

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 light 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.
