

*LION IN THE THICKET: A COLLECTION OF  
STORIES WITH A CRITICAL  
INTRODUCTION*

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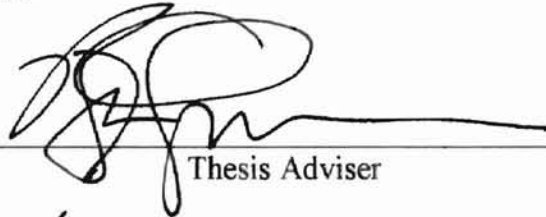
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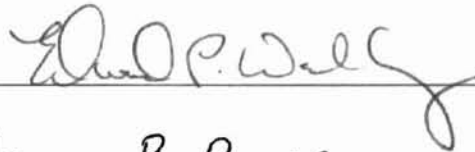


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This collection would not have been possible without the generous and kind support of my wife, Barri. I also wish to thank Brian Evenson for his friendship and guidance.

— William T. Decker

— Department of Psychology, The State

— University of Iowa

— William T. Decker

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## Critical Introduction

A collection of stories posits a fundamental relationship between author and reader, a

### Extreme Fighting

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relationship that starts with the title, or even the cover, and ends with the final punctuation

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mark. Between the beginning and the end, the reader follows the paths laid out by the

author, building on what the author offers and projecting what is to come. It is the

author's responsibility to provide the means by which readers may follow, and a

reader's responsibility to venture the path with open and skeptical

particularity. The case when a story begins well meant, either in structure

and/or expected, reveals malintended ironic vigorosity.

The bulk of a work, as it is by reader, is the form with

systems of style. A reader's work is to be

as much there as the author's, and the author's is to be

as much there as the reader's, and the reader's is to be

as much

as much there

as much there

A collection of stories posits a fundamental relationship between author and reader, a relationship that starts with the title, or even the cover, and ends with the final punctuation mark. Between the beginning and the end, the reader follows the paths laid out by the author, building on what the author offers and projecting what is to come. It is the author's responsibility to provide the means by which readers may follow, and it is the reader's responsibility to venture the path with open and skeptical eyes. This is particularly the case when works are experimental, either in structure or topic, since a reader's expectations are challenged more vigorously.

The evaluation of a work is made by readers who bring with them differing systems of value. While a work is presented by an author, readers evaluate the work, and, as a result, there will be a number of competing (and valid) responses to each particular work. As Stanley Fish recognizes in *Interpreting the Variorum*, "any procedure that attempts to determine which of a number of readings is correct will necessarily fail" (1240). This is particularly true, as Fish notes later in the essay, since "interpretive strategies are not put into execution after reading (the pure act of perception in which I do not believe); they are the shape of reading, and because they are the shape of reading, they give texts their shape, making them rather than, as it is usually assumed, arising from them" (1251). Interpretive strategies are learned; "they are not natural or universal" (1253). Readers not only bring interpretive strategies to a work, but also develop interpretive strategies as they read each text.

Wolfgang Iser suggests, in *The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach*, when “considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to the text” (1219). If the distance between the reader and author is collapsed, then the reader becomes less valued since the author provides undue influence. Distance, as Iser suggests, “gives rise to its [the work’s] dynamic nature, and this in turn is the precondition for the effects that the work calls forth” (1219). Without distance, the reader would not be interested in the work since there would be “nothing” to resolve.

Detachment or distance comes into play in the specifics of my stories, some of which require readers to recognize moral frameworks established within stories as rather different than their own. Careful readers, though, recognize and react to the internal logic of pieces rather than simply having structures imposed. The difference between the reader’s space and the work produces a dissonance. The work serves as a type of catalyst, allowing a reaction between the reader’s moral framework and the framework of the story, triggering a cognitive process that challenges readers. The challenge is set forth by means of the language and form; accordingly, the internal logic of a piece, which provides the foundation of the reading experience, is of paramount importance.

The notion of internal logic not only raises issues of moral frameworks but also structural issues. Formal considerations become important when examining some of my stories, such as *Ides of December*, *The Twins*, or *Twine*, which are not structured by way of linear narrative but instead consist of a series of dramatic jumps. These jumps become successful if they are patterned in such a way that the reader can grasp what is happening. Since the reader is an integral part of the puzzle, the reader has to be afforded the tools

necessary to follow the logic of the story. Without a reader, the story simply does not exist. In fact, the reader finally is the one who determines meaning. Stanley Fish recognizes this in his essay "Is There a Text in This Class?" where he suggests there is an "instability of the text" which results in an "unavailability of determinate meaning" (227). The author, while unable to determine meaning, does provide parameters that inform the readers as they determine the meaning of the text in question. Authors provide a logic through which readers approach meaning.

Internal logic, therefore, is arguably one of the most important aspects of any story. It is through a confrontation with this logic that the story can be explicated and explored. For instance, in *Piranhas*, a disjunctive synthesis, to borrow Deleuze's term, occurs between altruism and the pursuit of profit which cannot be simply reconciled. In *Three Trials*, the notion of justice gets wrapped up within a perverse form of entertainment. In *The Trip Down Under*, the notion of euthanasia becomes convoluted within an unusual environment. While the environment within particular stories supports certain actions, those actions cannot be readily reconciled with the apparent logic of contemporary society, creating a tension. This narrative technique produces a tension that engages readers even as it confronts them.

In addition to issues of logic, a successful collection requires stylistic variation. My stylistic umbrella is, I suppose, a variation of minimalism, both in the sense of language as well as in terms of expression of sentiment. Absent are omniscient projections explicating reasons for action. Overt explications tend, in my view, not only to belittle readers, but also to disallow readers the opportunity to engage stories as they read them.

The reader is forced to invent in concert with the author. It is the reader who affords art stories their power.

Stories such as *The Trip Down Under*, *Extreme Fighting*, or *Three Trials* are absorbing because of the absences within the texts. The moral landscape of such stories becomes more interesting, I believe, when readers are forced to deal with the situations unmitigated by language of explanation. Such absences force readers to recognize strange disjunctions: on the one hand, readers want to fill the void with certain moral notions; on the other hand, those notions are inconsistent with the moral framework developed within the stories (which may or may not be in concert with their vision of the world).

Within the scope of my stylistic umbrella, I have tried to vary the collection as a whole, though there are obvious stylistic similarities between the stories. The most obvious variations are structural. In *Ides of December*, there is no continuous narrative, but rather discrete sections that form a pastiche. In the very short story, *The Barber*, the sparseness of the story provides readers with a frame from which they can consider the Holocaust. Each story requires a structure fitting for its purpose so that readers are able to amplify the resonance within the piece.

Logical, structural, and stylistic considerations aside, topical considerations unify the collection. Writers, I believe, have an obligation to address social issues concerning society. That is not to say that writers should ignore the art of language, since the two can act in concert with each other. Social responsibility, on its own, does not make literature; similarly, art absent from society is anemic. In the final analysis, I believe, the most worthwhile art is art that balances artistic concerns with social ones. There is, as

Chinua Achebe recognizes, a balance to the opposing yet not contradictory views of “art for art’s sake” and social responsibility:

Now if you criticize or condemn the extremism of the bourgeois society, which is satisfied to free art from social responsibility, and then move right across the spectrum to the other end, or with the pendulum to the other extreme, and say that no art is possible unless it is committed to something you define, this is also a fallacy. (Lindfors, 130)

The continuum identified by Achebe is useful for readers (as well as authors) when they examine works and elements within works.

Hans Jauss values the reader by making the reader one leg of a tripartite structure, the other two consisting of the author and the work. Jauss recognizes that the “text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, altered, or even just reproduced” (1202). While Jauss is concerned with the reception of works through time, it is valuable to recognize he believes

a literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of that which was already read, brings the reader to a specific emotional attitude, and with its beginning arouses expectations for the “middle and end,” which can then be maintained intact or altered, reoriented, or even fulfilled ironically. (1201-202)

This temporal valuation of the task of reading, I believe, makes it possible to explore human nature. Texts, readers, and authors are not isolated. There is a connective “tissue” that not only ties the three together but also incorporates temporality.

One element that arises from topical concerns in my fiction is the use of violence. Violence is endemic to our society, and, as a result, I feel compelled to address it in my fiction. When choosing an image, I often base it on some real event. In *Lightning Drips from the Sky*, the image of the woman in the box is from a *National Geographic* photo. In the photo, a woman pokes her head through a hole in the box in which she has been confined until she dies. The image of the woman's teeth being extracted comes from Alphonso Lingis's book, *Abuses*, which I tempered in my story. In his factual account of torture in South America, Lingis recounts that

the most sophisticated techniques of plastic surgery had been employed. Great care had been taken by her medical torturers to obliterate her lips forever, using cuts and stitches and folds that would frustrate even the best reconstructive techniques....A small hole had been left in the face to allow the woman to take liquids through a straw and survive ....But when Luis and the medical team reopened the hole where her mouth had been, the sight was far more sickening than they had expected: All the teeth had been removed and two dog fangs—incisors—had been inserted in their place.

(39)

Is it necessary to address such horrors in fiction? I would argue, yes. Authors, I believe, have a fundamental responsibility to address the core of our collective being. Through fiction we can expose and explore. To neglect brutality would be problematic.

Fictional brutality, though it may be disconcerting, is not brutality against any person or being. The use of violence, or brutality, though, needs as I have mentioned earlier, to be consistent within the parameters of each story. Violence simply for the sake of violence is not fruitful.

Though the stories are connected by various topical and stylistic elements, I believe, each story should be able to stand independent of the others. I have specifically chosen not to create a short story cycle in the manner of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio*. My unifying principle is different. It is a complicit agreement between the reader and the text where "reading and writing open up new perspectives, break ground for new avenues of thought, and, above all, wipe out the tracks of an old topography of mind and thought" (Reda Bensmaia, xiv). While I am unwilling to suggest that my collection of stories manages to rise to this level, I am willing to argue that the collection does challenge readers' zones of comfort.

As my collection explores human nature, it reacts against the structure of largely patriarchal capitalistic society. In fact, my collection could be read as an indictment of the existing social structures and, as a result, my collection approaches Deleuze and Guattari's notion of minor literature. In order to argue that my collection reacts against the majority, I need to demonstrate that it seeks to destabilize the territory of the majority (a political act). Intentions aside, I feel my work addresses the majority both thematically as well as stylistically. In *Piranhas*, for instance, there is a strange juxtaposition of the patriarchal urge for altruism with the destructive forces of capitalism. Clearly, the story does not provide comfort for those believing in altruism as a source of comfort; in fact, it raises the notion that altruism is infected. Look, for comparison, at the annual Christmas time



advertising campaigns of companies such as American Express. Though they donate a portion of their profits to a hunger relief program, there is no doubt that the sole purpose of the campaign is marketing—altruism is trickery. In fact, if American Express did choose to act according to a genuinely altruistic “enlightenment,” the board of directors would be culpable of breach of fiduciary responsibility. The board of directors is charged with insuring the security of shareholder value—a valuation based not on any altruistic tendencies but rather of the bottom line of the income statement and the maintenance of asset value on the balance sheet. My collection exists in a space that is defined by its proximity to, among other things, the language of the majority.

One notion of violence that recurs in my fiction is brutality against women. I am cognizant of the horrific exploitation of Mary in *The Twins* and Dana in *The Ring*. This exploitation is, I believe, a reflection of contemporary society in which, as a recent court ruling suggests, women wearing jeans in Italy cannot be raped since it is only with their complicit agreement that such tight-fitting jeans can be removed, in which domestic abuse is the most common violent crime committed in America, in which the United States government instructs Peace Corps volunteers not to interfere with spousal abuse in host countries, in which women are ritualistically raped during war. My fiction addresses the power structure that perpetuates violence against women. Fictional portrayals are necessary to challenge zones of comfort.

The fictional world created in my collection is not particularly clean, since I tend to investigate brutality that is not restricted to Jasper, Texas. Many of my ideas, as I have mentioned, germinate from current events: *Three Trials* responds to the spectacle of high profile trials; *Crucifixion* responds to a death sentence carried out under Islamic law; *Last*

*Night* includes a portrayal of the abuse inflicted upon a Haitian in a New York City police department facility.

✎ Kate Chopin in *The Awakening* provides one path for a woman abused by way of patriarchal dominance. Near the end of the novel, after Edna leaves New Orleans, she walks to the beach after changing into her bathing suit.

But when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her.

How Strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky!  
how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known. (189).

Edna's escape from the patriarchy was complete as she became exhausted swimming out from the beach. The horror continues to exist, though it is often clouded, behind the facades of the late twentieth century. It is fitting that my collection ends with Conrad sending Dana off to prostitute herself, since we have yet to awaken from the nightmare that continues.

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"We prefer to know where **Lion in the Thicket**," he said during an interview with a local reporter when asked whether or not Amos would be allowed to continue hugging the statue. The laughing drunks collected themselves and burst into song as Amos passed. Amos was preparing for the coming of the Messiah, an event that had been twice prophesied in the town during the last decade.

Ten years before, after Amos' uncle, Matthew, was squirreled away, the mayor had announced, "We like the insane as much as the best of them, but there are limits." Matthew's tendency was to masturbate in public. "The seeds of the lord!" he shouted at climax. Matthew had made national news when a senator, participating in the town's centennial parade, saw Matthew among the fans doing his own waving. The shocked senator had pointed toward Matthew and had yelled a question to the driver.

"That's Matthew," the driver had explained. "He's seeding for the Messiah."

"He's what?"

"Seeding for the Messiah."

"He's crazy," the senator had said, still pointing.

"That doesn't change the fact he's preparing for the Messiah, ma'am."

Amos, too, was determined to spread love. He repeated to those he hugged, "The Messiah requires love." After a number of complaints, largely focusing on fondling and hip thrusts, Amos was banned from hugging the citizens. He settled on hugging the statue, a bronze, donut-shaped contemporary piece, in front of city hall. Curled up inside the hole, he hugged from the inside out.

"The heart is for hugging," Amos said, loosening his embrace as he rocked back.

"We prefer to know where he is," the police chief said during an interview with a local reporter when asked whether or not Amos would be allowed to continue hugging the statue. "The Messiah?" they would ask.

"But, he beat up three kids," the reporter said, getting to the point of the interview.

"Look," the police chief responded. "The guy's a kook, but he's got a right to defend himself."

"But, he..."

"They were throwing rocks at him," the police chief interrupted. "Amos has the right, if attacked, to defend himself."

"What do you think about his claim of being the Messiah?" the reporter asked.

"The department has no comment. I, however, am more willing to believe in a Messiah that's not a wimp."

"You believe?"

"As I said, the department has no official comment."

When the newspaper article appeared, people started to congregate around the statue, at first not too closely. Later, encouraged by Amos, people came closer and stroked the bronze. "It should be shiny," Amos explained.

"Tell us about the coming," people inquired.

"You don't want to know," Amos replied, never faltering from his rocking.

"Why?"

The next day, Amos explained, “Your heads will become like stones in a flowing river. I will be forced to leap from one to the next. Your ears will become sore.”

“The Messiah?” they would ask. “The minister insisted, sitting down on the grass.” “As I leap you will be praising God for his compassion.” He added, “God stopped in another town recently where he made the soldiers run naked through the streets before catching them and slicing them into little bite-sized pieces for the fallen angels.”

People stayed away until news struck that there had been a civil war where famished soldiers chopped up and ate their fleeing enemies. “How did you know?” they asked as they returned.

“I can’t hear you,” Amos said, pointing to the pile of cinder blocks he had stacked along side the sculpture. “I can only hear you if you lie down and place a cinder block on your head.”

After a while, a man lay down. He placed his ear to the ground and lowered a cinder block on to his head. “Answer me,” the man instructed. “I have done as you asked.”

Amos rocked out of the sculpture and with surprising quickness perched himself on the cinder block. “You need to be contrite in the field of the Lord,” Amos said, poking at the man’s eyes with his little finger.

The man apologized. Amos remained perched though he stopped poking. “I must be able to leap as though crossing a river,” Amos explained. “Before then, I am without inspiration.” Amos leapt back to his sculpture.

The next day a Baptist minister approached. "Can we talk?" the minister asked, walking through the crowd. Amos looked to the pile of cinder blocks.

"We will talk as equals before God," the minister insisted, sitting down on the grass and leaning against the sculpture.

"I will make an exception, once," Amos said, patting the minister on the head.

"How do you recognize truth?" Amos asked.

"Through God's guidance."

"Has God guided your wife?"

"Our marriage is a celebration of God's love," he answered.

"Then, I'll make it easy for you," Amos said. "If what I say is true, your legs will not allow you to stand, and I will spit on your face."

"That won't happen," the minister replied, adding, "Trickery is not faith."

"Enough," Amos said. "Your wife is a whore."

The minister, attempting to stand, fell; he folded over. Amos left his hole and instructed the minister to raise his head. When he complied, Amos spit in his face. "No one here did not know. In fact, she's a good value," he added before spitting again.

"Now collect a cinder block," Amos instructed. The minister looked confused then stood to retrieve a block. He lay down beside the sculpture and lowered the block to his head. Amos leapt swiftly to the block then back to his sculpture.

"No one will escape," Amos announced as he walked through the crowd that had formed around the sculpture the next day. The minister and the first man lay in their places with

blocks upon their heads. Amos skipped back and forth along the blocks several times before retreating to the curve of the statue.

“Good morning,” he added as he hugged the statue. “We will build a tower toward heaven. Your heads will be crushed with love.”

Amos released the statue and opened the cooler someone had left. “An offering,” Amos yelled, popping open a beer. Amos quickly downed it and a couple more.

“I recognize you,” Amos said, pointing toward a couple of men swaying in the crowd. “You are staggering from sea to sea, searching for the word of the Lord.”

The men stepped forward as if involuntarily. “We won’t call you a liar,” one admitted. “We have seen many false Messiahs.”

“And, now what do you see?” Amos asked. The two men took a couple more steps forward. “Tell me what you see!”

“We tested you with the evils of liquor and you failed,” one said.

“You are wrong,” Amos answered. “You have succeeded in doing right though you are ignorant fools. The walls of your homes will only be saved from fire and violent winds with honest offerings.”

“That’s absurd,” the other said.

“You ask me to hold back my wrath? That I am unable to do. You, who are close to believing, are the true sinners. Lie down and pray for mercy.”

“You’re insane,” the first said, turning. Amos leapt from one cinder block to the other before launching himself on the two men. He wrapped his legs around one then grabbed the other. He gripped their throats. The trio tumbled after a couple of minutes of



struggling. Amos dragged the men closer to the statue and placed cinder blocks on their heads. The bullet tore through his thigh. He rolled to the ground and grasped at the statue. Amos sat rocking and hugging as the police chief bolted down the steps, pulling free his gun.

“You’ve done it now,” the police chief said as he reached the sculpture. “You’re under arrest.” Amos stepped from one block to the next. “Some are less willing to believe than others,” Amos admitted, “but no line did I cross.”

The police chief pointed to the men on the ground.

“They are there of their own volition,” Amos said. “Ask them.” The men opened their eyes and agreed.

“You can press charges,” the police chief explained.

“We can only hope for forgiveness.”

“The beer is a problem,” the police chief said, turning to Amos.

“You mean the tithes?”

“No, idiot, the beer.”

The four men on the ground shuddered. Amos, sensing their distress, leapt from cinder block to the next, stopping briefly to caress their eyebrows. “We have agreed to walk together,” Amos said as he landed on each block.

Amos returned to the statue. “Enemies attempt to overrun the lands,” Amos said to the police chief as he initiated his rocking. “You celebrate false prophets and false laws. For this you will not stand.”

“I’ll be back,” the police chief said, turning toward city hall.

"Yes," Amos called after him. As the chief returned his gun to its holster, it discharged. The bullet tore through his thigh. He rolled to the ground and grasped at the wound. Raising the forearm, Amos narrowed his eyes. "You trample on the poor and force him to work without pay," he cried, swinging the handle of the law end forward and crushing the skull.

"I grow tired," Amos said as he approached the statue the following morning. The men had circled the statue with their heads facing inward. Amos stepped from one block to the next, lowering himself to caress the eyebrows of the unknown additions, adding, "Good morning."

"I am not a prophet but rather a shepherd," Amos continued. "I know not what to do."

"You are a prophet," the police chief said, walking with crutches through the crowd. He lowered himself and took his place in the circle, sore leg raised. "I need help," he added, nodding toward the pile of cinder blocks.

Amos careened around the circle a couple of times before collecting a cinder block and lowering it to the chief's head. "It's a little rough," the chief admitted, adjusting the block. "Tomorrow, I'll bring earmuffs."

Amos continued circling, picking up his pace to stretch his legs. He extended his stride every once in a while, skipping a cinder block or two. He misjudged and stumbled, knocking the cinder block off the minister's head. Amos replaced the block before resuming.

He launched to the statue after a couple of minutes. He opened the chest and pulled two beers, drinking them quickly. "Today we lay the foundation."

From beneath the ice, he pulled free a hammer. "There will be wailing in all the streets," Amos said, landing on the chief's cinder block.

Raising the hammer, Amos announced, "You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain," before swinging the hammer, claw end forward, and crushing the skull.

The claw pulled free easily. Amos jumped to the next block.

"Though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them."

"Though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine."

"I despise your religious feasts."

"I cannot stand your assemblies."

"Away with the noise of your songs!"

"I will not listen to the music of your harps!"

"Let justice roll on like a river!"

Amos dropped the hammer. Stepping off the last block, he passed through the crowd.

## Lightning Drips from the Sky

The sunset explodes then fades into darkness. Stars, fighting street lamps, appear. I answer the phone after the fourth ring.

“Yesterday, it rained. Tomorrow’s supposed to be sunny,” I tell my mother. She likes weather updates. It relaxes her to know her weather and mine are the same.

“Why don’t you come over for dinner?” she asks.

“I’ve already eaten.”

“You’re always welcome,” she reminds me before we fade into good-byes.

Exchanging the phone for a tumbler filled with whiskey, I take a couple of swallows. Joan also likes whiskey.

Last night, she cried herself to sleep again. She insists that it’s normal: a function of the times, a function of stress. She’s wrong; she just cries herself to sleep.

She’s also a giver of plants. A couple of weeks ago, Joan gave me a pot of geraniums for the balcony. She thought it would provide atmosphere. It’s dead, though, and it’s my fault, she insists, since I forgot to water it. “You’re on that balcony every night,” she said. “How could you have forgotten to water it?”

She threw a beer bottle at me when I answered, “Water what?”

Joan wonders if the plant dying is a “sign.” There might be something wrong with Joan. She seems somewhat emotional.

In the paper yesterday, I read about a baby being launched through an open window. I read the article to Joan, then suggested it made me think of her.

When Joan stopped by yesterday afternoon, she screamed a little about having had enough. I tried to listen but kept getting distracted. Auto racing doesn't generally hold my interest, but yesterday, I was the ultimate fan. After a while, she settled herself and grabbed two beers from the refrigerator.

We tried living together. It didn't work since Joan didn't want to give up her place and move. I can't blame her, though. Her daddy rents her an amazing three bedroom apartment overlooking the lake; it's a nice place. I didn't want to move and be beholden. Besides, there is a coffee shop around the corner, and I can walk to work. I also wondered whether or not such an arrangement would appropriately test our relationship. Anyone can get along in a three bedroom apartment. Tension is necessary to test the waters.

My parents were tested. They lived in a small one bedroom apartment with two kids for five years. After their divorce, my older sister and mom got bunk beds. I slept in the living room.

My dad got himself a new wife with kids. He also got his wages garnished. He played the hero during graduation, counting out the ten hundred dollar bills. "I wish I got that much kiss-off money," I overheard my mother tell her sister as we moved me into my apartment.

Joan took me to a new kosher deli she'd read about for lunch yesterday. We decided to walk even though it started to rain and she wanted to cab it.

"I don't want to get soaked," she said, holding her purse over her head.

"Let's hurry," I said, quickening the pace.

The food was excellent, and Joan finally admitted it was worth getting soaked for though she sulked a little when I told her that frivolous cab rides, like the one she had suggested, are to be avoided. “Economy is the root of happiness,” I suggested.

“Then why did you order the *jumbo* pastrami on rye?” she asked.

I decided she wasn’t ready to understand. “Famished,” I answered.

Yesterday morning we had coffee and blueberry muffins. “Do you think a song will be written about him?” I asked, handing Joan the paper across the table. The article buried on page eight reported that a Rio police officer, accused of killing two street children, was cleared of responsibility.

“People shouldn’t be culpable for accidents,” I added as Joan read the article. The officer’s gun, he had sworn under oath, had fired accidentally after the car hit a bump in the road. I decided not to ask Joan why she started crying. Though she may still have been affected by her dream.

She woke screaming last night. She dreamed that I had placed her in a box during a thunderstorm. The box apparently had a hole through which she could poke her head, turtle like. Once secured in the box, I wheeled her outside using a dolly. I was supposed to have said, as lightning lit my face, “It could be worse. We could be in a desert.”

“I probably would have put wheels on the box,” I mentioned to comfort her, “since a dolly would be cumbersome for repeated use.”

## The Ides of December

### I.

He continued his trek through the corridors. Tucked behind the Emergency Room was a small morgue. Fitting, and efficient, he thought. He circled back to the nursery. Some hospitals, he had heard somewhere, were now keeping the infants with their mothers—too many lost children, or something.

“Welcome,” he mumbled to the infants, tapping on the glass.

Returning to the transplant ward, he walked through an unmarked door.

“May I sit down?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“You’re willing to tell my brother that I have a medical excuse?”

“If that is your wish.”

### II.

The art of being unique. Bloomingdales. Gifts to dream of ... Martini time. Bergdorf Goodman. Henri Bendel collection. Give yourself a bonus. Bring on the night. Tourneau. Be good. Be giving. Where you meet your other face. Be grateful. From the Comet collection. Tiffany & Co. The anti-cellulite hosiery. Barneys. Cashmere comforts. Be gentle. Be gracious. Be good. Lord and Taylor. Calvin Klein. A whole new part of your life! Chanel. Handcrafted angels. Macy’s. Moonphase. Be glamorous.

### III.

A man sneezed before signing the bottom line. Exchanging his pen for a starched handkerchief, he accepted the check. After examining it, he placed it into his breast pocket.

Flanked by two lawyers, he exited the room. They boarded the elevator.

“Thank you,” he said, reaching into his pant’s pocket. He pulled free two sets of car keys. He tossed one set to each. “A little Jaguar bonus,” he said. The limited-edition Jaguars had sold out in eight days. He had bought six at a cost representing .5% of the termination settlement.

### IV.

A woman thumbed through the catalog, rereading some of the more interesting biographies, flipping back through the more appealing photos.

She stood and walked to the assistant behind the desk. “I’d like more information on 16, 24, and 57.”

The assistant scribbled the numbers on a pad, rose, and exited the room then returned with three files.

The woman studied the first two files, reading and rereading the extended biographies, comparing the photo spreads. After twenty minutes, she returned the two folders to the table aside her chair and reached for file 57.



She thumbed through it, stopping momentarily on the fertility effectiveness chart before collecting the three folders.

“Would you like to see any other folders?” the assistant asked.

“No,” she answered. “I’ve made up my mind.”

The assistant opened the top drawer, retrieving a form.

“Are you curious?” the woman asked, accepting the form.

The assistant, forcing a smile, answered, “Yes.”

“57.”

“A good choice,” the assistant said, reaching in a different drawer for a pamphlet.

“The fee schedule is straightforward,” she explained. “You are allowed to opt for a new donor once during the contract period. If you are going to make a change, we suggest you do so within the first eight weeks.”

V.

“There has been an excessive elevation in the importance of an individual human life,” the President said after a short pause. The President resumed pacing before stopping and saying, “There is no other explanation.”

VI.

Live in concert, a very special birthday celebration. Madison Square Garden opens its doors for a Coca-Cola® Concert Series concert starring David Bowie, Placebo, Foo

Fighters, Frank Black, Lou Reed, Sonic Youth, the Cure's Robert Smith, plus a surprise guest. The profits, all profits, benefit Save the Children®. A minimum donation has been agreed between the parties.

If you miss it, you can catch Michael Flatley in Lord of the Dance at Radio City Music Hall. The profits, all profits, do not benefit Save the Children®.

## VII.

The chairman stood before the cameras. He shifted his position slowly, raising his chin to set off the whirl. He settled on a pose that garnered the most action. He smiled slightly, re-igniting the clamor.

"Thank you all for coming," he said, motioning for the reporters to take their seats. "The only good consumer is a consumer who can navigate successfully in our stores. Megastore, Inc. is proud to provide funding to support the campaign against drunken driving.

"Isn't your campaign a little crass?" a reporter asked.

"My job is simple," the chairman explained. "It is to heighten shareholder value. We feel our investment will reap an appropriate return. Our research concludes that 72% of the 17,274 people who died last year as the result of drunk drivers were customers of ours, fewer deaths from drunk driving means more profits."

## VIII.

An extra dollar enables you to fly on Virgin from Boston to London. Once in London, scan page three while eating at Quaglino's, democratized glamour, where you can feast on seared tuna with wasabi and soy.

IX.

The shadowy Al-Faran guerrillas interrupted a trek. The end is known. John Childs lives; Hans Christian Ostroe died, beheaded in the hill district. Uncertainty remains for the four other hostages. The police now post, in the summer capital, a notice. The notice promises a reward: \$28,000.

X.

The limited-edition Mont-blanc pen introduced two months ago is sold out. Each pen retailed for \$850.

XI.

"You're going home," the truck with loud speakers boomed. The police had already surrounded the refugees. A fifteen mile trek will reunite the refugees with their homeland. A homeland the refugees left two years ago fearing reprisals. Machetes when swung properly slice well through flesh. Wipes clean easily, too.

XII.

Stumbling, he entered the house. He shed his overcoat, piling it aside the door. He climbed the stairs precariously, lumbering from side to side as if on a listing ship.

She approached as he gained the landing.

Grabbing her forcefully with his powerful hands, he pitched her down the stairs.

The housekeeper rushed into the foyer. She retrieved the coat, and hung it on the rack.

XIII.

He walked slowly to the gate, fumbling with his ticket.

“Identification?” the ticketing agent asked.

He pulled free his wallet, handing it across the counter.

The agent glanced at the ID and pointed to the bottom of the itinerary inside his ticket envelope. Printed in red: Due to security regulations, all passengers over age 18 must have a federal, state or locally issued photo ID that matches the name on the ticket.

“Sorry, you are unable to board this flight.”

“My father’s dying,” he mumbled.

“Excuse me?” the attendant asked.

“My father’s dying. My sister sent me this ticket.”

“Why didn’t she use your name?” the agent asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know,” he admitted.

“Who’s Franklin Ruppert?” the agent asked, looking again at the ticket.

“My father,” he answered.

“I’m sorry,” the agent said. The agent handed the envelope back across the counter.

“Would you like to buy a ticket?” the agent asked.

He placed the ticket on the counter and rubbed his face with both hands, stroking up and down slowly. “I don’t have any money,” he admitted.

“I’m sorry,” the agent said, extending her hand toward the next customer in line.

He picked up his ticket and his carry-on. He walked away.

“I’ve seen some sorry-ass stories to use tickets, but that has to be the best,” the customer said, handing over his ID.

The ticket agent smiled as she verified the ticket. She tore the boarding pass from the printer, sliding it into the front pocket of the ticket envelope. “Enjoy your flight,” the agent said, pushing the ticket across the counter.

## Twine

After knowing the turtle for five minutes, Shadow placed it on the table. He backed away, waited for it to stick out its head. When it did, he caught and squeezed its neck with a pair of vice-grips. Locking the pliers, he gazed into the turtle's face, swinging the hammer down to crush the shell. He waited, focusing on the mouth. When Shadow imagined the heart stopping, he felt he could see a piece of lint thread its way through the turtle's mouth toward his own. Attempting to catch the lint, Shadow inhaled it, then sneezed.

"It's wrong to be cruel to animals," Shadow's mother said after finding the shattered turtle with the vice-grips still attached.

"Yes," Shadow agreed.

"You're old enough to know better."

\* \* \*

After vomiting up a small ball of twine, Shadow asked, "What's happening?"

"Nothing, Shadow," his mother answered. She wiped his face with a damp washcloth and rubbed his forehead, at times placing pressure on the crest of his nose. "It happens."

He turned toward the wall to remember his grandmother's stories. As if foretelling the reaction at her own funeral, he remembered her saying, "This cursed family dies without sadness."

"I'll be sad."

“You will see,” he remembered her responding while she swung on her porch swing.

At his grandmother’s funeral, Shadow looked around the sanctuary.

“Why wasn’t anyone sad?” Shadow asked as his mother ran her fingers through his hair.

“What are you talking about?”

“Granny’s funeral.”

“People were.”

Realizing the lie, Shadow repeated, “No,” a couple of times before rolling onto his stomach, burying his face into his pillow.

\* \* \*

Shadow climbed up the hanging tree. He sat briefly on each limb before climbing to the next. On the murderers’ limb he remained an extra couple of minutes before returning to the limb reserved for children.

\* \* \*

Shadow had once seen his father hit his mother hard. They had all gone to the funeral of a friend who was shot accidentally in the face by her son. His mother had crawled around the casket, picking at the carpet, until his father picked her up, took her outside to the parking lot, and belted her. “Never again,” he had yelled.

\* \* \*

As he fought himself to sleep, Shadow caressed his wife's hair while imagining his mother curled over the toilet. After, as she was rinsing her mouth out with mouthwash, he imagined her saying, "There's no use fighting."

\* \* \*

After staring through the window at the skeins of yarn, Shadow stepped inside. He fumbled through his pocket, freeing a couple of dollars. "Can I have some samples?" he asked, extending his money. "Just an inch or so of each color?"

"You're a strange one, Jimmy," Sandy said, offering him her scissors. Shadow methodically combed through the store, gathering a sample of each.

\* \* \*

Carrying his rucksack, Shadow followed his dog into the woods toward the hanging tree. "Come here Rosie," he said, resting. Rosie sat beside Shadow, tail wagging. "How long have we known each other?" Shadow asked.

"Twelve years," Shadow answered.

"That's a long time."



Shadow dropped his rucksack. He pulled free a canvas bag and a wishbone treat. He put the treat into the bag and opened the bag. Rosie jumped in. "I've trained you well."

As Rosie poked her head out, Shadow closed the bag around her throat. He roped the bag. Rosie struggled. "Not part of the trick," Shadow admitted, patting Rosie on the head.

Throwing a rope over a limb, he hoisted the bag off the ground. He took out a hammer and tacked the canvas bag against the tree. Rosie's head, at the base of the bag, was level with his own. He tacked and tacked, making it tight as if tucking Rosie under a couple of wool blankets, then pounded away on the bag.

He put his face near Rosie's, watching carefully. He saw a piece of canvas thread its way out of Rosie's mouth toward his own. "Only this after twelve years?" he asked, failing to catch the thread.

\* \* \*

"Is it true what they say about Granddad being a killer?"

Shadow's mother continued making a salad. "These look like nice Vedralia onions," she said, cutting into one and taking a bite.

\* \* \*

When his mother died, Shadow visited the funeral home, leaving his wife and daughter, Flora, in the car. Looking into the casket, he hoped to see succulent twine spewing from her mouth towards his. He pulled free a loose piece of silk from her blouse and rolled it into a ball with his thumb and index finger. As he circled the casket, he placed the ball into his mouth, rolling it under his tongue.

\* \* \*

Shadow, walking with Marc, his friend, and Marc's dog, led them toward the hanging tree. "My grandmother said, 'when they hanged children they would use twine vomited from the stomachs of babies.'"

"You're lying," Marc said, pushing Shadow.

"That's what I told my grandmother. She laughed, then had my grandfather tie me to the tree. 'You'll see,' he said before leaving me. When he came back, I told him I had seen little boys and girls swinging from the tree. Others were vomiting up twine and roping it together."

Marc wrapped Slate's chain around his wrist a couple of times.

"How long have you had Slate?" Shadow asked.

"Since I was five," he answered.

Shadow turned and ran toward the hanging tree. "This is it. The kids would hang from the lower limbs," Shadow said, pointing. "That strong one there for murderers. And, that one for women."

Shadow dropped his rucksack, caressed the trunk. “Haven’t you ever heard of the hanging tree?”

Marc shook his head.

“Do you believe me?” Shadow asked. Marc again shook his head.

While rummaging through his rucksack, Shadow said, “There’s only one way for you to know for sure.” Shadow pulled free a rope of twine and quickly formed a slip knot.

“What are you doing?” Marc asked.

“I’ll tie you to the tree like my grandpa did me.”

Marc took a step back. “I don’t know,” Marc said, bending to Slate.

“It’s not a real knot. You can slip out of it easy,” Shadow said, showing Marc how easy the knot slipped. “You’re not scared, are you?”

Marc tied Slate by his leash to an adjacent tree; he walked to the hanging tree, putting his chest against the tree and extending his arms. “You have to turn the other way,” Shadow instructed. Shadow tied Marc’s arms snugly then grabbed a piece of rope and tossed it over one of the lower limbs. Letting the loose end hang, he placed a knot over Marc’s head. “It’s just to give you a better sense,” Shadow said.

“I don’t like this,” Marc said before Shadow took a bandanna from his rucksack to gag him. He tightened the rope to keep Marc’s head raised then let the loose end fall to the ground.

Returning to his rucksack, Shadow retrieved his canvas bag. After struggling with Slate, he finally bagged him, head extended. He tied the loose end of rope around the canvas sack then climbed up the tree to one of the child limbs.

After pulling Slate up to him, he lowered Slate until Slate's head was level with Marc's. Shadow then tied off the rope.

He raised Slate then pitched him out away from the tree. When the line became taut, Slate arced back toward the tree, hitting Marc in the face.

Shadow climbed down and tacked Slate into place before pummeling him with his hammer. When Shadow imagined Slate's heart stopping, he tore off the bandanna and saw a small piece of yarn twine its way from Slate's mouth toward Marc's. Shadow tried catching it, but missed. Marc, gasping for breath, inhaled it and coughed.

\* \* \*

Shadow imagined himself vomiting into the toilet as he feigned fighting off sleep. "It's just growing pains," his mother assured him.

"Nightmares," Shadow corrected.

"Everyone gets scared once in a while."

\* \* \*

Finding the grave of his grandmother, Shadow emptied his rucksack and pleated the grave with the yarn he had collected. "Son—you'll have to clean that up," the caretaker said, carrying a rake against his shoulder.

\* \* \*

He sat on the limb for murderers thinking of his father. His father had laughed at him after he had struck out swinging. "Three swings is all it takes," he had said, slapping his knee in the stands. Shadow had walked through the dugout to the bleachers. After walking up a couple of rows, Shadow swung the bat and hit his father as he repeated, "Nice swing, son." Shadow dropped the bat and ran to the hanging tree. He had scaled the tree by the time his father caught up to him.

\* \* \*

Shadow rifled through the front hall closet for his rucksack. He wrapped Flora in a blanket, then picked her up. He pulled the blanket over her eyes as he walked through the door. Gaining the back yard, he turned and looked at the house. "Needs a little paint," he cooed to Flora before turning toward the woods.

After taking the blanket from Flora, he placed her on the ground and tacked the blanket to the tree as if making a hammock. He placed Flora in the hammock and tacked it tight. Shadow swung his hammer three times after a practice swing. When he imagined her heart stopping, he searched her mouth for twine with his own.

## Last Night

Last night I died. I don't remember the particulars, but it seemed natural enough. It was windy, I believe—not too windy, but windy enough.

We had a cat once. It grew old, as cats do, lost control of its bladder, and disappeared. Years later, I learned from my mother that my father drowned the cat in a canvas sack with rocks for company.

The home is the territory for love, my mother claimed, caressing and holding my temporarily broken body after I was accosted by a bully at school. Cruelty is out there, she said pointing through the window as a police car drove by. Did you know, I asked my mother years later, that the police use Haitians and toilet plungers as sex toys? Out there, she answered, nodding.

My mother once told me my father had had a marginal affair. He had apparently gotten into the habit of playing only nine holes of golf before screwing his secretary's sister. Had he given up all eighteen holes, it would have been a true, unqualified affair. My mother relished the distinction.

The Haitian had given his consent, the chorus of lawyers sang. Did he, meaning the Haitian, stop screaming, no, and utter the phrase: please, please, please. Sex, when not tender, goes through a period of feigned resistance, the chorus argued.

Nearing my twelfth birthday, I had asked my father if I could have a bike. One better, he answered as I peeled opened my present and saw a lawnmower. I have given you the means to earn your bike.

I think I forgot to cry—not on purpose but rather accidentally—when my father died. There are many things to think of and do when your father dies. Somehow crying got left out.

My father accidentally killed a dog once. He shot the dog on purpose but had intended only to teach it a lesson. The dog bled and panted, then bled without panting, then lay still without bleeding or panting.

I wanted a son once. I don't really know why; it seemed like the thing to do—nature's impulse, I suppose. I married for that intent, but we divorced after I heard a boy tell his mother he wanted to be a police officer. Children have funny dreams.

## Twins

Ignoring Adam, Mary walked past him to his mahogany apothecary cabinet. She picked up several of the odd shaped jars, examined the contents, read the Chinese script. She held up one jar containing leathery strands, her eyebrows raised.

“I used to know,” Adam answered. “My father shipped the cabinet intact from Singapore. For a while, he hired on the apothecary, but he went back when I was nine.” Mary returned the jar to the shelf, picked up a jar containing teeth. She turned the jar in her hand, occasionally shaking it.

“Have a seat,” Adam said again, motioning to a leather couch. Mary, carrying the jar of teeth. As Adam pulled up a chair, she placed the jar on the coffee table in front of her. Adam placed his free hand on her knee.

“How much will I get for them?” Mary asked, staring at the teeth.

“Fifty thousand each,” Adam answered after leaning back and taking a sip of his coffee. “It’s a very generous offer.”

“I get to choose their parents?” Mary asked, turning her attention to the side table in order to examine a picture of an old man wearing a penis sheath. She picked up the penis sheath from the oak coffee table, examined it.

“Yes, but you will never be able to contact them.”

“What if they contact me?” Mary asked, sticking her finger into the sheath.

“That won’t happen.”

“But, if it does?” she asked, turning toward Adam.

“If it does, you will be able to interact with them.”



“Has it ever happened?” Mary asked, placing the sheath next to the jar of teeth.

“No, never.”

“When do I have to decide?” Mary asked.

“The sooner the better. If you abide by our prenatal care regimen, you’ll be paid a significant bonus.” Adam reached for his briefcase beside the couch, popped open the lock, pulled free the contract. He flipped through the contract, stopping on the third page. “You get a bonus of fifteen thousand per twin,” he said, pointing to the breakdown, “for a total of one hundred and thirty thousand.”

Mary picked up the photo. The erect penis sheath, mounted on leathery testicles, was held in place with strands of twine wrapped around the waist. Beside the man, a small boy stood looking across a valley outfitted with nothing but a small strand of twine around his neck. The man, missing a digit on his left hand, held that hand to his mouth while his massive right hand delicately covered the boy’s chest.

Adam placed the contract on the coffee table, stood, circled the room to the bay window. Looking out across the sand to the rolling waves of the Pacific, he said, “I realize it is a difficult decision, but you need to decide.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, yes, or okay, no,” Adam said, rotating toward Mary.

“Okay, yes,” Mary said, returning the photo to the side table.

“Good.” Adam lifted a pen from his pocket, handed it to Mary.

“Don’t we need to clear this with Greg?” Mary asked, examining the document.

“He’s already relinquished his rights.”

“Oh. How much?”

“That’s not important.”

“I guess not,” Mary said, signing the contract.

Adam walked to his desk, picked up the phone. “Sandy, will you come in please?”

Sandy, wearing a white lab coat, smiled at Mary as she entered the room. “I’m Sandy,” she said extending her hand.

Mary, ignoring Sandy, noticed a portrait behind Adam’s desk, stood, walked toward it. “Who’s that?” she asked, studying the textured painting.

“My grandfather,” Adam answered. Mary bent forward, examining the boldness of the strokes. The artist’s signature slanted finely backward.

“He’s a nice looking man, though I don’t like the frame.” Turning, she added, “He has compelling eyes,” before allowing Sandy to lead her from the room.

\*

Mary walked slowly down the corridor occasionally dragging her right foot. “It’s a nervous habit,” she admitted as Sandy turned at the sound.

“Everything will be fine,” Sandy said, slowing her step, allowing Mary to fall alongside.

“Do many give up their children?” Mary asked.

“The money brings them in,” Sandy admitted. “And with twins there’s always a premium.”

“Are twins that desired?”

“Yes,” Sandy said, taking Mary’s arm in hers. “With four healthy lungs, they’re in great demand.”

“I suppose a family of four is desirable,” Mary agreed.

“It’s a sign of virility.”

“What is it with virility these days?” Mary asked, slowing her step.

“With the real and perceived decrease in fertility rates,” Sandy answered, “anything thought to help is desirable.”

Coming to a full stop, Mary asked, “Am I doing the right thing?”

“You’ve made your choice.”

“But, is it the right choice?”

“It’ll have to be,” Sandy said, taking Mary’s hand, giving her a tug.

\*

“Do I get my own room?” Mary asked, realizing they had been passing door after door. She stopped at a door, looked through the small three by five inch glass window. Mary saw a pregnant women, naked, strapped to the metal frame above a bed as if she were a canopy; beside her, a woman sat on a chair, reading. The pregnant woman’s midsection extended three feet toward a coarse net strapped tight across the frame where the mattress should have been. A thick brown tube descended from her side while a small white tube snaked into her mouth. Mary stepped back.

“We’ve found that it’s best for the babies,” Sandy said, placing an arm

on Mary's shoulder before leading her down the hall. "Don't worry—the mother doesn't feel a thing," Sandy assured, "She's sedated."

Mary allowed herself to be led forward; she counted doors. When they had passed twenty doors, she asked, "How many?"

"What?"

"How many women are here?" Mary asked, stopping again, leaning backwards.

"It varies."

"How many mothers are here, now?"

"One hundred and forty," Sandy answered, tugging. "It's just a little further."

"How many facilities are there like this?" Mary asked, stepping in line behind Sandy.

"That isn't important," Sandy said, shortening her stride before turning to open the door. Mary followed Sandy into the room, knelt beside the bed, looked under the bed, confirming a net supported the mattress. Mary touched the net, fell forward.

"You're all right," Sandy said, helping Mary regain her feet.

Sandy reached her arms around Mary, grabbed the base of her sweater, pulled it up over her head. Sandy lowered Mary's chino pants along with her panties. Sandy slipped her arms around Mary's bra, unfastened it, slid it down along Mary's arms. Kneeling, Sandy lifted Mary's left foot, slipped off her sock, lowered her foot, repeated with her right foot. Standing, Sandy rubbed her hand first along Mary's right leg then her left before cupping her hands at the base of Mary's neck, massaging.

"You're beautiful," she said, lowering Mary to the bed, stretching her out along the length of the mattress.

\*

“That’s nice,” Mary said as Sandy massaged her feet. Sandy had taken a seat at the head of the bed by the time Mary’s doctor entered the room.

The doctor rolled Mary onto her right side, massaged her buttock, pinched it. “I find it makes the shot hurt less,” she said, inserting the needle. “We’ll let this settle for a couple of minutes,” she said, stroking Mary’s hair.

“What are you going to do?” Mary asked.

“Insert a colostomy tube,” she answered.

“A what?” Mary asked, drifting.

“A colostomy tube so you won’t have to get up.”

\*

Adam met the Johnsons at Marvin’s Steak House. After ordering oysters for appetizers and rare steaks, Adam raised his wineglass. “They’re the finest twins we’ve had in some time.”

“Cheers,” the Johnsons replied in unison, Samuel adding, “To our future and our family.”

“When are they due?” Nikki asked.

“Six weeks,” Adam said, adding, “which means they’ll be ready in ten.”

“Perfect,” Nikki said, checking her calendar.

"That's why we thought of you," Adam said, pulling a contract from his briefcase.

Samuel reached into his jacket pocket, lifted free a pen after receiving the papers, signed. "How's your father?" he asked, thumbing through the contract.

"He's been playing quite a bit of golf," Adam answered.

"Does he ever come in?" Samuel asked. He took out his checkbook, penned the check, passed the check and contract to Adam.

"That should do it," Adam said, placing them into his briefcase.

"Let's celebrate," Samuel said, raising his glass. "To conception."

"Cheers."

\*

Mary looked down toward the net, focusing on the twine, before glancing up at the mirror in front of her. She noticed her shaved head had started to stubble.

"Your neck will get stronger," Sandy said, rising from her chair beside the bed.

"Why?"

"As you use your neck more, you'll ..."

"No, why do I have to be suspended like this?" Mary asked as Sandy started massaging her hands.

"It's been found to be beneficial for the fetus," Sandy answered.

"How long?"

"You'll do great."

"How long have I been suspended?"

"Twenty-two hours."

"I feel like my arms are being torn from my shoulders," Mary said, rocking forward slightly.

"That'll make it worse," Sandy said, steadying her. "I know."

"You've done it?"

"The first time was eight years ago then again two years ago."

"How could you stand it?"

"The first time was tough," Sandy admitted. "That was before they gave companions."

"Is that what you are?" Mary asked.

"Yes."

Mary lowered her head, gazed at her colostomy tube. She watched a milky yellow fluid flow through the tube. "Did you have one of those?"

"Not the first time," Sandy admitted. "They're making advances."

"What other advances are in store?"

"You'll get a feeding tube," Sandy answered.

"So, I get to be coupled from both ends."

Sandy nodded.

"Will I be able to speak?" Mary asked.

"No," Sandy answered, "that's why they wait a couple of days."

"The nice thing to do," Mary said, raising her head.

"I'll be here throughout," Sandy said. She caressed Mary's forehead. "Try to get some rest."

"But, they'll put me out, right?" Mary asked. Reminding Sandy, she added, "You said that the woman down the hall was sedated."

"You'll never be unconscious," Sandy admitted. "It's better this way."

"They've found it's better this way," Mary mimicked.

"Yes—try to relax. You're going to need your strength."

"How am I going to regain my strength?" Mary asked, lowering her head. She raised her head before asking, "What is this really about?"

"The welfare of the twins," Sandy answered. "Everything is being done for the welfare of the twins."

"They're that special?" Mary asked.

"Yes."

\*

"I've got the files," Sandy said, holding five manila envelopes. "There's a minister, a doctor and her wife, a couple who are both teachers, a contractor, and an architect and his wife from Seattle."

"The minister was raised in Maine," Sandy said, opening the first file. "His wife's name is Vanessa; they've already adopted one child." Sandy held the photo for Mary.

"Cute family."

"The doctor and her wife live in San Francisco. They like to travel," Sandy said, holding a picture of the couple at Machu Picchu.

"How did you decide?" Mary asked, after Sandy had floated through the files.



“As silly as it sounds,” Sandy answered, “I flipped a coin,” adding, “I just couldn’t believe that my little Brandon could be so lucky; and, since it was by chance that I found Franklin, I decided it would be by chance that I made the final selection.”

“Let’s choose,” Mary suggested. “The doctor’s husband wants to stay at home, right?”

“Yes,” Sandy answered, raising their file to the top. “And, he’s an artist,” she said, showing Mary a painting.

“What?” Mary said, turning her head. “That’s the artist who painted the portrait in Adam’s office.”

“It must have been done from a photo,” Sandy offered as an explanation. “It’s nice though, isn’t it?”

\*

Sandy stood and caressed Mary’s head once Mary opened her bloodshot eyes. Mary slipped her tongue along the tube that violated her mouth, extended down her throat into her stomach. She slowly slid her tongue across the stitches that kept her lips sewn shut before running her tongue along the canyons of her masticated gums. She felt as though she could snake her tongue through the canyons to the top of her skull. As she explored one cavity, she tried to remember what it was like to lose a tooth as a child. As she moved from pit to pit she imagined how large her teeth must have been to fill the voids.

“They started excising teeth last year,” Sandy said as tears dropped from Mary’s nose through the net to the floor. “They found calcium was being diverted to teeth,”

Sandy explained before admitting, "I don't know why they insist on sewing the lips closed."

Mary closed her eyes, lowered her head, focused her attention on the throbbing, counted her unsteady pulse.

"I'm sorry," Sandy said, moving to Mary's feet, massaging.

Mary wiggled her feet until Sandy stopped massaging. Sandy squeezed Mary's calves, returned to the head of the bed, sat.

\*

"What are you doing?" Adam's father asked, walking past the receptionist into Adam's office.

Adam, standing, answered, "Business."

"It doesn't look that way to me."

Adam, returning to his desk, opened a desk drawer, lifted out a checkbook, rifled through it. He turned, faced his father, and said, "We have always followed the market. The market is in virility now; people are tired of adoption."

"For God's sake," his father said, taking a seat on the couch, picking up the penis sheath. "Your grandmother ran an orphanage," he said, tossing the sheath from hand to hand.

"No one is interested ..."

"No one," Adam's father interrupted, "but your mother and your grandmother."

“That market is closed,” Adam said, walking toward the apothecary cabinet, sweeping his arm along it. “This is the market,” Adam said, “period.”

\*

Sandy stopped singing her favorite lullaby, picked up the electric razor, shaved Mary’s head, eyebrows, eyelashes, swept the floor. Returning to Mary’s side, she rubbed behind Mary’s ears. Mary’s knotted shoulders twitched as she turned her head. She blinked three times.

“You want a bath?” Sandy asked.

Mary blinked once.

Sandy walked to the sink, rinsed out a sponge, lathered soap. She extended the hose and sprayed Mary. Mary blinked. “Sorry,” Sandy said, aiming the hose into the sink, testing the water.

“That should be better,” she said, squirting Mary. Sandy lowered the hose, picking up the sponge. She bathed Mary, climbing up on the frame to reach her back, laying on the net to wash her front. Once lathered, Sandy dropped the sponge, repeated the cycle, massaging with her hands. Retrieving the sponge, she rinsed it in the sink, relathered it, scrubbed Mary’s face and head. Again dropping the sponge, she massaged Mary’s face and neck, concentrating her efforts on pressure points.

“I’d chosen the name Brandon,” Sandy admitted as she massaged, “even though I knew I shouldn’t choose a name. I wanted the best for him. I thought I had gone to heaven when I heard about the Franklin Adoption Agency. It was like that fairy tale

where the prince and the pauper are switched; the poor kid gets raised as a king. I couldn't believe that my Brandon would be the son of a wealthy family who could care for him better than I ever could." Sandy stopped massaging. She hosed Mary off, patted her dry.

"I was so happy flipping through the family folders. There were doctors, lawyers, teachers, you name it, they were there, and I got to choose. I narrowed it down to a minister who lived on the ocean and a doctor who lived in Boston. I think he lived on Beacon Hill. Anyway, I couldn't decide so I flipped a coin. I'd already figured it was by luck that I found out about Franklin so I figured I might as well leave it to chance. The minister won; I was so happy I couldn't stop crying." Sandy lay the damp towel on the net, stretched out underneath Mary. Mary's belly touched her when Mary inhaled.

"One day I was walking in the mall and ran into the minister. I asked him how my Brandon was. He looked at me kinda' strange before telling me he was not a minister, but rather a model. It had all been a photo shoot."

\*

"This is your new companion, Shelly," Adam said, shaking Mary's shoulder. Mary, bolting awake, looked at herself in the mirror before looking toward Adam. "Sandy's sick," Adam explained.

Adam reached down, rubbed Mary's midsection that almost reached to the net. "I love doing that," Adam admitted, "but, I rarely get into the clinic."

“Take good care of her,” Adam instructed, turning to leave. Mary watched him leave in her mirror.

After Adam left, Mary looked toward Shelly. “I’ve heard you had quite a system,” Shelly said, standing. Mary blinked twice.

“One is for no, two is for yes,” Shelly said, knowing. “A twist to the left with a wink of the right eye means you want your feet rubbed.”

Mary blinked twice.

“From here on out, it’ll be one blink for yes and two blinks for no, period. Do you understand?”

Mary blinked twice.

\*

“We usually don’t let people into the clinic,” Adam said, escorting the Johnsons down the hall, into the nursery. He walked to the back of the nursery, lowered a small blind over a three by five inch window. “After the delivery, next door,” Adam said, patting the now blinded door, “the babies will be placed into these cribs. The babies’ will be fed their mother’s breast milk through these tubes,” Adam said, picking up the two clear tubes protruding through the wall. “It’s really rather simple.”

“The mother’s next door?” Nikki asked, picking up a soft, pink cotton blanket from one of the cribs.

“She’s been receiving the best care money can buy,” Adam answered, “for the last two months.”

“Will we get to thank her?” Nikki asked.

“No, I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

“Give her our thanks,” Nikki insisted.

“Certainly. Now, I’ll show you the private dining room,” Adam said, returning to the hallway door, opening it.

\*

“Enough of your winks,” Shelly said, picking up her riding crop, walking to the base of the bed, scourging Mary’s feet.

\*

Mary raised her head as the doctor walked through the door. “You’re ready,” she said, placing her hand on Mary’s side. She caressed Mary’s buttock, pinched.

\*

Waking, Mary looked into her mirror. Her head had been shaved, again. Tubes dropped from suction cups attached to her breasts. Further down, she saw her stapled midsection where the c-section incision had been made.

Shelly stood up, adjusted one of the cups, said, “Only one month left.”

Mary twisted her head to the right and winked with her left eye.

"I'm afraid I can't answer that," Shelly said.

\*

The waiter pulled the cork from the bottle of wine, waved it under Nikki's nose, poured.

The Johnsons raised their glasses. Samuel met Nikki's glass halfway.

"To a good ride," Nikki said to Samuel as Adam entered the dining room.

"It'll be about twenty minutes," Adam said, extending a plate of oysters. "After you're served, no one will disturb you."

"Thank you."

\*

The doctor entered the nursery. "They're about out," her assistant said, motioning to the monitors.

"How close together are they?" the doctor asked.

"Looks like about three minutes apart."

"That's within range," the doctor said, rechecking the equipment. "They've been strong," she added, pulling out the feeding tubes. She walked to the sink, scrubbed, toweled, put on gloves. She picked up two scalpels, two chest spreaders, extra towels.

"Give me the count," the doctor said, arranging her gear aside both cribs.

"Thirty seconds," the assistant answered, pointing to the baby on her left, adding, "that gives you about three minutes."

“Fine,” the doctor answered, picking up a scalpel. She hunched over the baby, waited.

The moment the baby’s heart stopped beating, her assistant said, “Now.”

The doctor, cut, picked up the spreader, extended the chest, sliced into the right lung, pulled free an annelid. She looked at the annelid as it curled around her finger. Her assistant opened an ice chest; she dropped it in. Slicing open the left lung, she freed another annelid.

“About twenty seconds,” her assistant announced, closing the chest, turning toward the second set of monitors.

After clearing two more annelids, the doctor pulled off her gloves, picked up the chest, walked through the door, passed the chest to Adam.

\*

“They’re really quite delicate,” Nikki said, carving into her second annelid.

“They remind me of boudins,” Samuel replied, licking his lips.

“You haven’t done that for a while,” Nikki said, standing, shedding her clothes. Samuel rose to meet her.

Adam walked into his office, picked up the penis sheath as Samuel lowered Nikki to the dining room’s floor, mounting her.



## The Trip Down Under

"I'm a loser baby, so why don't you kill me," Nikki said as she carried the coffee pot into the living room.

Marc put aside the paper and swallowed the last of his coffee. "Come again?" he said, extending his mug.

"Baby, why don't you kill me," Nikki repeated while pouring the coffee.

Nikki retreated to the bay window and watched the pugs bound after a squirrel. Mugsey and Bugsey were useless hunters; they were good for little more than rubbing snout against glass. She laughed as Bugsey retreated to the sliding door.

Marc glanced at the paper on the coffee table. On the front page was a story about the upcoming Olympics. "You want to take a trip Down Under?" Marc asked.

Bugsey staked out his position against the glass door. Every once in a while he stood back and jumped forward, rattling the door. "Sure," Nikki said, "it'll be nice to pack light."

"Yes, I guess it will. Remember our first trip?" Marc asked.

"The moose wallowing in the bog."

"Yes."

"You were worried," Nikki said, turning toward Marc.

"And, you?" Marc asked.

"That was a while ago."

"It was."

"What do you remember?" Nikki asked.

“The first time I caressed your back. You had had a trim and wanted help brushing the hair off your shirt.”

“I don’t remember that,” Nikki answered.

After a pause, Nikki asked, “Are you surprised?”

“No. It’s strange; but, I suspected it.”

“You couldn’t have,” Nikki said. “I just thought of it.”

“I could have initiated it.”

“Yes, I like that.”

Marc stood and walked to Nikki. He placed his hands on her shoulders and stared at her eyes. “What?” she asked

“You’ve got nice eyes.”

“Thanks. How are you going—“

“I don’t know.”

“Have you given it some thought?”

“Not yet.”

“But you must have?”

“Why?”

“You’ve known from the beginning.”

“Yes.”

“From the beginning,” Nikki echoed.

“Yes, from the beginning,” Marc said. “From the moment we saw the moose wallowing. Strange beginning.”

“Yes, very strange,” Nikki said, adding, “I’m tired; I’m going to take a nap.” Before leaving, Nikki glanced back toward the pugs and said, “They’re funny, aren’t they?”

“If they only knew,” Marc said. “Kiss?”

“Of course,” Nikki said. Nikki kissed his cheek and walked to the bedroom.

Marc followed after a couple of minutes. Marc stood in the doorway and watched Nikki curl into the comforter. “Are you—“

“Don’t ask,” Nikki said, burrowing.

“Okay,” Marc said before returning to the living room.

He picked up the phone and called United. “Two tickets to Sydney on the first available flight. Return, whenever ... okay ... okay ... the third of next month. No, we don’t have visas yet ... I’ll get them tomorrow. Name, yes, Marc Franklin. The second ticket, yes, for my wife, Nikki ... yes, Franklin’s the last name ... I know that they’re particular about the ticketing. No, I don’t want the Outback special ... no, I’m not interested. I just want the tickets. No, I’m not interested in a hotel ... I’ll make arrangements when I get there. No, I’m not interested in seeing koalas ...”

Marc hung up the phone and scribbled a note which he hung on the refrigerator.  
*Back in a while—went to get the oil changed.*

2.

Nikki was watching TV when Marc returned. “How’s it going?” he asked.

“Pretty good,” Nikki answered.

“Are you hungry?” Marc asked as he glanced at his watch.

“Not really.”

“You’ve got to eat something.”

“Why?”

“You won’t be able to sleep.” Marc answered.

“I’ll be fine,” Nikki said.

“I’ll just heat up some left-overs, then,” Marc said, turning toward the kitchen.

“Honey,” Nikki called.

“Yes,” Marc said, returning to the living room.

“Did you get the tickets?”

“I pick them up tomorrow.”

“When do we leave?”

“Day after tomorrow. Tomorrow we have to get our visas.”

“I need a hat,” Nikki said.

“A hat?”

“Yes.”

“We can stop by the mall after we get the visas. Remember, we’re going to travel light.”

“I just need a new hat and maybe a new bathing suit.”

“I’ve got to get something to eat,” he said, turning toward the kitchen.

“We can go out for dinner,” Nikki said.

“I thought you weren’t hungry.”

“I changed my mind. Leo’s? I feel like Chinese.”

“Sure.”

“What should I wear?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Nikki walked to the bay window before saying, “It matters.”

“Why?”

“Rem---“

“I remember,” Marc interrupted. Using his thumb, he rotated his wedding ring.

“It’s silly to think you forgot, sorry. Let’s just forget Leo’s.”

“I want to go,” Marc said. He joined Nikki by the front window.

“What should I wear?”

“That purple turtleneck and jeans,” Marc answered. “You look great in purple,”

he added as Nikki retreated to the bedroom.

3.

“Are we going to the Barrier Reef?” Nikki asked as they drove home from Leo’s.

“I haven’t given it much thought,” Marc admitted.

“If we fly to Sydney, we can go north to the reef.”

“We could,” Marc agreed. “I want to spend some time in Sydney.”

“I just want to make sure we get to the reef; it’s the longest barrier reef.”

“I’ve heard that,” Marc said.

“I wonder if we’ll see kangaroos.”

“They’re everywhere, like rats.”

“That’s the rabbits.”

“I know.”

“I just want to see some. And, I want to see koalas.”

“We can go to the zoo in Sydney,” Marc said as they turned into the driveway. He lowered Nikki’s visor and activated the garage door opener.

“There’s a zoo?”

“Why wouldn’t there be a zoo?” Marc asked, shifting the car into park after turning off the lights.

“I guess it’s all the ads,” Nikki said. “It always seems like the Aussies are always out of doors--in nature.”

“Aussies?” Marc asked.

“I heard it on the TV the other day—and they call the British Pommies,” Nikki said while stepping out of the car.

“I better take the trash out,” Marc said, walking behind the car toward the garbage cans. “I’ll have to stop the mail and the paper,” he said as he dragged the cans down the driveway.

“What?” Nikki asked.

Marc lifted the cans so as not to scrape them against the cement and repeated, “I’ll have to stop the mail and the paper.”

“And, call the pound for the pugs.”

“The pound?” Marc said, dropping the cans at the end of the driveway.

“Why not the kennel?”

“Either is fine,” Nikki agreed. “You make the call.”

4.

“Look,” Marc said, folding his pillow under his head as he turned off the alarm clock.

“We’ve got to get moving.”

“Coffee?” Nikki asked, curling into a ball.

After kissing her on the cheek, he answered, “Sure. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Marc pulled on the shorts he had dropped at the foot of the bed and walked down the hall, poking his head in each of the other three bedrooms as he passed. The first was cluttered with boxes while the second, decorated with floral wallpaper and smelling of potpourri, was their guest bedroom. The last was converted to his office. He glanced at the stack of faxes before turning down the hall to the kitchen. After grinding the beans and setting the coffee going, he returned to his office.

“Sally, I’m not coming in for a couple of days--have Jack take care of any loose ends. No...No, I don’t know when we can reschedule it ... Have Jack give him a call ... Yes ... There’s nothing I can do. Jack will have to call him ... Yes, she’s okay ... No ... I’ll check in ... Yes, go ahead and send messages to my e-mail ... See you later.”

Marc picked up the stack of faxes and thumbed through them. He pulled free a fax from his niece and put it in his back pocket after folding it.

“Who were you talking to?” Nikki asked as Tom entered the bedroom with two mugs of coffee.

“Sally.”

“She’s in already?”

“It’s almost ten,” Marc answered.

“I didn’t realize it was so late.”

“It’s these damn curtains,” Marc said, opening them. “They don’t let in any light. We face east without sunrises.”

“They’re good for afternoon naps,” Nikki said.

Marc looked out across the lawn. “We’ll have to get someone to take care of the yard,” Marc said as a cardinal landed in the Sycamore tree.

“Keeping options open?”

“I suppose.”

Nikki swallowed the rest of her coffee before freeing herself from under the comforter. She deposited the mug on her dresser. “I’ll be ready in fifteen minutes,” she said, closing the bathroom door after her.

Marc stared out across the lawn for a couple of minutes. After the toilet flushed, Marc said, “I’ll let the dogs out.”

Marc picked up Nikki’s coffee mug as she turned on the shower.

5

“Do you like it?” Nikki said, circling in front of the mirror.

“Yes,” Marc answered.

“Really?” Nikki asked.

“You look great.”

“You don’t prefer the two-piece?” Nikki asked, lifting the straps.



“Either’s fine,” Marc answered, examining their visas. “They’re tourist visas; they don’t allow for work.”

“Of course not,” Nikki said, raising the suit at her hips. “Why would we want to work?”

“We don’t, but a lot of people work while traveling in Australia.”

“How do you know?” Nikki asked.

“I guess I don’t,” Marc said.

“Do you like it or not?” Nikki said, turning one last time before stepping toward Marc.

“It’s probably easier to swim and snorkel in a one-piece,” Marc said.

“Which do you prefer?”

“I don’t know. The two-piece, I guess.”

After changing and paying, Nikki placed her arm around Marc. “Let’s find a hat,” she said, smiling. She swung the bag around her forearm as they walked.

“Aren’t you the happy one,” Marc said, allowing himself to be pulled along into the traffic of the mall.

Steering Marc, Nikki said, “Let’s try Eddie Bauer.”

“For the hat?” Marc asked.

“And, I might get a pair of khaki pants.”

“Aren’t we supposed to be traveling light?”

“We’ll travel light—with only new things.”

“It seems like a bit of a waste.”

“Why?” Nikki asked, stopping in front of Bauer’s. She stared at Marc before saying, “Why spoil the fun?”

“You’re right.”

While steering Marc into the store, Nikki said, “Good.”

“Let’s get a cup of coffee, later,” Marc said.

“After I find a pair of pants,” Nikki agreed, releasing Marc. “Help me look,” she said, advancing on a rack of Chinos.

“I’m going to check out the travel stuff,” Marc said, turning toward the glass cases.

After a couple of minutes, Marc returned carrying two money belts. “How do these look?” Marc asked, raising them for inspection.

“Two?”

“We should both have some money,” Marc said, lowering them. “That way we’ve got our bases covered.”

“You’re right.”

“It’s easy to get geared up, isn’t it?” Nikki said.

“Yes,” Marc answered. “It’s nice to be gearing up for a trip.”

“Too bad we didn’t plan it better,” Nikki said, lifting a couple of pairs of pants over her shoulder. “I’m going to try these on.”

“They’ve got luggage, don’t they?” Nikki said, turning back toward Marc.

“I saw some duffel bags,” Marc answered.

“We’ll get two. Tomorrow we’ll leave the house with nothing old and everything new.”

“It’s crazy.”

“Think of it: a spur of the moment trip with nothing from the past.”

“But the past exists,” Marc said.

“Not really,” Nikki replied.

“What about our rings, watches, and your jewelry?”

“Everything goes except the rings,” Nikki said, turning toward the dressing rooms.

“Now get yourself a pair of pants.”

Marc turned toward the men’s section and rifled through the racks picking out a couple of pairs of shorts, a pair of pants, and a few plain tee-shirts. Nikki caught up with him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “The Eddie Bauer man trekking through Australia,” Nikki said, admiring his pile.

“It’s silly,” Marc said, looking at the stack of clothes.

“It’s not,” Nikki said. She sorted through the pile and culled a brown shirt.

“Sorry honey, but you look terrible in brown.” She pulled a light purple shirt from the rack, checked the size, and folded it. While Marc retreated to try on a pair of pants, she added the shirt to his pile.

“Time for luggage,” Nikki said when Marc returned from trying on a pair of pants.

“We’ll get two medium duffels,” Nikki said, approaching the luggage display.

“They’ll be able to fit in the overhead.”

“What’s gotten into you?” Marc asked as Nikki freed a green duffel for herself and a red one for Marc.

Nikki collected two matching toiletry kits before answering. “What do you mean?” she said, walking toward the counter. “A little spontaneity never hurt anyone.”

“We’ve got to stop at the hardware store on the way home,” Marc said, catching up with Nikki as she piled everything on the counter.

Nikki turned and looked. “We need some duct tape and some garbage bags.”

“We can just get some laundry bags,” Nikki said.

“We need garbage bags, too.”

6.

Marc shook Nikki to wake her after she screamed. “You all right?” Marc asked when Nikki opened her eyes.

“Yes,” Nikki said. “Was I drooling?” she asked, flipping the pillow.

“Don’t worry,” Marc said.

“I was in a strange hotel and was waiting my turn to fight in a tent. I don’t know who I was supposed to fight but I was wandering the halls, poking my head in every door, looking for something or someone.”

“You okay?” Marc asked.

“I don’t know,” Nikki admitted. “It was going to be a fight to the death and I was preparing myself to rip at my opponent’s throat. Before that I imagined myself holding my opponent’s arm and kicking at the armpit to dislocate the shoulder.”

“Male or a female?” Marc asked.

“I don’t know. I think it was a guy.”

“Was it me?” Marc asked.

“No, I don’t think so. The hallways meandered. There were steps every once in a while--some up, some down. The hallways dead-ended as well, forcing me to turn around at times.”

“You don’t have ...”

“No, I want to,” Nikki said, placing her hand on her chest. “My heart’s still racing. Christ, I feel like I’ve had ten shots of espresso.”

“Is it like the other dreams?” Marc asked.

“No,” Nikki said. “Before wandering the halls, I watched part of a fight. With a machete, a guy was chopping the leg off of his opponent. The machete had a blue plastic handle.” Marc caressed Nikki’s head, stroking her hair along her ear.

“You want to talk?” Marc asked.

Nikki rotated her pillow before answering, “No.”

“We should,” Marc said.

Nikki closed her eyes for a couple of seconds then opened them.

“We should.”

“About?” Nikki asked.

“We can’t do this,” Marc said.

“You remember—“

“Yes,” Marc said. “I never thought it would come to this.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Nikki said. “We promised; you promised.”

“I know,” Marc said. “Let’s leave it until we get to Australia. Maybe things will change.”

Nikki folded her pillow around her head. "I don't want to talk about it," she said, rolling away from Marc.

"Australia it is," Marc whispered after kissing Nikki's shoulder.

7.

"Ready or not," Marc said, lifting their duffel bags. The boarding was smooth, the flight would leave on time.

"Ready," Nikki said, pulling free their boarding passes and passports from her purse before handing them to the stewardess when they reached the front of the line.

"Enjoy," the stewardess said, returning their passports.

"Thanks," Marc said. Nikki smiled.

"Koalas here we come," Nikki said, walking down the gangplank.

"Yes, koalas here we come," Marc said. "You want the window?" Marc asked as they walked down the aisle. Before hoisting the duffel bags into the overhead compartment, Marc asked, "You need anything?"

Nikki shook her head as she entered the row.

Marc exhaled deeply as he took his seat. Nikki rifled through the airport magazine. "Anything good?" Marc asked, twisting on his fan.

"The first inflight movie is *Crocodile Dundee*," Nikki said.

"That's a surprise."

"*La Traviata* is at the opera house."

"That's fitting," Marc said.

“Fitting?” Nikki asked.

“In a manner,” Marc answered.

“You want to see it?” Nikki asked.

“We’ll see,” Marc said as the stewardesses started the safety routine.

“We should pay attention!” Nikki said as Marc pulled his airport magazine from his pouch.

Marc laid the magazine against his chest and watched the demonstrated extension of the oxygen mask followed by the pointing toward the emergency exits. “The illuminated floor lights lead to the emergency exits,” the stewardess added before folding up her supplies.

“Safety first,” Marc said, glancing through the magazine. “There is a zoo,” Marc said. “We can take the ferry to it from Circular Quay,” he added after locating the map of Sydney.

“Where are we going to stay?” Nikki asked.

“Haven’t really given it much thought. I thought we’d first take a taxi from the airport to the Opera House.”

“I like that,” Nikki said.

“The Opera House was financed through a lottery,” Marc said, pointing to the article under the photo. He had just returned the magazine to its slot when the captain said they were next in line to take off.

“Wake up,” Marc said, rubbing Nikki’s shoulder.

“What? Did I scream?”

“No. Were you having a dream?”

Nikki shook her head then rubbed her neck. “These seats are uncomfortable, aren’t they?”

“I suppose they are,” Marc agreed.

“What time is it?” Nikki asked, rubbing her eyes, noticing the cabin lights had been dimmed.

“Close to three,” Marc answered.

“I never sleep well on flights,” Nikki admitted.

“Me neither. Marc stroked Nikki’s hair while saying quietly, “It’s time.”

“What?” Nikki asked.

“It’s time,” Marc repeated.

Nikki opened her eyes wide and stared at Marc. “Yes, I suppose it is.”

“I’ll meet you in the bathroom in a couple of minutes.”

“The bathroom’s okay, I guess. I wanted to see Australia though,” Nikki said.

“It’s easier this way. It would be harder later.”

“Yes.”

Nikki scooted past Marc and walked down the aisle. Marc retrieved his duffel, rifled through it, and pulled free a couple of plastic bags, a roll of duct tape, and his toiletry bag.

“Hi,” Marc said as he opened the bathroom door.

“Hi,” Nikki said. “I guess this is it.”



“Yes,” Marc agreed.

“A plastic bag—good idea.”

“I didn’t know,” Marc said.

“No, it’s fine.”

“I should tape your hands and legs first,” Marc said.

“Good idea,” Nikki said. “I’ll try not to struggle.”

“I know,” Marc said. Marc motioned for Nikki to sit on the toilet. He taped her legs together then taped her hands which she held on her lap.

“I love you,” Marc said after ripping a piece of tape to cover her mouth.

“I love you, too.”

Marc quickly taped her mouth then placed a bag over her head securing it around the neck with a couple of wrap-arounds of tape. Marc held her tight and watched in the mirror as condensation formed in the bag.

The boy shoves his hands into his pockets and walks down the corridor.

He stops before the first door, looks in. A father bends, raising a baby from a crib. The father steals a kiss, puts the baby down.

Without looking, the boy passes doors. Stopping again, he looks in. Kids play in a classroom. He rubs the back of his head, walks on.

A nurse passes him, dropping pills. He stoops, picks one up, and pops it into his mouth. He stoops and picks up another, and another. He misses doors.

He stumbles and falls, turning he sees his mother standing behind him. She's holding a bat. He feels the knot on his head, stands, and walks, stooping and popping.

A doctor and two more nurses approach. They pat his knotted head and advance. The boy stoops and picks up five pills.

Following the pills, he turns the corner into a gym. He finds a pouch; ten pills tumble to his hand. He swallows. The next pouch lies in the shallow end of a pool. He wades and dives, retrieving the pouch.

He swims out to the next pouch and dives. He picks it up and pushes himself toward the surface. Above him, two boys race. He surfaces, pops the pills, and swims after the boys.

A boat pulls alongside. A doctor reaches out and clubs him.

Two doctors and five nurses circle him as he wakes. His feet and hands are bound. One doctor picks the boy up while the others raise cinder blocks to their shoulders. The bundle is tossed overboard.

He sinks. His eardrums implode; cold water rushes in. He settles on the bottom, bobbing slightly. Before him rests a pouch. He wiggles and grasps the pouch with his teeth. He chews.

## The Barber

When the old man regained consciousness, he mumbled his story in German.

*I answered the advertisement for a barber. I was young with no experience. The hair I cut and collected was packed neatly into wooden crates then shipped by rail to makers of wigs. The wigs were worn by women of society. The women, they were beautiful.*

*I did not answer the advertisement for furnace operator. It was long, hot work. I disliked the heat and had a sensitive nose. The women, they smelled when burned.*

## The Digger

He wore jeans loosened by labor and sweat. He shed his shirt during both the oppressive summers and the frigid winters. His job was simple: he dug where he was told to dig. He had a life expectancy of thirty-six years. The advancements from human genome research were stunning; society controlled the genetic blueprint. Oncology was now only a word for trivia buffs.

The authorities had learned to keep the laborers busy, to keep them separated, and sexed. During the initial stages, some workers had revolted, clamoring that they too had a right to longevity. Such assertions were deemed “preposterous,” not to mention a violation of the national charter, a capital offense. The offenders’ heads were shaved and marked with a simple red dot at the base of their skulls. They were marched through the streets before being forced to kneel in the square. After being shot through the dot, their bracelets were collected.

He returned his shovel to the storage trailer. Its receipt was acknowledged with a simple beep as he passed his bracelet over the scanner. He repeated the gesture at the scanner in front of the foreman’s trailer. The speaker barked: “ten hours and thirty-five minutes.” Five minutes more than required.

He meandered into the corner cafe for his meal then thumbed through the catalog. After choosing a redhead, he punched in the code then swore when the speaker barked, “Busy.” He rifled through the catalog, picking a pencil-thin brunette. “Room 14.” He walked down the hall.

After showering, he walked to the pub. He waved his bracelet over the bar's scanner and ordered a drink. His allotment: four. He also requested a package of cigarettes, a revitalized luxury since lungs had been altered to accept smoke without effect. The bartender reread the monitor; the instructions were clear. He was to increase the strength of the digger's drinks. The digger would be drunk by the end of the third one. It was considered humane.

Birthdays were state secrets, as were termination dates. The average expectancy was ninety-five; the highest regulated expectancy was one hundred and forty-three; the record age being one hundred and eighty-three. The longevity gene was a rare prize.

The digger understood, fleetingly, what was happening. He joined the songs, swaying with his compatriots. He stumbled home to his dormitory cubicle. He flung himself onto the heap of sheets and blankets. Hooded figures arrived at midnight.

## THREE TRIALS

### I. Matthew Martin

#### *The Judge*

The judge licked his lips as he switched one video cassette for another. He had spent the night watching old trials and interrogations. He read the label, B56978, with the subtitle, Piggy, and smiled.

“This little piggy went to market. This little piggy went home.” The judge twisted his pliers, tearing free the toe. “Funny looking thing, isn’t it?” He released the toe, allowing it to drop in his hand.

“Tilt your head back,” the judge instructed. The man, bound, struggled.

“Just this once,” he added, “and the guards will take you back to the holding cell.” Using the pliers as a lever, the judge pried open the man’s mouth. The judge dropped the toe into the man’s mouth.

The judge picked up a glass of water. After pouring water into the man’s mouth, he said, “Come on, swallow.” The man gasped for breath after swallowing.

The judge bent down, pliers in hand, and wrenched free another toe.

#### *Justice by Smith*

“Move in!” the producer yelled. “Stick with it. Our ratings are soaring.” The producer looked at the digital readout: one hundred ninety million and climbing.

He was tied to a post and shoeless. Sweat poured down his grimacing face, teeth grinding. His jeans were soaked with blood and sweat. His shredded back showed the white of his spine.

“Pan to Smith.” Smith wore a black robe, exposing his green eyes; perspiration dampened the cloth around his eyes. In his right hand Smith held a knotted leather whip, the strands red.

When the counter atop the post read thirty, Smith put down the whip and took a seat next to the table. An attendant brought a glass of ice water. Matthew panted. His glazed eyes tried to focus on the attendant who offered him a drink after removing the splintered stick from his mouth. The camera moved in for a close-up.

“How many more?” Matthew asked after taking a small drink.

“Ten,” the attendant said. When Smith stood, the attendant replaced the bit.

### *Auction of rights*

“Ladies and gentlemen a guilty verdict has been reached. The victim’s family has chosen to offer the rights. The bidding will start at one hundred thousand.”

The judge looked to the booth reserved for the representatives of the major communication companies. The booth held only a few bidders. Only one bidder raised his hand.



“Do I have one hundred and twenty thousand?” the judge asked. A different bidder raised her hand.

“One hundred and thirty?” The first bidder shook his head.

The judge raised his hand. Matthew was removed from the stage and led through a side door where he stood in front of a table with five whips.

The large video monitor showed Smith putting down the whip and taking a seat. “Those facials are worth something,” the judge said. “Do I hear one hundred and thirty thousand?”

“Forty?”

“Fifty?”

“Sixty?”

“Seventy?”

“Eighty?”

“Ninety?”

The first bidder shook his head.

“Last chance.” The first bidder again shook his head. “Sold—for one hundred and eighty thousand.”

The judge returned to his seat and pressed a button, activating the light on Smith’s armrest. Smith stood and picked up the whip. After stretching his arm over his head, he walked towards Matthew, raising the whip as the attendant replaced the splintered stick.

*Trial by Jury*

“Today, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, we have three trials,” the judge said into his microphone. Three hundred jury members sat in the auditorium courtroom. The prosecutor and the defendant sat on the stage. Matthew was restrained. “Proceed.”

The video production was introduced by the President. “Good citizens. Today you are being asked to view the following presentation to judge guilt or innocence. Your nation thanks you.”

“You will respond by using the InstaVote handheld unit that rests in front of you. You will first be asked whether or not the defendant is guilty or innocent. A simple majority will decide the issue. If the defendant is found guilty, the punishment will be subject to vote based on federal guidelines. The defendant may then appeal electronically if the defendant so wishes. If the appeal is rejected, the defendant will be subjected to the punishment chosen by the majority.”

### *The Video*

Matthew entered a convenience store with a knife. He walked to the counter. The clerk opened the drawer. Matthew switched the knife into his left hand, extending his right. The clerk handed over some money. Matthew ran from the store.

“Positive identification made,” flashed in red across the bottom of the screen.

“Matthew was caught with the money three blocks from the store,” said the voice-over as a film of the arrest played.

The prosecutor’s face flashed onto the screen. “There is no doubt. Matthew Martin is guilty.” The prosecutors face faded into the stars and stripes.

The screen went black then the defense attorney's face slowly appeared. The attorney, following the advice of a media consultant, attempted to play with the jury's emotions. Matthew had been laid off from his job. He and his wife and their three children were living in a small one bedroom apartment ...

The prosecutor returned on screen to inform the jury that Matthew committed a second crime. The maximum number of children per couple is two. "The law is clear." The prosecutor reminded the jury that only the robbery is in question. The prosecution rested its case.

### *The Vote*

As camera operators took their positions, the judge said, "You will now consider the guilt or innocence of Matthew Martin. Please pick up your InstaVote unit and enter your verdict."

The judge walked toward the video monitor. "Matthew Martin is found guilty." Matthew's shocked face flashed on the large screen. The jury cheered.

"Quiet please." The judge raised his hands. "The punishment still has to be determined. This is Matthew's first offense. The guidelines suggest a flogging followed by lifelong probation. Given the fact that a weapon was used in the assault, a minimum of thirty is required. The maximum, of course, is seventy. Remember, anything over sixty is usually fatal. Enter your preference."

The screen flashed, 40. “The verdict is guilty. The punishment is forty strokes followed by lifelong probation. The guilty party will choose the whip. Thank you ladies and gentlemen.”

The stage manager typed in presidential response number fifty five. “Citizens of the jury. I would like to thank you on behalf of your fellow citizens for deliberating this case. Armed robbery is wrong and perpetrators must be punished.”

The Judge paced in front of the video monitor. He stopped, looked at the screen, and smiled. Shifting his attention to the jury, he said, “Ladies and gentlemen a guilty verdict has been reached. The victim’s family would now like to offer ....”

## II. Martha Brown

### *Sponsorship*

The speakers boomed. “Mace Products is proud to sponsor the trial of Martha Brown. We, at Mace, are not happy unless you are protected. Buy Identify Mace--mace that the police can track.” A video showed a bear of a man being made helpless after being sprayed by a little girl. The man stumbled away to be tracked by a pack of dogs.

### *The Video*

“Stalking is a vicious form of assault. The victim, in this case, was forced to live life looking over her shoulder. The prosecution intends to prove that Martha Brown, 18,

stalked Virginia Williams—robbing Virginia of her freedom. The stalking started when Virginia announced her engagement to David.”

The video showed scene after scene where Virginia was followed by Martha. Martha’s face would light up with glee whenever Virginia started to panic.

The defense portion of the video contended that the prosecution’s video was suspect. The video was produced by an independent and unregistered videographer. The angles and the number of shots suggested that a number of production crews would be necessary to film the events. Additionally, the defense contended, the close ups of Martha did not flow properly.

The prosecutor rebutted by reporting the videographer’s license was being processed. The videographer was well respected, having been in the business for twenty years. The prosecutor again showed one of the stalking sequences. “This, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, could hardly have been fabricated.” The screen halted on a split-screen image. Virginia’s agonized face looking over her shoulder; Martha’s plastered with glee.

The judge stood and walked over to the monitor. “Ladies and gentlemen, please enter your verdict.”

### *Presidential Address*

“Guilty,” flashed on the screen. The judge looked over to the stage hand who loaded in presidential address number eighty-five.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. The defendant is guilty of stalking. Stalking has become endemic in our society. I support the federal guidelines that promote harsh penalties for perpetrators of stalking crimes. I implore you to be harsh— being firm is the only way to free our society of the stalking evil.”

### *The Appeal*

“Certainly this is cruel and unusual punishment,” the defense attorney said.

“Do you wish to make an appeal?” asked the judge.

“Yes.”

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. The defense attorney is in the process of requesting an electronic appeal.”

The defense attorney frantically typed at his terminal as the judge spoke. “We shall know momentarily whether or not the appeal is successful.” The defense attorney finished typing and turned to Martha. He shrugged his shoulders.

The jury became quiet as the words, “Electronic Appeal in Process,” flashed on the screen.

The judge looking down at his screen said, “The defense contends the punishment is excessive.” The judge waited briefly before adding, “The appeal has been denied.”

The judge’s voice could barely be heard above the crowd. “The sentence stands. Martha is to be stripped, paraded through the streets, and flogged sixty times.”

The producer yelled into his microphone, "We're going to need all cameras to cover this one. Let's make it good." The producer smiled as a breast appeared on the screen. The ratings were soaring.

Virginia smiled as Martha's body crumpled when cut free from the post. Ten production companies bid fiercely against each other.

"Last chance. Sold—for two and a half million."

### III. Wilson Jacobs

#### *The Judge Rallies the Crowd*

The judge raised his hands. "Now, ladies and gentlemen of the jury—our feature case. The United States versus Wilson Jacobs." Wilson Jacobs was led bound with chains onto the stage.

The judge spoke quietly into the microphone. "Wilson Jacobs was released two weeks ago from SingSing. He was incarcerated for raping a young woman twenty years ago. The archaic penal system only sent him to jail."

"Ladies and gentlemen. Wilson Jacobs is accused of rape and murder. It is for you to decide whether or not Wilson Jacobs is guilty or innocent."

"Roll the tape," the judge yelled above the crowd. He stepped from the stage. His stagehand handed him a towel. He wiped his forehead and smiled.

### *The Video*

“There is no doubt that Wilson Jacobs is guilty of this crime.” The video showed the mutilated body of Laurie Heart. “Wilson Jacobs’ DNA matches the semen in the victim. Wilson Jacobs was seen at the scene of the crime.” Witnesses and evidence flashed across the screen.

The defense admitted Wilson’s guilt and spent its allotted time pleading for leniency. Images of a horrific childhood flashed across the screen along with images of his incarceration. “The defense wishes for Jacobs to be put to death by lethal injection.”

The judge spoke slowly. “There is no question of guilt or innocence. Wilson Jacobs is guilty. Your duty is to determine the punishment. Federal guidelines require that Wilson be put to death. You will determine the method. Please consult the methods book located to the right of your InstaVote unit.”

### *Smith*

Smith walked up to Wilson, who was still bound, and injected him with an anticoagulant before escorting him up the steps of the platform that was rolled onto the stage. The jury remained silent.

Wilson struggled as his bound hands were suspended from a meat hook. Smith restrained Wilson and slowly raised Wilson’s body several feet above the stage.



Smith ripped open the prison garb and quickly attached a piano wire around Wilson's penis and scrotum. He pulled the wire taut while unfolding a plastic tarp under the platform.

"Citizens of the jury," the judge yelled into his microphone. "Wilson Jacobs will no longer be able to attack helpless victims." The judge raised his hand. The crowd's excitement grew as they waited for the signal. "Remember," the judge said, "the estimated time from fall to death is fifteen minutes."

The judge lowered his hand. The echo of a shot reverberated through the auditorium. People cried out and began to scatter, revealing a woman near the front holding a gun. Wilson's skull had shattered instantly.

#### *The Authorities Take Control*

"Ladies and gentlemen," the judge yelled into his microphone, "please remain calm." Guards filled the room.

People standing close to the woman struck her. The guards interrupted the beating as she collapsed.

"You have just witnessed a tragedy," the judge said into the microphone. The jury, recovering from collective shock, acknowledged the judge by applauding.

"It is a sad day when a so-called citizen interrupts the process of justice. Such a crime is a crime against the country, a crime against the community, and a crime against humanity. We cannot allow such a heinous act. The perpetrator will be remanded to custody and tried. Anything less would mean that we've fallen to her level."

The woman was led away.

“Good night,” the judge said into his microphone. He waved to the jury and exited the stage.

### *The Judge*

The judge, descending the stairs, motioned for an attendant. “Take her to the back.” The attendant nodded. The judge stood, watching the jury exit the auditorium before briskly retreating behind the stage.

“Is she in there?” the judge asked, approaching his office. The attendant nodded, opening the door.

“You little cunt,” the judge said, approaching the bound woman.

The judge took a board and a frame from a shelf. He placed the frame on the board before freeing her left hand.

“Put your hand in the frame,” the judge said. The woman rolled her hand into a fist.

The judge grabbed at her hand, uncurled her ring finger. He gave it a quick jerk; it snapped. The woman yelped.

“I’ll break the rest if you don’t put your hand in the frame.” The woman sucked at her finger then placed her hand in the frame.

“That’s better.”

“You cost me a lot,” the judge said, tying her fingers in place. The woman flinched when he bound her broken finger.

The judge rummaged through the closet. He approached her carrying a tool box.

“Why?” the judge asked.

“He was my brother,” she answered.

The judge removed a hammer and a handful of nails. He walked to his desk and picked up a video camera. He mounted the camera on a tripod. He switched on the camera. “The woman is delusional and suicidal. Restraints are required.”

He placed the nail midway down her middle finger. He drove it home in two strokes, then grabbed another.

## Crucifixion

A woman I passed yesterday asked if I would be a good Samaritan. When I told her I would do my best, she asked me to have the decency to kill her. She admitted she was unable to commit suicide; she needed help. It seems she was banking on my good nature. When I told her I would have to think about it, she said she understood. There are repercussions, I explained. She recognized that and had in fact drawn up a contract releasing me of responsibility. Of course, she warned, if I signed without following through I would be in breach of contract. A contract is, after all, a contract, she added as she unfolded the creased contract. It looked official though I admit I didn't read it. Apparently the method was up to me though she said that she would prefer a gunshot to the back of her head, a shotgun maybe. I think she was hedging, figuring I wasn't a good shot. I suggested I could hunt her down on horse a la steeplechase with a pack of dogs, allowing them to rip her to shreds when cornered. I'm not very fast, she apologized.

Meeting this woman in the park by the rose garden got me thinking about a news clip that was in the paper a couple of days ago. Two men, I believe, or at least a man and a woman—almost certainly not two women—were convicted of serial murder. They had been successful, for awhile. There must have been a desert since the suggestion was that they had their victims drive out into the desert where they were killed and robbed or possibly robbed then killed. Though I'm not sure of the order, the end result seems to be the same. Watches were collected as were rings. Some hands, it seems, swell under stress making it difficult to free rings. The robbers, whatever their gender, would probably have used any available means to free the rings. It would then make a difference whether or not

the robbers were first murders. To remove a finger during the robbery, before the murdering, would be uncomfortable since from childhood on, we are accustomed to having our fingers and thumbs in place. The robbers were not good people it seems. Good, in this case, being the antithesis of robber, murderer, kidnapper, and finger remover.

Punishment, the president believes, needs to be a public spectacle; justice should not be blind. The guilty ones, the two men, or a man and a woman, though almost certainly not two women, are to be posted upon a cross for twenty-four hours then lowered. Once they have their desert legs back, they are to be killed by available means. The conjecture is that they will be shot. It's not very creative to shoot them, particularly after they've been on a cross for such a period. Maybe he'll think of something better since goodness has a tendency to sneak up on people. When they are on the cross I wonder if people will walk up and poke them a little. What is the protocol? It's really hard to know without being there. I also wonder if a boy picks up a stone and throws it and hits one of the murderers in the stomach will the boy be held accountable? If he hits a face with a slightly larger stone is the answer the same? There is also the question of how many stones the boy can throw before his arm gets tired. Remember though that such targets aren't generally available every day so we should assume he's willing to become slightly fatigued given the rarity of the target. Remember too that there are two targets. There are two men, or a man and a woman, though almost certainly not two women, pinned to the crosses. To choose a distribution of throws is difficult without knowing the particulars. Thankfully children are good at making up gaming rules so it won't take long

for the game to be aplay. I also wonder if when the boy strikes the murderer on the left,  
will the murderer on the right laugh? It's difficult to know what murderers think is funny.

## Piranhas

"I left some pamphlets on your desk," my assistant, Matt, said as I entered the office. He was stationed beside the door, briefcase in hand.

"Thanks Matilda," I said, walking past him.

"There are some interesting ones," Matt said, turning to follow.

"Coffee?" I said, approaching my desk. Matt retreated to the outer office, returning with a mug of coffee. He shifted the coaster so it would be close to the pile of pamphlets and placed the mug on top of the coaster.

"For example?" I asked, picking through the pile, ignoring the coffee.

"Hunting in Africa, Carnival in Brazil, diving in the pacific."

"Photo or shooting?"

"What?"

"The safari. Is it photo or shooting?"

"Photo, I think."

I picked up the Africa brochure and tossed it on the floor. Matt reached down and picked it up, flipping through the pages before throwing it away. Matt left the room after I tossed the pacific diving brochure on the floor beside his feet.

While booting up the computer, I engaged the intercom. "Get in here."

"I want to hit Franklin Construction today," I said as Matt entered.

"Did you get my memo?" he asked.

Leaning back in my chair, I pulled the skull from the bookshelf. In India, in the slums, a body is worth twenty-five dollars. I had to pay an extra fifty for a photo of the

bastard while alive. The skull, shiny from caressing, fits comfortably in my palm. The boy was two and a half and just learning to talk when the collectors picked up the body. I wish I could have gotten a picture of the wailing mother, tearing at the collectors. The father, the seller, took the money and went on a binge.

"It'll take twenty minutes to sign the papers," I said, scrolling through the address book. I auto-dialed Franklin at home.

"Jim, sorry to hear about your son. I'm heading out of town for a couple of weeks and want to close before my three o'clock flight."

"I can't," Jim said.

"You're no longer interested in selling your company?"

"For Christ's sake; I need some time. My son just died."

"Call Matt to arrange a convenient time."

"I told him we could work something out," Matt said, as I terminated the call.

"You're right. You will work something out. Franklin lives outside of Greensboro, right?" Matt nodded.

I scrolled through the Greensboro yellow pages, activating the auto-dial on the oldest funeral home in town.

"Are you doing the Franklin funeral?"

"What time does the service start this afternoon?"

"Donations?"

"Thank you," I said, hanging up the phone.

"Time for you to engage," I said, shifting my focus from my terminal to Matt. He fidgeted, rubbed his hands along the armrest. I took a sip of the coffee.



“How would you handle it?” I asked.

“We had a case study once,” Matt admitted, “in our business ethics class.”

“Distance, Matt,” I interrupted. “You need distance.”

Matt shrugged and nodded.

“Do we need Franklin?” I asked.

“They’ve got the tax credits we need,” Matt said, finally looking me in the eyes.

“Can we get them anywhere else?”

“I suppose.”

“Then let’s hit Franklin or move on.

“Couldn’t we wait a couple of days?”

“That’s not the point. Franklin needs to sell; we need to buy. Close the deal and life goes on.”

“It just seems crass.”

“And tomorrow we’ll prostrate ourselves because the slaughters and starvations in Africa continue.”

“That’s different,” Matt said.

“Crass only applies if it’s local? I’m tired of this.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You will call up Franklin and tell him that the transaction will occur at one thirty. If he wishes to postpone it, for even one day, I’m knocking fifteen percent off the offer.”

“But ...”

“Today—one thirty or fifteen percent—period.”

\* \* \*

Buried in the Brazil pamphlet, the government of Brazil provides a disclaimer: Support established charities. Do not encourage street children by giving them money.

I returned the skull to its station after retrieving my billfold. I freed Hoffman's business card which had rooted itself behind my American Express.

"Hoffman? Remember India?" I said, turning to look out my window overlooking the lower Hudson.

"I want you to set up a trip to Brazil. Street kids this time."

"You can leave this afternoon. Matt and I will follow on Friday."

"My new assistant."

"I'll have Matt take care of that. We'll return on Sunday."

"I'll transfer fifty."

"Call Matt with the alpha hotel once you make reservations," I said. I hung up the telephone.

Hoffman is a low-riding, broad-shouldered tank. He's no taller than five-ten and weighs over two twenty five. Organized charity requires certain conviction. In India, Hoffman culled fifteen kids from a mob of over one hundred. Selective, high-impact giving is effective. Kids adapt well when bound to a proven model.

\* \* \*

Activating the intercom, I inquired, "Franklin update."

“There’s no answer at home.”

“Call Moore’s.”

“Sir?”

I picked up a dart from atop my desk, stood, and launched it at the board above the laser printer. I picked up the second dart and positioned myself. “There is no doubt that Franklin is on his way to Moore Funeral Home. Call him there.

“But, sir.”

“How do you think Franklin will respond when he finds out you cost him fifteen percent because you were squeamish about calling a funeral home?”

I threw the dart before picking up the third. I disengaged the intercom, returned to the line, and tossed the last dart. Three triple fifteen’s.

\* \* \*

In 1993, my internet search revealed, a carload of off-duty plainclothes policemen opened fire on seventy sleeping street children. “The kids were unsightly,” one officer claimed under interrogation.

Assuming Matt had finished, I activated the intercom.

“Charity calls us.”

“Sir?”

“We’re going to Brazil,” I answered. “We’re going to take care of some street children. Their lives are hell, the police are shooting them as they sleep, we owe it to them to help put an end to the horror.”

“About Franklin,” Matt interrupted.

“Yes.”

“He’s coming in at one-fifteen.”

“Good. Contact Sisters of Mercy and get some information on their Rio facilities.”

“Franklin?”

“Have Mary show him to conference room C. We leave for Rio on Friday.”

\* \* \*

“I got a call from a guy named Hoffman,” Matt said, handing a piece of paper across the desk. “The alpha hotel is the Rio Hilton.”

“Good,” I said, throwing the paper away after giving it a cursory glance.

“Why alpha?” Matt asked.

“We’ll get a second hotel, beta, close to the mission.”

“What’s the program for the kids?”

“Same as India. We pick out fifteen kids, tutor them, integrate them into private schools, and, if possible, put them through college.”

“How successful has India been?”

“We’ve got eleven kids in private schools with four still receiving remedial tutoring.”

Matt laughed. He explained that he was surprised not to have heard about the Indian children earlier. Philanthropy, I explained, was not about publicity but rather action. I also explained my reluctance to open the flood gates of philanthropic

solicitations, not to mention the difficulty of maintaining tight negotiations if the kid cards were on the table or hanging as photos upon the wall. Kids hanged on the wall, of course, would be something completely different.

\* \* \*

Entering the board room at one forty, I extended my hand. "Good to see you again." Franklin reluctantly took my hand. Matt, standing beside Franklin, patted his back.

"Do you have the papers?" I asked.

Matt nodded.

In silence, we scribbled on a series of contracts. Matt explained the chain of forms and covenants. Franklin's grandfather's business was signed away in ten minutes. Two and a half lifetimes of work. Franklin would certainly cry if he realized that I was buying his business solely for seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of tax credits. The building would be sold after the trucks and the other equipment were liquidated. I wondered if Matt would pat his back again at the equipment auction. It's always a little pathetic when inept family attends the sales. They stare at me accusingly as though I was tearing the limbs off their favorite cat.

\* \* \*

Hoffman met us after we cleared customs. He had bribed an agent so we walked right through. Hoffman was smiling.

"Is everything all right?" I asked.

He nodded. "Couldn't be better," he answered. Hoffman walked past Matt's extended hand. "The car's waiting." Hoffman walked briskly. Matt striding beside Hoffman, hopped occasionally to keep up.

Hoffman stopped before reaching the terminal doors. "You won't have to worry about getting piranhaed here but be careful if you walk anyplace else."

"Piranhaed?" Matt asked.

"The street kids circle in packs victimizing the weak."

As I asked Hoffman, "It's extensive?" I realized that that was exactly why he was smiling as we exited customs. India, before the Sisters of Mercy became involved, was comparatively more difficult.

Hoffman led the way to the parked Bronco. A driver sat at the wheel. A kid accosted Hoffman as he loaded our luggage. Matt angled aside when the kid invaded his space. Hoffman took a half-step toward the kid and cuffed him hard on his left ear then caught his throat with a quick jab. Gasping, the kid stumbled onto the sidewalk, collapsing by a pole. The kid pulled a blue plastic bag from his pocket. He inhaled deeply, gazing at the Coke sign flashing on a billboard.

"The glue makes them feel numb and suppresses their appetite," Hoffman explained.

"Doesn't it cause brain damage?" Matt asked.

"Of course," Hoffman answered, opening the passenger side door for me.

"And keeps them placid," Hoffman added before shutting the door. Hoffman climbed in back after Matt.

\* \* \*

“Shoot! Shoot!” Hoffman yelled, jumping up and down on the beta balcony.

I focused the camera on a pack of kids circling around an elderly man. The man, dressed in sandals, khaki pants, and a white shirt, was a member of the lower middle class. The kids knew better than to piranha the upper class: when they did the police used bullets.

After I exhausted my film, I allowed the camera to hang at my waist. Matt continued to focus and shoot as the kids tackled the man. Lifting him in a choke hold, they stripped away his sandals and wallet. The man struggled as they tore free his shirt and pants. Naked, he was dropped to the street. The kids howled as they dispersed. The man rolled into a ball, hugging his knees. After collecting himself, he stood and continued his walk down the street. A couple of kids circled and jabbed him occasionally before he passed out of sight.

“How many?” I asked.

“Eighteen,” Hoffman answered, “give or take a couple.”

“Perfect.”

Hoffman agreed and added, “We’ll have a couple of extra in case we can’t relocate them.”

“Let’s reload,” I suggested, “and shoot some kids along the wall.” The passive, glue sniffing kids huddled along a wall of the mission, leaving the wall once a day to eat the meal offered by the mission.

Hoffman pocketed the exposed rolls and reloaded the two cameras.

“Leave everything in the room,” Hoffman suggested, taking his wallet from his pocket, “and stick together.”

Hoffman assured us that it was unlikely that the kids would piranha a group of three camera-bearing foreigners. “But, stranger things have happened,” he admitted as he shed his watch. “Tomorrow,” he added, “we’ll leave everything in the safe at the alpha hotel.”

Matt and I nodded our heads in agreement as we mimicked Hoffman’s.

The kids milled around the mission’s wall. Each kid, clutched a blue plastic bag. Occasionally, a kid or two would scuffle. For the most part, however, the kids rocked and inhaled glue fumes. One kid wore a tube sock with three stripes on his glue hand. Another with a shirt wrapped around like a sarong faced the wall and masturbated.

“Let’s shoot,” Hoffman suggested.

Matt readily agreed. “Gives me the creeps,” he admitted, raising his camera.

We shot the kids quickly.

“Thirty,” Hoffman said, predicting my question as we turned toward the beta hotel.

“I meant to ask,” Matt said, securing himself between Hoffman and I. “I thought we were out to pick fifteen kids.”

“Heads or tails,” I said pulling free the penny I’d saved for the occasion.

Matt looked first at me then at Hoffman; Hoffman shrugged.

“Heads or tails?” I repeated.

“Heads, I guess,” Matt answered.



I tossed the coin. Lincoln settled on the dirty street. The coin lay for a second or two before being snatched up by a street kid.

“The piranha kids it is.”

“What?” Matt asked.

“The piranha kids get the scholarships.”

“And the mission kids?”

“Let’s get the films developed,” Hoffman suggested, interrupting the conversation. We retrieved our gear from the beta hotel and returned by car to the alpha hotel.

In the car, I instructed Hoffman to cull the kids as soon as possible. “Tomorrow afternoon we’ll hand out the scholarships, say, two o’clock.”

I slapped Matt’s shoulder. “Tonight we relax.”

\* \* \*

“What time is it?” Matt asked as I shook him awake.

“Five-thirty,” I answered.

“What are you doing?”

“Hoffman’s ready.”

“What?” Matt said, rubbing his eyes.

“Hoffman’s out front. You have ten minutes to shower.”

Matt folded himself and rolled out of bed.

“I thought ...”

“Just get ready,” I interrupted.

I sat on Matt's bed as he showered. "Leave your valuables," I reminded him as he dressed.

Hoffman greeted us as we exited the hotel. "Good morning," he said.

"Any problems?"

Hoffman shook his head.

Matt rubbed his face and blinked his eyes furiously, adjusting to the crisp morning air.

Once we got in the car, Hoffman handed Matt and I each an ornate T-shirt and a hat with *Gamma Rio* inscribed on them.

"Gamma?" Matt asked, following my lead by putting on the shirt then hat.

"Yes, gamma," I answered.

In silence, we drove through the slums of Rio, finally stopping at a run-down hotel.

We entered the hotel. Hoffman led; Matt followed in the rear. The proprietor gave us a key and walked out the front door. Hoffman locked the door.

"There are only twelve rooms," Hoffman apologized as he caught up. "Had to double a couple."

"Fine," I said. Turning to Matt, I said, "This is when you become a partner."

"A partner?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered, following Hoffman who had started down the hall.

Hoffman entered a room. We followed. A boy propped himself in a corner sniffing glue. "These kids find it difficult to trust," Hoffman explained. "The police and the vigilantes keep them on edge." Hoffman placed a bill on the floor and stepped back.

Hoffman retreated to the bathroom. I motioned for Matt to sit on the bed. I propped myself along the wall by the door. The kid inched himself toward the bill. When he reached the bill, Hoffman launched himself from the bathroom and pinned the boy's knees to his chest. Using duct tape, he wrapped the boy into a ball. The boy clutched his glue in one hand and the bill in the other. His hands taped along his side.

"Roll and blow," Hoffman said, standing.

"Roll and blow," I repeated.

Hoffman returned to the bathroom and retrieved a bag. He freed a small hand grenade. He attached a piece of twine to the pin and shoved the grenade into the middle of the roll. He placed a pair of ear plugs into his ears and offered Matt and I each a pair.

"This is a joke," Matt said, taking the pair of ear plugs offered to him.

I placed my plugs in place.

Hoffman turned to the roll and pulled the twine, freeing the pin.

Matt ran into the bathroom as the concussion explored the corners of the room.

I walked into the bathroom and patted Matt's head as he vomited into the urine and feces lined toilet.

"Christ," Matt said, rinsing out his mouth and splashing water on his face.

I pulled free my plugs. Matt removed his.

"Price of admission," I said.

"I'm not going to do it."

I placed my hands on Matt's face. Hoffman stood in the doorway.

“So that you understand,” I said. “There are five for each of us. If you wish to NOT blow your five—Hoffman, who does all the rolling, and I will flip a coin for who gets to blow you—you, whom Hoffman will roll.”

## Trenches

My grandfather had great expectations for his sons. They both disappointed him. His first died horribly running scared from the front line. His second launched himself off a bridge onto a creek bed. Before my uncle was murdered in his war my grandfather fought bravely in his, stumbling through trenches, cursing poor tobacco and pit latrines. He liked to tell stories of shooting the enemy; a brave man standing taller than his two sons, ducking bullets, and popping back.

My father and his brother, I found out, were bastards though they choose not to talk about it. It seems, my grandfather pretended not to know his wife's brother fathered his children. My mother, on the other hand, played it hard. Afraid of the truth, my father ended his life. My mother pretended to be saddened by my father's death though she couldn't keep the ruse up for long.

Once when she was late coming home from the neighbor's my father hit her hard, cracking teeth. Saying nothing, she turned to the refrigerator, pulled free some steaks, fried them. My father cursed her after she visited the dentist, making her borrow the money from her father before allowing her to get the needed crowns. You keep your promise, he said to her as she left for her crowns.

My sister escaped to the confines of suburban sprawl. Instead of pissing out his boundary, her husband built a seven foot tall wooden fence. She likes to sunbathe nude, he told me before I conditionally agreed to help him dig post holes. I would help, I said, if he would let me watch her sunbathe, and then only if he promised to have her masturbate. He feigned anger until I assured him that brothers know these things.

I have learned to leave the family history alone. Proud of my grandfather, I researched his story. The new truth: he was discharged from the army for impotence. His impotence placed him in the hospital after an army doctor had heard that topless dancers no longer aroused him. The doctor tested him, allowing him to spank a nurse. Since an erectionless fighter is useless, my grandfather was sent home to raise his two sons.

My mother pretended not to want to know the truth when I started the story. Your grandfather was a good man, she said, listening. He was never fit for the war, she said, agreeing with the regulations.

How many times did Dad hit you? I once asked my mother. She simply smiled.

When she went to identify him, she lied, No, that's not him, after examining a distinguishing birthmark. The coroner, however, returned his body. It was worth a try, she admitted, choosing a pine box. They should have turned up the heat, she said, picking out bone flecks as she sifted through his ashes.

My son recently showed me the box that had been squirreled away in the attic. It had some ashes in it, he admitted. It's a nice box, he said. I'm going to keep my rock collection in it.

My wife fancies having another girl like the one we aborted. One is enough, I tell her, referring to our son. We always agreed on having a large family, she at times complains. We also agreed on raising him in the church, she reminds me when I afford him choice in the matter. He's too young, she adds.

Are you angry with Uncle Bill? I asked my grandfather one day as he rocked in his rocking chair. Have you ever wanted to wage war? he asked in turn. You're still a fool, he added after I answered.

While my grandfather waged war, my mother laughed. She kept a marker in her pocket to mark each time she laughed. At the end of the day, before brushing her teeth, she would count the slashes before realizing happiness or sadness. She was easily swayed. Once after I took her pen and slashed her, she giggled through the night. The tattoos of humor, she explained the following morning, stroking her first mark of the day.

My wife, at first, had been reluctant to abort our child. It doesn't seem natural, she said, defending her choice. Nature requires action, I argued, since I refused to sire my grandmother. Think of the pain, I argued, after reminding her that I am my father's son.

You learned your lessons well, she said, agreeing. Good I said, grabbing her jaw, asking her to smile. Occasionally, she has a beautiful smile.

## Morning Comes by Way of Restless Nights

Richard tossed from side to side. After glancing at the clock, he slid his feet across the bed, flinging them to the floor. His toes grabbed his slippers.

“One hundred and counting,” he said, marking the chalk board in the hallway.

“Pictures,” he thought, would be the normal hallway hangings.

He wrote down his guess, D, for the hangman game near the bottom of the board.

He walked through the house. His slippers guiding his tour. The plastic crumpled. The Carpet Doctor could think of nothing else to alleviate the wear. “Why don’t you walk elsewhere?” he had asked. “Take a different route,” he had suggested.

“That’s not possible,” Richard had answered.

The Carpet Doctor had shaken his head, “It must be.”

“It isn’t,” Richard had said. “I’ll take the plastic.”

“It won’t look very nice.”

Richard loved, loathed, then loved the sound of the plastic under his slippers. The cool plastic felt blue under his toes. The sound, too, was different. Eighty seven.

“Good,” he mumbled, walking down the hall. Erasing the guess, he wrote D in the first space of the five letter word.

\*\*\*

Richard rolled off the bed and crawled. Pulling himself, rather than pushing, Richard rocked down the hall.



He reached up and marked, pausing. One hundred fifty three.

“It’s not made for this,” Richard mumbled, caressing the worn trim.

He reached toward the hangman game, G. Five letters, starting with D. “Not a good guess,” he mumbled, leaving it. The hangman’s figure lacked arms, legs, and features. He licked his lips, success, almost.

Richard continued to lick his lips, crawling toward the plastic track. “Cleanup duty,” he thought. He lowered his face to the plastic, pulling, and licking.

He paused to remove a hair from his mouth. “Probably rat,” he muttered, resuming his crawl.

Returning to the hall, Richard crossed out the G, adding an arm.

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Richard rubbed out a calf cramp. Two cartwheels, half-bound. “Bruises come to those not wearing protective gear,” Richard thought, slamming into the door. “Fuck me, too,” he yelled.

Chalk in hand, T.

“Buy a vowel,” he said, writing A.

Richard cartwheeled round and around. He crashed into the wall. “That would have hurt a woman with webbed toes,” he said, collecting himself. Raising his arms over his head, he bowed before continuing.

Three hundred sixty five.

The hangman smiled. The price of flowers and vowels is steep.

\*\*\*

Step, turn. Turn, step. "A man who smiles is happy," Richard said, picking up the chalk.

"If I were a word, starting with D, third letter A, I'd have been dealt a good hand,"

Richard said, writing.

Three hundred sixty six.

"Time flies differently for me," spin, turn, "than birds whom are dealt wings."

"The plastic must be tacked down," Richard had said.

"That'll ruin the carpet," the Carpet Doctor had said.

"Tack it," Richard had yelled.

"Whatever," the Carpet Doctor had said, "you're paying the bill."

"I'll buy an E," Richard yelled, scribbling.

Tops fall; it is their nature.

\*\*\*

Elbows and knees, hands raised, army style.

Four hundred eighty nine.

Round and round, the plastic becomes slippery. Ice cream, water slides, summer fun. Elbows and knees, hands raised.

\*\*\*

Mattress on shoulder, walking forward.

Richard picks up the chalk in his teeth, making his mark.

“The mattress is your friend,” the mattress saleswoman had assured.

“Do you guarantee the mattress?” Richard had asked.

“For twenty years,” the woman had said.

“We can copulate and rise with a nineteen year old,” Richard had said, smiling.

“Funny bastard,” she had said, walking off.

“A raped Rumpelstiltskin could have sired many,” Richard said, counting.

Six hundred ninety five, not a mark more or less.

Mattress shouldered, walk forward.

\*\*\*

Richard glanced at the clock. “Eat me,” Richard said, standing. He walked through the house before returning to the board. The hanged man smiled, one eye drooped, held by the optic nerve.

## Extreme Fighting

Richard stumbled through the door, dropped his tool belt, and turned on the TV. After squirreling a beer from the refrigerator, he called, "Max. Come here, boy," kneeling to the floor. He stroked Max behind the ears. "That's a good boy."

He continued to rub Max's ears. Max lowered his head and arched his back. Turning toward the living room, Richard picked up his beer. "The bastard took my hammer," Richard said, flopping to the couch.

Richard looked at his hands. "Damn," he said, flexing his fingers. "Fuck decking with that shit-ass plywood," he added, pulling at splinters.

"Come here, Max," Richard said, rubbing his hands together. Richard reached behind the couch, pulling free a canvas mail bag. Max growled and Richard cuffed him. Grabbing Max by the throat, he stuffed him in the bag. He tied the bag and tossed it aside. Max pawed frantically for a couple of minutes before collapsing. His panting, heard through the bag, slowed.

"You in there?" Richard said, standing to get another beer. Returning from the kitchen, he kicked the bag. Max again pawed.

Richard collapsed to the couch. He leaned toward the bag and sniffed. "You fuck," Richard said, standing. Taking a brisk step forward, Richard kicked the bag. The bag skidded along the floor.

Richard picked up the bag and carried it to the bathroom. He tossed the bag into the tub then turned on the shower. He sat on the toilet.

Returning to the living room, Richard picked up the remote and clicked through the channels, settling on extreme fighting. He watched two bantam weights attempting to dislocate each other's feet. "It'll be a fuck'n draw unless you faggots get up and fight," Max yelled. "Pussies," he added when the fight was called a draw.

Penthouse October walked the ring.

"This should be good," Richard said, watching two middle weights bounce toward the ring. "At least they look like fighters—fuck the tacticians." Rolling out of a choke hold, the Avenger settled on top of Big John. The Avenger dropped his elbow into the base of Big John's neck. "Fuck'n'a, awesome elbow thrust," Richard yelled. Big John tapped out. The ref stopped the fight.

Richard retrieved another beer after Penthouse October again walked the ring.

"This should be good," Richard said, sitting on the floor. "Bare knuckle slugfest." The heavyweights entered the ring. In tight, Demon head butted Gladiator. Gladiator responded with a thrust, catching Demon's throat. Rasping, Demon dropped to the mat. Gladiator got in a couple of kicks before allowing himself to be pulled away by the ref. The EMTs carried Demon off on a stretcher. Richard finished his beer.

Returning to the bathroom, Richard turned off the shower, took a piss, and picked up the canvas bag. He walked to the back porch and swung the bag. It landed short of the dumpster with a thud.

## The Ring

Conrad lubricated his mother's finger with saliva and sucked the ring from her finger. He wiped the spittle from her hand, his tongue exploring the ring as he returned to the pew.

"Why did you do that?" Dana asked.

Conrad spirited the ring to the safety of his cheek before answering. "What does she need it for? She wouldn't want it to go to waste."

"You're sick."

"I can't wait to see Junior's reaction," Conrad whispered. Daniel Jr., shuffled toward the coffin.

"He'll be pissed."

"Junior," Conrad said to Daniel as he passed. Daniel nodded.

Daniel stood before Heather's coffin. He rubbed his hands over his face and through his hair. Covering his face with his hands, he stared through his fingers at his mother's folded hands then turned quickly.

"You bastard!" Daniel said, striding towards Conrad.

"You should spend more time by your mother's coffin," Conrad instructed.

"You stole her ring."

"Tastes good, too," Conrad said, producing the ring on the tip of his tongue for Daniel to see.

"I've had enough of your shit."

"Funny," Conrad said slowly, "I haven't."

Daniel turned.

“What do you have on that guy?” Dana asked as Daniel retreated down the aisle.

“Not as much as I have on you.”

“Bastard.”

Ignoring her, Conrad asked, “Didn’t Junior look nice in his double breasted suit?”

Conrad stared at Dana, forcing a response. “Yes, he looked nice.”

“You look nice.”

“A mini isn’t appropriate,” Dana said, tugging her skirt down her thighs.

“Regardless, you dress as you’re told.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Three quick knocks, followed by two. The attendant opened the door, blocking the way with his body. “The barkeep on the corner sent me.”

“His name?”

“Marley.”

“Fuck off.”

Daniel shoved the attendant, pushing him across the threshold.

“I’m just doing my job,” the attendant muttered. Daniel held him pressed against the wall.

“Then why block the door?” Daniel asked.

“You look like a cop.”

“I’m not.”

“Up the stairs, third door on the left.”

“What can we interest you in?”

“Rape,” Daniel answered.

“Simulated?”

“If that’s the best you can do.”

“Male or female?”

“What?”

“We get all kinds.”

“Female.”

“Anything else?”

“Blonde.”

“Bust...”

“Enough,” Daniel interrupted.

“Eighty.”

Daniel removed his wallet.

“Don’t leave any marks.”

“Marks?” Daniel asked.

“Marks—we don’t get too many looking for beaten and whipped ones.”

Daniel counted out eighty dollars.

“Down the hall, last door on the right.”

“Honey, we have to fill out the forms,” the nurse said. “Name?” she asked.

“What?” Heather asked.



“What are you going to name the little one?”

“I don’t know,” Heather answered.

“Why don’t you name him after his father?”

“Bastard, that’s a good one—father like son.”

The nurse waited, doodling.

Exhausted from labor, Heather closed her eyes. The baby suckled. “Daniel Jr.,” she said.

“Middle name?”

“Daniel, just Daniel.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“I need fifty bucks.”

“For what?” Daniel Jr. asked.

“To get Mom’s ring back.”

“You pawned it?”

“I needed some money.”

“For what? Or, shouldn’t I ask?”

“Dana’s friend wanted fifty bucks for a threesome.”

“You are scum.”

“It was worth it,” Conrad explained. “She’s worth more, but she gave us a break since she used to work with Dana.”

“What’s the name of the pawn shop?” Daniel asked. “I’ll get it this afternoon.”

“Mary’s,” Conrad answered. “I’ll meet you there.”

“No need,” Daniel replied, hanging up the phone.

“Can I help you?” Mary asked.

“I’m looking for a wedding ring. My brother pawned it.”

“Are you Junior?”

“Daniel Jr., yes.” Fishing through a drawer, she retrieved a ring suspended from a leather necklace.

“That’s it,” Daniel said, extending fifty dollars.

“I’m sorry,” she said, drawing the ring back.

“That’s not how it works, brother,” Conrad said, entering the pawn shop. “Hi, Mary.” Mary nodded.

“Mary has integrity,” Conrad explained. “She can only release an item to the person who pawned it.”

“That’s absurd.”

“Wouldn’t want her to lose her reputation.”

“Give her permission to give me the ring,” Daniel demanded.

“That just isn’t how it’s done. If you would like me to get the ring back, you’ll have to give me fifty-five dollars.”

“Fifty-five?”

“Five for profit,” Conrad explained. “Mary deserves a return on her investment.”

“I don’t believe this.”

Dana entered wearing a halter top and mini skirt, belly bare.

“Daniel, Mary,” she said in greeting. She hiked herself up toward Conrad who accepted a kiss.

“Did you know he pawned his mother’s ring for last night?” Daniel asked.

“Yes,” Dana answered.

“And that was all right?”

“You want me to pay for his exploits?” Dana asked.

“Christ!”

“His choice, he pays.”

“Money?” Conrad said, extending his hand. Daniel dug out another five dollars. Conrad took the ring and kissed it. “Bank it,” he said, handing the ring to Dana. Dana dropped the ring into her panties. Conrad smiled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Heather walked slowly through the bar ignoring the comments sprouting around her. Reaching the confines of a secluded booth, she relaxed. She thumbed through the forty dollars; the quickee had lasted five minutes.

“Company?”

“Fuck off.”

“Nothing but talk,” the stranger assured.

“It’s been used,” Heather replied.

“Excuse me?”

“Desperate men looking for freebies open with the heroic lines, ‘Nothing but talk.’  
Now, fuck off.”

“I’m sorry,” said the stranger.

“For what?”

“Just sorry.”

Heather laughed. “I’m going to regret this, but if you buy me a gin and tonic you can sit down.” The stranger retreated to the bar, returning with two drinks.

“Heather,” Heather said, extending her hand.

“Conrad,” said the stranger, taking her hand.

“I’ve got a son,” Heather said, adding “I’m too tired to tell lies. His name’s Daniel Jr.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“This is silly,” Dana complained, following Conrad into the photo studio.

“Junior will get a kick out of it.”

“He won’t.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“We have an appointment,” Conrad informed the receptionist.

“We require a twenty dollar deposit,” the receptionist said, after verifying the appointment. “Last door on the right,” the receptionist said, recording the receipt of the money. “The photographer will be right with you.”

“This is nice,” Conrad said, touring the room. Dana nodded. “Take off your shirt.” Dana complied.

“We don’t shoot pornography,” the photographer said, entering the room.

“Hear me out, then if you don’t like it, we’ll go someplace else.” Conrad outlined the shots he wanted.

“I’ll do it.”

“You don’t like them?” Conrad asked, smiling.

“They’re trash.”

“I think they’re quite good,” Conrad said, retrieving the photos strewn across the floor.

“Look at this one,” Conrad said, holding up a photo. “Don’t you like the symmetry?”

“A tit with a ring on it?”

“Junior, you’ve got no sense for art. It’s simple, really.”

“You are a sorry bastard,” Daniel Jr. said.

“No, brother—you are the bastard.”

“Mom had good reason to despise you.”

“She may have despised my lifestyle,” Conrad admitted. “But, she was never threatened by me.”

Daniel charged. Conrad ducked under his anemic swing. Conrad laughed while deflecting Daniel’s flailing.

“What the hell?” Dana yelled, entering Conrad’s apartment.

“Junior’s just a little bent out of shape,” Conrad said, maneuvering Daniel into a full nelson, “since he was Daddy’s little toy.”

Daniel fought to free himself, Conrad maintained his hold.

“Daddy loves you, loves you real hard,” Conrad whispered. Daniel struggled.

“Let him go.”

Conrad nuzzled his face in the nape of Daniel’s neck, gave him a hickey. “Return the favor sometime,” Conrad said, flinging Daniel across the apartment.

“I’ll kill you someday,” Daniel said, stretching his neck, rubbing the hickey.

“You won’t.” Conrad took the ring from his pocket and tossed it to Daniel

“Here, you deserve it.”

Daniel pocketed the ring and emptied the bills from his wallet. “That’s it,” he said, tossing the bills on the floor as he exited.

Conrad thumbed through the photos.

“Dana, looks like you’re working tonight,” he said, smiling.

Vita <sup>2</sup>

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