

EROS IN NEW ORLEANS
AND OTHER STORIES

By

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Abstract: *Eros in New Orleans* features nine short stories that explore the rich, even mythical character of the Gulf Coast. From New Orleans to Mobile, the mundane exists without comment alongside the fantastic, and in this collection, realism and surrealism coincide. “Graves Like Houses” explores the intersection of food and death as a baker must face responsibility for the burial of her estranged husband, while in the title story a Greek god falls in unrequited love in the contemporary Big Easy. In “Smooking Loon” a woman grapples with her mother’s abandonment, while in “Danes in Purgatory” Shakespeare’s melancholy prince charges a teenager with the task of explaining *Hamlet* once and for all.

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CHAPTER I

GRAVES LIKE HOUSES

The morgue lady was coming at three o'clock to talk about Walter, and while Leola knew what to say—some variant of “damned if I’ll bury the son of a bitch”—she still wasn’t sure what to serve. She thumbed through her recipe binder, past the entries for ginger snaps and apricot tartlets, lingering for a moment over the raspberry scones before flipping the page to peach cobbler. Here and there a telltale grease spot loitered in the margin next to the ingredient list, the imprint of some buttered finger, if not Leola’s finger then her aunt’s. Leola’s aunt was the one who had finally typed up the recipes after umpteen years of word-of-mouth, mother-to-daughter bequeathal, and if Leola didn’t take flowers to the aunt’s grave every Sunday, may the baking gods strike her ungrateful ass dead.

“Why bake anything at all?” her grown-up son Daniel said. He leaned against the kitchen’s doorframe and watched her turn from peach cobbler to apple crisp, his left thumb hooked into one of the belt loops on his jeans. “You don’t owe this woman a thing.”

“Somebody comes to your house, you feed them,” Leola said. “Besides that, it’s good for business.” And besides that, Leola hoped food would set the tone for what was

bound to be at the very least an awkward conversation. She didn't want to say anything she'd regret, and she was less likely to do so if she was alternating her statements with bites of cake. She had to remind herself that morgue lady was not the enemy. Yet.

Nothing with chocolate, Leola decided. Chocolate could say a lot of things—*I love you, I'm sorry, and Let's go at it like bunnies* among them—but never did chocolate say *You can't persuade me to anything, but we're adults and required to hear each other out politely so let's go through the motions*. Leola and Morgue Lady had never met in person, though Leola had talked to her briefly over the phone, long enough to decide that the nasal soprano voice issuing from the receiver belonged to a white person. Probably a skinny blond with manufactured curls. On behalf of the city of Nakishwana and the civil parish of St. Adelina, Louisiana, Morgue Lady was going to try to convince her to lay down some cash for the purpose of nailing the waterlogged body of Leola's long-lost husband into a box. Leola was going to say no thank you, I had more than enough of Walter Brown while he was alive, and now that he's dead I say let him be somebody else's problem for a change. Meantime Morgue Lady would steal secret glances at the large house and deduce that Leola could afford the burial expense, take private note of Leola's ambiguously brown skin and wonder what racial potluck produced this tall, big-hipped woman. And Leola would look at Morgue Lady and swallow down the bile that filled her mouth at the sight of this suited stranger's irksome presence on her sofa. So no, nothing with chocolate.

At last Leola settled on banana bread with cranberries. Banana bread was tasty but unfancy and easy to make. Banana bread would say, I respect you enough not to give you some crap-ass store-bought crumb cake, but don't push it, my friend.

She hadn't known what to feel when the sheriff told her that Walter was drowned. She couldn't say she felt nothing, but "nothing" was the closest approximation of what she did feel—a brief and infinitesimal tilting of the world, like a light blinking on and off again so fast you weren't sure if the light had gone out at all. For a moment a picture of the young Walter flashed into her mind, Walter from when he was eighteen and she one year older and they had just started going out to the local hamburger joint together. Blue-eyed Walter Brown; Leola didn't know eyes came so blue before. Brown hair that turned auburn in summer sunlight. High cheekbones, testament to a Choctaw great-grandmother, just like hers. In those days looking at Walter made Leola's insides melt and simmer like butter dropped into a hot skillet.

But the vision of young Walter disappeared as quickly as it came, not like the real Walter whose evaporation into someone she didn't know and couldn't love was as gradual as a geological shift and twice as disastrous. The moment she looked at Walter's paste-pale corpse in the morgue, all the other memories came surging to the forefront: the small, mean things he started doing about a year into their marriage, followed by the drinking binges and violent outbursts that accelerated throughout Daniel's toddlerhood, then the vase-shattering, door-demolishing fight that made her evict Walter once and for all, culminating in the Christmas Eve he broke into the house and started smashing Daniel's presents with a baseball bat.

Once these memories reasserted themselves, Leola turned to the morgue man and said, "Does the law say I have to claim this bastard's body?"

“Well, you could apply for parish assistance if you are unable or unwilling to pay the mortuary expenses,” the morgue man said without missing a beat.

“That’s fine,” said Leola. “I’ll do that.”

“Why didn’t you ever divorce him?” Daniel asked.

Leola set her mixing bowl and rubber spatula in their respective cabinets. “The only divorce lawyer in Nakishwana is Byron Roussel, and he’s a jackass,” she said. She gestured to Daniel to move out of the way and let her get to the bread, cooling on a wire rack in front of the toaster.

“You could have gone to town if you wanted a different lawyer,” Daniel said, sliding off to the side. “Town” was what the residents of Nakishwana called New Orleans and its immediate suburbs, an hour and a half’s drive due south. “Or even just down the road to LeJardin,” Daniel continued.

Leola pressed the bread lightly with her forefinger—barely warm—maybe another ten minutes. She twisted the egg timer to ten before turning to face her son. “Didn’t seem like there was much point going through all the legal mess,” she said. “The SOB was gone. What difference would setting it down on paper make?”

Daniel opened his hands. “Alimony?”

“I wouldn’t take Walter’s money if he had any,” she said, and even she was surprised at the sharpness in her tone. But she had long been decided on this point. The last thing she wanted was to give Walter an excuse to feel that she owed him something. She wanted to make perfectly plain to Walter that she could build her and Daniel’s lives

without his participation and without his help. She continued, “And I knew I was never getting married again. I think I’ve learned I’m not the marrying type.”

But these all sounded more like excuses than explanations. Maybe she had just been lazy. Nine plus years of marital mayhem had left her exhausted in every possible way. Letting Walter disappear into the sunset had seemed easier than dealing with him in court. In retrospect, she should have realized he’d make her life more difficult later if not sooner. All she’d done was postpone the inevitable.

Daniel said what she was thinking. “You should have divorced him when you had the chance.”

Leola was surprised. Daniel didn’t typically offer useless counsel. “Cupcake, you’re giving me advice fifteen years after the fact,” she said. Even though the egg timer hadn’t gone off yet, Leola checked the bread again. The loaf was still just the slightest bit warm, but she felt impatient and needed something to do with her hands. She pulled a serrated knife from its slot in the holder and started cutting wedges of bread about two fingers thick, jerking the knife back and forth.

Daniel must have realized he’d touched a nerve. He came up close behind her and squeezed her shoulder. Leola felt whatever defensiveness had risen up in her just a moment ago liquidate. Then Daniel stepped back and pushed the sleeves of his shirt up past his elbows. “You think he did it on purpose?” he asked.

Leola arranged the slices on a plate. “The sheriff said without a note there’s no way to know for certain. You heard that.”

“I’m asking what you think.”

“Oh, well. Walter never struck me as the suicidal type. Get me some Saran Wrap, would you?”

While Daniel rifled through the cabinets, Leola tried to imagine Walter poised at the river’s edge, ready to jump into the water and not come out again. In all her years of knowing the man, she never would have thought him capable of killing himself. She still didn’t. Sure, he was prone to the occasional gin-soaked depression, fueled by self-pity and fringed generously with rage, but suicide? Walter projected his discontents outward, not onto himself. Of course, she hadn’t so much as talked to him in something like seven years; possibly he had changed. But she doubted it. Even the change that had destroyed their marriage wasn’t so much a change as the gradual process of Walter becoming more like himself.

Daniel handed her the Saran Wrap. The sheet of plastic wafted and tangled as she tried to wrench it over the bread plate. “I always figured Walter would live to a hundred, just to annoy people,” she said.

Daniel’s lip curled up on the left side. “You mean to annoy you.”

“Ain’t that the truth. Ouch!” she said. She’d scraped her thumb against the jagged metal edge of the plastic wrap box, and pain bit across the width of the wounded finger. Blood rose to the edges of the frayed skin and pooled there. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” said Leola.

Her son started to say something, but the sound of a car turning off the River Road and toward the house interrupted him. “Damn,” said Leola. “She’s early.” She made for the living room window.

Daniel followed after her. “Ma, she’s exactly on time.”

An enormous Ford Bronco painted halfway between blue and black nosed its cautious way over the grass, braking for the chickens that roamed over the property.

“I’ll go bandage my thumb,” said Leola, walking toward the bathroom. “You go show Morgue Lady where to park her behemoth. If anybody asks, I got this cut in a knife fight in a dark alley.”

“I’ll tell her she should see the other guy,” said Daniel.

The money, as she found herself having to explain over and over again, was not the issue— not that the cost was insignificant. A basic cremation would run her up to two thousand dollars. But even if incinerating Walter’s remains cost her no more than a nickel, she would have thrown that nickel down a manhole before she spent it doing any favors for Walter Brown, even a dead Walter Brown. Paying for his burial would feel like he had once again maneuvered her into a position where she was forced to do what he wanted, like he was getting the last word. After all, wasn’t it just like Walter to cross to the other side on her dime? Disappearing and leaving her with the tab, as he had so many times in life? Leola imagined him laughing his ass off in whatever circle of hell he now inhabited.

She explained as much to the sheriff about a week after Walter’s death. Sheriff Lemoyne was a barrel-chested, affable man who visited the bakery Leola ran out of her kitchen no fewer than three times a week. He’d been a lieutenant on call that Christmas she had Walter arrested. While Leola slipped his loaf of French bread into a crackly paper sack, the sheriff stood in her foyer and tapped the hat he held by the brim lightly against his knee.

“The morgue’s packed as it is,” he said. “Seems like every corpse they get comes from a family with nothing to offer but grief. It’s gotten worse since the plants started downsizing.”

Leola folded the open end of the bag and flattened out the crease. “That’s all very unfortunate, but I don’t see what it has to do with me,” she said.

“You’re not like those others, Leola,” he said. “They want to bury the bodies, but they don’t have the means. You have the means but not the will. The whole parish council is after me to trim the budget. Paupers’ burials are there for people who need the service. You don’t.”

“That’ll be three-seventy-five.”

The sheriff handed her a twenty, and she made change. “Just let the morgue send somebody out here to talk to you,” he said. “She can explain things.”

“I don’t want to hear any explanations that end with me burying Walter Brown.”

But she finally did agree to meet with the Morgue Lady. (What did the sheriff say her name was? Brittany? Brandi? Some cheerleader name.) The sheriff promptly ordered a dozen chocolate éclairs.

Leola was right about Morgue Lady being skinny, and half-right about her being blonde. Her hair was decidedly yellow, interlaced here and there with darker, coppery strands, but the hair was thin and ramrod straight. She wore it pulled back and clamped in by a severe black barrette. The lapels of her pin-striped suit sagged over a breastless torso. Morgue Lady had buggy eyes of a washed-out blue color, accentuated by thick,

clotted mascara and heavy eyeliner. She shook hands firmly and introduced herself as Tiffany Arnaud.

“Banana bread?” said Leola.

“No thank you,” said Tiffany.

Off to a flying start.

Leola eased herself into a dusty rose armchair in the living room, and Tiffany sat on the edge of the sofa, her spine as rigid and elongated as a doll's. While Tiffany spoke—explaining that the morgue had suffered some brutal budget cuts, that since the recession started more and more St. Adelina citizens applied for parish assistance with mortuary expenses, that the parish simply did not have the resources it needed for day-to-day functioning—Leola deduced that here was a woman who had spent the larger part of her life trying to prove to people that her slight build and shrill voice and cutesy name made her neither a child nor a simpleton. Leola had had the opposite problem. Big-breasted at twelve, Leola had since adolescence found herself hurtling towards problems and expectations she was not equipped to handle.

“We've tried to streamline, be more efficient, eliminate waste,” Tiffany was saying, “but we can only do so much cost-cutting before the quality of the services we provide begins to degenerate. Ever since the recession—”

“I'm not responsible for the recession,” Leola said.

“Of course not,” Tiffany began, but Leola cut her off.

“You think I don't know there's a recession going on?” Leola said. “Flour costs more. Butter costs more. If I didn't keep my own chickens I don't know what I'd do for eggs. I've lost I don't even know how many regular customers.”

“Times are tough everywhere,” said Tiffany, her tone gentle. “Nevertheless, ma’am, I can assure you that you’re still in much better shape than a lot of people in this parish. Mr. Brown was your husband, and you are financially responsible for him.”

Leola laughed dryly. “No kidding?” she said. “You don’t understand. Money didn’t just slip from Walter’s hands. It jumped. Like soap. I’ve spent the last fifteen years recuperating from Walter’s spending binges.”

Leola heard the words spilling out of her mouth with a twinge of guilt. All this time she’d been insisting that her resistance was not about the money, but now, hearing herself, she wondered. Okay. Fine. She cared about the money. So what? Hadn’t Walter Brown pissed enough of her money away for her to be justified in refusing him any more? Still. She felt like the moral high ground on which she had planted her feet had become shaky.

As her confidence waned, Leola wanted more urgently than ever for the conversation to be over. She pulled herself out of her armchair. “Ms. Arnaud, I have three orders of pattie shells that need my attention right now. I’d be happy to discuss the Walter situation with you later in the week.” Under no circumstances would she be happy to do any such thing, but what else was she supposed to say?

“Oh, okay,” said Tiffany, but however bright and amenable her tone, she couldn’t quite mask the fact that she was no happier with the arrangement than Leola was. For the entirety of their interview Tiffany had worn a professional poker face, but now, watching the white woman jot down the time of their next meeting in her leather-bound agenda, Leola thought she saw unadulterated annoyance in the tight folds of Tiffany’s thin lips.

Daniel didn't reemerge until a minute or two after Tiffany revved up the engine of her Bronco and disappeared down the River Road in the direction of LeJardin. "Well?" Daniel asked.

Leola looked up from her crossword puzzle. "Well, she's coming back on Monday," she said.

"Jesus," said Daniel. He sat on the arm of the sofa, his grip on the upholstery beneath him rendering his knuckles huge. "You didn't promise anything, did you?"

"Beyond talking again on Monday? No."

"Good," said Daniel, and Leola wondered for a second when this clipped quality had entered her son's speech. Lately everything about Daniel, from his tone to the way his eyes cut across a room, seemed to crackle with muted rage. His full, soft mouth had taken on a steely firmness, so that his kiss on her cheek somehow felt both hard and perfunctory. He had inherited his father's intense blue eyes, startling in a black man's face, like a bright-plumaged bird out of season. Now, although the eyes burned bright as ever, they seemed sealed off, guarded. He had been a sunny, sincere child. What could have wrought such a change? Was it just Walter, the side effects of having a raving drunk for a quote-unquote father?

"I'm so pissed off at that cracker I can't see straight," he said.

Even though they were inside, Leola found herself turning to the left, the direction in which Tiffany Arnaud's truck had disappeared. "I don't like having her here either, but I didn't think she was all that bad," she said.

"Not her. Walter."

Leola looked at him. “Cupcake, you haven’t seen the man in years. Do you honestly care that much?”

“I care about my rights. I could give a shit about him.”

Leola nodded, not quite believing him. Through the back window she saw lush greenery against a blached blue sky, and suddenly she felt claustrophobic. “I’m going for a walk,” she said, setting her crossword and reading glasses on the side table. “You want to come?”

Daniel declined, saying he wanted to finish up some work for his environmental NGO before the weekend was up. Leola coaxed her feet into her hiking shoes and walked out the back way, locking the door after her.

Even though she lived right next to the river, Leola couldn’t remember the last time she actually looked at the thing. Her knees popped as she lurched up the steep slope of the levee. She was getting old. She remembered her aunt easing herself into a kitchen chair, short of breath and creaky, saying to her, “Don’t get old, you hear?”

She reached the dirt path in time to see a pair of black-bellied whistling ducks rise from the levee’s opposite base and flap away. They disappeared behind the Chinese tallow trees that choked the river’s edge. Leola turned right. Ahead of her a series of harbor cranes loomed over the docks and waiting ships. A slight breeze moved from off the water and swished her hair around. The slope she’d just climbed was spotted with patches of clover so copious Leola wanted to kneel and thrust her fingers into their soft green depths, as one might desire to braid the tresses of a thick-haired girl. When Daniel was a child, he used to climb to the top of this levee, lie on his side, and roll back down.

He did this hundreds of times, until one day he happened to roll across a red ant pile. He became cautious after that. He was not a child liable to be bitten twice by the same insect.

The stretch of land between the levee and the road widened as she walked, and soon she was passing tin-roofed houses with orange trees and chain-link fences. It was the third week of April, and the fragrance of the orange blossoms had drawn an improbable number of bees. In another two weeks, the heat at this time of day would be only slightly less than unbearable. Even now the heat was so strong that after twenty minutes of walking Leola had to stop. When she did, she saw that she had reached the old St. Adelina Parish cemetery, and she could see Sheriff Lemoyne's disproportionate frame standing among the tombs. She called his name, and he turned and waved to her to come down.

The tombs closest to the river were above-ground mausoleums, encased by iron fences gone red with rust. Further back were smaller grave stones, many with epitaphs in French, some with dates going back to the 1700s. Ici repose Jean Jacques Cantrelle. Adele Aucoin, née 1813, décédée 1857. The newer tombs were depressingly ugly by comparison: shoe-box sized slabs wedged into the earth, often adorned with some cheesy clipart image of a flower or praying hands. Sprinkled throughout the cemetery were iron crosses, a marker which signified, Leola knew, a yellow fever victim. A small cross meant the victim was a child.

When she reached the sheriff, he pointed to one of the old French gravestones. "This is my great-great—" he paused and ticked off the "great's" on his fingers—"great-great grandmother's grave."

Leola looked at the tomb, another of the French ones. “Your people have been here a while,” she said.

So had hers. But none of her people were buried here, at least none that would have acknowledged her. Her aunt, father, and mother lay in the new cemetery on Cement Road, and she had grandparents in the courtyard of the Methodist church, but beyond that, nothing. Leola looked out at the crosses standing stiffly askew and the mausoleums like miniature houses. The posts of the curlicued fences had crowns in the shape of arrowheads. These people were remembered. Perhaps there was nothing left of them but their names and the dates that bookended their lives, maybe a generic familial description, beloved father, devoted mother—a pittance, to be sure, but at least they had something testifying to their existence. What did her own ancestors have? Who knew what patch of dirt housed their remains?

“Sheriff, what exactly is a pauper’s grave?” she asked. “I mean, what happens when someone’s buried in a pauper’s grave?”

“Well, we wait until we have enough of ‘em,” the sheriff said. “Then we send ‘em over to Orleans Parish. They do our paupers’ burials for us. There’s no marker, though sometimes people do save up enough to put a marker on there.”

Leola nodded, her eyes fixed on the mausoleum. Sheriff Lemoyne’s relative had been named Joséphine. Without thinking Leola reached out and traced the supple “J” in the stone’s inscription with her thumb. In the silence that followed she could hear the honk and howl of a freight train sailing down the Union Pacific on the West Bank.

Finally the sheriff spoke up. “It’s tough,” he said. “Hell, Leola, I know what that man put you through. I wouldn’t ask you to do this if—”

“If it wasn’t an election year,” Leola finished.

The sheriff drew his head back and squinted at her. “I was going to say if the parish didn’t really need it,” he said quietly, and Leola felt a cold breeze blow across their friendship. She looked down at her feet and tried to think of the right thing to say, but before anything occurred to her, Sheriff Lemoyne said, “Well, I’ll be seeing you around, Leola,” and marched to his bent-up Firebird. Leola watched him start the engine and wheel the car towards the Airline Highway. Neither of them waved. Then she turned and started back up the levee, knees popping all the way.

She didn’t even find out about the other women until after she threw Walter out for the fourth and final time. Once, when Walter was drunk, he gave Leola a strange leer. She knew that leer as the look men wore when women made them feel powerful in an illicitly sexual way, and she knew that Walter must have worn that look before, probably recently. But her suspicions remained unconfirmed until some months after he left the house for good. Only then did she discover the number of times he went to bed with somebody else over the course of their marriage, how he had blown his paychecks and borrowed or stolen Leola’s money to buy these women drinks and steak dinners and eight-karat gold necklaces.

Tiffany sat erect on the sofa just as before, hands folded across her closed knees. As Leola sat down, Tiffany asked if she had had time to think over the matter of Walter’s burial.

Time? Sure, Leola had had time. But she hadn't used that time to think about Walter, not in any productive way, at least. She had drawn two columns on the back of a soup can label, one column marked "pros" and the other marked "cons," but every time she sat down to fill in the empty space beneath the heading, she felt a sudden urge to try the recipes that had been Scotch-taped to her refrigerator for over a year. Forgoing hot meals and a certain amount of sleep, Leola created a lime coconut bundt, a peanut butter pie, and a six-layer white chocolate sweet potato cake. The one thing she hadn't made was a decision. Throughout all of Leola's mixing and beating and slicing and melting, Walter hovered in the background of her consciousness, like a balloon nobody could reach bobbing in a ceiling corner.

"You know, when Walter and I were having an argument he used to cover my mouth with his hand to cut me off," Leola said. "I hated that."

"Who wouldn't," Tiffany said so quietly her lips barely seemed to move.

"If I asked him to do laundry, he'd do all of his own clothes and none of mine," Leola continued. "If I was saving a buttermilk drop or a little sliver of mandarin orange cake in the fridge, he'd eat it. Those were the good years, mind you, the early years. In the later years I started buying picture frames according to how well they'd cover the holes Walter punched in my wall."

Tiffany said nothing. Her eyes did not move.

"You know, sometimes I think the cake-pilfering bothers me more than the wall-punching," Leola said. "Walter only raged when he was out of his mind with liquor. In those early years he made the sober, deliberate choice to be unloving, over and over again. You get tired of being treated in an unloving way."

Tiffany leaned forward. “Mrs. Brown, I’m divorced,” she said. “I know what it’s like to want nothing to do with a man. If the parish’s problems aren’t enough to persuade you, let me ask you to think about your son. Every day that corpse stays above ground is another day you make him relive the hell your husband put you through. Don’t take three decades of unpleasant memories and make them the center of your life. You’re on the verge of pulling the trigger on a gun aimed straight at your foot, and if Mr. Brown saw you he’d find the whole situation hilarious. Trust me.”

Leola pictured Walter with that strip joint leer on his face. For a moment she hated him with an intensity she hadn’t felt in fifteen years.

“All right,” Leola said at last. “All right. I’ll claim the body. I’ll pay for the funeral. I’ll put a wreath of goddamn roses on the bastard’s grave. You win. The parish wins. Walter wins.”

Tiffany shook her head. “You shouldn’t look at it that way.”

Leola arose from her chair. “I’m doing what you want, Ms. Arnaud. Have the courtesy not to tell me how to look at things.”

When she told him her decision, Daniel listened with that closed-off expression, lips soldered together, eyes not meeting hers. Then he walked to the front door and put on his jacket, saying nothing, offering no response when Leola asked him where he was going but to walk out and let the door slam behind him.

Standing where he’d left her in the living room, Leola heard the sound of his motorcycle revving up and tearing down the River Road. Go then, she thought. Her hands trembled as she emptied the kitchen sink, tossing the whisks carelessly and shutting the

drawers too hard. Go, she thought again. Because God knows you're the only one who's disappointed right now.

After dinner she went back to the levee. Off to her right the sun sank behind the docked freighters, silhouetting them. Everything on the riverbank glowed as if radiating its own inner light, the birch trees and the blackbirds, even her own cinnamon-colored skin. When she looked at her hands and made herself conscious of their warmth, she felt as though she could gild whatever she touched.

She took a five-minute walk to where she knew a stone bench overlooked the river, and then she sat. The water moved in short, choppy waves. Early in the evening a couple of joggers passed by, but other than that she was alone. Leola stayed on the bench long after she should have gone home, watching sky and water together turn a dusky purple and then an inky blue. Finally she sensed someone approaching from the left, and she turned and saw Daniel lumber toward her.

"Jesus," said Daniel as he reached the bench.

"Haven't seen Him," said Leola.

"You know if you're going to disappear for over an hour you could at least leave a note saying where you are."

"Look who's talking." She scooted over, and Daniel sat. By this time the river had gone black, discernible only from the play of moonlight on the water's movement. They watched the silvered undulations for a few moments.

"This river is the reason I came back to Louisiana," Daniel said. "It's the reason I'll always live here. No matter how screwed up this state gets, this river is the trump card."

She tried not to, but Leola couldn't help but be a little hurt by this. She would like to think that she played some role in Daniel's decision to stay at home—that she was the trump card that called him back, just as he was and always would be so for her. She had never left Louisiana for long, and she did not know what life away from the water would be like, but she couldn't imagine that any topographical feature would have the pull on her that her son did. She squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them, trying to pull herself together. Mothers were supposed to feel this way about their children, not the other way around. Parenthood was not a tit-for-tat arrangement.

“So,” Daniel said. “We’re burying Walter Brown.”

Leola was glad Daniel couldn't see her eyes leak in the dark. “We can afford it,” she said.

“That’s no reason.”

Leola felt a battle coming on, and she didn't want to have it out here on the levee. “Are you hungry?” she said.

For a moment Daniel looked as if he was going to accuse her of changing the subject, but then he stood up and said, “I’m starving.” He held onto her hand to steady her on the way down the levee, but once they reached flat ground again he let go. They walked in silence back to the house.

The knife glided through the cake. Touch was what Leola liked most about baking: the feeling of thickened dough resisting a spoon, the slick lathering of an icing spatula. She enjoyed the way layer after frosted layer bent and parted under the knife's placid insistence, right until the blade clinked against the ceramic plate. She set the slice before her son, who looked at her with a wry expression that clearly said the subject was

not closed, the issue not settled. There was still plenty that needed to be said between them. Leola watched Daniel pick up his fork. She would wait to start talking until he took the first bite.

CHAPTER II

REDUCED TO ABSURDITY

Three o'clock. You start to ask yourself what, exactly, you're doing in this coffee shop, but then you stop and realize that you already know the answer and it's Charles. Charles is the reason you are sitting in a round-backed chair by the window at the Carpe Diem Coffee and Tea Company in Mobile on a Sunday afternoon in October, Charles is the reason you came to Mobile in the first place, Charles is the reason why you didn't cut your hair last week and why there are two Tupperware containers of chicken tetrazzini in the crisper of your fridge and why there aren't tickets to Die Fledermaus in an envelope at the bottom of your purse.

But you can't let yourself off the hook that easily. Charles may be the answer, but that answer prompts another question. And you can't let questions go. Charles himself would be ashamed. You think of your first logic class: all those syllogisms, all those fallacies, all those conclusions that weren't conclusions at all but invitations to take up another chase. When you were a freshman the idea of inexhaustible inquiry exhilarated you. After you had your first objectively banal but personally earth-shattering encounter with undergraduate existentialist angst, you were terrified. Now you're merely exhausted—especially when the question you have to chase is: but why Charles?

You stare at your coffee, waiting for it to cool. Why Charles. The first time this question arose alarmed you. You'd never thought loving Charles required justification before, and your visceral response—shameful, you'll admit—was to push the question away and try to forget about it. Apparently the Question refuses to be forgotten, so your only recourse is to scrounge for an answer. You form an argument.

- A. If your lover talks you into missing an opera you really want to see so you can meet him at a coffee shop instead and then doesn't show up, he doesn't really care for you.
- B. My lover has talked me into missing an opera I really wanted to see so that I could meet him at a coffee shop instead, and he hasn't shown up.
- C. ∴ He doesn't really care for me.

The argument is valid, certainly. But is it sound? You examine the first premise: because Charles has lured you away from Strauss, pleading that your work schedule keeps him from seeing you as much as he'd like, only to stand you up, he must not love you. Oh, but he does. You know he does. You picture him in your mind—thick-lipped, bespectacled, hair richly yellow but thin enough to tell you he'll be bald before he reaches forty. You imagine his lean frame stretched warm against your body, his hirsute arm draped across you in bed, the way he nuzzles your neck with his nose. He loves you. On cue your brain switches to Socratic dialogue.

Q: How do you know he cares for you?

A: That question's too big. Break it down.

Q: All right. Let's try a different angle. Do you care for him?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: Why?

A: He's intelligent. He's charming, at times. I don't want anyone else. And he was so sweet to me in undergrad, such a help. Charles has been so stabilizing these past few years. He's good for me.

Q: Good for you? Boyfriends are not bran muffins, Meredith.

A: Foul. Double foul. No negative definitions, no figurative definitions.

Q: Conceded. But you still haven't answered my original question.

A: I'm tired. Can't we do this some other time?

Q: Foul. We're in Socratic dialogue. *I* ask the questions, and *you* answer them. Those are the rules. As you very well know, missy.

"I am a lunatic," you say out loud. A man nose-to-nose with a newspaper two tables away, the only other customer in the coffee shop, looks up at you. You force a smile at him and raise the paper cup on the table to your lips. The coffee is still too hot and scalds the roof of your mouth.

When you were eleven your father decided to clean out the storage closet in the garage. By mid-afternoon he'd erected a tower of junk on the carpet in front of the piano: paint cans, ice chests, grease-spattered muffin tins, a bouquet of silk roses from a play you were in at school, a bicycle pump, an inflatable mattress. Your six-year-old sister discovered a box of old records. "What are these?" she said, pulling a thin black disc out of its yellowed sleeve. "Frisbees?"

"No!" your father yelped.

He dragged a turntable down from the attic, and for the next two hours you and your father lay sprawled on the living room floor listening to opera records. After the first few minutes your sister lost interest. But you didn't. You still remember what you listened to that day. Lucia Popp, Anna Moffo, Tito Gobbi. *Figaro*, *Butterfly*, *Carmen*.

You took up a record with an intriguing picture on the cover: two mustached men in feathered turbans and shoes that curled at the toes, arms outstretched in supplication before two women in eighteenth century dresses. "What about this one?" you said.

Your father, supine, craned his neck to read the title. "Ah," he said. "Mozart. *Così Fan Tutte*. 'All Women Are Like That.'"

"Like what?" you asked.

He hesitated. "Well, you sort of have to know the whole story."

"What's the whole story?"

Your father flipped over onto his abdomen and faced you. "Two young men make a bet with an old man that their fiancées will always be faithful to them."

"Do they win?"

"No."

"So this one's sad?"

"Oh no, it's a comedy. The guys pretend to leave to go to war, and then they come back in disguise—you know, wearing silly hats and these long fake mustaches, and each one tries to woo the other one's girlfriend. It's sort of a funny situation."

You frowned at the picture on the record cover. "You mean the guys leave the stage and come back with fake mustaches and the girls don't recognize them? Their own fiancés?"

“It’s a stage convention. Shakespeare used it all the time. Just go with it.”

You scanned the foreign title again—Co Zee Fahn Too Tay. All women are like that. Meaning what? That they wouldn’t know the most important person in their lives if he was wearing a lackluster Halloween costume? Or that they’d ditch the most important person in their lives for the first curly-shoed jerk who came along?

You must have looked concerned because your father said, “It was the 1700s, Mere. Don’t analyze it too much.”

At least you like the coffee shop. The building, originally somebody’s house, was constructed in the nineteenth century. Fairly recently the house was remodeled but not enough to efface the exotic feeling of oldness. People who use words like “quaint” would call it quaint.

The walls are painted the ripe red color of plums. Mixed media paintings crowd white mantelpieces, price tags hanging like tiny tea bags from the picture frames. Varnished floorboards crackle beneath the weight of the most delicate footsteps. Billie Holiday wails beneath the clinking and whirring that comes from behind the counter. (Or is that Ella Fitzgerald? You don’t know the difference.) The window next to your table reveals a sidewalk bordered with green trees—the seasons hardly change in Mobile—and a slab of sky, robustly blue. Because it’s mid-October, a string of orange and purple lights hangs along the ceiling, and here and there around the shop there’s a miniature pumpkin or a pipe-cleaner bat.

Bats—*Die Fledermaus*. The curtain rose half an hour—you check your watch—forty-five minutes ago. The only performance scheduled when you weren’t working was

the two-thirty matinee going on now, but Charles wanted you to come here instead. He doesn't like the opera.

“Oh, *opera*,” Charles said, wrinkling his nose, when you first asked him if he wanted to go with you to *Turandot*. “It’s like jazz. Nobody really likes jazz, they just pretend they do.”

“I like jazz.”

“No you don’t.”

Comments like that really irritate you. If he had tried to tell you what you did and did not like earlier in your relationship, you would have laughed in his face and walked out the door.

But instead you’ve followed him halfway across the country. When you met Charles, you were a freshman, and he, four years your senior, was a T.A. in your first semester philosophy class. Everything he said made you tremble. With him you navigated the delightful intricacies of Descartes and Hegel and Socrates, like someone exploring a new and beautiful island. All that first semester you walked from class to class in a heady state of song and sparkle, wondering how you ever thought you knew happiness before now. You pitied the people you saw in the hallway or the union or the dorm because the dazzling wave of happiness that bore you along didn’t touch them. The only comparable experience you’d ever had was lying on your bed when you were fourteen and listening to “*Mir Ist So Wunderbar*” over and over again.

Under ordinary circumstances you keep to yourself, but when something thrills you, you must talk about it. Had Charles not been the sole candidate available, you would have chosen him anyway. In any case, he was your only option. Most of the boys you

knew in your class were more interested in keggers than in Kierkegaard. (Not that you've got anything against keggers.) Causal determinism failed to seize those boys by their throats and hold them in frightened and titillated thrall as it did you. Charles was different. He understood you.

Charles is fifteen minutes late. Pulling your jacket on as you walk, you step out onto Carpe Diem's porch and down the four or five steps to the small asphalt parking lot. You hate talking on the phone in public places, and stepping outside of the enclosed coffee shop gives you, somehow, the illusion of privacy. You hit Charles' speed dial button and hold the receiver up to your ear. On the street directly in front of you, cars clip by with supreme indifference to the sign dictating twenty-five miles an hour. Two lanes of traffic separate you and Carpe Diem from one of Mobile's ritzier neighborhoods. The houses nestle in anonymous greenery that by March, if not before, will reveal themselves flamboyantly as azalea bushes, dogwood, and cherry blossom trees.

Charles' office answering machine chirps its too-familiar leave-a-message message in your ear. You hang up and try his cell phone. An acorn falls from one of the oak trees on your right and cracks against the concrete. A woman in shorts and a sports bra jogs by, her ponytail flopping back and forth. She runs past Carpe Diem and the neighboring buildings, the bank and the barbershop and the five and dime, out of sight. A large pot filled with snapdragons squats beside the porch railing where you stand. You pull at the petals to snap the dragon's mouth while you wait for the robotic voicemail lady to shut up. Your message is succinct—"I'm here. Call me."

The smell of espresso beans and sugar greets you as you open the coffee shop door. A tall, cylindrical iron rack of greeting cards stands in the center of the room. You browse through the selection. Happy Birthday. Get Well Soon. Thank You. Just Because. Packages of truffles, as shiny as wrapping paper, glint at you from the shelves. You take one down to read the nutrition label when your phone whirs and quivers in your pocket. Charles has sent you a text message, longhand and properly punctuated. "I'm running late, but I'll be there soon. Wait for me."

Impatience rattles in your chest, but you decide to wait for him. If you leave now, he could show up two minutes later. You and Charles have a history of just missing each other.

Recalling that first golden year of college, you're still not sure whether you confused your intellectual excitement with love or love with your intellectual excitement. Or both, or neither. The first few times you went to Charles' office you went to talk about the class material. I get the cogito, but how does Descartes get from the cogito to God? Isn't Frankfurt kind of copping out in this paragraph? What exactly is Berkeley saying here? Eventually you started seeking out difficult points in the reading so that you would have a pretext to knock on his door. Finally you reached the point where pretenses were no longer needed between you. You began dropping in regularly, no occasion but desire for his company necessary. The two of you could talk about philosophy, sure, and you did, often, but you could talk about other things, personal things, too.

For the following year you gorged yourself on threatening ideas as happily and obliviously as a baby reaching for a razor blade. Intellectually you grasped everything

you read, but experientially—you had no idea. Then one day you overheard some older students, people you didn't even know, discussing Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. And all at once, in a way for which no textbook could prepare you, the apparent meaninglessness of the universe made itself fully and instantly vivid in your mind. The wave that had carried you so sweetly through the previous year roared to its zenith and crashed down on top of you.

Shaken, you went to Charles for comfort and guidance. He was sympathetic and, to your surprise, rather pleased.

"Education is a series of controlled nervous breakdowns," said Charles. He handed you a box of tissues. "If you finished college without ever feeling this way, I would know I'd failed you."

With Charles' help you explored your options. Flirtations with a succession of Eastern religions ensued, predictably. Charles emptied his bookshelves into your arms—Hume, Sartre, Nagel. You let your history and literature courses go to hell while you cracked your skull against Kant and Camus, taking diligent notes all the while. (Incidentally, you let Charles' small-change intro class go to hell, too—and he docked you mercilessly.) Making the transition to unbelief from belief—even your vague, perfunctory belief—was daunting, but once you severed your ties to faith you were surprised at how little you missed them. Now you realize that the plunge into atheism was no plunge at all; you'd started worshipping Charles instead of God long before.

Existential despair revealed itself to you with shocking instantaneity—a switch flipped so fast the whole system shut down before the sparks hit the floor. Realizing you loved Charles took three years, and when you did finally know you weren't surprised in

the least. As soon as you knew he was willing to have you, you made love to him beneath a bust of John Locke.

Three-thirty. The first act must be over by now. You start to sing the finale, “Happy Is He who Forgets,” gently to yourself. Then you discover you’ve forgotten the words.

A. If I forget, I am happy.

B. I’ve forgotten.

C. ∴ I am happy.

You thought about telling Charles that the show was called *Revenge of the Bat* and letting him think you were going to see a comic book movie until both of you were already at the civic center. He’s so actively ignorant of pop culture, he might actually believe you. But, of course, he’s even less likely to watch a comic book movie than he is to watch an opera. You can hear him now: “Grown men running around in capes, fighting crime? That’s ridiculous. Nobody does that. The logistics are way off.” Et cetera.

As much as you dislike going to the opera alone, going with Charles is worse. You spend the whole time fretting about how bored he must be, and during intermission he unloads upon you a voluminous list of everything he dislikes so far.

Trovatore: “He’s standing there singing about leaving, about rushing away, about flying to his mother’s rescue, swift as lightning, for two verses, and the whole time he’s just *standing there*.”

Barber: “All these people singing at the top of their lungs about how quiet they’re being.”

Figaro: “The premise is baseless. The *droit du seigneur* was a historical fiction. This would never happen in real life.”

Butterfly: “A Japanese woman and a Caucasian man cannot produce a blond-haired, blue-eyed child. It’s biologically impossible.”

“All this time we’ve been together, and I never knew you were a geneticist.”

“Fair enough. I am open to challenge on this point. But even if it’s possible, I bet it’s highly, highly unlikely.”

Last Valentine’s Day you decided to play your best Callas *Traviata* during dinner. You thought the mood music would be romantic. Charles cut his pasta into smaller pieces and said, “I don’t see how a consumptive could hit those high C’s.”

You told him sopranos with TB were a stage convention and not worth scrutinizing. He told you that nothing was not worth scrutinizing. The two of you went on, arguing and counter-arguing, before you realized that you didn’t like this discussion, that you were tired of everything turning into a battle.

“Come on,” you said. “I want us to be happy today.”

“Some things are more important than happiness,” said Charles. Not for the first time.

Q: How do you know—

A: LA LA LA LA LA I CAN’T HEAR YOU LA LA LA LA LA LA LA.

The year you graduated Charles was accepted to a PhD program in Mobile. Following him meant putting your own plans for graduate school on hold, but you didn’t

mind. (And yet here you are, knee-deep in grief over missing an opera performance.)
Consciously turning yourself into the punch line of a humanities major joke, you took your bachelor's degrees in philosophy and theology and found a job tending bar.

You're twenty-three now. The mysteries of the universe are old-hat, and after two years of living with Charles you wonder if the unexamined life has its appeals after all. You've realized that the dark side of Charles' dogged and precise questioning is an indiscriminate cynicism about everyone's motives. Including his. Including yours. He's the kind of person who would let you drift into someone else's arms, would even push you towards them, not to prove anything, not to win a bet, but just so he would know, just so he could talk about the implications endlessly.

Q: Would you like him more if he wore curly-toed shoes?

A:

Q: Just a thought.

Four o'clock. Half-way through the second act now. The man with the newspaper is gone, so you venture to sing a little louder. The truth is you can't sing at all.

The coffee shop door opens. As if pulled from a string connected to the center of your breast, you perk up. But it's not Charles. It's a group of high school kids, the boys' crumpled shirttails hanging out from under the hems of their jackets, the girls' pleated skirts hiked up a good five or six inches above the knee.

Q: How do you know he cares for you?

A: That's a ridiculous question.

Q: That's a ridiculous answer.

A: I don't. All right? I don't know. How could I possibly *know* in the sense that you mean?

Q: For the sake of argument, let's accept the premise as a given. Is the fact that he cares for you—assuming he cares for you—enough to justify staying with him?

A: Yes.

Q: How do you know?

A: I just know.

Q: That's not an answer. How do you know?

A: I just *know*, can't you accept that I just *know*? God damn it, leave me alone.

Stop bothering me.

It occurs to you that the only reason you're debating yourself is because you came to this coffee shop expecting an actual conversation. Since the conversation you'd hoped for has failed to happen, you simulated a discussion in your brain. You feel utterly pathetic. Then you feel sorry for yourself. Then you feel contemptuous of yourself for feeling sorry for yourself. You go to the counter and order a chocolate chip cookie. While you eat, breaking off little pieces with your fingers and popping them into your mouth, you stare out the window and list to yourself all the reasons why you should stop crying.

A. All men are mortal.

B. All women are like that.

C. Von festem Geiste ist ein Mann. A man is of firmer spirit, he thinks about what he might say.

- D. La donna e mobile. A woman is fickle, like a feather in the wind.
- E. L'amour est enfant de boheme. Love is a gypsy child.
- F. Happy is he who makes the best out of any situation, and lets reason guide him through trials and tribulations.
- G. Socrates is a man.
- H. Charles is a man.
- I. You are a woman.
- J. ∴
- K. I'm sorry...what was the question?

Four-thirty. You stand up and pull your purse strap onto your shoulder. As you shove your chair beneath the table, Charles walks though the door. He says your name, begins to burble out some excuse. You're not interested; you brush past him and go home.

Once you reach your apartment, you drape your jacket over the loveseat, turn on the radio, empty the dishwasher. In a short while Charles will come home. You will fight; you will argue and counter-argue. Just the thought of all those thrusts and parries makes your feet ache and your bones feel hollow.

After locking the door of your bedroom, you plug the external speakers into your laptop. You scavenge through your mp3 files, sampling this and that, like someone squeezing boxed chocolates to find what she wants. "Der Hölle Rache," "Aprite un po' quegli occhi," "Donna sciocca, alma di fango." When the opening strains of "Ah, chi mi dice mai" begin, you know you have a winner. You like how Bartoli spits out the

syllables, the way her consonants cut and the blaring of her vowels. Where is he, she sings. If I find him I will rip out his heart. But she won't; you know this, would know it even if you didn't know the rest of the opera.

You put the track on a loop, so you're not sure how many times Bartoli has vented her spleen by the time Charles comes home and knocks on the door. "Meredith, we need to talk."

"I know, I know," you yell through the closed door. "The champagne made you do it, Eisenstein."

Silence. Then: "What?" he says.

You don't answer. You turn up the volume on your speakers.

"Oh, come on, Meredith."

"Can't hear you," you say, sliding the volume dial further up.

"You can be so unreasonable," says Charles.

The noise that comes out of your mouth is half-laugh, half-raspberry. Of course, Charles doesn't hear the noise, just as you can no longer hear whatever he's saying or doing in the next room. The two of you are cut off from each other by the stream of liquid anger firing from your speakers, howls from a world where even screeching and impotent rage have no choice but to be beautiful.

CHAPTER III

EROS IN NEW ORLEANS

The god of love was in love with a girl named Hazel. She worked at Brocato's, the century-old Italian ice cream parlor on the edge of Mid-City. Every morning, Tuesday through Sunday, Eros took two streetcars from St. Charles to North Carrollton, then walked through the white-framed glass door beneath Brocato's striped awning and ordered one of the desserts in the display case. Not that he cared for desserts—in the two thousand years or so since the gods left Mount Olympus, Eros had never acclimated himself to mortal food. He just liked to stand by the counter and watch her: Hazel, bending forward and extracting biscotti from the tray, her bony fingers and parti-colored nails gently encircling the fringed paper cup; Hazel, centering a doily on a ceramic plate and tucking a plastic utensil next to the tiramisu, all in motions so swift and smooth they seemed like a kind of dance. When he gave her exact change, Eros let his fingers brush gently against her palm. Her hand was moist and soft. With no more excuse to linger, he took his plate to a little round table and a chair with a heart-shaped back. For the next hour he let the spumoni turn to soup while he pretended to read the *Gambit Weekly* and surreptitiously watched Hazel chew on the end of her left braid.

Of course, Hazel did not know who he was. Except for when he went to certain clubs in the Quarter, he seldom ventured out of the Garden District in his true form. Sometimes he'd rather not be recognized, and the glittering golden wings were a dead giveaway. So he came to Brocato's in various guises—as a coiffed woman with a tomato-shaped nose, for instance, or a scruffy Arabian with spittle in the corners of his mouth. Hazel never seemed to notice Eros, which always disappointed him, in spite of the fact that not being noticed was the whole point of the disguise.

But while Hazel took no note of him, he took meticulous note of her. He knew the precise curvature of the metal thread crossing her upper teeth. He had memorized her entire wardrobe—which admittedly was not all too impressive a feat, since nearly every ensemble she sported consisted of a striped T-shirt, periwinkle Chucks, and electric-colored jeans that hugged her body tight from ankle to hips.

“Just so we're clear on this,” his Cousin Apollo said on the one occasion when Eros stupidly asked him to come and see the, as it were, goddess of his idolatry. “That ‘Love is blind’ thing is supposed to be taken metaphorically, right?”

Eros bristled. “She's lovely,” he said. “Look at her.”

They looked. Hazel popped her retainer out of her mouth, the better to gnaw at a grape Now and Later. She pressed her elbows on top of the display case and absently pushed the shapeless glob of lavender corn syrup across her mouth with her tongue. Apollo gave Eros an arch look over the top of his Ray-Bans, but Eros made no response other than to pick up his spoon and poke at the milk froth in his hitherto untouched cappuccino. True, Hazel was not what he or any of the immortals had been used to in ancient Greece, where statuesque bodies were as native and plentiful as the olive trees,

but Eros believed Hazel had her own, more precious brand of charm. In any case, externals were ultimately irrelevant. No one knew better than Eros the tricks love could play on the eyes—not to mention the brain.

For several weeks Eros relished the exquisite ache of loving from afar—or, if not from afar, at least from across several trays of gelato— but a point came when the ache stopped being exquisite and started to chafe. He needed more than silent longing. He needed to declare himself.

Sunday morning he rose early and examined his naked body in the mirror. For his purposes Eros looked, perhaps, too resplendent. He wanted to appear in his true form, yes, but with the wattage turned down. Dazzling, not blinding. He kept his luxuriant crop of dark curls, perfectly symmetrical face, and chiseled form. He reduced his height and left out the wings. Also he let the supernatural radiance of his skin dwindle to a mere healthy glow. This was the way he usually appeared to mortals when he wanted to awe but not overawe them.

Eros wore a burnt orange sweater and a thin scarf—he liked scarves. While waiting for Hazel to unlock Brocato’s filigreed outer doors and post the “open” sign, he stood beneath a palm tree on the neutral ground and pretended to smoke a cigarette. Tobacco was another mortal concoction he’d found baffling in his first years on this continent, though he had to admit, over the centuries the stuff had grown on him. The day was fresh and glittering. Not as blue as the Aegean, but close.

Finally Hazel appeared, flicking her cocoa-colored plaits over her shoulder. Eros’ heart turned hot and viscous. He dropped the cigarette and twisted the butt dead with the toe of his right Doc Martens. As he crossed North Carrollton, time seemed, impossibly, to

slow and quicken at the same time. Just as Eros' foot hit the curb, a teenager on a skateboard swerved in front of him and pushed to a stop on Brocato's doormat. Not today, my friend. This is a private party. The teenager turned toward the shop, but Eros flicked his finger and sent the skateboard careening down the sidewalk—psychokinesis being one of the few powers left to the gods. For a second the teenager stood frozen, but then the expression of oblivious self-command on his face jerked into one of alarm, and he went running after his board. Eros entered the ice cream parlor.

There she stood, lovely as a luna moth. Hazel rubbed her face with the cuff of her sleeve. Eros felt a stirring in his loins.

“Hello,” Hazel said. She smiled. Her retainer winked in the light from the ceiling fans. “Can I help you?”

Eros thought for a moment about riffing on her question with some suggestive wordplay and thereby winning Hazel's heart with roguish repartee, but his head was too clouded with love to be witty. In fact, his head was too clouded with love even to be coherent. His throat squeezed in on itself, and in a panic he adopted manners more suited to three or four centuries ago.

“O my darling,” he said. “Long have I worshipped you from afar, and now comes the time for me to reveal myself to you in my full majesty.” He took her hand, bowed, and then pulled himself erect again. “I am Eros, god of love. Sweet Hazel, your beauty and virtues acclaim you. I am in thrall to your charms. I wish to take you to wife.”

What are you doing? he thought at himself. You're blowing it.

Hazel gently wrenched her fingers from his grip and cracked her knuckles against her cheek. “Are you gonna order something?” she asked.

“I shall not order,” said Eros, “though my dread command as one of the immortals gives me that right.” Oh my god, he thought, and then remembered he was that god. “No, beautiful Hazel, I shall beg, not order, your love. I who am a god will become your slave. I ask only that you should come with me to Mount Olympus and be my bride evermore.”

Hazel’s eyes were steady behind the black plastic frames of her glasses. “Didn’t, like, everyone who the gods dated wind up as a tree or something?”

“Well, not everyone,” he said, and then realized quickly that this was the wrong answer.

“Or, like, a flower, or an animal?” said Hazel, trying to close whatever loophole she thought he was exploiting. “You get what I’m saying, right?”

This conversation was not going as Eros had planned. “Yes, true—transformations have been known to happen,” he said. “But it will not be so with us. We shall be felicitous always. You will live on nectar and ambrosia. You will become immortal. You might even turn into a constellation when you die.”

“That’s, like, contradictory,” said Hazel.

In the midst of his rising panic, Eros felt a glow of pride in the canniness of his beloved. He laughed affectionately. “No matter, my dear one,” he said, and he reached out and gave her a light tap on the nose with his perfect index finger.

A swoosh and a tinkling sounded behind him. He turned and saw the door propped open and the teenager with the skateboard walking through, his formerly pristine composure only slightly tarnished by his heavy breathing. A swatch of silky hair trailed over one corner of his right eye. He kept a white-knuckled grip on his skateboard.

Hazel leaned forward, her face bright as the bronze espresso machine behind her. “Hi. Can I help you?”

The skateboarder tossed his head. Eros assumed the boy was trying to get the hair out of his eye, but if so he was failing miserably. “Can I get a caffè mocha to go?” said the boy in a husky tenor. “Extra whipped cream and chocolate syrup.” He looked at Eros and tilted his head backwards in greeting. A silver stud the size of a pine nut glinted in the boy’s left ear.

“We don’t sell caffè mocha here,” said Hazel. “We have café au lait, will that work?”

“Awesome sauce,” said the skateboarder. “Gimme one a them green cookies, too.”

Hazel nodded and swiftly set about filling the order. Normally Eros took pleasure in watching Hazel work, but now, with the boy standing there tapping his fingers against his board’s griptape, the god felt awkward and spied upon. It didn’t help that the boy was giving him that look that meant he’d seen Eros’ picture on the cover of *People*.

“Dude, do I know you?” said the skateboarder.

“Don’t think so,” said Eros. He made a big show of reading the menu board.

The skateboarder didn’t take the hint. “Yeah, I do, I do know you. Just gimme a second.” The boy tossed his head again. The hair swatch rose and fell back to its previous position. “I know—Errol.”

Eros closed his eyes and exhaled. “Eros,” he said. “God of love?”

“Right!” said the skateboarder. He slapped the counter with his palm and gave Eros a sidelong grin. “Knew I recognized you. Hey, what happened to the gold wings, man?”

“One café au lait and a green biscotto,” said Hazel. She smiled wide as she handed the boy his order, and Eros flinched. Something was different. Then he realized: her retainer was missing.

“Muchos gracias,” said the skateboarder to Hazel.

Hazel tittered. “De nada!” she said, and tittered again.

On his way out the door the boy turned back to Eros. “Peace out, Erroll,” he said.

Eros turned back to Hazel. “So as I was saying,” he said, but he stopped because Hazel wasn’t listening. She stood on tiptoe with her neck craned toward the bay windows, watching the boy strut away, coffee and cookie in one hand and skateboard in the other, flicking his hair swatch like a colt.

Eros waited. Hazel’s mouth hung slightly open, and not in a cute way (although Eros, gods help him, still thought she was remarkably cute). “Hazel?” Eros said at last.

Hazel turned and looked at him as if she had forgotten he was there. “I’ll be right with you,” she said. She turned toward the sink and started fumbling around in her apron pocket. By stepping slightly to the right, Eros could see her fiddling with a plastic case the color of a traffic cone. She washed her hands, and when she turned back around, her retainer was back in her mouth.

At that moment Eros knew that the skateboarder must be smote, and he, Eros, must smite him.

“Darling, you take these things too hard,” said his mother.

Eros groaned into a throw pillow. He lay face-down and wracked with despondency on the loveseat in his mother’s house, and he had lain so for two days. The rage and resolve that flooded his veins when he saw how his Hazel gazed after the skateboarding mortal had dissolved into a watery anguish. Foolishly he went to his mother for sympathy, but though his mother nearly always had sympathy for the lovelorn, in his case that sympathy ran up against her invariable dislike for the objects of his affections. She peppered her concerned clucks and caresses with criticisms of Hazel, which Eros could not bear to hear.

“Ignorant bumpkin,” said Aphrodite. Eros flopped onto his back and watched his mother refresh her lipstick in the wall mirror over the floral arrangement. Aphrodite rubbed her lips together and smacked. “She ought to be down on her knees babbling her gratitude just to be noticed by a god.” The goddess dabbed at her throat with a goose down powder puff.

Eros repressed the groan lurking in his throat. “We don’t have the clout that we used to have, Mother,” he said.

Aphrodite glared at his image in the mirror. “I know it,” she said, and she snapped her compact shut.

Of course she knew. All of them knew. Not to have noticed the gods’ steep and steady fall in stature over the past few centuries would have taken myopia of, pardon the phrase, epic proportions. Every now and then they seemed to be gearing up for a comeback (the 1600s had been particularly hopeful) but now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the Pantheon knew more plainly than ever before that they would never

attain the esteem they had once held. Where Eros and his kin had formerly been supreme deities, they now were minor celebrities, fodder for checkout line tabloids and—gods forbid—reality television. They no longer hoped for worship. A little respect would have been sufficient.

Some of them had adapted better than others. These days Aphrodite was a regular on certain daytime talk shows. Meanwhile Aunt Athena busied herself with travel to this or that academy or conference or ashram; she looked well, if a little bleary-eyed. Aunt Demeter, on the other hand, went into a suicidal depression every time she read a food label, or at least it would have been suicidal if she hadn't been immortal. Even Uncle Poseidon had had to go on a long vacation when all that oil started spilling into the Gulf, his new province.

As for Eros himself, when the temple offerings stopped coming he told his stepfather not to bother making any more golden arrows. With no more love to create, Eros went to parties. He dabbled in opiates and poetry, developed a taste for absinthe and electric guitars. For a time he took sadistic pleasure in picking up mortals, women as well as men, whipping them into frenzies of sexual desire, and then dropping them cold. This was his revenge on the world for forgetting him, for turning him into a fat, winged baby they trotted out every February on some other person's feast day.

Those days were over, though. Hazel had changed everything for him. He said so to Uncle Poseidon at Juan's Flying Burrito the following evening. They sat in a booth close to the wall, right beneath a painting of a toothy, flower-eyed skull.

Poseidon gulped ice water and wiped his lips with a red hand. "And you've seen the mortal she's hot for?" he said.

Eros nodded. A few of Poseidon's punk rock anarchist buddies walked up and clapped the sea god on the shoulder. When he and the punk rock anarchists finished exchanging pleasantries, Poseidon turned back to Eros. "How does he take his coffee?"

"Chocolate mocha, extra syrup and whipped cream."

Uncle Poseidon made a harrumphing noise. "Chocolate syrup in coffee," he said. "You might as well order apple juice. Pasghetti 'n' meatballs." He laughed, scathingly, and sawed at his steak fajitas.

Poseidon had done a lot of hanging out in mortal restaurants and taverns and food trucks and juice bars, and he had developed or adapted a punctilious philosophy about eating and drinking. For his own part Eros had no opinions about these things, but he was eager to latch on to any opinion that made the Skateboarding Mortal look bad.

His fajitas dispatched, Poseidon wiped his beard with a cloth napkin. "Well, it's a bum deal," he said. "No denying that. But listen, bud—why get into a twist over one scrawny little girl?" He leaned in confidentially. "Last weekend, at One Eyed Jack's, I met a chick with a body you wouldn't believe."

Eros rubbed his brow impatiently. "You're not listening. There's no one for me but Hazel, no one."

But he could tell from his uncle's expression that Poseidon didn't believe him. "There's lots of fish in the sea," he said. "I should know." He signaled the waitress for the check.

Aunt Athena was more patient in listening but scarcely more helpful in advising. He met her at the Riverwalk fountain. Together they stood at the fence and watched cargo ships crawl up and down the Mississippi. Light waned. The breeze came hot and soft

over the dimpled water. Somewhere—several streets away, guessing by the sound—a trumpet farted its way through “Hello, Dolly.”

Aunt Athena fixed a Galoise to her opera length black jade cigarette holder. “Don’t get me wrong, kiddo, I’m not trying to denigrate your specialty,” she said, and then she stopped halfway to lighting the cigarette. “Well, to be honest, I suppose I am,” she said, and lit the cigarette after all. “You and your mother know how to take someone clear-eyed and capable and turn him into a woolgathering mess.” She took a drag. Eros traced the patterns in the tile with his foot. Athena continued, “And woolgathering’s not the worst of it, I mean, need I say ‘Trojan War’—”

“You needn’t,” said Eros.

A flock of college girls with bleached teeth and out-of-season tans approached. “Oh my God, are you the guy from *Greeking Out*?” the one in the front said. *Greeking Out*—Zeus’ reality show, on which Eros had made some reluctant if lucrative guest appearances. Eros answered the girls in the affirmative, and the girls shrieked with joy. He signed the slips of paper they thrust at him, receipts from souvenir shops and pages ripped from notepads with beaded covers. Athena looked the other way. She rolled the sleeves of her blouse up past the elbow and blew smoke toward the river.

“All I meant,” said Athena, a little more gently, once the girls were gone, “was that maybe it’s better to move on than to dwell on a love you can’t have.”

Should he say what he was thinking? That he couldn’t move on, even if he wanted to? Eros looked deep into the orgy of brown, rippling water beneath him and thought: I will never be happy again. True, he hadn’t really been happy in a long time anyway, but at least before there had been the possibility that he would snap out of his funk. When

you're immortal a century or two of unhappiness can seem like a mere phase. Plus he'd had those weak approximations of happiness to distract him—sensory pleasure, witty conversation, crowds and noise. Now, he knew, his grief bit too deep for fake happiness ever again to console him.

“Maybe if I could just make her think I'm special,” Eros said. “Maybe if the gods were still a little relevant.”

Athena tapped her ash onto the sidewalk. “We're very relevant,” she said. “We're always relevant. We're classic as well as classical, and don't you forget it.”

But Eros wasn't listening. He was struck by a sudden, overwhelming disgust at the skateboarding mortal's unworthiness. He thought about that stupid swatch of hair slicing across the teenager's face, flat and thin and, like the boy himself, always in the way. Not like Eros' hair, which was curly and thick, as untamed as his love, tresses that begged to be touched, so why wouldn't Hazel reach out and touch them? How could she prefer that unkempt urchin to him? Him? In the glow of the fountain lights, Eros indulged himself in a sweet and vicious fantasy. He would turn the skateboarder into some horrifying animal, a tick, maybe, or an earwig, and Hazel would be so revolted she would shift her affections from the skateboarder to him, Eros. Eros and Hazel would marry, and then they would honeymoon in the old haunts on Mount Olympus, and Hazel would be granted entry into the Pantheon. Of course, his mother would raise a big stink and would set a series of impossible tests for Hazel to prove her worth, but Hazel would pass the tests because he would help her cheat, and it wouldn't really be cheating anyway since the tests weren't fair to begin with. They would all be happy in the end. Well, perhaps not

his mother, but what could he do about that? The gods had a long history of terrible relationships with their in-laws, just look at Aunt Demeter and Uncle Hades—

Eros lifted his head. Of course. Uncle Hades. He would know what to do.

When Eros arrived at City Park, he found his uncle standing in the shadow of a big oak tree by the lake. The god of Hell had his gaze fixed on the other side of the water, where two female figures walked arm-in-arm: Aunt Demeter, round-breasted, wearing the kind of pompadour that was fashionable among mortal women a hundred years ago; and Cousin Persephone, taller than her mother, her long yellow hair braided into a soft and intricate knot at the nape of her neck. Hades watched them, his expression—as usual—intense and unreadable.

Hades said nothing as Eros approached. He did not turn and look at Eros, or unclasp his hands from behind his back, or indeed show any signs that he was aware of his nephew's presence at all. Eros wanted to break the strained silence, but he never quite knew how to approach Uncle Hades. Things were always awkward between him and those whom he had hit with his arrows. On the plus side, things had worked out for Uncle Hades, six months of the year notwithstanding, but still, Eros was never altogether sure if he had been forgiven. Hades was not, after all, a forgiving god.

At long last, Hades spoke. "Nephew," he said, "I realize we're both immortal and in that sense we have all the time in the universe, but some of us do have underworlds to attend to, so if you'd please state your business."

Eros had just finished rehearsing a lead-up in his head, but the words he'd planned evaporated in his throat. He was pained and embarrassed to spit out his dilemma

so blatantly, but in spite of himself he said, “I’m in love with a girl who doesn’t love me back.” Immediately his face grew hot.

Uncle Hades never laughed, and he did not laugh now, but sadistic merriment glittered in the black depths of his eyes. “And you’re turning to me for advice?” he said. “Maybe next my brother Poseidon will ask me about the finer points of dog-paddling.”

“Please,” said Eros.

Hades sucked in his teeth. “Does smack of poetic justice, doesn’t it?”

So he was going to be vindictive. Well, Eros could hardly blame him. Eros crushed the heels of his palms against his forehead. “Jesus,” he said.

“Oh, for gods’ sake, don’t talk about him,” said Uncle Hades. “Backwoods parochial upstart. Ruined us. That Paul of Tarsus. Why none of us turned him into a turtle when we had the chance I’ll never understand.”

Across the lake Persephone kicked off her burgundy heels and stepped barefoot into the grass. She knelt at the water’s edge and plucked a purple lily, which she fastened into her hair.

“Walk with me,” said Hades.

They walked down Esplanade Avenue to St. Louis Cemetery Number 3. The cemetery was nearly two miles away, but they were gods, and they made the distance shorter. While they walked Eros told his uncle about Hazel and the skateboarder. When Eros explained that she worked at Brocato’s, Uncle Hades said, “You mean that skinny tinsel teeth with the braids and the glasses?”

Eros stared at him.

“What?” said Hades. “The Lord of the Underworld isn’t entitled to a lemon ice now and again? She’s a bit young for you, mate.”

A streetcar rollicked down the line. Eros tilted his eyes toward Hades. “I’m practically primordial. Name a mortal on this planet who isn’t young for me.”

By now they had reached St. Louis Number 3. Hades turned and looked toward the streetcar shrinking into the distance. He spoke in a willowy Southern accent: “And then you transfer to one called Cemeteries, and get off at Elysian Fields. Well,” he said, dropping the accent. “An Elysian Fields. Not the Elysian Fields.” He pivoted toward the cemetery and folded his arms. “These tombs,” said Hades. “So big, so hard to ignore. Do you think the mortals look at these graves and see Death? Or do they just see a postcard?”

Eros knew now that this meeting was a mistake. Hades had prolonged their interview not to help him but to mock his predicament. He should have known. But before he could make his excuses and vanish, Hades very uncharacteristically clapped an arm around his shoulder and steered him into the graveyard.

The sun blazed white on the splotched mausoleums, and Eros turned his back against the glare. Directly ahead of him a sculpture of a winged child knelt on the crown of a tomb. The sculpture looked fairly similar to the way mortals so frequently and erroneously depicted him, and this, combined with Hades’ contempt, gave him another surge of fury like the one he’d experienced with Athena on the Riverwalk, only stronger.

“I don’t understand it,” he burst out. “I’m the god of love. I’m beautiful, I’m debonair. Nobody understands love better than me, nobody. How can she ignore me?”

Hades allowed a smug grin to cross his stern features. “You surface dwellers. Always in a twist because the mortals don’t fawn on you anymore. Well, guess what—

they never fawned on me, but they're all just as subject to me as they ever were. My dominion hasn't shrunk a bit. Sooner or later, I touch everyone. Nobody's bigger or better than death."

"Except for us," said Eros. "The gods."

Hades' stare grew flinty and quiet. "Arguably," he said.

"In fact," said Eros, suddenly taken with the idea, "you could argue that Mother and I have the upper hand in that respect, since even the gods succumb to our power. Or at least," he quickly amended, "they used to."

Here and there a car snarled up or down Esplanade Avenue. Across the street an old man with enormous headphones on his ears sat on top of a trash can, drumming the air in front of him and grinning wildly at the passing traffic.

"Well, I can take the boy," said Hades, "if that's what you want."

Eros squirmed. Spoken so brazenly the proposal sounded crass, but he would be lying if he said that he hadn't hoped for just this solution.

Hades spoke again, "But we both know that won't solve your problems. Come on, nephew," he said in response to Eros' stricken look. "You know how this works. A girl doesn't like you. She likes someone else. You take that someone else out of the picture and guess what? She still doesn't like you. Sad but true."

One of the mausoleums had a little stone shelf jutting out at the bottom, and Eros sat down on this shelf. "So there's nothing I can do."

Hades sat down beside him. "I didn't say that," he said, and then he reached into his shirt pocket and withdrew a golden arrowhead, brighter than bright and sharper than sharp.

“You recognize this, I presume,” said Hades.

He did indeed. Eros took the arrowhead in his fingers. One touch of the gold on his skin and he was back in the Grecian sunshine, the air clean and new, the grass of the woodland hot on the soles of his feet. He could see his uncle’s black-cloaked figure hidden in the grove, feel the bowstring strain against his pull while his mother whispered over his shoulder: Why should Hell alone hold out against us? Let our empire spread!

“Old ways are the best ways,” said Hades. “I’m sure I don’t need to remind you that I can personally attest the efficacy of this weapon.”

Eros felt a long-forgotten warmth spread through the sinews of his arm. Then a flash of doubt drenched him. He couldn’t. Not anymore. Not after two millennia, not in this era of eHarmony and pheromones. He shook his head and pushed the arrowhead back toward his uncle. “I can’t,” he said. “I haven’t even touched a bow since Greece.”

Hades clapped his hands on his thighs and stood. “I can’t help those who won’t help themselves,” he said. “But I’ll tell you what. Keep the arrowhead. Maybe you’ll change your tiny little mind.” He started walking deeper into the cemetery. With the gritty rumbling of heavy stone scraping against heavy stone, one tomb’s frontispiece slid slowly to the left, revealing a dark hallway flecked with flickering green flame. Hades ducked through the grave, and the stone slid shut behind him.

Eros twirled the arrowhead around in his fingers. For a long time he felt a tense queasiness, but as he walked up Esplanade Avenue he sensed at the center of the gut-churn a very small pocket of light.

He had thought that after all these years the bow would feel strange in his hands, but now, walking down North Carrollton with his fingers flush against the grip and his quiver thumping lightly against his back, he thought he'd never been more natural. The weight of his weapon filled him with such vigor that he realized for the first time how his body had craved the touch of these tools, century after century craved them. He moved down the craggy sidewalk like a prow cutting through smooth water.

When he entered the shop and saw Hazel, he felt the sweet, familiar melting of his innards. At the same time he noted the contraction in her eyes when she saw him, that look that said uh-oh, here comes trouble. "Can I help you," she said, as if she doubted she could and didn't really want to try.

He had decided, days ago, that he would wait to use the arrow. First he wanted to see if she could love him without supernatural prompting.

"Hazel," he said, thrusting his shoulders back. "I've told you that I love you. I do love you."

"What's that?" said Hazel, pointing at his bow. She had an orange butterfly painted on her fingernail.

"It's nothing," said Eros. "Listen, I don't expect you to return my love right away, but do you think you could at least try—give me a chance?"

Hazel shifted her weight to the other leg. "No," she said.

Eros had expected no less, but the reality of refusal still cut him. His eyes and nostrils stung. "Why not?" he said.

"You kind of, like, weird me out," said Hazel. "And besides, there's someone else. I just don't have feelings for you."

Not only to be turned down, but to be turned down with such horrific teenybopper soap opera dialogue. Couldn't she at least personalize his dismissal?

"All right then," said Eros, his breath sliding thickly into his throat. "Well in that case. Can I get one last cappuccino? As a goodbye?"

Hazel turned to make the coffee, and, while her back was turned, Eros picked up his bow and reached back into his quiver. His heart pounded as he nocked the arrow and took aim. The espresso machine whirred. Nineteen inches in front of his chin, Uncle Hades' arrowhead tapered into a needle-sharp point. Hazel started to hum a wavering, unidentifiable tune, and the beating of Eros' heart became so palpable he thought he could hear the blood squirting through his veins.

One moment the arrow was nocked against the bowstring, and the next it had plunged inches deep into Hazel's spine.

There was a wet crashing sound as the coffee mug splintered on the floor. A short, sharp cry issued from Hazel's mouth. Eros froze. Nobody ever screamed when they'd been hit by his arrows. Nobody ever stumbled backwards and fell to the floor, nobody ever reached behind for the shaft and brought their fingers back redly soaked in blood.

So Hades had duped him.

"Oh no," said Eros. He had gone numb. "Oh no. Oh god." And then he remembered that he was that god.

He threw his bow to the floor, leaped over the countertop, and knelt beside her, spilt coffee drenching his chino pants. Hazel was weeping, although whether from pain or fright or both, Eros couldn't say. "Don't worry," he said, though in a voice too urgent to give much credence to his command. "It'll be okay."

Hazel looked at him, and on her face, mixed in with the shock and the pain and the horror, was a fiery, righteous hatred of him, a hatred that said, It will not be okay, a hatred that asked with unadulterated bitterness, So is this the part where I die and they name a shrub after me?

Eros looked at the arrow sticking grotesquely out from the girl's back. He was a god. He could fix her. All would be well. He stretched his hand over the wound and summoned up all the power that was left to him. Heal, he thought. Heal.

Hazel started coughing blood.

"Heal," Eros said out loud. He closed his eyes shut tight. From the furthest corners of his mind he summoned memories: the feel of his wings beating against the faultless Athenian air, his altars awash in the aroma of roasted goat's flesh. "Heal," he said.

But she wasn't healing. Eros felt his numbness prickle into hysteria. He heard himself say the word "no" over and over again. He clutched Hazel's weakening form and wept for a long time, long after the body quieted and became still, long after the blood stopped gushing, until her skin was as grey as the skies of Asphodel.

CHAPTER IV

DANES IN PURGATORY

I saw the ghost of Hamlet last night. Yeah. That Hamlet. It was just after midnight and cold as a bitch outside, but I had insomnia bad and I really wanted a cigarette. I pulled on a bathrobe and a pair of Reeboks and snuck down to the circle at the end of our street for a quick smoke. Believe me, I would rather've stayed inside—I hate the cold—but I can't smoke within a fifty-foot radius of our house because my stepdad is a Nazi about that sort of thing. I swear to God, he can smell the least little bit of tobacco from a distance of four feet and three days, and then it's all "Dylan, we have discussed this" and other bullshit.

Anyway. There was fog everywhere outside, thick fog, like this little slice of Halloween in the middle of January. I shivered my ass off next to the streetlamp, thinking I should've at least pulled on a pair of socks before I went out into that Arctic chill, and then I saw Hamlet's ghost kind of glide toward me. I knew it was Hamlet because my sister's always reading that play, like always, and this dude looked almost exactly like the guy on the cover of her book: thin and pale and pretty, like an anime character, with these

big eyes and a sharp chin and black hairs splintered across his forehead. And the get-up he was wearing, long poofy sleeves, crazy-ass pants, *tights*. He came just within the light of the streetlamp, and then he stretched out his arm to me. I could see dried blood spattered across the lace cuffs of his shirt.

“Mark me,” said the ghost.

“Okay,” I said. You’d think I’d’ve felt afraid, faced with a ghost and all, but I wasn’t. I mean, maybe a little bit, but, like, crazy-drunk-man-following-me-up-the-street afraid, not paranormal-activity afraid.

The ghost had this really rich voice that carried without being too loud, you know, like a radio voice on one of the more boring stations. “My hour is almost come,” he said, “when I to sulphurous and tormenting flames must render up myself.”

He paused like it was my turn to talk. “Sorry,” I said. I wanted another puff on my cigarette, but smoking while someone else talked about being rendered up to tormenting flames seemed pretty insensitive, I thought. So I dropped the butt and kicked it down the sewer grate.

“If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,” said Hamlet, “in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, to tell my story.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I mean, I studied *Hamlet* in Mr. Kopeski’s English II class last year—at least I studied the SparkNotes—but I wouldn’t say I’ve ever held Hamlet or his play in my heart. Still. How do you tell a guy come from beyond the grave, or the pages of Shakespeare or whatever, that not only can you not tell his story, you can hardly read his story?

I could tell the ghost could tell I was hesitating, because he tilted his head and looked at me kind of sharp. “This is I,” said the ghost, like he thought he was clarifying something. “Hamlet the Dane.”

“Right,” I said.

We just looked at each other. Me in my navy blue bathrobe and him in his poofy pants.

Finally I said, “Sorry, man. I’d like to help you out, but I don’t speak Shakespeare.”

Hamlet scrunched his mouth up in a kind of facial shrug. “’Tis no great matter,” he said.

“And besides, the play already tells your story,” I pointed out.

The ghost snorted in an “oh please” sort of way. “Rife with ambiguities,” he said.

A black cat curled around a fire hydrant and then scampered off into the night.

My breath turned to smoke in the air. Hamlet’s didn’t, I noticed.

“Right then,” said the ghost. “Farewell. Remember me.” And he started to glide away.

I did *not* like the sound of that, so I followed him for a bit. “I’m serious, man,” I said. “I don’t want to tell your story.”

The ghost didn’t say anything, but he turned his head just a bit and gave me this off-kilter grin, like he didn’t see what difference my feelings made and I was funny to bring them up. Then he moved off into the fog until I couldn’t see him anymore.

So I walked back home, cold air licking at my skin all the way. I wanted to forget the whole incident, but I’ve seen enough horror movies to know that ignoring the ghost

never helps. At first I was kind of pissed off, but the more I think about telling Hamlet's story the cooler I am with the job. I don't mind helping a guy out.

When I asked my little sister Trish for her copy of *Hamlet*, she looked at me like I had asked to borrow her toothbrush. "What do you need it for?" she said.

That killed me. "I'm painting a still life," I said. "What do you think I need it for? I want to read it."

Trish sat on the plush carpet next to her desk and glued her old concert tickets to a plain wooden box. She's an artsy craftsy type. "You can read?" said Trish.

"Hey, hey," I said. "Nobody likes a smartass."

"Nobody likes a dumbass," she said, real quick.

Trish is a year younger than me and a natural blond, but the placement test put her in my junior-level English class and she's dyed her hair this awful super-fake black color. Also she's started to wear clothes with chains on them. You can tell she thinks wearing chains makes her a badass, but I think the goth costume makes her a more obvious dork. Her bedroom's still bubble gum pink, you should see it.

"Seriously, Dylan," she said. She swiped her glue stick across a Panic! at the Disco stub. "Whence comes this sudden and inexplicable urge to read Shakespeare?"

I leaned my back against her Pepto pink wall and scratched my shoulder blades against the paint bumps. "Last night the ghost of Hamlet came to me and asked me to tell his story," I said.

Trish snorted. "Cute," she said, but she gave me her book anyway.

If it wasn't Trish giving me flack, it was my friends at school. Our group is mostly guys on the track team, mainly me and Lance Ward and the two Michaels, Michael Ross and Michael Stevens. At lunch if the weather is good—and it usually is, it's only cold at night here — we sit on the breezeway between the main building and the gymnasium, right next to the senior parking lot and diagonal from our crappy asphalt tennis court. Every now and then across our campus these long, concrete benches pop out of the ground, slick with heavy layers of mouse-gray paint. Right in the middle of the breezeway two of these benches face each other, and that's where us track guys take our blue plastic lunch trays every day at 11:50. I decided I wasn't telling the guys about reading Hamlet, and forget about mentioning the ghost, but when I went back to the caf to buy an ice cream cone Michael Ross went digging in my backpack for a joke and he found the script. "Shakespeare?" he said, all skeptical. We're in the same English class, so he knew I wasn't reading the play for homework. "You're carrying around a Shakespeare play in your backpack?"

"Yeah. So?" I said. I tried to say it kind of tough, but it's hard to sound tough with an off-brand sundae cone melting over your fist.

Michael Stevens grabbed the play and read for a bit. He started laughing and pointing at the first page. "Look at this. 'Holla, Bernardo! Say whaaat?'" He said it really ghetto. Then he and the other Michael started mining the lines for that's-what-she-said jokes. Normally I would laugh, but I wasn't really in the mood today. I don't know why. Maybe I take this whole mission or whatever more seriously than I thought. Lance didn't seem to think the sex jokes were that funny either, and Lance has this way of making you care what he thinks of you, so the two Michaels ran out of steam pretty fast.

If you can get past the thee's and the thou's and the what-ho-sweet-lord's, all of that crap, it's actually not a bad book. I said so—well, not in those exact words—but I said so to Hamlet when we met again at the street lamp last night. He didn't say much back. Which I thought was pretty weird, because he never seems that quiet in the play. Maybe dying makes you less talkative.

Anyway, I was telling Hamlet what I thought of *Hamlet*. The two of us sat on a neighbor's garden wall, and the cold seeped up into me through the bricks. Even so, I felt pretty good—I mean, I'd just read *Hamlet* and more or less understood it, and that's an accomplishment. Plus I liked the play better this time around than when we read it with Mr. Kopeski.

The whole time I was talking to him, Hamlet had his face turned toward me, looking at me with these graveyard eyes.

“What?” I said.

Hamlet drew his shoulders back and stood. “This visitation is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose,” he said.

I was like, for real? “Oh, come on,” I said. “You gave me this mission only, what, six days ago? And I've already finished reading the whole 782-page novel. You should be more than happy.”

Man, that guy can lay a guilt trip on you without even opening his mouth. “It's not a novel,” he said. “It's a play. Now report my cause aright.” And then he started gliding away again, into the shadows.

Seriously, does he think that I drag myself out of my warm bed every midnight and trudge on over to that cold-ass cul-de-sac because I enjoy feeling my lips chap until they bleed? “Look, man,” I said, “I don’t know what you want me to do. Everybody already knows this story. Sooner or later most of us are force-fed this play.”

And then he said it again, emphasis on the last word: “Report my cause *aright*.” And poof, off he went.

Mr. Kopeski talked about Hamlet like he shat gold, but I’m starting to think he’s an asshole.

So I’m reading this goddamn play—again—and I hate to admit it, but I’m starting to realize why Hamlet keeps harping on me to tell the story right. I know Shakespeare’s supposed to be this big genius, but I don’t know. Lots of this book looks pretty sloppy to me. Like I was talking to Trish yesterday about Ophelia. She was all like, Hamlet doesn’t love Ophelia, and I was all like, yes he does.

“Well he doesn’t act like it,” she said. She sat on the floor with her legs stretched out in front of her and turned a page of her book. Trish reads while she talks to you sometimes. It’s super annoying.

I crashed chest-down onto her bed and looked at her from across the foot-end of her butterfly comforter. “He says he loves her,” I said. “He jumps into her grave.”

“That’s just because he’s having some ridiculous macho grief contest with Laertes,” she said. The book she was reading was one of those decorative books with a green leather cover and a built-in ribbon bookmark and gilt pages. I mean, seriously, nobody reads those. “Ophelia is an afterthought in that scene.”

“Oh, come on.”

“They have one scene together, and Hamlet spends it literally and figuratively jerking her around,” she said.

“That’s just because he knows the evil king and the old dude are hiding behind the door.”

“Right. Because under those conditions abuse is perfectly acceptable.”

It was so weird to hear her say this stuff. Trish loves *Hamlet*. She can recite “To be or not to be” and all of Ophelia’s lines from memory. I think she sleeps with the script under her pillow. Between you and me, no matter what shit she talks about Hamlet, I think if she came to the streetlamp with me and met him she’d have a total meltdown, like the way a normal fifteen-year-old girl would react to meeting Robert Pattinson. So I wanted to argue with her, but I didn’t know what to say. I mean, really, Trish is better at this stuff than me, so she’s probably right. But still. Even though he’s been driving me crazy lately, I still think Hamlet is an okay guy. I wouldn’t be helping him otherwise. So I tried to think of an excuse for him.

“Well, maybe he really is nuts,” I said.

Trish licked her forefinger and turned another page. “Don’t even talk to me if you’re going to cop out,” she said.

So I said I’d think about it. And I did. And you know, I think Trish is right. But then sometimes I think she’s not right. I don’t know. I thought I had everything figured out, but now I think I may have to actually read this play three times before I understand it.

Jesus. Today I walked into the locker room after track practice and Hamlet was there. Scared the shit out of me.

“Fuck,” I said when I closed my locker and turned to the left and saw him, lurking. “Holy shit, man.”

I guess I thought the streetlight at midnight was the only place he’d appear. Actually, now that I know he goes other places, I’m kind of pissed off that he’s been making me drag myself over there.

Hamlet didn’t even blink. “This visitation is but to whet—”

“Don’t even, okay?” I said. “Coach is pissed at me, and it’s your damn fault, so get off my case.”

That’s true. I was shit at practice today because I was up all night watching the *Hamlet* movie with the bad guy from *Wild Wild West* and the chick from *Titanic*. That’s why I was alone in the locker room. Usually we all wait for each other and leave together, but I guess the guys knew I wanted to be alone after Coach bawled me out.

Just then I noticed something, and it’s weird that I didn’t notice this earlier because it’s kind of a big thing. Hamlet didn’t look the same. He was still tall and still thin, almost the same height and width as the mustard-colored lockers all around us, but his face was different, sort of older and less girly, and his hair was short and blond with a clean part on the left side. Honestly, I’m surprised I recognized him at all.

“Didn’t you used to have black hair?” I said.

He ignored me. I know—shocker. “I say, old chap,” he said. “You don’t mind if I speak plainly, do you?”

That killed me. “I’ve been waiting for you to speak plainly since I met you,” I said.

“Now don’t take this personally, dear fellow, but you’re going about this business all wrong,” said Hamlet. He sounded British. I don’t think he sounded British before. “Plot analysis is all well and good, but surface treatment will only get you so far. You simply must look more closely, really dig in, have a go at the dialogue line by line, what what?”

I closed my eyes and leaned my forehead against a locker door. The metal felt cool and smooth against my skin, which was nice because I felt a monster headache coming on. “You’re driving me nuts, man,” I said.

“Poppycock,” he said. “Everything you need is right there in the verse. Try beating it out. Dee-dum dee-dum dee-dum dee-dum dee-dum, jolly good stuff, eh?”

I could feel my chest getting hot, which is what happens when I’m angry. If he really expects me to sit there and beat out all the lines of that play...that *four. Hour. Long. Play*. “Look, can’t you just tell me what you want me to tell people?” I said. “Why do I have to figure the whole thing out on my own when you could just—”

But then I stopped because when I picked my head up off the locker and turned to look at him, he wasn’t there anymore. I turned around, I walked up and down the aisles, but there was only me and a bunch of empty mustard-colored lockers and the leftover smell of Michael Ross’s Axe aerosol hanging in the air.

When the gym’s dark and empty, your footsteps echo really loud on your way across the basketball court and out the front door. I kept expecting Hamlet to pop out at me again from the shadows of the bleachers. The place was so spooky, seeing a ghost

then would have made sense. But then Hamlet never does make any sense. I don't get it. In the play Hamlet's dad is direct enough about what he wants.

But then I guess Hamlet does spend like half his time trying to figure out if the ghost is real or not, so maybe he's not that direct.

Okay, I think I need to go to sleep now, because, dude, by my fay, I cannot reason.

Did I just say that?

What I want to know is does Gertrude think that Hamlet's crazy after three-four. I mean, in that scene she says she thinks he's crazy, and then he tells her no, he's not crazy, it's an act, and then later on she says she still thinks he's crazy, but does she actually think he's crazy or is she, like, covering for him, I mean what with Polonius being dead and Hamlet trying to assassinate Claudius and all?

I was saying all of this over cheese fries at lunch and then all of the sudden Lance Ward busts out with, "Okay, Dylan, jeeze, enough with the Hamlet crap."

Things got kind of quiet. The two Michaels made awkward little half-joking "uh-oh" noises, to break the tension. Somebody tried to make a joke and change the subject, but the damage was done. Maybe I shouldn't have let Lance's disapproval bother me, but what do you want me to say? It did bother me. So I grabbed my stuff and dumped my second cheeseburger half-eaten into the trash and walked away fast, back up the breezeway through a gaggle of shrieky freshman girls. I was so mad I was barely even surprised when Hamlet started walking next to me, his footsteps slapping the sidewalk in time with mine.

“You can’t expect them to understand, of course,” he said. He still sounded British, but not in the same way. “These dread commands from beyond the grave are caviar to the general.”

“Watch your step, man,” I said. “You’re talking shit about my friends.” By this time we were up the steps into the main building and past the lobby with the vending machines. My sister and the other nerdy sophomores eat lunch in that lobby, so I moved fast, not wanting to talk to anybody. Then we rounded the corner and walked by the caf. Through the open doors you could hear six hundred voices bouncing off the cracked tile floor and smoky windows, the occasional clink and thump of people scraping their leftover canned green beans into the trash cans, and I wished that I was in there, roughhousing with friends and bitching about pre-calc and not being followed by a shape-shifting fictional ghost. I kept my pace really quick, but Hamlet kept up with me. I didn’t really know where I was going. I just needed to get up and move.

“Are those waterflies your friends?” he said. “When they fret you and would sound you from your lowest note to the top of your compass, like a pipe for fortune’s finger to sound what stop she please?”

Now we were behind the caf, in this little gravel space just between the secretaries’ offices and the parking lot where the milk truck comes. I turned and faced him. “You see, this is why they’re mad at me,” I said. “Because I’m starting to sound like you. Sometimes I think I’m starting to think like you. And I’m sorry, man, I’m sorry, but it gets old. It gets boring.”

For a second I thought I’d stunned Hamlet speechless. He just looked at me, his mouth a little open but not saying anything, and I started to feel sorry for hurting his

feelings. Then he blinked really fast and wagged his head in big overexaggerated circles. “Well, *excuse* me,” said Hamlet. “Maybe you can help me with this problem. I mean, I’ve only been a topic of riveting intellectual discussion among actors directors filmmakers writers readers composers philosophers theatergoers artists psychologists academics and students for four hundred years. Please, give me the benefit of your copious expertise on the art of being *interesting*.”

I walked over to one of those mouse-gray benches and slunk down, really tired all of a sudden. “It’s nothing personal,” I said. “It’s just—I don’t know.” But I did know. I just didn’t want to say. I don’t think I’m the same person as I was before I started this whole thing, and that really freaks me out. “Maybe I should just, I don’t know, stay by myself for a little while.”

Hamlet rubbed his beard. (When did he get a beard?) “Well, maybe it is better if you do keep your distance,” he said. He took a spot by me on the bench and hooked his right boot over his left knee. “Just until the mission is over. Shouldn’t be long now. I think you’re right on the cusp of an enormous breakthrough. I saw what you were doing the other day with animal imagery, some very interesting connections you were drawing, very interesting indeed.”

So there you have it. I’ll just have to plug away by myself for a while. Now I’m even more motivated to get this thing done fast. To tell you the truth, I’m relieved. Don’t tell Hamlet I said this, but I’m starting to kind of like this mission.

I quit the track team. There’s just no time to go to practice on top of my Mission. I’m cool with dropping out, I mean, something had to go, but Coach was kind of mad

slash disappointed and the guys are all pretty pissed at me. The two Michaels came to see me while I was in the library today. Both of them had their jaws clenched and their faces all hard and tense.

“So this is what you’ve decided to do?” said Michael Ross. “Hole up in the library every lunch period with that fucking play?”

I kept my script open and my finger on the line where I’d left off. “What of it?” I said.

Michael Stevens leaned against the reading table and folded his arms so his biceps popped out. He’s so freaking vain. “You know, we haven’t been killing ourselves on that track course all year just so that you could quit halfway through the season,” he said.

The whole setup was really awkward. “I need to get back to work,” I said. I started to pull the book closer to me as a way of subtly saying “conversation’s over,” but Michael Ross tried to grab the book from me. Dick. I wasn’t gonna let him have my script without a fight, so we had this, like, scuffle across the table. The tug-of-war pulled me up out of my chair, which fell and banged really loud against the table behind me, and one of the pages in Act II got ripped. Everybody in the library looked up at us. Curse words may have been spoken.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” That was Mrs. Weilbaeher, the librarian. “Nuh-uh, fellas. Break it up now or your name is Mud.”

Thank God. I grabbed my book back. The Michaels pulled their black JanSports onto their shoulders and shuffled out of the library, shooting me dirty looks all the way.

When Lance Ward stopped me in the hallway after the final bell, I figured he wanted to pick a fight with me, too, and normally I'd say bring it, but today I was not in the mood. I tried to slip past him, but that's no easy task—he's a big dude.

"Yeah, I get it," I said. "You're pissed at me for quitting. I know."

Lance jerked his neck back in a "psh" kind of way. "Dude, I don't care," he said. "I mean, I care, but, you know, it's your life, do what you want. I just had to ask."

I waited for him to say what he had to ask.

He tilted his head toward me. "You'd tell me if something was wrong, right?" he said. That surprised me so much I didn't say anything, so he kept going. "It's just—you're different than you used to be. It's not even about track, it's. I don't know, like." He looked me up and down. "I don't know."

I gave him this look like he was crazy, which was totally uncool of me because I knew exactly what he was talking about.

"Everything's fine," I said. "Anything else?"

I could sort of tell he knew I was holding back. He had this knowing glint in the back of his eyes. "Nah, man," he said. "I mean, you would know better than I would."

Neither one of us had anything else to say, so I kept moving down the hallway. My stomach churned like crazy.

Okay. Things are weird now. (Not that they weren't weird before, but.) Hamlet had his back leaned up against my window sill. This time his hair was curly and fox-colored and glowed in the light from my floor lamp. I straddled my footlocker and rubbed my eyes while we talked about *lex talionis*. You know how it is when you're energized

and exhausted at the same time? That's how I felt. This was the third straight night I stayed up to read and talk to Hamlet when I should have gone to sleep. The only reason I hadn't keeled over was I was hopped up on Pixy Stix and 5-Hour Energy.

Somebody knocked, and without waiting for an answer Trish barged in. "Dylan?" she said.

I nearly fell off the footlocker. Hamlet jumped to his feet. I don't know why he didn't disappear—I mean, he's good at that, right?—but I guess he didn't have enough time.

Trish looked around the room. "Who are you talking to?" she said.

I looked at Hamlet, and Hamlet looked at me. Then we both looked at Trish. The ghost walked up to her and waved his hand in front of her face, but she didn't react. That was a relief.

"Nobody," I said. I shot a questioning look at Hamlet, but he shook his head at me like he didn't know why Trish couldn't see him, either.

For a second Trish eyed me through her hipster granny glasses. Then she slid into the room and closed the door behind her. She crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Is he in the room?" she said.

I felt as if a small furry animal was clawing up my windpipe in a panic. "Who?" I said, trying to sound puzzled.

"Don't play dumb," said Trish. "The ghost of Hamlet. Is he here?"

I forced a laugh. "For real? That was a joke." I fake-laughed again, which I now realize was overdoing it. Damn, my fake laugh sounds fake.

Trish shook her head like “nice try pal.” “You don’t have the willpower or the attention span to keep up with a joke for this long. So is the ghost here or isn’t he?”

At this point the furry animal slid back down my esophagus and started to burrow into my aorta. My mouth twisted into different shapes while I tried like crazy to decide what to say. All I could come up with was: “Maybe?”

Trish gave me her deadpan glare of death for like ten seconds, then sighed and sort of seemed to give up. “Okay, I don’t care if he’s here or not. This has to stop, Dylan.”

“Who is this starveling?” said Hamlet.

“You’re not yourself,” Trish was saying (they were sort of talking over each other). “Look at you. Look at the circles under your eyes. You’re not taking care of yourself, and you’re not staying in touch with your friends. Keep this up and you’ll wind up dead or crazy or both. Frankly I think that’s exactly what whoever you’re seeing and talking to wants.”

“Calumny!” Hamlet practically screeched. “I’ll make a ghost of thee, thou irksome stock-fish!”

“Shut up,” I said to Hamlet. “Not you,” I said to Trish, because her eyes had sort of flared up like they do when she’s pissed. My heart pounded so hard I could feel the tics in my ears. “I don’t understand. Why would Prince Hamlet want to drive me crazy?” I said.

“Well, maybe he’s not the real Prince Hamlet,” said Trish. “Maybe he’s an imposter and he’s gaslighting you. Ever think of that?”

“Scullion!” said Hamlet. “Strumpet! Rump-fed ronyon!”

I gestured to the ghost to pipe down, but he kept going. I tried my best to tune him out. My insides felt like T.V. static—you know, shaky. “If he isn’t Hamlet, who is he?” I said.

Trish looked like she had been waiting to say this for a while. “A goblin damn’d abusing you to damn you and draw you into madness.”

“Disgracious hell-kite!” said Hamlet. “Jackanapes! Oh, my sword!”

“I don’t know why he’s targeting you, specifically,” Trish went on. “Maybe this particular demon is potent with such spirits. By which I mean he has a powerful effect on people with your—”

“I know what that means,” I said, annoyed.

Hamlet cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled in Trish’s direction, “I wonder that you will still be talking, nobody marks you.”

And then they both started talking at once, and the racket slammed against my temples like a hammer hitting an anvil. I pressed my hands against my ears. I was mad and sad and scared and confused all at the same time, but mostly I was just dead-tired. “Shut up,” I said. “Both of you, please.”

For a couple of seconds they shut up. I squeezed my eyelids shut like I was trying to get juice out of them. Seriously, all I wanted was to go to bed. “I need to be alone,” I said. “Please leave. Both of you, get out.”

They hesitated, but finally, thank you baby Jesus, they left. I switched off all the lights and dove into bed, but I couldn’t sleep. Too much sugar and caffeine in my system. I felt sick to my stomach, and not just because in the past week I’ve drunk so much Red Bull I can smell the stuff in my sweat. I couldn’t stand the thought that maybe Trish is

right. Who have I been talking to all this time? Why does he look and sound different every time I see him? Maybe I'm a sucker. Maybe I've busted my ass over this play for three months and the whole time I've secretly been in a *Scooby Doo* cartoon.

The first thing I did when I woke up around noon the next day, before I got out of bed even, was I picked up my copy of *Hamlet* from off the floor and I slung it across the room hard as I could. The paperback slapped against the back wall of my closet and slid down behind a pile of old shoeboxes. I didn't so much as look at that script for a week. By Saturday I felt better, healthier, less jittery, but at the same time I felt worse. I felt like there was a bowling ball sloshing around in my digestive juices.

Lately, after school, when my homework's more or less finished, I go for really long walks: down the block and across the canal on Jefferson Street, then up to the rusty old playground my real dad used to take us to when Trish and me were little, with the wooden seesaw and the metal slide that burned your skin in the summertime. Also the juniper tree. When Trish and me were kids, we used to collect the round blue seeds and throw them at each other. The seesaw's gone, but the juniper tree's still there.

If I walk to the playground and see kids around, I leave—I don't want anybody to think I'm a bully or a perv—but if the place is empty I slam into a black rubber swing and kick my feet against the scoop of powdery dirt beneath me until I feel like it's time to go home again. While I'm at the playground I don't think about anything. It's nice, not thinking about anything for a while.

Yesterday I walked over to the playground, as is my new usual, and when I rounded the corner there he was. First time I've seen him since the night Trish barged

into my room. The ghost sat at the stone picnic table underneath the juniper tree. He looked like he did on the day I first met him—Manga meets Ren Faire. I guess I could have just walked away, but what was I gonna do? Stay away from the playground forever, just because his royal emo-ness showed up? Not my style. I walked up to him.

“So,” I said. I nodded toward his hair. “Back in black, I see.”

Hamlet sad-smiled in that way he has. “It’s my best color.” He gestured to the empty bench across from him, inviting me to take a seat.

“I’m sorry I called your sister all those names,” he said as I took my place across from him. “She’s wrong, but she means well.”

“Go tell her, then,” I said. I was in the mood to be harsh, and my tone showed so. Hamlet stopped talking. The sky was gray and gloomy but rainless, which isn’t normal for our area. The crappy weather pissed me off even more. What are you waiting for, clouds? If you’re going to be gray then just rain already, will you?

Hamlet watched me fiddle with a juniper seed on the table. “You don’t trust me anymore,” he said. “Well, I suppose a little skepticism is a healthy thing, given the circumstances. I’d be skeptical if I were you.”

I launched the seed into the gravel with a flick of my index finger. “Don’t say what you’d be or do or feel if you were me,” I said. “You don’t know what I’m going through, so don’t act like you do.”

Hamlet gave me one of his looks. “Oh, don’t I?” he said. He leaned across the table and looked me straight in the eye. I don’t think anybody’s ever looked at me that intently before, this fierce, steady look that stops just short of being aggressive, like a

Rottweiler you think is going to jump and bark at you but then doesn't. When he started to speak he spoke quiet and fast, but I heard every word.

This is what Hamlet said: "A cataclysmic event has fractured your world, the kind of event that splits your life into two pieces: Before, and After. Nobody understands you. Everyone wants you to be what they want you to be. They want you to shut up and get with the program. But you can't, because everything's changed; you've changed. You think you can trust two or four people, tops, but you soon find out that you can't. Everyone else carries on, business as usual, but you? You have to carry around this burden everywhere you go, this great big bundle of discontent that nobody wants to hear about even though you think your spine will snap under the weight. And break your heart, for you must hold your tongue."

He held my gaze for one more second, then settled back in his seat. I hadn't realized how tightly knit the muscles in my chest had become until that moment, when they started to loosen.

"God, you're a ham," I said.

"I've been called worse," said Hamlet.

Dark spots spattered across the picnic table as the rain finally began. I felt little pinpricks of wet on my face.

"Okay," I said. "You can come back. We can start work again. But no more popping out at me when I'm at school and no more Red Bull."

Hamlet nodded.

I walked home in the rain. Something seemed strange and I couldn't figure out what, but then I realized: I was happier than I'd felt in weeks.

Hamlet and me were going through the play, circling all the references to gender roles, when there was this knock at the door.

“Yeah?” I said, but nobody answered. So I stood up and went to see who it was. The minute I opened the door, Michael Ross and Michael Stevens busted into the room and knocked me against the back wall before I had a chance to react.

“What the hell?” I said. Trish and Lance streamed into the room behind the Michaels. My sister locked the door. Lance carried a big cardboard box full of something that sounded heavy and metallic. I tried to knock the Michaels out of the way, but I couldn’t. Bastards. If they’d come at me one-at-a-time I could have taken them easy, but two on one? With the element of surprise in their favor? Wasn’t gonna happen.

“I’m sorry, Dyl,” said Trish, “but you’ll thank us later.” She kneeled down and shoved aside my schoolbag and sneakers to make a clear space on the floor. Lance set the box down next to her.

“Thank you for what?” I said.

Trish pulled two bigass brass candlesticks out of the box. “We’re having an exorcism.”

If I hadn’t been busy dealing with Frick and Frack, I would have laughed. Hamlet evidently didn’t think the idea was funny, though. He gaped at me, clearly horrified.

“Stop them!” he said.

“You stop them,” I said, straining against the Michaels’ grip. “Do some sort of ghosty thing.”

“Like what, exactly?” said Hamlet. He was back to the brown beard today. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I’m afraid the dead can’t do much beyond grand entrances, sudden exits, and the occasional guilt-inducing spectacle.”

At this point I looked down and noticed that Michael Ross had a strand of white, papery bulbs strung around his neck. “Are you seriously wearing garlic?” I said. “He’s a ghost, not a freaking vampire.”

In the meantime Trish pulled a book and a call bell out of the box and set them in between the candlesticks. Also she had our grandma’s old digital watch, the one with the rooster sound effect button. Hamlet tried to pick up the book, but his fingers slid through the binding like a hologram. He couldn’t touch anything. He tried to get the Michaels off of me, but no dice there, either. “Unbelievable,” he said. Seriously, he looked more miserable than I’ve ever seen him, and that’s saying a lot.

“Guys, cut it out, you’re upsetting him,” I said.

“Don’t worry,” said Lance. “If he’s not a goblin damn’d or whatever, he should be fine, right?”

“I’m in purgatory, you whoreson clodhopper,” Hamlet said to Lance (who, of course, couldn’t see or hear him). “I’m a goblin semi-damn’d, and I’m going to go on being semi-damn’d if you don’t cease and desist.”

Even so, it was hard for me to get worried. This exorcism looked cobbled together from half-remembered episodes of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. I could probably find a twelve-year-old on YouTube with a better idea of how to do an exorcism. I mean, shit, they were using scented candles, the whole place smelled like a cinnamon roll.

Trish started reading aloud from whatever that book was. She mumbled, so I couldn't really tell what she said, but the words sounded like Latin. I told Trish she was an idiot to take Latin as her elective, that she'd never find a use for a dead language. Guess she showed me.

Weird thing was, the longer Trish read the more nervous I got. "Damn it, guys," I said. "Knock it off." They didn't listen. Hamlet had a hand clasped over his eyes, like he just couldn't face defeat. Trish stopped reading. I felt my stomach drop, and suddenly I knew what was going to happen.

"Don't!" I said

But it was too late. Trish closed the book, snuffed out the candle, and rang the call bell. Then she pressed the button on the digital watch. Cock-a-doodle-doo.

"Oh, fie," Hamlet said, and then he kind of, like, exploded. Like these red sparks started shooting out of his body and then there was this loud noise, like thunder times ten, and he was gone.

You can't mourn for somebody who was already dead when you met him, right? Still. That's what I feel like I've been doing these past few days. If the ghost was a fake, then, well, that blows. And if he wasn't, then that's even worse. I mean, I still think Hamlet was kind of a douchebag sometimes, but he was growing on me, you know? And even when he annoyed the hell out of me, he was the only person I could talk to about the Mission. Like, without the ghost, there is no Mission. I don't know what to do with my time. Sometimes I think I should have a séance and see if I can get him to come back, but even to me that idea sounds stupid.

I still walk down to the playground after school. Yesterday I sat in one of the swings for a good while, and then I looked up and saw somebody with black clothes and black hair walking toward me across the soccer field. For, like, a nanosecond I thought, oh my God, he's back, but then I realized: not Hamlet. Trish.

She hoisted herself up into the swing next to mine. "How's it going?" she said.

Jeeze. I never thought that question would sound so complicated to me. I blew air through my lips like a horse. "Okay, let's put aside the issue of whether the ghost was real or not," I said. "Either way I don't have my Mission anymore. I've let Hamlet down. And that sucks."

While I tried to find the way out of Bum City, Trish paddled her feet against the dirt in a circle so that the chains of her swing twisted around each other above her head. "Not necessarily," she said. When she lifted her feet, the swing spun her around as the chains untangled themselves. I waited until she'd stopped spinning to ask my question.

"Come again?" I said.

Trish gave me her "you know better" look. One day she's gonna strike terror into the hearts of noisy library patrons with that look.

"Do you think the world would still be talking about Hamlet if we knew what the hell was going on with him?" she said. "He's interesting *because* he doesn't make any sense. The best way to make sure we keep telling Hamlet's story is to keep his story as confusing as possible." She started twisting her swing chains again. "If that was the real Prince of Denmark haunting you, then we've done him a favor sending him back to purgatory. He was on the verge of self-destruction and didn't know it."

"But I was so close to figuring out how to tell the story right," I said.

“You can tell the story right,” said Trish, still twisting, “or you can tell the story forever.”

Don’t tell her I said this, but she kind of blew my mind right there. For a second we were silent—no noise but the scratch of Trish’s high-tops on the dirt and the whistle of an unseen bird from the branches of the juniper tree—while I looked up at the sky and tried to pick my way through her argument.

“So you’re saying that we should keep trying to figure out the play even when we know we can’t? For, like, forever?” Something inside of me seized up in resistance.

“What is the point of that?”

Trish lifted her feet, and her ponytail flew up behind her head as the swing spun around and around. “It’s fun,” she said.

So that’s the story of me and Hamlet, I guess. Trish says she has an essay on depictions of Ophelia that she wants me to read. The Mission continues, sort of. Sometimes I sense myself really wanting to zero in on the story, thinking I’m seconds away from the big secret that will make everything clear, but when I start to feel that way I go outside for a walk. I’ve already been there, dude, and let me tell you, that way madness lies.

CHAPTER V

ASSASSIN

Well, what could you say about a thing like the downtown shootings? The man was a maniac, people said. Such unexplained violence was devastating, people said. It made you wonder, people said, though they didn't say what, exactly, they wondered. You expected such lunacy—well, you never expected such lunacy, but if you were to expect such lunacy you expected it in the city, in Houston or Dallas, not here in Gleason.

But of course, people were quick to remind themselves, Gleason had changed. Once a clearly separated suburb at the city's outskirts, Gleason now boasted a bustling downtown area, a strip of restaurants both local and chain, and the crime that came with growth. Wait, though, people said; the downtown shootings were no ordinary crime. The shooter—the alleged shooter, as the newscasters decorously referred to Hank Owen Darrow— had walked into the middle of the downtown area, taken out a Dan Wesson Razorback from his coat, and started firing in every direction. After a minute or so someone tackled him and wrested the gun from his grip. Deprived of his weapon, the shooter sat, quiet and cross-legged, in the middle of the street and waited with lamb-like calm for the police to arrive. No one could chalk up that sort of unmotivated violence to

urban sprawl. Something was obviously wrong with Darrow's head. Well, in any case, people concluded, this was no doubt a sad time for Gleason. A sad, sad time indeed.

Such were the kinds of comments people made about the shootings. Up until the reporters started calling the house, Andrea said them, too, feeling no different from anyone else. How awful, she thought; two people dead, a half-dozen wounded, not so much as a whiff of a satisfying explanation. Sometimes customers at the gas station where she worked would place a Dr. Pepper or a bag of pork rinds on the counter and mention something about the shootings to her as she rang the items up: You hear one of the guys got killed had a pregnant wife? Kid gonna grow up without a father 'cause a that trigger-happy looney-toon. Think they'll give that (a silent inner struggle to find a family-friendly word) son-of-a-Bisquick Darrow the death penalty? I'm not a fan of capital punishment, me, but in a case like this, hell, I'd pull the switch myself.

Any mention of the shootings leached the sunshine right out of Andrea's day, at least for a few minutes. She was a naturally cheerful person, though, and couldn't stay down for long; she was cheerful, in fact, on the afternoon the first reporter called, humming as she folded fresh towels, warm and smelling sweetly of detergent. Then the telephone rang. When she picked up, a man's voice asked if he could speak to Andrea Somerson. "You already are," she informed him.

"This is Wesley Scott with *The Gleason Sentinel*. I wanted to know if you have any comments about the downtown shootings?"

Andrea used her head and shoulder to keep the phone pressed against her ear while she shifted her laundry basket from one hip to the other. She was surprised that a reporter would call her for a statement—why would anyone want a statement from her of

all people? and whoever heard of *The Gleason Sentinel*? Last she checked the local paper was called *The Advocate*—but she launched into the typical expressions of general dismay that everyone was making. Very sad, horrible for the families, everyone concerned was in her thoughts and prayers, et cetera.

At first Wesley Scott made no response to her statement, and in the beat of silence after she finished talking Andrea was reminded of a teacher she had in high school. Every time Andrea answered a question in class, the teacher made a similar pause before responding. That pause always told Andrea she had answered the question incorrectly.

“That’s not what I meant,” said the reporter (sure enough). “I wanted to know if you had any comments regarding your personal connection with the shooter.”

Andrea told him she didn’t know what he meant.

“In reference to the statement he made a couple of hours ago,” the reporter said. “Saying that he did it for you.”

Andrea begged his pardon.

“He told the police and the press that the shootings were an attempt to impress you.”

Drawn, apparently, by some inner radar signaling that something was amiss, Andrea’s fiancé Joe came into the room and stood, looking at her expectantly. From the look of uncertain concern on his face, Andrea knew her own face must have fallen. She could no longer think clearly. She felt like someone had taken a giant leaf blower and sent all her ways of knowing where she stood in the world at any given moment skittering off into the distance, leaving her lost—without landmarks. The towels in the basket on her hip had gone cold.

“Ms. Somerson?” the reporter prompted.

“I have to go,” she said, and she lowered the phone into the cradle.

While Andrea rifled through a pile of the previous week’s newspapers in search of a good photograph, Joe clicked back and forth between local news stations. “Channel six will be covering the shooting in a couple of minutes,” Joe called from the living room. The phone rang. “Don’t answer that,” Joe called again.

Andrea continued to fish through the stack of papers, getting more and more flustered. The only decent photograph she could find showed Darrow, handcuffed, being herded into the police station. He was in profile, his head slightly ducked. Stocky. Pale. Shaggy blond-brown hair. She didn’t know him from Adam.

“It’s on,” Joe called.

Andrea went to the living room. While the newscaster recounted the circumstances surrounding Darrow’s arrest, the screen showed his mug shot—the same face Andrea had seen in the newspaper, only this time wearing glasses. Instantly, and with some astonishment at what a difference the addition of a pair of glasses could make, she knew who he was. He came to the gas station about three times a week. He always got a banana from the basket stand by the register and a Snoopy ice cream bar from the freezer in the back. Sometimes he bought gas, too—always in small, haphazard amounts. \$6.14 on pump three. \$8.97 on pump five. She had seen him, she thought, just four or five days ago.

She told Joe she recognized Darrow, and how. Joe looked at Darrow’s image on the screen with wary dislike. “He ever say anything to you?” Joe asked.

Andrea shook her head. “Just the usual stuff,” she said. “Hello. How are you. Can I get change for a twenty.”

“You say anything to him?”

Andrea wrenched her eyes away from the screen and looked at Joe—his boyish mop of blond curls, his comforting girth. She felt like the floor was sliding from under her, like she was walking up a down escalator. “I didn’t treat him any different than I treat anybody else who comes in,” she said.

Joe cupped a hand around her shoulder. She turned her eyes back to the screen. The newscaster quoted Darrow saying that the shootings were an offering of love to Andrea. When asked who Andrea was, Darrow said he was referring to Andrea of the Fillerup Gas Station on Bentley Boulevard. He didn’t know her last name.

The telephone rang. Joe gave Andrea’s shoulder a squeeze before lurching to the wall and ripping out the phone cord.

The next morning after Andrea dressed for work she found herself unable to walk out of the door. She lingered in the foyer next to the chockablock coat closet until she was almost late. Joe offered to drive her to work three times, but she kept turning him down. The fourth time he offered she agreed.

It was September now. The Indian paintbrushes were winding down, and the mornings were cooler. Joe already had the car’s heater on. Joe’s low tolerance for cold was a running joke between him and Andrea. For his sake Andrea didn’t ask him to lower the temperature. For her sake, she figured, Joe switched off the radio when they first boarded the truck; he knew Andrea didn’t like the morning call-in shows.

Bentley Boulevard was the most heavily trafficked street in Gleason. Four lanes and a median cut between two strips of Bentley businesses—here a locally owned sports bar shared a parking lot with an Applebee’s, there a family-operated mattress store peddled Sertas next to a Big Lots, everywhere assorted dives and grills and bistros squatted in the shadow of a Barnes and Noble’s or a Circuit City or a Radio Shack. The shootings had taken place just two blocks from Bentley, at an intersection shared by a tackleshop and a Regions Bank.

On other days when Andrea sat in the passenger seat and Joe drove, the storefronts on either side and year-long sunflowers on the median seemed to be the ones gliding past while she and the truck remained stationary. She didn’t feel like that today. Today she felt like she was the one moving, all too quickly and in the wrong direction. The cloth of the seats scratched against her bare arms.

Andrea put up with the heater’s blast without comment for as long as she could. Finally she gave a quick punch to the power window control button, lowering the pane of glass on her side by a hardly noticeable crack. But Joe didn’t miss a thing. He switched off the heater and lowered both windows all the way. Andrea reached for Joe’s knuckles, curled over the gearshift, and rubbed them, wondering what life would be like without their endless, silent exchange of gifts.

The Fillerup sat, unassuming, in a little grass-and-dirt area just behind the exit that led to the Interstate. Andrea’s manager, Vern, was waiting for her outside when she arrived. “Well the good news is we’re both famous,” he said when she opened the truck’s door.

“I’m sorry,” Andrea said, and immediately she wondered what she was sorry for. She slipped out of Joe’s truck and onto the ground, some two feet below her, holding onto the door frame for balance. She was surprised at how her knees wobbled with the impact of landing.

Vern was a small man, half-Mexican but with a voice that was all Texas, his thin shoulders and body out of balance with his large head. “Ain’t even eight o’clock,” he was saying, “and already I had to chase away two newscasters and a Foe Toe Journalist.”

When she turned to close the door, Joe reached for her hand through the open window and made her promise to call him if anything happened. Andrea promised and forced what she hoped was a reassuring smile. Joe did not look convinced, but he nevertheless drove away to his job at the office supply store, the truck’s windows rising as he went.

“Shoe’s untied,” Vern said as she approached. Andrea stopped and fumbled with the laces. Vern waited for her to stand up again before saying, “Cop in my office wants to talk to you.”

A certain dread kicked through Andrea’s gut.

“Well, don’t look like that,” Vern said. “You walk in lookin’ like that he’ll either phone an ambulance or charge you with somethin’.”

Andrea followed Vern to his office, a cinderblock room about the length and width of a broomstick. Two chairs with metal frames and plastic seats and backrests sat in front of Vern’s desk. The cop—a tall, red-haired man who looked too young to be a cop—sat in one of these. When they entered he rose and introduced himself to Andrea, then turned his eyes to Vern, who excused himself.

The sergeant invited Andrea to sit, so she sat. She forced herself to smile for the second time in as many minutes. “I feel like I been called to the principal’s office,” she said.

She hoped that this would tease a smile from the grim young man in uniform, but no. Instead Andrea could sense a sudden alertness prickling across the sergeant’s skin and through his eyeballs like a radio signal sharpening from static to clarity. “Why?” he asked.

Andrea didn’t know why. She didn’t even know what. As in, what the hell is going on? Or, what the hell am I talking about? She tried to sift her way through the massive pile of clutter that crowded her brain, to reduce the pile to a manageable phrase, but she couldn’t. “I don’t know why,” she said after an uncomfortably long pause.

The sergeant asked her about Darrow, and she told him everything she’d told Joe. She insisted that she and Darrow had never seen or spoken to each other outside of the gas station, that they had said nothing to each other but what pertained to the buying and selling Fillerup’s products, and perhaps a comment or two about the weather. When she finished, the sergeant thanked her for her time and said he’d keep in touch. He also said he’d do what he could to keep the press at bay. Then he left.

Andrea took her post behind the cash register, but right from the beginning her workday was a series of small catastrophes. A motion detector on the door made a loud beeping noise whenever someone crossed the threshold. On the best of days this noise was grating. Today it rang through Andrea like a carnival test-your-strength game, a quick jerk that started at the navel and broke against her skull. Even after the quick bursts of alarm had fizzled down to flat Coke and dishwater, she felt distracted and vague. She

made incorrect change four times. On the fourth time she gave the customer, a lank-haired girl wearing a studded choker, ten dollars fewer than she was owed. Under the girl's icy stare, Andrea apologized clumsily and fluttered her hands about trying to fix the mistake. "Are you okay?" the girl's similarly dressed friend asked. "You're, like, green."

All Andrea could think of all day were the two dead men, the three men and two women and one teenage girl laid up in the hospital.

At one o'clock Vern announced that her shift was over, two hours early. He would drive her home himself just as soon as a replacement cashier arrived. Andrea thought about arguing, but she didn't have the energy. As they walked out the back door toward Vern's Chrysler, Andrea saw a man seated on a bench in the neighboring used car lot. She took note of him because he seemed so very immediately to take note of them. He was eating a hamburger wrapped in plastic, and when he saw them coming he jumped to his feet like a hunting dog and dropped his half-eaten burger into a paper sack. Vern swore gently to himself.

"That's the same jackass I ran off this mornin'," he said, "'scuse my French."

Andrea looked back at the man—brown-haired, dark-eyed, good-looking though a bit on the thin side for her tastes. He looked as if he wanted to approach, but Andrea didn't give him a chance. She quickened her pace and ducked into Vern's car without looking up. As Vern pulled the Chrysler onto Bentley, she looked into the side mirror and watched the man watching them leave.

Joe was against her returning to work the next day. He was furious that Vern had said nothing about the police officer being there until after he, Joe, had driven away. That

night, when the local newscaster said that one of the shooting victims in the hospital was in critical condition and might not survive, Andrea's hands started shaking uncontrollably. Joe said that going back to work in that condition would do no good for her.

But once she stopped shaking, Andrea insisted on going to work. They needed the money, she said.

Things went a little better for her the second day. She came up with a coping mechanism—reciting the multiplication table to herself backward, starting with the twelves and working her way down. She was on her third set of eights when she glanced out the glass doors and saw the man from yesterday lurking near the pumps. He raised a camera to his face. This must be the Foe Toe Journalist. Vern wasn't there; he had driven to one of his other gas stations. The Foe Toe Journalist must have seen him go.

Eight times twelve is ninety-six. Eight times eleven is eighty-eight.

The man began to walk toward the building.

Eight times ten is eighty. Eight times nine is seventy-two.

The man opened the door and walked through. He walked up and down the aisles, glancing casually at the packaged beers and bags of gummy worms as if strolling through a garden park. Eight times eight is...eight times eight is...what was eight times eight? Sixty-four? That didn't seem right.

Finally the man walked to the cash register and laid a bag of peanut-butter M&Ms on the counter. "Hi," he said, smiling.

Andrea glanced from the candy to the man and made no move to ring up the item. The jitters she had felt all day yesterday were gone, replaced by white-hot anger. “What do you want?” she said.

The man looked startled, but he adjusted quickly. “Wesley Scott,” he said, holding out his hand for her to shake. “We spoke a couple of days ago.”

“Not what I asked,” she said.

Though Wesley Scott had seemed a good-looking man at first glance, that first impression did not hold up under bright lights or close inspection. His brown hair was well-combed, but his mouth was too wide for his face and his ears stuck out at an almost ninety-degree angle. Taken altogether he was, as Andrea’s mother might have put it, completely normal-looking.

Since Andrea didn’t respond to Scott’s waiting hand, he put the hand back at his side, smooth as you please. His smile didn’t drop an inch. “I’m the editor of *The Gleason Sentinel*,” he said, “and—”

“Never heard of it,” Andrea said. Some part of her was surprised and a little alarmed to discover behind this statement a long-quiet instinct for finding the jugular, but she was too angry and too worked-up and too sleep-deprived to care.

Scott’s smile fell just a bit then, but he obviously wasn’t about to give up. “It’s a good paper,” he said. “You should look into it. But what I want to know is would you be willing to—given the unusual circumstances of your connection with Hank Owen Darrow—”

“No,” Andrea said.

Scott angled his face at her in a questioning stance. “No?” he said, asking for clarification.

Andrea repeated herself. No, she would not speak with him. No, she would not say anything on or off the record to *The Gleason Sentinel*. No, she had no connection with Hank Owen Darrow, never had, never would, couldn’t answer questions about a connection that didn’t exist. She wondered whatever became of the sergeant’s promise to keep the press off her back, but then maybe it hadn’t occurred to him to bother with the *Sentinel*; maybe he, like her up until a day ago, had never heard of the *Sentinel*.

When she made it clear that she would not be moved, Scott let his head decline in what seemed to be surrender, then walked out of the gas station. He left the candy on the counter.

The next day he was back. He walked into the gas station, then through the aisles as if making a selection. He picked up a bag of peanut butter M&Ms and placed them on the counter.

Andrea sent him on his way again. Just like she did the next day. And the day after that. And the day after that.

She thought about telling Vern what Scott was doing, but then she didn’t. She didn’t even tell Joe. The good thing about Scott’s stubbornness was that it gave her something to think about besides the eight people who bore the scars of Darrow’s lunatic love for her. If she was busy being angry at Scott’s nerve, or astonished at Scott’s persistence, then she didn’t have time to feel confusion and misplaced guilt over the twisted love offering she never asked for. Besides, Joe didn’t like for her to talk about

anything related to the Darrow incident. Last week as she and Joe were washing the dinner dishes, Andrea had mentioned, pretty casually she thought, that the papers said the pregnant widow Darrow's victim had gone into premature labor. For a moment Joe went strangely quiet. Then he laid the plate he was drying on the countertop, turned and faced her squarely.

“Andrea, you have to stop thinking about this,” said Joe. “You have to let it go.”

Andrea felt her chest cavity become hot and narrow. The water streaming from the faucet scalded her hands, so she turned up the cold tap. “Well, it's not as easy as all that,” she said.

“Yes it is,” said Joe. When she answered him with a hard look, he said, “Look, it wasn't your fault.”

“I know that,” said Andrea, but Joe spoke again before she could finish.

“It's been weeks, okay? You have no reason to feel guilty. I thought you were stronger than this. I don't like seeing you make yourself miserable over something that had nothing to do with you.”

Andrea let her voice rise when she answered, “It had everything to do with me.”

A heavy snap cracked through the kitchen as Joe slammed one of the cabinet doors shut. Andrea jumped.

“Then fine, damn it,” Joe said, his voice rising past hers. “Just give him the power, okay? Give that crazy son of a bitch all the power over your life. Because that's what you're doing, Andrea. Every time you think about him.”

Joe stalked from the room. For a while Andrea stood alone in the kitchen, listening to the water gush wastefully down the drain. Then she turned off the water and

dried her hands. Telling Joe about Wesley Scott seemed pretty much off the table after that.

Finally one day, when he'd been hounding her for almost a month, Scott came into the Fillerup and walked straight to the cashier, foregoing his usual routine up and down the candy aisle. "Trying something different?" Andrea said.

"Yes," said Scott. For the first time she thought she spotted hesitation and lack of confidence in his expression, in the way he brushed the edge of his thumb beneath his left eye. "Look," he said. "I'm not going to ask you to say anything to the *Sentinel*, I mean, not today. I just...that is...have dinner with me."

Andrea didn't react because she didn't know how. Scott glanced off to the side and back, the fingers of his right hand doing and undoing a button on his jacket pocket. She felt like she had missed the punch line of a joke, but then she realized the real punch line was that Scott wasn't joking, and that was even funnier. She started to laugh.

"Don't laugh," said Scott.

And something in his voice made her stop. She held up her left hand. "You been coming in here every day for three weeks," she said. "In all that time you never noticed this ring?"

"It's just dinner," he said. "It's just food."

The door's motion detector gave a quick scream. A petite blond woman charged toward the counter with fast, important footsteps. She eyed Scott. "Are you in line?" she said.

“No,” he said, backing up to give her room. The woman tossed her clutch down next to the cash register and pointed behind Andrea’s back to a pack of Silk Cuts. Andrea rang up the cigarettes, but the woman’s I.D. was expired.

“So what?” the woman said. The indignation on her face was almost as thick as her metallic eye shadow. “It’s my I.D. My age is on there.”

Maybe so, but Andrea still couldn’t legally give her the cigarettes.

The woman pinched her mouth shut. “Whatever,” she said, shoving her I.D. back into the purse and zipping with a vengeance. She took four fast, important footsteps to the door. “You know, this is why I don’t come here if I can avoid it. Because there’s always some bullshit with you people.” She was gone so fast the motion detector barely had time to bleep at her.

Andrea turned back to Scott.

“So,” he said. “Dinner?”

Something in the woman’s exit reminded her of the way Joe had stomped out of the kitchen that night, his back squared and unyielding. She slid her eyes up to Scott. The reporter’s mouth was slack with anxious hope. He looked like someone who’d given her a homemade present and was waiting to find out if she liked his gift or not.

“If I eat dinner with you,” she said, “will you stop coming here and bothering me every day?”

Scott nodded rapidly, like this was more than he had dared hope for. “I can do that,” he said.

Andrea nodded. “Okay then,” she said.

The waitress set a basket of packaged margarine and saltines on the table between them, then gave them each a great big red plastic cup of ice water and a straw wrapped in paper. Scott banged his straw vertically against the table to punch it through the wrapping. Andrea tore the paper off with her fingers.

“What did you do before the Sentinel?” she said.

“Two years at the *Washington Post*,” he said. Scott’s fingertips brushed at the hair over his left ear. “I never got out of the mailroom,” he said. “Figured it was better to come on home. Start my own paper.”

“How big’s your staff?”

Scott moved like he was going to brush at that patch of hair again, but then he lowered his hand and instead made a gesture that was part “voila” and part “it-is-what-it-is.” “At this very moment, you’re looking at the entire masthead of *The Gleason Sentinel*,” he said.

Andrea didn’t think in time to hold back her surprise. She had figured that the *Sentinel* must be a tiny outfit with a circulation to match, but she didn’t realize until just now how bad Scott’s business was. “You write all your own articles?” she said. “You take all your own pictures? Make your own deliveries?”

Scott looked a little abashed and laughed. “Well,” he said. “Hard times. Small paper. You know how it goes.”

He was trying to act scrappy and optimistic, but Andrea could tell that beneath his brave underdog antics was fear of failure and rejection. The curve of his mouth said “look out, world,” but his sensitive eyes and flighty hands begged for kindness. She would feel sorry for him if she didn’t suspect that he already felt sorry enough for himself. Looking

at his naked neediness made her uncomfortable, so she shifted her glance to the bric-a-brac lining the restaurant's wall-mounted shelves—ceramic teapots and porcelain figurines of girls in flouncy hoopskirts.

After his third Blue Moon, Scott leaned across the table and tried to kiss her.

“Whoa—what are you doing?” she said. She pushed him back into his chair.

“Ms. Somerson,” said Scott, and he tried again.

She couldn't believe him. “Stop,” she said. “I'm engaged.”

“You came here,” he said.

As he dove in for a third attempt, Andrea slid across the torn vinyl bench out of reach and left through the restaurant's grated front door. The night was balmy. She turned left down the sidewalk, then swerved around and started right. Her heart pounded. Once a few years ago a car had almost hit her as she crossed the street, and she felt now as she had then. Fear and surprise leftover from the danger she'd avoided mingled with anger at the nerve of some people and a certain sense of unrealness, a disbelief that disaster had not struck her after all.

She stopped at the curb. Wesley Scott ran out of the restaurant, babbling apologies. Her feelings toward him had hardened. He was like a child. He *was* a child.

“Take me home,” she said.

He took her home, both of them dour and silent all the way.

When she arrived home she saw that Joe had cut some zinnias from the garden and vased them in a mason jar on the kitchen table. As she set her keys on the hook next to the door, he came out of the living room to greet her.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” she answered.

He hung in the doorway and tapped his fist against the frame. Lamplight and television sounds spilled into the dark kitchen from behind him.

Andrea pointed to the flowers. “They’re nice,” she said. “I like them.”

“I’m glad,” said Joe.

She had told him that she’d be late coming home because she wanted to take a look at a nursery in the next town—that she’d heard they were having a sale on hibiscus shrubs. That was the first lie she had ever told him, unless you counted not mentioning Scott’s visits to the gas station as a lie. Now she’d never be able to tell him about Scott, and the fact struck her as strange because Scott was out of her life now. Or was he out of her life? His way of facing forward as she exited his car gave off a certain forever-ness, but Andrea knew from bitter experience that some men never gave up. No matter how plain and direct you were with them, some men looked on your “no” not as a final, unchangeable answer to a question but as an invitation to switch tacks. They dropped out of your life just long enough to find their second wind—or their third, or their fourth. In any case, now she had a secret from Joe, something she’d never had before. Things had changed between them, and the change made her sad.

“I’m sorry I shouted the other day,” said Joe.

“Let’s sit down,” said Andrea.

They sat. From over in the living room came the bong-bong-bong of Vanna White touching the lit squares and turning them into letters.

“When I was little I collected seashells,” Andrea said. “One year we went to Galveston and we found about a million hermit crabs. They all had big, beautiful shells, the spiral-y kinds you don’t see too often. My daddy took a butterfly net and scooped about ten hermit crabs into a bucket, and when we got back to the motel he took the crabs, one by one, and pulled them out of their shells with a pair of pliers so he could give the shells to me.”

She remembered the neon blue of that plastic bucket, the frayed meat of the naked hermit crabs littered across the glass-top patio table. She remembered how the surf pounding in the background had intensified the movement of her own quivering gut and ragged heartbeat.

“I didn’t want him to,” she continued. “The whole time he was yanking out those crabs I had this feeling in the pit of my stomach like something was being crushed to death inside me, something fighting and losing. But he was my daddy and he was trying to please me and I didn’t know how to tell him no, that’s not what I want.”

Joe looked tired. “Say what you mean, Andrea,” he said.

“I love you so much,” she said. “You know that. But this time you need to give me what I say I need and not what you think I need.”

Joe looked at the table. She wanted to take his hand, but she was afraid he would pull away from her touch. For a moment she wondered would he sit there silent all night, would he stand and return to the living room without a word or a glance, but then he reached for one of the zinnias, an orange one, and tucked the flower gently behind her ear. The petals were cool and itchy on her skin. Andrea rose from her chair. Of the three men who had given her gifts in the last month, this was the one she’d betrayed. Her

outstretched hand invited him onto his feet. She pulled him in close and pressed her face against his chest. As Joe's hands found the small of her back, Andrea breathed in his cedar scent and let herself melt into the soft warmth of his ample body.

CHAPTER VI

BULL MOOSE

Samantha Carob knew that layoffs were coming—all of the teachers knew—but she would never have guessed that Annie Mae Gauthreaux would be the first to get the ax.

“I thought Annie Mae signed her contract,” Samantha said.

“She did,” said Priscilla Roussel. The two of them stood in the South Wing hallway between Priscilla’s classroom and Samantha’s library. The seventh period bell was about to ring, and uniformed middle schoolers moved in swift streams on either side of the two teachers. “But the fine print says the contract is void if enrollment is down.”

And of course enrollment at St. Patrick’s was down, had been declining slowly but steadily for going on four years. The plants and refineries where many of their students’ fathers worked were cutting jobs left and right. Catholic school was fast becoming a luxury that many LeJardin families could not afford.

Samantha called out to a couple of sixth grade boys to stop rough-housing and get to class. When the boys trundled off, muttering, she asked what was Otto Perilloux thinking, getting rid of Annie Mae like that? I mean, of all people?

The halls had just about emptied, and when Priscilla replied she did so with her voice lowered. “He’s already let go of all the pre-school and kindergarten aides,” she said. “Now he’s doing what the rest of the country is doing and nixing the employees who make the most money.” Behind the perfect circles of her eyeglasses, Priscilla’s face was tight and cynical, even though her words were generous. “He’s a good principal. He’s just run out of corners to cut.”

About six wasteful expenditures sprang to Samantha’s mind all at once. “I could think of a few more,” she said.

Priscilla waved Samantha’s comment aside. “So could everybody, who’s going to tell him?”

Samantha couldn’t believe the gall, the ingratitude the administration was displaying. Annie Mae was one of three teachers who made up a legendary fourth grade triumvirate. She and the other two fourth grade teachers had occupied the same corner of the East Wing for decades. They co-chaired committees for science fair and Field Day, and every fall semester they came to St. Patrick’s Oktoberfest in matching costumes. Last year they came as three peas from the same pod. “How is she going to come into work and stand in front of those children for the rest of the semester?” Samantha said.

“She won’t,” said Priscilla. “There’s four weeks left in the year, and Annie Mae has a month of sick days built up. She’s out of here.”

The bell rang. Priscilla returned to her social studies students, and Samantha retreated to the stacks.

She was supposed to monitor a make-up exam, but the boy, less than shockingly, hadn’t arrived yet. As she filed away some Maurice Sendak books, Samantha did a quick

calculation in her head. Thirty-nine years—that’s how long Annie Mae had worked here. Next year would have been forty. There would have been a party for her anniversary—catered, a room reserved at LeJardin’s only formal restaurant, because whatever Priscilla said, Otto sometimes cut the wrong corners.

Samantha slid Zlateh the Goat into its little hole in the wall of books, then returned to the front desk and started checking volumes of Madeleine L’Engle and Zilpha Keatley Snyder back into the computerized catalogue. Priscilla had come to St. Patrick’s thirty-five years ago; Samantha, twenty-eight. Samantha wasn’t sure when exactly she became part of the old guard. One day she’d been a young teacher, and another day that didn’t feel too long after that she looked around and discovered that most of the people she’d started with were gone. Their spots had been taken up by younger people, many of whom she herself had taught. Every now and then she looked at a colleague and found herself picturing the woman at age twelve, wearing the same checkered skirt and monogrammed blouse her present students wore, perched sprightly in one of the tablet arm desks in the classroom where she taught seventh and eighth grade literature.

She was shaken out of her reverie when a child approached the desk and said, “Mrs. Carob, can I have some potato chips?”

“I don’t know, can you?” Samantha said automatically. She really didn’t relish being that woman, that killjoy who corrected other people’s grammar in casual conversation and took a red pen to fliers asserting that you should vote for some particular student council candidate because he would “be their for you.” She knew the kind of rancor and derision that woman invited. But if she wanted to be loved, she supposed, she should have driven an ice cream truck.

The girl rephrased her request, and Samantha opened the bottom desk drawer and gave her a one-point-five-ounce bag of sour cream and onion Lay's in exchange for two quarters. Selling chips in the library was one of Otto's ideas for generating revenue. The fundraising scheme also had the effect of filling Samantha's days with a plethora of tiny triumphs and heartbreaks. Every time she watched a student approach her desk she imagined a drum roll in her mind. If, once the drum roll was over, the student wanted a book, the studio audience cheered and Samantha did a little flamenco dance in her heart. If the student asked for chips, the studio audience groaned collectively and Samantha silently endured a deflation worthy of a Peanuts cartoon.

I'm sure glad I have six years of higher education and twenty-eight years of teaching experience under my belt, Samantha thought as the girl walked away, clutching the chip bag tenderly in both hands. Otherwise I might not be capable of sitting behind this desk every day and fulfilling my duties as a human vending machine.

Another of Otto Perilloux's save-the-school initiatives sat heavily on the far end of the counter: the pencil machine. Twenty-five cents would get you a brand new unsharpened number two Ticonderoga with an eraser so pristine you hated to use it, lest you mar its perfect cylindricality. Of course, if a special green pencil rolled into the tray, then you could present the pencil to the front office in exchange for a special prize. Which was all well and good, except that Samantha couldn't shake the vague though admittedly alarmist notion that they were planting the seeds of future gambling addictions in their young charges. She had once seen a child spend his entire recess slipping five dollars worth of quarters into the machine in pursuit of the elusive green pencil, his eyes glazed, his mouth a little slack— and was that sweat trickling down the side of his face?

The boy whose test she was supposed to proctor showed up about five minutes after she started discharging books.

“You’re late, Ryan,” she said.

Ryan Hymel gave her his small smile. Both of them knew the smile was actually a smirk, but the contempt wasn’t overt enough for her to do anything about it. Therein lay the genius of the gesture. “I was helping move tables for Mr. Perilloux,” he said. With his right hand he loosely gripped the one strap of his school bag he’d bothered to pull over his shoulder. “I can go get a note if you want—”

“That won’t be necessary,” said Samantha. The last thing she needed was to give the kid another excuse to roam the hallways. Besides, she believed him. Otto would pull a kid from class and not tell his teacher. “Take out a pencil and have a seat.”

“I ain’t got a pencil.”

“You don’t have a pencil,” Samantha said. She pulled a pencil out of the mug on her desk and handed it to him, along with the test sheet. “Get started.”

Ryan dropped his bag to the floor and plummeted into a chair at one of the library tables. He stretched his arms high above his head, like a pantomime of waking up, before he bent over the paper. Samantha tried to suppress her antipathy. Ryan had been in her seventh grade literature class last year, and this year he was in her homeroom as well as her eighth grade lit. When she saw his name on her class list back in August she went to the guidance counselor who split the students into homerooms and asked, only half-joking, “What did I ever do to you?” Ryan Hymel was a pain in the ass—disruptive, disrespectful, a show-off. And not like some of her other show-offs, who clowned for attention but were basically harmless, even reasonably intelligent if you could get them

alone. Ryan was spiteful. She had seen him needle a classmate until the boy was sent home for kicking in a gym room locker. One day last October a girl burst into tears in the middle of Samantha's class. The girl had been sharpening a pencil, and Ryan had been standing right behind her in line. He protested that he'd done nothing, and the girl wouldn't say what was wrong, but Samantha had her suspicions regardless.

Furthermore, Ryan was ringleader of a group that tried to discourage anyone from participating in class. If a hand went up a series of shushes and whispered "no's!" floated through the classroom until the students who might have answered a question were too intimidated to speak up at all. Ryan played that little game with Samantha for the first time in the middle of her introduction to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a class that usually went very well. As Samantha looked out across her silent classroom, half the students looking anxious and bewildered, the other half—Ryan's cohort—shaking with suppressed laughter, she caught sight of Ryan stretching his shanks out beneath his desk, one arm hooked behind his chair, and she thought for the first time in her entire teaching career: I hate you, you little punk. She didn't know if her face projected what she was thinking, but when Ryan made eye contact with her his hitherto bored expression broke into the most openly malicious grin she'd ever seen him wear.

Ryan erased an answer from the test, pushing down on the eraser so hard Samantha thought the little pink nub would become dislodged from the pencil. He brushed the eraser dust onto the floor with the back of his hand. She had to remind herself that these actions were not objectively irritating. If she found them to be so, that was her subjectivity or her prejudice or whatever, coloring an activity that in itself was neutral. She wished she were above these flashes of untriggered aversion, but since she obviously

wasn't, she thought that maintaining awareness of how nonsensical the feelings were was the next best thing.

She turned back to her books. Ryan's parents, of course, were no help at all. Mrs. Hymel found Ryan's minor acts of rudeness and disruption adorable, and if ever he seemed to be in serious trouble, she would treat the whole thing as an annoyance resulting from the lamentable thick-headedness of St. Patrick's entire faculty and staff. During their purgatorial parent-student conferences, Mrs. Hymel would sit with arms folded and legs crossed, pointedly checking the time every three or four minutes. Her watch hung loose on her wrist, and every time she wanted to look at it she had to give her hand a rather theatrical flick to make the face turn up. Then she'd tuck her hand back into the crooked elbow of her velvet jacket and lean back in her chair, her eyes turned upward in an expression that said *You're nothing but a card I have to punch*. Samantha tried to smile at Mrs. Hymel in such a way that her own expression would read *Sweetie, the feeling is mutual*. Meanwhile, Mr. Hymel planted his elbows on the table and dealt in non sequiturs for forty-five minutes. "I don't understand how my son could have a 'D' in literature," he'd said at one conference's outset. "I'm paying tuition, aren't I?"

Mr. Hymel owned a number of small businesses in LeJardin—a motel, a bar, a restaurant. The biggest and most lucrative was a country club over in the newer subdivisions. His father, Ryan's grandfather, was an even wealthier man and one of the pillars of St. Patrick's parish community. They were speculating, of course, but Priscilla and Samantha both suspected that the administration handled Ryan with unique clemency for fear of alienating the old man. The preferential treatment was unfair and therefore a serious matter, but at the same time Samantha found the insular, Lilliputian arrogance of

LeJardin familial politics absurdly comical. She once overheard Ryan's father tell someone that he and one or two other prominent families in town were "all that was left of the best blood in LeJardin." Samantha laughed for days afterward. To her way of thinking it was like claiming to be among the chief aristocrats of Dogpatch.

She watched Ryan crack all the bones in his neck. Maybe he'd grow out of the sense of entitlement. Some people did. Not very many, she thought. But some.

A few minutes later Ryan stood and approached her desk. He held out the pencil she'd lent him, showcasing the broken point. Samantha didn't have a sharpener. She nodded toward the pencil machine off to her right. "You got a quarter?" she asked.

"I *have* a quarter," said Ryan.

For a split second Samantha experienced a surprise that was rimmed with something very close to pleasure. But then she remembered where she was, who she was talking to, and the pleasure turned to confusion and discomfort. In the mouth of another student, the statement would have been admirably witty. Had another student made that reply, she might have interpreted the remark as playfulness, a joke in which she was a participant and not just a butt. With Ryan she wasn't so sure.

Ryan crossed over to the pencil machine. When his pencil rolled out, he coughed a quick laugh. "I won a green pencil," he said.

Of course, Samantha thought. Of course you did.

He held the pencil up for her inspection. "How 'bout that," she said. She tried for a smile. Maybe this was his way of being friendly. Maybe he was outgrowing the bad attitude.

In spite of his late arrival, Ryan finished the test with minutes to spare. Samantha made sure to keep him until the third period bell rang, though. “Hasta la vista, Mrs. Carob,” he said on his way out the door, and he was gone before Samantha had a chance to reply.

Nearly half an hour passed before Samantha found the little tab of paper with all the answers, scrunched up and tossed into the trash bin just outside her door. He’d Scotch-taped it to the bottom of the table, as she could tell by the torn-off remnant of tape stuck to the table’s edge.

When Ryan heard about her discovery, he’d probably imagine her cackling and rubbing her mitts together in delight. Actually she was the opposite of delighted. This was going to be a major headache, and she was surprised, given her low expectations for Ryan, at how disappointed she felt in him. She was irritated, too, at the sloppiness. Ditching the contraband right outside the room where you’d taken the test? Come on. If you’re going to cheat, cheat smart.

Samantha switched off the lights and locked the library door behind her before she left for her literature class—on today’s agenda, a vocabulary lesson in preparation for beginning the next section of *The Call of the Wild*. Of course, Ryan was smart—too smart to cheat so clumsily. The carelessness indicated how stupid he thought she was.

She tapped the horn twice as she pulled into the driveway. Her husband Clifford stood from his crouch over the side garden and waved cheerily. He was weeding the monkey grass in what must have been a desultory way given his dress: hands gloveless,

still wearing his school clothes—a button-up tucked trimly beneath his black leather belt and khakis that stopped a good inch-and-a-half above the lip of his loafers.

Samantha pulled herself from the Buick, coffee thermos and battered leather bag in tow. “Oh, frabjous day! Calloo callay!” Clifford called. This was their traditional Friday afternoon greeting, their way of heralding the end of another work week.

“Well, it’s frabjous for some of us,” Samantha said, and then she told him about Annie Mae.

His face clouded. “You’re kidding,” he said. She shook her head wryly, and Clifford frowned. He looked back at the monkey grass, as if hoping he’d find an explanation poking out of the ground alongside the trespassing clover and dandelions. “Oh, man,” he said after a bit.

Samantha knew what he was thinking. He was trying to comprehend the full implications of Annie Mae’s job loss, not just for Annie Mae but for the entire Gauthreaux clan. Unlike his wife, Clifford was a LeJardin native, and he was related by blood or marriage to half the town. In the gravity of his unfocused gaze Samantha saw him wondering if anyone had told Charlene over at Ansel’s Seafood Store or Wayne teaching drama at the high school.

Samantha shifted her bag, heavy with papers, from her left hand to her right. “How’s your squash doing?” she asked.

Clifford looked up at her, then draped his arm around her shoulder. “Let’s go look,” he said, steering her into the house.

Clifford was an unlucky but indefatigable gardener. The first year they moved into this house, some fifteen years ago, back when their now-grown daughter was eight or

so, Clifford had spent all spring digging and sowing, watering and weeding, and in return for his pains the garden yielded him nothing—not one tomato, not one rose. Even the bean plant that wound its tendrils up and over the fence posts, so that every time Samantha saw the plant she thought “feed me, Seymour,” even this dropped its comely pink blossoms and withered before producing a single bean. Clifford tried remedies for mites, slugs, and nematodes, then had the soil’s pH level assessed, but finally he had to face the fact that the land around his house was irreversibly infertile. Not to be deterred, Clifford nailed some boards together to form a makeshift box about the size of a laundry basket, filled the box with bagged soil from Home Depot, and replanted. These plants fared better, though they never quite flourished. Still, Clifford was content with them, and Samantha, who enjoyed gardens but had no faith in her ability to maintain one, was happy as long as he was happy.

Samantha pushed aside the sliding glass door, and the two of them stepped out into the backyard toward Clifford’s boxed garden. One of his three squash plants had produced a yellow flower. They cheered. Samantha raised her arms and shook imaginary pom-poms. After a moment, though, Clifford shook his head and said, “Poor Annie Mae. I just can’t believe it.”

Clifford was a teacher, too, a history teacher at one of LeJardin’s abysmal public schools. He made more money than Samantha did, but he also had to put up with a lot more grief: pressures to teach to the LEAP test, students who were literally and not merely figuratively juvenile delinquents, parents who were as apathetic as the parents at St. Patrick’s were overinvolved. She remembered helping him grade papers once early in their marriage and discovering two identical tests. “I know,” he said when she pointed

them out to him. “I saw them copying off each other. Doesn’t matter. They’re both flunking anyway, and it’s easier not to deal with the cheating, trust me.”

“My Favorite Student cheated on the test I proctored for him,” Samantha said, “so I’ll have to call Otto tonight. It’s going to take some effort for me not to give him a piece of my mind.”

“Make the effort,” said Clifford with a dark, warning glance.

Samantha took a seat on a patio chair. “Don’t be surprised if I’m next,” she said, articulating for the first time the thought that had been on her mind all day.

“Oh, come on, Sam, Otto wouldn’t do that,” said Clifford, filling his watering can. Clifford was the only person Samantha allowed to call her “Sam.”

“He did it to Annie Mae,” Samantha said. “Who saw that one coming?”

Some of the water missed the box and splattered against the concrete patio.

“Nobody does literature like you,” Clifford said. “Otto knows that.”

A clay pot of impatiens lay at Samantha’s feet. She played with one of the petals, smooth and waxy on her fingertips. Every year she picked out a potted flower or two to tend, and every year Clifford was the one who wound up keeping the plants alive past the weekend. “I don’t know,” she said. “The administrators look at me and they think ‘dinosaur.’ I still use a blackboard, for God’s sake, I mean actually black, with actual chalk. The administration wants more bells and whistles, they don’t like this sage-on-the-stage stuff that I do. Maybe I should start using PowerPoint.”

Clifford made a face. On several previous occasions he had dismissed PowerPoint as a glorified slide projector that sapped the energy out of a class.

“And I’m not what you’d call universally loved around there,” Samantha continued. Last year Samantha found out that some of the younger teachers, the ones she had taught some fifteen years ago, referred to her and Priscilla collectively as “Scylla and Charybdis.” She wasn’t nearly as insulted as she was surprised at the wit. Also she was amused: she had been the one who way-back-when had taught *The Odyssey* to those girls for the first time, using the Bernard Evslin adaptation. That, dear children, is an example of irony.

What was more surprising and more disconcerting than the cleverness or the cruelty of the nickname was the fact that Priscilla was lumped in with her: a clear-cut case of guilt by association. Priscilla was eminently likeable, a gifted conversationalist, a nice person, and more than that, a local person, LeJardin born and bred. These—the parents who showed up to Open House night, crammed absurdly into the school desks—were Priscilla’s people. Not Samantha’s. Samantha hailed from Mobile, and twenty-eight years of living in LeJardin was apparently not long enough to be considered a LeJardinite. She had married a native son, but apparently localness didn’t transfer. Not in her case anyway. Maybe if she had been sweeter or less truthful. Maybe if she’d been Catholic instead of Baptist. Maybe if she cared less about doing the job she was hired to do, which was not to be anyone’s friend. Allowances might have been made for her under those circumstances. Under the actual circumstances, LeJardin looked at Samantha as a resident outsider.

Clifford shook the dregs of the watering can into the potted impatiens, then set the can on the concrete floor and sat opposite his wife. He grunted a little on the way down.

“I guess I could always be a Wal-Mart greeter,” Samantha went on. “I don’t know though. Do I really care if the Wal-Mart shoppers of LeJardin have a nice day, not really.”

She was aiming for levity, but Clifford didn’t respond, and his silence combined with the stillness of his face made her think they should steer away from the subject. She marveled at the rapid growth of his morning glories, then asked if he had seen a particular column in that morning’s newspaper. By and by the conversation drifted on to other things until Clifford seemed to have more or less forgotten about St. Patrick’s job cuts. Samantha didn’t forget, but Clifford seemed to, at least until after dinner. They cleared the table and started on the dishes, Samantha washing and Clifford drying, when suddenly he said, “You know, maybe you should use PowerPoint.” Right then she knew he was really worried.

Samantha rapped on the door. “You wanted a word?” she said.

Otto Perriloux waved her in. Otto’s office was not large, but the bric-a-brac cluttering up all the shelf-space made the room feel even smaller than it was. A large metal photo display tree took up most of one tabletop, holding snapshots of Otto with various ex-students. A lumpy clay bowl held all of Otto’s paper clips, and cards made of crayon and folded construction paper were sticky-tacked to the back of his door and the front of his desk. There were a lot of figurines in chain mail and armor, ranging in size from the three-inch tall action figure propped up against his computer monitor to the two-and-a-half-foot plush toy holding its nylon sword aloft on top of the file cabinet. St. Patrick’s mascots were the Round Table Knights. Samantha never said anything about

the incongruity of a school named for Ireland's patron saint having such an Anglo-Saxon mascot. The joke wouldn't have been funny enough to be worth the energy. And people around here took their middle school sports teams very seriously.

Otto was totally bald with a compensating handlebar mustache. He looked like the missing member of somebody's barbershop quartet. "So Dianne Hymel kept me on the phone for about forty-five minutes Friday night," he said, pausing to set aside the stack of accreditation materials he was looking over.

Samantha settled into the wicker chair directly across from Otto's desk. "I'm sure," she said. "It's the Dreyfus affair all over again."

The corners of Otto's mustache lifted up in a brief smile. He tapped a ballpoint pen against his desk calendar. "Actually, Samantha, I was wondering if we could give this whole thing further consideration."

Samantha looked at him.

"I just worry that we may have been too hasty in our handling of this," Otto said. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I think you may have jumped to conclusions."

Samantha folded her arms and started to say something, but Clifford popped into her brain like a cartoon better angel and pleaded with her to tread carefully. "I would have thought I'd earned more credit than that," she said.

"Please, don't misunderstand me," said Otto. "You've been an asset to St. Patrick's for twenty-eight years, nobody knows that better than I do. About how old are you now, Samantha?"

Samantha's insides twanged. She said nothing at first, but then Otto repeated himself. "About how old?"

“You are not allowed to ask me that question,” she said too quickly and quietly, hearing the stiff tension in her own voice. “There are laws against asking me that question.”

Otto held up his hands defensively. “Just wondering,” he said.

“I’d say I’m hardly that much older than you are, Otto.”

“Okay, fine, let’s drop the subject.”

“Did you call me here to talk about Ryan Hymel?”

Otto hesitated.

“Oh, God,” said Samantha. Her tone sounded hollow and flat in her own ears.

“Oh my God.” If she hadn’t already been sitting down she would have needed to sit down. What was she going to do? Sure, she had been joking about the possibilities on Friday night but that was laughing in the dark, that was an attempt to keep the fear at bay. She had been preparing herself for the worst to come next year, or the year after, or five years from now. Not now, not today.

“I just wanted to say,” Otto said, “that maybe we could give the boy the benefit of the doubt. That’s all.”

If she hadn’t already felt like her job was on the chopping block, Samantha might not have had the nerve to say, “Mr. Hymel Sr. didn’t happen to call you up too, did he?”

He had every right to get angry, but he didn’t. “In the present economic climate,” he said, “St. Patrick’s needs all the friends it can get. You didn’t actually see the boy cheating, did you?” Samantha admitted that this was so. “Well then,” said Otto. “Perhaps we’d better leave well enough alone.” He stood up. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Samantha.”

She had to sit in her car for about twenty minutes before she felt still and calm enough to drive home. Things would be okay, she told herself. She didn't believe her own assurances, but she repeated them anyway. Things were okay now. She had bought time. She remained convinced that he had called her into his office to get rid of her for good, but he screwed up, asking her that question, or he chickened out. She could be almost sure of getting another year, and maybe in another year things wouldn't be so bad. For a moment Ryan's smirking face swam into her mind, and she pushed it down. What had been a regrettable if justifiable dislike for the kid would from here on out be undiluted hatred, and there was nothing she could do about that. She'd have to play the waiting game with him, wait for him to graduate and get out of her hair. Only one month. Could she stand seeing him for fifty minutes a day for a whole month? She would have to. In the meantime she would go home, make some PowerPoint slides.

All the way home she wondered what she would say to Clifford. What could she tell him that would be honest but not worrisome? She had a few phrases prepared, rehashes of the assurances she'd used to soothe herself, but when she pushed aside the sliding glass door and saw what Clifford was looking at, the words left her. Clifford's garden had been destroyed. The pliant squash stalks had been wrenched and twisted until broken, the severed ends thrown casually to the ground.

"It was like this when I got home," Clifford said.

Samantha stepped out and slid the glass door closed behind her. Clumps of impatiens lay at uneven intervals across the patio floor, clods of soil still clinging to the exposed roots. Her gaze traveled along the fence to the rosebushes, their buds methodically clipped, and the morning glories—randomly, inexplicably intact.

“Well,” said Clifford. He nudged a decapitated rosebud with the toe of his shoe.

“Well.”

The scare Otto had given her had rubbed her nerves raw—too raw to feel the full weight of this latest violation. Looking at the plant corpses scattered across the lawn caused a muted thrumming in her chest, a small ache she could convince herself would not grow into something less manageable. “I’m sorry, Clifford,” she said.

Clifford shook his head. “It’s not your fault.”

A blue jay alighted on the fence and angled its face toward the ruins of the garden, like a busybody neighbor. This was the first blue jay Samantha had seen up-close all spring. She always forgot how enormous these birds were.

“Why would somebody do this?” Clifford said, not in the voice of someone wondering about the specific motives of a specific garden destroyer, but in the voice of someone contemplating the presence of evil and meanness in the world as a whole. Samantha couldn’t help him with generalities, but she suggested that somebody might do this to a teacher who caught him cheating and tried to have him punished.

“Your Favorite Student?” he said. “He would do this?”

Samantha breathed in, considering. “With relish,” she said.

Clifford shook his head. “I can’t believe that,” he said.

That was Clifford for you—always reluctant to ascribe wicked deeds to anyone, even with the evidence in plain sight. Then again, the evidence really wasn’t in plain sight; the evidence was in her heart and her gut, in the instincts she’d honed day by day for the better part of three decades. Ryan would know by now that she’d turned him in and that the administration had taken his side. The balance of power between them had

tilted in his favor, a fact of which he was well aware. He wanted her to know just how aware he was. Ruining her garden—he would have assumed, of course, that it was her garden and not Clifford’s— would be the cherry on top of his victory, his vicious, adolescent way of saying “nanny nanny boo boo.” Samantha had taught middle school literature for nearly thirty years, and if there were two things she knew how to recognize straight off they were a schoolyard taunt and a symbol. The wrecked garden was both.

By this time Clifford had taken his place on the patio loveseat. He pushed over, making room for her.

Samantha sat. She looked out at all the green fragments strewn around them and felt like this wasn’t their garden, like this vandalism had happened to someone in a movie she was watching. “I guess we should clean this up,” she said.

Clifford said nothing. Neither of them moved.

“They have petunias on sale at Matherne’s,” said Samantha. “And plumeria.”

“Sam.”

“We could put some zinnias where the squash was, or maybe some portulaca,” Samantha continued. “The summer’s just beginning. They’ve got hanging baskets, too. I don’t know what the flowers in the hanging baskets are called. You would know. We could go look, if you want.”

“I don’t want,” said Clifford, and when she turned to look at him he looked tired and pale. He took her hand. “Let’s just sit for a while,” he said.

Samantha twined her fingers with his. Over on the fence post, a mob of purple martins swooped at the blue jay, which rose and batted its wings in protest but finally

flew away. Those purple martins. They were little, but they were mean. “Clifford, I think I’m losing my job,” she said.

Clifford looked for a moment as if he was thinking of what to say, but the seconds passed, and then the minutes, and then the sky above their backyard neighbor’s rooftop went purple and sunless, and he never said a word.

She woke up the next morning livid about the garden, as if her anger had needed a night’s dormancy to reach its apex. Anger permeated her entire morning routine. She twisted the cap on her coffee thermos more tightly than necessary, held the steering wheel in a death grip. All the way to school she carried on phantom arguments in her head, justifying her anger. This wasn’t just a few squash plants, this was the happiness of her husband, this was the sanctity of her home, this was her job security teetering on the edge of an abyss.

When she saw Ryan in her class line at morning assembly, her heart reared like a startled horse. She made herself look away from him, out across the concrete playground at the six hundred other children sitting in rows by homeroom, their clamor bubbling into the April sky. The sun slanted over the tin roof of the East Wing, where Annie Mae had taught, and washed St. Patrick’s brick buildings and four-square courts in a golden glare. In this light the school possessed some approximation of beauty, a beauty Samantha could recognize but not feel. Her senses had been hollowed by the realization that her love for her students—and oh, yes, she did love them; once years ago she had told a class that she loved them, and their response was astonished laughter—had depleted a little. Looking out at them, she could do nothing but wonder how many of them were in her

garden yesterday, and how many would hear the story and laugh about her misfortune today. Her eye was continually drawn to the empty space over by the fourth graders where Annie Mae usually stood. She wanted to talk to Priscilla but didn't dare do so in hearing distance of certain other teachers.

She maintained a rigid control over herself all through homeroom, keeping her voice and facial expression impassive when she called his name during roll, avoiding eye contact. When the first period bell rang and the students siphoned out of her room, she felt, if not quite relieved, then at least less anxious. Then she noticed some unidentifiable clump left on Ryan's desk. Upon approaching closer, she saw that the clump was a bedraggled yellow squash blossom.

Her hands were shaking. She held the right one out in front of her and examined it. She could remember her hands shaking like this on only one other occasion in her life, and that was when her daughter was attacked during her senior year of college.

Samantha taught four literature classes: two sections of seventh grade and two sections of eighth grade. (In the old days it would have been three sections of seventh and one honors section of eighth, but grade sizes were smaller now.) The rest of her day she spent in the library. This was fortunate because she was distracted and somewhat snappish with students today, and the repetitive action of checking and shelving books gradually assuaged her frazzled nerves. By the time sixth period rolled around, she felt ready to face him again.

She braced herself for a visceral reaction when he walked into the room, and here he came, and, yes, there the reaction was, her heart like someone leaping out of a chair

and pointing in alarm. Silently she counted to ten. She read the blurb on the back of *The Call of the Wild*. The hysteria petered out. She could handle this.

Roll taken, Samantha flipped to Chapter Seven. “So what happens with Buck and the bull moose?” she asked.

The air conditioner hummed. From behind the wall off to Samantha’s left, Priscilla held forth to her own students. The words were indistinguishable, but the voice was undeniably Priscilla’s.

“Anyone?” said Samantha. Bueller? she thought.

Slightly more than half of the students stared at their desks whenever she looked their way, which was only slightly more than normal. She started counting to twenty in her head, figuring that by the time she hit seventeen someone would grow uncomfortable with the silence and produce the right answer: Buck attacks the moose. The moose is old, and the herd can only protect him for so long. At some point he becomes a liability and they abandon him to Buck’s merciless tenacity.

She hit seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, and then a hand started to crawl slowly upwards. Thank God, Samantha thought. Save me.

Someone hissed, “No!” The hand paused, then went into reverse and disappeared beneath the desktop.

Samantha’s eyes swept across the classroom. She registered which children were swallowing grins or chuckling behind their hands, which were looking as lost and helpless as she felt.

“Page sixty-five,” Samantha said. “What happens to the moose?”

The children shuffled through their paperbacks until they found the appropriate page, and then, staring at the black print, they sat as still and silent as before. One of Ryan's gang turned to share his delight with a friend.

"Eyes up front, Marcus," Samantha said.

In the next room Priscilla went on and on. Two small windows punctured the back wall of Samantha's classroom, each of them sheathed in a dark blue curtain. Five years ago, and for the twenty-three years this had been her classroom before that, the back wall had been windows from about knee-height all the way up to the ceiling. But then the windows were sealed off, something to do with insulation, and the two pinpricks of sunlight left over were curtained for security purposes. This was about the same time they installed gates around the entire campus. Why did they keep children in windowless rooms for seven hours every day, ten months out of the year? Come to think of it, why did they keep her, and Priscilla, and all of the other teachers cooped up in this cellblock semester after semester after semester?

She took in a breath. She was gearing up to tell the children, fine, if that's the way you want it, we can spend the rest of the year answering response questions on paper, which will be no fun at all. We can discuss the material together as a class, or we can do boatloads of written work. It's up to you. She was gearing herself up to say this when Ryan Hymel leaned back in his chair and propped his feet up on the back of the desk in front of him, making the girl who was sitting there jerk forward. The offense was stupid and comparatively small, and yet, mysteriously, the sight of those black lace-up uniform shoes pressing against that girl's back made Samantha lose her last shred of patience.

"Out," said Samantha.

The students glanced around, not sure what she meant. Ryan returned her stare, unblinking.

“Out,” she said again, louder this time. Suddenly she was across the classroom, she was pulling Ryan out of his chair by the elbow, and he looked, for the first time since she had known him, flabbergasted. Words streamed from her mouth so fast not even she could take in what she was saying. She heard something about his parents raising a terrible human being. Somewhere in the rush she told him to take his bag and get out of her classroom. Ryan sputtered some objections but she couldn’t hear them over her own raised voice. She swiped *The Call of the Wild* from his desktop, grabbed his shoulder, and in five clacks of her heels against the classroom’s tiled floor they were at the door. She pulled at the knob, shoved him into the hallway, threw the book at his feet, and slammed the heavy gray door in his shocked face.

Next door, Priscilla’s voice stopped. For a moment or two there was no sound or movement, only the crash of the door against the frame reverberating in Samantha’s ears and, she assumed, everyone else’s. Then Priscilla started up again. Samantha turned and faced twenty-seven horrified children. Someone started to laugh uncomfortably.

“Silence,” Samantha said sharply, and the laughter stopped. She wasn’t annoyed at the child, not at all; she was appalled at herself. She had broken every cardinal rule of teaching policy, chief among them Do Not Touch a Student. She could feel the blood thumping through her veins.

There was nothing else to do. She crossed back to her podium and opened Jack London to Chapter Seven.

“Where were we?” she said.

CHAPTER VII

WHY I LEFT HIM

In the middle of our marriage vows, his father had a heart attack. Right there, in the second pew. Completely unexpected. The old man was dead before the ambulance even arrived at the church.

You can imagine what a pall his father's death cast over our honeymoon. My new husband spent our wedding night just crying. All night long. I stayed up with him, held him, listened to him, cooked food for him and understood when he pushed the plate away and started crying again. We didn't make love once.

In time he began to heal, or so I thought. His good humor returned. We started sleeping together. Normalcy reigned. But then our first anniversary crept closer and closer. And the closer it came, the more wary and aloof my husband was. He was even worse on our second anniversary. By our third he had become intolerable. Acrimonious, suspicious. If I sneezed, he thought I had an ulterior motive for doing so. One day I was so fed up I waited for him to leave the house, then I turned all the faucets to full blast and stood in the middle of the living room and screamed.

When he came in from work and saw me with my suitcase, he was surprised. Maybe even a little discomfited. But not what you would call upset. I think he was glad to be rid of me. Or, at least, relieved. For three years I was an omen of ill winds to him. He was, at heart, a superstitious man.

I was twenty-one and in love with a cellist and I'd never been to an opera before. He was playing for a production of *La Traviata* downtown, and in spite of harboring every kind of prejudice against opera, I decided to go, just for a chance to spot him in the orchestra pit. I thought maybe if I went to the backstage entrance after the show and stood there for long enough I'd see him come out. I know. The move was desperate, transparent. I didn't care. I was in love.

I was up in the cheap seats, so close to the spotlights I could have made shadow puppets with them if I'd wanted to. I thought I could see him tuning up, though from that distance I might have been mistaken. The conductor came out; the music started; the curtain rose. I kept my eyes glued to that tiny brown blob so far below me and the tuxedoed man barely visible behind it. At first.

Then something happened: a voice. I didn't know it at the time, but the voice was singing "E strano!...Ah! fors'e lui." The music felt like it was coming from everywhere, like it was all around me, creeping along my skin, and not just around me but inside me, like Verdi had burrowed his way into my gut. No, that's not what happened. I don't know how to describe what happened.

I mean, here was this woman on the stage, singing out this pure, beautiful longing, sending that longing all the way up to me in the top row, and all the while trying to

convince herself that the desires pulling that other-worldly song out of her mouth weren't real.

My hair just stood on end. I was rapt, in every sense of the word. I walked out of the theater without even thinking about the reason why I went there, too busy playing and replaying that song in my head.

Later on I met up with him—the cellist—and before I knew what I was doing, I started gushing about the opera, saying how gorgeous the melodies were and how exhilarating his job must be, to take part in creating something so beautiful. He got this look on his face, like he was bored but too polite to say so.

I got over the cellist. I never got over *Traviata*.

He was a low-carb, sugar-conscious vegan with celiac disease. I rest my case.

I don't even know how many times I broke up with Nathan in high school. Dozens. I take that back. The first few dozen times I never actually succeeded in breaking up with him. I would say, "Nathan, it's over," and he would say, "No it's not." Just like that. "No it's not." And then, what do you know, he was right. Ten minutes later we were holding hands, we were walking down Magazine Street arm-in-arm, he was buying me a stick of Roman candy.

Given his unwillingness to let me end the relationship, I always figured Nathan was pretty attached to me. So you can imagine my surprise when I walked in on him sucking face with Candace Brady. I fled the scene, but he followed me, calling my name and asking me to wait. So I stopped and let him speak.

“We can work it out,” he said. “This is okay. This is meaningless. This is a blip on the radar. This is a minor incident. This is forgivable.”

I looked him straight in the eyes and said, “No it’s not.”

Contrary to what he must have thought, I’m not a fucking idiot. I knew he was cheating on me. I just needed proof—something I could bring to the lawyers to establish marital fault.

One day I was surfing around on Facebook. If it wasn’t for him, I would never even have had a Facebook account. I’m what they call a technological laggard, always have been. I still don’t own an iPod. And Twitter, hell, I don’t know what that shit’s about. Like we need more outlets for our collective self-obsession. But in college Facebook was pretty much his sole means of communication, so I registered and set up a profile. Anyway, I was screwing around one day on Facebook, and I noticed that one of our mutual friends had posted some photos of a party. I clicked on the album, flipped through the pictures. And in the background of this one shot, there he was: one hand holding a daiquiri, the other hand curled around the waist of some girl I never saw before. I clicked to the next picture: still in the background, now he held the same girl in his lap. And the next picture: their faces smashed together, mouths opened so wide they looked like their jaws were unhinged.

Then and there I saved the pictures to my desktop and my flash drive, and I printed out some hard copies, too. Then I sent him a message—still via Facebook—by this time we hadn’t lived together for like a month—and told him I could prove infidelity

and we should meet with the lawyers. He sent me a message back: “I admit nothing. What do you have?”

Every year on the anniversary of our divorce I cash my alimony check, buy a bottle of champagne, pour myself a glass, and make a toast: Here’s to social networking, solipsism, and the end of privacy. I deleted my Facebook account, though. Big fucking Brother, that’s what we’re coming to.

I had some kind of reaction to my birth control pills. I felt sick all the time. Had these terrible migraines. People told me that it was normal, that these were just temporary side effects that would go away if I waited long enough, but they didn’t go away. So I told my boyfriend what was happening, how bad I felt and how worried I was.

“That’s okay,” he said. “Just keep taking them.”

Kirk had a five-year-old son. Every time Kirk and I tried to get intimate, the son would burst into the room, yelling, “No, no, no!” And then Kirk would roll off of me and let the five-year-old climb into bed between us.

Needless to say, I was fed up with that little routine in no time at all. So one day I said to Kirk, when he comes into the room like that, we should just keep going. I mean, that’s Parenting 101, you know? Learning to ignore tantrums. Once we show him that he can’t get everything he wants by pitching a fit, he’ll stop pitching fits all the time.

Kirk just looked at me like I sprouted tentacles out of my face or something. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” he said. He said it five or six more times. “What the

fuck is wrong with you? What the fuck is wrong with you?” Right about then I figured it was time to move on. And I made a new rule: from then on, no guys with kids.

I found out he didn't subscribe to *The New Yorker*.

He became interested in stamp collecting. Very interested.

I kept forgetting his birthday. Got tired of feeling guilty about it.

The hardest part of being Jeff's girlfriend was pretending to like his poetry. In our junior year of college, not long after we started going out, he sent me a link to his website, where he posted all of his poems. I remember there was this one called “Lady of the Night,” about being confronted by a prostitute or something. “As I turned to walk away/ she screamed I wouldn't have to pay.”

He sent me love poems. Lots. And lots. Of love poems. I felt like kind of a bitch, criticizing the poems he wrote for me. But I mean, I'm an English major. What was I supposed to say?

Then one day out of the blue Jeff sends me a new poem—good, I mean exceptionally good. All these startling images and dead-on perfect similes. I told him he should submit the poem to the university's literary magazine. He was surprisingly resistant. He hemmed and hawed and made excuses. But I insisted. I dragged him to the mailroom and made him slip his poem through the magazine's entry slot. Jeff's awful

poetry was a running joke in our circle of friends, and I wanted everyone to know that my boyfriend did have a literate bone in his body after all.

Of course, two months later Jeff was suspended for violating academic integrity. Turns out that lifting a poem wholesale from a James Merrill anthology and passing the work off as your own constitutes a level two plagiarism offense. Needless to say things were pretty complicated for both of us then, and after he went home, we little-by-little stopped calling each other. Just as well. If I had to read one more poem that rhymed “love” with “heaven above” I was going to shoot one or both of us in the face.

I wanted to wear skirts again. The stores put out their spring clothing collections, and the racks were filled with skirts. Floral prints. Solids in Easter egg colors. Flounces and ruffles and pleats.

I hadn't worn a skirt in over a year. He didn't like skirts, so I stopped wearing them. All at once, as I stood in that department store and grazed skirt fabric with my fingertips, spring weather blaring at me through the windows, going through life in jeans made no sense to me. So I dumped him for white tiered eyelet and never looked back.

Every now and then I tell my husband, “You just remember, I could have been Mrs. Roger Becnel.” And I could have, too. But the truth is I didn't want to be Mrs. Roger Becnel. Never did. Sometimes I think to myself, surely, at some point in those six or seven months...but no. He was too old for me. He was always too old for me.

I didn't know how old he was when I agreed to meet him for lunch the first time. This was back in '72, back when I was in college. He called the house to talk to my sister

Claire—Claire was a secretary at the firm where he worked. Claire wasn't home, I kept telling him she wasn't home, but he wouldn't let me off the phone, and finally he talked me into meeting him at Galatoire's for Friday Lunch. When Claire came in, I told her what happened. "Oh, Mary, you didn't," she said.

I knew what she meant when I walked into Galatoire's and saw him. Holy smokes. He was more than twice my age. He was too old for Claire, and Claire was ten years older than I was. I thought, this will be our first and last meeting.

But even though Roger Becnel didn't do a thing for me, Galatoire's sure as hell did. Roger—my first instinct was to call him Mr. Becnel, but he told me to call him Roger—right away Roger ordered us both Sazeracs and a plate of soufflé potatoes and fried eggplant. The waiter's name was Albert. He was Roger's regular waiter. Albert recommended the pompano menuière amandine and the crabmeat yvonne. But before that Roger insisted on the Grand Gouté—shrimp remoulade, crabmeat maison, crawfish maison. When I admitted to him that I'd never been to Galatoire's before, he added a side of oysters en croquette. Have you ever had oysters en croquette? Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. And then when the pompano came, good Lord, and then banana bread pudding for dessert, I didn't think I could like anyone's bread pudding better than my Mama's, sweet Jesus, God.

We were there for three and a half hours. Three and a half hours for lunch. In that time I learned a few things about him. He was a lifelong bachelor. His mother, with whom he had lived all his life, had just died. And he was a member of Rex, so you knew he was loaded.

When I got home Claire was waiting at the kitchen table. “You’re not going to see him again, are you?” Claire said.

“Have you ever dipped fried eggplant into powdered sugar?” I said. “Incredible. Who knew?”

The next week Roger and I went to dinner at Antoine’s. Then we had brunch at Tujague’s. Best. Brisket. Ever. And another dinner at Arnaud’s. And of course we were a Friday afternoon fixture at Galatoire’s. I started borrowing my girlfriends’ dresses and jewelry because I was embarrassed to be seen in the same Sunday clothes from week to week.

I think I kidded myself into believing that Roger’s interest in me was more or less avuncular. Deep down I knew better, of course. The turning point came one day as we were walking down Chartres Street, and I saw some old geezer with a young woman perusing the bracelets at New Orleans Silversmith’s. For a moment I wondered cynically whether or not she was his daughter. And then a thought came to my mind, unbidden, like somebody else was talking to me, Well what do you think you look like? How are you any different? Why don’t you just hang a sign around your neck that says “Pompano Prostitute”? And I saw with perfect clarity that I was approaching critical mass, that if I kept accepting invitations from Roger I would at some point be called upon to pay him back, most likely in the form of taking his name and sharing his bed and doing the things his mother had spent the last forty years doing for him.

So Roger and I called it quits. Which was probably lucky, because all of my clothes were getting snug and I didn’t have enough money to buy a whole new wardrobe. I never will forget that pompano, though. Damn.

CHAPTER VIII

SUGAR MONEY

Jackie hadn't even wanted to take this job. School let out the preceding Friday, and she hated, on principle, the idea of getting up early on the first Monday morning of summer vacation to babysit. Her mother had nagged her into saying yes. "Go earn some money," her mother said. Jackie shrugged in response. In general, she didn't use that much money. She would rather have the time to herself than the money. "What else are you going to do— piddle around the house all day?" her mother said. Jackie replied that she would do her best to piddle in the toilet. At that point her mother abruptly dropped the coaxing tone she'd been using and began to speak sharply. "Jacqueline Miller, I am not going to deal with you spending all day loafing about making smart aleck comments and complaining to me that you're bored, you've got a good opportunity to put a little money aside and you're going to take it, Mrs. Lankin is a friend of mine and she needs you to do this for her," etc. So Jackie called Mrs. Lankin and told her she'd be happy to babysit on Monday.

Still, she was pretty irritated with the whole situation—irritated enough that when Dale Hennessey showed up on the Lankin’s doorstep, spinning their hanging basket of petunias back and forth with his fingers like a DJ spinning a turntable, Jackie only halfheartedly told him to go away.

“Go away, Dale,” she said.

“Hey, dorkface,” said Dale, ignoring her, as usual. His hair was combed into spikes and hardened by gel. He ran his fingers over their peaks.

Jackie folded her arms and leaned against the door frame. She’d seen Rachel McAdams stand like that in a movie. “You’re not supposed to be here,” she said. “The Lankins wouldn’t like it.”

“Would you like it?” said Dale.

Jackie brushed her bangs out of her eyes. “I wouldn’t care either way,” she said.

In Dale’s book this was practically an invitation, and Jackie knew so. He gave her his up-to-no-good grin and sidled past her into the house.

Actually, if Jackie was going to have a boy over while babysitting, Dale was a good one to have. Kids loved him. Five minutes after he crossed the threshold, Dale was already deep into a game of “hot or cold” with the three Lankin children.

“Cold,” said Dale to the middle girl, who had her head stuffed in the dryer. All five of them were gathered in the garage-turned-playroom. Jackie took a seat on the sofa beneath the window and tried not to look too interested. The oldest Lankin brother riffled with noisy abandon through a plastic bin of Legos. “Even colder,” Dale said.

Meanwhile the littlest Lankin tottered toward the garbage can where the Lankins kept their dog food.

“Warm,” said Dale. “Hot. Red hot. Blazing hot! Nielson, you’re on fire!”

Nielson lifted the lid of the garbage can and discovered an inflatable plastic treasure chest perched on top of the Purina. Dale cheered, “Yes! Nielson, that was awesome!” and gave the boy an elaborate high-five. The other two Lankins retreated into the kitchen, and Dale and Nielson brainstormed new hiding places together. Jackie crossed her right leg over her left.

“The desk?” Nielson ventured, pointing to a big hulking brown thing on the other side of the room.

This, Jackie knew with a jolt, was her cue to intervene. “I don’t think your mom would like it if we went digging in her desk,” she said.

Dale had already opened the bottom left drawer. “We’re not digging in it,” he said. He tossed a box of stationery, a stack of manila folders, and a pair of scissors onto the floor. “We’re just gonna use it for one game.”

Jackie was quite suddenly not in the mood. She rose and crossed the room. “I’m serious, Dale,” she said. “You’re going to get me in trouble.”

“No I’m not.” Now the drawer was empty except for a big cardboard box with a black lid, wrapped in two thick rubber bands. Dale hefted the box out of the drawer. “God, what’s in here, bricks?” he said. Over Jackie’s objections, Dale peeled off the rubber bands and knocked away the box’s lid.

The box was full to the very tip of its brim with wads of money. Fifty-dollar bills, sorted and wrapped in thin slips of paper.

At first Jackie assumed that she was looking at yet another toy. Surely the money in the box had come with a board game. Surely if she looked at the bills more closely

she'd notice that the ink was off-color, that the paper was too thick or too thin, that the faces on the bills were cross-eyed with their tongues sticking out. But no. Ulysses Grant frowned up at her looking somewhat skeptical but not at all silly. In contrast to the monochromes of Monopoly money, on these bills soft shades of purple, blue, green, yellow, and red gradated from one edge of the paper to the other. These bills were genuine. Jackie's mind reeled, trying to grasp how many bills there were in the box. She thought there must be thousands, and she thought of all those guess-how-many-jelly-beans-in-the-jar contests she had lost for underestimating.

“We found the sugar money,” Nielson said.

Jackie had almost forgotten Nielson was there. “The what money?” she asked.

Nielson opened his mouth, but then his eyes shifted to the side, as if he'd thought better of saying what he was going to say. “It's a secret,” he whispered.

“That's okay,” Jackie whispered back. “We won't tell.” She bent down to Nielson's eye-level and asked, “Have you seen this money before?”

Nielson nodded. “Mommy and Daddy were in their room and they had all these bags of sugar on the bed,” Nielson explained. “And they had money. And I came in and asked why they had bags of sugar in their room, because they always tell me don't eat on the carpet. And they said it was a secret and don't tell anybody.”

Jackie sincerely hoped her suspicions were incorrect, but she didn't see how they could be. She looked up at Dale. Holy crap, Dale mouthed at her over Nielson's head.

Jackie turned back to Nielson and asked, “Did you taste the sugar?”

Nielson shook his head. “Daddy said it was bad old sugar and I should only eat the sugar in the kitchen,” he reported. “Please don't say I told you.”

“We won’t,” Jackie said. “Why don’t you go get T.J. and Annabelle and we’ll all play Candy Land in the living room?”

Nielson scampered off.

“Holy crap,” Dale said.

Jackie retrieved the box lid and rubber bands and tossed them into Dale’s arms. “I’ll distract the kids,” she said, “you put this back.” She fled from the room, gathered the children together, and flung herself into their play with forced gusto.

By the time the Lankins got home, Dale and Jackie and the kids had played four games of Candy Land and six rounds of charades. Jackie heard with a strange mixture of relief and anxiety the squeal and click of the Lankins’ key turning in the front door—relief because she would be leaving soon, anxiety because the interval between now and then would be excruciatingly awkward for her.

Mrs. Lankin was a short woman with shoulder-length black hair in large loose curls. She had very large, very bright teeth that protruded a bit when she smiled, which was often. Mr. Lankin was tall, square-jawed and clean-shaven, with plastic-rimmed glasses and thin hair—good-looking in a middle-aged sort of way. Jackie introduced Dale to them and explained why he was there. Mrs. Lankin handed Jackie her money—ten dollars an hour. The Lankins had always paid well. Of course, Jackie now knew, they could obviously afford to. The Lankin children had taken a liking to Dale, and Annabelle and T.J. each latched onto one of his legs to prevent him from going. Once the children had been pried from Dale’s limbs, he and Jackie left.

They waited until they were both safely inside Jackie's old Mazda and out of the Lankins' driveway before either of them spoke. Finally Dale said, "Dude. You babysit for drug lords."

"Don't exaggerate," said Jackie, flicking on her car's turn signal. "This is serious enough already. Kids are involved." She checked the speedometer—too fast. She pumped at the brakes lightly. "Look. I'm going to tell my dad about the situation, but I think it's best if we don't say anything about this to anyone else just now. Okay?"

"Actually...I'd really appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone."

"Why? What are you talking about?"

Dale peeled open one of the pockets on his cargo pants, Velcro crackling, and withdrew one—two—four wads of money.

"Are you insane!" Jackie yelled after pulling back onto the road. The rage she now felt was a cross between the way she felt when she caught her baby cousin playing with rat poison and the way she felt last summer when her friends made her stand lookout while they stole a street sign, only times a thousand, times a million, and minus any thrill that engaging in minor misbehavior might give her. Dale was an idiot, and if anyone asked, no connections existed between him and her. She was not friends with this boy, she did not know this boy, and she had never entertained for an instant the idea of making out with this boy. Oh God, had he really brought drug money into her car? Into *her* car?

Dale tried to assure her that they had no responsibility to tell anyone about the "sugar" money, but Jackie would have none of it.

"It's not like they were growing weed or something, this is cocaine, this is a hard drug—"

“Could be heroin,” Dale said, not sounding particularly concerned. By this time he had opened another pocket and withdrawn five or six more wads of money. “Or anthrax, if you want to get technical.”

“Whatever!” Jackie said. “My point is those kids could find it accidentally, like Nielson did—”

“I doubt it,” Dale interrupted. “The Lankins are good parents. I guarantee you, they’ve stashed their stuff out of reach. You realize I am splitting this with you, right?” he said, flipping the stack of bills through his fingers like one of those animation flip books everyone collected in the fifth grade.

“Oh, no,” said Jackie, bringing the car to an awkward halt in front of Dale’s house. “Keep your stolen drug money. Or better yet, give it back.” Jackie had failed to realize until now that she’d been babysitting the wrong people.

Dale stuffed the cash back into his pockets and snorted. “Yeah, sure. ‘Sorry I took your crack money, Mr. and Mrs. Lankin, here it is back again.’ I ain’t that stupid.”

“You were stupid to take the money in the first place.”

“Maybe,” Dale said, opening the door and sliding out. “But what’s done is did. So it’d be awesome if you didn’t say anything. Please?”

Jackie was more profoundly irritated than she could ever remember being. But she knew she couldn’t say anything that would get Dale into so much trouble. “Fine,” she said, “but I’m not taking any of that cash.”

“Suit yourself,” Dale said, and shut the door.

The following week, at her parents' insistence, Jackie took a job at the Sonic off the highway, carrying food to customers' cars on roller skates. Sometimes her friends showed up to make fun of her uniform and purchase slushies. Sometimes her parents' friends would show up and tip her extravagantly. So she wasn't too surprised one evening when one of the other employees told her a customer had requested for her specifically to bring the food out. She just didn't imagine that the customer in question would be Mrs. Lankin.

Jackie hadn't seen Mrs. Lankin since that Monday two weeks ago, and now here she was, smiling with her big bleached teeth from behind the steering wheel of her Buick. Mrs. Lankin waved, and in light of her apparent friendliness, and in this setting—a warm summer gloaming, surrounded by luminescent menu boards, pop music descending softly from some unseen speaker in the ceiling and daddy long legs brushing themselves gently against the light bulbs—Jackie's apprehensions felt silly. She skated to Mrs. Lankin's car and said hello Mrs. Lankin with a bright, professional smile.

Jackie held the bag out for Mrs. Lankin to take. Mrs. Lankin took the bag and set it aside in the passenger's seat, then grabbed hold of Jackie's wrist and pulled Jackie deeper into the car's interior, so that their faces were mere inches apart. Jackie's roller skates slipped and she banged her knee against the side of the car.

“We know what you did,” Mrs. Lankin said.

Jackie willed herself to believe that Mrs. Lankin was referring to anything but what Jackie thought she was referring to. “Excuse me?”

“We want it back,” Mrs. Lankin said. “All of it.”

Mrs. Lankin had long fingernails. Jackie felt them pressing into her skin. “I don’t know what you mean—” she started.

“Cut the bullshit,” said Mrs. Lankin, softly and calmly. “You took it. You’re the only one who could have taken it. You and your little overly coiffed friend.”

Jackie’s left foot was splayed painfully to the side at an unnatural angle. She struggled to get back on her feet, but the roller skate wheels kept slipping from underneath her. “I didn’t take anything, Mrs. Lankin, I swear to God I didn’t...”

“You think you have something on us? You think we’re afraid of you, little girl?” Mrs. Lankin said. “We could crush you like a bug.”

Jackie tried to twist her hand out of Mrs. Lankin’s grip, but Mrs. Lankin just dug her nails in harder and yanked Jackie’s torso more fully into the car. The only thing keeping Jackie from panicking altogether was the shock. She thought about calling for help, but somehow the idea seemed absurd and useless.

“I want my money back,” said Mrs. Lankin. “Whatever you spent, I want it back.”

“I can get it to you,” said Jackie, “but it might take me a little time.”

“Come to my house Friday at three o’clock sharp. No excuses.” With that Mrs. Lankin let go of Jackie’s wrist, and Jackie went sprawling onto the sidewalk. She felt the concrete and pebbles pound and scratch into her exposed flesh. Her wrist was moist and sore. The skin on her legs was stippled red and white and burning, and after a moment little specks of blood rose to the surface. A long, ash-white strip of flesh hung tenuously from the palm of one hand.

“You should wear knee and elbow pads,” Mrs. Lankin called out the window before driving away.

For a long while Jackie just sat on the sidewalk where she had fallen. Too many parts of her body throbbed and stung for her to be aware of them all. She felt like one big throb and sting. The shock had not worn off, but she was cognizant enough to realize that after three o'clock on Friday something awful was going to befall her. After several minutes she pulled off her roller skates and limped in her sock feet back to the hamburger stand. The manager started to yell at her, demanding to know where she'd been all this time, until he saw her bleeding legs. She told him she had tripped and fallen, and he begrudgingly told her to go home.

She had to hold the steering wheel at an awkward angle to avoid irritating the peeling part of her palm. When she got home she went straight to her room, rebuffing her parents' inquiries. She emptied half a tube of Neosporin onto all the parts of her that were gaping, then turned out the lamp and lay on top of her bed, eyes open in the dark. Her body still ached, but internally she remained numb. She crawled into dark, quiet coolness like a temporary shelter, blocked out all thoughts, and waited for dawn.

CHAPTER IX

SMOKING LOON

About half an hour ago, Jeannine noticed Mrs. Enclade gliding away on her golf cart, heading down Holly Drive in the direction of St. Patrick's. Just as well. Jeannine suspects that the old lady does not like her. She tries to comfort herself with the idea that Mrs. Enclade would not like anyone who bought the house, a white camelback shotgun with an addition in the oldest subdivision of LeJardin, a house formerly shared by Mrs. Enclade and her son. Maybe the old lady doesn't dislike Jeannine so much as she dislikes the situation, sharing the house with a stranger. After all, before her son sold the place and moved to Chicago, Mrs. Enclade was a homemaker, and now the right of residency clause in the housing contract has turned her into the human equivalent of the free toaster you used to receive when you opened a bank account. Maybe she simply needs time to adjust. But Jeannine senses tension in the brisk nods that are Mrs. Enclade's only form of greeting, in the rigidity of her spine when she rides up and down the street in her golf cart, and above all in her reticence, and Jeannine has a feeling that the source of the tension is personal. The feeling is brutally familiar.

Two quick taps on a car horn summon Jeannine to the front porch. She pads across the floorboards, grateful again that Mrs. Enclade is not here, saving her the awkwardness of making introductions. By the time she crosses the threshold and hooks her arm around the left porch post, her sister-in-law has already emerged from a blue Honda Civic, all angles in a thigh-length summer skirt. A giant Macy's bag in each hand, Linette teeters across Jeannine's lawn in silver stilettos with an overabundance of leatherish straps. At forty-three Linette is two years older than Jeannine, but she looks five years younger and dresses fifteen years younger. Jeannine wonders briefly where her own shoes, a pair of podiatrist-approved New Balances that might be called "sensible" if they weren't rainbow-colored, have disappeared to. The porch feels hot and sticky against her bare feet.

Dishware clatters against dishware as Linette sets her Macy's bags down on the porch steps. She pulls Jeannine in for a hug. Jeannine gets a big whiff of Chanel No. 5. "Have I told you how chère you are to do this for me?" Linette says.

"Once or twice," Jeannine says, and the hug ends. Linette was going to host her daughter's bridal shower tomorrow, but two weeks ago Linette's husband, Jeannine's brother Gabe, found a winged termite on the window sill of their McMansion—they live in the new development across the railroad tracks that bifurcate the town. The Orkin man came by and confirmed that they were looking at a widespread infestation and damage in the tens of thousands of dollars. So Linette called Jeannine and said I'm so sorry to ask but would you. And Jeannine said yes, of course, what were friends for.

Linette takes a step back and gives the facade a cheerful once-over. "I'd forgotten how bright it was," she says. She means the paintjob. This past February Jeannine painted

the bulk of the house a sharp purple color, with shutters and doorjambs in orange and porch posts the color of lemon peel. She also used a flat cerulean on the gingerbread and scarlet on the window mullions, but that would have been since the last time Linette came over.

In spite of the fact that they live in the same town, Linette has been here only twice in the eight months since Jeannine took up residence. Back in January Linette delivered a tin of house-warming pralines, and once in March, shortly after the second coat of paint went up, the whole family came over, an event without precedent or replication, triggered by an argument between Jeannine and Gabe. Jeannine accused her brother of not visiting their father enough, and the following week Linette called and said why don't they all get together this Sunday? If Jeannine would lend the house, then Linette would bring the food. The five of them—Jeannine, Gabe, their father, Linette, and Linette and Gabe's daughter Clarissa—crowded together in the twelve-by-fifteen living room. They made sandwiches from white mountain rolls and a spiral ham and ate them off of Chinet plates, along with potato salad and break-and-bake chocolate chip cookies. The afternoon was, Jeannine thought, lovely in many ways, even if there was a certain artificiality about it, a palpable sense that for her brother's family the visit was at least as much a duty to be accomplished as a pleasure to be taken. Even so. Jeannine hopes they'll gather again some time.

Linette's eyes trail gradually from blue gingerbread to yellow porch post to orange door jamb to purple house. "Gosh, it's bright," she says. From some unseen location down the street, a motorcycle explodes into life. Jeannine's spine jerks upward. She has heard this motorcycle nearly every day for the past eight months, but she never

fails to jump at the sound, never fails to feel startled by the suddenness of the noise or by the aggression in the engine's hum.

One morning when Jeannine was eight and Gabe seven, their father made them pancakes from a boxed mix and said their mother was going to be gone for a while.

Jeannine remembers the moment, or thinks she does, with hyper-real exactitude: her father's face like an open wound above the kitchen table, the network of dingy rosebushes sprawling across the wallpaper behind him, the golden-brown pool of excess Aunt Jemima's forming a perfect disk on her blue-rimmed plate. That was the morning Jeannine lost her taste for maple syrup.

"How long will she be gone?" someone asked. In her memory Jeannine feels the words formed by her own mouth, but she hears them spoken in Gabe's childish voice.

Their father said he didn't know how long. "Where is she going?" Again, the speaker is unknown. Jeannine feels certain that she asked this question, but Gabe, the two of them discovered over a shared bottle of Abita Amber one late night on a porch step a decade and a half later, feels just as certain that he asked.

"Your mom just needs some time to figure things out," their father said. Before she left, their mother put a note next to the coffee pot, but their father did not tell Jeannine or Gabe about this note until years later, long after he had poked the note through the slats of their charcoal grill and cooked burgers. When college-aged Jeannine asked what the note had said, he pressed his jaws together, gripped his coffee mug tight like the safety bar of a roller coaster, and refused to tell her, and she did not press him. Nevertheless, she remained convinced that her father remembered the note down to the

last word, down to the last ink blot, and his reluctance to speak about the note's contents confirmed her fear that whatever the note had said was hurtful in the extreme, that her father's memory of the note, even more than her mother's absence, was what leached him of his former energy and made him never quite so happy as he used to be. The note took on the aura of a tribal fetish, a secret she did and did not want to know.

Only now in adulthood did Jeannine realize how much strength that morning must have taken from her father, how terribly brave he was and how inept he must have felt. At the time all she knew was his assertion—that their mother needed time to figure things out—made no sense. How much time? Figure what things out? If their mother needed to figure things out, why couldn't she figure them out right here?

The words were no more comprehensible to Gabe than they were to her, but Gabe latched onto them desperately, seeming to think that the words were a kind of rope and if he just grabbed hold of them with all his strength, someone would pull him up out of the chaos and give him whatever magic he needed to make sense of the situation—or better yet, his mother would come back and there would be no situation of which he would have to make sense. Gabe repeated the words to everyone he saw for the rest of the day. His second grade teacher, the school librarian, Sr. Rosalie, the man who delivered plastic pouches of milk to the cafeteria: all of them received the news that his mother was taking time to figure things out.

For the first week Jeannine was afraid to leave the house. If she left her mother might come back and, finding the family gone, leave again. So Jeannine stayed home and kept a constant lookout. Every Saturday morning she climbed onto the pink seat of her bicycle and circled the area in front of their lawn. She didn't dare go far, not even as far

as the cul-de-sac some ten houses down the road, but instead stuck to the twenty feet or so between the basketball hoop on the left and the fire hydrant on the right. She started checking the mail as soon as she arrived home every afternoon, a practice she continued out of habit through middle school and high school and all the years of young adulthood she spent at home, long after she resigned herself to the fact that there would be no letter, no postcard, nothing.

After about a month she stopped asking when Mama was coming home. She reasoned that every good or important thing that had ever happened to her happened when she was not paying attention, and so she tried, deliberately, to stop paying attention. Of course, the task was impossible. The act of trying to forget a thing necessarily involved remembering that very thing. In any case, she realized, the reasoning behind her strategy was flawed: she had not been paying attention when her mother left. Still, she was able to consign her mother's memory to the far corners of her mind, where it remained ineluctable but silent, well-behaved. She couldn't exorcise the ghost, but she could stop it from moaning and breaking the window panes.

Gabe had always been smarter than she was, and, in spite of his initial attachment to the words of their father's explanation, he gave up hope more quickly than she did. He became testy, difficult to play with on those increasingly rare occasions when Jeannine could entice him to play. He started mouthing off to the teacher and picking fights with his classmates. Eventually Sr. Rosalie sent him home with a suspension and a copy of the Serenity prayer. "He has a rigid sense of justice," Sister told their father over the phone. When Jeannine heard the phrase, she wanted to puke. She was brittle with umbrage over Gabe's recent behavior, and she hated to hear that behavior described in a manner just

two shades shy of praise. Gabe's so-called sense of justice had nothing to do with anything. If Gabe was really so concerned with justice, he wouldn't, just when she was sick with grief from the loss of her mother, make her feel she'd lost her brother, too.

After stashing the cut-glass platters in one of Jeannine's empty cabinets, Linette notices the newspaper lying open to the classifieds on the kitchen table and asks about the job search. Jeannine says something vague and optimistic about the number of applications she's filled out, but the truth is the job search isn't going as well as she would like. In fact, the job search is not "going" at all, has been at a complete standstill since the interview she bombed in June.

She arrived at the interview sweating in one of the second-hand Lane Bryant pencil skirts a post-diet Linette gave her. Of its own accord her left leg bounced up and down like a jackhammer as she sat in the reception area and practiced answers in her head, running through spiels about her experience at the bank that had just laid her off and her reputable community college degrees in math and finance. She was interviewing for an accounting job in the administrative office of the local hospital, and Jeannine's nerves were in part due to her conviction that the job was perfect—*perfect*— for her. After the handshaking was over, the interviewers settled into their swivel chairs and asked the first question. She stuttered and babbled. She felt her sweat get sweatier. After two drinks of water her voice still sounded like a bad Tom Waits impression. The questions became easier as the interview progressed, but that made no difference. Her confidence was shaken to a point beyond recovery, and Jeannine could do nothing but sit in that conference room and listen to herself vomit up nonsensical answers to every single

softball question. She wishes that getting a job did not require an interview. She does not know how to make people like her in less than an hour.

The women return to the living room through the row of aligned doors. Jeannine watches her sister-in-law's face contract with concentration as she stands in the center of the room and slowly revolves, taking in the décor. Vertical blinds dangle off-kilter in front of the sash window. Catty-corner from the window, a beige sofa Jeannine picked up at a garage sale, one of the few articles of furniture in the house that aren't Mrs. Enclade's, sits flush with the wall. Between sofa and window there's a defunct fireplace. Linette's eyes and sensibilities have been sharpened by a two-year subscription to *House Beautiful*, and Jeannine finds herself unexpectedly feeling like she's on trial. "Shall we finish cleaning up?" Linette says.

Jeannine's mood abruptly drops an increment, like someone popped one or two of the balloons keeping it afloat. She tells Linette she thought she had finished cleaning up.

"What about those?" says Linette, and she nods toward the wine bottles crowded on the mantelpiece.

Jeannine haltingly explains that those bottles aren't trash. They're decoration. She likes the labels. One night she finished off some chardonnay and couldn't bring herself to throw out the bottle. She'd bought the chardonnay precisely because she liked the label, a print she didn't know the name of that depicted impressionist water lilies. So she just left the bottle on the table. Once she used the bottle as a vase for sunflowers. Ever since then, she chooses which wine to buy based on the labels, with varying results in terms of taste. Right now the bottles on the mantelpiece have an animal theme. There are bottles of Black Swan, Smoking Loon, Monkey Bay, and Little Penguin. Just last week she added

the kangaroo frozen in mid-jump on her Yellowtail shiraz and the hippopotamus planting his haunches on the white square of Fat Bastard. She thinks of it as her own version of the Glass Menagerie, but she doesn't say this to Linette. In fact she doesn't say anything to Linette, because Linette has that full, closed look on her face, that look of potential energy she gets when she can't think of how to say something nicely. An acute embarrassment seizes hold of Jeannine. All at once she realizes how tacky keeping empties on the shelf is. She must look like she had her living room furnished by a homeless person. But even more than she feels embarrassed, Jeannine feels angry, because she hates nothing more than she hates unsolicited advice, all the more so when the advice is correct.

Linette used to be fat. Twenty-odd years ago, just a few months before she graduated from college, Jeannine went to a gathering of women friends at Linette's apartment, dinner and drinks and a card game. At one point Linette looked as if she were about to meld, but instead she pulled in her cards, tapped them against the tabletop, and said, "I have wasted my youth." This wasted youth included graduating valedictorian of her high school class and summa cum laude from college. The day after the card game Linette joined Weight Watchers and bought copies of *Southern Living* and *Real Simple Magazine* at the grocery store. In the months that followed she appeared more and more infrequently in her old costume of jeans and long-sleeved T-shirts and instead favored skirts and blouses. Her shoes became trendier, her taste in jewelry more understated. She seemed by turns happier than she used to be and more irritable. Phrases like "vintage eclectic" crept into her vocabulary. When she and Gabe started dating that spring, Linette attributed the development to her changing appearance. Personally Jeannine thought that

Gabe had spent the past five or six years carrying a secret torch for Linette. He must have liked her decisiveness, her punctilious nature. Linette had a blueprint for everything and a leadership personality. You could depend on a person like that. At the same time, right now in the middle of her tiny living room, Jeannine finds those same qualities brusque and judgmental, and she wishes they were tempered a bit with—what? Not compassion: Jeannine doesn't want anyone's pity. Maybe just a willingness to mind her own business.

Mercifully, the whir of a golf cart returning up the drive interrupts the awkward silence. Linette crosses to the window and pulls aside one of the blinds. "Is that...?" she asks.

"Mmhm," says Jeannine.

Together they watch Mrs. Enclade shuffle up the sidewalk toward the back of the house, her cane preceding her every other step. She has one of those canes with the handle sloping up and out like the head and beak of a flamingo. Mrs. Enclade still wears a mantilla to Mass, despite a distance of half a century from Vatican II. Beneath the black lace, and regardless of her advanced age, Mrs. Enclade's hair is still dark and stops just between her shoulder blades. Jeannine doesn't think Mrs. Enclade dyes her hair, because the color variegates, and because the hair, though dark, is rather dull, as if age has depleted the hair's luster but left the color intact.

When Mrs. Enclade's son still lived here, he built her a little house all her own in the extensive backyard. The terms of the contract give Mrs. Enclade free access to the whole property, but Jeannine hardly ever sees the old woman in the main house. She herself went into Mrs. Enclade's little house only once, when she'd first moved in. The place was dark, muffled sunlight from sheathed windows backlighting everything, the

smell of Pine-Sol and potpourri thick in the air. A vase of blue marbles and silk larkspur shared the coffee table with an old green glass ash tray. The sofa, off-white with a cherry-colored floral pattern, had thin curled legs that looked too rickety to support much weight, so Jeannine kept her one-hundred-and-eighty-seven pounds on her feet. In any case, Mrs. Enclade did not ask her to sit. Jeannine looked forward to meeting Mrs. Enclade— she had always liked old people— but she was nervous, as she usually was meeting a new person, and Mrs. Enclade was so unsmiling, replied to her inquiries so shortly, in a voice that was so quiet but so clear and unwavering, that Jeannine could not figure out how to sustain the conversation or if she even wanted to. So after a very short visit she excused herself and hasn't been back in the little house since.

By this time Mrs. Enclade has stepped out of view, down the side of the main house toward her little place out back. The show over, Linette returns to business. “Do you mind if I toss these out?”

“Oh, no,” Jeannine says, though she does. With every thunk and clink of a bottle dropping into the kitchen trash can, the knot in Jeannine's chest pulls a little tighter. She's been keeping a bottle of Elephant Hill pinot noir in the pantry. She thought that bottle would complete the set. Throwing the bottles out now, without the missing piece, deprives her of the chance to see them all together, a sight that might make her feel in some small way satisfied.

Jeannine has exactly one unambiguously happy memory of her mother. She was five years old. Her mother sat in the bench swing on the front lawn, pale legs crossed beneath her, toddler Gabe wedged against her side like a puzzle piece. Her mother had

big black glasses and a pert, pink mouth. Her tawny hair was pulled tight and high behind her. The back of her head pullulated crisp golden ringlets, abundant and haphazard as kudzu vines.

The memory begins with her mother starting to sing “She’ll Be Coming ‘Round the Mountain.” For some forgotten five-year-old’s reason, Jeannine was angry at her that afternoon. So every time their mother asserted that the female in question would, in fact, be coming around the mountain when she came, Jeannine said petulantly, “No, she won’t.” The first time she said this, Gabe and their mother both started to laugh. Jeannine was surprised to discover that she, too, found her added lyric funny, increasingly funny as Gabe and Mama laughed harder the second and third time she said the phrase. Her anger evaporated. All of them started laughing together, and Jeannine crawled up onto the bench swing and buried her head in the soft folds of her mother’s belly, and this was her favorite part of the memory, the memory of her mother’s faded orange T-shirt soft against her cheek, and most of all the memory of her mother’s smell, that smell of equal parts chicken gravy and vegetable oil. Jeannine’s angry improvisation became the family joke, and after that afternoon they never sang the song any other way.

So much for happy memories. Every other reminiscence Jeannine has of her mother is fraught with ambiguity. Always there was the sense that something was wrong, and the refrain of her childhood was the query, “Are you mad at me?” The answer was always no, of course not. But even as a child Jeannine could detect the disconnection between her mother’s reassurances and the arm’s length at which she seemed to keep her children. When they kissed her cheek, she shrank back a little. Her mother’s hugs were hugs the way stage whispers were whispers. She would occasionally put her arms around

Jeannine and Gabe, but she wouldn't squeeze, wouldn't press them to her, and if they tried to crush themselves into her hip or the soft places on her chest and abdomen, she would simultaneously pat their shoulders and push them away. That was one reason why Jeannine cherished that memory of the bench swing so much; never again had she come so close to her mother and not been pushed away. She developed an almost maniacal craving for her mother's smell and touch, a craving that stayed with her all of her life. One winter evening when she was sixteen she went to a fried chicken restaurant with a group of school friends. When she walked out of the darkness and wind into the restaurant's heat and orange light, the overpowering smell of oil combined with the sudden warmth shoved the image of her mother into her mind, graphic as a car wreck. She had to lock herself in a bathroom stall and count her breaths up to sixty before she was steady enough to rejoin her friends at the table.

Recently, though, Jeannine has had to confront the possibility that she's foisting unhappiness onto those other memories. Maybe the distaste her memory-mother displays for her is a product of retrospect, a prophecy after the fact. Gabe does not remember their mother pushing them away at all. That, for Gabe, was part of what made their mother's departure so devastating—the fact that nobody saw the abandonment coming, the fact that her disappearance was so utterly unexpected and inexplicable. “Everything was fine,” he said, “until one day it wasn't.”

By ten o'clock that night Jeannine is about two-thirds of the way through the Elephant pinot. The rest of the menagerie is back up on the mantelpiece; she went and rescued the bottles from the garbage can right after dinner, peanut butter and jelly

scooped from the same jar and slathered generously onto Wheat Thins. If Linette doesn't want the menagerie in the house, oh frickin well. Linette can deal.

Jeannine drinks regularly, but she has been drunk only once in her life, back in her junior year of college. A commuter to a school of commuter students and too shy to linger long after class and make friends, Jeannine missed out on the traditional exploratory aspects of college life. Realizing she was about to turn twenty-one, she went one night to a bar three blocks from campus and told the sporty blond bartender that she had never been drunk before and wanted to know what drunkenness felt like, so what did she recommend? The bartender amenably brought her a series of Jägermeisters. Jeannine downed them methodically and without much enjoyment. She'd had cough syrups that tasted better to her. Furthermore, with every drink she became more and more depressed. By the time Linette showed up to drive her home, Jeannine was wondering if you were allowed to write a suicide note even if you had no intention of actually committing suicide. When she sobered up the next morning, she felt even worse; she realized with a surge of shame that she'd spent the evening spewing the most contemptible self-pity at whoever would listen. The sporty bartender, the old bald guys in oversized polo shirts lurking around the pool table, the Dennis Quaid lookalike and his girlfriend with the blond highlights and loud freckles, to all of them she'd turned and said with the melancholy air of one imparting a deep dark existential truth that the world belonged to the mean kids on the playground at school. You went home and your father told you it was all right, that before you knew it you'd grow up and never have to see those kids again, those kids who picked you last for volleyball and called you fatass and told you that even your own mother didn't like you, but what your father forgot, or omitted to

spare you more suffering, was that those kids grew up too, those kids follow you everywhere and they are Legion, and sometimes they live in your own house or they take up all the space in your head so you can never get away. After that Jeannine limited herself to one glass a night.

But tonight she doesn't care how maudlin she gets. She wants to wallow. She refills her glass. How come some lucky bastards drink and feel better instead of worse, she wonders? "Drink until hilarity," her brother used to say as a preface to his post-college binges. He was quoting one of the saints—Aquinas, she thinks. That quote was the extent of her brother's religious practice once he moved out of the house. Jeannine continues to go to church every Sunday and has gone all her life, though she doesn't pray outside of church. More often than not the words of the Mass float by her, uncomprehended, but still she goes. This, she supposes, is what people are talking about when they speak contemptuously of "empty ritual." Jeannine sees their point, but she also thinks that empty ritual is all an empty person has to give. She believes in going through the motions if the motions are all you can do.

She raises the glass to her lips and at once there's a metallic crash right outside the back door. Her wine glass topples. She freezes and lets the wine creep across the table. She thinks of prowlers, rapists, and, even though she does not believe in them, ghosts.

Still scared, but realizing that she can't just stand there forever, she creeps over to the kitchen window and pulls down one of the blinds. In the gray haze of the porch light, she can make out Mrs. Enclade lying on her side in the grass, struggling ineffectually to get up.

For a second Jeannine wonders stupidly what Mrs. Enclade is doing out there on the ground, and then her brain kicks into gear and tells her no, moron, she's in trouble.

"Oh shit," she says out loud. She flies through the back door and down the back steps.

"Do you need help?" Jeannine says. Well duh.

"Just a bit," says Mrs. Enclade, her tone flat and winded. "Get me into a sitting position, will you? I feel like a frazzling turtle."

Jeannine reaches down, feeling a little foolish and awkward. Mrs. Enclade catches hold of her arms, and between the two of them they manage to get Mrs. Enclade sitting up. A little dribble of blood slides down the side of Mrs. Enclade's face.

"Oh, shit, you're bleeding," says Jeannine. Normally she wouldn't curse in front of an old lady, but the situation seems to merit the word and the pinot has loosened her tongue.

"Honey, I'm the one bleeding, so you calm down," says Mrs. Enclade. Jeannine hasn't heard Mrs. Enclade's voice for so long that she's surprised by how deep the voice is. "Are you loaded?" the old woman asks.

Jeannine is about to object when she feels the remnant of the wine, sweet and stale on her tongue. "I have drunk until hilarity," Jeannine says, though of course she does not feel the least bit hilarious.

"Okay," says Mrs. Enclade, seeming to decide that hilarity is sober enough for the moment. "Pull me up." She lifts her arms toward Jeannine. Mrs. Enclade has frightfully skinny arms, and Jeannine fears that if she pulls them too hard they'll snap like stalks of celery. She takes hold of an elbow and gives a halfhearted tug. When she looks at Mrs.

Enclade's face, she is surprised to see her mouth twisted with amusement. "You're gonna have to do better than that," says Mrs. Enclade.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. Now pull."

Jeannine plants her right foot behind her, tightens her grip on Mrs. Enclade's arm, and pulls, lifting from the legs. There's a moment when it seems that Mrs. Enclade is going to slip, and the old woman exhales sharply and clutches Jeannine's sleeve, but soon she's on her feet, leaning heavily on Jeannine, but upright. Together they walk haltingly toward the little house. A frog on the doormat jumps out of their way just ahead of their final footfall.

Luckily the door is already unlocked, so Jeannine is able to wrench the knob to the right with one hand while steadying Mrs. Enclade with the other. When they get inside Mrs. Enclade directs Jeannine to that spindly sofa she remembers from her first and last visit, then tells her there's rubbing alcohol and Band-Aids in the bathroom down the hall, last door on the left.

Jeannine switches on a wall light. At the end of the hallway a small table holds a framed picture of the Sacred Heart and a votive candle encased in red plastic. She's never seen this picture before. This is not the doe-eyed blond effeminate Jesus hanging up in the parish cry room, although he's not what she'd call a macho Jesus either. This Jesus looks more Jewish, with dark hair that's a little unruly rather than the smooth wheat-colored curls she's used to. He has heavy eyebrows. This Jesus, Jeannine senses more acutely than she ever has before, is smarter than she is. He'll listen to what she has to say, but he may or may not believe what she says. There's a pamphlet folded accordion style

next to and exactly perpendicular with the candle. Jeannine lifts up the top fold of the pamphlet so she can see the title: a novena to St. Monica.

Jeannine retrieves the rubbing alcohol and a Ziploc bag of cotton balls from the medicine cabinet (she looks quickly for hair dye and finds none) and walks back down the hallway and through the foyer into the living room where Mrs. Enclade waits, slumped back on the sofa. At Jeannine's approach Mrs. Enclade pulls herself forward, gripping the sofa's arm for support. Jeannine shoves the alcohol and cotton balls at the old lady, who looks bemusedly back up at her. She realizes of course the woman's not going to apply this stuff herself; she can't see the wound. "Do you want me to...?" she asks, and tilts the brown bottle of rubbing alcohol back and forth as a way of finishing the sentence.

"I think that would be best," says Mrs. Enclade.

Jeannine sets her supplies down on the coffee table and pulls up a chair. She has never cleaned anyone else's wound before. She tries to remember how her father bandaged them up when she and Gabe were children, but nothing comes to mind, and in any case he was a Neosporin man. Jeannine unscrews the alcohol, presses a cotton ball against the open mouth of the bottle, and tilts the bottle over, cringing as she spills some liquid on the table. She scooches her chair closer to the sofa and senses Mrs. Enclade bracing herself. Then she nervously presses the cotton ball against the bloody spot on the old woman's cheek. A little spasm twitches across Mrs. Enclade's face, and her fingers curl tight around the sofa's arm, but she doesn't say a word.

Jeannine's fingers shake a little as she peels the Band-Aid and smooths it over the cut. The flesh beneath the center pad of the bandage feels soft and squishy, like an

overripe peach. She leans back. Somehow Mrs. Enclade looks more vulnerable now, with that khaki-colored rectangle plastered across her cheek, than she did when the gash bled uninhibited down her face. At once, and not, she suspects, altogether reasonably, Jeannine feels a certain kinship for this old woman with her bleeding face and her prayers to the patron saint of mothers with disappointing children. She thought the woman didn't like her, but what evidence does she have of that, really?

After returning the first aid items to the medicine cabinet, Jesus looking as gently skeptical as ever, Jeannine asks Mrs. Enclade if there's anything else she needs. The words are out of her mouth before she realizes they sound like an exit line, and she's not altogether sure she wants to exit. For one thing she doesn't want to be rude, and for another there's nothing for her in the house but the dregs of the pinot. Mrs. Enclade asks would it be too much trouble for Jeannine to go get the cane, which is still out lying on the grass where she fell. Of course it wouldn't. The air outside is hot and heavy and still. When she hands the cane over to Mrs. Enclade, the handle leaves a metallic scent on her fingers.

"Thank you, Jeannine," the old woman says.

"You're welcome."

"Take care."

And as much as she wants to stay, the finality in those phrases keeps Jeannine from lingering. She crosses to the foyer and opens the door. For a moment she stands on the threshold, letting the indoor lamplight and relative coolness mingle with the humming of frogs. After she closes the door behind her, she stands and glances around like a person deciding what to do and where to go next. Which is silly, because she knows exactly

where to go next and that's the big house some twelve feet away from her. Where else is there to go?

Early the next morning Linette returns. She goes about the final preparations quickly and efficiently, straightening tablecloths and arranging cut fruit and grape clusters on tiered platters. Jeannine swallows a yawn as she lays out the flatware. Her sleep last night was spotty at best, and now she's trying to cobble together some energy and cheerfulness. She doesn't want to seem unenthusiastic at her niece's bridal shower.

Clarissa and her bridesmaids are the first to arrive. They squish together on the sofa, all five of them coiffed and pleasantly if intimidatingly pretty. Clarissa is the prettiest and the most slovenly, her flaxen hair sticking out from its pins in a way that seems careless and perfect at the same time. The girls' laughter has the cadence and musicality of sleigh bells, and Jeannine feels a spark of affection for these young women she mostly doesn't know. She's wearing her rainbow sneakers. Clarissa has told her she thinks they're a hoot.

The rest of the women arrive in twos and threes. Every few minutes the doorbell rings, making Jeannine's insides snap like a window shade. Neighbors, cousins, Clarissa's old teachers, Linette's new friends: all of them gather in Jeannine's small living room. They sit with legs crossed on flimsy white folding chairs and drink pink wine from plastic tumblers.

At first Jeannine feels anxious. Clarissa is the bride, Linette is the hostess, but Jeannine is the owner of the house, and she worries about this assemblage of women, at least half of whom look and sound like Linette, inspecting her possessions and making

judgments. Now, though, she looks at everyone gathered together and finds she doesn't care what they think. She doesn't feel hostile towards them; she just doesn't care. She piles her clear plastic plate with shrimp mold and crackers, then gets into a conversation with a couple of her second cousins until it's time for the bride to open presents. When Clarissa tears the paper from Jeannine's muffin tray she turns her face, bright and open as a flower, to Jeannine and says, "Aw, thanks, Aunt 'Nine!" Jeannine's childhood nickname. Jeannine flushes with pleasure and knocks back the rest of her white zin.

After Clarissa unwraps the last oven mitt and thanks everyone for coming, Jeannine turns back toward the kitchen to refill her glass. Before she walks through the doorway, though, she hears someone say, "She could show a little respect, be a grown-up. I mean, those shoes."

Jeannine stops. The voice belongs to the mother of one of the bridesmaids. There's a murmured response, and though Jeannine can't distinguish the words, she knows the second voice is Linette's.

"Oh, come on," says the first woman, and then her voice gets too low for Jeannine to tell what she's saying.

"She's just lost her job," Linette whispers.

"Okay, but a muffin tin? My Kelsey did better than that, and she's in so much hock to Sallie Mae she'll probably have to give them her firstborn."

Linette whispers something, and then the woman whispers something, and then Linette whispers again. Jeannine cranes her head around the door just enough to see the woman make a dismissive gesture with her hands and head.

"She's flighty and frigid," says the woman. "Just like her mother."

Outside the doorway Jeannine feels like a roll of firecrackers has gone off in her chest. Linette and the bridesmaid's mother start to leave the room, and Jeannine ducks out of the way. They don't see her. Jeannine continues into the kitchen on legs that waver and prickle. She digs a cube out of the ice bucket with a silver shovel and plunks it into her glass, and then she looks at the trash can and notices that her wine bottles are back.

Her heart shivers in her chest. How had she not noticed the bottles were missing from the mantelpiece earlier? She feels her throat constrict and go raw. When she looks down she sees the lime green laces of her sneakers blaring up at her and shuts her eyes tight. She doesn't mind what the bridesmaid's mother said so much; everyone in LeJardin knows the woman is ridiculous. Linette's half of the conversation is what bothers her. Linette is supposed to be her friend, albeit one she understands less and less as the years go by. She would have hoped that whatever defense Linette put up on her behalf would be more than half-hearted.

One after the other she pulls the wine bottles out of the trash. She cradles them in her arms and strides back into the living room. Looking at no one, she makes a beeline for the mantelpiece and starts putting the bottles back, making as much noise as she feels like making.

Suddenly there's Linette at her side. "Jeannine, what are you doing?"

Jeannine turns the Fat Bastard so the hippo faces front. "Leave me alone."

Linette squints at her. "Are you drunk?"

"I have not even begun to get drunk."

"Please, Jeannine," Linette says, and she starts to take the Yellowtail out of Jeannine's hands. Jeannine yanks back and bumps into a guest, and the bottles in her

arms clink together loudly. The room gets quiet. Jeannine looks up. Half of the group is staring at her and Linette, but the other half has their faces turned in the other direction, to where Mrs. Enclade has just entered the room.

Mrs. Enclade wears a white chapel veil and a lacy, ivory-colored dress. From the looks of it she outstrips everyone else in the room by over a decade. She rests both of her hands on the swooped handle of her cane. Her engagement ring is enormous on her shriveled finger. She looks like Miss Havisham.

“Well, hello, Earlene,” says a guest, one of Clarissa’s teachers from St. Patrick.

“Priscilla,” says Mrs. Enclade in return.

Linette recovers herself. “Can I help you?” she says.

“I doubt it,” says Mrs. Enclade. She shambles over to an armchair by the window, the place where Linette had been sitting. “Unless somebody wants to pour me a glass of Chardonnay,” she continues as she eases herself into the seat.

This isn’t Mrs. Enclade’s party, and this isn’t Mrs. Enclade’s house, but nobody, not even Kelsey’s mother, has quite enough nerve to point those facts out. “I’ll get it,” says Clarissa at last, standing up.

“Oh, sweetie, don’t,” says another guest, sweeping toward the kitchen. “You just sit tight and look pretty.”

The St. Patrick’s schoolteachers resume their conversation, and all the other little pockets of women follow suit. Linette emits a little laugh, Jeannine’s not sure for whose benefit, and wanders off. Jeannine rubs a fingerprint off of the Little Penguin with her shirt sleeve. She places the bottle in the last empty space on the mantelpiece, then scans her collection with a sense of relief. Good. Nothing is missing.

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