survivors and no dandelions or alligators or turtles to speak of—and certainly no unexplainable patches of sudden green, no untouched meadows in any line of regular sight. But when Tanner appeared out of the rubble—nearly dead and partly wishing he had been—it occurred to him that the small place in which he had emerged was in need of new truths. And this is what he saw. This was his vision.

His mind filled with a world that had somehow endured despite it all. So when he finally encountered people, ripped of hope and faces, disfigured and ill-fed, he told them that he had arrived from elsewhere. That he had collected

men, women and children all along his way. That there was something out there. Nothing could have been further from the truth. The land was charred blacker than night. And night was everywhere. Stars did not exist beneath the heavy clouds of thick and macabre dust. Horror spit itself forth into every inch of air. Fire took the place of trees. This was no world for anyone, and there was barely anyone left in it at all. Eyes seemed like a waste.

But that was no story to tell for the strangers whom he saw, stumbling dazed into half-left walls. What good was it to hear anything like that? Instead he told his tales of the gathering and saving and wandering. He said he'd seen water. And so the story went, that one night beside some water's edge, in epiphany and tranquility it came to him. He told them he knew—that the world would go on. This was amazingly untrue. But he said it anyway. And after that thought emerged, he said, he knew then he must once more rise up to leave the green and turtles and waters behind. (There were, actually, roaches everywhere, and he used them as proof.) And he said this all brought him: "Here, where I'm standing right now. Where I knew you'd all be. Where I was needed. And when time comes, I will take you there. Or somewhere just as good. There is a spot of green almost always within thirty or forty or seventy miles."

For now, he explained, they would need to stay. Gain back health. If he'd learned anything in his brief but extensive travels, it was that traveling with the ill, the weak, was bad plans. Plain and simple. Strength was the key and when strength returned, their journey would begin. In the apocalyptic world, people believe anything.

There was mild expectation among the remaining—a small hope that survival would reap them an encumbered, but existent life. They made barely a camp and at least stayed warm since there was no lack of fire. They sat and waited. They ate what little there was. Some smoked cigarettes and some got stoned one hit at time by a couple of joints from an empty box. The only things in the world were those that burned. Reverie came for a few one night in a scalding bottle of whiskey. Tanner tried to gather hope from the chaos and dust, but disintegration had begun.

In time the ill got worse. The disfigured fell apart in their limbs. The few that were healthy began to grow unsteady; no one's condition improved. And in his waning days Tanner himself acquired a viscous shiver—a rattle so deep in his bones that the earth nearly quaked below him. All was approaching the end.

His stories began to lose their weight, as this does now, in light of the understanding that there was never a chance for salvation. That the

apocalypse, by definition, must always finish badly. And though he would like to have said that there was even this—a small collection of the undead cobbled together to waste away among the remains—waiting for him somewhere, if he could somehow join it, he knew better. There would be no more conversations. He knew from the empty sounds of the wretched moanless world outside his dark tomb of cement and mortar, that what he once could imagine as partly green, then fiery black, was merely and plainly dark. Pure unhappening.

Although there was wind. And roaches scurried through the small open spaces among his own darkness. And he could move, sometimes, a finger or almost straighten his leg.

There was, near the end, the voice of a woman. He could no longer tell if she, too, was imagined. It was accompanied by all but nothing. There was just a plaintive wailing, and occasionally a comforting talk—as if knowing that if she was the last voice on earth, there was no one but herself for dialogue. Tanner listened. This or that. Her words were uncanny in their insignificance.

But more than her voice was the song of her steps, quietly displacing small rocks above him into falling space, unraveling the chilly rattle of tumbling stones. Some overhead he could hear.

And after that, finally, the rain. The last rain of the world threw itself upon the earth like a grand conflagration. Tanner felt water on his head. He imagined small gorgeous feet settling on rubble above his back. He knew of a planet in revolution. Beneath his hands, the ground was wet. ~

Tino & Esperanza

Tino and Esperanza were in it for the long haul. Not to say that things didn't come between them. Things come between all of us. Tino and Esperanza got a phone call.

It was a couple of years after they were married. It was when they were trying to have a baby—the first time. It was Esperanza's idea. She said she'd noticed something about her changing. It wasn't an easy thing to notice, she said, and if she hadn't been paying such close attention she wouldn't have noticed a thing at all. She said she was becoming a mother.

“What does that mean?” Tino asked, sitting at the kitchen table figuring out the bills and making out checks. He lifted his head in puzzlement, narrowing his eyes and crowding his eyebrows into a thick bunch.

“I'm talking about a baby Tino. I'm talking about us having a baby. Can't you see my aura changing?”

Esperanza had strong beliefs about auras and karma and fate. When she first met Tino's

father, a Filipino doctor, a first generation immigrant, she said he had one of the most distinct auras she had ever seen. She said it was like the sun, that's how she explained it. In Esperanza's eyes, Tino's father carried the sun around on his shoulders and in his hands.

Tino understood none of this. At the time of all this baby talk, he was a poor graduate student studying sociology and, in particular, the census. In Tino's mind, everything about America was buried in a census somewhere, and he was going to get to the bottom of it.

But, love being what it is—blinding and convincing—Tino believed Esperanza when she told him that his father was carrying around the sun. And so it was with the whole matter of children and motherhood.

“I guess I do see,” he said. “You do seem different.”

“I told you,” she said, widening her arms like wings, throwing back her head and giving herself a spin. “It's like I'm already two. You can't imagine how it is. We have to start trying, right away. Do you promise you won't change your mind?”

But before Tino could answer, the phone rang. Esperanza dropped her arms again to her side and scampered to the cordless. The call was

from Leslie, a friend from Champaign when they were undergrads. Leslie, as Tino could infer, had just become engaged and wanted to them to attend an impromptu party that night at her apartment in Chicago.

Esperanza turned to Tino and explained the invitation. "Let's go," she paused and waited for Tino's response. "We can celebrate."

Tino stopped his calculating again. "Sure," he said. "It sounds great."

And with that the two broke off their Saturday afternoon routine and began getting ready to make the short trip into the city. Tino stacked the bills in a pile and Esperanza slipped off her sundress and waltzed into the bedroom to stand in front of the open closet.

The night that Tino and Esperanza were engaged was a hot night in June and they spent it drinking beer, eating Filipino food and making love to the sounds of a George Gershwin album that played over and over. "Rhapsody in Blue" until four in the morning. Esperanza said that listening to Gershwin made her feel like an American; she was born in Mexico next to the Texas border and grew up traveling between Texas and Illinois, part of a family of migrant workers.

"But you will be an American, Esperanza," her father told her. "Everyone in my family will be an American."

The night that she and Tino were engaged, Esperanza laid in bed, Tino's long black hair draped across her bare stomach and her arms stretched far above her head. "Now," she had said, "I will be an American bride."

And on the day they were married, in a loud bustling ceremony inside of a tall ornate Catholic church, Esperanza positively glowed. It was the middle of May. Throngs of dark-skinned immigrants pressed themselves into pews, sweating and smiling and gabbing unendingly during every moment of the long ceremony.

They had come from all over the country and some from the Philippines and some from Mexico, all finding their way into a church in the heart of Skokie, Illinois. And they were all in love with Tino and Esperanza that day.

Tino's great uncle, the last surviving brother of his Lolo, who had died when Tino was still young, remarked at the reception afterward how the rings shined so brightly on their fingers as they stood at the alter.

"Did you not see?" he asked Tino's mother in slow speech muddled from a stroke. "The sparkle. It was like they were ringing. Yes?"

And this was true. On the day that they were married, everything shone brightly.

Now, today, Esperanza tugged at the dresses in her closet. She pulled some off of the hangers and dropped them gently onto the bed and some she pushed aside into the end of the closet.

“Maybe we should take the train,” Tino called out from the living room. “I’m don’t really feel like traffic today.”

“The train?” Esperanza said. “What if we stay late? The trains don’t run late. We’ll drive. If you get tired I can drive us home.”

“But the truck is dying. It barely goes anymore.”

“Please, let’s drive. I don’t want to wait around for any trains,” Esperanza said. And that was that.

Esperanza held a long white sleeveless dress against her body and angled herself in front of the mirror. She tilted her head to the side and then threw her dark hair over her shoulder.

Tino walked in from the living room and stood behind her. He watched as she turned her body in front of the mirror. He tucked his shirt into the front of his pants. He studied her naked back, the strong lines of the muscles beneath her shoulder blades, the little meadow where her spine eased down to her waist.

When he first met her she was a young girl, thirteen only. She arrived for the last couple of months of the eighth grade school year. It was a routine that she had grown accustomed to, spending parts of the year in different schools, losing time, forcing her to take an entire grade over when she was eleven.

He felt mysteriously about her. A stranger with an accent that was different from his parents. A beautiful girl who was mostly alone, mostly walking the halls not saying a word. When he saw her again it was two years later, her father had saved enough money and they bought a big house in Illinois that they shared with her uncle and his family. He spoke to her for the first time a year later, asking her to the Junior Prom.

The story that he told his grandchildren, as an old man, a professor, a teacher of sociology, was that he knew from the beginning. It was a story they liked to hear. And he liked to tell them too, that on that day, today, he could see a vision of all of their faces while looking along the back of their grandmother, Esperanza. Even on the day he buried her, he told the story one last time, for all who were left of the friends they knew.

“What are you doing back there Tino?” Esperanza asked, eyeing him in the mirror over her shoulder, “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Are you going to wear that?”

“Yes. Why? Don’t you like it? You gave this to me, don’t you remember?”

“I remember. I like it. I think you should wear it.”

Esperanza wore the dress and put up her hair and when they were ready the two of them walked down the back steps of their apartment building to the old Ford pickup that Tino had taken off of his father’s hands a few years before.

The blue rusted truck made a horrible noise when it started and Tino always looked around after turning the key, watching to see who had noticed that it was his truck that sounded as if it was going to get up and die right there in the lot.

He directed the pickup out into the street slowly, grinding it into gear and then noticing Esperanza grimace as she checked her makeup in the side mirror.

“Wait,” she said. “We forgot.”

Tino slowed the car again as they approached the railroad where the trains ran by all day on

the Northwest line, shaking and shouting across the parking lot behind their apartment.

“What?” he asked.

“A gift. We need a gift.”

The truck gave a shudder. “Damn,” Tino muttered.

“It’s alright, we’ll just run into town. It won’t take long.”

“No,” said Tino as he put the truck back into neutral. “The truck, it’s stopped.”

Esperanza looked past Tino, out his window and over the tracks where the truck now rested, noiseless and still.

“Well, what? Start it,” she said, raising her voice. “We’re on the tracks Tino, we have to start the truck. Come on.”

By now a few cars behind them were beginning to honk and their drivers were making a racket. Tino turned the key, but nothing.

“Tino,” she said, now in a panic.

Tino gave it a few more goes, but still nothing, nothing but a few clicks. “Damnit. Goddamnit.”

A man in a red sedan pulled around Tino and buzzed ahead. Another man in a pickup drove past, “Goddamn spics! Fix your fuckin’ car!” he hollered. Tino looked up and Esperanza’s jaw drew tight.

“Tino.”

“Shit. Alright,” Tino said and swiveled his head back and forth checking the tracks. “I told you this would happen. I told you we should take the train.”

“What?!” Esperanza yelled. “I can’t believe this.”

“Get out. We need to get out,” he said, opening his door and stepping down to stand outside of the truck. Esperanza grabbed her purse and stepped outside too.

Tino pulled on the lever to release the hood, then moved around to the front of the truck, prying open the sun-warmed metal and leaning over the engine. A tall, heavy man walked over from the other side of the road and joined Tino in front of the truck.

“Looks like you’ve got a problem,” he said, resting his hand alongside the engine and peering over the dark mess.

“We’ll need to push it,” Tino said. “This isn’t going anywhere. Son of a bitch.”

And that’s when they heard the noise. First a little ring in the tracks themselves and then the ring of the bells at the crossing. Then the lights. Then the gates.

The tall, heavy man stood a moment, amazed, and then turned to Tino, expressionless. Tino rushed behind the truck. “C’mon,” he said to the man. Then he turned to Esperanza, who stood crying at the side of the road. “Esperanza, push!”

The man got behind the truck with Tino and leaned his hands into the back bumper.

“Esperanza!”

Esperanza stood and shook her head. “Tino, no! Stop! The train! Come over here—the two of you, stop!” She yelled.

The man turned his head to Tino, “She’s right.”

The sound of the approaching train now joined the noise of the dinging crossing gate, the collection of sounds braiding together in a familiar chorus.

“What?” Tino said. “We have to move this, now. Esperanza, help us!” He yelled, but the other

man stepped back and then hurried to stand beside Esperanza. “What are you doing?” Tino pleaded.

Tino looked at the two of them standing together, listened as Esperanza yelled for him to move, then stared over at the freight train approaching slowly with its horn blaring wildly. And then he stepped back too, and stood beside Esperanza and the stranger, watching as the train grew louder, moved closer.

“I can’t believe this,” Tino said. “We could’ve moved the Goddamn thing. What were you thinking? We can’t just leave it.”

With the train about a hundred yards away, the three retreated in a rush, moving what they thought would be a safe distance to witness the collision. Cars that had stopped on the other side of the tracks slipped into reverse and backed away from the crossing. People got out of their vehicles, some wandered out of the parking lot of the apartment building and leered from the edge of the driveway.

Tino and Esperanza stood together with a tall, heavy stranger dressed in jeans and a white undershirt, yelling at each other, Esperanza screaming about fate and Tino yelling about how a pickup truck isn’t a heavy car, how it’s an easy thing to push. And they watched as a slow moving freight train drove at quarter steam into the broad side of Tino’s father’s old blue rusting Ford pickup. The crossing bells rang just like they always do.

They didn’t make it to the city, but that night Tino and Esperanza drank San Miguels and listened to Gershwin, then devoured each other in the long, late, weighty heat of a Midwestern summer. They named their first child George. ~

Between Waters

Night waves pummeled them in the long, open sea between the islands of Luzon and Samar. Solid walls of cold, green, frothing saltwater hammered the 3-foot-wide wooden outrigger, dousing Gloria, her toddler and infant, her two barely-teenage brothers, and the twenty defeated Filipino soldiers wedged beside them in the narrow boat.

It was 1942, and behind them—on Luzon—Japanese infantrymen walked with their guns through the streets of Manila and filed off in columns to the edges of the city, firing bullets into an endless jungle, chasing away Americans with guns, some of whom would come back later to kill them and some of whom would die on the island, marching and starving through that endless jungle on bare, bloodied and muddy feet.

Jaime, the strong, athletic and older of the two brothers, had come to Manila from Samar to bring his sister and her boys and his brother, Paeng, home early from a long holiday—back to the town of Ipao, where the Japanese soldiers had fewer reasons to kill Filipinos.

Soon after Jaime arrived, just before dawn amongst the bedlam of the overrun capital, he was mostly hopeless. His family was no longer in Manila; they had escaped to somewhere in Cavite. Somewhere. How would he find them? He wouldn't, he thought. How long would he look? Should he stay there until he died too? But he would go. Jaime ran—between the soldiers' boots and the people fleeing—along the road to Cavite.

He kept his head down, gazed in no one's eyes, wore the demeanor of someone with no business in this world worth knowing. He was simply a boy in a war, running from one chance at death to another. He was the wallpaper that soldiers splatter each other's blood across.

And though no one seemed to notice him, Jaime watched everyone—from the corners of his eyes, he saw everything. He saw the grieving panic, the shriveling direness in the faces of the fleeing. He saw never too far off in either direction down the road: fire-seared flashes, followed by a dead thud, then some brackish pillar of smoke. Sometimes he saw the fleeing cover their mouths and noses when they walked through the lingering, gray and gunpowdered wisps above some freshly-rutted and body-speckled ground.

He saw that there were two kinds men with guns: those who were already weary of the killing and those who were hungry for more.

But all the gunned men stomped along together—the murderers and the soon-to-be victims. He steered clear of every huddled, worn-out and agitated clump of uniformed humans, kept away as much as he could from the stench of their terror. Jaime shuffled past them like a moth, an almost nothingness, and wherever the road flushed him out again into an open and anonymous stretch of tree-walled, tire-tracked dirt, he ran.

When he finally sprinted into the streets of Cavite, Jaime's heart began to swell with panic. His breath would not come back and his skinny legs froze; the numbness of terror prickled in his hands. *Where would he begin?* The intersection before him was chaos: horses dragging over-piled carts trying to nudge past each other, trucks overstuffed with Japanese soldiers blaring through, clutches of people scurrying. He would never find his family here.

But he looked. Jaime ran from street to street, hollering their names. He asked random strangers as they passed: *Gloria, a young woman from Samar, beautiful, fair-skinned, with her two babies, and my brother, Paeng, a boy.* Many didn't answer. Some took the time to shake their heads and a few stopped to pity him—they were the ones who seemed most wise and none of them tried to offer hope.

Down a wide, quiet alley, he found a wrinkled, dark-skinned, white-haired woman like a

hunched statue behind an empty fruit stand. After Jaime asked about his family, she smiled and grabbed his face in her thin, coarse hands, then kissed him gently on the forehead and said, *You are a good brother. There will be better times.* He scampered for another hour through the streets, believing the woman was an omen of fortune, but every blank look and answerless shout brought him closer and closer again to his questions: How long would he look? Should he stay here until he died too?

And then he saw him there, in the middle of the next intersection with his short-cropped hair in the late afternoon light, peering at and waiting for a mule to cross, and balancing a sack of rice on his shoulder: *Paeng.* Jaime was looking straight at his brother. When he yelled his name, Paeng nearly dropped the sack; from the sound of the voice he could see Jaime's round face before he even looked up.

At the harbor in Cavite, it was their sister—they called her *Glory*—with rambunctious, two-year-old Leo in hand and baby Ogie on her hip, who led them from boat-to-boat, looking to somehow squeeze their way along to Samar. Jaime pointed out two vessels that he thought might suffice, but Glory shook her head and frowned. *Those are too crowded already. They're fools. They'll die.*

Instead she carried Ogie and tugged Leo to the end of the dock, where 18 just-surrendered

Filipino soldiers—some bandaged and wrapped and most merely bleeding—filled edge-to-edge a small 3-foot-wide wooden outrigger with a sail. She knew they were going to Samar. Two men stood on the dock tossing a few rations and some packs of cigarettes into the boat. Glory stood beside them, waiting, but they ignored her and said nothing, except a few words to the other men. Behind her, Paeng stared at his feet and Jaime tugged at a small sack slung over his shoulder.

Then Glory yanked at Leo's hand, stepped around the two men and pulled on one of the ropes, bringing the end of the boat to the dock. Lifting Leo into her other arm, she hopped aboard. *We are women and children*, she said, *We're going to Samar. We'll barely take up any room.* The soldiers inched their slack bodies down the boat like a waning caterpillar. She motioned to Jaime and Paeng and they glanced over at the men on dock, who nodded, expressionless, toward the boat. The boys leapt aboard, and none of the other men looked at them.

Nearby on the dimming horizon steely-dark clouds glided slowly toward the harbor, patches of lightning sparking at their edges and white-capped waters percolating beneath. The travelers were waiting for the dark. The Japanese Navy lurked along the western coasts of the mottled archipelago, and the conquerors

wanted no one else on their newly-claimed seas. *Moon. Wind. Open water.* These were the prayers of the men as they waited.

Glory thought none of those things. As they finally drifted out of the harbor and into the lapping and swaying of the sea in the night, she told Paeng and Jaime to always be thinking of what they will do if the boat turns over. *Grab something to float. Find each other and make sure I have the boys. Stay away from the men. It is better to be caught by the Japanese than to die in the ocean.* She told Leo to always yell her name: *Shout, Gloooooorrrryyyy! Not mama, everyone will be shouting for their mama.* And she laughed, although Leo wasn't sure why it was funny. Then Glory whispered to Ogie and told him not to worry, *I will never let go of you.*

Beyond drowning, she worried about food. She and the boys had barely eaten for days. The men would not be sharing their nearly-depleted rations, and the food that Jaime carried in the sack—fist-sized balls of sticky-rice, snugly wrapped in thin strips of bamboo like little, starch-filled grenades—would only last Glory's family a few days. Their journey, just at night, might last as long as ten, maybe more. In the moment, she had only one solution: *All of you, sleep now. The more you sleep, the less you will eat.*

On the first night the high clouds threatened and hid the moon, but the wind was good and no storm harmed them before dawn. As soon as

first light started glowing far away at the curve of the planet, they pulled into a cove of sheer rocks with overhanging vines and dropped an anchor. When thunderstorms swept above and deluged their enclave in the afternoon, everyone pulled tarps over themselves and most of the men fell back asleep under the damp drumming. Beneath the dark cover, Jaime and Paeng tried to gain a sliver of light by lifting an edge, then played games with the leftover bamboo strips and later, for Leo, made them into something like a little toy bike. Leo smiled and spent a long time running it around a small rectangle of light on the floor of the boat.

But the peace they found on the first afternoon was fleeting. In the next few nights the water grew rugged, an ocean of boulders and ledges—the boat was punishment. And by 9 already each morning, before any real sleep had set in, their anchored coves would succumb to the pure dead-heavy heat, ruining them in its sun. On the fourth day, all the food on the boat had dwindled. When they launched again into the rocky sea that night under true Armageddon clouds and electric skies, it was to the protests of some of the men who felt doom in the storm. But hunger drove the rest—hiding in the cove was not enough right now, they needed somewhere and its food.

Glory uttered nothing while the men argued, and eventually Jaime leaned over to her, *Why*

don't you tell them what you think? She looked at Jaime, *I think I only need to tell them if I disagree with their choice.* Her choice was always to keep moving. She was a thing that other things didn't stand in front of.

But storms are not things, they are places; you cannot push them aside, you merely live beyond their presence. This storm this night was a harsh place. The canyon-walled waves drove high-enough all around the boat to build a city of looming watery skyscrapers, no view of the horizon. Jaime and Paeng encircled Glory and the boys, locking their arms together and cinching them into a bone-aching grip whenever a cliff of ocean broke down onto their human mound, soaking them in cold sea and sloshing piles of water across their feet. The boat became its own jungle.

Deep into the night—when the fatigue of holding on for life had made all their muscles heavy, but the thrashing seemed almost beginning to relent—the outrigger heaved over a sudden steep ledge of water, skipping airborne and slamming down concretely against the surface, gauging more water into the craft. The jolt thumped Leo and Paeng backward, hard into the side of the boat and tipping them partly over its edge. Leo's eyes bolted wide with panic and Paeng squinted as he coughed out saltwater. Jaime grabbed each in a man's grip and yanked them both into their huddle again.

When the storm finally ceased, midway through the morning, everyone had survived, but the rudder had not. And they were all hungry. The group made their list. *A shore. Lumber. Food.* By noon, the first was found: a broad, shallow, warm lagoon with a little beach, and just into the sandy island, a very tiny village sheltered by a small clump of trees. The village had no lumber nor any trees that were right for the rudder, but they would in two days when the next supply boat arrived. There was no food, though, on the coming boat, and the village had almost nothing to share. But their fishermen—three graying and thin, and one young and plump—were on their way out. The oldest one said they had another boat that two of the soldiers could use. The villagers were hungry too and had waited three days for a group of Japanese ships to leave their waters. They hadn't seen the ships since last night; they couldn't wait any longer.

Three boats with six men left the lagoon under the clearing skies in the early afternoon. None came back. For the next two days Glory and her family kept away from the lagoon and didn't leave the tiny village, sleeping in one of the missing fishermen's thatched huts and eating almost nothing. She nursed Ogie a little at feeding times, but he always cried for more, and she didn't have much to give.

After the lumber finally arrived, they had the rudder fixed by that nightfall. Two less men made more room in the boat, but barely. The rest were starving and angrier, and Glory and all the boys could feel it solidly now: how the men were different from them. Jaime had been fooled by their softer Filipino faces and their torn, patriotic uniforms, but these men were the same as those he feared along the road to Cavite—murderers and victims. He wondered which ones might still have a gun, whom among them could be preparing to lose his mind. After staring at some of the men's faces in the shadows for a long time that night, he wondered if their skulls would crack and shatter if you wrapped on their heads with just a knuckle.

On that night more than any of the others, Glory thought of her husband, Salvador—a young ship captain who'd been away at sea for months, and then was recruited by the American Navy to help navigate their massive ships through the local seaways and harbors. Now that Navy and everyone with them was falling back and further away into the deeper and deeper oceans. Glory assumed that he—she called him by his nickname, *Badong*—was still alive and they would see each other again, because there seemed to be equal reason to believe both possibilities. And she wanted to see him again, badly. She closed her eyes and imagined inhaling his pipe smoke while she chopped

garlic for dinner in their home along the ocean in Ipao. *The Japanese cannot stay forever*, she thought. Glory glanced at her sleeping boys, then turned to the man steering the boat: *No stopping until we find a bigger village.*

But they did stop, the next morning in another hot cove and stayed for the duration of the sunlight after spotting a Japanese destroyer in the too-near distance. It was on their eighth day then, more than half-way to Samar that they saw a small harbor beside a large village and tacked toward it warily through the wind. As they neared the shore, armed men formed a line on the beach and some of the soldiers in the boat begged the others to turn around, but their outrigger sailed on to the harbor. Glory sat the two small boys behind her—Ogie on Leo's lap—and her brothers crouched on each side of her, shielding their nephews.

When they reached the beach, the armed men barked commands roughly and spoke from behind bandanas tied as masks, although they wore no uniforms. But soon everyone—the men on the beach and the men in the boat—realized that they were all Filipinos, and the armed men pulled down their bandanas. They were not official soldiers, but guerrilla fighters—men who said that they'd helped repel Japanese forces on an island just an hour south. The guerrillas didn't ask why the men in the boat had uniforms, but no guns, and almost none of

the defeated soldiers said a word as they limped out of the water and across the sand.

Glory walked straight to the tallest of the armed men, the one who'd done most of the yelling, and told him that they hadn't eaten in four days. At first he agreed to feed everyone and give them enough food for the rest of their journey, but back in the village he heard that the soldiers had just surrendered. He called them *cowards*, *deserters*, and said they wouldn't waste their food on them. Others in the village argued for the soldiers and Glory's family, but no one pointed any weapons, and they came to a compromise: they would feed everyone before they left tonight, but they could not spare anything for them to bring with. Glory said only *thank you* to the villagers, and told her brothers not to leave her side.

The moon was full and enormous that night as the uniformed and bandaged men filed across the sand toward the outrigger after their meal. Glory trailed behind them at the edge of the village—Ogie was long-asleep and heavy in the sling across her chest, and Leo dragged his feet, drawing her hand back as he tugged. And as she stepped out onto the beach, a woman slipped up beside Glory, handing her a small bag with some bamboo-wrapped sticky-rice; there was even less than what they'd brought from Cavite. The woman put her finger to her lips before they could thank her, and Glory had just barely

nodded to the woman before she turned and flitted back toward the village. Glory broadened some of the sling's fabric and stuffed part of the sack into it, hiding most of the contraband. Jaime spoke low, under his breath, *You won't be able to hide that on the boat.* She walked faster and dragged Leo along, *I know.*

Glory and her sons were the last to board; keeping an arm over the bag, she squeezed the three of them between her brothers. On the beach the guerrillas sneered and held their machine guns at their waists while the outrigger opened its sail and drifted back out to the sea. In the boat, Paeng bobbed his knee nervously and Jaime narrowed his eyes at him. Leo blinked heavily and leaned his head against his mother's arm. A few of the men crouching near Glory craned their necks a little toward her sling and saw that she had a bag. They stared, but said nothing.

When they were clear of the small harbor and in the open water, Glory pulled the bag out of her sling and held it up. *I have rice here. It is not much and it is not our food. But if you eat it, my children will go hungry.* And with that she set the small bag of sticky-rice down at her feet on the floor of the boat. All of the men looked at it; some glanced back up at her before turning their eyes again to the ocean. No one said anything and the boat creaked and wrested with wind under the broad moon.

For the next two nights, the boat ran fast and they didn't want to stop, so they went past dawn both mornings and made up more time. By the eleventh day, Samar felt close. That night started the same, good gusts and open waters. But soon after midnight, the air fell more breathless, and then there was absolutely none: no wind, the sail didn't even lurch. The men began to grumble between each other—some talking of omens—and their noise woke Leo, who looked out over the silky glass water, amazed. He reached a small brown hand over its surface, hovering above the still perfect flatness. Jaime smiled at him, *Do you like it?* Leo nodded and smirked, then mumbled, *It's a mirror.* He'd seen water like this near Christmas just a few weeks before, not as smooth, but like an epic mirror: vast Manila Bay viewed from its edge, reflecting the sparkling and ear-cracking fireworks between Japanese and American fighter planes at battle not too far above. Paeng pinched Leo's side, *Don't you want to jump in?* Leo shook his head and squirmed, but kept his hand over the water—it was like a magnet beneath his palm. It made Leo feel something, but he didn't know a word for it. The whole time Glory just watched and resisted the urge to stroke his hair.

They were so close now, but that night and the next the wind was nowhere, and the rice was all but gone, and the men grew more agitated than ever. Two fights had broken out, one each night,

and one man was knocked unconscious in the second melee. The outrigger was a cauldron. Glory thought about going ashore before Samar; it would be easy to find their own way from here. Mistakenly, she thought that the men on the boat were now the gravest threat to her boys.

But Glory told herself they'd wait one more day, and on that night the wind returned. Now they would be in Samar by the next afternoon. Knowing they were almost there kept the men from each other's throats. When Leo awoke in the morning he complained that he was starving, and Glory said she might make him a whole meal soon. She tried to nurse Ogie, but there was barely anything for him. She assured herself that they would be sailing into the harbor in Calbayog before evening. And at twenty-five minutes past four, they were pulling up to the dock.

After one of the men leapt from the outrigger and looped a rope around a piling, shouting began to bellow from the beach and a column of soldiers started marching out the broad door of a nearby boathouse. Glory squinted toward them; they were Japanese. The man on the dock dropped the rope and stood stiff. A half dozen of the neatly-uniformed Japanese men trotted quickly toward him, rifles raised chest-high, a few angled down toward the outrigger. The man on the dock yelled, *We've surrendered!* Glory

crouched and bent over as low as she could in the boat, pressing her boys down beneath her.

The soldiers ordered the man to lie down, and he dropped to his stomach. A Japanese officer, leading more men, came up behind the half-dozen soldiers, walked past them, and squatted in front of the man on his stomach. He asked if they were all unarmed. *We are.* He asked where they had come from and why they were not still there. *Cavite. We surrendered.* He said they should still be in Cavite then. He told them no one was allowed to travel. The officer ordered the man to stand and collect his men. *They are not my men. We are not at war with you.* The officer erupted and unsheathed a sword. He shouted at his soldiers, telling them to tie the men's hands and deliver them to the prisoners' camp. Before stepping onto the dock and having their hands tied, some of the men looked hard down toward the water in the bay, but none jumped in, and all of them went quietly with the soldiers. As the last men filed off the boat, Glory came out of her crouch and stood beside her brothers, her sons in her arms.

The officer turned and looked down into the outrigger. Glory began to step forward, but the officer held up his hand and she froze. He pointed to Paeng, and motioned for him to come toward the dock. Jaime fidgeted. As Paeng walked along the center of the narrow boat, two soldiers beside the officer followed him with the

tips of their rifles. Another soldier pointed his rifle at Jaime, and another pair aimed at Glory and her boys.

Paeng sweated and his hands shook; he wasn't sure he'd be able to speak. When he reached the end of the boat, he stopped and looked up. The officer called down to him, *And why are you here, not in Cavite—who has sent you? Did you surrender too?* His soldiers chuckled. Paeng tried to lick the dryness from his lips. *My brother and I go to school there, classes just finished. My sister came to get us, and she did not want to leave her boys.* Paeng did not know if he needed to lie, or if the tiny lie had even made things seem better. But the truth was that they were running from *him*, this man in front of him, those like him, and saying so didn't seem wise.

The officer tapped the end of his sword against the dock, and soldiers pointed their rifles restlessly—at Paeng, Jaime, Glory, and the two tiny boys.

This moment in the long war would not actually be the closest that Leo and Ogie would come to having their lives ended by Japanese gunfire. Later, on this same island and not too far away, the boys would be 3 and 4, playing hopscotch amongst a small group of other kids, and after arguing about who would go first, Leo and Ogie would relent and stand at the back. In a moment, the first three children in line would be sprayed with gunfire and fall straight to the

concrete, looking to Leo like dolls whose strings had been cut. But Leo and Ogie would survive that encounter too, and Glory would come running out to the playground and grab her children while other mothers wept.

Not long after, during the end of the war, Leo and Ogie and their mother would run in terror from the enemy one more time: while the Americans bombed their way back into Samar, and the Emperor's soldiers scattered in retreat, killing in bunches as many islanders as they could along the way. Glory and her sons would escape that brutal exodus by tearing through bullet-filled air along the Ipao shoreline toward the mouth of a river where they might hide and live. Paeng ran carrying Leo on his back, and the boy couldn't help but turn around to see again the ear-cracking fireworks of exploding shells and look up at the streams of sparking gunfire in the clouds.

Even later, Leo would become a doctor and a father in America, practice family medicine in Illinois for 40 years, a rabble-rousing pillar of his community. And Ogie would become an engineer and raise his family in Cebu—staying in the same home where Glory would bring them all, the two boys and three more girls when they outgrew the house along the ocean in Ipao. And Glory would travel the world to follow her children from place to place. New York City. Chicago. San Francisco. Near her end she would

attend the book party of her youngest and promising grandson, who grew up with her sometimes in his house and dedicated the book to her, and at the party he would ask her, at 96, to stand in front of everyone and be applauded. Her dear Captain, Badong, would see almost none of this, dying aboard his ship on the ocean in 1973, a well-earned heart attack forty years before his Glory would leave this world.

The officer lifted his sword and slipped it into his sheath. Then he turned around and pointed his men toward the boathouse. They lowered their guns. The officer didn't say anything and strode with his soldiers back down the dock.

Glory handed Leo to Jaime and carried Ogie down the boat toward Paeng—when she reached him, Glory placed a hand on his back, *That was smart. You made us seem innocent.* Tiny waves, echoes from some far off wake, swayed the boat side-to-side, splashing pebbled water against its hull. ~

EPILOGUE

How It Happens

We are wary of the sudden. It's a human condition. I've seen it everywhere, we all have: caution at the street curb, palm readers, life jackets. We want to avoid that unknown twist, or foresee it, or at least feel ready. And when something comes up that way, without the least bit of expectation, we're likely to distrust it.

Which is partly how my marriage ended so long ago— that is, in addition to all of the causes that I'm sure will always remain a mystery. Sudden is a problem for humans because life is, on balance, entirely mysterious to us. It seems that anything can happen. So when that horrendous stench began, seemingly all at once, on a Sunday afternoon in the early summer of my novice life as a married man, Jane and I didn't think it could mean anything good.

It hadn't been there at all that morning before we'd left for a short walk into town, a little browsing in the bookstore and then brunch. Wandering lazily through the aisles of books— setting off to explore our particular interests alone but together—was the kind of thing that made us feel married. It was our first stab at adult life, and this was the way we imagined

grown Midwesterners (the agnostic sort) spent their Sundays. It was also, in retrospect, one of the good kinds of things we tried to do with our marriage early on: devise methods to define what being married was. Not that it was as concerted or specific an effort as that might sound—just a basic urge to create a life that could confirm we were, indeed, a couple. Which sounds simple, except to those who have been married. And, to tell the truth, some people do make it simple. Or try. I suppose it's what children can bring to a marriage: perpetual common ground. But we never got that far.

Although we might have. The year before it ended, we tried for seven or eight months to light the genetic torch inside of Jane. No luck. I'd like to say it wouldn't have changed anything, not ultimately. It is unpleasant to imagine that my destiny was shaped by the factors determining when and how my wife and I chose to have intercourse during that time. Of course, the beginnings of all our destinies are subject to exactly that category of conditions. Yes, a baby might have changed everything. But children were nowhere near our minds during that Sunday afternoon in 1979, a June when we were not yet thirty. It was a time when birth control pills were our dear friends and sex was had for any reason but a good one.

We had made love in the morning. Early, with the sounds of Charles Kuralt enunciating low

tones from the T.V. that Jane had turned on while I percolated coffee. The mugs sat in the sun on the windowsill, the coffee grew cold, and we writhed in the drowsy language of intimacy. It had begun as that kind of morning.

And our excursion into town was good. We didn't buy any books, although I spent a long time fondling something about Edward R. Murrow. (I was a reporter then—a brief career diversion that taught me journalism pays absolutely squat.) At the bright cafe, I made my way happily through a stack of pancakes and too much bacon. Jane liked the fresh fruit and almost ordered a piece of pie when the waitress brought us our check.

On the walk home we passed through the fragrant arena of something in bloom. I should be able to say what it was, but I don't know anything about flowers. It was the smell of pure sugar, so sweet you could feel it crystallize in your lungs. At first notice of the scent, we stopped and mentioned a garden we would someday have, but wouldn't. Jane knew something about planting, having grown up at a place you might call a nursery. It wasn't what her father really did—he was a sort of country lawyer—but they lived on several acres and he hired people to help manage some small orchards on the land. During her senior year in high school, her father died (massive coronary)

and she delayed college to assist her mother with family affairs. This included helping to oversee the nursery for a time. I think now that somewhere in the corner of her mind she fantasized about us going back to her old home, buying up a few nearby estates and unleashing her father's orchards over the whole bucolic spread. In the end, I don't think she could have imagined anything better than that.

When we came upon the actual blooms, Jane leaned half over into the foreign yard and spoke slowly, with her eyes closed. "This reminds me. Reminds me, reminds me—"

"What?" My hands were in my pockets.

"Oh, this is something, this smell, something I remember."

"A place?"

"No. No, something that happened. Somewhere specific."

"Specific in time."

"Yeah. Like," she stood and tilted her head to the sky. "Oh, what? What is it?"

I closed my eyes and tried to let a memory come to me. Nothing revealed itself.

Then she was walking again, her rapture suddenly doused. "Humans must've needed to smell things to remember them. Once upon a time. It must've been important," she said.

Jane's hair was long and dark and very straight. It caught easily in the wind and at that moment some strands floated out lightly behind her.

"That seems logical. I'd say that's right," I nodded and took one last honeyed breath before we walked out of its reach.

"But you'd have to be better at it than I am, I guess." she said. "To be any use."

"You'd get better with practice. I mean, they would've been doing it all the time."

"Maybe we are too. Maybe we just don't pay any attention." And with this she threw me a betcha weren't thinkin' that squint, accompanied by a raised Mr. Spock brow.

"Anything's possible." I smiled and she skipped ahead of me, narrowly avoiding a biker who came speeding around the corner and jumped the edge of the curb. I thought I should admonish the biker, but he was by so fast I couldn't even manage a gesture.

The rest of the walk was uneventful. We greeted a dog in the yard a few houses down from our

apartment, prying our fingers through the narrow openings of the wood fence and feeling the cold of his nose. When we reached the stairs that led up to our front door, I paused to divert myself to the mailbox.

"Not today," Jane hollered on her way up. "Sunday. Remember?"

I had, but was on auto-pilot, driven by the daily curiosity of what awaits. "Right. Today, we don't exist."

Which is, in fact, how I now view that entire small space of history in the waning 1970's: a gentle lag time in human existence. As far as I remember, the whole of my life—and the country, it seemed—succumbed to a state of time-bent inertia during those few years. It was a century of Sundays. Even if I believed that something worth wanting laid wait in the mail, nothing did. I was no one to the world then, but too naive to appreciate the joys of such anonymity.

Upstairs Jane had left the door open behind her, so that the stench hit me even before I stepped inside.

"What is that?" Jane squeezed out her words in a way that expressed extreme displeasure.

I stopped in the doorframe and inhaled deeply.

It was repulsive, but totally unfamiliar. A sweet rot layered above an earthy fetid base. And something that almost smelled like stale fuel.

"Check the fridge," I said, knowing full well that nothing could have rotted like that since the morning.

"No," Jane was down the hall near the bedroom where we'd left the sliding door open and the screen door locked. "It's coming from back here. From outside."

I heard the skimming of metal along a plastic runner, then Jane's steps onto the back deck. I followed, catching pockets of the stench on the breeze that blew in. Outside we could see the yard a floor below and over the surrounding fence to some of the adjacent homes. There was no obvious evidence of a source.

"My god," Jane said. She held her hand over her nose and mouth, muffling her words. "It's terrible. It's completely putrid."

I took in another deep breath, trying to detect something familiar. I gagged. "Something died."

"What?" She was now actually holding her nose closed with her fingers. "What do you think it is?" Her pinched clown voice made the situation seem suddenly comic.

"I don't know. What, a raccoon maybe? Weren't raccoons fighting out here a few nights ago?"

"Those were cats. You think it's a cat?"

And that was our first thought, a dead cat.

"Do cats kill each other?" I asked, and felt a little stupid for it, but had never owned a cat then.

Jane took her fingers from her nose. "Not on purpose. But it could happen. Go look." She pointed down into the yard. "Oh gosh, what if it's their cat?" Jane nodded downstairs.

I remembered that the cat fighting we'd heard lately was between the neighbor's cat below us and some local feline of undetermined origins. Our neighbors beneath were nasty, unhappy people. They complained about everything, hated us and had avoided eye contact for over a year. I'd heard him more than once threatening the foreign cat with bodily harm if it didn't leave his aging Siamese alone. "Maybe he killed that other cat."

Jane rolled her eyes. "This is not an episode of 'Quincy.' Come on, go check. I don't wanna have to tell them if their cat's dead."

"Neither do I."

"You're the man." She said this as if it meant something.

"Fine," I said and started down the stairs.

The thing was, once I stepped into the grass, I couldn't really tell where the smell was coming from. It permeated the whole yard, seemed to blow in from all directions. In the corner of our fenced-in space, there stood a small utility building with a laundry room and some storage closets. I poked around its edges and peered into the dryer vent that exited one side of the structure. Nothing. Nothing but the stench that pressed up into my nostrils with an unforgiving persistence.

"I can't tell," I yelled. "Come down and see what you think."

"You're lying. You found something. It's gross isn't it?" She had taken on the pose of a distrusting younger sister.

"Seriously. I haven't got a clue," I pulled my shirt up over my nose. "But it's awful."

"I don't think I'm coming down."

And she probably wouldn't have, except for what I found next. In a narrow alley of bare mud between the utility hut and one side of the fence was a fresh pile of dirt. I hadn't noticed it before, but I also didn't have much cause to be looking around there with any frequency. Neither was it the case that the stench seemed

to be coming from the pile in any particular way. Still, it looked suspicious.

"Okay. Well," I realized she couldn't hear me and raised my voice. "Well, this might be something. You'd better look."

I gestured her toward me and, after a pause, she ambled down the stairs in quick small hops. Now that there was something to look at, Jane couldn't resist.

"Is it bad? Do I want to see?" she asked as she drew closer to the fence.

"There's really nothing, except what it might be."

Jane looked puzzled and reached out to grab my elbow in her hand before leaning her head around the corner of the building. Her brown eyes fixed on the loose, cluttered pyramid of earth. "What's under there?"

"A cat?"

"Did you look?"

"No, I didn't look. I've just been standing here. I told you he killed that cat."

"He did not. It's probably just-garbage." She waved her hand in front of her face.

I laughed a little at the image of our neighbor burying garbage behind the building in the dark by flashlight. "Okay, that's absurd. It's not garbage. For one, garbage wouldn't smell like this. It's a cat. He killed that cat." I was fairly sure of it. I could even imagine remembering the sound of a shovel whacking something, a tinny reverb late last night.

"Now you're absurd. It's probably exactly what it is. A pile of dirt. It has nothing to do with this smell," she said, covering her mouth again. "But, my god, whatever this is, it can't be good. Something's rotted all to hell. Something's being eaten alive."

Jane had gone into hyperbole, and it was part of her charm. She was an artist. Or dreaming of being one. Which meant she'd arranged to set up an old, unused mobile classroom as a temporary studio while she worked a paying job as an art teacher at that same elementary school. So, as an artist, she was prone to exaggeration, likely to bring everything into an unnecessarily dramatic context. She labored in mysteries that were grand and unsolvable. I preferred the concrete noir plot lines that rely on malice and flesh pleasures as their basis for cause and effect. But both our perspectives led us to believe that something foul was at play.

"Where did this come from? How could it just appear like this?" Jane asked, looking at me as if I might have some answers.

I shrugged. I wanted to dig up the pile, but knew Jane wouldn't go for it. I thought I might come out later that night with a shovel. But I worried about getting caught by the neighbor; I couldn't imagine that being a pleasant scene. My curiosity was festering.

"Let's dig it up," I said and immediately felt I'd said it too enthusiastically.

Jane dropped her shoulders and tilted her head forward. "No. But I knew you were going to say that."

"Why not?" But I knew why not; it just wasn't the thing you did. "Okay, but if we don't see that other cat around—"

"What."

"Well, the smell's just gonna get worse 'til we get it out of here."

"There's no cat. Seriously. We need to find what this is from." She shook her head. "I'm going upstairs to close the windows. Ugh. We'll have to turn on the air."

Jane made a quick pirouette and darted up the steps. I watched her close the sliding door, then I edged closer to the mound of earth. A few bugs squirmed near the top of the pile and a trail of ants wiggled along one edge of the mud base. There was no special attention paid to the mound by flies or other carrion-seekers. I began to think that it was probably just a pile of dirt. We'd buried our dog once when I was a kid and it didn't smell like this, not as I could remember.

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That night something happened that has rarely ever occurred, before or since: I couldn't sleep. There are people called insomniacs; I know this. But they are creatures as foreign to me as the poison-breathing eels and tubes that clutter the vents along the bottom of the sea. In fact, the late of the night is in some ways like the ocean in my life—mostly dark and unexplored, despite its obvious presence in the world. I've always found its shapelessness discomfiting. There have never been any common strings tying together those nights that I have gone sleepless. Once, in college, I'd come down with bronchitis and was too lazy to pick up any medicine. Once I'd stayed up with Jane after going to a party in Chicago with a few of her painter friends and we'd seen the sun rise over Lake Michigan. A couple times, some years after everything here, I'd worked all night in the weeks following the start of my printing

business. And there had been this—the least obvious situation of them all, although looking back one might say just the opposite. The one to say such a thing, however, would be a person more like Jane than myself. From today's perspective she might say that there was no way the universe could hide what had happened from our subconscious. And she might add that my sleeplessness was evidence that I was more sensitive to such things than I might admit.

That was one of the things she did. Jane loved me and chose me because of my desire to see things concretely, in an affirmative but earth-bound way. I was her final relief from the intriguing but unsturdy drifters that she had wandered between in her younger years—poets, actors and sculptors who may or may not have eventually fulfilled their callings. Nonetheless, she was always trying (or hoping, maybe) to inject in me some of that dreaminess, to unearth a hidden wish to believe in the unexplainable. But I do not. I do not believe in religion or astrology or psychic abilities—all of which I consider to contain the same degree of veracity. I am a printer who was for a while a photo archivist and, briefly, a newspaper man. I am a maker and keeper of some parts of the public record of things. It is how I sleep. Because I know I am just a creature that needs to rest, and will do so in order to go about the business of taking my small place in the world. But on this night, that did not seem enough.

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A day that follows sleeplessness can become like a conscious afterlife. And on that Monday I felt like a ghost who had returned to dreamily relive a long moment from his past. I left the apartment early, driving to the newspaper offices as if I were settling back into a far gone habit, remembering by way of forgetting, muscle memory assuming the temporarily permanent routines of an ancient existence. I wondered if it might be the kind of feeling that Jane had while painting. It reminded me of how she sometimes described her experience: not always knowing why she made the strokes the way she did, but feeling them come from inside her anyway—like the impulse had been created when she wasn't looking. Which usually just sounded like a lot of artspeak to me, evidence that the creative process was more intuitive than explainable.

Jane's exact words had once been: "Art, I think, is just an expression of habit. Habits of the mind, the things that are so much a part of us we forget they're here." She'd actually spent a whole night coming up with the words. They were part of some introductory remarks for a summer art seminar that she'd agreed to conduct at the public library. I'd liked the way it sounded when she spoke the words aloud among the hushed stacks of books, as if she'd come up with them right on the spot—inspired

to eloquent insights by the presence of so many art-thirsting strangers under one roof. But I told her I'd never really understood it. Still don't, not really. It's the kind of response that must've sounded flippant in the Jane and I days, but now should be read for exactly what it is: an honest concession to life's ultimate unknowingness.

On those rare occasions, however, when I suspected that an experience might provide me a hint of Jane's inner theater, it made me feel closer to her, more involved in who she really was. So while my body enacted its ritual daily motions that morning—finding its hands on the coins I exchanged for a cup of coffee, executing forward steps in a practiced pattern of diagonal across blacktop and right angles over sidewalk—I found myself fantasizing of Jane. The thought of being inside her mind merged salaciously with the desire to be inside her body. It is one of youth's great irrepressible pleasures: the conjuration of sex through the merest implications.

I wasn't much use that morning. The only real work I even attempted was transcribing some notes from an interview with the head of a local planning commission. He'd been trying to build support for a radical plan to rezone large swaths of agricultural lands that bordered the edges of town. It would turn out to be a futile attempt to implement a sound, forward-thinking policy of "managed growth"—something that the locals

believed would merely encourage the unholy destruction of a place they liked perfectly well exactly how it was. They did not seem to understand at the time that such growth was an inevitability, that Chicago would unburden its bulbous population into the adjacent landscapes with such determined force that nothing could stop it. In the modern American world, growth and progress are entities that move ahead with the same kind of nonchalant forward effort as time itself. Just more proof of the forces propelling us inexorably toward an end we are not seeking.

These, however, were not the kind of thoughts I wanted on that particular Monday morning; my mind frequently drifted to the idea of meeting Jane at home over lunch and erasing the doomed aftertaste of my sleepless night with a devious midday romp. My early afternoon schedule of interviews and photo commitments was oddly vacant (for reasons that had slipped my mind on that morning, but would soon make themselves known again) and I would have more than enough time to affect a genuine disengagement from my darkening mood. It seemed like a very good idea.

I called Jane an hour before noon to schedule our tryst, trying to ensure that I wouldn't further submarine my day with the disappointment of expectation arriving at an empty apartment. The initial returns on my

suggestion were not promising—a few comments about "not being available by appointment" and a facetious inquiry regarding whether or not I intended to leave any money on the nightstand. Apparently Jane was not in a good mood either. She complained that the smell had gotten worse and she hated having the windows closed on such a beautiful summer day. She also asked what I had been doing all night, maybe hoping to find something there that might automatically disqualify my idea and remand me to temporary marital-privilege probation. But she found nothing prosecutable about my sleeplessness and agreed that it might be fun to pretend we were honeymooning again.

For all intents and purposes, of course, we were still in our "honeymoon" phase. But one of life's more prominent illusions is that the early years of a marriage resemble in any way what marriage actually becomes, so like most young couples we were given to playing like the whole thing had become old hat already. Thus our intimate encounter over that lunch hour would be perceived as the revival of a memory that we were, in fact, actually at that moment living.

At 11:58 I checked my watch, pushed my notebook to the corner of the desk, tossed an empty styrofoam coffee cup into the trash basket, and then quietly began making my way to a side exit that opened into the alley. The exit was tucked in the back of the paper's layout

room and on my way out I passed Stacia Poncinet, a dangerously attractive and playful recent graduate who had infused our little weekly with a much-needed dose of design sense during the sixth months since she had been hired. She had also in that time become an irresistible distraction for most of the paper's married men (which included every male on the small staff, except for the part-time entertainment reporter whom rumor defined as gay, never confirmed). To my credit, I had stayed clear of any obvious flirtatious overtures toward Stacia, but this only served to create the foundation for a relationship in which I would become her in-house confidante.

Men who have not been blessed with *you want to fuck me even though you hate me* good looks know that the role of confidante is the clearest path to any sexual engagement with illicit overtones. It was a strategy that I no longer employed consciously, but that nonetheless had become in many ways my de facto persona with any attractive woman whom I could not simply choose to avoid. The problem being, of course, that all men in the presence of a beautiful woman want to be liked, can't help but rely on whatever tools they have to achieve this goal, and sometimes end up with more success in the matter than they are aptly prepared to handle. Women have this problem too, but when a man receives the unexpected attentions of a woman he tends to respond with the kind of overly

enthusiastic appetite that quickly short circuits the whole process. Men make poor objects of desire, since their own desire typically outshines the lust of whoever is pining for them.

I never did sleep with Stacia, but she would eventually become an issue anyway. The situation grew into the kind of problem that starts when you're on your way out of the office to rendezvous with your wife and are caught slinking to a side exit, leading to a coy admission of your destination (nothing is more attractive to a young woman than a man's desire for his own wife) and creating the first entry into a relationship that now includes a kind of just between you and me intimacy that can only mean trouble. If I could give just one piece of advice to young men embarking on a lifelong journey of monogamous commitment, it would be to avoid these sorts of interactions as if they were an unstable nuclear device that has just appeared in the middle of your living room. Don't touch it, don't go near it, don't even entertain the thought that you can somehow diffuse it with your meager store of technical skills. If you have to, move out of the house and leave the device behind to annihilate the next owner. The bomb is destined to go off and your goal should be simply to avoid becoming one of its victims. I have been irradiated on more than one occasion in a futile attempt to choose between cutting the green wire or the red one.

Few things are more embarrassing than the blatant self-aware stupidity bred by youth and maleness, nothing more revealing of the silly gene-spurred animals that we are. But at least on that day, those troubles had barely begun.

When I arrived at the doorway of our apartment, vague cross sections of the unexplained offending odor washed by in the air. Some parts of the scent had now become familiar, but it still remained an unidentifiable whole. The door was unlocked and I wondered what the odds were in this world that we might someday become the victim of a violent intruder. Then it struck me as funny that we would choose to barricade ourselves in our homes as we do; I conjured an aerial image of a crowded community, each tiny unit locked steadfastly away from all of the others, all the inhabitants in constant fear of what might be done to us.

Inside Jane was playing a Joni Mitchell album and I could hear her washing the previous night's dishes in the sink.

"Has my home just been invaded by a stranger?" Jane asked, her voice meshing between the sound of running water and Joni's sweet melody.

"I was just thinking that, actually," I said.

Jane turned off the water and appeared from around the corner, drying her hands with a dish towel. "What, are you a stranger?"

"No, I was wondering if that was possible here. An intruder, someone with ill will choosing us as his destination."

Jane contorted her face into an expression of minor disgust. "That's a creepy thought."

"Not like I think it's gonna happen," I realized that this line of discussion was a quick way to drain the optimism from our impending sexual encounter and possibly risked derailing the notion altogether. "I was just, anyway—let's forget I said that. I'm already on to other things." I shuffled over to her, slid my hands along her waist and leaned in to gently kiss the front of her neck.

"Right, other things. Well, my appointment book has 'other things' scheduled for 12:30. You're a little early. Might want to grab a magazine." Although this was a barb intended to remind me of the set-up's tenuous nature, she said it with a kind of giddiness.

"I'll pay extra?" It was a dangerous comment, but I have to admit to somewhat enjoying the imaginary notion of our sex being played out as a transaction. Maybe seeing it as merely an acceptable expression of desire and maybe

recognizing that she was the one who had introduced the conceit, Jane was willing to keep the game going.

"You really want trouble, don't you?"

"Yes?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Aren't those good words sometimes?" She whispered the last part into my ear.

"Yes."

She tucked the dish towel into my front pocket and began to unbuckle my belt. "Yes," she whispered again. I felt her cheek brush alongside my face like a soft green leaf and I took in a deep breath of anticipatory lust. "Maybe we should—"

Jane didn't finish the sentence. Her half-completed thought marked the juncture in that day when sex became an impossibility, a fact that was set into motion at that particular moment by an unexpected knock on our door.

Jane removed her hand from my belt and pulled back to give me a confused look straight in the eye. "Am I not the only one on your schedule this afternoon?"

I wanted to immediately make clear that this was not an interruption that I should be held accountable for, but that too would soon become impossible. I raised my finger to my lips to suggest silence, then whispered, "Don't look at me. Give it a minute, they'll go away."

But they knocked again and Jane shook her head disapprovingly. "No, come on, now I want to know who it is."

"Fine, but I'm getting rid of them," I said.

When I opened the door, however, to find Carl Albright looming ominously outside our entrance—the full girth of his mid-50's former-football-player colossus taking up most of the door frame—a few of my day's fuzzy-minded mysteries quickly started coming into focus. The hole in my afternoon schedule had not, in fact, been a happy coincidence. It was something I'd done specifically to clear space so I could meet with Carl over lunch to discuss the possibility of purchasing my first-ever life insurance policy. It was an appointment I'd made two weeks before—after failing to successfully refuse an invitation to join my editor, Jay, at lunch with some local Chamber of Commerce leaders. Worse than just a dull, overbearing gathering of men whose attitudes and disposition I'd once liked to categorize as pre-Vietnam, it had devolved into a two-drink minimum afternoon campaign to recruit me

into the fold of upstanding community alpha males. It is the kind of community that, in the many years since, I have reluctantly joined, albeit purely for business purposes and done without a hint of the self-importance that even my post-Vietnam colleagues now imbue such matters with. In contemporary parlance, you could say it has merely been a networking decision. But at my lunch with Jay and Carl and all of the other now nameless middle-agers who I believed sought to transform me, I was a hesitant candidate who found a temporary way out of the whole mess by promising to sit down with Carl to determine a sound avenue for securing the future of my family.

Jane hated Carl. Although they'd never officially met, she knew him as the city council member who had recently led a successful effort to deny a permit for a No Nukes rally that a group of local peaceniks had tried scheduling for the Sunday before Memorial Day. Jane had been part of a small but boisterous crowd who protested the decision at the previous month's council meeting and no doubt recognized Carl the moment I opened the door. For his part, I'm sure Carl never had a clue that Jane had been among his detractors. Men like Carl typically see the opposition as a faceless mass of naive insanity and encountering any of them as individuals is antithetic to how they perceive such forces in the world. From the subtle look on Carl's face when his view crossed the

threshold of our door to Jane's presence in the background, I would guess that his first thought upon seeing her was that he wished he was still young enough to be getting some of that for himself. A couple of years after Jane's and my divorce, Carl actually expressed just such a sentiment to me; I was drunk and bitter enough at the time to admit in response that I'd never really liked him and hoped he would someday go fuck himself until he was blue in the face. It was one of the last conversations I had with any of the local pre-Vietnam alpha males before moving permanently out west.

On this day Carl was dressed surprisingly sporty, in nice slacks and a polo shirt instead of the uniform suit and tie I'd usually find him in. Maybe he'd even been golfing that morning.

He greeted me with the convincing grin of an insurance salesman. "Paul!" he bellowed and reached out a course, thick hand that I shook grimly as he moved his glance back to Jane. "So, this is the little lady that you've been hiding from us. Well, we're gonna set her right up for you."

"Are you?" Jane asked in a stern tone that probably caught Carl a little off-guard.

He then leaned over to me in a stagy way that pretended he was making a comment in hidden confidence. "Don't worry, I won't let on that you might be more valuable to her dead than alive."

Carl chuckled and gave me a nudge to imply that this was just jolly, common, life-insurance joshing. He might have even believed (mistakenly) that this was part of his solid technique for making people comfortable with the idea of him selling them something that promised the inevitability one's own death.

"How's that?" Jane asked, now in full stealth combat mode, happy to make me squirm with the thought that she might choose to blow my cover at any whim.

"Uh-oh," Carl said, still smiling stupidly as he tried to find his footing on what he now sensed was unexpectedly rocky terrain. "I think she's onto us." Then he laughed again, hoping something I suppose, although I wasn't sure exactly what.

These days I would do everything I could to put at ease a man like Carl in a spot like that. These days I'm a lot more like Carl than who I was then, and I understand that all he probably wanted was to get in, make the sale and get out. It's obvious to me now that he had no interest really in who we were or what we believed. He didn't want to transform me into anyone. And if he'd known the extent of our differences he probably would've just chosen to go elsewhere with his war stories, football tales and promises of security. He'd simply misinterpreted who I was and I never gave him much reason to think

of me otherwise. In retrospect, I feel a little guilty about the way I condescended to him, but at the moment my main concern was making Jane understand that I hadn't been consorting with the enemy.

In a panic, I offered my opening salvo. "Carl, oh gosh, I was supposed to meet you at my office, wasn't I?" This was a lie. I'd tried convincing him of that originally, but he said he preferred meeting at our place. I thought it was his way of deftly inserting himself into my personal life, thus initiating the first stage of transforming me: colonization. I now assume he merely thought that this was the best environment for closing a sale.

Carl seemed to believe my confusion for a moment, then likely realized he had stumbled near somewhere that might explain the oddness he'd sensed. Being a more generous man than I at the time, he quickly figured to play along.

"Right," he said. "Went by there actually." He winked at me—something I'm sure Jane saw. "Jay thought maybe you had the days mixed up. He suggested it wouldn't hurt to come out here, twist your arm, haul you away for a long lunch." He blazed a smile over my shoulder in Jane's direction. "With your permission, of course."

I didn't turn around to see, but I knew at that point that Jane had fired up her own killer grin.

"I'd love to hear what you've got going on. We can all sit outside on the deck," she said, undoubtedly pleased with this sudden opportunity to wreak unencumbered mischief. But she never got to make her next move.

"Pardon," Carl had stopped listening and moved on to an entirely different moment—one that he immediately weighted with a sober seriousness. "Do you smell that?"

In my minor distress I hadn't noticed how the scent had already poured in from outside and begun to collect around the doorway. Once it came to my attention, I was surprised that Carl hadn't said anything about it straight away. But we were really smelling it now.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "It's awful. Just came out of nowhere yesterday. Don't know what the hell it is."

"Don't know? For heaven sakes, something's dead. Where's it coming from?" Carl said this with absolute authority and then strode into the apartment like an army general. "Is that coming from out back?" He pointed. Jane opened her mouth but Carl started again, "Door back here?"

Suddenly Jane relaxed her pose, easing her shoulders and softening her face as she answered Carl's questions. "We thought something was dead out there. We'd said so. But

we couldn't find anything." She led him to the bedroom in the back and slid open the glass door, allowing the full force of the stench to reel inside.

"Well," I said, "I found a pile of dirt."

"Dirt? Jesus, this isn't dirt." Carl waved his hand in front of his face as he stepped out flush into the sun; Jane and I followed. "Folks, one of your neighbors has up and died. I almost guarantee it. Don't you know the smell of death?" Not waiting for an answer, Carl marched down the stairs.

"You think this is a person, a someone?" I asked, realizing that I hadn't much considered the idea of someone's life being tied to the smell.

Carl was now hollering up from the yard. "Paul, have you got a ladder down here? Somethin' I could get over this fence with?" He was pointing to the seven foot high wood slat fence at the back of the yard, the one that stood adjacent to our mysterious pile.

I was not enamored with the thought of Carl hopping the fence into our neighbors' back lawn. The home behind us belonged to a young couple about Jane's and my age, although they were both already successful professionals and had acquired more of the standard trappings of an adult life. I didn't think they'd have much

cause to be keeping any dead people around. "Carl, maybe you oughta check out that pile back there first. I really think it might just be a cat. Behind the building."

Jane exhaled loudly. "Paul," she began, then waited until my eyes were locked with hers, "just get him the step ladder from the storage, will you?"

"Jane—"

She yelled down into the yard, "We've got a ladder down there. He can get it." Jane turned back over to me and glared. "You invited him."

Without much choice, I reluctantly strode down the stairs and extracted a metal ladder from our storage unit. Carl stood anxiously in the middle of the grass and took the ladder from my hands as soon as I reached him. As he carried it to the edge of the fence I tried to draw his attention to the mud alley where the pile resided.

"Did you check this over here? I think something's buried—" I started to point toward the alley, but when my eyes cleared the corner of the building I noticed that the pile was gone. In its place was a small circle of loosely-packed dirt that sat even with the surface of the ground.

Carl opened the ladder and jammed its legs hard into the grass. "Can you come here and steady

this for me? Who lives back here?" He placed his feet on the first step of the ladder and peered over the fence.

I stood still for a second, mystified by the pile's disappearance, then walked over to Carl and grabbed hold of the ladder. "Umm, Kendall, Mike and Lisa. He's a lawyer in the city. They're young."

"Hmm. Don't know 'em," Carl took two more steps up the ladder.

"Be careful!" Jane yelled, leaning against the deck railing above. "Should I call someone?"

Carl turned at the waist and looked up at Jane, "Probably. Let me get over here first. But I'm afraid we've got something bad." He turned back to face the Kendalls' yard, finished ascending the ladder and then straddled the wooden boards.

As Carl awkwardly tried to manage his decent beyond my view on the other side of the fence, I imagined him for the first time as a young hulking man, dressed in fatigues, a rifle and ammunition strapped to his torso, heaving himself over a stone wall somewhere in the heart of 1940's France. Then I heard a thud in the hidden grass.

"Goddamnit!" It was Carl on the other side of the fence.

"You okay?" I asked, the sight of young Carl now replaced with the image of old Carl crumpled in a heap above a twisted ankle.

"Fine," I heard him stand and then the wood creak as he leaned into the fence. "I'm fine. There any kids over here?"

"No, just Mike and Lisa," I said as I took a few steps up the ladder and looked over into their yard.

"Paul," Jane was yelling again from above. "Paul, why don't you just stay over here."

Despite my increasing curiosity, I had no intention of involving myself in what I believed was a blatant and unwarranted invasion of our neighbors' privacy. I simply wanted a better view. "Don't worry. I'm just checking on Carl."

Carl looked up at me dismissively, "I'm fine." He took in a deep breath through his nose, then winced. "Oh Lord, somebody's dead here. You say they're young?"

For the first time since encountering the stench, it began to mean something to me, to take on a persona beyond its ambiguous component parts. I had an impulse to vomit, but barely kept it at bay. "Our age," I said, "mine."

Carl shook his head, then pulled out a handkerchief to cover his mouth and nose. "Just

stay there," he said as he began stepping slowly toward the French doors that I knew led into Mike and Lisa's kitchen.

Sometimes at night during the months after we'd first moved in and before I'd quit smoking, I'd stand out on our deck having a cigarette, peering out over the fence. And sometimes when their lights were on in the kitchen I could see through their windows and the glass panes of the French doors and watch them go about some mundane business together. I have always been a shameless peeping tom and take great pleasure in the fascination that other people's lives seem to engender. I find, however, that sexual acts and other more obvious voyeuristic fare are far less compelling than your average forgettable daily behavior. I believe that watching someone clean their kitchen can be far more revealing than any moment of ecstasy.

Sometimes I would watch one of them pull the trash basket from under the sink, yank out the bag, open the drawer beside the cutting board to grab a twist-tie, fasten the bag at the top, then drag it out those French doors and drop it into the garbage can behind the garage.

Sometimes I would see her interrupt him making a sandwich, sit him down at the counter, then finish making the sandwich for him. It seemed to be a little game they played.

And I must confess to often experiencing that predictable *grass is always greener* longing when

peering through those windows across the fence. Although I could not explain exactly why, except to say that maybe because pain and suffering usually develop as internal, solitary burdens, we are more likely to perceive them in ourselves than others.

When Carl pulled open the unlocked French doors, the force of the smell made him draw his head back. He stepped forward and opened the door to a room beside the kitchen, a place that I had never seen inside and never would.

Carl's voice was a little muffled and distant, but its gravity could still be easily sensed. "No. Oh, dear Lord. Oh Jesus." He turned around and slowly surveyed the kitchen, his hand still holding the handkerchief in front of his mouth. "Paul. Paul, tell your wife to call the police. He's really done it over here."

"What's he saying?" Jane hollered. "What's wrong over there?"

I started moving to the top of the ladder, and didn't turn to face Jane. "Call the police. Carl said you should call the police."

"Paul!" Carl had stepped back outside and stood in front of the open French doors. "Just stay there! Cops aren't gonna want anybody else over here. You should wait for them in the street."

"What's over there? Who is it?" I asked, hoping the answers might be something other than the obvious.

"It's both of them Paul. Looks like he's done it to them both. This was a sick man over here, sick man. Poor woman."

I turned around and looked up at the deck, but Jane had already gone inside. I directed an empty stare to our moundless mud alley.

"Paul," Carl barked, "don't make this out to be more than it is. Man's killed his wife. A coward. Then he finished things up like one. But you don't need to make this look too tawdry in the paper, that wouldn't serve anything."

I hadn't, in fact, even thought of it as news—maybe proof that I wasn't born much of a reporter. But there was no way I would be the one to write about it, and in the end I never even read the story we printed.

"You listening? You make sure this gets done with some tact." Carl shook his head. "These things just happen. That's the world these days. Damned inferno."

~

I don't know how it happens that a seemingly regular man chooses to murder his wife and

himself. I didn't know much about Mike before their deaths and nothing that was discovered through investigating the matter seemed to suggest he would one day make such a decision. By all appearances, including the ones I glimpsed secretly through their windows, he and Lisa were an unimpressively normal and content couple. For a long while I held an unspoken belief that the violence had actually been perpetrated by someone else, a stranger maybe, and that they'd covered it up by arranging the scene like a murder-suicide. I'd even wondered if our phantom pile had temporarily stored hidden evidence, which didn't make much sense but nonetheless conjured images of that same violent intruder pilfering the fresh mound in our dark yard as I sat awake sleepless in the middle of the night. But I certainly didn't share any of these thoughts with Jane, fearing she might never shake the idea (however implausible) that we could just as easily have been the victims of my imaginary criminal.

What I should have feared is another thought that we never shared: how close were we to becoming those same doomed neighbors? In the years after our horrific discovery, which would become the years before our divorce, it seemed that Jane and I lived in utter terror of asking the question aloud, as if offering the idea out into the spoken world would give it life or somehow introduce it into the dangerous

universe of the possible. I think the question's silent weight in a way disfigured us, shaped us each into a person who might be hiding someone else beneath their skin. I do know that there is a long list of more concrete causes for the dissolution of our life together, but my regret is large enough to fill any number of locations in my past.

And this regret comes quite simply from the fact that I desperately wish I'd never lost Jane. It is a sorrow that was only amplified by some of the events that followed our divorce. First, Jane remarried—rather quickly—to a man whom I barely knew, and did not ever seek to learn much about. Then, not more than a few years after remarrying, Jane died. It was a simple one-car accident that ended in a steep ditch. She was alone. She may have fallen asleep, no one knows. In the months after her death, I could not contain my grief. I felt immeasurable guilt and loss over not having spent the last years of her life with her. I was haunted by scenes I pictured of Jane in some foreign kitchen, washing dishes without me, maybe going her entire night without even a thought of me crossing her mind. I imagined a thousand magical ways to return to my past and participate again in any moment that I had been in her presence. And I could not, of course, help but think about how she might still be alive if we had somehow salvaged our life together. Eventually, however, I moved out west, let these

thoughts go, and replaced them with a lesser sadness—one that laments grief's absence, because it was the final connective tissue between you and what was lost.

Although I have never remarried, my existence now is not a morbid or lonely one. I have had a few other women pass intimately through my life and there are many people whom I care deeply about, but I've chosen to keep my time with Jane a secret from them all. Since moving west, I have never told anyone about those couple of days or their disturbing conclusion. That former man is now who hides beneath my skin. I like to think of those memories as my Alzheimer days. When my mother was near death with Alzheimer's, she seemed to exist exclusively in a world from her far gone past. Who she saw us as, the places she described, even the smells she claimed to notice all unwound out of memories that she had stored away while still a young woman. I would often listen to her recite the same tales over and again—as if I were a stranger each time—nostalgic amber recollections of her early marriage and what it was to fall in love.

My hope is that my faulty genes will someday do me that same favor. Someday I hope to be a weak-legged old man, propped in a comfortable chair, hallucinating scenes from a century that has since faded darkly away. I'm in no particular hurry to arrive there, but if I'm lucky enough to avoid an unexpected end and wander into the luxury of a natural demise, I hope such a gift awaits me. I want perplexed nurses and confused old friends listening as I paint the sight of Jane in bed asleep beside me, my young self sitting up switching channels by hand, watching late-night reruns of long gone shows. I want them to wonder if they should be smelling something too. I hope there is utter bewilderment over where I might be, what life I could possibly be recounting. I want to have no idea that this world is only an illusion. ~

ECHOES FROM SOME FAR OFF WAKE

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