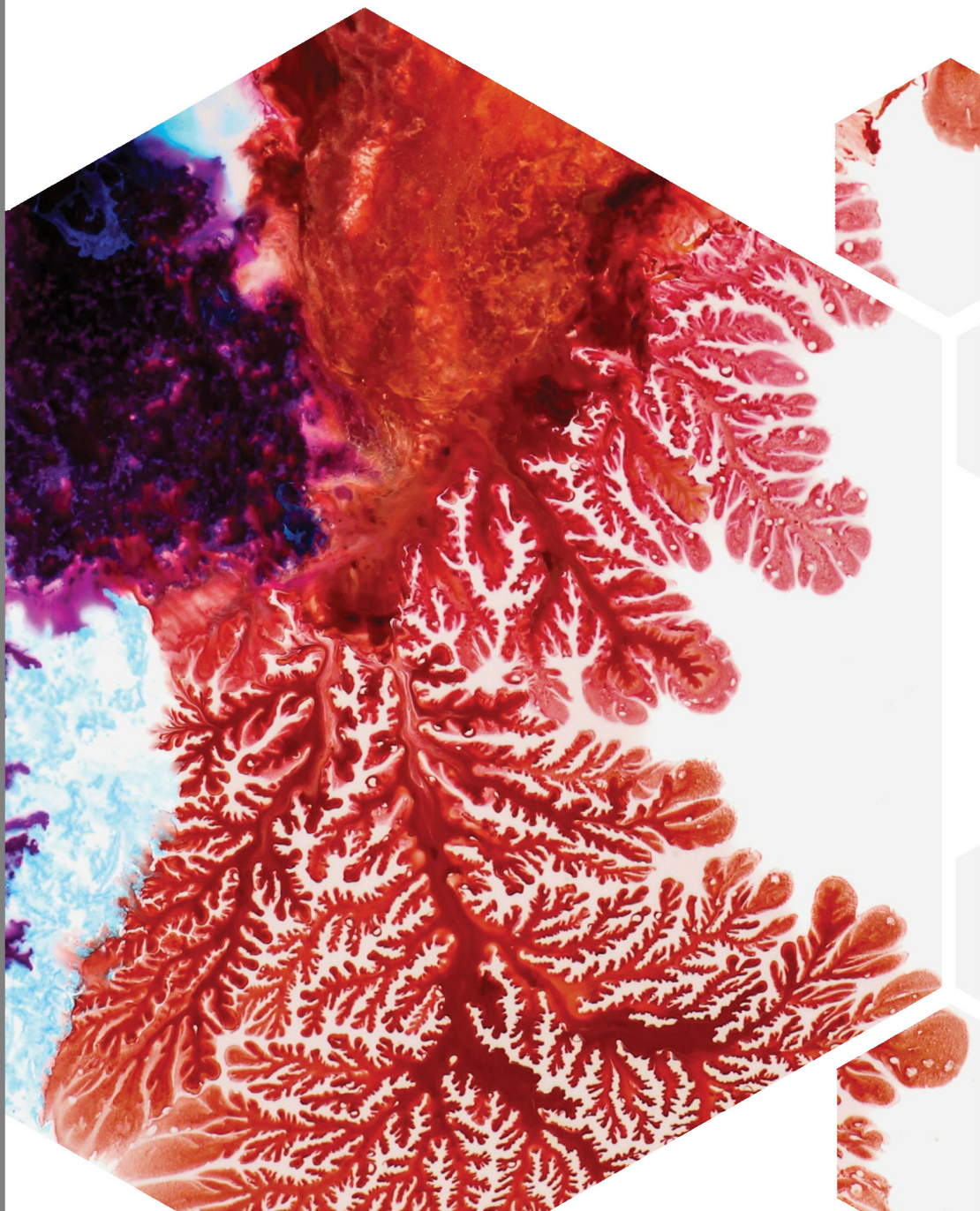


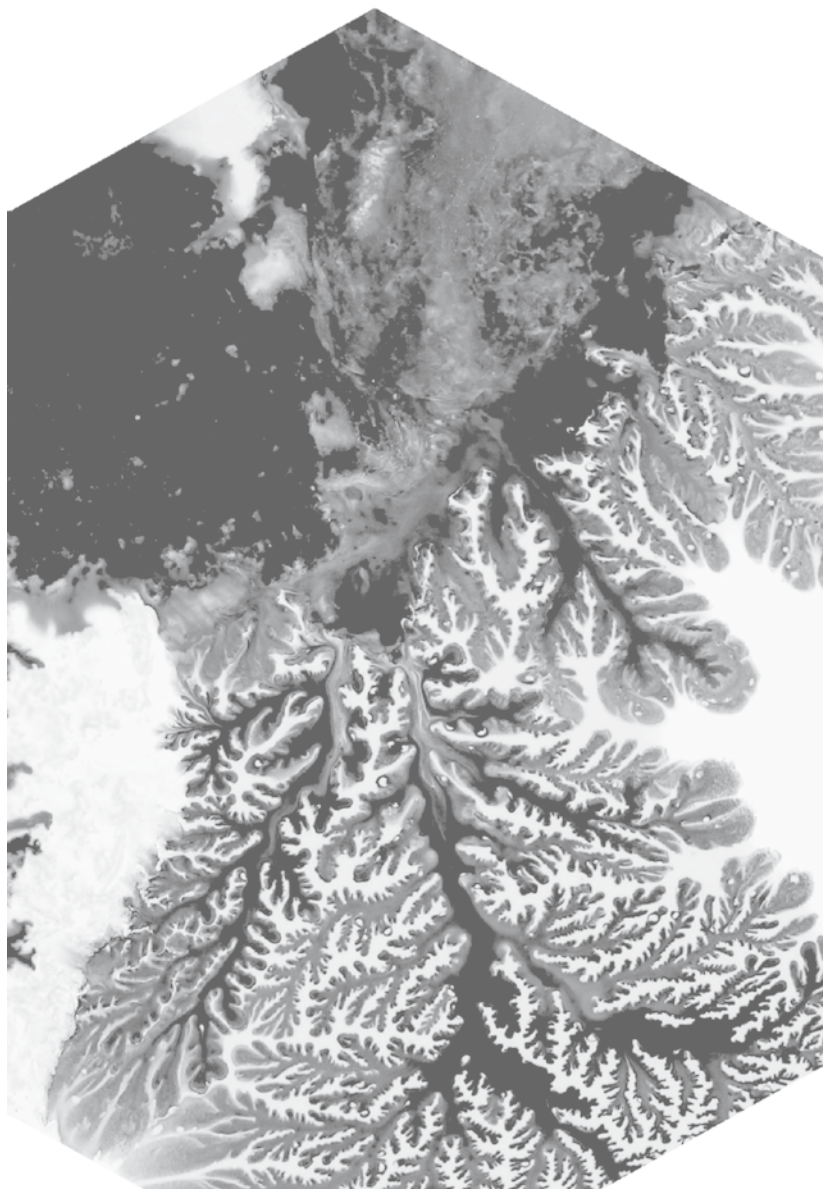
SIXFOLD

FICTION WINTER 2023



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George Vendura

Water Uphill

I'm just a garbage man, but God gave me the eye. Sometimes I pick up broken things, and I fix them. When I come around the corner and see a pile of trash by the street, I'm on cloud nine. I ease Bernice to the curb and throw most of the stuff into her back compartment and pull the lever. Her compressor whines. But every once in awhile, there's something that makes my heart go pitter patter. I gently place it beside me in the cab along with the day's other treasures.

It ain't that bad a job. The pay's okay. It's got its benefits. I get to move my arms and legs with nobody in a suit and tie looking over my shoulder. Good outdoor work—not cooped up in a tiny room like Herman, my supervisor. I can smell the fresh air, at least when I'm upwind of Bernice, and I get to drive out of the city to the dump two or three times a day.

It's amazing what people throw away. So many things, just a little damaged. A touch of glue, a dab of paint, another hinge, and they're as good as new. I can't count how many bicycles I've placed in the cab over the years. Maybe on Pine Street I might find just a frame. Or the wheel's folded in half because some goofy kid tried to ride three friends on it all at once. A bent wheel's no problem. I already have four spares hanging in the garage that might just fit. Even if they don't, I'll find the right one by the curb in a day or two.

My nieces, my nephews, the neighborhood kids . . . they all ride Caruso specials. I also bring 'em to Father Porcelli who knows other families that need them. A little buffing with some steel wool to get the specks of rust off the chrome, and they're making someone happy again.

Every day, more prizes. I give them all away. I mean, how many birdhouses does a guy my age need? Not just kids' stuff. The chandelier that's in Mrs. Sabatini's dining room that needed a few wires . . . Mrs. Mancuso's sewing machine, oil and a belt . . . Mr. Bellomo's lawn mower, a spark plug and an air filter . . . even the accordion after I removed the dust balls that's now in the old timers' home on Steeple Street.

There was the boy without a father two houses down from mine who was going a little south—a loose nut, a wobbly wheel. It happens to all of us. One day I stopped by with a basketball hoop I'd picked up on Foster Road. I tried to talk to him as I set it up in his driveway. He didn't answer, but he sort of hung around behind my left shoulder as I worked. I just kept talking away while I tightened the bolts as if I hadn't noticed. The next week I showed up with a basketball, almost brand new, and then a month later with a nice fiberglass backstop. He started coming around. Before I knew it I was tousling his hair and giving him noogies whenever he missed a shot.

"Mr. Caruso," he said to me a few years later when he finally finished college. "I want you to be the best man at my wedding."

I choked up. A big palooka like me, a best man, even though I'm old enough to be his father.

Then there was the evening little Emily knocked on my door with tears running down her cheeks. I looked into her cupped hands. My mouth dropped open. A baby robin, a little thing with a hanging wing.

"*Momma mia*," I said to myself, "I can't fix no robin!"

"Please," Emily begged with pleading eyes.

A broken doll, that's no big deal. But a living being, full of fear, is another matter.

I plopped Emily on the stool by my workbench and brushed away her tears with the clean corner of my shop rag. I told her that I'd try and sent her away with an uncertain smile on her tiny face.

Me and the robin, we had a staring contest. For a long time I just sat there, all 250 pounds of me, while this tiny creature, less than an ounce, glared back from the middle of the table, feathers on one side drooping, full of its own doubt and pain.

I spent half the night digging in the garden looking for worms with a flashlight hanging from my mouth. No luck.

For hours more I played with a razor blade, toothpicks, and Popsicle sticks, all the while making what I thought were adult robin noises. By morning he was all splinted up. Emily was delighted.

"Why the light bulb?" she said, peering into the shoebox and stroking the little head with a finger.

“To keep him warm.”

“What’s that for?” she asked, pointing to the spaghetti soaking in the glass of warm water. The stuff was a little yellow from the crushed vitamin pill I mixed in.

“He thinks it’s worms,” I answered. “Watch.”

I held a wet noodle above his beak, and the little fella opened wide for his new mudder. Emily clapped her hands and laughed

We named the little bugger Henry. I sent him home with her. He still lives there without a cage.

Yeah, yeah, I know. Some people say that because I’ve been by myself all these years that I’m just a lonely guy with a garage full of junk. But it ain’t so bad. I have my bottle of Elmer’s glue, and my clamps, and my jars of paint. How can I be lonely? I just keep busy. The other drivers, every night the same. A six pack of Miller and the sports channel. Me? Sometimes in the middle of the night while I’m working on something really delicate—a music box with a broken ballerina—I think about Colleen and how it didn’t work out, but what’s past is past.

Now the things crowding my workshop are my friends. God gave me the eye, and I can see when something that no one wants any more still has a lot of good. Each one has a soul. It ain’t junk—at least not after I’m through. All that it may need is a gentle touch, some patience

An old rocker might sit on the table for two or three months. You just look at it for a long time not knowing how to start. At first, you’re tempted to quickly bang in a nail here and there. A schlock job.

Time . . . time I’ve learned that you just have to give it time. You study it. You stroke it. You talk to it. You reassure it. You wait. And eventually it talks to you—maybe in a whisper or whimper at first, about where it hurts, what it needs to be whole again. You see how it’s really made, and you do it right—carefully drilled slots, wooden dowels You caress it some more. In the end you’ve got something good—better than it’s ever been. Alive again. Something you love and that loves you back.

Sure, I’m just a garbage man. To the pencil pushers in city

hall, I'm at the bottom of the heap. That's why my salary's not as good as the town's electricians, the plumbers, or even the pothole fillers. But I can't believe how lucky I am. The big shots on the mayor's floor, they get company cars. But a Cadillac weighs only 5,000 pounds. Me? They gave me Bernice, fifteen tons empty. I named her after Bernicia, my grandmother from Palermo, who was also big. Best of all, they actually pay me to load the front of her with things that are still beautiful. Some days the cab is so full I drive home half leaning out the window.

No ringing phones. No one running up to me with piles of papers making crazy changes. And as I make my rounds every day, I get to watch. I have time to think.

Sometimes, something that's real good isn't by the curb yet. I wait. I just wait. The statue of the angel on the front lawn of the house on Astoria Boulevard—so lovely. For years I slowed down and looked in her direction every time I drove by. Eventually I could see the chip on her elbow all the way from the road.

I waited. I waited some more. Sure enough, one day as I turned the corner, my heart did its little pitter patter. There she was, finally, leaning against the can. By this time the left wing was busted, and her curls had all worn away. But in my mind's eye I could see her when she was new, fresh, and full of joy. I slipped my arms under her real careful—so as not to hurt her any more. As I picked her up and cradled her against me, her head brushed against my cheek, and I had to catch my breath. As I gently placed her in the passenger seat, I resisted the temptation to kiss her.

Back behind the wheel, I put Bernice into gear and eased down on the accelerator. At every red light I looked over at her, and my chest swelled to think that she was finally mine.

As soon as I got home I placed her on the work table. For a long time I just looked at her. I then reached for my putty knife. I filled the bigger holes with cement. Next came the layer of wet plaster. Ever so tenderly I swirled my fingertip around her head and then down to her shoulders, and her hair was curly again. I touched the corners of her lips, and she began to smile. I worked on the missing wing for hours—Michaelangelo and the Angel Gabriel. I textured each and

every feather and carefully tapered the edges. As I caressed her slender legs I could feel my spirit enter hers. Before I knew it, she was graceful and vibrant again. She looked like she could fly. Better yet, she looked like she wanted to fly. I nestled her in the garden under the maple tree. Now, every time I step outside she makes me feel light and young.

Sometimes at night when I can't sleep I open the mangled folder by the bed with the scraps of paper. My poems. Some from a while ago, others more recent but still not right. But they're mine. Here and there I touch up a line or two. As I turn the pages, I find the last Christmas card my sister Angela sent five years ago. I sigh. I look back up at the ceiling. It's been such a long time since I've seen her and her children even though they live only a few miles away. I try not to think about it. Instead, I just shuffle into the garage. I take out a needle and some thread, my sandpaper, a jar of red paint. A ripped teddy bear and a toy soldier with a dented drum are waiting for me.

I do okay. Besides my broken friends on the workbench, my customers are my family. They're part of mine even though I'm not part of theirs. Most smile and wave. Once in a while someone says a couple of words about the weather. Of course there are a few that are not so nice—the ones that treat you as if . . . well, like you're a garbage man.

At Christmas there are gifts of all types—lots of coffee mugs, a case of beer, a bottle of chianti, an envelope with a few bucks. Sometimes they come out to meet me. Other times something's just left on top of the garbage can without even a note. All well and good. All very appreciated.

It's nice how you get to know your customers over time. You can tell a lot about them from reading their garbage. Every address is a book. Years are like chapters. Each pickup's a page. The paragraphs are what people throw out. The baby clothes, the first highchair, the sandbox, the kiddy swing, larger and larger shoes—first sneakers, later, high heels. One day there's a little girl in pig tails with a jump rope. Before you know it you turn the corner and she's been transformed into a young woman getting into a limo in a bridal gown.

Funny. The same people who pull down their curtains and

wouldn't dare allow their own priest through the front door think nothing about the confessions in their trash cans. You see what they wear, what they eat, how they sleep. Secrets? You don't have to sneak up to the house and peek into their bedroom windows. You can see the ripped nighties, the girlie magazines. If you're a good garbage man you turn your eyes away.

You learn what they value and don't value. You see their yesterday's. What they once held precious—their old books, faded uniforms, torn photo albums . . . broken dreams that they've finally given up on. You notice if they've been fixed before. And you can tell by the nature of the repair whether they were treated with love and respect—the number of patches, the quality of the paint, how carefully it was applied. You discover so much by how their pasts are discarded. Whether the item is placed reverently by the curb as if saying goodbye to a dear friend, so that it now looks like a dignified old man waiting for a bus—or crushed inside with the potato peels.

You peer into their tomorrows. The boxes from their new stuff proclaim their future hopes—the workout equipment, the golf clubs, the computer, the new TV.

Open or closed? Some pack their empty beer cans in cases, piled high like trophies. Supermarket brand or hoity-toity? Others squirrel their booze bottles in ten layers of plastic. It's hard to fool a garbage man. You can hear them rattling around when you swing the load into Bernice's bin.

Even the condition of their garbage cans—how often they've been replaced, how close to the curb, how packed or empty. Whether the contents are neat or sloppy, whether they're separated out, wrapped in newspaper, tied up with cord, or sandwiched between cardboard.

You know if your customers are rich or poor, trying to save a dime or blowing the bucks like they've just won the sweepstakes. Whether they're living high on the hog on king crab legs or just squeaking by on macaroni and cheese.

I feel for each and every one. Little Billy on Wilson Street with the banged-up head after that football game; Ed, the fireman, who broke both legs and was out of work for a year; crazy Mrs. Kelly on Chamber Street whose cat always gets

stuck up the tree. I still hurt for some of them—the couple on Blanchard who never get along.

Other memories make me smile. The lovely lady, the one I've seen in passing for so many years on Buttonwood Drive—so kind. The one who always keeps to herself. More often than not, she'd be walking slowly beside her mother, helping her along, one hesitant step after the other. Other times she'd be serving the older woman on the porch swing who'd have a hand-knitted Afghan over her knees. They'd be on opposite sides of a table, teacups in hand, sipping delicately. So formal, so polite, like from days gone by when women still wore white gloves to church on Sunday.

One August day it was so hot that I was driving with my head outside the window just so I could breathe. Even then the air hitting my face felt like I had just opened an oven. My clothes were sticking to me. Bernice, she smelled especially bad. I turned the corner. There she was standing by the curb in the God-awful heat just waiting with a pitcher of ice water and a glass on a metal tray. So nice. So very much appreciated. I stepped down, all sweaty, and pulled off my cap.

“Please take the entire pitcher with you,” she said in a quiet voice. When she spoke she enunciated her words ever so carefully like a grade school teacher afraid to smile. “You may return it some other time.”

That night I couldn't sleep. Even my poems didn't help. I lay in my bed in the dark, looking up at the ceiling, thinking. Surely, just another kind person on a route with a lot of other nice people. Besides, she wasn't exactly young. I imagined her friends all getting married 20 years earlier and moving on while she chose to stay home to take care of her mother.

I was a little nervous the next week as I rang the bell. No answer.

I left a note with the empty container. “*Grazie*. Thank you.”

Afterwards as I made my rounds of the neighborhood it was not possible to push her out of my mind. As I turned onto Buttonwood there she'd be again—her usual routine, walking alongside her dear mother, such a slow pace, her hand gently under the old woman's elbow. So simple. No makeup.

An unkind person might say plain. But I couldn't help but take notice—such a lovely thing, and at the same time so delicate, like Grandma's espresso cups from the old country that Angela got when Momma died. That's okay. Angela can use them. She always has a house full of company, although I haven't visited in years. Besides, what does a big dummy like me surrounded by empty pizza boxes need with espresso cups? I'm not exactly the kind of guy who eats with a napkin on his lap. I wonder if the lovely lady would disapprove.

Over time there were other hot spells, and again she'd be standing at the curb. Not every scorcher, but often enough. One day ice water; on another a Coke. Sometimes a paper plate with two cookies. Just being nice, that's all.

In time her mother grew more stooped, more infirm, and it took them over an hour to inch around the block. I know because I do one side of the street for several miles before looping back later for the other side.

The summers went by. The mother eventually had a cane, then a walker. I kept watching. I'd catch myself stretching my neck as I turned onto Buttonwood Road. A moment of joy! At the same time, a stab of pain. Eventually the mother could no longer stand. She'd be slumped in a wheelchair, too weak to hold up her head. I'd click my tongue. It was just a matter of time. Every few feet the lovely lady would stop to tuck the blanket back up under the old woman's chin. She was trying so hard to be brave, but then each time I saw her, just like her mother, she'd seem a little more lost, a little more tattered.

"It's okay, lovely lady," I heard myself praying. I'd look at her forlorn figure in the neat but drab clothes in the side mirror as I drove past. I'd make the sign of the cross. It was all I could do.

For a while a Ford began to appear in the driveway. I actually saw the fella once or twice. Seemed like a regular guy—not too much hair.

She started dressing differently—pretty outfits with a bit of a waist. She even applied some color to her cheeks. Not a lot, but enough to notice. She looked nice. I was happy for her. Why not?

I noticed the empty cans of diet drinks, the cartons from

the gym equipment, the cosmetic wrappers. Then one day the shiny Ford was gone and the empty potato chip bags reappeared. A month later a stack of glamour magazines was piled alongside the cans.

Later that night I lay sleepless in bed staring up at the ceiling. Colleen Sullivan. She was very, very beautiful. I so much wanted to take her to the freshman dance. How she lit up when I asked her, but her Irish parents said no. They didn't like someone whose grandparents were born in Sicily.

My thoughts drifted back to the lovely lady. Maybe, just maybe, I began to think. But then I snorted. I forced the silly thoughts from my head. I remembered from catechism, *thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife*. Okay, so the lovely lady wasn't married, but nevertheless I felt dirty. It's just not good to want something too much—to covet things that were never meant for me, that's all.

But she was still so beautiful to me in her dreary clothes, even when she'd be on her hands and knees in the garden covered with dirt.

I watched. I waited. I waited.

There was a period when I didn't see her and the elderly woman. Not a few weeks. More like six months. Then one day as I rounded the corner there were boxes and boxes stacked ever so neatly by the curb. The top one was open. I looked inside. Old-lady clothes.

I knew.

I took off my cap, held it to my chest, and raised my hand to knock on the door. But then I didn't. I couldn't. What was I doing here? What's a jerk like me got to say?

I took a clean scrap of paper from the garbage and did my best. It wasn't my greatest poem. Very short. But it was from my heart. I signed at the bottom. Under my name I added, "P.S. I said a Hail Mary for your mother." That's all. I squeezed it into the crack of the door.

Afterward as I drove along, I again wondered why God makes things to break and people to suffer. Why do all His creations start off so fresh and new only to get old and tired? How terrible that everything and everyone gets all chipped and bent until one day you find yourself standing by the curb.

In the meantime, before you wind up in the back of the truck for that final trip to the dump, you reach out with trembling fingers and try to gather up a little joy.

I heard this professor on Bernice's radio once explain how everything goes downhill. Like water. Mountains turn into dust. Nothing can ever get better by itself.

Water, mountains, even people, the radio professor said. You start out like a shiny bicycle—bright, cheerful, happy to be alive. Then after a month or a year, a single speck of rust appears on the chain, perhaps on the handle bars The bike that only yesterday was spanking new gets grease on the spokes and hits some bumps in the road. Can't do anything about it. That's the way it is. Someday even the sun will go out. That's what he said.

I thought about it as I drove along. What then? Maybe there's a big garbage man in the sky who gently removes the darkened stars and takes them to His workbench. The next day He plugs them back in, and they shine again, good as new. Or does He just toss them into something like what the radio professor called a black hole and start the compressor?

As I considered it all, I got sadder and sadder. I tried to snap out of it, but I just couldn't shake off the gloom. I wanted to push it all out of my mind. I'm just a garbage man. I don't get paid to think. The city tells me to toss the stuff into the back of the truck.

I happened to spot a table by the curb just ahead—not brand new, but decent. One of the legs was a little loose, that's all. But after listening to that radio show, what's the use? After all, this man's a professor. He knows what he's talking about.

I reached for the table. It was all in my hands now. The cab or the bin? I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes as I shoved the table up Bernice's backside and pulled the lever. A few hours later at the dump I lingered. I just couldn't help it. I watched as the dozer pushed some dirt over what was left of it. I wanted to cry.

For a long time my heart felt heavy every time I drove along Buttonwood. I slowed down as usual, but the curtains were now always drawn. The flower beds were choked with weeds. The paint was peeling off the porch swing. I wanted to

go up to the door, but I didn't. What could a big dummy like me possibly say?

Then one day, again, it was ghastly hot. My clothes were drenched. As I turned the corner my heart skipped a beat and did its little pitter patter. There she was, standing by the garbage cans, tray in her hands, swaying unsteadily, the water in the pitcher shaking. My eyes went up and down. My lovely, lovely lady . . . so much thinner, so shattered. Her forehead was creased. Her eyes were weary, sunken.

I took off my cap and stepped out of the truck. She said nothing. She bit her lip as she just stood there like a statue, stiff, with eyes cast down as she tried to fight back the tears.

Ever so gently I reached for the tray, but she held it so tightly that I had to tug a bit to get it away. I placed it on the nearest can. Even then her hands remained extended—empty, so empty, as if she didn't know what to do with them. I searched for words. How I wish I had finished high school. Maybe I'd have learned not to mumble when I try to speak.

Everyone's been kicked in the teeth. Like the day I showed one of my poems to Angela, and she just laughed. I keep telling myself that it was such a long, long time ago. A human being is no different from a bicycle. It may have a scratch or two or a bent spoke, but I can see into its splintered soul, even if everyone else has given up on it. Even if it's given up on itself. Alone, all alone by the curb, it's tired, and it's scared. It's as if it wants to stop living. As if it can't take another breath. It happens to both bicycles and people.

But deep down it's still so very, very beautiful. I know. I can see. And even though I'm not sure at first exactly how I'm going to fix it, something inside tells me that I surely can and will. I reverse time. I carry the water back up the hill.

In the end a tattered heart becomes whole again, and suddenly there's joy. Not only joy for the thing saved. Double joy. There's my joy too. I bring it back to life and get it to smile in the sun again. I share a gift with the Creator.

Before I knew what I was doing I lowered an arm and slipped it under the lovely lady. I picked her up ever so gently so as to not hurt her any more. She didn't resist. As I cradled her against me her hair brushed across my cheek, and I had to catch my breath. Slowly, ever so carefully, I placed her in

the passenger seat.

Back behind the wheel, I put Bernice into gear and eased down on the accelerator. At every red light I looked over at her and felt my chest swell.

Time. Time. It would take a little time, but I knew I could do it. All that was needed was a gentle touch, a little patience. In its place there would be something good—better than its ever been. Something you love and that loves you back.

I'm just a garbage man, but God gave me the eye. Sometimes I pick up broken things, and I fix them.

Stephen Parrish

Bury Me Standing

Sister Mary Lorenzo didn't ask the social worker about my background, whether my parents had been struck by lightning or had merely left me on a doorstep, whether I was a scholar, an athlete, or a bedwetter. She only measured my height with a yardstick. A boy's height was proportional to the effort it would take to subdue him, and thus defined him.

The schoolhouse was a Victorian mansion divided into classrooms by walls too thin to hinder whispers. Together with a whitewashed rectangular barracks, it stood in the center of a well-groomed lawn dotted with oaks and mulberries. But the serenity was a deception. A chain-link fence, angled sharply inward at the top, encircled the grounds. And across the street, through a padlocked gate, was a church we attended every morning before school.

The fence, we were convinced, was electrified.

Saturday afternoons we shined our shoes and lined up in the day room. The couples, mostly young, wearing expensive wrist watches, arrived in four-door cars and entered the room holding hands. They passed before each boy in turn and engaged in small talk. If you had a name they could pronounce, and no visible deformities, you went to a foster home. I always said I had no name, or none that I could recall, and they frowned and moved on.

Evenings we spent on "facility beautification." After mopping the barracks floor we took the mops outside and leaned them against a wall, upended and evenly spaced, like dirty-blond stick mannequins. I imagined they were dance hall girls taking a break, chatting and smoking cigarettes.

He was bald but for a few thin strands of hair, like the husk of a coconut. His skin was smooth, pink, and puffy. Altogether his head resembled that of a newborn baby. But in his case the baldness had resulted from a loss of hair, rather than gave promise of hair to come, and the empty gums from a loss of teeth. The aging process appeared to be acting in

reverse, returning the old man to his infancy by erasing the tracks of time.

He walked down the line of boys like a general inspecting the troops. It was obvious straight away he was different; he asked no names.

“How about you, boy?” he said to the one standing next to me. “Staying out of mischief?”

“Yep.”

“Yes *sir*,” Sister Mary Lorenzo corrected him.

“Yes *sir*.”

His eyelids lowered unevenly, as though he was peeking at the world from behind tiny curtains.

“Any good at climbing trees?” he asked the boy.

“Yes *sir*.”

“Ever fall out of one?”

“Never!”

“Hmm.”

He stopped in front of me. “Too little,” he said, and moved on.

“And what’s wrong with you?” he asked my neighbor, Billy, who was clubfooted. “You look like you’ve fallen out of a tree or two yourself.”

Lorenzo spoke in the old man’s ear: “Billy’s . . . not been well.”

“I once planted a tree,” I volunteered.

“Speak when you’re spoken to,” Lorenzo ordered.

The man came back, stood in front of me, and peered into my eyes. They say the eyes are windows to the soul, and I gathered he was inspecting mine. His eyes, in as much as I could see behind the curtains, were dark mirrors.

Lorenzo muttered, “This one’s been something of a problem.”

“Did it live?” he said to me.

“No *sir*.”

“Ah. Where did you plant it?”

“In the driveway.”

He turned to the nun and pointed down the line. “Is this—all you have?”

“It more’n likely would’ve lived,” I said, “if my father didn’t run over it with his car.”

They went into the office while we waited. His voice rose several times. “Too old? *Too old?*” He left by himself, but the next morning the principal, Sister Mary Delaney, called me in. I figured the old man had selected me because I’d impressed him with my tree planting, on account of this thing he had for trees.

“You’ve been using Billy’s bedpan,” the principal said.

“No Sister.”

She massaged her temples. “*You’ve been using Billy’s bedpan.*”

“Yes Sister.”

“Why?”

“Well, Sister. I figured if I used mine I would have to empty it, and since Billy has to do that anyway I figured I would just use his, and it wouldn’t make any difference to Billy, Sister.”

She stared off at a faraway place. “Do you know what happens to boys like you? Do you know where they go? Do you have any idea? I don’t think you do.”

I did. But at least down there you knew where you stood. It was tales of Heaven that scared the hell out of me.

She said, “No, I don’t think you do. You’ll never be adopted by anyone. You’ll never leave this orphanage.”

That night I took a can of gasoline from the groundskeeper’s tool shed and emptied it over my sheets. When I struck a match, the flames whooshed up and lapped the ceiling. It was glorious. Screaming boys scattered in all directions. I watched my reflection in the grated window as it was engulfed by the blue-tipped fire.

The old man’s house was three blocks from the college campus. The neighborhood was planted generously with sugar maples, whose seed is a pod with a feathery appendage that spins like a rotary blade as it falls, slowing its descent to benefit from wind dispersal. The pod spins stubbornly to stay aloft, to avoid an end.

The old man and I made the most of our summer together. I think he sensed it would be his last. Every day, weather permitting, we walked down to a nearby creek to skip rocks. He never got the hang of it. He chose his stones poorly, and when they deflected from the surface, if they did at all, they

immediately tilted over to one side and knifed the water. You have to choose rocks that are flat, but not too thin. I showed him how to do it. My stones bounced many times against the shallow current, then skimmed across the surface until they spun slowly down and settled on the bottom.

He liked to kneel in the grassy, untilled fields next to the creek and look for beetles. When he found them, after carefully parting and combing the grass, he lifted them gently on his finger and said, “So delicate, so beautiful.” He loved spiders. Their poison-tipped fangs made them kings of their weedy jungles. You couldn’t find a better example, he said, of a creature that had mastered its niche and guaranteed as best it could the future of its kind.

On the way back to the house we passed among the maples and felt their pods crunch beneath our feet. Sometimes he reached down for a handful and threw them into the air, just to watch them spin slowly back to earth.

In the evenings we sat together on the porch, drinking iced tea, he with his legs crossed and I swinging mine under the chair, watching the students stroll by, carrying their books. He stared far, thought deeply, said little, napped often. Once I asked him why he had taken me in.

“Aren’t you handy with a shovel?” he answered, blinking his eyes as if he had just woken up.

Sure he had misunderstood my question, I asked, “Are you afraid of dying?” He answered without hesitation:

“I’m much more afraid of not living forever.”

The end of the summer came one afternoon in August while we were baking cookies. He stopped what he was doing. Dropped the spatula on the floor. Grabbed his left arm. Squeezed it between the elbow and the wrist. Flexed his fingers.

When he returned from the hospital he said, “Take me to church.” He’d never been. They had made me go every day at the orphanage so I knew how it worked: you sit on a long wooden bench and kneel on a low wooden beam. The trick is to know when to sit, kneel, or stand, as required by whatever ritual is underway at the altar. Generally someone in the congregation has mastered the choreography and the problem is reduced to one of close imitation. I preferred sitting over

standing, and standing over kneeling. Lying down was not allowed.

Holding his cane with one hand and my hand with the other, he nodded to one side of the aisle and said, “What is that?”

“Um, holy water.”

“Why is it holy?”

“The priest blessed it.”

“You mean he muttered incantations over it while waving his arms.”

“Well, yeah.”

He thought about that for a moment. He asked, “Do you drink it?”

“Oh, no. Too many hands go into it for that.”

Then, “Why do they put it in birdbaths?”

He insisted we visit a funeral home, and there he got into it with one of the undertakers because the poor man couldn’t answer his questions: “How much longer will I last in aluminum?” and “Why don’t they make them in yellow?”

He sat on the front porch and watched the college girls walk by; he observed them with detached scientific interest. He hobbled onto the lawn, broke off a blade of grass, and chewed it. He stroked the bark of a box elder that shaded the porch. He wrote his thoughts in a notebook:

Every organism is programmed to die, so its species may survive and flourish. The key to the program is a biological clock, located perhaps in the brain, but more probably in each individual cell. The clock tells the body when to age; the program tells the body how to do it.

He woke often in the night and rapped his cane on the floor to summon me. Once I found him sitting upright in his bed, staring wide-eyed at apparitions fleeing the dawn.

“A black camel,” he said, pointing a bony finger across the room.

I followed his terrified gaze to the window, but the only intruder there was the meager light offered grudgingly by a drowsy sun.

“Do you need some water?” I asked. “Are you cold?”

His eyes softened as he came fully awake and whatever pursued him quit the chase. I eased him back on his pillow

and tucked him in. He held his blanket tightly under his chin, leaving only his pinkish face and bony fingers exposed to lingering ogres. But both he and I knew the ogres paid little heed to blankets.

Eyesight and hearing dim, as if light and sound were receding down a long tunnel. Reflexes dull, accelerating perceived motion, and everything is over almost before it happens. Teeth and hair fall out. Bones turn brittle. The body becomes vulnerable in an environment to which it is intended to fall victim. Medicine compensates for some vulnerabilities, but though individual battles are won, the war is ultimately lost.

From then on, despite my youth and propensity for mischief, I assumed complete responsibility for him. He was still my legal guardian, but I was his eyes and ears, his guide and interpreter. I helped him up the stairs each night to bed and untied his shoes. I spoon-fed him at meals when he lost the resolve to eat.

The thymus gland, which regulates the immune system, begins to shrink even before puberty. Even as the body peaks in strength and sexuality its disease fighting apparatus has begun to wane. In old age it almost disappears altogether, and with it, the body's cancer fighting armament. And if medicine were to win that battle there would be another. The organism is programmed to die so replacement and natural selection will occur.

Why, then, do species die?

Although some may vanish in an accident—celestial objects striking the Earth, say—there is also a program analogy: each species is programmed to die—to become extinct—so that life on Earth itself may flourish.

He came to believe he was my grandfather. He was certainly old enough, but I couldn't grasp his age in years any more than I could that of an eroded mountain, because like the mountain it was not so much time as weathering that had sapped him of his youth. In one summer, in one August afternoon, his youth was gone. I found it significant even then that little difference existed between young mountains, freshly emerging from their tectonic foundations, and old ones, denuded and retiring.

We held hands during our walks. I pretended that my presence on the other side of his cane lent balance and support to his fragile frame.

The biological clock is probably contained in the genetic material of each individual organism. Youth is characterized by an expanding population, maturity by specialization. The chief vulnerability in old age is overspecialization, because a species that overspecializes is prone to extinction when its environment abruptly changes.

Replacement occurs with analogous natural selection. Species come and species go, and life, therefore, goes on. Not only must all organisms die, but so eventually must all species. There is no immortality to be gained by having children. There is no immortality of any kind at all.

Unless.

Unless.

Fall came. The leaves turned and drifted to the ground. He stayed in his room for weeks. Then it snowed. He watched from his window like a kitten as the flakes swirled and tumbled in their impromptu ballet. When it stopped he shuffled out the door and stood barefoot in the white powder. The box elder was stripped of leaves, its naked branches reaching purposelessly into the sky. He knelt at its trunk and cried.

When they came to get him in the early spring I was away at school. I got home at dinnertime and found the social worker, tall, skinny, steely gray-haired, waiting for me in the living room.

“We’ll have a new home for you,” she said.

With bedpans?

“You’ll be with people who love you.”

Love was my mother’s wet kiss and my father’s stiff beard. I could still smell his cologne.

“People who will help you avoid sin.”

My guardian angel was supposed to prevent me from sinning. Lately he had been slacking off. He was also supposed to protect me from harm, but I had fallen into the creek enough times to know that was a crock.

“I’m going to visit him,” I said.

“No you’re not.”

I underestimated her when I bolted toward the door. She was good; they had sent one of the best. She beat me to the door, then covered the entrance to the dining room when she saw me eyeing it hopefully. Her ankle-length skirt was wide, and as she planted her legs apart and crouched, her knees stretched the skirt and made her look bigger and more intimidating. Like a blowfish. Like an alley cat fluffing its tail.

Only the coffee table obstructed my path to the stairs. I jumped right through the lamp on the table, knowing it would give easily, and came down on the other side in a somersault with tangled cord and crumpled shade and shards of thin hot glass. She hustled around the table, but I was already back on my feet and pounding up the stairs. Her footsteps were right behind me.

“You-you-you!”

I went through my grandfather’s bedroom and climbed out the window. It was a two-story drop. I hesitated only until the social worker reached for me, then I jumped, landing in the grass on bent knees and rolling to absorb the impact.

She was in the window, looking down. If I hadn’t known better, I’d have thought she was smiling.

“**H**e’s my grandfather,” I said to the nurse. She looked me over disapprovingly, then led me down the hall to an open bay sectioned off by curtains. She opened one of the curtains, and there he lay, wires emerging from his pajamas and rising to a monitor above his head. She closed the curtain and waited outside.

His breathing was labored and his mouth was open. I touched him on the arm—his eyes opened instantly. He turned his head slowly, as if it hurt to do so, and squinted at me through tears.

When he spoke it was in a breathy whisper. “The fear of death,” he said, “is supposed to fade with age, yielding to passivity, or even, for some, grateful welcome.” He closed his eyes and licked his lips. “They say it’s one of the body’s natural defense mechanisms.”

“Don’t go,” I said. On his face was the look.

“I don’t want to go.”

“Then don’t.”

I had seen the look before, when my father took me hunting. A deer stepped out of the brush, its legs planted in the grass, splayed outward slightly like a knobby-kneed sawhorse. When my father fired his gun the deer’s legs buckled and it collapsed in the grass. On its face was the look.

He clutched my arm. “Bury me standing. It’s the only chance I have. Promise me you’ll bury me standing. Promise!”

“I promise.”

Then he cried, his fists clenched. So the retrogression was complete. The middle years were nothing more than a temporary departure from the genetic message. Those just after birth and just before death were the true portraits of man.

“The leaves will come back to the trees,” I told him. “They always do. And you can talk to the trees the way you used to, and send me up to pick the acorns.”

“I have to go now, my young friend.”

“And you can throw the maple pods in the air again, and watch them spin real crazy down, and laugh at them the way you used to, and say, ‘Silly pods, you can slow it, but you can’t stop it.’”

“Call me grandpa one more time.”

“And if you’d just pick the flat rocks that aren’t so thin, they’d keep going longer. I can teach you, Grandpa.”

“Keep your promise,” he said.

“Don’t you want to see the spiders drink the dew?”

The nurse came in and led me out gently. I had to hold her hand because I couldn’t see. A windshield in the rain without wipers.

Back at the house after the long walk home I watched from across the street, but there was no activity, no light. The social worker wouldn’t still be there; she got off at five.

The house was cold, so I turned up the heat. Dinner was instant mashed potatoes and peas. I plowed the mashed potatoes by dragging my fork over the top, and planted peas by spacing them neatly in the furrows. Salt and pepper fertilized the acreage.

Then I went to bed. After a fitful hour I climbed upstairs

to my grandfather's bedroom and crawled into the great canopied bed. The four bedposts stood like sentries. The blanket, pulled up to my chin, warded off ogres.

Keys rattled in the lock downstairs and the door opened.

I woke immediately. My first thought was that it was Steely Gray-Haired, come to snatch me in the night, and I poised to go for the window. But when the footsteps came up the stairs it was clear they didn't belong to a woman. And by the sure, familiar way they came, I knew they didn't belong to a burglar. I sat up straight in the bed.

He had not gone to my bedroom first but knew instinctively I would be in his. When he entered the room I noticed he didn't have his cane, and he walked without his usual stomp, swish, thump gait. He knelt down by the bed. His eyes were bright and alive. Like a burden had been lifted from him. Or something deep had been revealed to him.

"Come, get up," he said. "There's little time."

"Where are we going?"

"Hurry! It's almost light."

I slipped into my shoes and followed him downstairs. We left the campus and headed south to the woods. He trotted between the trees, gliding over fallen logs and ducking under low branches. We moved under the ever-darkening forest canopy until I could find my way only by following his bobbing image in front of me.

"Are you sure this is okay?" I asked. "Aren't you sick?"

"Hurry!"

We came upon a giant fallen elm that blocked the path. It was a healthy looking tree, and I didn't know what had brought it down until I peeled off a section of bark and saw the trails in the wood—evidence of Dutch Elm Disease. The roots were strong and supple and still held soil. They looked naked and bony, like fingers that had grasped the soil tightly when the tree was still standing and held it now in a firm, stubborn grip, long after the trunk had toppled over.

In the shallow pit that remained was angular, unweathered gravel. Next to the pit was a mound of soil the roots had tossed up when they were ripped out of the earth. And growing in that mound were three tiny maple saplings, closely spaced, each trying to take advantage of the space, the soil, and in the

absence of the elm from the canopy, the available light.

“Remember your promise,” he said low and urgently.

He was staring deep into the woods, to where individual trees diffused and blended in the pitch of night, like the generations of their cousins they would one day join in the till. Then he turned to me and grinned horribly. His face was a pale, iridescent blue. His eyes were sunken yellow pits. I stepped backwards, but he lunged forward and grabbed me by the wrists.

“I’ve got you!” he said.

“I’ve got you!”

It was a woman’s voice. I opened my eyes. Sunlight streaming through the window of my grandfather’s bedroom was blocked by a scrawny silhouette that held me by the wrists.

“You!” she said.

“My grandfather, where is he?”

“You fool. He’s not your grandfather, don’t you know that?”

“Where is he?”

“Dead. He went during the night.”

I shook my head to clear it. “You mean this morning?”

“No, last night, after you left him.” She yanked me out of bed and held me fast by the collar. “You’re coming with me.”

Billy told me he wanted to be a missionary, but only if it paid respectably and he didn’t have to get up early. He said that since the world was infested with Protestants and other heathens there was plenty of work for both of us should I care to join him. Neither of us had ever seen a Protestant, so we asked Sister Mary Melusky about them. She told us Protestants looked pretty much like ordinary human beings; their flaws were concealed inside.

Most of my academic time was spent drawing pictures of Jesus and his ilk. I drew Jesus on the cross with nails in his hands, Jesus held at bay by Roman soldiers toting implausibly long spears, Jesus limp and lifeless, draped over Mary’s knees. I drew Mary with large knees. My specialty however was burning bushes. I applied warm crayon hues to create a flame that seemed to ignite the paper itself. My

burning bushes earned me a reputation at the orphanage. If you wanted a picture of a burning bush, you came to me.

At the wake Sister Mary Delaney urged me to kiss the old man goodbye. She pushed firmly on my back until I was leaning over the edge of the casket. Inside was a corpse. I didn't want to touch it, let alone kiss it. It used to be him, but now it was a dead thing and I didn't want to touch it.

During the funeral Father Malone spoke of his being "a true disciple of academia" and "a pillar of the department." About "decades of humble service." They lowered his casket into a hole and covered it with dirt.

Later I asked the school librarian for the newspaper, and located the obituary: "Retired Philosophy Professor Herbert Miller Dead at 79."

I went outside to the fence that faced the church. A breeze whisked down the street, carried high in the maples and mulberries, passed from one tree to another until it reached me and settled down with its load of loose twigs and leaves and its soft murmurs.

"Unless," I quoted him. "Unless."

I waited until the snoring started up, then I waited another hour. The darkness gelled within the barracks and suspended each boy stiffly in his bunk. I rose normally from my bed, as though to use Billy's bedpan, and seeing that no one woke I stole out through the window and into the secular world.

The mops outside were lined up properly in a row on the rail.

"Goodbye Madeline," I said to one, and ran my fingers through her hair. "Gwendolyn, take care of yourself. Try to put on a couple of pounds, will you? And you, Cecile, cut down on those cigarettes."

From the handyman's shed I took a shovel, a crowbar, and some rope. And a wheelbarrow in which to carry them. The gate in the fence came unlocked with a turn of the principal's own key.

I rolled the wheelbarrow through a cryogenic town. I first crossed the campus, passing slumbering dormitories and lifeless auditoriums, then entered a labyrinth of empty

sidewalks and struggled to remember the way.

When I found the graveyard I paused outside under the streetlights. The stones crowded the fence like prisoners, but they were only capitalizing on the available space. Further inside, they appeared as soft blurs of white. I knew my time was short, so when I found the plot I started digging right away, and didn't stop except to wipe the sweat from my face.

An owl called once, then was silent. After a brief pause I continued digging. My shovel struck metal. I cleared the remaining dirt away to reveal the casket, then wedged the crowbar under the front lip and put all my weight on it. Finally I had to stand on it and bounce a couple of times before the lock would give. When the lid was up it wouldn't stay up, so I propped the crowbar inside to brace it.

His eyes were closed, his hands were clasped in a relaxed fashion over his chest, his legs were stretched out to their full length. It was an unnatural position for him; he had always slept in a tense crouch, ready to spring into flight should the ogres emerge from under his bed.

He was too stiff to fit into the wheelbarrow, so I let him lay across the rim, like a cracker too big for the soup bowl.

A wind lifted, thick with the night, and warned me that my time grew short. I couldn't be picky now but knew he would understand. Two blocks and a rickshaw ride away was a small city park with a grove of maples and several benches strategically positioned on a green lawn. I picked out a healthy looking tree that occupied an out-of-the-way corner. It felt like the right choice. Its bark was smooth and its leaves were just returning to the fingertips of its branches.

"Here you go, Grandpa," I said. "I'm keeping my promise."

My shovel's blade struck bits of jagged stone, so a glacier had tread here too. The hole was wide enough, but was it deep enough? Too shallow and the dogs dig him up. Too deep and he doesn't feed the tree. The impatient light was already spilling over the horizon; it would have to do.

I lifted him from the wheelbarrow, rolled him onto the bed of till, and tucked him in under the welcoming grasp of the exposed roots.

"I hope you like it, Grandpa."

The sunrise, now supplemented with a band of yellow, had

achieved peak beauty.

“I think it likes you too.”

I filled the hole and replaced the sod. Then I kissed the bark but the tree didn't stir. Maybe a small twitch of twig, a rustle of leaf. It was probably the abating breeze.

“I have to go now, but I'll come back someday, and—”

Maple pods. Brown and withered, they littered the ground. I hadn't noticed them in the dark. They were remnants of last year's futile flights, dropped from an older neighboring tree.

“—and we'll be together again.”

Years passed before I was able to return to the park. It was a cold fall afternoon and the sky was busy with clouds gorged with snow. I sat on a bench and viewed the maple. Its branches were dense with leaves scorched with color.

There was a knot in the trunk I didn't remember from before, but the wood inside was twisted into a familiar shape. A knot in a tree is a window to its soul. Look closely within, and you'll recognize its ancestry, as well as the hope that rose with it from the immortal soil.

A tiny, enterprising spider had spun a web across the knot, to catch any bugs that might seek refuge there. I knew the old man would like that; he had a thing for spiders.

Late in the afternoon a child approached the tree with a pocketknife in hand and tried to carve his initials in the bark. Before long he ran crying to his mother.

“It bit me! It scratched me!”

“Oh honey, don't be silly. It's only a tree.”

On the other side of the park, far enough away for privacy, yet close enough for conversation, was a straight, sturdy sapling. I introduced myself. The trunk swayed a little, the leaves stirred. It was probably just the breeze.

Dustin Stamper

Chinese Finger Cuffs

I see penises. All the time. Everywhere. An endless parade of penises, a disorganized phallic army, some slouching, some crawling, some marching at attention, all unwanted.

I lie. Maybe not lie, just embellish. I don't really "see" penises. I mean, I've seen penises, plenty of them. I once overheard my college roommate call me "walking Chinese finger cuffs, built to trap fraternity dick." I'm not Chinese, but that's a whole other thing. First, the penises.

I guess it would be more accurate to say I imagine penises, but I don't like that word, "imagine." It implies effort, like I'm trying to imagine penises. I am not. They just appear in my head, as fully formed images, so real I can almost smell them, not that I'd want to.

Like the other day, I'm behind the counter, and this guy walks up. He's wearing a gray hoody and he's got the hood up, even though we're inside and it's warm out anyway. He looks vaguely "ethnic," something weird, almost white, like Armenian, and before I can even ask him what he wants, there it is in my head, a rumpled uncircumcised member tucked snugly in boxer-briefs, a grower, not a shower.

The girl next to me is hovering, mouth-breathing all up in my space. I should forgive her. It's her first day. She's just trying to learn, she's supposed to hover. But I hate her so much. Not just her. Everyone. And everything. Think of it like the title from that movie I'm supposed to like because I'm Asian: I hate everything everywhere all at once. And not in a cute or clever way. I'm not the funny disaffected girl too cool for everything and I'm not the grumpy old white guy with endearing eccentric hate. My hate is exhausting and personally disruptive and has conquered three therapists.

I'm busy imagining a penis and hating everything, so the guy's just standing there all expectant. Why can't anyone just order a cup of coffee unprompted? Instead he asks where I'm from. Arlington, I say. No, I mean, he says, before trailing off. I know what he means.

After he's ordered, Jayna, standing infuriatingly close to me, says, I hate that, I get that all the time. She's Han Chinese (I didn't have to ask) and she might have the most punchable face on the planet. She goes on a long rant about how asking where we're from implies we're "other," "different," "unusual." No one ever asks a white girl where her "family" is from, she says, with air quotes.

I don't disagree, but I hate her anyway, the smug way she delivers this sermon, and how hypocritical it sounds, how it reminds me of how hypocritical I am. The first thing she said to me was, "Oh my God, you're so pretty, your skin is so perfect." Yeah, I caught the undertone. Right back at you.

She walked in like a porcelain doll, all miniature and adorable, smelling like Herbal Essence and innocence. I should have been happy. It's always easier with a woman, usually no penis to see. I avoid crowds, it's overwhelming to be around so many men. Here a penis, there a penis, everywhere a penis. Like Russian dolls, open one, find another, then another, and another, except they never get any smaller.

Jayna has a big round face and a diminutive body, like a bobblehead. She'd fit in fine in the Xianyang Palace a hundred years ago, bound feet reduced to nubs. It's okay. It's not racist because I'm Korean. Half Korean. My mom is from Seoul, my dad is white.

I know working in service isn't a good decision when you already hate people, but as a college dropout, my choices are limited. And I am desperate for money. I can never go back home.

It's slow after the morning rush and Jayna asks me if I'm going to answer my phone. It's been buzzing nonstop. It's just my mom, I say, which is a lie. Asian moms, right? Jayna says.

This isn't the Joy Luck Club, I tell her. We're just coworkers. We don't have to be friends.

You're so funny, she says.

I hate Jayna so much, but then I hate myself for hating her, so I soften and tell her, it's just the usual shit: You never call. Are you eating? We can't change the password for the wifi. Your father is asking for you, he doesn't have much time left. I don't say this last part, but I think it. My mother sent it in all caps a few weeks ago. She writes in all caps a

lot, though: DON'T EAT BOK CHOY FOR THREE WEEKS. SALMONELLA IN SUPPLY CHAIN.

My phone buzzes from a blocked number again. Jayna can see the screen and asks if my mom is trying to trick me. We have a customer, I say.

He's wearing a neatly ironed pink polo shirt and the front of his hair salutes me in perfect gelled formation. His strong jaw almost makes him handsome, but his eyes are too close together. Then I am seeing his penis, a lanky rod, the skin raw from the suction of repeated attempts with a penis elongation device.

It's a relief when Jayna and I switch to making drinks. The less interaction with customers, the better. Of all things, Jayna has a natural gift for this. I never tell her anything twice. She seems to intuit the function of every device. She makes a perfect tall medium roast hazelnut caffe latte with oatmilk and I bring it over to the counter.

Brad, I call.

A man walks over and looks at the cup. This is hot, he says, I wanted a nitro cold brew.

He's got an unruly beard and he's wearing an orange knit hat that looks like the head of a penis, and it's a relief, because instead of seeing his penis, I see his whole body as one large penis dressed for Halloween in an orange traffic cone costume.

Are you Brad, I ask him.

This isn't right, he says, and he lifts the cap and dips in his finger. I wanted cold brew, he says.

Are you Brad, I ask him again.

Just then Brad comes over. Brad wears glasses and has a mustache that is probably ironic. His penis is large and mishappen, but he's proud of it anyway. I know this is Brad because he says, I'm Brad, is that my coffee?

Jayna appears by my side. She glares at Orange Penis, never taking her eyes away while she says, sorry Brad, I'll have to remake your drink, someone put their finger in it. Orange Penis mumbles something in lieu of an apology and walks away. For a moment, hate makes way for an unfamiliar rush of affection: Jayna's a badass. Then I'm not hating her, but hating myself for not being her. Because of course

I hate myself most of all. A fortune cookie once told me that all hate springs from self-hate and my self-loathing gushes from a well of immeasurable depth. Like my mother texted a few days ago when I refused to answer her calls: I GET IT! DOCTOR PHIL SAYS HURT PEOPLE, HURT PEOPLE.

My phone buzzes again from a blocked caller and it is all too much. I take off my apron and stride out the back door without a word, trying to look purposeful and dignified rather than crushed and hopeless. I can find another job.

I am pacing unfamiliar streets desperately trying reach customer service for my phone carrier. After a soul-crushing fight with an automated menu and eleven minutes on hold, I hear a human voice.

How can I help you, she says.

I can't find any option to stop notifications when blocked numbers text or call me, I say. Is there some kind of setting to turn those off and can you help me do it?

Yes, I can help you block a number, she says.

No, no, the number is blocked, I tell her, I just don't want to see any notification when the blocked number tries to call or text.

You should not be receiving any texts or calls from a blocked number, she says. I can show you how to block a number correctly.

No, I know how to block numbers, I'm not receiving the actual texts and phone calls, I'm getting a notification that buzzes and says we blocked a text or a call from a blocked number.

Yes, she says, that's the notification so you know a text or call was blocked.

Exactly, yes, I say.

She pauses here. For a long time. I can almost hear the absence of a sigh. So, what's the issue then, she asks. And then I see it, a hated penis painfully strapped and hidden against her leg as she saves money for a long-dreamed about surgery. I am a coil of barely suppressed rage.

I try and explain that it is the notifications themselves I don't want. That the notifications are almost as bad as receiving the unblocked text or the call in the first place. That every time I see the notification, I'm forced to think of that

person and their penis. I don't think I say that last part, but I'm not sure. I am shouting and crying and hating. I hang up.

Jayna calls me that night. I forgot I gave her my number. You left your sweater, she says, I'll bring it in tomorrow. I'm not coming in, I say, I'm fired.

No you're not, she says. She explains how they told her that everyone knows I'm struggling with mental health. That I need to walk out every once in a while, but that I'm normally dependable, if unfriendly. That maybe it would be different if they weren't so understaffed, but that I'm still employed and everyone's expecting me to make my shift tomorrow. She says all this in a conspiratorial tone, bemused, two Asian girls who can't believe how dumb these white people are, like she's my little sister.

I had an older sister once. Or have. I don't know. She disappeared when I was six. She was 13. I should remember her more but somehow don't. A feeling, some images, a handful of moments, not all of them good. I can remember her cutting the hair of my favorite American Girl doll and then threatening to shave the rest bald if I told anyone. Once she offered me an M&M if I could go five minutes without crying and then pinched my inner thigh so hard that it bled. The M&M was delicious.

My parents never talked about her after she was gone, not once that I can remember. She was simply there and then she wasn't. Any pictures of her vanished at the same time. I used to wonder if I invented her, but I can remember how my dad changed afterward. Suddenly he was gone all the time for work. When he was home, he wouldn't talk to me, would barely even look at me. For a while. I didn't understand it then. I would later.

Last year I found my sister's birth certificate in my parent's house by accident. No father listed. Different last name.

I bided my time. I pandered to my mother for a month, texting her to clarify recipes, calling to compare daily step counts, showing her the Ken Jeong special on Netflix. One day when my father was gone, I cornered her in the kitchen, demanded answers, what the fuck happened to my sister. I begged. I raged. I cried. I appealed to her heart, I applied emotional blackmail. She was impenetrable.

Ancient history, she said. There was nothing she could tell me, she said. It was better for me not to know anything, she said. She is simply protecting me, she said. She has always just tried to protect me, she said. She was certainly always protective, but it was never me she was protecting. I haven't spoken to her since.

I have not looked for my sister myself. I can't even picture her face. It's easier to rage at the world for its unfairness than to do something about it. I don't want anything to undermine the grievances fueling my hate. It is all I have left.

I meet Jayna for a drink. I hate the bar immediately. Everything on the menu is a deconstructed version of something else, every drink is local, every employee is smug. The bartender is paying too much attention to us. He keeps retying his ponytail so he can lift his arms behind his head and show off his tattooed muscles. I see his tiny penis, the shaved pubis and pierced shaft failing to make it look any bigger.

Have you tried the BLT taco chicken bites? He asks. They're fire.

He's practically leering at Jayna, which is nice. Let her imagine some penises. I usually get a lot of attention from men. My college roommate said it was because guys watch too much porn and they all have Asian fetishes. Sure she was jealous, and casually racist, but maybe not totally wrong.

I have tried and failed to un-remember the chiseled lacrosse player gripping my hair from behind and instructing me to beg him in Chinese for his come. Don't come inside me, I said instead, in English. Just say it, he said. Seriously, do not come inside me, I said. He told my roommate I was "a bad lay."

I liked Patricia Meehan at first. Her family called her Pat when they dropped her off, but she reinvented herself as Trish the second they left. She was loud and brash, with a delicious laugh. Her neck and face got all red and splotchy when she drank, which was often. She hated how much attention I got from guys, especially the ones she liked. There was always a look that lingered too long, polite chit chat that was too eager, an "accidental" drunk dial.

By the end of the year, as I was flunking out (to our collective relief), I began to see it, one of the first I ever saw. She would be

changing clothes, white cotton underwear barely restraining an unshaven pubic mound, and the image was just there: A micro-penis and an unknown Y chromosome, hidden for the first 13 years of her life by the failure of normal male sexual development in utero, a rare genetic disorder, revealed only when the testosterone began pumping in puberty, awakening the micro-penis, a baby's pinky finger rising from the ashes of her girlhood, useless for a man, devastating for Trish.

The bartender asks where we're from. I worry that Jayna is going to lecture him, tell him that we are not all the same, do not all look the same, are not all from the same place. Sometimes I wonder how much we can blame them.

The only NBA player I can name is Jeremy Lin. I am obsessed with Naomi Osaka. Once my mom got so happy watching Wheel of Fortune when Jason Chang won the largest prize ever that I asked her if we were related to him. No dummy, she said. He's not even Korean.

Jayna says she's from Sri Lanka, that her parents were gypsies, and it is the least I've hated anyone in months.

The bartender thinks she's flirting. He brings us two reimaged vanilla bean rum shooters, "on the house." I'm too smart to drink something I didn't watch come right out of the bottle, but Jayna is already drinking it and then I am too.

Should we do karaoke, she asks after our third shot. And I can't tell if she's joking about Asian stereotypes or if she really wants to sing. This is the drunkest I've been in months, and I don't like it.

What's happening with you, she asks, really.

I have something to do, I say. I'm sorry.

I walk out. I call my mother. I am coming, I say. To the hospital. Right now.

When I get there, it feels like a cliché. There are machines chirping and monitors monitoring, and my dad is laid out in those undignified reverse pajamas, doing the whole Darth Vader thing through breathing tubes in his nose. The blocked cell phone sits by the bed.

His bare feet are exposed, the gnarled toenails making a compelling argument for fungal cream. Capillaries have burst all across the bridge of his nose, and his old adolescent acne scars are flushed red.

I don't have to imagine his penis because I've seen it many times. In the usual ways at first, changing at the pool, that sort of thing. A short, ruddy thing, in a nest of curly hair, a purple mushroom poking out. Slightly unsettling even then. Later, I saw it angry, rigid and red, a blue vein crawling up from the scrotum to a swollen bulb at the top. I have felt it in my hand, and in other places too, and everything's all jumbled up, and confused, and somehow that makes it worse, not better, like I can't even trust my own unwanted memories, and I just want to unfeel it, unsee it, undo it, undo everything.

He looks at me with wet blue eyes and reaches out a hand. It hovers for a moment, conspicuous, before he lays it down. I'm so glad you came, he says. I love you so much, he says. I made so many mistakes, he says. I'm so sorry, he says. I never wanted to hurt you, he says. I was weak, I was sick, I hate myself, he says.

His voice is weak, his breath is mushrooms growing on gym socks.

I lean in close, holding onto my hair so nothing of me touches him. My mouth is close to his ear, intimate, like he used to like it. You are evil, I say. This suffering is less than you deserve, I say. I'm so glad you'll be dead soon, I say. I do not forgive you, I say. I hate your fucking guts and I am happy you'll be rotting in hell, I say.

I feel nothing. There is no satisfaction, not that I expected any. Maybe it will come later. Or maybe it will be regret. I don't know, and I don't have time to linger. I leave him there, walk past my mother, avoiding her eyes. I know in my heart I will never speak to her again. I have nothing left to say to her, and right now, I have something else to do. I have a sister to find. I have good news for her.

Conor Hogan

Forsaken

Adrian stepped out from the air-conditioned bus and into the muggy heat of the Puerto Vallarta afternoon. He'd asked the driver to let him off early, at the 7-Eleven near Emi's house on the outskirts of town. The agave plantation behind the convenience store exhaled a humidity that concentrated the sun's rays like a magnifying glass. Adrian blinked away the bright whorls stamped on his eyes, then ordered an Uber. When Fernando's silver Camry parked in front of him, Adrian held up his duffle, and the trunk unlatched. But when Adrian tried to open the back door, he found it locked.

"Front seat, please," called Fernando through the passenger window.

"Here too?" asked Adrian, sliding in up front.

"Unfortunately," said Fernando. There was a basket of miniature water bottles between the seats. "241 Via Alvarado?" asked Fernando, dragging an index finger over his phone to see the suggested route.

"That's it," said Adrian, taking a water bottle. Adrian prided himself on always accepting complimentary offers. "So there have been some problems?" For the past year, newspapers had followed a rise in assaults against Uber drivers in cities like Oaxaca and Morelia, as clients grew scarce and taxi drivers turned to violence.

"A few," said Fernando. Adrian waited, but Fernando didn't continue. Emi had mentioned that Vallartenses were tight-lipped and cautious these days, after the latest wave of arrests opened a vacuum in the city's power structure.

"Too bad," said Adrian, pitching his voice a half-octave higher. He glanced around the car. An anime character dangled from the rearview mirror. The stereo played a DJ set he didn't recognize. After a moment, Adrian asked, "From dust to dust, huh?" He pointed to the tattoo on Fernando's forearm: *Génesis 3:19*.

Fernando looked at him, impressed. "You got the whole book memorized?"

“Just a couple parts,” said Adrian. “I teach Sunday school sometimes, and the kids love that story. Naming the animals and all that.”

“Kids are weird,” said Fernando, braking at a stoplight. “I think it’s about the freakiest thing ever written.” They watched a young man crutch out into the intersection and start juggling a soccer ball with his only foot. “So are you getting back from somewhere?” asked Fernando. “Or is this vacation?”

“My brother lives out here,” said Adrian, watching the teenage amputee balance the tattered ball on his forehead, then flip it onto his back. “You from Vallarta?”

“No,” said Fernando. “I moved here a few years ago, to help my cousin manage her hotel. But I’m originally from Metepec.”

“Really? I’m from Toluca,” said Adrian. He rolled down his window and handed the kid ten pesos as he crutched by. “We’re neighbors.”

“Neighbors,” repeated Fernando, smiling as he shifted into first. They came over a small rise, and the sea stretched before them, flashing as facets formed, then vanished, then formed again. “How is Toluca? Have they paid the garbagemen yet?” Over the past couple weeks, the police, firefighters, and trash collectors had been protesting in Toluca. They hadn’t received their salary for months on end, and images of black plastic bags piled two meters high across Paseo Colon had gone viral on social media. So had videos of federal agents arresting municipal police officers after the local cops set a city bus on fire. The memes had been ruthless.

“Who knows. I moved to Guadalajara after high school,” said Adrian. A taxi pulled even with them, and Adrian wondered how he could contribute to the illusion that he and Fernando were friends, not driver and customer. He decided to plane his hand through the air rushing past his window. “So is this what you do on your weekends, then?”

“And my weekdays,” said Fernando with a sigh. “The hotel went under during COVID. People stopped traveling, and we couldn’t afford the taxes.”

Adrian was puzzled. “Taxes?” he asked. “But they stopped... ah.” Fernando slowed down as they passed the charred

remains of a gym. He glanced at Adrian, then back to the road. The blackened skeletons of squat-racks still stood among the wreckage. “*Those taxes,*” said Adrian. He pulled up his sleeve and showed Fernando the verse tattooed on his own arm: *Eclesiastés 12:14*. “Well. God brings everyone into judgment.”

Fernando rolled to a stop and held out a business card embossed with the words, *Hotel Trópical*, followed by a phone number. “He sure is taking his time, though, huh?” he said. “Message me if you need another ride. You can’t be too careful these days.” Adrian thanked him and got out. An alert from Uber informed Adrian that he’d been dropped off. He gave Fernando five stars. After a vision of Fernando getting yanked from his car by vengeful taxistas flashed across his mind, Adrian also gave him a 30-peso tip. Then he called Emi. “Hey. I’m out front.”

Emi unlocked the gate and the two brothers hugged. Victor stepped out from behind Emi and wrapped his arms around both of them. “Reunited and it feels so good,” Victor sang in clumsy English.

“Are you guys already drunk?” asked Adrian. “Really celebrating having the house to yourself, eh?” Emi’s face was rosy beneath a few days of stubble. He’d grown thinner with each FaceTime, and now, standing before him, Adrian tried not to stare at Emi’s scooped-out cheeks. At the strands of muscle bulging from his neck.

“You think it’s a joke, asshole,” said Emi. “But this place is a warzone. Turns out the boys just needed a common enemy to bring them together, and since the move, they found one: me.” Emi had written the December cover story for *Sociedad*, about executives at PEMEX selling maps of their company’s subterranean infrastructure to huachicoleros. The article included emails from board members giving the thieves advice on when the gas flowed and where to puncture their pipelines. After the story came out, the police chief advised Emi to leave Guadalajara, at least for a couple years.

“And you,” said Adrian, turning to Victor. “You’re still fat as ever, thank God.” He pulled Victor in for another hug.

“Fatter,” said Victor. He’d shaved his beard into a brambly chinstrap, and Adrian could already hear the argument the two of them were going to have about this decision later on.

Victor grabbed Adrian's shoulders and stepped back. "You, on the other hand, managed to stay handsome, you son of a bitch." The trio walked through Emi's small house and out into the backyard. Emi handed each of them a beer, and they sat at a small table on the patio. A high wall, crowned with concertina wire, encircled the yard.

"So did your boys march yesterday?" Adrian asked. Ale, Emi's wife, had sent photos of Marco and Luis dressed in robes to one of their family's group chats.

"Come on, man," muttered Victor, pinching his eyebrows together. "He just calmed down."

Emi scowled. "Oh, they marched," he said. He scooted closer to Adrian and showed him a jerky video, of Marco dragging a wooden cross through a crowded street. Colorful stalls along the sidewalk sold food and trinkets. Overhead, amusement park rides whirled gigantic metal arms. Marco hobbled from one patch of shadow to another, tears streaming down his face. From behind the phone, Ale called out, "Fuerza, mi'jo!"

"They still don't let 'em wear shoes, huh?" asked Adrian, taking a sip of his beer. He turned to Victor. "It's like walking on a frying pan. Me and Emi thought we were smart, tried duct-taping the bottom of our feet one year. Melted off in like half an hour." Emi swiped to another video, of Luis tripping beneath his cross and splitting open a red hole in his knee. "It's a character-builder, that's for sure," said Adrian.

"It's medieval," said Emi. "Tell me, altar boy: why do we keep worshiping the guy who fucked this place up so bad? It's like we're a bunch of prisoners, worshiping the warden."

"Woah," said Adrian. He leaned away from Emi. "You trying to catch a lightning bolt to the head? It's the day before Easter. He's listening extra hard right now. Can't the blasphemy wait a week or two?" Victor and Adrian laughed.

"Blasphemy? You wanna talk blasphemy?" asked Emi. "I've been working on an article about the Nesausser lawsuit. Remember? When they proved the runoff from the Monterrey factory was giving kids cancer? Well, the settlement package said that Nesausser had to buy chemo for anyone who got sick. All the medicine got delivered to the mayor's office, and this bastard switched the labels. Sent bags of saline to the local hospitals and sold the chemo to China. 53 kids died

before anyone found out. Know where the mayor is now? Me either. Some rat told him the National Guard was coming to arrest him, and he fled the country. Probably on a beach in Venezuela right now, laughing his ass off.”

Emi pulled up another video Ale had sent. Each year, someone from Iztapalapa was chosen to play Jesus, and once all the teenagers had marched, everyone gathered at el Cerro de la Estrella to watch the reenactment of the crucifixion. After struggling through las viacrucis, the actor playing Christ was bound to a massive cross and his hands were nailed to the wood. Emi showed them this year’s Jesus, hanging above the crowd and shrieking, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*” as blood ran down his arms.

“That’s where the whole story should have ended, far as I’m concerned,” said Emi. The video evaporated, replaced by an incoming call from Ale. Emi tapped accept. “Your ears must’ve been burning,” he said, walking inside.

Adrian pulled a baggie of weed from his pocket and started rolling a joint. “What’s his problem?” he asked. “He seems even pissier than normal.”

Victor opened the bulging Ziplock and inspected one of the small buds. “I guess Ale mentioned the d-word again,” said Victor.

“Damn,” said Adrian, licking the paper. “So we’re getting hammered? Tomorrow’s Easter. I wanted to go to church.”

“I’m sure the big guy will understand,” said Victor. “Sucks. It’s the last thing Emi needs.”

“Yeah, well,” said Adrian. He lit the joint. “You kinda get what you’re looking for, you know?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Emi, closing the screen door. He sat beside Adrian and took the joint.

“It means you’ve spent a long time searching out the devil, little brother,” said Adrian. “Writing about man and all his sins. You could always choose to focus on the way God shows his love instead.” Adrian pointed to the sink of clouds to the west, flaring pink and orange as sunlight drained over the horizon. “Maybe it’s a matter of perspective.”

“That’s what’s so confusing about you,” said Emi. “A couple pretty lights, and you’re satisfied. You don’t think we’ve been gaslit? Tricked into thinking all of this is our fault?” Emi blew

smoke through his nose. “Tell me, who’s the real sinner: the disobedient children, or the deadbeat who abandoned them?”

Adrian chuckled. “That’s a good line. You’ve been preparing.”

“Always,” said Emi. He grinned. “What about you, Vic? You think the man upstairs is good, or evil?”

“I reject the premise,” said Victor, clapping a hand on each brother’s shoulder. “I think we’re home alone. And just like any kids left unsupervised, I only see one option.” Victor opened the bottle of tequila sitting on the table and poured three shots. “Now, since we’re tackling life’s thorniest questions tonight, next topic: who’s winning la Liga this year?”

After dinner, they decided to go downtown. Adrian called Fernando, but got no answer, so they took a bus to the city center and found a bar alongside a small plaza overlooking the sea. A band played beneath the quiosco in the middle of the plaza. Three women sat at the next table over, their words elastic with Yucatecan accents. One of the women, wearing a sash that read *CUMPLEAÑERA*, was telling the other two how Puerto Vallarta was overdue for a massive tsunami. How the obsolete tide gauges in place would offer just seven minutes of advance notice before the first wave hit shore, destroying every city within twenty kilometers of the Jalisco coast.

“Another example of God’s benevolence?” Emi asked Adrian. The woman wearing the sash glanced toward their table.

“Please excuse my brother,” said Adrian. “He has daddy issues.” The woman smiled. She had a small swoop of a nose and bobbed hair.

“Don’t we all?” she replied.

Adrian held up his beer. “Happy birthday. How old are you?”

“Gracias,” she said, lifting her margarita. Her voice dragged over a slight rasp. She pushed her bottom lip into a pout. “I’m 32.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Adrian. He looked her up and down. “Well. Maybe.”

“Que grosero,” said the woman. She ran a fingertip around the rim of her glass, then licked the gathered salt.

“Sorry,” said Adrian. The band started playing *El Preso*. “Could I make it up to you?” he asked. The woman rolled her

eyes. Adrian stood and took her outstretched hand. “What’s your name?” he asked, leading her onto the plaza.

“Eva,” said the woman, her hand warm in Adrian’s as he caught the drumbeat and drew a tight circle. Adrian was an excellent dancer, and always relished the first moments with a new partner. He marked a turn, touched Eva’s hip, and sent her back beneath his arm. She frowned as he whirled her through a series of spins. “Where’d you learn to dance?” asked Eva.

“The internet,” said Adrian. He led her through an enchufla, then cocked his head toward Emi. “My brother and I used to watch videos online and trade off being the girl.”

“Funny,” said Eva. Her bare back pressed into his stomach. She looked up and shifted her hips, then pointed to one of the women at the table. “That’s how my sister and I learned to kiss.”

Adrian missed a step. “Really?” he asked.

“No, pervert,” said Eva. Her aquamarine eyes flashed. “Are you always so gullible?”

The song’s momentum carried Eva an arm-length away. Then she was back, her chest against his. “I’m pretty sure I’d believe anything you told me,” said Adrian. A pale delta fanned out from the moon and across the black ocean.

Eva’s face broke into a grin. “Well,” she said, and stepped further into his arms. “That could be fun.” The song ended, and the band struck up another. Victor offered his hand to Eva’s sister. After a minute, their other friend dragged Emi from his seat. Soon, more couples joined them on the plaza, clapping and laughing. Two toddlers held hands and bounced to the sob of the trombone.

Eva was a hydrologist and worked for a nonprofit bringing clean water to rural communities throughout Jalisco, Adrian learned over a shared cigarette. Her contract was about to expire, and when it did, she would begin her new job as vice-president of planning at Energía Paradiso. Adrian asked if she needed a trophy husband. He said his goal in life was to be a kept man. Eva squeezed his thick arms and said, “Maybe.”

After the cigarette, Adrian walked into the restaurant, to find an *Out of Order* sign pasted on the bathroom door. A busboy crouched in front of the toilet with a toolbox.

“Damn,” muttered Adrian, turning around. A pair of police stood outside, near the restaurant’s entrance. “Excuse me,” said Adrian. “The bathroom here is broken. You know where I could take a piss?” The rest of the shops surrounding the plaza had closed hours ago.

One of them glanced over while the other watched Eva dance with Emi. “Yeah,” said the cop. “Just go up the promenade a bit, to the rocks.”

“Thanks,” said Adrian. The cop nodded. Adrian’s head swam pleasantly. He wandered up the promenade, until slime-bearded rocks abutted the cement. A few meters below, waves dragged small stones over big stones with a hollow, toe-breaking percussion. “This can’t be right,” said Adrian. Then he chuckled. A cop telling him to piss on the sidewalk did seem to fit the mood of the night. He unbuttoned his pants and settled into a wide stance, facing the sea.

After a moment, a voice behind him said, “What are you doing, idiot?”

Adrian zipped up and turned around. A new pair of cops walked toward him, one shining a flashlight in his face. “Sorry,” said Adrian. “But I just asked one of your compadres and he told me I could piss here. Our restaurant’s bathroom was broken. I swear, he’s just over there.” Adrian gestured toward the plaza.

“Really?” asked the officer with the flashlight. “You’re sure he didn’t mean those?” He pointed his light across the promenade, illuminating a sign that read *Baños Públicos*, above the entrance to a bathroom.

“Híjole,” said Adrian. He grimaced theatrically. “Honest mistake.”

“Hands on your head,” said the other officer. Adrian looked toward the sky, and felt palms work their way up each leg, then around his waist, before the cop pulled the Ziplock of weed from Adrian’s pocket. “Ah. What’s this?”

“I have glaucoma,” said Adrian. He blinked a few times, then squinted, as though suddenly half-blind.

“You have enough for intent to distribute, is what you have,” said the cop with the flashlight. “I hope you’re local. Our jail is *not* fun for out-of-towners. Unless you really like acupuncture, I guess.” He unclipped his handcuffs.

“Acupuncture,” his partner repeated, chuckling. “Que culero.”

“Listen, guys,” said Adrian. “Is there any way to take care of this between us? Save everyone the hassle?” Adrian was certain he would be let go. Here they were, three people occupying the station’s life had swept them into. Law, and lawbreaker. But beneath their uniforms, these were good men, just like him. They didn’t actually want to make him suffer.

“How much do you have?” asked the cop holding the bag of weed.

“About a thousand, I think,” said Adrian.

The policemen shared a look. “I suppose we could look the other way, this once,” said the cop with the flashlight.

“I appreciate it,” said Adrian. He pulled a sheaf of pesos from his wallet, counted the bills, and handed them over. “1200, actually. For your trouble.” After a pause, Adrian asked, “So . . . can I have my bag back?”

The policemen glanced at each other again. “Don’t be a moron,” said the cop with the flashlight.

Adrian unclipped his watch from his wrist. It cost four times what the weed was worth. But convincing the cops to return his drugs seemed important. It would prove things were the way he thought, and not some other way. Adrian smiled. Held out the watch.

The cop handed Adrian the bag of weed, then clipped the watch to his wrist. “How does it look?” he asked his partner, turning his hand.

“Pretty cool, actually,” said the cop with the flashlight. They all laughed. On the other side of the promenade, white spangles trembled on the dark water. Above the horizon, the moon beamed. Adrian bid goodbye to the officers and walked toward the brassy sound floating from the plaza. “Where were you?” asked Emi.

“Just enjoying the pretty lights,” said Adrian. Emi shook his head and grinned as Adrian grabbed his hand. Everyone cheered while the two brothers pressed cheek-to-cheek and waltzed back and forth across the cobblestones.

After the band struck its final chord, Adrian asked Eva if he could see where she lived. She rolled her bottom lip between

her teeth, then said, “How about I give you my number? And we can go on a proper date?”

Adrian thought about pushing, but didn't. Instead, he handed Eva his phone and wondered when he'd next be in Puerto Vallarta. He'd brave the seven-hour bus ride from Guadalajara to see her again, he decided. Who knows, maybe he'd move here for her. “Expect a call,” said Adrian. Eva narrowed her bright eyes.

Adrian, Victor, and Emi walked toward the street, pawing at each other and laughing. They staggered, playing up their drunkenness for old time's sake. Adrian told Victor that he was going to shave his beard the moment they got home. Emi said he thought it looked distinguished. Adrian scrolled through his phone and found Fernando's contact. But this time, when he called, the line went straight to voicemail.

At the other end of the block, a taxi driver was talking with the same pair of police who'd frisked Adrian. The cops looked over, and the one wearing his watch pointed toward them. Adrian waved. The cops waved back as the driver walked over. “Where to?” the taxista asked, his eyes darting back and forth along the ground as though searching for something.

“Via Alvarado,” said Emi, fluffing Victor's beard with his fingers.

“70 pesos,” said the driver. A muscular flatulence, the smell of a punctured colon, wafted from an open sewer line running out to sea.

“Deal,” said Emi, and slid into the back seat. Victor followed. As Adrian started to climb in after them, a hand caught his arm. He looked around to find Eva. She glanced toward the policemen, who were watching a commotion in front of a bar down the street. Men tumbled out, shoving each other. One of the cops tapped a baton against his thigh.

“I changed my mind,” said Eva. “It is my birthday, after all.”

Adrian turned back to the cab. “See you guys tomorrow,” he said, and slammed the door on their catcalls. The lock clicked, and the cab pulled away. “Where to?” asked Adrian. Emi shouted something, his arm waving through the window. The cop with Adrian's watch turned to his partner and laughed.

“It's just a few blocks,” said Eva. Adrian pulled her to him. She tasted like fruit, and her body fit neatly against his.

They walked arm-in-arm along the promenade, listening to the waves lift toward the moon, then fall. The sea still determined, after all this time, to one day touch that shining light far, far above.

In her room, they undressed quickly and tumbled into bed. Eva wrapped her smooth legs around his hips. She kissed his neck, gripped his back. “Que quieres?” whispered Adrian, looking down.

“Tú,” said Eva, and breathed.

Adrian awoke to Eva tracing the tattoo on his forearm. “Good morning,” she said, examining the stylized letters. Adrian pushed the comforter down. The sheets released an artificial sweetness, sharpened slightly by the briny pheromones of their sweat. Eva’s studio was small, with a balcony that overlooked the ocean.

“Hi,” said Adrian. He braced for the familiar morning-after polarity reversal, when he would want to do nothing more than leave. When a list of invented obligations he could be late for would ticker through his head. Instead, Adrian wondered if Eva might want to go to Mass with him that afternoon. He propped himself up on his elbow and looked down at her nude body. She had a tattoo of her own, a delicate serpent uncoiling along her ribs. “Dios mío,” said Adrian, shaking his head. “He took His time with you.”

Eva swallowed a grin and fixed Adrian with a stern look. “Just so you know,” she said, walking her fingers across his chest. “I’m not usually this easy. Last night was an anomaly.”

“I’ll propose right now, if it would make you feel better,” said Adrian. He was surprised to find that the idea didn’t seem crazy, hanging between them in the daylight. “As long as you don’t make me sign a prenup. I want some of that Paradiso money if we don’t work out.”

“Hmm,” said Eva. She palmed Adrian’s stomach. “You *are* very pretty.” She slid her hand up his torso, then gently pushed his head toward her waist. “But what else can you offer? I need more than just a pretty face.”

Afterwards, Eva went to the bathroom. Adrian heard water running, and Eva singing *Di Mi Nombre*. He turned on the television, stood up, and began gathering his clothes. His

shirt was draped over a chair, his pants in a bundle beside the nightstand. Adrian fished his phone from the back pocket. Eva came out of the bathroom wearing a towel wrapped around her head and nothing more. She walked to the kitchen and began to slice an apple, quietly humming.

Adrian watched her and imagined a lifetime of mornings spent this way, naked and content. Then he looked at his phone. The screen was covered in an outbreak of small red numbers. 47 missed calls, 105 unread messages, 387 new WhatsApps. Like anyone born in this country, Adrian had long ago learned to fear unexpected notifications. He locked his phone again. Then he unlocked it.

There were messages from people Adrian hadn't spoken to in years. 19 missed calls from his mom. 32 WhatsApps from Ale. Random words from the truncated previews in his inbox seemed to glow: *sorry, best, help*. Adrian sat down on the bed. A professional voice cut through the static building inside his head. *A renowned journalist, Emiliano Gomez was best known for his work exposing corporate corruption.* Adrian looked to the television. *Easter Morning Massacre*, read the chyron. Two bodies hung beneath a bridge. One heavy, one thin. Both half-skinned, like fruit on display at some hellish market. Channel 7 would only show this footage once before the RTC threatened to censure them, Adrian heard himself think. A sheet flapped beside the bodies. A warning painted in blocky letters.

Mistaking them for out-of-town drug dealers, sicarios of La Nueva Generación once again demonstrated their ruthlessness toward any perceived competition. Adrian tried to push away understanding. *Already, other journalists are alleging law enforcement's involvement in the murders.* The television displayed side-by-side pictures of Emi and Victor, pulled from somewhere on the internet. Behind him, Eva gasped.

Adrian turned at the sound of her voice. She looked at him. He looked past her, out across the ocean's surface. Beneath that steely sprawl, noxious chemicals, known nowhere else in this or any other universe, seethed. Eva walked over and sat beside him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. Adrian braced for the acid-

wash of guilt, or rage, or grief. Instead, he felt a different kind of toxin spread across his mind. Comprehension, pure and searing. The entire race's slow awakening, distilled into a single second. "Should we get dressed?" asked Eva, putting a hand on his forearm.

Adrian stared a moment longer toward the horizon. A dark mass of thunderheads concealed the line where sea transformed to sky, but somewhere beyond that gathering storm, Adrian now knew, chaos gave way to void. Struggle dissolved into apathy. Orphans, all of them, left to this impossible task. Adrian met Eva's eyes. Even in her sorrow, they appeared backlit, as though refracting some muted glow within. "Yeah," said Adrian. His own voice sounded bizarre, distant and bulging with anguish. Eva wrapped her arms around him. Adrian, shaking, covered himself with the sheet. Never before had he felt so exposed, so unprotected. He leaned into Eva and said through the first, racking sob, "Yeah, I guess we should."

D.F. Salvador

The Long Vacation

The parking violation pinned behind the windshield wiper of Rosario's white Kia van looked as innocent as an advertisement, the official seal of the Municipal Court like any other corporate logo. Rosario crumpled the yellow slip and tucked it into her shirt pocket. She hoped Hector, her husband, was still asleep. He had told her not to park there, but what better place was there to park than on the shoulder of a tired road pockmarked by potholes? They weren't bothering anyone here where the road ended by the entrance to an old mom-and-pop gas station. What kind of cop would be so cruel as to cite them for parking too close to a fire hydrant?

And the thing was, Rosario didn't see a fire hydrant. Baffled, she walked along the crumbling curb until she finally saw the speckle of red amidst the tall weeds. She kicked the weeds aside and there it was. Hector was right. She shouldn't have parked there. They had been parking in a well-lit but quiet road that ran behind a Walmart in a good area of the city, but the previous night, a trio of 18-wheelers had used up all the curbside space.

Rosario returned to the van and peered through the rear window, relieved to find Hector still asleep on the backseat, his body curled into the tight space. Feist, their black cat, filled the gap in the crook of his legs.

Rosario quietly opened the driver's side door and settled in behind the steering wheel. She hadn't even started the engine when Hector stepped over the center console and plopped himself into the passenger seat. He groaned as he aligned himself.

Rosario slapped his thigh. "What are you doing climbing around like you're a little kid?"

"I feel like a young buck today," Hector said, rubbing the gray whiskers on his chin. "Doc said it's good for my back to stretch a little bit."

"If you get stuck, I'm not prying you free."

"*Mi vida*, you wouldn't need to. Your driving would jolt me

loose.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “We should fill gas while we’re here.”

“We have half a tank. We need dog food. They can’t survive on our scraps.”

“But gas prices will be higher tomorrow.”

“You say that every day, Hector.”

He flashed his confident smile. “And every day it’s true. When the summer’s over, we won’t have to run the engine so much to stay cool. We’ll stock up on dog food then.”

Rosario turned the ignition, and the van and her six cats and two dogs huddled in the back all came to life. She pulled into the gas station lot and parked next to a pump. Hector handed her his wallet. They were down to their last twenty dollars until Hector’s disability check arrived the following week. When she opened her door, Viola, their cockapoo, leapt out and looked up at Rosario, waiting for her owner to fish through the trash can for bits of food to share. Viola was Rosario’s hippy dog and Hector’s animal soulmate, never picky about destinations or meals. Except now there wasn’t much to eat.

Rosario left Viola under Hector’s watch and entered the gas station’s little mart. She searched the shelves but found only some cans of cat food. She grabbed four. That would leave a little for gas but couldn’t possibly be enough food for all her pets. She grabbed four more. Gas would have to wait.

An old woman carrying a morning six-pack of Modelo sidled up next to her. “Hungry cats?”

“Yup,” Rosario said. “The old ones gotta eat, too.”

“You can go to Walmart and get ‘em for twenty cents less.”

She smiled politely at the old woman in a way that said *have a nice day, but I’m done with this conversation* and made her way to the front counter.

The young cashier looked up from his phone when Rosario approached. His green polo was untucked and didn’t quite make it around his belly, leaving a visible gap of hairy skin. He smiled, grabbed a can, and ran it across the scanner. “How’s your morning been?” he asked.

Rosario watched him scan each can individually. “You know they’re all the same.”

He kept right on scanning. “Anything else I can help you with?”

“Are you hiring?”

He handed her the bag. “I don’t hire anyone. I just work here.”

“Well, I’ll take an application anyway.”

“An application for what?”

“Never mind.” Rosario stepped outside. Beads of sweat tagged her forehead. The nauseating smell of rubber and oil hung in the humid morning air. The parking lot had filled with cars, but Hector and Rosario’s van stood out amongst them all in its shabbiness. It had seen better days in its fifteen years. The rear fender was dented, the tail lamp cracked, a streak of rust sliced the hood, the rear door bludgeoned from when those boys pelted the van with baseballs for no reason other than to startle the couple. None of this was worth fixing. Layers of cosmetics couldn’t mask its antiquity or hide its fragility. Dirt permeated every seam. It was the same reason Rosario didn’t bother wearing makeup anymore. Having just celebrated her sixtieth birthday, she didn’t yet consider herself old. A long future lay ahead of her. She had plans for getting back on their feet. A job. An apartment. New clothes.

Rosario had always been a planner. For years, she had prepped her home for a large family, holding onto the dream of having her own children. Even when the doctors told her she couldn’t, she continued to make the preparations for a child with the hope that God had a miracle for her. She had carved out a little space in the spare room where the crib would be, and she started planning for her pets, researching what dogs would be gentlest around an infant. She wanted her kids to have a puppy to grow up with.

Hector, on the other hand, never thought that far ahead. He lived for the moment, each day a unique game. Seeing the sunrise was the prize for winning the previous day. He leaned against the van and had the gas nozzle inserted into the tank. Viola, now joined by Bruno, their chocolate lab, was taking in the new scents. Hector nudged them away from a small puddle of gasoline. Ever since the accident, any kind of bending caused him pain. Rosario hoped no one would misinterpret his little kick as abuse.

“Are they going to activate the pumps?” he asked.

“I didn’t buy gas.”

He gave her a suspicious smirk. “The well run dry?”

“They need food.”

“The oilmen?”

“Our pets.”

“Sheesh, *mi vida*. I was joking. Don’t give me that serious face. They eat more than me.”

“What about Vino?”

“Vino didn’t starve to death. He had cancer.”

“And Swiss?”

“Ah, she was just old.”

Rosario loved her animals. When they vacated their house, they’d had ten. Now, there were eight. They both knew caring for the animals on their fixed income would be a problem, but what could she do? She couldn’t find anyone to take the pets, and if she dropped them off at the shelter and no one adopted them soon enough, well, she didn’t want to think about that. Her pets were her family. She had rescued all of them, given them hope. If no one would take in the helpless, what would this world come to?

Rosario opened the cans, and the six cats leapt from the van to battle for the food.

“Save some for Viola and Bruno,” Hector said, scolding the cats for swatting away the dogs.

A blue Ford Mustang pulled up on the opposite side of the gas pump and a young woman in pink pajama pants got out. She crossed over to their side of the pump and squatted to pet Viola. “Wow! You’ve got the whole crew here. Are you on vacation or something?”

“Something like that,” Hector said. “A long vacation.”

Rosario knew this was no vacation. Vacations always held the promise of a return home.

Pink Pajamas tried to pet Bruno, but he pulled his head away. She laughed. “It’s good to get away from home, sometimes. I wish I could take a vacation. But the animals. It’s always such a pain finding pet sitters. You know, there’s an app for your phone where you can—”

“My wife likes traveling with the animals,” Hector said. “She can’t bear the thought of being away from them.”

Rosario bristled at her husband. As much as she hated begging, Hector should have taken the opportunity to get a

few bucks from a fellow animal lover.

“I totally get it,” Pink Pajamas said. “Where you folks headed?”

Hector flashed that same smile that earned him the title of Homecoming King so many decades ago. “We’re like a tumbleweed. We go where the wind takes us.”

“Sounds wonderful. I wish I could go on a long vacation.”

Rosario wanted to say *Just get foreclosed on, sell everything you can, pack up the van, and the dream can be yours, too*, but she had learned not to get so bitter when Hector flirted with someone. Every minute of conversation with a beautiful young woman was another point in Hector’s daily game that helped him secure the win. There were other points that mattered, like getting food and having enough for the copay on prescriptions, but he could survive and win the day without those things every now and then. Physical necessities were just a part of the game’s scoring system. Also, Hector was both player and coach. Even though he’d complain about the pets and how much they ate, or shit, or whimpered throughout the night, he felt it was his responsibility to lead them to victory.

Pink Pajamas filled her tank and sped off. Hector and Rosario herded their pets back into the van.

Hector took a deep, satisfying breath. “Where to, oh blessed day?”

All Rosario could think about was the parking ticket. “We need to go to the Municipal Court,” she said.

“Now? Why?”

“I think we overpaid on our property taxes. We might be able to get some money back. Any bit will help, right?”

“Don’t we need to go to the Tax Assessor’s office for that?”

“There’s a new program at the Municipal Court where lawyers will help us navigate the process. You can even get the money there, I think.”

“Where did you hear about this?”

“An old woman inside the store.”

“And you think it’s worth driving across town to see if the lady is right?”

“She works there. And she said there may be some job openings.”

The truth was Rosario had some cash stashed away that Hector didn't know about, and she didn't want this ticket hanging over them. A month after receiving the foreclosure notice, a nice young woman had come by their house with an offer of one-thousand dollars cash if they vacated their home immediately instead of going through all the legal proceedings, which would end up with an eviction anyway, sans the thousand bucks. Rosario, of course, didn't tell Hector about the payout, because she was saving it to go towards the first and last month rent they would need for an apartment. She hadn't touched it for four months. She'd tried to put it out of her mind. Several times, they'd gone for a couple days with no food other than a little trail mix. Rosario could have dipped into the eviction slush fund, but she knew if she did it even just once, it would be that much easier to do it the next time, and then it would be gone.

They drove past the green stucco building that long ago used to be Wurly Burger, the place where all the football players would go after the Friday night game. The girls would get there early and wait for them to make it seem like the boys were chasing them and not the other way around. Hector would inevitably walk in with his winning smile, even on those nights when his Bulldogs were on the losing side of things. Rosario always reluctantly tagged along with her friends until she lay eyes on Hector. Then she went willingly.

Eventually, the Wurly was where Rosario and Hector would share a banana milkshake and talk about the future, the places they'd go, the kids they would have and what they would name them. By the time they were married, Wurly Burger had gone out of business, much to the dismay of everyone who'd grown up in the area, and it was replaced by a taqueria that nobody wanted but turned out to be better than everyone expected. Rosario and Hector would go there, and over tacos and horchatas, they'd discuss Hector's landscaping company that turned into a roofing company.

Now, the little building was a pawn shop and was where they'd gone to pawn Rosario's wedding ring a few months back when they were dead broke and they and their animals were starving. They got three-hundred dollars for it.

He promised he would get the ring back, that this was just

a temporary setback. If they lost everything else, it didn't matter because he was going to get that ring if it killed him. His confident smile was no longer reassuring to Rosario.

They never brought it up again. *Damn it, she had the money.* But she couldn't tell him about it. Now, the ring was gone, sold off.

But marriage wasn't about rings and things. It was about love and trust.

She had the money, but she said nothing.

They arrived at the Municipal Court, and Rosario climbed to the back of the van to get her nicer walking shoes that she told Hector should be reserved only for special occasions like job interviews. Stuffed into the toe of the left shoe were the ten one-hundred-dollar bills. She snuck them into her purse and put the shoes on.

The courthouse was a confusing maze of hallways leading to courtrooms and offices. Besides the security guard who waved the wand over her to make sure she wasn't a threat, no one else acknowledged her. She knocked on the door of a courtroom and hearing no response, opened the heavy door. The courtroom was empty except for the judge who sat on the bench punching away at her laptop.

"Excuse me, Your Honor," Rosario said. "I have a ticket I need to take care of."

"Ma'am, I can't help you. You need to go talk to a prosecutor."

"Yes, but I don't think it was fair. They said I was parked—"

"Room 106. That's where you go for parking tickets." The judge's eyes returned to the computer screen.

Rosario slipped out of the courtroom and navigated the hallways until she found 106. She pulled the crumpled ticket out of her pocket and put it on the counter. "I received this ticket."

A pale old woman with thick glasses and bags under her eyes glanced at the citation. "How do you want to plea?"

"What are my choices?"

"Guilty or not guilty."

"Is there someone I can talk to about this?"

"You're talking to me."

"Well, you see, the officer said I parked too close to the fire

hydrant, but I couldn't see it because the weeds were too tall."

"You can request a trial." The woman thwacked her keyboard with her fingers a few times. "It's not in the system yet. You'll have to come back."

"But I'm here now. Can you check again?"

The lady typed more numbers into the computer. "Nope. It's not showing. But I do see you have warrants."

"Warrants? For what?"

"Failure to maintain financial responsibility and failure to appear."

All Rosario heard was failure. "What does this mean?"

"You had a ticket for no insurance."

"A long time ago, yes. And a speeding ticket. I paid that, and they said they would dismiss the no-insurance ticket."

"If you came back to court with proof of insurance. But you didn't. And now you have a failure-to-appear violation."

"Can it be dismissed? I can show you proof."

"Not once it's gone to collections."

"How much do I owe?"

"Eight hundred and fifty dollars."

"And if I can't pay it?"

The old woman sighed and gave Rosario a brief look of pity. "Like I said, you have warrants."

Rosario peeled off nine one-hundred-dollar bills and placed them on the counter. The woman gave her fifty dollars in change and a receipt.

"Are the warrants off?"

"They should clear out by tomorrow. Don't get pulled over or anything between now and then and you'll be fine."

"And my parking ticket?"

"Just come back within thirty days. It should be in the system within the week." The clerk handed the parking ticket back to Rosario.

Rosario stepped away from the desk, gathered her courage and said, "Ok. I have one other question. Is anyone hiring here right now? I'm very good with numbers and very punctual . . . except paying that old ticket which was only because I didn't remember and . . . I will . . . I will value this job like my life depended on it."

The old woman smiled. "Not at this time, hon."

Rosario exited the building and stepped into the midday swelter. Hector had moved the van to the far corner of the parking lot, away from the police cruisers and from anyone else who might pay too much attention to it. She squinted at the van, the sun reflecting its full fury off the white surface. She felt a stickiness in her eyelids when she blinked. As she walked to the van, she felt the stickiness in her toes as if they'd melted into one sloppy clubfoot. She felt it under her arms, between her legs, the moist, flabby skin of her thighs colliding and resisting every stride. The stickiness permeated her skin, her blood moving like sludge through her veins. She felt moldy and rotten. She teetered with each step and thought she'd never reach the van which now blended into a vague horizon like a mirage. But she moved onward, calibrating her steps, and when she finally reached the van, leaned over and clutched the door handle, it felt like victory.

Hector had the window down, his elbow dangling out the opening, sweat dripping from his armpits. Bruno was barking, not in his usual deep grunts but in sharp, plaintive wails as if something fierce were attacking him.

"Why did you move the van?" Rosario asked.

"Bruno. He's acting crazy. Everyone started looking. One lady came by and said I should turn on the car because our poor pets were probably too hot. So, I moved us across the lot away from her. Fixed that problem."

"Bruno's hungry. He's big and needs space to move. And you should have left the car on with the AC running."

"I had the windows down. Can't waste gas. Less than half a tank and no money unless . . ." He forced a wry smile. "Well, *mi vida*, was the lady a liar or do you have some money?"

Rosario pulled the one-hundred-fifty dollars out of her pocket and showed it to Hector. She forced a smile to make her moist eyes appear like tears of joy. "I did well."

"Way to go! The lady was not crazy. That was a good place you picked to park."

"I'm glad you trusted me. I told you it was a good place."

He got out of the car and gave her a sweaty hug.

She accepted it. "Do you know what today is, Hector?"

"No. What is today? It's not my birthday. I don't think it's yours. So, tell me."

“Today is the anniversary of the day I told my friend Lucie that my future husband just walked in the door of Wurly Burgers.”

“What?”

“It was the first time I saw you. You walked in and I said, ‘That’s my future husband who just walked in the door.’”

“We hadn’t even spoken yet.”

“I know. I just knew. I always knew you were the one, Hector.”

“And that was today?”

It wasn’t this date. It was actually October sixteenth, the day the Bulldogs beat Carver Heights in overtime. But it didn’t matter. The moment was true. Her words to Lucie were prophetic. “We’re going to have a steak dinner to celebrate,” she said.

“Steak dinner!”

“And then we’re gonna get big bones that we’ll give to the dogs. We’ll all eat like kings today.”

“Don’t tease me, *mi vida*. My stomach is already growling at just the thought of a steak. A ribeye? Are you sure?”

How much was a smile worth in the daily game? Rosario wondered if some wins stood out over others. How did Hector win every day? She wanted this. She wanted this for him.

After they freshened up and changed out of their sticky clothes, Rosario drove to Caravaggio’s, a steakhouse they couldn’t afford even in the best of times, but today it was necessary. Since it was a Wednesday night, they were able to be seated without a reservation. And when the bread came, they didn’t touch it. Instead, she shoveled it into her purse for them to eat later. They asked for more bread, and more was delivered and hidden away.

Hector ordered the ribeye and the lobster fried rice. They each had a glass of wine, the house red. How long had it been since they’d had a glass of wine? And they toasted. How long had it been since they’d had a reason to toast? And Hector’s smile was authentic and assuring. There he was, the proud linebacker who could stop a runner dead in his tracks at the goal line and then extend a hand to help them off the ground, the good sport he was.

They laughed like they hadn’t laughed in so many years,

and when the food was done and the bones and leftover rice bagged up, she was able to pay the bill in cash and leave a decent tip. They were laughing still when they exited the restaurant. The sticky decay was gone, and her head danced a little jig, the effect of the wine.

Then Rosario saw the two police cars parked behind their van, one with its lights flashing.

It was over. They had come for her. Her expression must have revealed as much.

Hector's smile evaporated. "What did you do, *mi vida*? Did you steal this money?"

"No, Hector. I didn't steal the money."

"Why are they at our van?"

"Because I have warrants."

"Warrants? What did you do?"

"It's from a long time ago."

"Oh, *mi vida*. How could you not tell me? This must be a mistake. You knew about this?" He grimaced.

"Yes, Hector."

Rosario walked up to the van and a police officer approached her.

"Ma'am, is this your van?" asked an officer with TORRES emblazoned on his name tag.

She nodded.

"We received a report that a dozen animals are locked inside. One of the dogs has apparently been howling for over an hour."

"We have eight pets."

An Animal Control truck pulled into the lot and the handlers stepped out to have a conversation with the other officers on the scene.

"Unlock the van please," Officer Torres said.

Rosario complied.

Officer Torres pulled out his notepad. "Can I see your ID?"

"Officer, I have warrants, but I paid my tickets earlier today."

"I'm not worried about your traffic tickets. You can't keep these guys locked in there in this heat. "

"We're in here all day with these animals. They're used to the heat. And we opened the windows. And . . . and this is for

them.” She opened the bag to show the officer the bones and leftover rice. “They’re going to eat like kings.”

An animal wrangler opened the van and Viola leapt out. Bruno woofed. The cats wailed. And all the evidence of their homelessness spoke through the dirty laundry scattered on the seats, the jugs of water stashed on the floor, a litter box tucked into the back, trinkets of life that had no value except in the purity of the memories.

“You live in this van?” Officer Torres asked.

“Yes.”

The News12 van pulled up and made a sudden stop. A reporter and her cameraman hopped out. Officer Torres tried to shield Rosario from the reporter.

Officer Torres looked at the doggy bag. “Steak dinner?”

“We were celebrating.”

“You’re celebrating?”

“I know, officer. You wouldn’t understand.”

The reporter penetrated Officer Torres’ defense and positioned herself in front of Rosario. She asked Rosario questions while Hector looked on from where he sat on the curb. She told the reporter everything—the eviction, their earnest attempts to find their pets a better home, the fear she had for tomorrow—but she left out the part about the thousand dollars and the traffic tickets.

As the animals were loaded into the animal control truck, Rosario glared at the news reporter who offered a concerned expression as she gave her final summary to the camera, to the thousands of people who would watch the evening news or see the story on social media. “This story just tugs at my heart. This is no way to live, cramped in a van, sweating out the summer. As a community, we can do something about it. Let’s show that we care. Please help these poor animals find a home by calling the number on the screen. Give these pets the second chance they deserve.”

As the truck drove away, Viola howled.

Elliot Aglioni

Mortimer Causa

On Thursday afternoon, in the lobby of the National Bank, Mortimer Causa found out he was dead. He was depositing his end-of-year bonus payment from his employer, the firm of David, Thomas, Bento & Rosenstern, when the teller disappeared, leaving Mort at the counter and a line of clients behind him.

As he waited, the sun reached an angle to stream through a window and refracted off the crystal chandelier hung in the middle of the room. Mort followed a rainbow dancing over landscape paintings, ornamental mouldings and brass sconces. The lobby glowed, and he could make out details normally shrouded in civilized dimness. The clerk at the next counter was hiding a pimple on her chin with cover-up. The upper shelf of a cabinet hadn't been dusted. The carpet had suffered more than a few coffee spills. The sun dipped one degree lower and the spell was broken. Everything returned to orderly and efficient gloom.

Mort's senses awakened to the possibility of bureaucratic obstacles when, instead of returning alone, the teller came back to the counter accompanied by a manager in a royal blue suit.

The transaction Mort was attempting to conduct was impossible to complete, the manager informed him. The precise nature of the problem could not be disclosed due to the privacy policies of the National Bank. Mort would have to make an appointment by calling their central line, and would he now please leave the counter so those who maintained an account with the Bank might conduct their business.

Mort replied in the calmest voice he could muster, "I'm sure with your diligence—not to mention exemplary customer service standards—we'll get this sorted quickly. Speaking of which, you're implying I'm not a client, which perplexes me, as I've had my account over twenty years. As a matter of courtesy for a long-time patron, could you please tell me what the problem is?"

The manager didn't appreciate Mort's appeal to reason and simply repeated that he must leave, adding that he did not wish to have to resort to calling the police and have Mort removed from the premises.

"That's a great idea," Mort said, permitting himself a more aggressive tone in the face of Blue Suit's suggestion that the use of force was necessary. "I'd love to hear why you shouldn't be charged with theft for not letting me access my account. I'll gladly wait while you call."

Mort sat fifteen minutes in an uncomfortable Chesterfield chair. He texted his principal that he had been waylaid, then scrolled aimlessly through photos of strange children and advertisements for hair regeneration treatments and testosterone pills.

The manager approached the policeman straight away when he entered the lobby, shook his hand, then pointed at Mort, like he was the defendant in a TV courtroom drama. The policeman followed Blue Suit behind the counter, leaned down to look at a screen, then straightened and started towards Mort with a slow, off-kilter gait.

"ID," he said, and Mort complied. Officer Bland considered Mort's photo for a second.

"This isn't a police matter," he said, resting his hand on his holster. "The manager there says you're into some type of fraud. Says it's because this guy," Bland pointed to Mort's ID, "is dead. Showed me the screen—black on white. Account locked. Look, I know fraud when I see it. This is an administrative cock-up. Nothing I can do to help you there." He handed back the card. "Bank closes in ten minutes. Maybe you come back tomorrow," he said, and lumbered back through the lobby and out the door.

Mort didn't feel like going back to work, and having just made partner, he could permit himself small indulgences. He called his girlfriend and suggested he bring over ramen from their spot, with gyoza and a soft-boiled egg, which he knew she wouldn't refuse.

On Friday, Mort had his assistant contact the civil registry office, and the following Friday he received a manila envelope by courier. He placed the letter opener under the flap and dragged it across, opening the cavity. He could hear blood

rushing through his ears.

According to the civil registry office, Mortimer Causa had died four months ago in an explosion at Reverend Mike's, a downtown watering hole Mort didn't think he had ever visited. He certainly remembered the news of the explosion, the work of a separatist terrorist group. The city had been on edge eight days, until police arrested the culprits.

The coroner's report detailed bone fragments and body parts recovered from the scene, belonging to a male of Mort's approximate age and size, but the decisive factor appeared to be the discovery of a half-incinerated wallet—Mort's wallet—he had lost it around that time. He still couldn't fathom how he could have been declared dead without so much as a phone call or someone knocking at his door, but whatever the reason, the fact was before him.

Mort's first thought was to call his mother. He hadn't spoken to her in two weeks, having missed their Sunday call in favour of a brunch date at Café de l'Europe, meaning multiple mimosas and sloppy sex. Maybe it was that she'd birthed him, so it felt right to tell her of his alleged demise.

Mort could hear the TV in the background—the unmistakable urgent tone of daytime news. He agreed to stop by for dinner over the weekend, a penance to assuage his guilt. His mother seemed unperturbed by the news. The woman who was sent into a panic when his flight was delayed due to weather didn't react at all. But when Mort told her the circumstances of his supposed passing, she gasped and yipped in excitement, unable to get a word out.

"Victim," she gargled. "Victim of that terrorist attack! My boy!"

She had been following every twist of the story and recounted it in bursts of agitated sounds. Mort gathered only her dismay that the death penalty had been abolished, since every breath drawn by the six wicked separatists was an affront to God. She promised she would pray for him, and Mort didn't know what to say.

Hannah entered his apartment without greeting, sloughing off her bag onto the floor. She was a doctoral student in sociology, smarter and better-read than Mort, but gracious

about it. When they debated the texts she was teaching over dinner she let him get away with little things—like conflating deconstruction and post-structuralism—for which Mort was grateful.

She did not wait for Mort to ask her what was bothering her, as was their custom, but launched directly into a series of questions about his marriage intentions. The topic itself was no great surprise. They had had a conversation some months ago discussing their respective expectations of a collective future, where Hannah conveyed that she wanted to be married soonish, and Mort indicated a rough timeline of a year might make sense. Mort had casually looked at rings online and had vague ideas of a spring proposal and fall wedding. He told her as much.

“That’s all fucked now, isn’t it?”

“Sorry?” he said, needing a beat.

“Can’t get married if you’re dead, can you?”

“I’m sure this will get resolved soon. Besides, what should it matter? We can just have a private ceremony.”

“A fake wedding? It’s always something with you, Mort, isn’t it? Wait until I make partner. Wait until you defend your dissertation. Wait to move in together because I’m such a busy, important attorney. I’m thirty-fucking-four years old and I want kids, so if you can’t marry me—actually marry me in the eyes of the law—before I hit thirty-five, this is over. We’re a good match, Mort, but don’t think I don’t have other options.”

“How is this my fault?” he managed, but Hannah had already picked up her bag and shut the door behind her.

Mort’s mother lived in a bungalow about an hour outside the city in one of those exurban towns populated by retirees and sad-looking families with too many children. The house was decorated with pastel knitwork and retail prints of flowers. Mort entered through the side-door from the garage. He couldn’t hear the TV on in the kitchen, nor did he catch a whiff of chicken paprikash, which was the only thing his mother cooked when he came over. He glanced at his phone to see if he had somehow mixed up the time, but it was six on the dot.

He wandered down the back hall and saw his mother seated at the vanity, wearing a black blouse she hadn't worn in years, applying eyeliner. He stopped, held his breath and watched how she put her tongue to her lips as she guided the tip of the pencil under her eyes, then inspected, turning her head from side to side, leaving her eyes fixed on the mirror.

"You startled me! What are you doing here? Oh," she realized, "I completely forgot." Her eyes lit up. "Did I tell you? Channel 4 called. They want to interview me—it's about you, dear, of course. Your name—the last victim—it's all in the news. But you shouldn't be here." She put the eyeliner back in a drawer and stood up. "No, no it's OK. You'll wait in my room. You'll stay back here and won't make a sound, right?"

"This is crazy, Ma. You're going to lie to people?"

"Lie? I ask you to sit and be quiet half an hour, and all you can do is call me a liar. Go ahead then. Do what you want. Don't worry about me."

Mort watched the news truck roll into the driveway from the side window as he ate a turkey sandwich with mayonnaise and a wilted piece of lettuce—the best his mother could muster in a few minutes. He could make out most of the interview from the hall. His favourite part was when the reporter asked his mother whether, after four months of waiting, the confirmation gave her closure, and without missing a beat she said he was here with her now.

Once the cameras had gone, Mort went back to the living room. His mother was still on the sofa, holding a baby picture. He put his arms around her.

"I didn't think it would feel like this," she said.

"What would?" he asked, but she was oblivious. She held the picture frame against her chest and rocked back and forth in his arms.

The phone rang. His mother jumped up.

"That'll be my sister. Sorry about dinner, but you'll come over next weekend, yes? I'll do chicken paprikash to make it up to you."

On Monday morning, Mort's assistant accosted him before he got to his desk. He was wanted urgently in Mr. Thomas' office.

“Morty man,” Mr. Thomas greeted him as he knocked on the open door. “What’s this business of you being dead?”

Mort told the story from the start, as Mr. Thomas tapped his pen against the edge of his desk: Blue Suit at the bank, the civil registry office—Mort left out the bit about his girlfriend—his mother’s fixation with being on the news.

Mr. Thomas interrupted Mort’s description of the TV interview. This situation was putting him in a tough spot, he was saying. Legally speaking, Mort couldn’t be an employee or receive a salary. The amounts he’d been paid the last four months would have to be clawed back. The sum was substantial, and Mr. Thomas was getting pressure from the other partners. The firm had a claim to a death benefit from the insurance policy the partnership purchased on Mort’s life. They couldn’t jeopardize that claim.

Mr. Thomas was counting. Thirty. Sixty. Two-hundred thousand. A quarter-million.

“Can’t you just put them off a week? I’m already drafting a writ of mandamus,” he lied. “I was hoping you would represent me.”

Mr. Thomas’ tone intensified, admonishing Mort not to let his emotions cloud his judgment. His death certificate was on file. (Thank you, by the way.) It would be wrong to ignore. He should know the law is unconcerned with subjective views of reality. Mr. Thomas looked at his watch and stood up to dissipate the unpleasantness.

“I’ve got to get to the conference room. Sorry, Mort.”

Mort went back to his office, sat at his desk and looked out the window. It was still early, the orange sun just under the skyline. He could see traffic still blocking the highway. Hundreds of cars stopped by kinematic waves of humanity. A fierce wind whistled past the plate glass. He stood and pressed himself against the pane with his arms at his sides and looked down.

Mort’s breath fogged the surface and all he could see was a patchwork of grey. He considered the moisture on the window then exhaled heavily again. Mort raised his index finger and wrote his name over the hazy city.

It was a matter of days until the bailiffs closed up Mort's apartment and seized his car. He absconded with a couple suitcases of stuff to his mother's. She was still reveling in her TV appearance. She had managed to get a recording of the broadcast that she would play every night after dinner, silently mouthing the words as she watched along. Mort would watch with her, and she always asked him whether he thought she seemed like a good mother.

"You are a good mother, Ma," he would reply.

Mort had tried to get his own interview, writing missives to newspapers and TV stations, but had only received a single response:

Sir/Madam:

While we are sensitive to your situation, the *Tribune* does not presently publish personal interest articles.

Yours truly,
Tribune Staff

His court appearance was a flop. Mort sat in a windowless room a Friday morning in a slightly creased suit. A lawyer for the Registrar and an associate from his former firm sat on the other side of the room. When the file was called from the roll, the clerk asked counsel to identify themselves for the record.

"Mort Causa, applicant," Mort said.

Justice Louis looked up from his file. Mort thought he saw a glimmer of recognition in his eyes—Mort had appeared before him only a few weeks prior—but he must have been mistaken. Justice Louis didn't even let opposing counsel speak.

"Am I to understand that you are appearing for yourself? And the object of your application is to challenge a proof of death from the Registrar? And you are—or claim to be—this selfsame deceased?" Justice Louis shook his head. "You have no standing here. Dead men don't plead. Get yourself a lawyer and set a new date."

Every day, Mort would take the train into the city and walk. At first, he killed time in museums and libraries but soon realized he preferred the noise and volatility of the street. He let himself be carried by the movements of crowds, following the direction of the largest swarm of people. He enjoyed the clash of bodies probing for space in subway cars and elevators, the smells of strange hair and clothing pressed against his face.

Mort found himself on campus. He walked across the icy quad and up the hill to the Arts Building. He waited for Hannah outside her class. When it was over they sat on the steps, watching groups of students collide and divide in social dance. Mort bummed a rolling paper, some shag and a light from an unkempt undergrad. He let the smoke linger in his mouth.

“You look like shit,” she said, then asked what she was getting in his will—a few paintings from his apartment, including one she had been keen on. Two figures played volleyball, each only visible from the waist up. They were mirror images, one facing away from the viewer and the other fading into the background, features blurred. The ball was a yellow comet. Mort told her he thought she should keep it.

Mort was lightheaded from the tobacco. He stood up and said words and walked down the steps. The clouds were unbearably white. He tried to shield his eyes, but it was no use, the light reflected off the snow and ice. The world became blotches of blue and burgundy. Someone had taken a scalpel, cut the city open and pulled back the veneer, revealing pulsing, fleshy bits of existence. Mort could hear the grinding of metal, feel his bones vibrate. He let out a low groan in the same key.

Mort’s lawyer looked almost as shabby as him. His suit hung off his frame as he hunched over the desk straightening the file. Justice Marks barked at him to hurry up, but he was unflappable.

He had insisted Mort attend the scheduling hearing. It was no inconvenience. Mort was always downtown early. He had taken to walking back and forth across congested intersections during rush hour. Exhaust fumes and the cacophony of horns

invigorated him as he paced deliberately on the crosswalk.

“My Lord, given the overwhelming evidence that the man who sits next to me is the same man the Registrar says is dead, we must insist this case be heard promptly on the merits.” His lawyer made a show of jostling Mort’s shoulder as he addressed the judge. “Justice demands it. We are available any time, even today, my Lord.”

Marks turned to counsel for Registrar.

“We have no objection, Mr. Justice Marks, only a slight complication. The court will undoubtedly want to hear from the coroner who declared Mr. Causa dead. He has unfortunately taken ill—something serious I’m afraid—and he will not be available for at least a month. And yes, I have inquired about obtaining an affidavit in lieu of testimony, but he is simply in too delicate a state. Strict orders from his doctor.” She proffered a letter. “We will be speaking to him the first day we are able. In the meantime, I must implore the court to grant a small delay. It would be risky to make a final determination without hearing from the man who made the medical finding at issue.”

“One month,” Marks growled. “If I don’t have your coroner here in a month, I’m proceeding, medicine be damned.”

From his seat on a bench in the tourist district, the building across was half-hidden by fencing. Pictures and posters littered the panels, plastic flowers at the base. The scene was lit by streetlamps and watched over by a disapproving priest in a turtleneck, eyes inches above the shrine.

Mort raised himself and walked the perimeter of the fence, peered through the gaps. He reached the far side where it ended against the wall of the adjoining building. He set his foot halfway up, reached for the top, and almost gracefully pulled himself over.

The windows were boarded up. The door was just a piece of plywood. Mort pulled it open. The place was empty except steel piles and stacked bricks. Skid marks streaked the walls, the roof a quilt of tarps, dotted with nails. Mort stood in the center and conjured.

The bartender rattles ice in twin cocktail shakers as he shouts something to the waiter. Patrons press up against

the bar, brandishing fingers or smiles. In darker corners, wannabe Don Juans hum their lines to the impressionable and unimpressed. People are dancing between tables, tentative steppers and groovers in abandon to the music. A couple embraces. Hands are in hair and hands grasp a waist. The air is heavy with potential energy.

Cut to white. The soundtrack goes silent. A wave rips through his body. Fire separating flesh. Mort doesn't feel scared, just stupid. Stupid in the face of the infinite, with a tiny thought like pain, or love, or death.

"Hey," a voice was saying. "Hey! You can't be here."

A security guard was coming through the doorway, headed straight for Mort. Mort was bolted in place. The guard put his hands on him.

"You gotta leave." He pulled Mort off balance. Mort didn't resist.

Mort fell into the guard's broad chest, cheek against his Kevlar vest. His arms flexed around Mort's torso, holding Mort's entire weight. His skin was so soft. It smelled of cocoa butter. Mort looked up into his eyes, pupils dilated, sucking in every photon.

A vacuum woke him. The whirr of the motor. Brushes spinning over carpet. Grains of sand rattling up a tube. A ringing phone pierced the white noise and the vacuum stopped.

The sun was breaking through lace, drenching the bedspread. A greenhouse. Flowers on flowers. Mort kicked through them. He was wearing a dirt-stained suit. He shed the jacket as he rolled off the bed, lunged for the window as he slipped out of the pants. Unwound the crank. Cool air rushed into his lungs. His breathing slowed.

Wisps of mist rose from the wood behind the bungalow. White tendrils wrapped around tree trunks before the wind swept them up. Silver rivulets ran down the slope. Mort pictured walking there. His feet sinking through snow down to mud underneath. Silt between his toes. Heat radiating from his legs, his calves steaming. Ice melting around him. He popped out the window screen.

The skunk cabbage would be blooming. Purple and green fingers jutting from black puddles. The odour of rotting meat.

Terry Mulhern

Watch out for snakes

“Off with you!” My mother swished her straw broom at my retreating buttocks.

“Bye, Ma,” I called over my shoulder.

“And watch out for snakes!”

I ran out of the hut, dodged three flapping hens, leapt the split rail fence in one go and continued at pace across the paddock. I slowed to a jog as I neared the bush. On the flats near the creek, the big gumtrees were sparse. But as I started up the hill, the stringybarks drew closer together. The nearer I came to the foot of the escarpment, the denser the forest became.

Pushing my way through a thicket of dogwood and musk, I startled an unseen wallaby which thump-thump-thumped away from me. The musty scent of the dark forest’s dampness and decay filled my lungs. Massive, buttressed roots of towering swamp gums blocked my path and forced me sideways to slither over moss-covered logs and through swathes of glossy green fishbone waterfern. As I scrambled my way higher, the understory thinned and dappled light broke through. Further up the steep hillside, I began to see patches of blue sky and glimpses of the high cliffs through gaps in the canopy. Here, the dry leaf litter crackled underfoot.

Eventually, I reached the enormous rock that bulged out from the ridgeline like a great grey sphinx. I clawed my way up the precipitous rockface. Once atop the sphinx’s head, I opened my kangaroo skin knapsack, removed the old amber glass rum bottle, pulled out the cork and took a swig of water. The bread and cheese wrapped in a cloth, I saved for later.

Far below me, a sea of grey-green foliage filled the valley, except for the ten acres of pasture around our hut. A thin twisting ribbon of blue smoke rose from its chimney. To its left, I could see the milling white dots of sheep being moved by my stepfather, Patrick O’Brien.

The farm wasn’t much to look at, yet O’Brien was proud of it. In Van Diemen’s Land few men with a convict background

owned land, and O'Brien never tired of telling the story of how he was rewarded with the King's pardon and thirty acres for capturing the bloodthirsty bushranger, 'Roarin' Jack' Rathmines.

"It was him or me," O'Brien would say, "and even though he had a pistol, and all I had was my shillelagh—Jesus, Mary and Joseph—I knew it wasn't goin' to be me!" Then O'Brien would put down his pannikin of rum, lift his shirt and point to the purple scar the size of a crown piece where the pistol ball glanced off his rib.

A shower of small stones rattled down the sphinx's back. I spun around and peered up at the bushes where the rock buried itself into the mountainside. My heart thumped hard in my chest. Probably just another wallaby. Then something moved. Something much bigger than a wallaby.

"Who's there?" My throat was so tight the words had difficulty escaping.

A man's bare foot emerged, followed by his outstretched leg and then the rest of him. He slid forward on his backside. His matted hair and beard were filthy, and his stained yellow convict slops marked with the government's broad arrow were ragged and torn.

"I means ye no harm, lad. But I'm ever so thirsty. Could I trouble ye fer a sip o' water?"

A bolter. I weighed the consequences of being caught assisting an escaped prisoner against failing to be what Ma called a 'good Samaritan'. I walked halfway across the rock and placed the bottle down.

The man grimaced as he held his swollen purple foot off the ground and crabbed his way forward. With shaking hands, he grasped the bottle and poured its contents down his throat. When he was done, he wiped his mouth and sighed with relief.

"Thank ye kindly. I slipped comin' down yon cliff." He waved towards the fluted rock stacks that towered above us like castle battlements. "Busted me ankle. Been scrabblin' round on me arse since yesterday. Like the 'Grand Old Duke of York'," he chuckled, "I could go neither up nor down." He paused. "I thought I was done fer. Till ye come along. What's thy name lad?"

"Michael. Michael Mulligan."

“Well, I owes ye a debt of gratitude, Michael-Michael-Mulligan.” He held out his hand and winked at me with a smile, “Richard-Richard-Arkwright, *Proteus*. Life. Fer machine breakin’.”

I folded my arms, “Shouldn’t you only got seven years for that?”

“Ah, well ye have me there, ‘yer honour’. Maybe, someone also heard me threaten a rich bastard of a mill owner, and perhaps I set fire to his house—but nobody was killed.”

“Why you running?”

“Got tickled by the cat one too many times.” I could see an involuntary wince as he recollected the bite of the lash. “Decided to take me chances in the bush . . . Been on the run about a week.” He shut one eye and grinned meekly, clearly embarrassed. “Turns out, I’m not so clever a bushman as I thought.”

“I suppose you’re hungry then?”

“Aye. A touch.”

I reached into my knapsack and handed him the bundle of food.

Ma passed me the bowl of potatoes. I heaped a larger than usual portion onto my plate. O’Brien scowled. “Mind you leave some for the rest of us.”

“Leave him be, Patrick. He’s a growing boy.”

“Shut your mouth, woman. He’s a growin’ boy that’s never around when needed.” O’Brien narrowed his eyes at me. “Tomorrow, there’ll be no disappearin’ into the bush after dinner, like you been doin’ lately. I require a *growin’ boy* to dig holes for the new fence. And you can get inside the fowl house and find where somethin’s gettin’ in and stealin’ eggs.”

“Yes, sir.”

My eyes met Ma’s for an instant. She didn’t say anything, but I sensed she knew something was afoot.

“**I**done some explorin’,” said Richard between mouthfuls, “while ye been away. I found somewhere better to sleep.” He pointed along the cliffs, “Behind that big rock, is a cave.”

My eyes widened, “Really? I didn’t know that.”

“Aye, when ye crawl about ye get a different view. Wouldn’t’ve

noticed otherwise. I reckon natives used to camp in there. Maybe that's where they eat their victims?"

"They aren't cannibals!" I said, rolling my eyes. "Old Punch, one of Mr Stocker's men, told me all about the Aborigines. He was on friendly terms with them. He said, as long as you 'paid your rent' with sugar, tea and tobacco—and treated their womenfolk proper—they gave you no trouble. But if you broke their laws, they'd hunt you down and spear you."

"Ever seen any round here?"

"Nah. But O'Brien says there used to be, back when he first come here. He said, once he showed them whose land it really was, they stopped bothering him. Me and Ma only been here a year. Since she took up with O'Brien."

"Fond of him then?"

"I hate him. When he's on the drink—which is pretty much all the time—he beats Ma. I've copped a fair few floggings, too. Ma keeps saying she'll leave him if he hits her again. She won't, though. She's more scared of what he'd do if she did."

I looked left and right, to see no one was about, then started across the yard. O'Brien stepped out from behind the barn and grabbed me by the collar.

"Where you headed, Master Mulligan?" His hot rum-soaked breath in my ear.

"Nowhere."

He shook me, snapping my head back-and-forth like a rag doll. "Don't take that tone with me, show some respect!"

"Yes, sir. Nowhere, sir. I mean, I was just going for a walk, Mr O'Brien, sir."

"That's better." O'Brien shoved me hard. I stumbled and fell, my face striking the ground. He laughed. I dragged myself up onto my hands and knees and spat the dirt from my mouth. I could taste blood.

"I seen you nosin' around up there," O'Brien motioned towards the cliffs. "You're not to be goin' up there anymore. You hear me?"

"Yes sir", I said as I stood up.

"A young fella could 'accidently' slip and fall. And we wouldn't want that, would we Michael?"

"No, sir."

A week later, I smiled to myself as I climbed the sphinx. It'd been getting harder to give O'Brien the slip. But today, he headed off early to Westbury to sell some wethers. If he made good money, he'd be back late.

I whistled to summon Richard. There was no reply. After a while, I whistled again. Still nothing. I sat down. My eyes grew misty. Richard's ankle had been improving, and I knew he'd be moving on soon. Even so, he should've said goodbye.

I decided I'd better check the cave. It took me a while to find it. Richard was right. Unless you got down on all fours, you'd never see the opening. I peered into the tunnel, took a deep breath, and crawled in.

The light receded and darkness swallowed me. As my eyes adjusted, the cave wasn't as small as I feared. The walls and roof were formed by massive, blue-grey granite pillars running across each other at odd angles. The air was damp with a mineral tang. I shivered. Outside was summer, yet here it was cold as a grave. Somewhere in the darkness water dripped. From the unseen depths an unearthly moan reached out and grasped my heart with long bony fingers. I told myself it was only the wind. I felt I wasn't welcome here. Trespassing in an ancient, secret, sacred place.

"Richard!" I called and was unnerved by the returning echo. I groped along the wall until I came to the dead ashes of a campfire, a neat stack of firewood, and the old blanket I'd given Richard. I brightened. There was no way he'd leave without the blanket. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed dim light coming from where the wall met the floor. I got down on my belly. A low passage, less than a foot high, led to another chamber. The air on my face was fresh. If I squished myself flat, I was sure I could squeeze through.

I pushed my knapsack ahead of myself and wormed my way in. Pushing and pulling and wriggling, I inched forward. Until I was halfway. Here, the passage was lower, and I felt the disconcerting pressure of stone, both from above and below. I began to panic. It felt like the whole weight of the mountain was crushing me. Calm yourself. You got in, you can get out. I strained backwards and, with a grunt, dislodged myself. Between deep shuddering breaths, I thanked the Lord for saving me. As I lay there gasping, I noticed the gap was wider

to my right. I squirmed over. Soon, I emerged, puffing and panting into the light. This chamber was smaller than the other, but open to the sky with a jagged oblong of blue twenty yards above me. With a sigh of relief, I pushed my knapsack to the side. Barely a foot from my face, a human skull stared at me with empty eye sockets.

I let out a cry and leapt up. At first, I feared the skull was Richard's. But there was moss growing on it, and there wasn't just one. Two large skulls and another smaller one sat amongst a scatter of bleached bones. I guessed they'd laid there for years.

The child's skull that confronted me had a neat circular hole in the forehead, the size of a musket ball. I shuddered. Then something else caught my eye. Among the bones was a loop of plaited leather cord attached to an animal skin pouch. I picked it up. It felt like it was filled with sand. Upon opening the drawstring, I found ashes. Old Punch told me about these. Charms made from the cremated remains of loved ones, worn to ward off evil or pressed against the body to cure illness or injury.

I wasn't sure if this was the right thing to do, nevertheless I said a rosary for these people. People I'd never known. But people who'd not died well. Later, when I thought about it, I don't know why I tucked the pouch into my pocket. I then began to climb up and out of the cave.

Just before I reached the top, I heard a familiar voice.

"Ello Michael."

I looked up. O'Brien's gap-toothed grin stared down at me. "I told you to stop comin' up here. Now, you've seen more than you should've."

I froze. "I don't know what you mean, Mr. O'Brien, sir. It's just a pile of old bones."

"I watched you down there. I heard you prayin'. I know you've worked out what happened."

"Please, sir. I won't say anything to anyone. I promise."

"I don't believe you, Michael. You're too bloody honest for your own good. The governor says it's murder to 'shoot crows'. Well, no white man has yet swung for it, but sure as hell, I ain't goin' to be the first."

O'Brien pursed his lips and shook his head in mock

disappointment. “I can see only one solution to this conundrum. Remember what I said about ‘accidentally’ fallin’? Well, you won’t be able to say I didn’t warn you—‘cause you won’t be sayin’ anythin’ ever again.” O’Brien bent to lift a large rock from near the lip of the hole. “Better start prayin’ again, boy.”

There was a deep whirring sound. O’Brien had barely enough time to turn and face its source. The heavy bulbous end of a wooden club struck him where his brows met the bridge of his nose. He dropped the rock at his feet and toppled head-first down the hole, doing a half-somersault. O’Brien was facing directly towards me with a surprised look on his face when he struck the boulder. His spine snapped like a whip-crack. I’ll never forget that sound.

I began shaking uncontrollably. I was still staring into O’Brien’s dead eyes when I heard Richard. “Here, lad, give us thy hand. Easy does it. I got ye.”

Richard hauled me up. I hugged him and started to cry. Not for O’Brien. Maybe for the dead family. Maybe out of relief. I didn’t really know. Richard held me close. Eventually, the tears stopped, and I wiped my face on my sleeve.

“Where’d an Englishman learn to throw a shillelagh like that?”

Richard looked at me quizzically. “What do ye mean? I was up here lookin’ for another way into that cave when I heard O’Brien. I come as quick as me bloody ankle would allow. But all I saw was his arse disappearin’ over the edge.”

Just then, Richard and I saw the young man. He’d moved almost imperceptibly, but enough to make his presence known. He must’ve been standing there the whole time. His dark skin was drawn tightly over his naked muscular frame. His hair, coloured with red ochre, was collected into thick braids hanging down to his shoulders. Around his neck were strands of iridescent pearly green seashells. In one hand he held a bundle of long thin spears. His other hand was empty. He raised it, fingers spread, palm outwards.

I clung to Richard, uncertain of what would happen. The young man walked over and picked up his waddy from where it landed after striking O’Brien. He tossed it up, spinning into the air and deftly caught the handle as it dropped back down.

Then he looked me in the eye and with a hint of a smile, tapped the waddy on his chest.

The young man then took a deep breath, leaned, and looked down the hole. He hung his head. After a time, he began speaking softly in a language I didn't understand. Then his voice began to rise in musical loops drenched in sadness. As his lament reached its peak, he threw his head back and shouted at the sky. Gradually his voice fell, until at last, he was silent again. His eyes glistened with tears and their shiny wet tracks lined his face.

A hush came over the bush. No bird or insect made a sound. No reptile moved in the dry grass. It was like there was a hole in time. I'd never before, or after, experienced such stillness. Then a gentle breeze began to whisper through the treetops and the leaves recommenced their shimmering rattle. A shrike-thrush called, and the buzz of cicadas hummed around us. The young man emerged from where his song had taken him, looked first at Richard and then me, nodded and turned to go.

“Wait!”

I reached into my pocket, withdrew the pouch and held it out to the young man. He took it in his long fingers and caressed it. He draped the cord around his neck, smiled at me, turned, and walked away.

A search party found the sheep tethered by the roadside, a few miles from the hut. But there was no sign of O'Brien. What happened to him remained a mystery. Most believed he stopped for a rest, was bitten by a snake and delirious, wandered off into the bush and died. The native hyenas and devils probably feasted on his carcass. One old lag said, if they did, they would've been drunk for a week.

Richard stayed for three more days. As we parted, we agreed we wouldn't tell anyone what really happened. No one would believe us anyway. Everybody knew Governor Arthur's 'Conciliator', Mr. George Augustus Robinson, brought in the last handful of Van Diemen's Land's natives back in 1834 and imprisoned them all on the Great Island in Bass's Straits. Despite this, some still blamed the Aborigines when a hut was robbed of food, blankets and the like. But most put it down to absconders. Maybe, I would think with a smile. Or maybe not.

O.T. Martin

Reconciliation

At nine o'clock on a particularly blistering summer Sunday morning, Andre stood squarely in front of his neighbor's waist-high chain link fence. He cleared his throat and shouted, "Hello there, sir!"

From inside the house, a surly octogenarian peered through his screen door. "Who the hell are you?"

"My name is Andre. Just thought I would come over and check up on ya."

"I don't need anyone to check up on me. You least of all." The man's gravelly voice gurgled like a lion roaring underwater. He narrowed his gaze on Andre, "I don't trust your kind."

Andre shook his head and grinned. He never knew how to respond to this sentiment. As the smile faded from his face, a massive barking doberman tried to break through the man's screen door. The dog sustained a cacophony—much the same way that libraries don't.

"Nice pooch ya got there!"

The old man didn't flinch. "This is Francis. She also doesn't like people who look like you."

Andre flashed his quick eyebrows and let out a little laugh. Then he launched a response over the incessant barking, "How come you know that!?"

The old man's eyes narrowed further, "Because she doesn't like *anyone*."

"You know, I'll bet you ten dollars your dog'll come over here and let me pet her belly."

The old man scratched his mismatched stubble. Then he looked to the murderous beast biting his screen door. A wild and toothless smile overtook his face.

"I've never been one to turn down a sure bet. Even if I am a little tight on cash. Why don't you open that gate over there, and come into the yard. Then I can let ole Frannie have a running start at ya."

Andre smiled and said, "Yessir, no problem."

Unlatching the gate and walking into the chainlink arena,

Andre momentarily felt like the convict he used to be.

“Now, you’re sure you want to do this? I don’t think there’s a snowball’s chance in Mexico you can hop that fence if she gets a bite into ya.”

Thinking of snow capped Mexican mountains thousands of feet above sea level, Andre nodded. “Unleash the beast.”

The old man shook his head and cracked the door. The dog launched herself towards Andre, foaming at the mouth. Who knows how much she had to eat over the past week? Andre looked on in admiration as her muscles expanded and contracted inside a beautifully shiny black coat. In a fraction of a second, Francis was mere inches from her challenger’s face. Andre could count each of the wonderful jagged teeth inside Frannie’s murderous cavern.

At the exact moment before Frannie reached him, Andre reached into his pocket and produced a singular gravy-coated milk-bone. The dog snatched the treat from his hand and gobbled it up in the same amount of time it took her to leap off the front steps. Francis then tackled Andre, giving him a lovely amount of slimy licks to the face.

The old man’s jaw slacked as his eyebrows contorted. Andre let out a hearty chuckle and petted Frannie’s belly.

And so, the Sunday routine had begun. The next stage would include Andre apologizing to the old man, Barry, and spinning a tall tale about his magical abilities to speak with animals. To make amends for hustling the poor old man, Andre offered to mow the lawn. Barry always refused at first, but Andre knew Barry liked his lawn kept tidy.

Barry showed strong symptoms of dementia, but hadn’t been to the doctor’s office in six years. He hadn’t even left his house in five and a half. But Andre had been assisting him for a while now. Ever since he got parole. Each Sunday morning, he would wake up and head over to the old man’s house. Each time, he had to win Barry back over. Although those words always gave him pause—*I don’t trust your kind*—Andre knew they came from a temporarily twisted mind. In all fairness, Andre couldn’t blame Barry for hating how he looked any more than he could blame himself for the tattoos chiseled on his face and throat.

While Andre was mowing the lawn, he couldn't keep himself from thinking about Barry's son. Certain Sundays, Andre found it easy to ignore the memory of Vincent. But with the sun burning so hot in the dead of summer, Andre found himself reminded about the day his best friend had died.

In the end, Andre took the sentence. Vincent took the bullet. Things hadn't worked out like either thought they would. But as Andre cut small ridges back and forth on the lawn, he wondered if things between Vincent and Barry ever could have been different. After all these years, would Vincent ever have returned to take care of Barry like Andre did? After Barry kicked Vincent out so many years ago, that would have been unthinkable. But here Andre was, taking care of the person who rejected his best friend years ago.

Andre flipped the power switch on the mower. Sweat dripped from his burly shoulders as the sun climbed even higher in the sky. Despite the noise of the mower, Barry had nodded off a few times while the grass was being cut. His small but once proud house was beginning to sag. Andre noticed the roof tiling coming loose in multiple places. He promised himself he would repair it once the weather changed. But for now, he needed to get out of the sun.

He called up to Barry, "What do you think?"

"You did a great job, boy. Looks like I got the best of . . ." Barry searched his mind, unable to pick up on the thread exiting his mouth.

"We made a bet, sir. I lost and had to mow your lawn," Andre lied.

Barry nodded with eyes glazed over. This had been happening more often recently. Now a different, cooler sweat covered Andre. This was always the tricky part—retrieving Barry and Frannie's weekly supply of food. He always worried Barry would reject him at the gate, forcing him to start the ritual over again.

"Hey, sir?"

"What's that?"

"I lost my dog a month or so back. I have a bunch of extra dog food I need to get rid of. You mind if I bring it over for ole Francis?"

Barry looked at Francis sitting on the porch, tail wagging. “Whaddaya say, girl? Want a little extra food in your bowl tonight?” Francis tilted her head.

“That would be just fine with us, boy.”

Andre nodded. He moved quickly. He had everything bagged up: Francis’ food by the door, two plastic bags in the fridge, two on the counter. As Andre practically ran towards the chain link fence, the cold sweat on his neck made him think of the morning he lost Vincent. Andre was in a hurry when he moved off the front steps that morning, too. Although Andre and Vincent had gotten tattoos to mark their allegiance, they still needed to stick up some random joint for full status in the BSK. Vincent had always aimed to join the Bluffside Kings. Andre was never sure. But on that day, things had already been set in motion.

Andre remembered how worried he was to ask Barry if he knew where his son was. Barry was irate seeing his son with a face disfigured by snakes and the ink they were forged in. The morning Vincent died, Barry threw his son out for good. Andre’s mind replayed the look of genuine fear masked by stubborn self-assurance in Barry’s eyes when he came looking for Vincent. Andre’s mind replayed the events of that night as he gathered the items for Barry. Hardened by his resolve to help Barry and Frannie, Andre pushed the thought of Vincent’s death out of his mind.

Andre came into Barry’s line of sight as quickly as possible. “Ah, see girl, there’s the food!”

Andre breathed a huge sigh of relief. Now it was time for the next step. Today, he was lucky again. Barry allowed Andre to enter the house. Walking inside, Andre breathed the familiar scent of sickly stale air. He put the food in the fridge and cabinets, always in the same places. Then he put two cigars in a special box and a bottle of bourbon on another table.

Barry mosied through the house and looked around, surveying this strange new-old place. His eyes lit up when he saw the bourbon.

“Ah, I forgot I still had this bottle. What do you say we sit on the porch and have a drink? I’d say you earned it, son.”

This was the key. As long as Andre could get a glass of

bourbon into Barry's hands, it no longer mattered what he looked like. At that point, he didn't have to be an intruder anymore. He could be Barry's friend. "It'd be my pleasure."

Barry smiled honestly for the first time that day. "Now what good is a drink without a smoke? Do me a favor and look in that dusty box. That's where I keep the good ones."

Andre walked to the porch after gathering the cigars and glasses. The old man smiled again, "A gentleman of my taste! One ice cube. Just how I like it."

The two started on the whiskey and cigars. Andre looked out at the lawn. He had done a good job. He exhaled a plume of pride and smoke.

Now it was time for the portion of their routine when Andre didn't know what would happen. Sometimes Barry would sit in almost complete silence, save the occasional: 'top me off, will ya?' Other times Barry could reach back in the supposed empty recesses of his mind and tell stories of his childhood. Even though those special moments had become increasingly rare recently, Andre would let Barry speak for as long as was possible. It was healthy for Barry to remember what he could. But Andre always feared the arrival of next words that came from Barry's lips.

"You know, my son had tattoos. Just like yours."

Andre's stomach twisted, just as it did in that weekly moment of self-doubt, right as Francis lunged at him.

"Is that so?"

Barry spat. "Senseless—the way he died."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"He was shot by a convenience store owner. On the same day I told him I never wanted to see him again." Barry shifted and a small noise escaped his throat. It was one of those indiscernible creaks, just like the ones that escaped occupied adirondack chairs in the dead of summer. "My boy, I spend my days in a fog. I often find it extremely difficult to remember where I am, to tell you the truth. But I can tell you one thing—I will never forget what my son looked like when I pried open his casket."

It never got easier hearing this. When Barry didn't speak after his comment, Andre reminded himself that Barry never elaborated further after this admission. He could be safe

if he let silence linger. But in a Sunday routine Andre had perfected, this day presented an aberration.

Barry pushed through the silence, “You see, the thing about losing your memory—it strips you of everything. You live in an impenetrable fog.” The old man sipped his bourbon and stared into the street. “But every once in a while, that fog clears for a moment or two. When you spend so much time wading through nothingness, small clarity feels as though you have reached a lucid island. One that can truly save you. And when you finally touch something from your previous existence, you find an overwhelming sense of relief.”

Andre reached down to Francis and scratched her ears. Would this be the day he could summon the courage to tell Barry he had been with Vincent the night he died? Would Barry even be willing to listen to how he had grieved the loss of his closest friend, how Andre thought of Vincent in prison—and out of prison—as often as his father couldn’t? Would Barry believe that Andre didn’t want them to join the BSK? Andre was paralyzed within the fences of his own inaction.

Barry reached into his pocket and produced a gold ring with a red seal, featuring a snake. Andre had seen it before, but never in Barry’s hands.

Barry played with the ring in his palm, “I pried open that casket looking for my son. There was nothing left of him. At least—nothing I could recognize. But that’s when I saw the ring I had given to him, and took it off his finger. I can’t remember to do much, but each morning I remember to take it off my dresser and put it in my pocket.” Barry moved his thumb counterclockwise over the ring’s captivating seal. “The ring lets me remember that my son had lived.”

Barry continued to follow the momentum of the ouroboros. He moved in harmony with that singular snake, forever consuming its own tail.

Barry looked out to his freshly pruned lawn, the small world that contained his life since the day his son died.

“I guess . . . When you spend so much of your time without direction, even keeping close to the person that brought you the greatest amount of pain is a comfort.”

Nick Gallup

The Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune

“German Shepherd, my ass,” Jack muttered. “That’s the howling of a wolf.”

He had come to the window in the boat house to see what Gulliver was howling about. He had an unpleasant inkling of what it might be. It had happened twice before when a dead body had washed up against the pier. Both times, as he was doing now, Gulliver had assumed his howling pose, sitting on his haunches and directing his snout skyward.

He paused between howls and looked back to see if he had attracted Jack’s attention. When he saw Jack at the window, he ceased howling and started to bark excitedly and rushed towards Jack and then back to the end of the pier.

Jack knew it was futile to yell at the big German Shepherd once he donned his “Call-of-the-Wild” cloak. Even though it was May, it was still cold in northern New York. The wall thermometer read 60-degrees outside and 75 inside. As soon as he opened the door, Jack knew it was another Lake George weather trick. There was a cold wind blowing down from the North Tongue Mountain Range and sweeping angrily across the choppy lake, and it had a strong taste of melting ice. He reached for his parka.

“Okay, I’m coming, Gulliver.”

The lake water looked especially dark. Maybe it was just the first ice melting in the mountains bringing down debris and trash accumulated during the winter. It was scary-looking, uninviting water, a black matte, as opposed to the bluish hue of a normal lake.

Gulliver stopped barking when he saw Jack walking toward him and was now looking down at something in the water. Gulliver was indeed more wolf than German Shepherd and came above Jack’s waist when Jack arrived and stood beside him. The big silver gray looked at him with mesmerizing blue eyes and then back down at the water. Jack leaned over.

Another body.

Jack's athleticism was a thing of the past. Piercing and persistent pains in his abdomen and knees shot from years of hardcourt, very competitive tennis precluded him from squatting for a better view. The brisk wind was already making him unsteady. He carefully lowered himself to his knees and studied the body.

A girl. She was wearing a blue hoodie, which had snagged on a piling as changes in atmospheric pressure pushed the water from one side of the lake to another. Her upper body was several inches out of the dark water. Her face was turned up towards him. Her eyes were shut and her face blue. Her features were perfectly formed, small ears and slightly upturned nose, and even from six feet away, Jack discerned long eye lashes lying placidly on her cheeks. Her black hair was plastered against her forehead. She looked peaceful, as if she had just drifted off to sleep.

This was the third body he and Gulliver had discovered in the lake, and he didn't need another autopsy to tell him the cause of death. "Victim rendered incapable of movement by hypothermia and subsequently drowned," he recalled reading from autopsy reports of the first two bodies, both errant fisherman, who had likely fallen into the water while standing up to make a cast or reel in a catch. But they were older, his age, and, although they had looked at peace as well, their deaths were less tragic. This was a beautiful young girl.

No way could he retrieve the unfortunate girl by himself.

He put a hand on Gulliver's sturdy shoulders and raised himself.

"Keep an eye on her."

He and Gulliver had been together eight years, and they were now settled-in and fine-tuned to one another. Gulliver's eyes signaled he understood. He lay down, his silver chin on the pier, as close to the drowned girl as he could get.

Jack's office was in the boathouse, but he never brought his cell phone with him when he had writing deadlines to meet. He wanted no distractions and was disgruntled when Gulliver had summoned him from his desk. He was only a few chapters away from finishing his 12th Damien Hague novel. He was fortunate to have conjured up Damien, a likable private eye whom loyal readers would still pay \$30 to

read about. Once he had established the formula for a good P/I mystery, or so he had naively assumed as he began his mystery-writing career, it would be easy to grind out sequels. Not so. Each plot was harder to flesh out and research and write to Prescott's exacting standards.

"Each book must be better than the last," Prescott counselled.

Jack had been coaxing Damien 12 into the home stretch when Gulliver summoned.

Jack walked to his home higher on the lake front to collect his cell phone. Even though the builder had called his home a log cabin, it was 6,000 square feet with a 30-foot-high ceiling in the main room. Jack had purchased it and a hefty mortgage 40 years earlier with profits from the first two Damien books, both of which were made into high-grossing movies.

Jack called the local sheriff.

"Recognize her?" Darby asked.

He told the sheriff no and described her.

"We've got a 16-year-old missing girl who fits your description. A local who's tried to kill herself before. We were afraid of this."

Gulliver hadn't moved in the hour it took Darby and the EMS crew to arrive.

They borrowed Jack's skiff and worked quickly to get the girl out of the water.

"Storm coming up," Darby explained. He shrugged big shoulders and tightened his yellow raincoat around him. He was wearing a baseball cap with the Warren County seal on it, a portrait of John Warren, a hero of Bunker Hill, after whom the county was named. Darby was from Queensbury, the county seat. Jack lived in nearby Hague, his hometown.

Jack testified at the coroner's hearing, which ruled the girl's death a suicide, based on the physical evidence and a lamentable note she left detailing her inability to cope with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, much as Hamlet had pondered. The coroner, Russell Harris, was one of Hague's local doctors and a long-time friend of Jack's. He confirmed Jack's diagnosis as to cause of death.

Jack lingered to speak with Russ after the hearing. Russ also happened to be the doctor treating him for bad knees

and lately his persistent abdomen pains.

“She looked peaceful,” Jack recalled. “I’d think drowning would be terrifying.”

“When preceded by hypothermia it’s much like going to sleep.”

“The others looked peaceful, too.”

“Not a bad way to go. Just not at 16.”

“Poor kid,” Jack said. An understatement, to be sure, he realized.

Russ was six-five and towered over Jack. An athlete of repute in his younger years, he still had the muscles to show for it. His face was wide, pleasant, and quick to smile. Not your usual stand-offish doctor. He was 60 now and graying, but still participated in the annual three-mile swim across Silver Bay. Jack was ten years older and just over six feet. He, too, had been athletic in the day, but now the wears and tears of age were beginning to show. His hair was white, and he had given up on comb-overs. Despite his many years staring at a word processor, his eyes were still 20/20, blue, and visibly intelligent. No lake swims for Jack, even though he had a beach below his cabin and easy access to the lake. The Lake George water was too cold. He preferred laps in his indoor, heated pool.

Gulliver found no more bodies, and things went **G**uneventfully for the next few weeks. Jack finished the novel and emailed it to Prescott, his editor in NYC. He and Prescott had been together since the first Damien novel. A junior reader at the publishing house had read the novel first, and, although she personally liked it, did not deem it of enough merit to enhance her editorial career.

The dubious young reader had devoured the novel in a single sitting, though, unusual for a book destined for the slush pile, and she found herself shouting out some of the one-liners by its private-eye protagonist to her colleagues.

Sample: “My fee’s \$500 a day,” he told the stripper. “A \$100 more if you want sex.”

Prescott, the elegant and prescient Max Perkins of the publishing house, hearing such humorous shout outs from Jack’s book, grew curious and requested it be exhumed from

the slush pile and brought to him. The one-liners were indeed good and the plot, filled with smoke and mirrors and clever sleight-of-hand, was enticing. He contacted Jack and agreed to work with him on the novel. He asked Jack to make the plot more LeCarre and his protagonist less Spillane.

“Let’s shoot for Dashiell Hammett.”

Under Prescott’s guiding hand, Jack Falcon, his nom de plume, was a best-selling author out the gate. A producer offered the publishing house and Jack near-record recompense for film rights to a private-eye novel by a first-time author.

An accountant friend recommended Jack divert a portion of his royalties to an investment fund that bought and sold luxury condominiums in Miami Beach. Bernie Madoff was not involved, and Jack eventually realized more money from people buying into Miami Beach than Damien Hague.

Jack gave his Damien books legs, and shapely ones at that, by adding Courtney, a beautiful lieutenant of detectives, who only on rare occasion deigned to sleep with Damien, his suave and sophisticated P/I. Jack even took cooking courses so he might write more knowingly about the gourmet meals Damien prepared to tempt his elusive lover.

“**K**now who Courtney reminds me of, old Sport?” Prescott asked him one day.

“Haven’t a clue,” Jack answered.

A clue? He was in possession of proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

“Why Olivia, Jack. Look how she slips in and out of my life. Disappears for months. When she returns, she just says she had to get away for a while. When I ask her where she disappears to, she disarms me with a bewitching smile and those incredibly long-lashed brown eyes and says, quite convincingly, “Oh, just different places I can scarcely remember and a splash of faces I can’t attach a name to.”

One of the faces she couldn’t attach a name to belonged to Jack, and one of the places she could scarcely remember was his log cabin in Hague. Prescott professed to be in love with Olivia, but he, like the fictional Courtney, also had commitment problems. Jack had based Courtney on haughty Prescott and the stunningly beautiful Olivia.

Paradoxically, Jack longed for commitment, and, despite the plethora of danger signs posted round Olivia, fell outrageously in love with her. So-in-love with her that one night, after too many Martinis, he proposed.

She had touched his face tenderly and looked at him as if he were an abandoned child.

“Dear, precious Jack. You haven’t gone and fallen in love with me, have you?”

He realized she was light years away from commitment, and if pressed, might sever their now-and-then relationship, which was known only to them and his good friend and doctor, Russ. Better to have her on her terms than not at all, as King Solomon might have sagely counselled. So, Jack laughed as if his proposal were but a joke brought on by excessive gin. She studied him for a minute. Discerning only amusement on his poised, poker-player face, she smiled with relief and snuggled up to him as a crackling fire burned beside them in the large fireplace in the main room of his log cabin in Hague.

“I’m ready to be bedded, Jack,” she purred, encasing him with long slender arms.

Welcome words, those, but first things first. He reached for his notebook, which he kept always near, to jot down phrases and ideas for use in future books. And that was the night Courtney Queensbury was born, and she spoke those very lines to Damien Hague in Jack’s next book.

Jack had that and other plot twists he skillfully concocted, such as Mallory, a serial killer he kept killing off, only to cleverly resurrect him later to the delight and consternation of his devoted readers. Still, and despite Jack’s deft writing, book sales had begun to wane. His once legion of loyal fans was ageing and dying off with few new readers to replace them.

“Think I’ll start writing in text,” Jack joked.

Prescott groaned. His job, too, was on the endangered list.

The Damien book he had just finished, the 12th, ended with Courtney finally agreeing to marry Damien. As they are returning from their honeymoon, Damien is struck down by the villainous Mallory, who had somehow extricated himself from an exploding aircraft and returned to slay Damien. A

grieving but extremely agitated Courtney pursues Mallory and this time ensures his demise by coldly emptying a Glock into him.

The ending sparked sales, and there was talk of somehow resurrecting Damien in a 13th novel, as Arthur Conan Doyle had done after too hastily killing off Sherlock Holmes via a plunge down a water fall as he savagely fought with his nemesis, Professor Moriarty. Jack was willing and even offered up a plot twist to do so. Mallory, he explained to a doubting Prescott, had a twin brother, Murphy, whom Courtney had unknowingly dispatched instead.

Prescott laughed at the ingenuity of his favorite writer. “But what about the more obvious problem, Jack, the resurrection of Damien? Your readers are grieving not over the death of Mallory, your villain, but the death of your hero. Did Damien have a twin, too?”

Jack grinned as if Prescott were a simpleton, which indeed he was not. He was a genius, to be sure, in matters of editing, but Jack was the writer who created what had to be edited. A different skillset.

“Damien knew of Murphy,” an amused Jack explained. “Mallory was willing to offer him up to get Damien and Courtney off his trail while he concocted a plot to kill them. So, Damien feigned his own death, too.”

“Can you give me a hint as to how?”

“Where did Damien and Courtney go on their honeymoon, Prescott?”

“Niagara Falls.”

“Surely I can find a spare waterfall there.”

Jack’s ingenuity aside, there wouldn’t be a 13th novel. Time and circumstance had decided otherwise. At the insistence of Russ, Jack had undergone a series of tests to determine the cause of his incessant abdominal pains. Russ called to report he had the results of the CT Scan and MRI’s and sundry other tests and asked to meet with him at the log cabin that night.

“Is there extra charge for house calls?” Jack inquired.

“Perhaps a whiskey or two.”

“Then you are most welcome.”

Jack knew Russ would come bearing unwelcome news.

If the tests were negative, he could have easily said so over the phone. Jack was an optimist, though, and the worst he expected was a gallbladder or kidney stone prognosis, an operation, and a painful recovery.

“Regrettably, my good friend,” Russ informed him, endeavoring to speak professionally and without emotion, as they sipped whiskeys in the main hall, “you have metastatic stomach cancer. I am afraid there is no cure and that you must prepare yourself for even more acute pain and end of life.”

A poker-faced Jack displayed no emotion and spoke with his usual aplomb. “Thought we agreed after Olivia, Russ, you’d nuance bad news to me in the future?”

Russ shrugged, but Jack read the pain in his friend’s misting eyes.

“Not a nice thing to say, Jack. There’s simply no nice way to say it.”

Creature of habit he was, Jack reached for his notebook and jotted the line down. Russ knew of the notebook and smiled wryly.

“What does metastatic mean anyway?” Jack asked. “Might as well note that, too.”

“It means it’s spread to other places in your body.”

“How many?”

“Lots. Makes it impossible to treat.”

“Would you permit me a non sequitur, Russ?”

“I’d welcome it.”

“Are you fond of Gulliver?”

“Indeed.”

“He’s my parting gift to you.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. I want him to be in the best of hands.”

Gulliver was on sentry-duty by the floor-to-ceiling windows, keeping watch over a strip of bright moonlight shimmering on the dark lake. The wolf in him made him territorial, Jack mused, and, although he had yet in his years of residency with Jack paid for a single log, he had assumed co-ownership of the cabin. Gulliver sensed they were talking about him and raised his head attentively.

Jack grinned. “Yeah, we’re talking about you.”

All seemed well, so Gulliver returned his focus to the lake.

“I’ll call Prescott and give him the news,” Jack said, somberly now, as the reality of what Russ just told him had settled in. He anticipated his mentor’s feisty reaction, though, and had to smile.

“Why the smile?” Russ wondered.

“I’m about to be remanded to NYC where Prescott will summon specialists to look me over and concoct miracle cures. Prescott takes ‘Never say Die’ quite literally.”

“Doesn’t trust the old country doctor, huh?”

“That’ll be the gist of it. No offense, but I hope he’s right.”

“As do I. I’ll give you the test results to take with you.”

Prescott reacted as Jack anticipated and emphatically summoned him to NYC, where he subjected Jack to the scrutiny of sundry specialists. Alas, all to no avail. If anything, Russ had been optimistic as to how much time Jack had left. One doctor expressed amazement at Jack’s lucidity and ability to even walk. He wanted to hospitalize him immediately. Jack declined.

Prescott was a wreck. He was 73, several years older than Jack, but still tall and handsome in a lean, supercilious British manner. When he had too much to drink, he would brag that he aged like fine wine, and he found himself saying Brit things like, “Sorry that,” and “Old Sport.” He was to the tuxedo born, he would claim, and the well-attended parties he gave and the august way he reigned over them reminded Jack of Scott Fitzgerald and Gatsby.

As they parted, Prescott grasped him tightly. “You are the best of my friends, old Sport, and I always hoped I would go first, as I cannot fathom how I can proceed without you and your addictive detective tales.”

“You’ll throw a party, Prescott, and make a magnificent toast as you did for Olivia.”

They both laughed, or at least uttered sounds like laughter.

Russ retrieved Jack at the train station in Queensbury and drove him to the cabin. The pains in Jack’s stomach were growing exponentially, as if there were a competition to see which of the affected organs would deliver the coup de grace. His friend took note of his grimacing and handed him two

bottles of pills.

“Read the directions,” he said in doctor-speak. “One is for daytime, and it is the weaker so that you can wander about. The other is for sleeping. I doubt you could sleep without it. I’d recommend you not drink, but you wouldn’t listen and would do precisely as you like.”

“I would listen.”

“You’d hear, Jack, but not listen. One of your charms. You politely ignore.”

“Do you think it would have helped if I had checked myself into the Mayo Clinic every year for a head-to-toe physical? Bob Hope did that and lived to be 100.”

“It wouldn’t have hurt, but Hope was blessed with exceptional genes. You, my friend, are the victim of a rogue gene that stayed hidden for years only to emerge with insidious intent. Time and circumstance. You were to have your biblical three score and ten and no more.”

“I nonetheless count myself lucky,” Jack philosophized. “I had my three score and ten, and they were incandescently happy years. I was able to make a magnificent living doing something I loved. How many people can say that? Think of the beautiful little girl we pulled from the water. Time and circumstance gave her but a half-score and six.”

“She had choice in her demise. Hard to characterize as time and circumstance.”

“No, Russ, I disagree. She had a rogue gene, too.”

“Point taken.”

Gulliver had appeared eight years before. He was mostly silver then and even as a puppy had those bewitching eyes. Jack did not realize at first he was a puppy, as he was the size of a grown, medium-sized dog when he abruptly appeared.

Jack dutifully called his neighbors and asked if any had a dog gone missing or were aware of someone who did. He described the dog to them and drew blanks. Where had Gulliver come from? How had he survived? Where had his travels taken him?

Jack decided to keep him, and, to commemorate his odysseys, christened him Gulliver.

The possibility of him being fully grown was quickly discounted, as he grew inches overnight. Although still in his youth, he seemed remarkably mature and affectionate, never malicious or destructive. One of Jack's fetishes was expensive English shoes. He never lost a pair to Gulliver needing something on which to cut his large teeth. Nor did Gulliver ever try to climb upon him, for which he was especially grateful, as the extra-large dog could have easily bowled Jack over given his slightness. Most amazing of all, Gulliver possessed commendable bathroom decorum, always announcing his needs by positioning himself conspicuously before a side door leading to the outside.

The vet who attended Gulliver was amazed at the dog's impeccably good manners.

"His previous owner must have been a skilled trainer," the vet remarked. "He looks like a wolf, but wolves don't have blue eyes. And only a few German Shepherds do."

"Do wolves ever mate with German Shepherds?"

"It's possible, but I've not heard of it happening around here."

"I think it did," Jack mused.

It was a mystery the mystery-writer never solved.

The time left Jack was down to weeks. The medicine Russ gave him helped, especially at night when his stomach ached as if he had swallowed strands of glass. He could not have slept without the medication. He braved the pain during the day but longed for the night and sleep without it. It was tempting to take the night pills during the day, but he fought off doing it. Russ visited him daily, and a distraught Prescott checked in on him frequently. And he had Gulliver, who never left his side.

Gulliver was a good listener. He almost shook his great head in compassion as Jack vented to him about the pain, and his concerned looks buoyed Jack's spirits.

Jack had no family, other than obsequious and greedy cousins. He left most of his money to the Salvation Army. Gulliver was certainly part of his fortune, and he had already told Russ Gulliver was to be his. Jack owned the log cabin outright and had decided to bequeath it to Russ. The only

condition was that Russ reside there until Gulliver lived out his Canine three-score and ten. He could then do with the house as he wished. Jack left him a stipend for maintenance of the cabin. Russ objected, but acquiesced when Jack acquainted him with how much taxes and insurance and upkeep were on a not-so-simple log cabin. Far more than a country doctor could afford. Jack's affairs were settled, except for . . .

. . . Except for Olivia's ashes. They were in a box in Jack's writing room in the boat house, together with the last letter he had received from her. It had been a wondrous surprise.

"Dearest Jack. You proposed to me several years ago. Though you blamed it on Martinis, I know now you meant it. If you recall, I never said yes or no. And, because you never retracted your offer, then, by Victorian Law, you are honor-bound to hear my answer. Jack, my love, I happily accept your proposal. When we dock in The Virgin Islands in two days, I will mail you this letter. From there I will fly to San Juan and then to NYC, where I will retrieve my car and drive to Hague. I expect you to be waiting with a ring. Nothing garish, although I confess to a weakness for rose gold. Fair warning. I want to have six kids. The first boy will be Damien, the first girl, Courtney. We will search your novels for the names of the other four, so long as they are not Mallory or any of your villains. All my love forever. Olivia."

He had but a few days to rejoice before Russ brought additional news.

"I'm afraid I bring ill tidings, Jack."

"Then say them quickly."

"Olivia was killed in a car crash."

"When?"

"A few hours ago."

"Where?"

"Near Queensbury."

"Are you sure it was her?"

"I spent many evenings with the two of you."

Sad news is infinitely worse on the heels of joyous.

All Jack could say was, "Should you have occasion to deliver bad news in the future, Russ, can we agree that you will nuance it to me?"

"Agreed, and I know how much you loved her. You have my

deepest condolences.”

Olivia’s industrialist father had bequeathed her a substantial trust fund, which she had been using to finance her many travels, searching, Jack reckoned, for what she eventually realized she already had, himself. Her lawyer informed Jack that she had made a recent change to her will leaving half of her estate to him and the other half to the Salvation Army, a charity she admired because it kept so little of its donations for itself. She stipulated she be cremated and her ashes scattered in a place where she could be visited by friends. She was cremated in Hague and the ashes delivered to Jack. He requested two urns. He placed her ashes in one and gathered ashes from his fireplace for the other, which he gave to Prescott. It was Prescott’s desire to scatter her ashes in Central Park, which was permitted. Olivia was well-known and liked by many, and Prescott, after securing the necessary permits, held a ceremony for her as he unknowingly scattered ashes from Jack’s fireplace in a part of Central Park reserved for such ceremonies. A farewell party followed. Prescott’s eulogy, unsurprisingly, was magnificent.

Olivia’s lawyer later presented Jack with a large check, which he used to retire the mortgage on his log cabin. It was thereafter *their* cabin and that thought served in a small way to make Jack’s immense grief bearable.

He purchased two plots sharing a common headstone in the Hague cemetery. One side of the headstone read “Olivia Constance Morgan, Beloved Fiancée of Jack.” His side read “John Falcon Hendricks, Beloved Fiancé of Olivia.” Their dates of birth were five years apart, not unusual for a man and woman. The woman, though, had died 35 years before her fiancée. A puzzle to many who take time to read tombstone sentiments, but not to those like Russ, who understood that Jack was incapable of replacing the irreplaceable. Prescott never knew, and Jack saw no reason to tell him.

Jack had seen to the engraving of the tombstone himself and had left it to Russ, who was aware of the sleight-of-hand with the ashes, to appoint it with the dates of Jack’s demise.

Jack’s ability to tolerate pain had reached its limit. He picked a Saturday, as he knew Russ worked the hospital

ER those nights. He asked Russ to come by after his shift as he wanted to discuss moving to a hospice, which Russ had been urging.

It was late September and cold. Jack waited until dark.

Wearing his parka, he led Gulliver to the end of the pier. He knelt and pulled the dog's large head close to him. A light shone brightly at the end of the pier, and he could see it reflected in Gulliver's eyes as the dog gazed at him. A gusting wind pummeled Jack's ears and tore at his hair. The wind made small ripples in Gulliver's thick fur. Gulliver was impervious to the cold.

"You know I'm hurting, don't you, boy? Russ will be here in a while, and he'll be taking care of you from now on. And, when your canine three-score-and-ten are up, he'll put you, well, your ashes anyway, by Olivia and me. Who knows, maybe you'll get a chance to meet her."

Gulliver looked as if he had known all along what Jack was going to do, and, if this was what Jack wanted, he understood. Jack gave him a final hug, then stood and unhesitatingly dove into the dark water.

It was cold, so cold, but Jack was a good swimmer, although his skills had been honed from laps in a heated pool, not the increditably cold and dark water of Lake George. He heard Gulliver barking behind him, but he swam on. The water became more tolerable, but he knew that would not last. He had on shoes and the parka, now soaked in water, and he could feel the increased weight dragging him down. Looking back, he was surprised at how little distance he had covered. He could clearly see the light and Gulliver beneath it, looking out towards him.

His arms were exhausted and numb. He was treading water, but he could sense nothing from his waist down. He could feel the numbness creeping up his chest. His body shivered spastically from the cold. Then, abruptly, as if the world's largest heater had been switched on and heated the entire lake, he became warm all over. The shivering ceased. He relaxed and basked in the soothing heat. Time to let go. As he began to slip peacefully beneath the dark water, he heard the sound again.

The howling of a wolf.

Ian R. Villmore

Love Is an Anchor

I.

Danika,

What's up with the email? Who uses email anymore? Why the hell aren't you answering my texts or my calls?

Fine. What the hell is this list you sent me? You don't live here anymore. You're not entitled to anything. If you left it here, you didn't want it. Simple as that.

How are you fucking paying for the lawyer who sent it anyways?

Dave

II.

The email arrives simultaneously with Tom's text. I check Dave's email first. The curt, dismissive tone is familiar, the incredulity a delicious new spice. I swipe away the email and read Tom's text.

On the road. Be there in an hour.

My thumbs fly. I'll be ready.

I head into the shower, by the time I finish blow drying my hair my mind is a swirl of leaves in a breeze. Checking my joke of a closet, I look at each one of my five shirts for far too long, noticing lint balls on one and a fraying hem on another.

What the hell am I thinking? He's taking me to a freaking hockey game.

I locate the faded Bruins tee that my mother gifted me for Christmas one year, my skinny jeans, favorite boots, and my leather jacket. Staring at them laid out on the bed, I hesitate. Something's missing. Dave's degrading tone barks in my head.

Digging through my underwear drawer, I locate the white, lacy matching panties and bra Dave gave me for our honeymoon and put them on. They still fit somehow, although my stretch marks sag over the hem of the panties. It feels transgressive, wearing this for Tom. I laugh and get into the rest of my outfit.

The more minutes tick by, the more my stomach flutters.

I try breathing through my belly; the oxygen only kicks my anxiety into overdrive. Downing a Narragansett does a better job of settling me, the alcohol playing the role of ballast.

This is supposed to be casual. It has to be casual.

My phone buzzes.

Tom's message is laconic: *Here.*

I set the empty Narragansett can on the couch and head downstairs to the street.

III.

The mug of black coffee radiates into my hands, easing January's ache. I hover one hand over the steam, feeling it coil around my skin.

"You see, Gabby Girl," I say, "heat and love have a lot in common. They're so full of energy that they cannot be contained. That's why when you feel love, you feel like you're going to float away."

My daughter mimics my movements over her cup of cocoa, a serene smile illuminating her face.

"Then why don't you fly away when you see me?"

I smirk. "Oh, I did when I first met you, love. You don't remember because you had just come out of my belly. The doctor wrapped you in a blanket and set you in my arms. I floated right off the bed, buck naked up through the hospital ceiling. It was a perfect autumn day, crisp and warm with the smell of cinnamon and apples. I held you close, stroking your hair as we flew higher and higher towards the sun."

My hand rises until my arm is fully extended. Gabby's eyes grow big. She leans forward on her elbows, knees settling onto the chair.

"How did we get down?"

"Your father flew up to meet us. He was just as excited as I was. He kissed me and you, then wrapped his arms around us and we slowly floated back down. Daddy's not a little man, is he?"

Gabby giggles and shakes her head.

"You know how when you and I get upset, Daddy likes to hold us? He does the same thing when we're happy, doesn't he? He doesn't want us to float away."

Gabby's brows furrow. "Is that what happened to Shawn?"

He got so happy he flew away?”

I hold my mug tighter, hoping it's heavy enough to anchor me in a different way.

I.

Danika,

What the actual fuck. I thought you wanted this to be done and over. Now I get this letter from your lawyer saying she's coming over with some sort of appraiser to go through my house. There's nothing of yours here. What do you want? Seriously, tell me.

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

Dave

II.

What's left of my flutters dissolves when Tom's arms envelope me. Every man I've ever known hugs me like they're afraid they'll snap my toothpick body in half. Not this man. He acts like every hug is going to be his last.

He grins at me. "Ready?"

"And willing."

We sit together on the train to the TD Garden, his hands resting on his knees. The hard fluorescent light draws my attention to the serrated scar on his face that's mostly hidden by his beard. My finger traces his wedding ring. That and the scar were the first things I noticed the night we met at The Burren and the main reason I kept an eye on him. Rings meant they weren't going to glue themselves to me. So when he turned my way when I yelled at the Sox game, flashing a lopsided smile and a quick wit, I was a moth to a bug zapper.

I hadn't bargained on myself becoming glue. How else could I explain being willing to brave crowds for the first time in months?

"Dave emailed me today."

Tom raises an eyebrow.

"He wondered where I found the money to pay for the lawyer."

"You tell him it's a gift from a 'friend'?"

I smile. "I'm gonna let him stew. I'm enjoying having power over him, even if it is via email."

Tom laughs and flips his hand over to hold mine. “I won’t tell if you won’t.”

“Right? Why spoil the fun.”

At the game our seats are high up in the nosebleeds and the crowd safely distant far below. I scream and jeer at the grown men pulverizing each other over a vulcanized rubber puck. And laugh—at Tom’s jokes, at his eyes lingering on me, that he’s yelling just as loud as I am. Unlike Dave, when he disparages the refs he doesn’t brood on the slight but waves off his anger as quickly as it rises. As a result my shoulders remain loose.

We’re waiting in line for another round of beers during the second intermission when I spot a woman holding a little boy, maybe six months old, wearing a black and gold toque.

Shawn.

The name echoes down through my body and into my fingertips. My knees lock, eyes transfixed on the chubby, laughing face. Although I’m too far away, I can feel that laugh vibrate in my bones—the laugh that made sleepless nights bearable.

Shawn.

I feel a steadying hand on my shoulder. Turning my head, I see a familiar wedding ring. Part of me wants to shrug off Tom’s hand. He doesn’t understand there are times a man’s touch is the last thing I want.

The mother and the baby move off down the concourse and my legs regain mobility.

“Do you wanna get out of here? Take a walk around the harbor or something?”

I shake my head. “I’m good. Let’s get a beer, I’m good.”

III.

I pick up my daughter and carry her over to my bedroom. Resting on my vanity next to a forest green urn is a big picture of Shawn in a yellow onesie staring into the camera with wide gray eyes. Gabby sits on my lap, chewing a lock of hair—her tell of nervousness. I rub her back.

“Shawn did fly away, Gabby Girl. But I didn’t get to see him fly away. I woke up one morning and went to his crib and he was gone.”

Gabby looks at me. Her eyes swim with sudden tears and I stroke the side of her face.

“You’re not gonna fly away, love. See when *you* love, you want to float away. When others love you, it keeps you anchored here on Earth. Remember how your Daddy’s love helped me come down from the sky with you? Well, Daddy and I love you very, very much. We won’t let you fly away.”

Gabby looks at the picture of Shawn, then back at me. Then Shawn again.

“Does that mean Shawn’s daddy didn’t love him?”

Suppressing the reflex to laugh, an automated response to my twisting stomach, I manage a wan smile.

One day, I think, one day I will tell you everything.

I.

Danika,

Are you fucking happy now? Your lawyer and that appraiser were here for three goddamn hours going through my stuff. They even knocked on the walls and floors looking for hollow spots like I was some kind of criminal. What do you think I’m trying to hide? I said whatever you left behind I assumed you didn’t want and I threw out.

Now my lawyer says your lawyer wants us all to meet. Fine. Whatever. You better not make me miss work for this.

Dave.

II.

Tom and I are in a ten-stool bar somewhere in the North End. ESPN is running through the night’s highlights. My hand finds Tom’s again, tracing the prominent veins bulging amongst the forest of blonde hair. His gold ring reflects the red neon light—the flame I could not resist.

“How long are you planning on wearing that?”

Tom spreads his fingers and attempts to smile, the corners of his mouth weighed down by the ring’s symbolism.

“I almost didn’t wear it tonight. No . . . that’s not true, I almost forgot it.” He makes a fist. “I ran back into the bedroom because I felt naked without it.”

His eyes narrow in frustration.

I down a swig of my Narragansett and place a hand on the

back of his neck, fingers massaging. Tom's dark blue eyes pour into mine.

"I still feel the urge to text her. Can you believe that? I actually did it once, to see what we were doing for dinner. When I got home, I found my text on her phone and felt like an idiot. I'd plugged the damned thing into the wall after the funeral and never unplugged it, thinking I could notify anyone who tried to text or call her."

"Has anyone?"

It's a dumb question. My head tucks into my shoulders, waiting for an explosion. Instead, I see tears well up.

"Why would they? She's dead and buried, all because of my stupidity. They don't have to live in the apartment with all her stuff. I do. I still do. And I hate that I can't throw any of it away."

The scar on the side of his face deepens in the poor light, giving him the look of a patient, suffering saint.

"Fuck," he mutters and turns his attention back to the television.

Opening my mouth to say something, nothing emerges—not an apology or even an empathetic phrase.

I gulp down the last of my beer and set the can down with a hollow plunk. "I'm gonna hit the head."

Staring in the grimy mirror, Tom's story has irritated an itch. Something about his anger turning inward instead of out; instead of at me. My skin begins to crawl. I can't help but trace horizontal lines across my thighs.

What I should've said in response to his confession is that half the time when I leave my apartment I find myself feeling like I forgot Shawn's diaper bag, and cry when I remember why I don't need it.

When I get back to the bar, I run my hand through Tom's hair. "Hey, let's get out of here."

That crooked grin of his reappears.

We end up at the harbor, just as he suggested earlier in the stadium. A six pack of Sam Adams sits between us on a stone bench. The lights of East Boston across the way twinkle on the water. I hold my empty bottle by the neck, swirling it to try and condense what's left of the foam.

"Can I tell you something?"

Tom turns to me. “Always.”

“I nagged Dave to take care of Shawn that night. I was pissed off and exhausted. I just needed sleep so bad.”

I feel my throat rattle as I exhale a deep breath.

“He had no freakin’ clue how to lay the kid down. Oh, he wanted a son; guilted me into getting pregnant right away after we were married. But I thought, why should I hesitate? We’d said our vows, he had a good job, everything in my life was finally stable.

“But then, of course, he never showed up for the parenting classes his mother signed us up for. Why would he? That’s what he had his darling wifey for. So naturally he didn’t know that laying an infant down on its belly increases the likelihood of SIDS.”

My teeth clench so hard my ears start to ring. Tom’s hand rests on my forearm.

“Danika . . .”

I yank my arm from his touch. “Don’t say it. I knew Dave was a selfish asshole, I knew it before he proposed. I knew it when he refused to change diapers, to feed our son, to see him as anything other than a trophy and me a shackle. I knew better than to trust him.”

Without thought, I raise the bottle and smash it on the bricks. Glass flies in every direction. I grab another bottle and smash it, too, my shriek echoing across the waves.

“Danika!”

I grab a third bottle. “I’m Shawn’s mother! And all I cared about that night was fucking sleep!”

The bottle erupts with a crash. Tom grabs my wrist when I reach for a fourth; his face is twisted like mine was in the mirror back at the bar.

“Just as I knew better than to gun it and try to make the light the night Vicky died.”

I glare at him. “Stop trying to say you get it. You don’t. A spouse isn’t a child. You’ll never get it.”

Tom’s eyes skitter back and forth, as if speed reading through a manual to figure out what to do when some weird light illuminates on your dashboard. He settles on a default setting.

“I’m sorry.”

He actually is sorry; I can hear it in his voice. But sorry for what? That he can't understand, or that he can't play his savior role?

I grab the last beer out of the six pack and hold it out to him. He takes it, places the cap on the edge of the bench, and punches down to pop the top off. I take a deep swig.

"Guess we're both just a pair of idiots," I say.

"Amen to that."

The breathiness of his "amen" washes through me. My hand traces the scar on his face, his eyes close at the tenderness. The rage that had moments ago been expansive enough to swallow the world dissipates, replaced by the swelling of my heart.

III.

I'm holding Gabby horizontally in my arms, her limbs fully extended like Peter Pan. My lips blow raspberries as we fly out of my bedroom, through the living room, to the kitchen, and back again.

"Faster, Mommy!"

I pick up the pace, step up onto the couch and spin. Gabby squeals with laughter, her chestnut curls covering her face. I collapse onto the couch.

She clings to me. "I'm glad I didn't fly away."

I hold her tight. "Me too, love."

While we wait for her father to come home, we make butterscotch oatmeal cookies. Gabby doesn't like heavy metal but is willing to listen to acoustic covers. I smile ear to ear at her singing along with a child's sincerity to Black Sabbath's "N.I.B.." She spins slowly with her cookie dough covered hands spread wide, matching the tempo of the chorus. I join her, my voice helping her fill our home with music.

I.

Danika,

I'm going to give you one last chance. Call off the lawyer and this meeting. Fuck, I'll pay you. That's what this is about, right? Maintenance? Don't be a bitch.

Damnit, I supported both of us on my income throughout the pregnancy and paid you to stay home with my son. And

you couldn't even manage that correctly, could you?

I'll give you a one-time payment to sign the divorce papers. Just call off this meeting. I don't need your fucking lawyer poking through my life, making me feel like I did something shitty.

Because I didn't.

Dave

II.

My bedroom is populated by my collection of boots, a derelict dresser from off the street that holds up my picture of Shawn, and my mattress on the floor. Tom isn't the first man I've dragged in here, but he's the only one to see it more than once. I pull him in now, gripping his hoodie as we kiss.

On the train ride home, he had transformed. Gone was the polite comfort of a friend who made me feel safe, secure, self-possessed, replaced by an assertive hand on my thigh, drawing me closer to his solidity. His eyes, while never shy, glowed with anticipation in the subway car's straw yellow light.

I can't help but smile at the warmth that tingles my skin whenever he looks at me like that.

He would understand if I said no, that I'm not feeling it; but he would not whine, pout, or manipulate. He's not Dave. Or the boys that came before him.

Not yet, a voice whispers in my ear.

Experience screams at me to listen to this voice, taunting me that this man sliding my leather jacket off my shoulders will turn sour like Moxie soda. It's so tempting to ignore that voice when I feel him not rushing, both in the moment and in the big picture.

I float onto the bed as he undresses me—his lips meeting mine in slow, savory kisses that nourish a starving soul. His hands—damn, those hands—don't fumble. His fingers and lips slide up my calves, past the cutting scars on my thighs (remnants of my high school mental civil war) and settle on my postpartum stomach. Each kiss on the stretch marks feels like an act of worship.

Tears start to trail down my face when he kisses the clavicle that Dave broke the night I left, the night I told him what we

both knew to be true.

“Hey, you okay? Do I need to stop?”

I shake my head. “No. Fuck me. Please.”

His finger lingers at the hem of the panties Dave bought for our honeymoon.

“That’s some fancy underwear you’re wearing, gorgeous.”

He calls me gorgeous. Fuck. He called me gorgeous that first night when I was drunk, sprinting toward the inferno I thought he represented. He called me gorgeous in all my hungover scuzziness the following morning.

I tell him where I got the lingerie and for what occasion.

“Dave bought you these?”

Tom’s smile makes my stomach quiver. I nod.

Without hesitation, he tears my panties to shreds. I know he caught the grin on my face before I let out a squeal of delight. His lips follow his hands, providing a different satisfaction. By the time he’s done, I’m crying; the heat radiating from my core loosening what I cover with beer and bluster.

I want the sex to hurt. Need it. He’s big enough to make it hurt for real. Instead, he kisses me, whispering “easy, gorgeous” when I try to force him in. Only when he knows he won’t hurt me does he begin to move with determination. My eyes catch the photo of Shawn on my dresser. I ask to change positions. I end up screaming into the pillow—screaming my pleasure, screaming my pain. Screaming my grief.

III.

Gabby and I put our cookies in sandwich bags to go along with our lunches, I hold open the baggies while she drops them in. Every time we zip one closed, she sets it into one of three separate piles, making sure we all get the same amount. She’s been obsessed with fairness from the very beginning. The click of the front door makes her head snap up and she runs out of the kitchen.

“Daddy!”

I smile and continue dividing up the cookies.

Tom emerges from the hallway carrying Gabby in his arms, his face lit up with the same crooked smile he always gives me.

“. . . and then we sang in the kitchen while we waited for the

cookies to bake,” she says.

“What’d you sing? ‘Baby Shark?’”

Gabby’s face screws up in disgust. “Ewwww, Daddy, don’t be silly.”

“But that’s what Daddy is, Gabby Girl,” I say. “He’s our silly goose.”

Tom’s honking makes our daughter laugh.

I greet him as he sets Gabby down.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he said. “How was your day?”

He still calls me gorgeous.

I.

Danika,

My lawyer says I shouldn’t email you, says the “e” in “email” stands for “evidence.” He also told me you gave me the rope and I hung myself with it. I’m guessing your lawyer told you I would. Yeah, yeah, I’ve always had a temper. You and I both know that. Not my fault. I do try, I know you’ve seen me try. I’m honestly wondering why I’m even bothering to write now. You’ve taken half of everything.

You think I don’t feel sad about Shawn? I still think about him every day. He was my son and it hurts. That’s why I kept his ashes in the closet. I couldn’t stand to look at them. It never crossed my mind that you’d want them. I thought you left them behind on purpose.

Happy now?

Dave

II.

My head rests on Tom’s chest, the steady thump thump of his heart rocking my emotions to stillness. My fingers tug on his chest hair, I look through the individual strands to the top of the dresser. Even obscured, I can feel Shawn’s Atlantic gray eyes searching me out and hear that laugh turning around a tiring day in an instant.

“Does this ever get easier?” I ask.

Tom’s hand moves slow across my back, fingers counting the bumps of my spine. “Life creeps in this petty pace, from day to day, until the last syllable of recorded time.”

“The hell?”

With my ear on his chest, his chuckle sounds like it's coming up from a well.

"Shakespeare."

I roll my eyes and pull hard on his chest hair. He's aware of how much it annoys me when he knows I won't get a reference. He laughs at the pain and then sighs.

"No, gorgeous. It never gets easier. But one day you'll suddenly realize you haven't thought of Shawn all day. Years down the road you'll think to yourself, 'I haven't thought of him in a couple of days'. Time has a way of doing that."

I roll on my side to face the wall. He moves into the spooning position and holds me tight against his body. His warmth seeps into my muscles.

"Have you thought about Vicky today," I say.

His chest expands against my back and his breath drifts across my neck.

"I do, every day."

He squeezes me tighter and I hear a telling sniff. I squeeze his hand. My eyes close, his heart rocking me to sleep.

I wake in the middle of the night. Tom has turned over and is facing the dresser. I prop myself up on my elbow and start to rub his back. In the moonlight I can see Shawn's photo and feel my son smiling at me.

Tom stirs. I lean down and lick his ear. Before he can laugh or say anything, I kiss him. His groan makes my heart float.

"Wanna know something stupid?" I say.

"Always."

"The first time I let you stay the night I didn't feel like I was betraying Dave; I felt like I was betraying Shawn. That's how I knew this was different, I hadn't felt that before."

Tom turns to face me. My hand rests on his chest.

"Why do you think I haven't had you in my bed?" he says.

I cock my head.

"Well, when you're ready, I'll be happy to go mattress shopping with you."

He reaches out and cups my face.

"That's the sexiest goddamn thing you've ever said to me, gorgeous."

The shy smile I respond with is matched by one from him.

"Come here," he whispers.

I climb on top of him and pull the sheet over us.

III.

My head rests on Tom's chest, the steady thump thump of his heart matching my own's relaxed rhythm. My finger swirls his chest hair.

"Gabby asked why steam rises today."

Tom doesn't respond, continuing to massage the back of my neck.

"I told her steam and love are the same—they're so excited to exist they fly into the air."

His chest vibrates as he hums in agreement.

"When she asked why I don't fly away when I see her, know what I said." I lift my head and meet his eyes. "I told her your love for us keeps us both from flying away."

Tom runs his fingers through my curly hair. "The same goes for you two when it comes to me."

I hold out my free hand. His fingers interlock with mine.

"She asked about Shawn. I hadn't thought about him today until she asked. The second she mentioned his name it made me want to fly."

He lifts his head off the pillow and kisses my forehead. "Gabby and I will be here when you return, gorgeous."

I know you will. You two are the reason I come back down.

Katrina Soucy

Breathe

83, 84, 85, then a gasp for air. Maggie fell forward with the breath, light headed after a few rounds of practice. *Breathe*. She blinked her eyes open and focused on a knot on the wooden wall across from her to ground herself. She stayed like that for a moment, staring, steadying, as she'd done many times before. Her mind traveled back to her family's cabin, long summers, hot and sticky memories. Knots like eyes on the walls taking over her imagination after a long day in the sun on Lake George. She'd stare for what felt like hours, looking into the eyes of some monster who wouldn't move if she just didn't take her eyes off of it. Maggie tried that the first day with Ben, staring him dead on to show him her strength, to make him too scared to move. It didn't work. She never made that mistake again, always looking away. Staring into the eyes of real monsters is a much harder thing to do.

It'd been 263 days since he took her. 263 days of this cabin. Just four walls, a sunken mattress and a girl on a chain. On one wall was a counter Ben used to clean fish he'd caught. He would bring jugs of water for drinking and fill a bucket from the river to bathe with when it wasn't frozen over. He liked her clean. Most of the floor was wood planked, but there was a corner by the counter that had been fixed with concrete, a small rusted drain in the center. She used this during the winter to wash off her filth. After the snow melted and spring came he started letting her clean her body near the river. It was painfully cold, but it was the only time he let her off of the chain. The fresh air and the feel of the river water on her skin was freeing, even with him watching. Another bucket was given to Maggie as a toilet that he'd empty when it was full. If he was gone for too long, she'd make do with empty jugs as long as she could, until she couldn't. When Ben would come home to messes he would spit on her or slap her, then toss her some old clothes and tell her to clean up her mess and wash off her impurities.

The only other furniture in the room was a tattered green

and navy armchair that'd been around longer than Ben had been alive. That's where he liked to sit, rubbing the worn arms down like he was soaking up memories through osmosis. She often wondered who else had been in this room. Old family members who Ben inherited it from. A great uncle with nobody who wanted it after he died. Maybe Ben came here as a boy, some different person before something changed in him or maybe he was always this way. Or maybe some stranger owned it before Ben bought it from them to do what he wished. Maggie liked to think they had nice memories, probably went fishing in the summers on the river that led to Lake George below, cooked them up on a fire outside of the cabin like Ben would do sometimes. But, maybe other women had been here, too. He'd never talked about other women being at the cabin, but she couldn't help wondering and that turned into frantic thoughts of what might have happened to them and what would happen to her. And then she'd stop. Hold her breath and count until the thoughts disappeared down the rusted floor drain. It was hard not to think who had walked on the same floor she was chained to, the thoughts always coming back to the bad ending. Some dead girl on the news, or missing, never found. Lost in the forest for years and years. *Breathe.*

263 days. It was November 13 when he took her. Maggie thought back on that day a lot, too. She woke up, walked out into the kitchen, said "Morning, Dad." He'd been too consumed in his laptop to return the greeting, as many mornings seemed to go. She poured herself a cup of coffee, checked her email: *Class canceled for 11:30 with Professor Schuerr.* She'd told Kate she would meet her at the Women's Rally if she had time after class. Now she had more than enough time. Then Mom came down the stairs, big comfy robe, big mom smile.

"Good morning, sweetheart!"

"Morning, Mom," Maggie answered before quickly flipping her eyes down to her phone. She texted Kate, telling her she'd be free around 11:15. Free, a word that always pops back to her mind, such an easy thought back then. She finished her cup, kissed her mom an abrupt goodbye, skipping by her dad on the way out. She put on some jeans, a well-worn pink sweatshirt with Syracuse written in white across her chest &

a light jacket to mask the November chill. A hat too, grabbed just as she walked out the door thinking in her mother's voice "You might get chilly, just in case, love."

She spent the majority of her afternoon with Kate. They walked through crowds of women in pink pussy hats, all carrying signs with brightly colored pro-woman words and hashtags. They were all sisters that day. She watched the women hold hands with strangers, cheering each other on. Maggie hooked Kate's arm with her own and led her to the main stage as they started chanting "My body, my choice" in unison with thousands. The air vibrated with the sound of strength. A woman wearing an "Impeach Trump" shirt handed them wire hangers wrapped in pink. It was a horrible reminder of what could be. They chanted louder, holding hands, supporting one another.

After the rally was over, they'd found a small coffee shop on the corner and stayed to chat a bit before heading home, still feeling the buzz. They split ways about an hour later. Kate went right, Maggie left. Already walking away, Kate asked, "Do you want me to drive you to your car?"

"It's just a few blocks, I'm okay." Maggie waved back to her as she continued on. *I should have taken the ride.*

She was just a few cars away from her own when she heard, "Hey, excuse me!" Maggie turned around, startled by the closeness of the voice. She wondered how long he'd been behind her. "Did you drop this?" He held his hand out, but it was cupped in just a way that she couldn't make out what he was holding.

"I don't think so. What is it?" She took a step closer to look, still unable to see. He was tall, maybe 6'2", brown hair, brown eyes. He was average. Normal.

"Keys, do you have yours? I just found them right here near the curb." He stepped closer too, motioned to the ground behind him, still not showing. It felt like a children's game. Guess what's in here. She reached into her pocket, feeling the metal of her key against her finger. When she looked up again he was just two steps away. There was something in his eyes that made her catch her breath. Too close, too focused on her. He smiled, but it held no warmth.

She stepped back, ready to turn away. “No, thanks though. I’ve got mine right here.” She pulled them out, carefully placing her key between her fingers and making a fist as her mom had shown her. A small weapon. A tiny feeling of security. Maybe the wire hanger would be better. She turned taking a quick step. He was quicker. His hand grabbed onto her arm too tight.

“Sorry, I’m Ben. I saw you, at the rally.”

“I’ve really got to go, I’m meeting someone.” She gripped the keys tighter, then he ran in front of her.

“A boyfriend?”

“Yes, my boyfriend. Please, I need to leave.”

“You don’t seem like you have a boyfriend. You seem like a slut. Your filthy mind is corrupting you. You need to learn to behave.” His eyes moved to her hand.

“Stay the fuck away from me!” She felt it, the negative energy swirling around her, the pulse of bad thoughts spewing out of him. Maggie shouldered past him and made a run for her car looking for anyone, just one person who would see, who would make it stop or call for help or just do something, but there was no one. She wasn’t fast enough. Ben grabbed her from behind and banged her head into the window of her car door. Dizzy, she stumbled. He picked her up before she could go any further, took her keys and unlocked her trunk, tossing her in like it was nothing. Like she was nothing. And then he took her, his body now.

263 days. She couldn’t take one more. Ben told her he’d be gone for two days. It’d been four, she knew he’d be home soon. He would leave for a few days every other week. The first few times when he took longer than he’d said, she hoped that he was dead. Then she’d spend the time waiting, thinking to herself that if he is dead, how would she get out? The dread would set in. The waiting. Either he’ll come back and hurt her forever or she will spend her last days starving to death, chained to the floor like a forgotten animal. After the first two months she realized he liked running late. He liked to see her anxiety soften a bit when he’d walk in the door, pretending she was just happy to see him rather than that he was her only ticket to freedom. *He’s done this before.*

She'd been planning. Waiting for the right moment, practicing as much as she could while chained to the floor of the shack. *He'll be home soon.* Maggie grabbed an old coffee mug he left her to drink from, an old man and a dog sitting by a lake illustrated in red on the front of the cup. She kneeled down by the bed and smashed it underneath, shards flying. She scooped them into a neat pile beneath so he couldn't see, sorted through and found the sharpest piece, the back of the dog's head staring into nothing. Lifting the hem of the oversized T-shirt she was wearing, she took the broken ceramic and brought it up to her inner thigh close to her panties and slit her skin, warm blood running over her hands and down her leg. Stifling a scream, she held her legs closely together, making sure they both were coated in blood. She squeezed the cut and couldn't help but cry out, managing to get some blood pooled in her hand before falling to her knees. She made her way to the bucket she used as a toilet and dropped some blood in, wiped some on the edges, then wiped her hand onto her panties so that they were covered in blood too. Now all she had to do was wait. She curled up on the floor and held her breath. 1, 2, 3 . . .

It was a few hours before he came back, the blood dried up on her thighs. She sat up onto her knees as she listened to his key turn in the padlock outside. He looked at her, looked down, saw the blood. "Maggie, what happened? You're a fucking mess." He slammed his hand down on the counter next to the door. His eyes turned dark and angry, like the first day, like so many more.

"I've been bleeding, I'm sorry. Can I go take a bath, please?"

"You aren't due for blood for another week."

"I think, I think maybe I've had a miscarriage. It hurt." She held her stomach and braced herself for a hit. He lurched forward, then stopped himself on his old chair.

"You don't deserve a baby. You are unclean. Maybe if you get rid of the filth inside of your mind, on your skin, maybe then you will be deserving."

"I know, I'm sorry. Please, can I please take a bath?" She bent her head down, not daring to make eye contact with him. He liked it when she made herself small for him.

“Alright, let’s go.” Ben grabbed an old dirty towel from under the sink, then checked the gun on his hip. He grabbed the keys from his pocket and made his way over to her, snatching the chain up. She eyed the gun. *Don’t, he’ll get it first. Just breathe.* “Get undressed.”

They walked out then, her in front and him watching. She made her way to the river’s edge and carefully bent down, the cut on her inner thigh throbbing. A few rinses, her body shaking. She looked into the water, shallow towards the edge with a few rocks, deeper in the middle. It was fairly wide at this spot. She’d never been in fully, but she couldn’t see the bottom from about three feet in. A nice smooth jump.

“You’re shaking, is the water cold? It’s nice and hot out today,” Ben said, he took a step closer. *Don’t.*

“I’m fine, just a little sore.” Maggie forced a smile, making him smile in return. She turned back to the water and bent once more, scooping up a little water to scrub her face. Then took the deepest breath she’d ever taken, stood up tall and jumped as far as she could into the water. 1, 2, 3, she got past the shallow edge and swam down as far as she could.

“Maggie!” She could barely hear from under water, but could make out a murmured cry and what sounded like “God damn you!” Then the bullet rang out as he shot into the water. She almost gasped. 35, 36, and then another, closer. She swam harder and harder. 57, 58, she was losing her hold. She needed to go up for air. Bang, another shot. She swam up, 72, 73. *Breathe!* She was up just long enough to see she’d made quite a bit of distance, Ben was farther away than she’d thought. “I’ll fucking kill you!” *Deep breath.* Back in the water, swimming down, then going for distance.

She made it to 82 before swimming back up for air again and the clearing where the cabin stood was gone. She was surrounded by trees, but she could hear him yelling, running through the branches. *This is it, go deeper, farther. You’ve got this.* She took another huge swallow of air before heading back into the river, the current getting faster. Maggie didn’t know when she’d stop, if she’d dump out into the lake for someone to find her or if he’d find her first, a bullet to the back. All she knew was in that moment, she was free. *Breathe.* 1, 2, 3.

Dan Timoskevich

The Point

Trey's head is hot, and his feet hurt. His toes are wet and mashed together in his shoe, stinging where the blister has ripped loose. He's afraid of changing out of his socks, soaked with three hours of sweat, because if he removes them, he might rip away the puffy shell of blistered skin that's delicately hanging on. Trey bounces the tennis ball exactly three times, a pre-service ritual he must perform to satisfy his coach. He catches it and holds it against his racket for a moment before he serves. He's one point away from winning the Boys 16 and Under division at the Southern Open. He wants it to be over.

He considers going for a big serve and ending the match with an ace. Nagging voices inside his head persuade him to reconsider. Coach: *Why go for the lowest percentage serve on the biggest point of your life?* Mom: *This is what we've been talking about. You can't lose your focus on big points.* Dad: *What was going on inside your head?* Mom: *At least you'll learn from your mistake.* Dad: *He never seems to learn.* Coach: *Eliminate thinking errors.* Mom: *Why do you complicate things, Trey?* Coach: *Keep your thoughts simple.*

Standing just outside the fence with his arms folded across his chest, his coach hides his facial expressions in the shadow cast by his large straw hat. Trey's parents are seated on a Carnival Cruise beach towel draped over a row of the aluminum bleachers. Trey didn't go on that cruise. He was training for this tournament, for this moment, a moment that has left him confounded.

His right quadriceps twitches, signaling an oncoming cramp, and this convinces him to hit a safe spin serve to his opponent's backhand. *Just get the point started.*

His opponent blocks the return back to Trey's side of the court. Trey jerks his racket back and scrambles into position. His swing is no longer fluid but is now a disjointed abbreviation of the looping stroke he and his coach have been working on for the past four months in their weekly lessons.

At least he strikes the ball cleanly, sending it safely across the net to the middle of the court.

Every point has been like this for the last thirty minutes. Neither player aggressive. Both terrified of making a mistake because an error would mean precious energy had been wasted, and after three hours of slugging balls back and forth, neither of them has energy to spare. Trey is aware of the obvious paradox. Because he and his opponent are playing cautiously, the points have become much longer and more grueling, but both refuse to take a chance with an aggressive shot. It's become a demonstration of willpower rather than skill. Trey wishes his opponent would just take a rip at the ball and put an end to this torture. But he doesn't, and they continue lofting heavy topspin forehands, each shot clearing the net by a comfortable margin.

Trey has never made it this far in a big tournament. His parents and coaches have long insisted that his game is there, telling him that he *should* be making it to the finals and winning tournaments. He's not sure if this assertion is meant to be an encouragement of his abilities or an indictment on his failures. His mom has told him it's just a mental thing. *You have to want it.* He doesn't want it. He just doesn't want to lose. He doesn't want to come close, tease his parents with success only to fall short yet again. All the money they've spent. Lessons, clinics, hotels, rackets, strings, shoes.

All that he deep down really wants is for this third-set tiebreaker to be over so he can retreat to the bench and hide his burning face in the little rectangle of shade from the lamp head hanging high over the court. He's fighting harder than he's ever fought for something he doesn't want. He doesn't want to lose.

In the humidity, the ball has become shaggy and heavy, its black print nearly worn off. It spins at him through the air, a giant, yellow furball. He considers the color and texture of this ball so carefully it becomes a blur. His next shot shanks off the frame of his racket, sending a painful jolt through his tired arm. He hears his mom gasp in disgust, or at least he senses it.

The ball zig-zags in the air like a knuckleball. It's headed out, beyond his opponent's baseline. The score will be even

again. All this effort will have been wasted, and instead of walking away the champion, he'll have to win two more points in a row to win. He's not sure if he wants to go through this again.

But somehow—maybe a gust of wind—the ball changes trajectory and falls straight down, clipping the baseline. Still, he expects his opponent's index finger to shoot up in the air indicating a call of "out." A shot that ugly *should* have gone out. As his opponent stumbles backward to make a last second recovery, his left hand rises into the air ambiguously. Instead of extending his finger, he launches a high, defensive forehand back in return.

Trey can tell his opponent wanted to call the ball "out", but the shot had been too slow. All six people on the outside of the court had a clear view of the line. They would know the ball had been in, and they would have known his opponent had cheated if he had tried to call it out.

In a way, Trey regrets that his opponent had not called the ball out. It would have released all the tension, relieved the pressure. Sure, he would have dropped his racket on the ground, clasped the top of his skull in disbelief, and charged the net yelling, "No way! That was *so* in." Because there are no line judges on the court, there wouldn't be anything he could do to reverse the call, and Trey would look back to the sidelines at his parents who would share in his anger, his dad probably muttering something about what a big cheater the other boy was in a voice just loud enough for the boy's parents to hear.

It would have been a relief, this outcome. A win-win. If he had ended up losing, he'd have an excuse, an asterisk next to his opponent's victory. Trey would have the moral high ground. His opponent only won because he had cheated, he'd tell people. And Trey would believe it and sleep easier at night knowing this. But the bastard called it in. The point continues.

Trey is even more careful now, his shots landing shorter in the court while his opponent has gone on the attack. He senses his opponent is frustrated, anxious. Trey would be too if he were him. The point should have been over after that horrible mishit. Perhaps pressure has been relieved on the

other side of the court. Now, if his opponent should lose the match, he could claim that Trey had won because he'd been lucky. That's one thing Trey has learned. Rarely are there both winners and losers in tennis. There are those who won and those who claim they should have won. Defeat is difficult to accept, and those who do accept it toil at the bottom of the rankings until they're so discouraged by their lack of achievement, they eventually give up.

Out of the corner of his eye, Trey sees his opponent's parents shaking their heads, gesturing with their hands, and whispering over and over, "That was out." They actually want to believe that Trey's ball had been out. They had wanted their son to cheat, and they would have accepted it.

Trey is now sprinting from corner to corner, chasing down balls, trying to hit at least one defensive shot good enough so that the attack stops. He finally hits his first decent shot in the last thirty minutes, a sharp crosscourt forehand that sends his opponent scurrying towards the sideline. The shot has taken just about everything out of Trey. If his opponent hits it back, he's done.

His opponent does get it back, a slow, loopy shot down the line to Trey's backhand, just enough within reach that Trey has to waddle over to it. This is it. He attempts an ill-advised, poorly executed drop shot that lands barely over the net but bounces too high, giving his opponent ample time to retrieve it. His opponent races to the net and drives a backhand into the opposite corner. Trey doesn't make a move towards it. The ball lands squarely on the sideline. *In.*

Trey extends his left index finger and says, "out."

It's over.

He's won.

Contributor Notes

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Conor Hogan is a smokejumper with the U.S. Forest Service. After graduating from the University of Montana with a degree in English and Spanish, he spent two years on a Fulbright scholarship in Mexico. His writing can be found in *Dreamers Magazine*, *The Hamilton Stone Review*, and *Overtime*, among other places. He currently lives in Washington state.



O.T. Martin strives to create stories which dive into Catholic upbringing.



Terry Mulhern is an award-winning writer of fiction and nonfiction. Terry's writing spans themes of Australian colonial history, ecology, and culture. He was twice winner of the Van Diemen History Prize for nonfiction and his short stories set in 19th century Tasmania have been published in Australia and internationally (for details see terrymulhern.com). His quarterly column "Lobster Tales" appears in print and online at Forty South Tasmania (fortysouth.com.au).



Stephen Parrish's short work has appeared in *The Austin Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *The Good Men Project*, and elsewhere, and has been read in public at Liars' League, Lit Crawl, and other venues. His first novel, *The Tavernier Stones*, won an Independent Publisher (IPPY) gold medal and became an Amazon #1 mystery. He edits *The Lascaux Review*. Website: <https://stephenparrish.com/>



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Katrina Soucy's "Breathe" is her first published work of fiction, though she has many other stories under her belt. She dabbles in all forms of writing and genre, but she especially loves a good thriller/horror story. Katrina wears many different hats and balances many different plates, but being a mom, writer and co-hosting *Stay the Night Podcast* with her sister Mo are her favorite things of all.



Dustin Stamper is a closeted fiction writer still working through a slow-motion midlife crisis. He is a published author of mostly unpublished short stories who aspires to one day write an unsuccessful novel. He lives semi-happily in Virginia with a wife he doesn't deserve and two children he does.



Dan Timoskevich's short fiction has appeared in *Sixfold*, *The Thing Itself*, *The San Antonio Current*, and *The Aquila Review*. He has also co-written two award-winning musicals produced in San Antonio, Texas.



With a Ph.D. in physics, **Dr. George Vendura** has 43 publications in various technical journals and six patents. His solar cell inventions have enabled NASA-JPL's *Sojourner*, the first exploratory robotic vehicle on the surface of Mars. He is also a creative writer. Credits include *The Reader's Digest*, *The New York Daily News*, and numerous local publications. He's recently completed *Bronxcapades*, a memoir, and *State Penn*, a novel, for which he is seeking representation. www.georgefromthebronx.com



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