AN APARTMENT IN VIAREGGIO: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES WITH CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

By

BRIAN GEBHART

Bachelor of Arts

University of Missouri

Columbia, Missouri

2004

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
May 2007

AN APARTMENT IN VIAREGGIO: A COLLECTION

OF SHORT STORIES WITH CRITICAL

INTRODUCTION

Thesis Approved:

Toni Graham
Thesis Advisor

Edward Walkiewicz

Lisa Lewis

A. Gordon Emslie
Dean of the Graduate College

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Fantastic, the Mundane, and Lived Experience:

A Critical Introduction

In the past three years as a graduate student at Oklahoma State, I have probably learned more about the craft of writing than I learned in the previous twenty-two years. I have developed my ability to employ the most effective language and discovered methods of balancing the many elements of fiction: character, plot, setting, dialogue, conflict, tension—the list could continue. Equally vital to my growth as a writer has been the rigorous workshop format, which forced me to produce drafts on a regular basis, and proved to me, once and for all, that "inspiration" and "creativity" will carry a person only so far—and not very far at that. There exists, in popular culture, an unfortunate myth that these indefinite qualities form the substance of a writer, and determine the level of that writer's success. Though I never wholly subscribed to that notion, I have come to realize that I, too, once held these qualities in high esteem as the things that separate a serious writer from everyone else. Over the past few years, the attributes of diligence, dedication, and meticulousness, have taken their rightful place next to inspiration and

creativity. I have lost any illusions about writing not being "work" in the standard definition of the word—it most certainly is. And yet, the best writing still inspires me, makes me want to create images, characters, and stories as vital and potent as those I have read. Without the power to elicit these desires, writing remains inert, nothing more than marks on a page. Good writing, writing worthy of being read, must combine the solid elements of craft with a more intangible aspect, a sense that the world created by the writer is imbued with a heightened resonance, a significance that we rarely experience—or, at least, seldom recognize—in our own lives. My development as a writer over the past three years now appears as a battle for preeminence, in my own work, between these two necessary elements. Ultimately, they must cooperate and reinforce one another, but that realization has arrived only after much struggle and a major re-thinking of my motives for writing and my goals for the finished product. Thus, to fully discuss the stories in this collection, the process of bringing them to fruition, and my development as a writer over the past three years, I must first examine the twenty-two years that preceded my time at Oklahoma State.

The Fantastic

While I was growing up on the outskirts of Stillwater, Oklahoma, my options for occupying time were limited—at least, they certainly seem so in retrospect. I did not live in a neighborhood full of kids, bicycles, and basketball goals, as most of my friends did. My parents chose not to pay for cable, so my television viewing was limited. I had no brothers or sisters with whom to play or fight; the Internet and high-quality video game

systems had not yet arrived. So I read books, lots of them, and of all different kinds. But the books I kept coming back to, reading again, and, eventually, imitating in my own first stabs at writing, were the books that most readily embraced the fantastic (an admittedly murky concept, which I will use throughout to refer to events and storylines that either reject accepted boundaries of plausibility, or else push those boundaries to their breaking point). During my youth and early adolescence, I devoured the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, Isaac Asimov and Frank Herbert, as well as dozens of more contemporary writers of what is now termed "speculative fiction." At the time, I just called it good reading. Only several years later would I begin to understand that this kind of writing was not granted a great deal of respect for artistic merit, a respect which, I believed, it so richly deserved.

Soon after I came to this realization, I stopped writing my generic imitations of those fantastic tales. And while I have long since abandoned such weak mimicry, I remain convinced that my early experiences with the dizzying possibilities of fiction still inform my processes of reading and writing today. Margaret Atwood has investigated the genesis of the storytelling impulse in her essay "Reading Blind," which she wrote as an introduction to *The Best American Short Stories 1989*. In the essay, she describes the two main kinds of stories that children hear: the overheard, gossip-laden "kitchen stories" and the fantastic fairy tales and Biblical stories designed for children's ears. The distinction between these two types of tales, she argues, arises gradually: "It's only when we are older that we are taught to regard one kind of story as real and the other kind as mere invention. This is about the same time we're taught to believe that dentists are useful, and writers are not" (1457). Fortunately, I never accepted this second notion; if I

had, I might be spending my time studying teeth instead of words. Still, the understanding that certain kinds of stories are considered more real—and, implicitly, more relevant—created a profound dilemma for me. I remained enchanted by fantastic tales, but I yearned to read, and later, to write, fiction that people would deem relevant.

Thus, during my high school and early college years, I searched for authors who strived to reconcile this dilemma. Works of dystopian fiction by Orwell, Huxley, and Heller, as well as the postmodern novels of Vonnegut, Pynchon, Atwood, and DeLillo, captured my interest with their complication of the overly simplistic categories of real, realistic, and imaginary. As a result, I began to explore the boundaries of these categories in my own work. The first story manuscript I wrote as a graduate student—a story that does not appear in this collection—narrated the strange and fantastic experiences of a character during a one-night's stay at a hotel in New Mexico. In the middle of the night, this character finds his way to the hotel's basement, where he stumbles across a hidden room filled with gold and other priceless treasures. He is discovered by two hotel employees and chased through a labyrinthine basement until finally surfacing and locating his friends. These friends, predictably, do not believe his story, and as they drive away, he is left wondering whether he really saw everything he remembers seeing. Without any concrete evidence to reassure him of the experience, he realizes that he will never be able to know for certain.

Looking back on it, I am still intrigued by the basic idea, but I can also see the glaring flaws in my execution. The characters are flat, the actions contrived, and the story's conclusion highly unsatisfying. The narrative is weighted down by an artificial plot and lacks interiority—that sense of the individual mind struggling to come to grips

with the outside world, what Frank O'Connor has termed "an intense awareness of human loneliness" (19). After listening to a workshop critique of this story, I began to realize that I had written a simple thought-experiment, with characters and a set of events piled haphazardly around the main concept. Ever since I wrote this story, I have attempted to wrench my work away from the dominion of abstract concepts. I have tried to base my stories, instead, upon characters and their lived experiences. Undeniably, I am still attracted to fantastic occurrences, as some of the material in this collection will reveal. In "Nocturne," a disaster at a nuclear power plant throws a young man's world into disarray, and he spends most of the story struggling to reclaim a sense of order. In "The Real Deal," the main character watches a meteorite fall through the roof of his parents' house as a teenager, and this strange incident changes the course of his life. In earlier drafts, both these stories remained focused on an originating concept, but through the process of revision, I have, I believe, pushed the characters onto center stage. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that these changes do not make the newer versions inherently more realistic than the previous. As Ben Marcus writes, in his introduction to *The Anchor Book of New American Short Stories*, stories "are language-made hallucinations, fabrications that persuade us to believe in them for their duration" (*xv*). Any creation of language is, in a certain sense, just as real as any other creation. The distinction is that the vast majority of people who read literary fiction want to read about human characters, people with whom they can identify and sympathize, people who undergo struggles not so far removed from their own. If I wanted to write philosophical tracts, I realized, I had chosen the wrong field.

The Mundane

Luckily for me, I do not want to write philosophy, or fairy tales, or metaphysics; I want to write fiction. The skill of generating viable fictional subjects, however, did not come naturally to me. In large part, I believe this deficiency stems from encountering short stories fairly late in the development of my reading habits. I remember reading, in my Senior English class at Stillwater High School, John Updike's "A & P." In a class that focused primarily on Shakespearean tragedy and lyric poetry, Updike's story stood out as a wholly different kind of writing. I had read short stories before, but most of them were by the likes of Poe, Hawthorne, and O. Henry—worthy writers all, but hardly practitioners of the contemporary short story form. In "A & P," Updike describes an incredibly ordinary situation, seen through the eyes of Sammy, a young grocery store clerk. But at the end of the story, after Sammy quits his job in protest, there is a line that remained stuck in my head for days afterward: "His face was dark gray and his back stiff, as if he's just had an injection of iron, and my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter" (833). The quiet gravity of that line still rings true: Sammy's revelation, while brought about by the most trivial of circumstances, carries monumental importance for him. After the class read "A & P," the teacher challenged us to write a story in a similar vein. When I sat down to attempt it, I realized I did not quite know how. How could I write a story filled with mundane occurrences, yet simultaneously infused with great significance for the narrator and, as a result, the reader?

Over the past several years, I have developed a few tentative answers to that question by trying to work out the problem in my stories. While none of the occurrences in this collection equal the concentrated force of Updike's "three girls in nothing but bathing suits" (828), I have attempted to depict the long shadows often cast by small events. In "Flyover," the difficulty of four people trying to negotiate the streets of New York has rather large implications for the characters, as does a purse lost at a restaurant. Similar situations arise in "Nocturne," with a misplaced document; in "A Heap of Ashes," with a broken camera; in "October Revolution," with the choice of Halloween costumes; and in "Noble Savages," with an elaborate piece of graffiti. Each of these seemingly small details has a major impact on the internal and external lives of the characters.

For the vast majority of human beings, the mundane remains the order of the day. In reflecting on his aims as a short story writer, Sherwood Anderson points out the disjunction between fictional conventions of the time and the lived experience of ordinary people:

> I was certain that none of them lived felt or talked as the average American novel made them live feel and talk and as for the plot short stories of the magazines—those bastard children of de Maupassant, Poe, and O. Henry—it was certain there were no plot short stories ever lived in any life I had known anything about. (1455)

But even though a person's external life may follow a monotonous routine, that person's internal life may be rich and vibrant beyond any other individual's ability to comprehend. Anderson's work in *Winesburg, Ohio*, exemplifies this principle. While his characters

live in a quiet, rural town and work mundane jobs as teachers, farmers, preachers, and innkeepers, Anderson gives great depth to their private lives with a powerful emotional and intellectual resonance. The inhabitants of Winesburg sense the inadequacy of their jobs and their relationships with other people, and they yearn for something greater, though they are often unable to define exactly what that something would be. Reading *Winesburg, Ohio*, I felt as though I knew these people; the near-century separating them from me is irrelevant. The hopes and fears that he reveals in the characters are timeless, and his depiction of their troubles recalls O'Connor's "intense awareness of human loneliness." Often, Anderson segues from a description of some ordinary action to a character's deep sense of loss or yearning, often triggered by a specific image or sensation. In the following passage from "Beth's Garden," I have attempted to evoke the main character's grief for his late wife by using this method:

> The backpack dug into his sore collarbone, so he shrugged his right arm out of the strap, putting the full burden upon his good shoulder. He suspected the wound would never heal completely. Finishing the deck with his collarbone still in the process of knitting was certainly the most difficult thing Garrett had ever done. And he had never felt a greater sense of his own isolation than when the deck had been completed and there was no one to help him celebrate. He realized he had spent innumerable hours piecing together an ugly wooden platform where, in days to come, he would sit alone and watch the sunset.

This passage reflects my desire to portray mundane experiences in the strikingly significant light they often acquire. Refining my skills in this area remains one of my primary goals as a writer.

In recent years, as I have read numerous pieces of contemporary short fiction—from the best output of the country's literary journals to the most hackneyed of *Cimarron Review* submissions—I have sought out short story writers who are able to reveal profound truths about human existence without stepping outside of their characters' everyday lives. One writer who caught my attention about two years ago is Deborah Eisenberg. In "Some Other, Better Otto," she writes about a character whose daily existence does not involve any major hardships, yet who remains strikingly dissatisfied with his life. Near the story's end, Otto's partner tells him:

> I don't know why you're unhappy. You do interesting work, you're admired, we live in a wonderful place, we have wonderful friends. We have everything we need and most of the things we want. We have excellent lives by anyone's standard. (173)

Eisenberg's story captures the odd dilemma of millions of people all over the world, but it is a dilemma that seems especially potent throughout much of middle-to-upper-class America. Otto's life, as described above, is perhaps more trivial and mundane than any of the lives in *Winesburg, Ohio*, or Joyce's *Dubliners*, because there are no struggles left for him. He no longer has any obstacles to overcome or any significant conflicts to resolve. The only thing troubling about his life is the fact that he cannot figure out why his life remains so troubling. He seems doomed to the impotent frustration of feeling depressed for no apparent reason, of having everything he could reasonably want and yet wanting more. This is the essence of the mundane as I would like it to work in my fiction—a daily existence that yields an intense, yet indescribable, longing, for some greater significance to life that cannot be put into words. So far, I have been unsuccessful

at reaching that goal, though the feelings elicited from Paul in "The Real Deal," when he contemplates the meteorite, are perhaps as near as I have been able to come.

Lived Experience

The two main impulses I have identified, thus far, as providing an impetus for my writing may seem, on the surface, to contradict one another. "Fantastic" and "mundane" are not words that would usually appear in the same sentence. But if there is one place where these two ideas intersect to form something unique, it is in the realm of lived experience. While most of a person's daily tasks are likely to appear mundane, both to that person and to other people, an element of the fantastic can sometimes slip back in. I have previously defined the fantastic as that which stretches the boundaries of plausibility, but the concept of plausibility is just as subjective and contingent as that of the fantastic. Rational science has only stretched these boundaries further, by allowing humans to experience so many things that would seem to be the products of wild delusions if we had not seen and heard them firsthand; today's science fiction is tomorrow's hard-nosed realism. Beyond this rather simplistic formulation, though, there lies a deeper truth, which is that our lived experiences often border on the fantastic.

I am most interested in these borderlands, the liminal zone where the fantastic and the mundane meet. In recent years, the emergence of magical realism and fabulist fiction has begun to highlight the difficulties of drawing a line between the real and unreal, the plausible and implausible, between truth and fiction. In the work of authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Toni Morrison, Italo Calvino, George Saunders, and David

Mitchell, among many others, the conventions of a plausible narrative are abandoned all together. And yet, the worlds these writers create remain startlingly similar to our own. The characters they describe could often slip into a "realistic" narrative with little or no modification. These characters have families and jobs and bills to pay, but the scope of their stories is not limited to these attributes. In George Saunders's story, "Sea Oak," for instance, the main character's Aunt Bernie comes back from the dead, vowing to experience her second life to its fullest, after living out her original life attending quietly to her duties, never making a fuss, never feeling much excitement. Very soon after her resurrection, however, Bernie's body disintegrates and she dies a second time. This experience causes the protagonist to change his life in a few small but meaningful ways, and he begins to set aside money for a headstone:

> What do you write on something like that? LIFE PASSED HER BY? DIED DISAPPOINTED? CAME BACK TO LIFE BUT FELL APART? All true, but too sad, and no way I'm writing any of those. BERNIE KOWALSKI, it's going to say: BELOVED AUNT. (30)

Still, when he is visited by Bernie in his dreams, she does not seem to be resting in peace: "'Some people get everything and I got nothing,' she says. 'Why? Why did that happen?'" (30). While this story is highly absurd, Saunders uses the absurdity to reveal the hidden depths behind the callous exteriors of his characters, and to ask profound psychological questions about the nature of life and death. To my mind, this type of story fits the description Frank O'Connor offers of "human life as we have all experienced it—nostalgia and disillusionment and a fresh nostalgia sharpened by experience" (37). While I have never been quite so bold in using the absurd and the fantastic in my own writing, I

hope to be able to do so someday. Still, some elements of the stories in this collection reveal a gradual movement in that direction: the grotesque painting in "Noble Savages," for instance, or the chaotic library basement in "Nocturne."

In a significant way, much of the difficulty in writing fiction arises from the role that lived experience can play in the process of composition. One of the most repeated platitudes in the world of fiction is, "write what you know." But, as Jerome Stern points out in *Writing Shapely Fiction*, this concept becomes constraining unless interpreted broadly: "There's a plentitude of possibility in what you know, what you can know, what you might want to know, and what it means to know" (64). While the events that take place in this collection's stories are not autobiographical in any narrow sense of the word, I have certainly used my own experiences, in many cases, as a basis from which to extrapolate further events. All of the stories are set in places where I have lived or visited, whether that place is New England or the Great Smoky Mountains, central Missouri or Tuscany. In addition, many of the most fantastic details in this collection are based in part on lived experience: the avalanche of mud in "Beth's Garden," Ethan's menacing presence in "Noble Savages," the riotous images on Vicki's walls in "October Revolution," and Teddy and Sean's nighttime exploits on the streets of Florence in "An Apartment in Viareggio." Ironically, some of the most fabricated details—that is, those farthest away from my lived experience—are also some of the most mundane. It often seems more difficult to generate plausible inanities than it does to modify lived experiences that already carry an element of the fantastic or absurd.

Still, the primary goal I have for these stories is for readers to find them enjoyable. If there is anything enlightening to be found there, so much the better, but it

would be hubristic of me to expect such a reaction at this stage. Finishing this thesis, I feel as though I have just emerged from the laboratory with a very unusual new type of beast in tow. For me, fiction is a unique and often messy collision between the fantastic, the mundane, and my own lived experience. While combining these elements, I often feel like I'm pouring a lot of unknown chemicals into a test tube, waiting to see whether it explodes. This process can be nerve-wracking, but I also believe it lends a certain vitality to the work, so I hope these stories reflect the nature of the process used to create them.

Margaret Atwood again provides a description of good writing that echoes my own ideas. In "Reading Blind," she identifies the most important attribute for a storyteller as "the Ancient Mariner element, the Scheherazade element: a sense of urgency" (1459). She goes on to qualify what she means:

> Urgency does not mean frenzy. The story can be a quiet story, a story about dismay or missed chances or a wordless revelation. But it must be urgently told. It must be told with as much intentness as if the teller's life depended on it. And, if you are a writer, so it does, because your life as the writer of each particular story is only as long, and as good, as the story itself. (1459)

During my years as a student in fiction writing at Oklahoma State, I have tried to bring a sense of urgency to everything I write. Along the way, my technique and my craft have improved dramatically, thanks, in large part, to the excellent instruction I have received—from my advisor, from the many other professors who have taken an interest in my education, and from my fellow graduate students in workshops and elsewhere.

This thesis represents the culmination of three years of work—work that is sometimes fantastic, sometimes mundane, but always, I hope, urgently told.

Works Cited

Anderson, Sherwood. "Form, Not Plot, in the Short Story." *The Short Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction.* Ed. Ann Charters. 6th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 1453-55.

Atwood, Margaret. "Reading Blind." *The Short Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction.* Ed. Ann Charters. 6th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 1456-59.

Eisenberg, Deborah. "Some Other, Better Otto." *The Best American Short Stories 2004*. Ed. Lorrie Moore. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.

Marcus, Ben. Introduction. *The Anchor Book of New American Short Stories*. New York: Anchor Books, 2004.

O'Connor, Frank. *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story*. Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1962.

Saunders, George. "Sea Oak." *The Anchor Book of New American Short Stories*. New York: Anchor Books, 2004. 3-30.

Stern, Jerome. *Writing Shapely Fiction*. New York: Laurel, 1991.

Updike, John. "A & P." *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*. Ed. R.V. Cassill. 5th ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 1995. 828-33.

Noble Savages

I turn off the paint sprayer and set it down, having finished the third side of the house. The tips of my work gloves are splattered with forest green. Hannah stands above me, near the top of the ladder, using a brush to fill in the edges around the windows. I take a few steps back from the wall to get a better look, marveling at the difference a new paint job makes. The inside will still require months of work, but at least our house no longer looks like a place where boys will spend the night on a dare. Hannah's father, when he sees the changes tomorrow, will be thoroughly impressed.

"Let's call it good for today," I say. "We should walk down to the beach."

Hannah twists around to look at me, making the ladder tremble against the side of the house.

"That's okay," she says. "You go ahead. I want to finish these windows and the porch railings before tomorrow."

She turns back to her work, concentrating on her brushstrokes. When a gust of wind blows her dress up around her waist, she does not move to pull it down. In any case, I'm the only one around to see. The nearest town is Waterton, a good ten miles back up the winding private drive and narrow coastal road. Several houses stand about a

mile to the south, crowded in a fat semicircle around a few hundred yards of coastline. Hannah and I can just glimpse this neighborhood—mostly summer homes of Boston professionals—from our vantage point up on the ridge. We can't quite see, but can surely imagine, the white linen pants and floppy straw hats, the array of plastic beach accessories.

"You sure you don't want to come? The tide's out right now; we could go hunting for mussels."

"No, Alan, I'm sure."

"All right," I say. "I'll be down there."

The wind bends long strands of grass toward me as I walk down the narrow trail to the ocean. The trail is rough and hard to follow in places, but I've traversed it so many times in recent days that I think I could probably walk the path blindfolded. Lately, I've had a hard time concentrating on the house. I'll work for a couple of hours, tearing up old carpet, tightening leaky pipes, scraping and sanding the exterior, but I always end up with my feet in the sand, gazing out at the ocean. The disrepair inside the house seems to affect me less and less as I grow accustomed to it. I lived in a disordered household throughout my childhood and learned to live with cluttered rooms and broken fixtures. Neither of my parents bothered themselves with tidiness—there were far more important things on which to focus their attention. They spent their free time going to folk festivals or hiking the Adirondacks; my sister and I always were dragged along. They practiced various meditation techniques, which I was never able to grasp. Dinner at my parents' house was a three-hour affair, punctuated with heated discussions about art and politics,

interrupted often to reheat neglected food. My mother liked to say that a well-ordered mind was more important than a well-appointed living room.

One reason Hannah and I hit it off, though this may seem a little twisted, was our shared dislike for the people around us. We met at a small private college in central Massachusetts, populated by the sons and daughters of old New England wealth—those who didn't have the grades for the Ivy League, that is. Most students received monthly allowances of a couple grand, which they proudly spent on booze, clothes, and video games. Hannah and I had a cultural anthropology class together our junior year; we were both new majors fascinated by the ways early humans had thrived in a hostile world. Their lives seemed to possess a purity that ours lacked.

I had been thoroughly charmed with the tiny studio apartment she rented. She stuffed the place with mismatched furniture, either purchased secondhand or picked up from the curbs on moving days. Hannah maintained that all ornamentation should be personal and handmade, so she turned old clothes into drapes, hammered bottle caps into coffee tables, and painted murals on the walls, only to whitewash over them and paint new ones. I was surprised to learn that Hannah came from an old-money Boston family: an ancestor on her father's side had opened one of the first law offices in the country, nearly three centuries ago. At our wedding this past July, the two sides of the aisle had made a nice study in contrast. The bride's side looked resplendent in tuxedoes and formal gowns with immaculate corsages. The groom's side wore corduroy sport coats and polyester skirts, and each male wore those thin, knit ties that went out of style in the seventies. A Hollywood screenwriter would have pitched our wedding as a modern-day comedy of manners.

When I arrive at the beach, I remove my shoes and socks. Walking barefoot on this stretch of coastline is fairly safe—no broken glass or crumpled soda cans. Hannah's father has held on to this land despite repeated offers from developers. He says he hates the thought of some slick-talking real estate tycoon turning his family's land into timeshares. After the wedding, Hannah and I offered to move in and fix up the place. We told him we'd be living there only temporarily, six months at most, but privately we talked of making the place our permanent home. Hannah's father was letting us live there for free, and we started waiting tables part-time at a restaurant in Waterton to cover living expenses. For the coming spring, Hannah had lined up jobs for us, working with a former professor on an archaeological project—he had received a grant to dig at an old Onondaga village just across the state line in New Hampshire. In the meantime, I hoped to keep occupied nosing around here. With twenty acres of undisturbed land to explore—land that had been inhabited for at least ten thousand years—one never knew what some careful digging might turn up. I felt certain that I would eventually find an artifact, some proof of a bygone era: arrowheads, pottery shards, bones, teeth, stone tools. Common people discover items like these every day, but the discoveries are rarely publicized because they usually hold little archaeological value. Sometimes, though, they turn up the Dead Sea Scrolls.

I hear footsteps behind me and turn to see Hannah swishing her way down through the grass. Her dress is spotted with burrs and seed pods. She plops down next to me and crosses her legs in the sand.

"I think I'm satisfied," she says.

"Good—you should be. If you don't care what your parents think about you, then you shouldn't worry about appearances."

Hannah considers this a moment before responding.

"I don't care what they think about me, I just want them to know I'm not a complete failure. That we're not failures."

"We're way too young to have failed yet."

"By the time they were my age, my father was studying for the bar exam and my mother was working fifty-hour weeks at the *Globe*, while pregnant with my sister."

"Yeah," I say, "but wasn't that the main reason they got divorced?"

"I'm just saying they have high expectations. I don't want to live like them, but I don't want them to think I'm worthless."

I decide to change the subject. As far as parental expectations go, I have an entirely different frame of reference.

"You want to have a fire out here when it gets dark?" I say. "We could bring that bottle of wine, spend an evening on the beach."

She nods and says that sounds good. We sit for several minutes in silence; I watch the seagulls swarm around a dead fish. Twilight begins to turn the landscape hazy. The tide has shifted and is returning, each wave creeping a little higher on the shoreline. I lie back, lace my hands behind my head, and close my eyes. With nothing to occupy my mind, it drifts into daydream. I imagine that I'm walking north along the beach, some day not long from now, climbing around the rocky outcroppings that dot the landscape. At the base of a boulder, I notice an opening that seems to lead down under the sand. I duck my head to explore the grotto and see something glitter from within. On hands and

knees, I crawl downward for several feet until I can stand. A shaft of light from the passageway reveals a deep cavern, and as my eyes adjust I begin to glimpse strange patterns on the cave walls. I see paintings of animals, stick figures holding weapons, odd symbols and runes, even gold-tinted pictographs that resemble hieroglyphics. Every inch of rock is decorated with designs of many different varieties, as though a succession of ancient inhabitants had each left their mark on the walls of the cavern.

Hannah prods my arm; a wave sweeps up the shore, wetting my toes. The vision of my imagined discovery dissolves.

"We should go back and eat dinner," Hannah says. She stands up and extends her hand.

We return a few hours later, bearing firewood, a flashlight, and a bottle of wine. I dig a shallow pit and begin building a teepee-like structure out of the bigger logs. After I have the skeleton in place, I collect some smaller sticks and stack them in between to serve as kindling. Keeping my back to the ocean as a windscreen, I light some of the paper scraps we brought from the house. I feed the fire steadily until I think it can survive on its own. Hannah pours wine, and we sit down side-by-side, facing the fire and the ocean beyond.

"Here's to making it through the first month," I offer. We clink our glasses.

"And to getting the place ready for winter," Hannah adds.

I remember the bedroom radiator and its ominous noises but I do not mention this detail. The house will never be perfect, not with the work of our amateur hands, but at least the work will be ours. I will figure out how to keep the heat running, and if all else

fails we can move to a different room for the winter. Snow might bury the yard and creep up the sides of the house, or blow powdery drifts across the porch. We will be prepared for anything. I see myself shoveling snow out of the driveway and scraping ice from the truck's windshield, only to find that the truck will not start. I am not worried; we have provisions to last us for weeks if necessary: bags of potatoes in the cellar, canned green beans, sweet corn, peaches, twenty pounds of steaks and sausage in the deep-freeze, hefty sacks of flour and sugar. We call the restaurant and tell them the situation—sorry, but we won't be in until the snow melts. Even if the pipes freeze, we will have dozens of gallons of bottled water. We can sit in front of the fireplace reading for hours, or simply wrap ourselves in blankets and watch the snow float down.

Waves slap against the shoreline. The tide is still coming in, so the water creeps closer and closer to the fire. But the waves do not move in a simple progression, a little bit more each time. Instead, some waves fall flat on the beach, while others skitter all the way up to the edge of the fire pit, and it occurs to me that history resembles the movement of the tides. Change does not happen in steady increments, rather, the progression leaps from one extreme to another and everywhere in between. Only over time does a pattern emerge—only in retrospect can one discern forward motion. I start to relay this observation to Hannah, to give voice to the idea so as not to forget it, but she speaks first.

"Do you ever worry about being so isolated?" She pours us each another glass of wine.

"Sometimes," I say. "But I like that part of it, too. We have so much peace and quiet. And so much privacy."

I place my hand on her knee and allow my fingers to drift upward. She halts their progress.

"Not that much privacy."

Down the shoreline, from the direction of the beach house community, I see a fire flicker. Within a few years, I feel sure, the slow march of development will be nudging at the borders of our land. A terrible thought hits me: what if some construction worker uncovers a treasure trove of artifacts with his backhoe? Would he treat this find with the reverence it deserved, or would he pull a lever and fill in an ancient wonder with sand? I imagine some developer setting up a historical landmark within sight of the house, charging an admission fee to gaze at the archaeological marvel. They would allow me inside only as a tourist, a paying customer.

A noise like a cough shakes me back to the present. Hannah looks at me expectantly, but I have no idea what to do. I listen closely; the waves smack against the shore. The wind whistles through the trees behind us. I hear the noise again, closer, but now it sounds like a laugh. Then I hear voices, and distinct forms begin to appear out of the darkness. The first form, taller than the rest, walks in front, stumbling in the sand. Three others follow behind. As they approach the firelight, I see they are all teenage boys, thin and shaggy-headed.

"Come on," the leading boy says over his shoulder. "We didn't walk over here for nothing." He slurs his words, as though he has sand in his mouth.

"Hey, guys, you need help with something?" I say.

"Yeah," the first boy announces. "We heard there was a party over here. I hope the liquor's free, cause I forgot my wallet." I hear snickering from his three companions, who still hang back in the dimness.

"Sorry guys, we just finished our wine, so there's nothing to drink and, as you can see," I spread my hand in front of the fire, palm open, "no party, either."

"No way," the leading boy says, seemingly incredulous. "I could have sworn they said this was the place."

"Well, it's not," Hannah says. I can hear her digging at the ground, scrunching the sand in her fists.

Inexplicably, the boy stands on one leg, balancing like a crane, windmilling his arms to stay upright. After a few moments he falls. His face, streaked with sweat, glistens in the firelight.

"Hey, you don't mind if I have a seat, right? My name's Ethan, by the way." I introduce myself. "Come on, guys." He waves his companions over. "Let's warm up for a minute before we walk back."

The other three boys edge into the firelight and sit, hunched together, several feet away from their leader. They look at the ground, or the fire, or Ethan, but not Hannah or me. For his part, Ethan can't keep still. He fidgets and cracks his knuckles and rolls his head around in circles. Hannah has scooted over until she's right next to me, her leg brushing against mine. Nobody speaks. Ethan lies back against the sand, arching his neck so he can see the ocean, and then flipping over on his chest.

"Do you ever wonder," he says, "how many people have sat here since the beginning of time and looked out at that same ocean? You know what I mean? Like,

who was the first person to stand right on this spot and look out there?" He extends his arm, pointing, and glances back over his shoulder at us. "Probably the chief of some old tribe—one of those noble savages, right?" Ethan titters. "You ever hear about them? The Indians? They called them savages—noble savages." He seems to find this hilarious.

I feel cornered. If I talk to him, try to be friendly, he might think I've sanctioned his presence here. If I ask them all to leave, tell them they're not welcome, threaten them, they might get belligerent.

"Hey, Ethan, let's head back," one of the companions says.

"Chill out," Ethan said. "I'm just, I'm just hanging out by the fire. Don't get all…" Here he trails off and leans forward, staring into the flames. The firelight flickers across his face. His eyes are bloodshot and his pupils dilated. Without looking away, he unties his shoes and slides them off. Next, he peels away his socks, balls them up, and tosses them into the fire. He gazes intently at the burning cotton, as though he were conducting an experiment. Then he begins to swipe his hands back and forth through the flames, but he eventually misjudges and strikes one of the logs. Sparks and embers fly everywhere.

"All right, fellas, time to go." I scoop sand into the fire pit. "We're going home, and so are you."

"Yeah?" Ethan said. "Where you live at?"

"Look, this is our property, so technically you're trespassing. I'm not trying to make a big deal out of it, but you need to go home."

"Aw, come on, man. Let's hang out." Ethan rubs his hands together, as though washing them with an invisible bar of soap. "You can't leave us here. We don't have any booze, and I'm gonna be up all night. Come on."

"I don't think so." I take a step backward. Hannah is already making her way up the trail. "Nice to meet you all, but it's time to go."

The three companions are already heading back down the beach in the direction from which they came. Ethan is following, but he's walking backward, keeping his eyes on us.

"So you live over that way?" Ethan calls after us. "Maybe we'll stop by after a while. You know, for a nightcap."

I hear the three companions burst out laughing. Hannah is nearly jogging up the trail, but I will myself to walk steadily. Just four punk kids, I tell myself, barely out of puberty—nothing to be afraid of. Still, better if they don't know they've shaken you up.

Once they are out of eyesight, I walk briskly back to the house. Hannah goes around inside, closing and latching all the windows. I stand on the front porch and gaze downhill into the darkness. My mind pursues the rest of the night down all kinds of violent avenues. Those are not ordinary kids, I think. I run through a list of potential weapons in the house: hammer, butcher knife, baseball bat. Which would be most effective? I'm getting worked up over nothing, I tell myself. Those kids won't come near the house. Hannah comes outside and hooks an arm around my waist. A gust of wind blows through her hair and several strands tickle my neck. Hannah shivers.

"You think we need to turn on the heater tonight?"

"No, we'll be fine," I say.

"What the hell was that kid on?"

"I'm not sure, but I'll bet it wasn't Sudafed."

"Unless he swallowed the whole bottle."

I decide not to speculate any further. We step inside, and I lock the deadbolt for the first time in weeks. Since we left our fire out there, I tell Hannah, I'll build one in our fireplace. Clearing away the ash and debris takes several minutes, but eventually I construct a moderate blaze. We scoot our chairs up and rest our feet on the hearth. Hannah buries herself in a novel while I tend the fire. My nerves have finally begun to ease off. As I watch the fire sputter, I think about my coming life as a digger. For the first few years I'll be a peon, assigned to a specific cross-section of earth and told to dig. I don't mind the prospect of being bossed around, though, of having no prominent position or authority. As long as I get paid to dig for bones and relics, I'll be happy. Someday, perhaps, I will lead an expedition of my own, but I'm in no hurry. The earth's human detritus, and the secrets concealed therein, will remain long after I'm gone.

The fire pops, startling me out of my thoughts. I hear a clink at the window, and I glance at Hannah to see if she noticed. She's fallen asleep, head lolling against the chair. There is another clink at the window. A pebble. Someone is throwing rocks at the window, like the lovesick boy in every teenage romance. Another rock hits the window, this time making a louder clank. I stand up and walk to the fireplace, removing the poker from its stand.

"What's going on?" Hannah says. Her paperback slides to the floor.

"I think they're here."

Another rock smacks into the window with a crunch; the glass cracks but does not shatter. My hands shake as I march to the door and throw it open. I stand on the porch brandishing the poker.

"Hey," I shout. Now that I'm out here, I don't know what to do. I peer out into the darkness, but the flood of porch light makes it difficult to see anything beyond the house. A rock whizzes past my head and strikes the door. "Hey," I bellow. I pick up one of the rocks and hurl it randomly into the night, still holding the poker aloft.

"Batter up," a voice announces, and this time the rock whacks the side of my head, just above the ear. A cackle of laughter erupts from beyond the lighted circle. "Take your base," another voice quips. This one sounds like Ethan. Shading my eyes from the glare, I focus on where I think the voice came from. After a moment, I see a patch of tall grass rustle suspiciously. Without hesitating to devise a plan, I leap off the porch and run toward the grass, yelling and waving the poker. Two dark forms take off in opposite directions away from the house, and when I turn, I see two more silhouettes, having jumped up from a different hiding place, following in their footsteps. I stand at the edge of the grass, chest heaving, poker still held high, watching Ethan and his friends vanish into the night.

"I ran them off," I say, when I cross the threshold again, shutting the door behind me.

"Are you sure?" Hannah says.

"Yeah, they scattered. I don't think they'll be back anytime soon."

Hannah nods. She does not, however, move from the big armchair, nor does she relax the tension written on her face. Her features are still taut, but expressionless, her

mouth a sharp, horizontal line. She remains wrapped in a blanket, curled into the chair, knees folded beneath her chin, arms crossed around her legs.

I busy myself with the fire, which has burned down to the coals. I stack logs upon the grate, maneuvering them into the right positions. Poker held firmly in my hands, I prod the coals until flames arise to lick the undersides of the logs. My prodding scatters sparks across the hearthstone. The blaze spreads until it fills the fireplace, popping noisily every few minutes. I remain standing, gripping the poker, as the fire consumes its fuel and begins to die. As I am removing the screen to pile on more wood, I hear a clanking sound, dull and metallic, from outside the window. I glance over at Hannah—she's heard it, too.

"Probably just a tree limb banging against the eaves," I say. "It's pretty windy outside."

Hannah does not respond, but I can hear how frail my voice sounds. Adjusting my grip on the poker, I walk to the door, open it, and step outside. I look into the darkness, staring intently, gradually rotating my head to scan the entire lawn. Taking a few steps to the side, I lean over the porch railing to peer around the corner of the house. The only movement comes from the grass and bushes, quavering with each gust of wind. I wait, frozen, for the shadowy figures to appear, but they do not.

"Nothing there," I tell Hannah, shutting the door behind me and throwing the deadbolt.

"What are we going to tell my dad?"

I do not answer right away. I hesitate for a moment, pretending to consider the question, as though it had not yet occurred to me.

"Are you sure we should tell him anything?" I say.

Hannah shoots me a look of disgust. Though I know this does not bode well for me, any expression at all is better than that rigid blankness.

"Yes, I'm sure," she says. "It's his house, it's his property, he has a right to know that it's been attacked."

I feel trapped. I know she's right; there is really no good reason not to tell her father. But the idea of bringing up the subject, and then telling him about the situation in detail, is a prospect I would rather not consider. At the same time, how can I communicate this to Hannah without seeming spineless? I cannot puzzle out an answer, so I say nothing. Instead, I refocus my attention on the fire, working to build it back up again. After I've done this, I settle the poker back on its stand and settle myself back on the couch. Hannah still sits in her chair, knees tucked under her chin, but she has now closed her eyes. I cannot tell whether or not she is sleeping, but I don't feel like disturbing her. As I stare at the fire, my mind begins to drift, and I remember, for the first time in years, the stories my father used to tell me about the summer he spent in Brazil. The streets of Sao Paolo, he said, teemed with gangs of homeless children who begged for coins during the day and raided shops at night. They would use charcoal to etch symbols on the buildings, marking their territory, warning others to stay away. When adults wandered into the wrong places at night, groups of hungry boys would pelt them unconscious with stones and then rob them blind.

When the fire dies, I do not build it up again. I wonder how far into the night we are. I think I may have dozed off at some point, but I can't be sure. I look over at Hannah, now clearly asleep, considering whether I should wake her so we can move

upstairs to the bedroom. A real husband, I think, would sweep her up in his arms, gently yet powerfully, and carry her off to bed. She would mumble something unintelligible as her head fell against his shoulder. He would cover her with blankets and solemnly kiss her brow, but would sit up all night watching over her.

Instead, I give her shoulder a soft nudge and her eyes snap open. She seems startled. I ask if she wants to go to bed and she nods. We walk silently upstairs to the bedroom; I lock the door behind us. Hannah climbs into bed, and I follow her a few moments later. From the window, seeping in under the curtains, I see the first yellow shreds of dawn.

I wake clammy and frigid; Hannah is still asleep. My face, hands, and feet are numb from the cold. I stumble out of bed and crank the knob on the radiator. A tiny spider crawls along the windowsill toward me. I flick it onto the floor. The sun has just risen but I don't want to go back to bed, so I get dressed and tromp downstairs to pour a bowl of cereal. The air is warmer on the ground floor. I glance around the living room and everything seems intact. The door remains locked, and all the windows are fine, except the one they cracked the night before.

Hannah's father won't arrive until around noon, so I have a solid four hours to make the house look a bit more presentable. In four hours, I could drive into town, buy a new pane of glass, drive home, and have the window fixed with time to spare. Hannah would appreciate that. Maybe this thing with the kids was a freak occurrence; they were probably from out of town, spending the weekend with some friends at the beach house.

I'll take a look around outside, make sure everything is okay, and then take Hannah some breakfast in bed. Perhaps I can convince her to come to town with me.

When I open the front door, the first thing I see is paint, splattered in the grass and on the porch. I step out into the yard, where the paint cans we left out yesterday have all been moved to one place, next to the wall. I turn around.

On the house's front wall, beside the porch, someone has painted a grotesque human figure. Done mostly in red, with touches of yellow and blue thrown in, the figure is painted in profile, with features and ornaments betokening a Mayan or Aztec god. In his left hand he holds up a long, black stick, or what may be a fire poker. His right hand is curled into a disproportionately large fist, and this fist clutches an equally large penis, which is spurting a gob of dripping, red ejaculate onto the front door. The doorknob, in fact, has been painted red.

I stand gazing at the painted figure for a long time. Many of the colors have bled into each other as the paint dripped downward in the night. The figure seems vicious but also gleeful; his mouth hangs open as though he were rabid. His teeth are sharp and prominent. I study the figure carefully, trying to decipher its meaning, as if I were an explorer, a wanderer in some exotic land, where the old rituals are still followed and the old gods must be appeased. I understand that Hannah's father would not find this figure interesting. He would not want to stand and ponder the impulses that inspired its creation. Hannah, for her part, might be a little amused, but she would certainly be disturbed, as well. I turn and walk back into the house for the paint sprayer, knowing that the events of last night must be concealed, buried deep and never unearthed.

An Apartment in Viareggio

Teddy stared across the table at his wife, trying to gauge her mood. Gina poked her spoon at the *panna cotte*, avoiding his gaze. Teddy had explained that he did not really want to go out with Sean tonight, but that Sean had insisted that, before they left, they must explore Florence after dark.

"Try not to stay out too late," Gina said after a while. "But enjoy yourself. I'm jealous."

"Don't be," Teddy said. "I'd rather go back to the hotel with you and Summer, but it wouldn't be polite to turn him down now."

Sean had taken their daughter, Summer, outside so that Teddy and Gina could talk for a minute. It seemed like the first time in days that they had a moment by themselves, without "Uncle Sean"—as he called himself—looking over their shoulders, inserting himself into their conversations, hamming it up to make Summer giggle. Sean had always taken things too far, including friendships. He had insisted upon eating at this specific trattoria because they offered family-style dining, and over dinner he had begun to call Summer his girl, as in, "Is my girl going to finish her vegetables?" Teddy had said nothing because he could not figure out how to do so without seeming like a jerk.

After walking with Gina and Summer back to the hotel, Teddy and Sean turned south and made their way towards the Arno. The night was clear and cool; the moon lent everything a pale illumination. This is what they would have done in college, Teddy thought. Sean would have found a way to score some smoke, even in a foreign city. They would have felt like heroes of the underground, marching through the ancient, empty streets with red wine sloshing in their guts. They would have been guided by a soft murmur rising from the flagstones, whispering that if you wanted to buy hash in Florence, you went to Santo Spirito after dark.

The piazza next to the church of Santo Spirito was small and dingy, with a late-night café on the southwest side. They entered from the north, walking up beside the church's front steps. Their pace slowed as they entered the square, surveying the scene. Sean nudged Teddy in the ribs, nodding toward the other side of the piazza, where a skinny man with long, slicked-back hair lounged on a bench. They had already agreed that Teddy would be the one to approach him, since Sean was buying. They were still standing there, Teddy working up his nerve, when the skinny man stood up and came straight toward them.

"You want to smoke, yeah?" he said. "Come with me—very good stuff tonight."

Sean followed immediately; Teddy fell in behind a second later, thinking this was way too easy. Something must be wrong. They would turn a corner and be assaulted by a dozen leather-clad *ragazzi* wielding knives. But only one man stood in the alley behind the café, and the transaction was over in a few seconds. Sean paid the man thirty euro for a chunk of hashish the size of a pencil eraser. It was dark and dense, like a piece of clay.

They bought rolling papers and a pack of Camels from an automated cigarette machine. Sean had planned everything out. They found an empty courtyard near the river where they could work safely. Teddy emptied the tobacco from a cigarette while Sean heated the tiny brick to make it soft and crumbly. He then mixed the tobacco with the hash, twisting them together into one of the rolling papers. When finished, Sean had produced a serviceable joint.

"Ready, Ted?"

"Sure." He felt a flash of guilt when he thought of how he had promised Gina, on Summer's first birthday, that his smoking days were over. Gina had quit the day she discovered her pregnancy and if she ever missed getting stoned she never brought it up.

"Let's go to the river," Sean said. "There's this great spot on one of the bridges."

"You've done this before, haven't you?" Everything seemed to be working too smoothly for coincidence.

Sean said he had not, but Teddy didn't believe him. Sean could easily pay some doorman or cab driver to do the dirty work for him, but he would enjoy buying directly from the back-alley dealers; he would find it thrilling.

The street opened out as it approached the bridge, where it spanned the river in a gentle arc. Two concrete supports jutted out beyond the sides of the bridge, tapering to a point several meters past the edge, forming small triangles of flat space just a few feet below the roadbed. They chose one on the east side so that they could look at the Ponte Vecchio, the next bridge up the river from this one. Teddy sat at the base of the triangle, with his back up against the thick support. Sean straddled the tip, feet dangling over the

edge. The wind tossed his hair about. Teddy noticed how he rocked back and forth, seeming to bask in the image of his own recklessness.

The joint burned slowly and gave off a thick plume of smoke. There was no traffic on the bridge, but when they had almost finished they heard voices and saw two young men walking along the sidewalk just above them. The two *ragazzi*, black haired and black-jacketed, sniffed the air noisily but kept walking.

"Maybe we should leave," Teddy said.

"Nah, don't worry about it. Just a couple of kids." Sean took one more puff and flicked the remainder into the breeze. The cherry flew out, and they watched the spark spiral down toward the water, forty feet below. Sean lay down on his back and put his hands behind his head, feet still dangling over the edge. "No need to get paranoid." He pulled a Camel out of the pack and lit it.

Moonlight gleamed on the waters of the Arno. Teddy remembered how green and sickly the river had looked in the daylight. Tomorrow they would take an early train back to the apartment in Viareggio. Sean had purchased the seaside apartment two years ago, when his father died. Having no interest in running the chain of hardware stores his family had started, Sean sold out to a larger corporation, grabbing a quick twenty million in the deal. Teddy knew the exact amount because Sean had made a point of telling him. Since then, he had been insistent that his old college roommate, with family, come stay at his "little place on the Italian coast." Teddy had finally agreed because now, seven years out of vet school, he had been hired as an associate veterinarian at a sizable clinic and could afford the plane tickets. Sean had offered to pay for the airfare several times in the past, but Teddy had consistently refused. He didn't feel right mooching off an old

college buddy, even one who had become a millionaire simply by signing his name to several pieces of paper.

Still, Sean had paid for all their food and wine in Viareggio, their ferry tickets to Sardinia, their train tickets to Rome and Florence, their accommodations at the five-star Hotel Brunelleschi. When Teddy had insisted upon paying for dinner that night at the swanky La Rotonda, Sean had to leave an extravagant tip, nearly half the price of the meal, though the service had been awful.

"What do you think, Ted?" Sean sat up. "*Va bene*, right?"

Teddy nodded, breathing the cool, damp air. "Yeah, this is nice. Thanks for giving us a place to stay and showing us around the country."

"Oh, forget about it. Really, I'm the one who should be thanking you. I barely have any friends these days." He stubbed out his cigarette. "I know it sounds stupid, but I get lonely sometimes. I'd give anything for a family like yours—a beautiful wife and daughter. You may not think so now, but you're a luckier man than I."

Teddy didn't say anything, but he resented the comparison. Sean made it sound as though having a family was something a person just lucked into one day, as though it could be stumbled over like an inherited company worth twenty million dollars. As though maintaining a marriage and raising a child did not involve years of patient labor; as though the whole deal were risk-free. He wanted to tell Sean that he, too, felt lonely sometimes, even when he was sleeping next to Gina or cooking dinner for the family or reading Summer a bedtime story. He did these things because they needed being done, because they were the necessary structure of his life, not because they gave him some all-encompassing sense of fulfillment.

Instead, he said, “Yeah, I guess I’m pretty happy with where I am right now.”

“Well, good. You should be.” Sean scooted back from the edge, closer to where Teddy was sitting. “I’ve been thinking about something, tossing an idea around in my head. Let’s walk.”

They crossed to the north side of the Arno and walked east along the river, in the direction of the hotel. Sean had fallen silent. Their steps led them past the Ponte Vecchio, that vestige of medieval vanity and Medici greed. The countless jewelry shops that lined both sides of the bridge had been closed hours ago, their doors and windows guarded by thick hardwood shutters, reinforced with iron bars and heavy padlocks. Also equipped, no doubt, with state-of-the-art alarm systems. A tour guide had told them that if all the gold on the Ponte Vecchio were melted and stretched into a wire, that wire would stretch from Florence as far north as Torino and as far south as Brindisi. He wondered how much of that wire Sean could afford to buy. Half of it? All of it?

“So,” Sean began, “I told you that the family below me, on the third floor, is moving in a couple months. I’d been planning on buying their apartment, but then, when you guys got here, I had a great thought.” He held up a finger, pausing to spit over the protective wall and into the river. “What if I bought the whole building? I’m sure I could convince the other two tenants to let me buy them out.”

“What for?”

“Your visit has got me thinking. Remember how, when we were in college—you, me, Nick, Tom, Jake—we all used to say how if one of us ever got rich we’d buy a big house someplace where we could all just come and hang out?” Sean spread his arms wide. “Well? One of us got rich, right?”

Teddy remembered that Sean, who had more money back then than the rest of them did today, had always started those conversations. Nobody had ever committed to such a plan, because they knew Sean would inherit millions when his dad died.

"I don't know, Sean. I mean, I have my own things now."

"I know. I understand completely. Don't worry, man—I love your family. Of course they're always welcome, too." Teddy couldn't think of anything to say. "Listen, nothing's been decided here. Just think about it; that's all I'm saying."

In the silence of the deserted streets, Teddy heard footsteps behind them. When he looked back, he saw the two black haired, black-jacketed young men who had passed them on the bridge. They remained a considerable distance away, a hundred feet or so, but Teddy still felt his heart rate increase.

"Sean," he said. "I think…"

"I know a shortcut back to the hotel," Sean said. "We'll be fine."

They turned north onto a side street, leaving the river behind. More quickly than he'd expected, Teddy heard the two *ragazzi* round the corner, now perhaps only fifty feet behind them. Their footsteps were growing more rapid. One of them called softly.

"Hey, americani, we just want to talk to you."

Teddy and Sean picked up the pace, trying to hurry without looking frightened. Sean swerved into a narrower street and Teddy had no choice but to follow. This time the footsteps rounded the corner almost immediately. They started running and the footsteps behind joined them, echoing off the stone walls. The *ragazzi* had nearly caught up with them when Sean turned again, this time into a tiny alley. Several steps into the

alley he realized it was a dead end. They had no choice but to turn and face their pursuers.

"Can't get out that way, americani." The pair snickered. "All we want is some smoke, americani—we know you have some."

"*Non abbiamo niente*," Sean protested. "*É finito*."

"So? We just want a little smoke. If you don't have, then give us money so we can buy." They were now only a few feet away.

"*Per favore*," Sean said. "*Non voglio un problema*."

"We don't want a problem either, americano. *Vogliamo fumare*. Just a little smoke."

Teddy remained motionless; he could feel his heart thumping in his temples. The pleasantness of the high had vanished. He waited for Sean to do something. The two *ragazzi*, no more than teenagers really, stared at the two Americans. Teddy saw one of them reach inside his jacket.

"Okay, okay," Sean said. "*Va bene*, fine." He reached into his back pocket for his wallet, hands visibly shaking. He shot Teddy a look that was clearly meant to communicate something, but Teddy had no idea what. He tensed his muscles, thinking, *He's going to get us stabbed. We'll lie here and bleed to death on the stones.* Sean extracted a wad of bills from his wallet and, in the same motion, hurled them into the air. The Italians looked up at the brightly colored euros floating down—blue, orange, pink—like oversized confetti. Sean bulled into them, taking them by surprise. Teddy followed him through the gap faster than he would have thought possible. When they reached the end of the alley and looked back, the black-jacketed *ragazzi* were still scooping up loose

bills. Sean led them through a maze of angular streets at a fast jog, turning often, but always heading in the same general direction. A couple of minutes later, within sight of the hotel, Sean exhaled a gust of air and started laughing.

"That was close, huh? For a second I thought you weren't going to move—that you'd just stand there watching them pick money out of the air." Teddy wondered what Sean would have done if that had happened. He felt himself wishing he could collapse in his own bed, in his own house, where there were no strangers to be feared.

"Just don't tell Gina about this, okay?" Teddy said. He refused the invitation to meet Sean in his room for a nightcap. *Let him drink by himself*, he thought. He could tell Sean was excited, boosted by adrenaline, and wanted to rehash their brush with danger. He wanted no part of it. He still felt lucky to have made it back to the hotel unharmed; he wanted to see his wife and daughter, to reassure himself that he really was okay.

They rose early the next morning, packed their bags, took their breakfast of pastries and espresso standing in the hotel café, and called a cab to take them to the train station. The cabbie let them out at the circle drive in front of the *stazione*, where several laborers in dirty jeans and T-shirts had taken a break to smoke cigarettes. As Gina swung her legs out of the taxi, one of the workers gave a low whistle and the others laughed. She ignored them, but she could not avoid having to lean back into the cab to grab her purse. As she bent down, the men made strange, *tsst-tsst* sounds by blowing air through their teeth. She didn't acknowledge their presence, but Summer was standing by the open car door, staring at the men. Sean picked her up and headed toward the station, leaving Teddy with the bags.

He paid the driver and picked up the luggage, a slow-burning rage building in his head. He felt like the laborers were sneering at him as he walked away. He imagined going back there, taking them by surprise, bashing their heads against the cab's windshield, watching the blood stain their unshaven faces. He knew he could do it; he was much taller and broader than they were, with their skinny arms, their dirty jeans, their reek of sweat and cigarette smoke. In America he would have at least said something, made it clear that he did not appreciate having his wife leered at.

The train ride to Viareggio took about two hours. Gina read a magazine. Sean played Connect-Four with Summer, letting her win every time. Teddy looked out the window, watching the city dwindle into the countryside. He had expected Florence, the jewel of the Renaissance, to be conspicuously neat and orderly. Instead, the city had shocked him with its simple dirtiness, its chaotic intermingling of ancient architecture and modern technology. The streets and piazzas were littered with trash; clotheslines displayed damp undergarments and stained dishrags; the aromas of fresh bread wafted out of the open doors of bakeries into the streets, where they would mingle with the stench of an antiquated sewage system. Fourteenth-century wine shops shared building space with cell phone stores.

Out the window of the train, retaining walls strewn with graffiti gave way to green, rolling hills covered with cypresses and umbrella pines. The rougher ground closer to the tracks was scattered with brilliant poppies, defying the supremacy of dirt and gravel. For a few moments, the train seemed to hover outside of time, as though Teddy was stationary and the world was flashing by in front of him. He wondered how the landscape had looked five hundred years ago and how it would look five hundred years

from now. Would the cypresses be chopped, the hills leveled, the poppies bulldozed? He felt a twinge of sadness but shook it off—there was enough to worry about without adding something so distant and out of his reach.

"So, Ted, have you given any more thought to that idea I told you about?"

"What idea?" Gina said, glancing first at her husband, then at Sean. Teddy gave Sean a look so hostile that he stuttered for a moment, struggling for words.

"Uh, nothing. It was just something I had asked about last night—not really important—we'll talk later, right?"

"Yeah," Teddy said. Gina lowered her sunglasses to look at Teddy but, getting no response, she went back to her magazine.

This trip was a mistake, he thought. I should have known better than to come along with this overgrown class clown, to let him near my family. He never really matured beyond his teenage years, sheltered by the umbrella of his parents' pocketbooks. Even after college, Sean had always been the loud one, the drunken one, the one with the malicious sense of humor. He had always possessed a talent for putting his friends into awkward situations.

Three days ago, in Rome, Summer had spotted a dead pigeon lying in a gutter. When she asked her father why it was not hopping around like the other birds, Sean took it upon himself to explain that the pigeon had gone away, maybe to a better place where it wouldn't have to eat refuse off the street to survive. He told her that when they got back to Viareggio he would buy her a bird of her own that she could keep in a cage in her room back home—never mind the cost of birdfeed and the two hundred dollar surcharge the airline would tack on for extra luggage.

Sean had told them about a little mountain, about ten miles north of Viareggio, which offered an incredible view of the ocean and several ancient hill-towns in the surrounding area. Since it had just passed noon and they had nothing planned for the rest of the day, they decided to climb it. Teddy thought the mountain air might clear his head.

After dropping their luggage off at the apartment, they loaded water and snacks into Sean's BMW and drove north on a twisting highway. They turned east just before they reached La Spezia, gaining altitude immediately. Sean wove the car through the narrow streets of a little town and out the far side onto a mountain road. After a few more minutes of uphill driving, the road dead-ended in a cul-de-sac at the base of a tiny village. The village had been built into the side of the mountain and contained only twenty or thirty small houses, connected by stone paths and long flights of steps. They got out of the car and Sean shouldered the lone backpack.

The main stairway led them up through the village and onto a trail that climbed up the spine of the mountain. The loose dirt of the trail was covered with animal tracks; when Summer asked what they were, Sean told her that the people up here raised goats, since the terrain was too rocky for cows. Cypress trees dotted the trail at the beginning, but after they had hiked for half an hour the trees disappeared altogether. The only vegetation that remained was a sort of coarse, dull-green shrub, tough enough to live in the mountain soil. The trail grew steeper and rockier, until the dirt became pebble-sized hunks of clay interspersed with pieces of granite.

Sean asked for a water break, so they stopped to rest beside a white stone wall. No more than a few seconds had passed before he spoke up.

"So, what do you guys think about coming to live with me in Italy?"

Summer's eyes shot wide open, and she gasped. "Can we? Can we really?" Teddy clenched his jaw to hold back the words he had for Sean. Gina remained calm.

"I don't know, honey," she said. "We haven't discussed it at all."

"Oh," Sean said. "Teddy hasn't told you yet?"

"Told them what, Sean? That you already have our future all planned out for us, one big, happy family?"

Gina and Summer both looked confused. Teddy felt an urge to brain Sean with a rock.

"Listen," he said, "I wanted to speak about this in private, with my wife." Summer had already taken up a refrain of *why not*s and looked close to tears. "So if you've had plenty of rest, why don't we get going?"

Teddy took off up the mountain, Sean close behind him. He was winded after only a couple of minutes, but he ignored the fatigue and kept on going. Every time he heard Sean's breathing behind him, he increased the pace, taking long, swift strides that made his ankles and calves burn. The last signs of vegetation had now vanished from the mountain; the trail had become a collection of loose stones that slid away under his steps. Teddy began to enjoy the rush of the upward climb. He felt as though his head was skimming the bottoms of the clouds. Sweat dripped down his face, even though the air had grown chilly and the wind had increased. The summit appeared to be only a short distance away, though he knew that mountains were tricky that way—you reached what you thought was the top, only to realize you still had a mile to go. He heard shouts from

behind him and wondered if Sean had decided to give up. After several repeated shouts, one of which sounded like Gina, he halted and turned around.

Sean stood about thirty feet back, bent over with his hands on his knees. He straightened and trudged a bit further up the trail.

"*Basta! Basta!"* he said. Sean's voice sounded a little frantic. "You'll collapse and roll down the mountain."

"I'm fine," Teddy said, chest heaving.

Gina and Summer had stopped at least a hundred feet down the trail. Gina was crouched down, running her hand through Summer's hair. Teddy started back the way he'd come, brushing past Sean without a word. He already felt like a bastard. He saw himself through Summer's eyes, a stern-faced bully of a father, single-minded and pitiless. His foot struck a loose rock, sending it clinking down the path. Gina looked up, glaring at him over their daughter's head. Teddy saw the lines of irritation creasing the space between her eyebrows.

"We're going back to the car," she said. "Summer doesn't feel good." He crouched down next to them, taking his daughter's hand, trying to draw her gaze.

"I'm sorry you don't feel good, honey."

She looked up at him without speaking.

"You scared her, Teddy," Gina said. "She thought you were angry at her, that that's why you wouldn't let us catch up."

"No, no, I'm not angry. I just got carried away. I do that sometimes." He put his hands on her thin shoulders. "Do you forgive me?"

She made no motion, just blinked. Teddy, at a loss for anything to say, picked her up and held her against his chest. She leaned her head on his shoulder. When he looked up, Sean was ambling down the trail. Teddy tried to block him out of his thoughts.

"Should we go back?" Sean said. "It's no big deal to me—I've been to the top before."

"The girls are tired. They want to go back." He let Summer down.

"We should all go. Really, it's no big deal."

Teddy could sense Gina staring at him from behind, waiting for his decision. He didn't care about the view anymore—it couldn't be that much better than the one they had right here. He didn't care about the low stone walls crisscrossing the mountainside or the cypress trees or the glittering ocean or this whole goddamned beautiful country.

Still, he found himself saying, "No. I want to see it from the top."

Teddy took one last look at them and turned to face Sean and the remainder of the mountain.

"Give them the car keys," he said. "We'll meet them at the bottom."

Nobody said a word; he felt that even Summer must know something had happened. He started back up the mountain with Sean at his heels.

"What'd you do that for, Ted?"

"Shut up."

He increased his pace; Sean kept up. Occasionally Teddy would slip on the loose rocks but he managed to avoid falling. His sides stung but he ignored the pain. The wind had become frigid, and Teddy realized his own sweat was making the chill worse. He ignored that, too.

"Listen Ted, let's quit being stupid." Sean had to stop talking a moment to catch his breath. "I don't know what's got you so pissed off." He paused again. "But let's stop, take a break, and talk it over."

"You take a break," Teddy said. "I'm not stopping 'til it's done."

Teddy charged up the slope, almost running now. His head throbbed and his legs tingled. His ears began to ring. Looking up, he saw the top of the ridge only thirty feet above him. The path had grown so steep that he was using his hands to help pull himself upward. With a final burst of energy, he scrambled up the last few feet, over a rough ledge, and he was there.

Sean had, indeed, taken a break at the spot he had suggested. He was now sipping from a water bottle and looking up at Teddy. Teddy stood on an outcropping of granite, returning Sean's gaze. He felt a sense of relief wash over him, joining the euphoria of the frantic climb. Gina would understand, once he had explained everything to her. It was Summer he was worried about. He hoped she would eventually lose the sense of resentment she would surely feel when he told her that she could never see her Uncle Sean again.

Nocturne

Preston was sitting on a metal footstool among the stacks, shelving documents, when he heard the first sirens. At first they sounded distant, well outside city limits. Gradually, sirens began to go off nearer, until he could hear the tiny motors cycling up. They sounded the way air-raid sirens sound in a World War Two film. This observation helped Preston determine that it must be a false alarm. A nuclear meltdown did not seem like a realistic prospect; it was more of an idea, a historical concept. He had never feared a nuclear disaster, never sensed any danger from the gray reactor on the horizon. Terms like *radiation* and *fallout* seemed comically outdated. They were connected to old fears, the fears of his parents' generation.

He walked to the edge of the stacks and looked out over the library basement. His government documents shared the basement with a large, open study area—heavy wooden tables and several rows of computer terminals. A couple of dozen people sat at the tables and computers, and none had reacted to the sirens. Preston wondered if he was imagining the sound. Then one woman raised her head from a book, alarmed, and searched the faces of those near her. When her gaze met Preston's, he turned away and shuffled back into the stacks.

The sirens grew louder, too loud to be ignored. So Preston got out his mp3 player and inserted the earpieces. He scrolled through the list of composers' names, the titles of sonatas and concerti. He wanted something loud, to drown out the sirens, but also light and melodic, something to calm his nerves. He knew he could counteract the heavy thud of his heartbeat with an appropriate choice of music. A Mozart symphony—elegant and precise. That should do fine.

The trumpets entered with a quick fanfare, and when the percussion joined in, he could no longer hear the sirens. He pushed his book-cart down the aisle, shelving documents for the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of the Interior, the Departments of Justice and Labor. He shelved a series of NASA documents that catalogued all the U.S. government satellites orbiting the Earth. Preston inhaled, nostrils flaring wide. He loved the way the basement smelled, like leather and sawdust. It smelled of accumulated knowledge, of the tireless dedication of countless researchers, reporters, and scribes. When he closed his eyes and breathed deeply, he felt like he was in an ancient and isolated place of learning, a monastery, perhaps, high in the French Alps. He could sense rough-hewn stone walls, stiff wooden chairs, parchment scrolls, tallow candles, dark cowls and robes. Slow lines returning from matins to dip quills in ink-jars.

He exhaled slowly. The shrill whine of the sirens intruded again, so he turned the music as loud as it would go. Cymbals crashed. He imagined the gentle rasping noise of the paper as he slid the documents into place and wished he could hear it. To Preston, that sound was a dissonant note corrected, and the click of the document's spine against the metal shelf was like the final resounding chord at the end of a piano sonata. His

shelving felt incomplete without those sounds, but he didn't want to turn down the music. He began working with quick, rapid motions, hoping to get the morning's shelving done before he was interrupted. It was important that he finish this task; if the shelving was allowed to pile up, documents might be inaccessible for days.

The job had fallen at Preston's feet five years ago, after he filled out the university's general employment application. His parents had cut him off the day he told them he had dropped out of school. They now spoke to him once a month—maybe less—to make sure he was still stable. Within a few days of working in government documents, he had immersed himself in the strange, subdued life of the library basement. He saw, in the crooked stacks of Senate hearings and soil surveys, a trove of manuscripts containing precious knowledge. Each day in the basement offered an array of silent pleasures: shelving, cleaning, stamping and stripping documents, shifting the stacks, opening new shipments from the GPO. He even enjoyed handling the microfiche, though the rows of black filing cabinets were a bit intimidating at first. How many millions of pages must be contained within those sleek, metal boxes?

The wonderful smell of the basement had been a comfort to him back then; the stale scent of tiny paper fibers wafting through the air recalled images of his childhood. Preston was the eighth of nine in his family, and his parents had mastered their routine by the time he was born. They each worked fifty-hour weeks, to which they added numerous social gatherings, charity banquets, and other civic responsibilities. By the time Preston started elementary school, his mother and father had consigned most of their parental duties to the older siblings and one beleaguered nanny. The best place in their massive Victorian house was the attic, overflowing with dusty furniture and packed

bookshelves. He treasured especially the ancient set of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The pages were stuck together from long years of storage, so he had to be careful in turning them, prying each page apart with just the tips of his fingers. He liked to sit on the bare wooden floor, legs crossed, and leaf through the yellowed volumes. By the simple act of flipping one page over another, he imagined, the knowledge held therein would filter through his skin and up into his brain, where it would remain for his access whenever a situation demanded some specific piece of information. Occasionally he would pause to read an entry more thoroughly—the one for "eye," say, or "Napoleon"—but these brief interludes were only a diversion from the major purpose, his solitary education. When he finished with the encyclopedia, he started in on the Audubon guidebook series, then his parents' old history and anthropology textbooks, finally cookbooks so old that their pages left a residue on his fingers.

Huddled in the attic corner next to the small hexagonal window, Preston could watch his parents come and go from the garage. He could hear his three older brothers playing Sega on the third floor while his baby sister wailed perpetually on the second. He heard them in a part of his brain that remained disconnected from the focused state of mind that turned pages to learn everything there was to learn about the world. When he grew tired of leafing, he would pull all the books off the shelves, dust them, and replace them, always in the same order—the natural order, the order in which he had discovered them.

The violins and cellos came to a rest as the symphony's first movement ended, and he heard footsteps behind him. He turned and saw Geoff walking toward him. Preston removed the earpieces.

"Hey Preston, we need to talk," Geoff said, over the sirens' dull shriek. The head government documents librarian was a small man with a neat gray beard. He had always been friendly to Preston, but their conversations never strayed away from library business or, when it was called for, the weather. To Preston's great relief, Geoff seemed content with this level of interaction.

"What's going on? What are the sirens for?" Preston did not know why he had asked, since he already knew.

"It's the nuclear plant—I just got a call from the city."

"So what do we do? Do we have to take shelter or something?"

"We're supposed to stay where we are. It could be dangerous at this point to go outside. Everybody is supposed to stay inside and get underground if possible. So everybody who's in the library right now is coming down here."

Preston felt the hair standing up on his arms. He imagined masses of people swarming down the stairs and into the basement, huddling against the walls, crouching in the stacks.

"You don't really think there was a meltdown, do you?" Preston said.

"Honestly, I don't even know what a meltdown is. I just know that something's wrong and we're supposed to stay indoors."

"Okay. Is there anything specific we're supposed to do?"

"I don't think so," Geoff said. "You can come back to the office if you'd like, if you need to use the phone to call somebody. I turned the radio on, but they're not saying much." Preston considered his options, and then told Geoff that he'd rather keep working.

After Geoff left, Preston resumed his shelving, moving through Presidential Releases and the Department of State. He could hear a growing number of voices from the direction of the stairs. In a matter of minutes, what seemed like hundreds of people entered the basement. Preston did his best to ignore them and concentrated on putting the shelves in order, making the documents line up straight and neat. By the time his book cart had been emptied, the basement buzzed with voices. Outside, the sirens howled.

He pushed the cart back towards the office, maneuvering around clusters of people. The office was located at the opposite end of the basement, so it took him several minutes of stop-and-go pushing to get there. He ran over several pairs of toes on the way, wheels making a clunking sound as they rolled over shoes, but he didn't apologize. He clearly had the right of way. Outside the office, at the angle in the wall where two rows of filing cabinets met, there was a gap that formed a little niche. Preston wheeled the cart into this space, hidden from the study tables and computers.

Along one wall, dozens of people paced back and forth below the windows, talking on cell phones, able to get reception only in this small strip of the basement. He stood at the edge of the crowd, hearing random snippets of conversation. "No, I can't leave, either…where are you?" "Feed him one-and-a-half scoops…two is too many…because, he'll get fat." "I'm supposed to be there in ten minutes…of course this happens to me." "What time does the game start?" "No, honey, you can eat one of those frozen meals for lunch…just nuke it for about eight minutes…don't forget to cut a slit in the plastic." He could no longer hear the sirens over the roar of so many voices. The study area was jammed with people, so as more kept filing in they began to stray into the stacks, browsing aimlessly. From across the basement, he could see a man bump against

a shelf, knocking a booklet to the floor. Preston felt a need to be over there right now, to keep strange hands away from the documents.

To get back to the stacks he would have to fight through the crowded aisle that separated the computers from the study area. Small knots of people clustered around each terminal, craning their necks and elbowing each other. One computer screen bore the multicolored whorls of a weather radar map. The crowd surrounding the terminal debated air currents and wind direction. The next computer displayed the nuclear plant's website. The homepage bore a snapshot of the facility's chief officer standing in front of the main reactor. He wore jeans and a hardhat, sleeves rolled up. He had his hands on his hips. The reactor behind him was emblazoned with the facility's logo, a diagram of an atom with a lightning bolt cutting through it.

At the adjacent computer, a man shouted "Oh my God!" Preston watched the screen from behind him as several people scurried over to see what he had found. The man had discovered a news website that was playing a live video feed from a helicopter that appeared to be circling above the power plant. Preston could see the main reactor, with its atom-and-lightning bolt logo off to the right side of the screen, but in the center of the shot was a low building with a smoking hole in the roof. A tanker truck stood nearby, spraying a bluish chemical in the direction of the hole. A dozen men in green plastic milled about the truck.

The people crowded around Preston began to disperse—they were going to other computers to look for themselves. Soon, every computer screen in the basement bore the same image—smoking hole, tanker truck, men in plastic suits. Preston stayed where he was, even as the man at the computer scrolled down to read the text below the video. The

best guess of the authorities, according to the caption, was that a meteorite had crashed through the roof of the waste storage facility. This report, the website emphasized, was unconfirmed as of yet. Another possibility was that perhaps someone had lobbed an explosive device over the walls and into the facility, or dropped it from an aircraft. The news agency did not use the word *terrorism*.

Preston turned away from the computers—his duty was to protect the documents, to try to keep the stacks in order, so he continued moving through the mass of people. At one of the study tables to Preston's right, a group sat with their hands linked and their heads bowed. A heavyset man was leading their prayers. His bald head was shiny with sweat. At the next table, several students had encircled a professor who appeared to be giving a lecture on nuclear physics. He wrote equations on an old, wheeled chalkboard that he must have discovered by snooping in a storage room. As Preston neared the stacks, he saw a little boy standing alone, red-faced and wailing. Lost his mom, Preston thought. He felt guilty, as though he should do something, but since he had no idea what to do, he ignored the boy.

When he reached the government documents, he started walking along the edge of the stacks, glancing down the rows as he passed. People leaned against shelves and sprawled on the floor. Some had taken documents down and were flipping through them. The shelves were already beginning to look ragged and uneven. In one aisle, documents had been piled on the floor in neat little stacks, all down the row. He decided to try to contain the damage. He started confronting people, asking them to refrain from unnecessary browsing. They peered at him with puzzled expressions and slowly replaced

the documents they had been holding. Some assumed he was joking and laughed in his face. Others simply ignored him. He began to grow frantic.

He came upon one young man, in the Department of Defense section, who was systematically rotating documents onto their spines, making them lie horizontally.

"What are you doing?"

"What's it look like I'm doing?" the man said.

"You're messing it all up. Quit it."

"I don't want to."

"Look, I work here. I'm the one who's going to have to fix it tomorrow. All right?"

"Who knows, tomorrow we may all be dead. You too." Preston stared for a moment. He was beginning to sweat.

"Maybe so," he said, "but why does that mean you have to screw everything up?"

"I'm just doing what I can to stay calm during the crisis."

"But you're just being crazy. You're—you're just making random chaos."

"Look around you," the man said, smiling. "What do you think that is?"

Preston had nothing to say to this, so he turned and walked away. In the next aisle, a short man, wearing a necktie and glasses, was looking over the shelves. He glanced down at a slip of paper, then looked back up at the shelves. Preston spoke up, relieved to find someone who had a purpose, a reason to be here.

"Can I help you find something?"

"It should be right here," the man said. "But it's not."

"What are you looking for?" But when he saw the documents the man was looking at, he knew, and wondered why he hadn't thought of it himself. The man was standing in the *Y3* section (Congressional Documents), subsection *AE* (Atomic Energy Commission). He was looking for the inspection reports of the local nuclear plant.

"See, look." The man gave Preston the slip of paper. It read *Y3: AE.6/8*. He pointed at the shelf. "That's where it should be. Right there."

Preston looked for himself. Sometimes these thin paper booklets slipped to the back of the shelf and couldn't be seen. He pulled out a handful and flipped through them. It wasn't there. He scanned over the entire shelf. All the booklets were in order and the set seemed to be complete. Except for *Y3: AE.6/8*. He began checking the surrounding shelves for documents that looked out of place. It was nowhere to be found. Did someone steal it? Slip it under their coat as a souvenir, a bit of memorabilia? Was it taken to some higher authority, someone who could interpret the numbers and codes? Or did they get rid of it to eliminate some evidence of wrongdoing? Was the document ever there to begin with?

The man said something, but Preston wasn't listening. The buzz of voices seemed to have risen in pitch. His ears were ringing. He stood up and walked toward the office, bumping into people, moving them out of his way. When he got to the wall of filing cabinets, he wheeled the book cart out of its niche, got on all fours and crawled in. He needed to be alone, to collect his thoughts. With people crammed and sprawling throughout the basement, nobody would notice Preston folded in his little hollow. He pulled the cart back in front of the open space, walling himself in.

He slipped the earpieces in and pressed play. Soon he could no longer stand the Mozart symphony. It was too cheerfully well-balanced for the angry psychic vibrations that radiated from the basement. He scrolled through the playlist. Here it was. Stravinsky. *The Rite of Spring.*

Preston huddled in his nook, arms wrapped around his knees. He peeked through the carts at the melee beyond. He couldn't see into the stacks and was glad for it. The music grew stronger. He turned the volume as high as it would go, until it began to drown out the tumult of voices. At the study tables, he saw that the professor was still lecturing; the neighboring group still listened, rapt, to the bald man, who was standing and speaking emphatically, gesturing with a Bible clutched in his left hand. Preston scanned the rest of the basement, growing steadily more terrified.

Usually, at this time in the afternoon on any other day, he would sit at his desk, stamping documents or sorting microfiche. He would listen to something soothing, Debussy perhaps, or Vivaldi if he was in the mood for something more venerable. Often, as his mind drifted, he would try to peer into his future. He would see himself married, living in a spacious home filled with the chirping music of children. In this future there was always a warm glow emanating from his body's core that spread to his face and hands. He smiled frequently; he teased the kids. He sat at the piano, teaching his son how to play, guiding the small, awkward fingers. The kitchen smelled of rising bread dough. The study smelled of leather and sawdust.

Preston squeezed his eyes shut, trying to summon this vision, to dig it up from the vaults of his mind. Soon he gave up, allowed the music to fill his consciousness; it began to take over, to push everything else out of range. It painted shapes on the backs of his

eyelids. Preston let his mind wander, let himself be carried along by the music. He imagined primitive humans in a cave, gathered around a fire. They began to dance madly. There was no form or unity to their movements. They flung their arms about and whipped their heads from side to side. Everybody joined the dance. The fire threw shadows against the rock walls. During the diminuendo, they slowed, became less frenzied. They all turned towards the opening of the cave. There was a flash of light. They bowed their heads.

Preston kept his eyes closed. He cupped his hands around his ears, eliminating the remnants of outside noise. When the music finally ended, he started the piece over again. He let it play all the way through a second time, and then started it over again. He concentrated his full attention upon those strange rhythms and discordant sounds. He gave himself wholly to the primitive dancers. He began to enjoy the crazed, exaggerated movements of their shadows on the walls of the cave. And then, after the diminuendo, the flash of light.

The music ended for the third time. Preston raised his head and took his hands away from his ears. The din had quieted. In fact, the basement was nearly silent. He opened his eyes. He saw only a very few people, spread sparsely over the basement. Had they given some sort of all-clear signal? He stood up and walked over to the stacks.

The shelves were in disarray. Books, folders, pamphlets, brochures, manuals all lay scattered on the floor. Some documents had been replaced upside down or backward. The disorder looked casual. The man who had been turning the shelves horizontal had completed two entire rows of shelves, all the documents in one aisle, top to bottom. A wall of bound paper. Preston started at one end and began turning them right side up

again, so that the labels on their spines were visible. The hum of voices grew fainter. He had been working for several minutes when he heard keys jingling, and Geoff came walking down the aisle.

"Where did you go, Preston? You just disappeared. Nobody could find you."

"I was here, trying to keep things in order," he said. Geoff looked as though he did not believe him, but even so, he did not question him any further.

"Well, okay. Here's this." Geoff handed him a white paper surgical mask. "We're supposed to wear these for today, even though they say there's no danger. I guess it can't hurt." Preston put the mask in his pocket and continued righting the documents. "Hey, don't worry about the mess. We can take care of it tomorrow."

"I'd like to stay and get the stacks back in order. Besides, I still have an hour or so of my shift left."

"Why don't you go home?" Geoff chuckled, but he seemed uneasy. "I'll sign you out for 5:00. The rest of the staff has already left and I'm on my way out the door. We've decided to close early. Everybody's had enough for one day."

"Okay, but I think I'd like to stay, if you don't mind. I'd like to leave the stacks in good shape."

"God's sake, don't you feel like taking the rest of the day off? Have a drink? Breathe a sigh of relief?" Geoff scratched his beard. "Weren't you a little scared?"

"Of what?"

"Of radiation? Toxic waste? I don't know…terrorism? Government conspiracy? Anything?"

"I don't know." Preston considered it. "I don't think so."

"Well, if you want to stay, here's the keys. Just lock up on your way out." He started to turn away, then hesitated. "Pretty weird, isn't it? This whole satellite business."

"What?"

"Didn't you hear? It was a piece of a satellite that crashed through the roof of that building. Could have been worse, though. Could have hit the reactor and caused a meltdown."

"Yeah." Preston stared into space.

"Okay, Preston. I'm leaving. Don't stay any later than seven, though, because with everyone leaving, that's when they'll set the alarms."

"Uh huh," Preston said, thinking about satellites. As soon as Geoff disappeared around the corner of the aisle, Preston walked to the NASA section. He scanned the shelves until he found the list of satellites that he had replaced earlier that morning. Right next to it sat the booklet that the short man with glasses had been searching for: *Y3: AE.6/8*. He pulled it off the shelf and opened it. At the bottom right-hand corner of the front page, a lightning bolt slashed through an atom.

Preston did not stop to consider how the document had arrived where it was. The location was too perfect for him to question it. He felt no urge to return the booklet to the rest of the set. It belonged here, had been placed here for a good reason. There was something of cosmic importance in the way those two particular documents had been placed together, he felt sure.

In fact, Preston thought, why stop here? The current system had proved ineffective; therefore, it must be changed. If an inspection history of a nuclear reactor

belonged next to a study of asteroid patterns, the possibilities for more oblique connections between documents were endless. It was time for a new system. He thought about all the documents that would have to be relocated. The endangered species pamphlets could now set beside the EPA reports. The binders full of government revenue figures could now share shelf space with census documents. These combinations would be only the beginning. He envisioned a government documents department where a soil survey sat next to the Justice Department's statistics on juvenile crime. He would understand the system intuitively. The stacks would become aesthetically sound, no longer constrained by an arcane system of letters and numbers. Perhaps other people would lack the ability to negotiate the subtle frequencies of the shelves, but Preston could help them out. He would guide the people through the reams of paper until they found the knowledge they desired.

Preston began to set up a playlist on his mp3 player. He would start out with something a little more subdued—one of Chopin's Nocturnes should do. He would follow that up with a Berlioz symphony, something that would build slowly to a stunning climax. He needed music that would fuel his fire. He began to add more dramatic, forceful selections: Mussorgsky, Bartok, Shostakovich. He clicked the play button and heard a few graceful notes from a piano, but he could already anticipate what was to come. He began pulling handfuls of documents down from the shelves, piling them any way that seemed natural at the moment, by shape, size, and subject matter. It didn't matter much right now. Once the old system had been dismantled, he could start building a new one. Preston turned the music louder and began to move along with its rhythms, letting it guide his hands.

October Revolution

"Jacob, come talk to your brother," Dad yelled from the living room.

I trudged downstairs in my socks to take my turn on the phone. Brad called home every weekend, and the passing of the telephone from Mom to Dad to me had become a family ritual. Every time I talked to him, though, I experienced a strange anxiety. I never had any stories to tell him about my life, at least nothing on a par with his shocking and sordid tales. I was a senior in high school, but my parents and I had just moved into town, and I was having trouble meeting people.

"What's up, Jake?" Brad said, as I took the receiver from Dad.

"Nothing. Same old stuff."

"Yeah? You found a crowd to run around with yet?"

"Not really," I admitted. My brother had been class president, yearbook editor, a two-sport letterman. The extent of my extracurricular activities was a nominal membership in the Latin club.

"How are things up there?" I asked, not wanting to talk about my social life.

"Great, man. Just great. We've been going out with the Kappas lately—those girls are crazy, bro. You have no idea."

He was right; I did not. The only frame of reference I had was the stack of explicit Mardi Gras videos Brad had kept piled in the back of his closet for years.

"But, listen," he continued. "That band I was telling you about—October Revolution—they're playing at The Blue Angel over Halloween weekend. You should talk Mom and Dad into letting you come up here."

I said I would try. After an awkward silence, Brad said he needed to go, so I handed the receiver to Mom for the goodbyes and walked upstairs to my room. Halloween was nearly two months away, but the prospect of spending a weekend with Brad, in his world, made me both excited and frightened. I imagined the drunken pranks he and his frat brothers would get me involved in. There would be loud music and beer chugging and bare flesh. Amidst all the debauchery, however, I figured I could meet a girl, a freshman, probably, who would be attracted by my gaze from across the raucous party. She would invite me back to her dorm room, and we would touch each other gently in the darkness. My thoughts began to race forward in time, reaching, inevitably, our long-term correspondence, the promises to wait for each other, the tenderness with which we would preserve each other's memories. And the sex—fantastic, sultry sex—there was that, too.

After school, having nothing to do before dinnertime, I would usually walk down to Max's Music and Coffee House. The place was quiet during the afternoons, the drinks were reasonably priced, and, most important, the staff played good music. One of the baristas, a dark-haired girl with a raspy voice, told me that Max's had started decades ago as a small store that sold vinyls to the local hipsters.

"But then," she said, "when coffee shops became so big back in the nineties, he bought the next building over, knocked the wall down, and bought espresso machines. Good for business, bad for atmosphere." She gestured toward several small tables in the corner, where several khaki-clad patrons clicked away at their laptops and fiddled with their IPods. The original part of the shop still had a bare concrete floor and discolored ceiling tiles; the walls bore ratty collages of concert posters and album covers. I could tell what she meant about the atmosphere, and I wanted to voice my agreement, but I was not sure how well I would have fit in at the old Max's.

She rang up my purchase—an October Revolution CD—and placed it in a slim brown bag, folding over the top and creasing it neatly.

"Good choice, by the way," she said. "Their older stuff is so much better than the new stuff. They went completely mainstream."

"Thanks," I said, nodding to her as I walked away. I felt as though my luck must be changing—I had picked this CD at random, out of a large stack of the band's albums. Apparently, I had chosen correctly.

I pushed open the glass door and collided with a wall of pure heat. The sun glanced off all the bright concrete surfaces, blinding me. I was relieved when, after about five minutes of walking, I made my way clear of the commercial area of town and could enjoy the relative shade of tree-lined neighborhoods.

I had been without a car since mid-summer, when Brad had totaled his Jeep on a curving road at night. He had admitted to having a "couple of beers" at the party he had come from, but claimed that he was perfectly okay to drive. My parents must have

believed him because they let him take my car and said they would work something out for me. After all, Brad had to have a car at college, or he would not be able to return home every month as my parents requested. In truth, I had not really minded the loss of my wheels. Not having a car gave me a natural excuse to stick to myself, and I used this fact to my full advantage. Besides, I enjoyed the leisurely pace of a good walk. Mom would drop me off at school every morning, after her Pilates and before her daily teleconference, and I would make my way home in the afternoons. I could spend anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour walking home, depending on my mood. Sometimes I took long detours intentionally, exploring parts of the town that were unfamiliar. We had moved to Fairmont from St. Louis at the beginning of the summer—Dad had landed a job as the head of technology systems for the local, private arts college—and for the first time in my life, I could walk for miles in any direction without having to worry about wandering into the wrong part of town.

A car engine sputtered down the street behind me; I stepped up to the sidewalk. Sensing that the car was slowing, I glanced over. An old, red sedan, covered with a thin layer of dirt, idled beside me.

"Hey, man, you need a ride?" The voice was female. Her face was obscured by the sun's glare. I crouched down to peer through the passenger window, squinting and shading my eyes. The driver was the clerk from Max's, the dark-haired girl who had chatted with me.

"Sure," I said.

I climbed in, holding the creased paper bag between my knees as I searched for the seatbelt.

"No seatbelts," she said. "This baby's a real piece of junk. You'll just have to trust me."

She yanked on the stick shift, and the car lurched away with a clunk. An ominous rattle emanated from somewhere under the dashboard. I kept glancing at her from the corner of my eye, trying to get a good look without being obvious about it. Now that she was out from behind the clerk's counter, I realized she was pretty. Or maybe not pretty—striking was more like it, which was just as good, to my mind. She had round cheeks, soft features, and dark, wavy hair. She wore thick, angular glasses that narrowed at the edges, lending an exotic accent to her eyes. I began to feel as though I were staring, so I scanned the interior of the car. The drab, maroon carpeting was littered with paper trash—receipts and cigarette foils and gum wrappers. Several strings of beads swung from the rearview mirror, along with a smiling, decapitated doll's head.

I knew I should say something, try to make conversation, but I was too busy deciding how to sit appropriately, what to do with my hands—these simple, unconscious choices suddenly seemed of great significance. Also, my throat felt scratchy, and I did not want to risk croaking at her.

"Where am I taking you?" she asked.

I blurted out the address.

"You live in that neighborhood?"

"Yeah. I mean, my parents…"

"Oh, you're still in high school?" She did not wait for my response. "I figured you must be a freshman at least. Most of the younger people who hang out at Max's are college students, that's all."

I waited too long searching for a clever retort, so when I finally thought of something, it came out sounding lame.

"Well, I guess I'm wise beyond my years."

She found this hilarious. She laughed enthusiastically, taking her eyes off the road, which made me nervous. I thought she drove too casually, not keeping a firm enough grip on the steering wheel. The car lurched every time she shifted gears, a fact that bothered me, though she seemed unconcerned.

"Seriously," she said, "you have better taste than most of the people I see in there. Better taste than most of the people I know at Brideford." Brideford was the arts college, the one where my Dad worked, and, I assumed, where she went to school.

"Well, I hear about a lot of music from my brother. He's a senior at MU this year." I was not sure why I had felt the need to mention Brad.

"Do you have a job?" she asked. "Because we just had to fire someone. If you want, I could talk to Max for you. He likes hiring people who know good music."

"Yeah, sure," I said. A whole new universe of possibilities had just opened out before me. I looked into the future and saw promise. "Thanks."

When we arrived at my house, strings of beads and doll's head still swinging, she extended her hand. I took it.

"Nice to meet you…"

"Jacob," I supplied.

"Jacob. I'm Vicki."

"Nice to meet you, too." I opened the door, hinges creaking. "I'll probably see you at Max's sometime."

"Hope so," she said.

I smelled meatloaf as I stepped inside the house. Mom checked the oven, waved at me, and returned to her laptop to type out an e-mail. Dad was making the salad. He wore his cell phone headset throughout the process, talking to a panicking employee while rinsing lettuce, solving a computer crisis while chopping carrots. I found this behavior unnerving, but I was used to it by now. For my parents, staying wired-in was second-nature. In fact, I was amazed we were having dinner together in the first place. When we sat down to the table, finally forcing them to disconnect for a few moments, I told them I wanted to get a job at Max's. I told them I had met someone who could probably get me hired.

They confronted me with silence, so I repeated myself.

"We heard you the first time," Mom said. "You have to give us time to process." Her voice unreeled in a clear, soothing line.

"How are you planning to get to and from said job?" Dad asked.

"I can walk there, like I do every day. Plus, I'm sure I can catch a ride from someone on most days."

"I'm just not sure whether you need to be worrying about a job right now," Mom said. "You need to be focused on school and applying for college. Senior year is very important. Anyway, Brad never had a job in high school."

"I'm not Brad."

"I know, honey. But is it really necessary? If you feel like your allowance isn't big enough, we can discuss that. I realize we haven't adjusted it for inflation in a few years."

"That's not the point," I said. "I want my own money. I want a job."

"Your father and I will discuss it. I can see that you feel strongly about it, so we'll certainly take that into account."

My parents avoided the topic for a week or so, but eventually they gave in. There were simply not enough reasons to refuse me.

"You can have the job," Dad said, "on the condition that you keep your grades up and don't work more than twenty hours a week."

Over the next month, I began to live for my shifts at Max's. The work itself was simple: operating the cash register, making cappuccinos, doing inventory of new music. When I got bored, I read paperback sci-fi novels and browsed through the CD cases. The other employees were friendly and, like Vicki, they were amazed at my precocious tastes. They began to treat me like one of them. In school, I sat through tedious lectures on the Civil War and Shakespeare, stuff I already knew. I waited patiently for three o'clock, when I would walk the four blocks to Max's and hang around until my shift started. If Vicki was there already, we would go outside and she would give me cigarettes, telling me every time that I should not be smoking. We talked about music and books and politics, things that nobody at school seemed interested in, and I tried to work up the courage to ask the more personal questions I felt would be the necessary preamble to asking her out. Constrained by my inexperience, I always failed.

Vicki's apartment had become the gathering place for Max's employees. One day in early October, she invited me over after work. She said they were having a little party, but that she could drive me home whenever I needed to go.

When I entered her apartment for the first time, I vowed that I would never forget what it looked like and how I felt. The place was a riot of color, a chaotic tribute to the boredom and disaffection of Vicki and her friends. The walls were covered with posters and photos, and one side of the living room had been decorated with a giant mural done in spray paint, oils, acrylics, even colored pencil. The images were random and distorted, mixed with words and symbols. Over here a blue elephant blowing roses out of his trunk stood on a volcano made of tomatoes—or was it heart shapes? The blood (tomato juice) ran down the sides of the volcano and into a cemetery, where the gravestones doubled as yellowed, rotting teeth. The inscription, written in scrawled cursive above the elephant, read, "He may be friendly, but he's still a big, dumb animal." I thought about the walls in my parents' house, an inoffensive shade of cream, decorated sparingly with prints of Impressionist paintings.

I had stopped in the doorway, so Vicki had to nudge me inside so that she could shut the door. I stood in the entryway staring.

"Pretty wild, huh?" she said. "We got bored one night a couple weeks ago, so we bought a bunch of paint and went crazy with it. So much for the security deposit, right?"

Within a few minutes, the rest of the crew arrived. We drank boxed wine and listened to music, cracking jokes and talking about work. I felt better than I had in weeks, better, in fact, than I had felt since we moved to Fairmont. These were my people, I now understood. They did not care about trivial things like clothes or cars or

television—or maybe they did, but at least they did not talk about them. Most important, they did not act like I was somehow less intelligent, less worthy of their attention, because of my age or my status as a high school kid.

Somebody rolled a joint, and when it was passed to me I took a long drag, holding my breath for a few seconds before coughing explosively. Vicki laughed and pounded my back. Nobody asked if it was my first time to get high, and I was glad. After a few minutes, my head began to buzz, and I found it impossible to concentrate on what anyone was saying. Bodies moved in and out of my vision in a blur, and I focused intently upon the music—I could hear each instrument distinctly and could pick out the varying strains of melody as though separating different-colored strands from a tangled ball of yarn. Each sound was unique and meaningful; music had never been this fascinating before. When the song ended, I still felt unable to join the conversation, so I let my gaze wander around the room, marveling at how much the apartment assaulted me with images. I stared at the coffee table, making a mental catalogue of all the objects on it: miniature pumpkin, portable CD player, paycheck stub, glass of water (full), four beer bottles (empty), pair of yellow cotton gloves, assorted pens, pencils, markers, and crayons, broken shard of mirror, wine bottle (empty), ashtray (overflowing), stack of flyers for a student film exhibition, computer disk, bag of marijuana, glass pipe, set of keys, silver bracelet, paint brushes in a cup of gray water, scraps of paper and cigarette cellophane. I wondered what significance I should attach to those objects. Did their placement have any greater meaning to a person who could decipher the arrangement?

"Jacob," Vicki said, causing me to jerk a little. After she and the others had a brief laugh at my expense, she continued. "We were talking about the Halloween party," she said. "I'm throwing a big bash this year. Are you going to come?"

"Of course." I realized, at this point, that I had not been keeping track of time. "Oh, shit. Could you take me home? My parents will be pissed."

When I walked in the front door, Dad was hunched over his laptop and Mom was watching TV while filling out paperwork. Neither seemed to notice that I had returned two hours later than usual. I went straight upstairs and climbed into bed, but I lay awake for a long time, thinking about Vicki's apartment, looking around my own room and observing how bland it seemed.

From then on, I became an official part of the Max's crew, both at work and outside of work. Leaves were falling, and the weather had turned cold, so Vicki gave me rides more often. Evenings at her apartment became an almost daily affair, as did my doses of eye drops and air freshener, to keep my parents from asking awkward questions. Though they said they were worried about how much time I was spending at work, they never did anything about it—they were both working sixty-hour weeks themselves. I kept up my grades but felt an increasing distaste for school. The teachers seemed oblivious to the world I lived in, and the subjects they taught seemed, at best, only tangentially related. I began to nod off in class.

Near the end of October, Dad announced that the auction would take place the following Saturday—Halloween. My grandmother had died several months ago, and Dad had resisted doing anything with his parents' belongings and their old homestead.

My grandparents had retired to a farm in southeastern Missouri and lived there, alone and isolated, for the last twenty years of their lives. They died earlier in the year, within weeks of each other, and their house had sat empty ever since; Dad said he was too busy to take care of things. I assumed he was just avoiding the inevitable, mournful process of digging through all the stuff they collected over fifty-five years of married life. But now, he had finally lined up buyers for the house and an auctioneer to conduct the farm sale. My brother and I were expected to help out.

"Well, that's a bummer," Brad said, during our weekly phone conversation. "That means we can't go to that show I was telling you about."

"Yeah, that sucks," I agreed. In truth, I had forgotten about our plans for my visit that weekend. I had long since decided that October Revolution was far too mainstream for my taste, especially their new album, which was the only one Brad had heard.

"And we won't get to party it up, either," he continued. "Unless you know about something going on in Fairmont."

"Not really, no," I said.

"What do you mean, 'not really'? C'mon bro, don't be holding out on me."

"I'm not. I mean, I heard about this one thing, but you probably wouldn't have any fun there. It's just someone I work with; it'll be lame."

"Not when we show up, it won't be. Look, don't worry, kid. We bring the party with us."

My grandparents grew up in Missouri during the Depression, and, as a result, for the rest of their lives, they never threw anything away. Or so it seemed, going through

their belongings. Their house, the attic, the garage, Grandpa's shop, the barn, and the two sheds were all packed full of stuff. Boxes upon boxes of clothes, blankets, and kitchenware were stacked on top of broken appliances and furniture so old that it had almost become stylish again. Our job—Brad's and mine—was to drag all these items out to the lawn, where my parents would catalogue them and group them on the dozens of fold-out tables rented for the day. We kept count of the things we found multiples of: four washers, six TV sets, seven bed frames, and an incredible thirteen lawnmowers. Not one of the lawnmowers, as far as we could determine, was functional.

After carting all this stuff onto the front yard, there was little else for us to do, so we wandered across the eighty acres that had belonged to our grandparents. We walked through the small grove of pecan trees where we used to play as kids. I remembered the epic snowball fights Brad and I would have with our cousins during Christmas break, sometimes remaining in the cold so long that our hands would stiffen as though frostbitten. I gathered fallen pecans and filled my pockets with them. Brad was growing restless; he kept glancing at his watch. As I reached up to grab a tree limb, shaking some more pecans to the ground, his cell phone rang.

"Wassup?" he yelled, grinning at nothing. "No, man, I'm here all weekend. Yeah, I know, but my little bro and I are going out tonight." He threw his arm around my neck and crushed my head against his shoulder. "Yeah, some party he heard about. Doesn't matter, as long as there's ladies and liquor, right?"

When he hung up, he said he was going to head back to the house. I told him I would meet him up there in a little while.

As I watched him walk away, I thought about the Christmas several years ago when Grandpa had his first heart attack. The four of us—my parents, Brad, and I—were playing cards in the kitchen, while Grandma and Grandpa dozed in the living room. Grandpa was a notoriously loud sleeper; he wheezed and snored with every breath. I was the first one to notice that the house had remained unusually silent for several minutes. Dad ran over to the recliner, shaking his father and yelling at him to wake up. He began pounding on Grandpa's back, pounding and shaking him until, finally, he coughed. Dad pounded harder, and Grandpa coughed some more, flecks of saliva spattering the carpet.

In the car, on the way to the hospital, Grandpa was placed in the backseat with Brad and me. Brad was given the task of holding on to him, making sure his head stayed upright, making sure he kept breathing, making sure (though nobody said so) he did not die. Dad sped along the winding dirt roads, Mom pleading with him to slow down, while Brad held on to Grandpa and looked at me in terror. I had to sit, huddled in one corner of the backseat, feeling death swirl around me, helpless. Brad had at least been given a task, he had somewhere to focus his will, something to grasp, a body to hold on to. I had nothing.

We made it to the hospital all right, and Grandpa recovered, though his mind was never too sharp after that. My parents praised both of us for staying calm and helping out through the crisis. Dad said that Brad had stepped up to the plate and taken responsibility, behaved like a man, and that I should try to follow his example.

By the time Brad and I left the farm, the moon had risen. When we made it back to Fairmont, night had fallen and all the stores were closed. We searched our parents'

house for costume possibilities. Brad found one of those cheap Richard Nixon masks in a box in the attic, but decided not to wear it because there was no slit at the mouth through which beer could be poured. Instead, he stripped a sheet from my bed and wrapped it around himself as a toga. Then he tore a couple of vines from one of Mom's hanging plants and wove them together into a little wreath to balance on his head. Once he had the whole outfit on, he posed for me, spreading his arms, hairy chest half-exposed, seeming very proud of himself. I borrowed one of Dad's old suit-jackets from the seventies and put on the Nixon mask.

The party was in full swing when we arrived. I did not see Vicki anywhere, so we made our way to the kitchen and put our beer in the fridge. Everyone in the apartment wore a costume, and they ranged from ornate to garish to simply lurid. One of my co-workers was dressed as Captain America. Two different girls came as Jessica Rabbit, and the entire cast of *Rocky Horror* was present. Max himself wore an Elvis jumpsuit.

"Is this the crowd you hang with?" Brad said.

"Sort of. Just some people I know from work."

"Let me guess—art school kids, right? That's cool." He gave me a knowing wink. "I mean, some of the girls are pretty hot. And they're probably freaky, too."

At that point, Vicki walked into the kitchen. I lifted my mask so she would recognize me. She came over, looking at the tall guy in the toga standing next to me. I made the introductions.

"Nice to meet you," Vicki said. "I've heard so much about you." This struck me as a strange thing to say, since I rarely mentioned my brother around her.

"So, you go to MU?" she said. Brad nodded. "What are you majoring in?"

"Finance," he said. "I'm minoring in French, though. That's what I'm more passionate about, but I have to think realistically, you know. Still, my dream would be to work on the Paris Stock Exchange."

Brad had never said anything to me about a minor of any kind, and I was almost certain he had never taken a French class.

"Oh yeah?" Vicki said. "Say something in French."

"Vous semblez le beau ce soir, mon cheri."

"Thank you, I think." Someone called Vicki's name from the living room. "I'll be right back," she said.

Brad cinched the sheet tighter around his waist, maneuvering the upper half of the toga until it revealed a little more of his chest. He took a long swig from his beer bottle.

"You made that up, didn't you?"

"No," he said. "That's really French."

"I mean the part about your real passion and wanting to work in Paris."

"Hey, let's just say I speak the truth in the form that people like to hear it." He elbowed me in the side. "Especially when the people have an ass that nice. She's not bad, right?"

Having no idea what to say, I remained silent. I still wore the Nixon mask, so Brad could not see my face. He let nearly a minute pass before speaking again.

"What's the deal, bro? You got a thing for her? She's a little old for you, but I guess there's always a chance. You want me to leave her alone?"

I said nothing.

"Look, Jake. Let me tell you something. There's two kinds of people in this world—those who take what they want, and those who stand around wishing it'd come to them." He pulled the mask up to my forehead, in order to see my face. I pulled it back down. He spread his hands out, palms upward. My breath, held against my face by the mask, felt hot and moist. When I inhaled, I smelled plastic.

"Okay then," he said. "Here goes nothing."

For the next few hours, I wandered the party, standing at the fringes of conversations, trying to feel anonymous behind the mask. Every once in a while, somebody would notice me, point, and I would do the "V" peace-symbol thing. Mostly, though, I watched my brother and Vicki talk to one another, as they increasingly ignored the rest of the party.

At one point, I tried to look at my brother the way other people might look at him. In the toga, he did cut quite a striking figure. He was tall and broad, obviously in great shape, with dark hair and a sharp jaw line. His voice was soft, but resonant. He talked more than most people, but he counterbalanced this trait with an easygoing, self-deprecating sense of humor. More than anything, he knew what to say to make people believe him.

Sometime later, I watched Vicki get up and walk to her bedroom. A few moments later, Brad followed. I tried not to think about what was surely happening just a few feet away from me, but I could not get the image of their paired bodies out of my head. Vicki had seemed very drunk the last time I talked to her, and I tried thinking about how Brad was using her for his pleasure. I tried to fix this thought in my mind, but

an image kept intruding—the barest suggestion of a smile, hovering about Vicki's face as she walked to her bedroom. The smile was faint, but I knew it was there.

I rose to my feet and left the apartment, slamming my fist against the brick wall on each step down the stairway. I tore the Nixon mask off and threw it into the street. After walking a block, however, I turned and went back to get it. Dad might go looking for it someday. Besides, the wind had grown bitter, and the walk home was long. The mask would offer a little protection against the weather.

Beth's Garden

Garrett crept out his back door and shut it gently behind him. He did not flip the light switch to illuminate the deck—though he was sure the worksite to the north was deserted, he didn't want to take the risk. He slipped a black stocking cap over his balding head and shouldered the backpack that he had already stashed under one of the rough-cut cedar benches. The bag was heavy—filled with about ten pounds of sugar—and it tugged at his sore collarbone.

He descended as softly as he could in his black tennis shoes, but the steps, poorly constructed, creaked anyway. Garrett had never really learned anything about carpentry, but since the deck was his pet project he had insisted upon doing everything himself. Beth, if she had still been there, would have called him foolish for thinking he could build the deck without any help, especially at his age. But he had done it, even after the broken collarbone, and he wore the injury like a battle-scar. A thick wooden beam had slipped out of wet concrete and landed in the angle between his neck and shoulder. With no one around—Beth having passed away six months before—he lay on the damp grass under the deck for several minutes, the wound burning with pain, not sure whether he should go call an ambulance or simply curl up like an old dog and die.

Garrett reached the wide expanse of soft dirt that had buried the bottom two steps. A few days ago, during an early spring rain, a sea of mud had cascaded down from the construction site that loomed just a few feet on the other side of the back fence. He had watched from the kitchen window as waves of mud poured down the slope, swallowing the vegetable garden where Beth had spent so much of her short time at the house. He cursed himself again for insisting they build so close to the fence line. Beth had wanted to build on the hill that overlooked the lake half a mile to the south. He had argued for the seclusion of the current location over the breathtaking view the hill would have offered. They fought for weeks about where to build. Garrett won out through simple hardheadedness. Had he given in to Beth's wishes, the house would now look down upon this cleared-and-leveled wasteland, instead of being engulfed by it.

The nearest machine, a heavy-duty track-hoe used to dig the deep trenches for water and sewer lines, sat perhaps forty feet beyond the fence. He stared at it. Moonlight glinted off the metal claw, which rested with its teeth sunk into the ground. The hulking machine cast a shadow across the plain of bare dirt. He could have simply hopped the fence right there and started with the track-hoe, but having planned every stage of the night's work, he didn't want to start improvising. He would circle around the site and approach from the north, returning the same way once the job was done, so that any stray footprints in the soft dirt would lead to the subdivision at the opposite end of the site. Though Garrett imagined his mere appearance—aging widower, living alone in his country home—would convince any authorities of his innocence, he wanted to take every possible precaution.

Reaching the top of a small ridge, he paused and turned to survey the land stretched out below him. To the north lay acres upon acres of bare, flat dirt, compacted over the past several months by the metal tracks of bulldozers and earthmovers. When Garrett and Beth had begun building their house, three years ago, the land to the north was heavily wooded, a backyard wilderness for two longtime city-dwellers. At night, coyotes yipped and howled. When he opened the back door in the early morning, rabbits would scurry away from the garden fence, where they devoured Beth's carefully tended layers of oregano and mint.

The garden was Garrett's first project after they moved into the house. He tilled up the entire backyard and then trucked in a half-ton of premium topsoil. The project was finished in two weeks, just in time for spring planting, and Beth started immediately. She spent several hours each day throughout the previous spring and summer, planting, watering, weeding, and trimming. About once a week their daughter, Karen, would drive out to help her mother tend the garden. Garrett always asked Karen to stay for dinner, and occasionally she would, but she never stayed afterward to linger over wine and conversation, which was what Garrett really wanted. She preferred to spend her time with her mother, hunched over rows of vegetables. Sometimes he felt abandoned in favor of the garden; it was certainly less demanding and more malleable than he, a companion that could be shaped and sculpted, withered or ugly parts snipped away. He decided to build the deck so he could have something to devote as much attention to as she did to her vegetables.

He was in town—the day after Labor Day, he remembered that very clearly—ordering lumber for the deck, when she suffered a stroke and collapsed in the garden,

where Garrett found her a few hours later. She had snapped several dead cornstalks when she fell, and they lay under her like a funeral bier.

Now, only the deck remained, stranded in the sea of mud that had drowned the garden, along with the entire backyard. Garrett took one last look at the ugly scene and swung his backpack over the fence, enjoying the dull thud as it hit the ground. He climbed through the strands of barbwire, careful not to tear his shirt and leave a telltale piece of cloth. He retrieved the backpack and headed through the woods at the edge of the flat expanse of dirt that would soon house fifty families or more. Garrett had seen the blueprints for the subdivision at the city planning commission's meeting, where he went to protest the reckless clearing of land that, he argued, would guarantee an erosion problem. The developer wanted to cram in as many houses as possible, and he said he needed the ground completely bare and level for maximum efficiency. The planning commission agreed, approving the plans for the Oak Meadows subdivision without adjustment and simply admonishing the developer to "keep an eye on the erosion."

Creeping through the underbrush, Garrett reminded himself that his task tonight was a justified response to provocation. He had tried to make the developer take precautions. One day, watching through his kitchen window as the earthmovers and bulldozers tore up the earth, he had noticed a man in a white hardhat talking to another man and pointing toward his house. With a pair of binoculars, he identified the man in the hardhat as the developer who had been so politic at the planning meeting, so full of assurances. Garrett went outside and waved the man over to the fence. He again expressed concern that during the heavy spring rains, without any vegetation to hold down the topsoil, all that bare dirt would turn to mud and flow downhill, right into his

backyard. The developer—Mr. White Hat—nodded and said that of course they had foreseen that possibility and taken steps to prevent it. He showed Garrett a silt fence they had erected to catch any excess mud. The fence was about two feet high, composed of a thin, canvas type material, and staked down with wooden poles. Garrett said he didn't think that was good enough.

"Look, buddy," White Hat said, "I know what I'm doing—this isn't my first project." He raised his hand, pointing at Garrett. "This also isn't my first time dealing with a 'concerned citizen' who's got nothing better to do than show up at the planning commission and wail about how I'm cutting down trees."

"Hey, I'm no tree-hugger," Garrett said, mentioning that he was a retired oilman, that he'd done plenty of cutting and clearing in his day. "So I realize there's nothing I can do to stop you from developing."

"You got that right."

"But I also know that you have a lot of time and money invested in this project, and there are plenty of things I could do, if I decided to invest *my* time and money, to throw a wrench in the gears. You know what I mean?"

The developer took off his hardhat and dragged his arm across his forehead.

"If the gears are big enough, they'll grind that wrench into powder."

Garrett had consulted a lawyer, but the lawyer said he couldn't sue the developer until actual property damage had occurred. He argued that certainly there must be some sort of negligent construction law or improper building code he could cite. The lawyer told him to come back when something had happened and that he might be entitled to a hefty settlement if it did. Other lawyers had given him similar advice. But two days ago,

when Garrett watched the tide of mud sweep over Beth's few remaining tomato vines, he decided to forego both money and lame apologies. Even if the mud were removed, his backyard would never look the same. He had chosen, instead, to extract his pound of flesh.

So here he was, walking through the edge of the woods with a backpack full of sugar, bound for the gas tanks of whatever heavy equipment had been left at the site. He also carried a funnel to eliminate any spills that might, in the light of morning, alert someone that the machines had been tampered with. He wanted the machines to appear completely normal when the workers started them. Once the engines injected enough sugar around the pistons they would seize up—so he had always heard—and Mr. White Hat would have to spend thousands to get them fixed. And maybe in the few days of dead time Garrett could figure something else out, some way to stop them for good.

After another few feet, he emerged from the brush at the edge of a barren cul-de-sac, where more houses in the neighboring Woodland Trails would someday be built. He turned and walked along the line that divided the two subdivisions. No fence had yet been erected, but the separation was plain—on his left, bright green strips of sod, on his right, bare dirt, stamped with the markings of various tracks and claws. When he spotted a bulldozer about a hundred feet away, Garrett stepped off the grass and headed back south, straight for the yellow beast. He could see his house in the distance, perhaps half a mile away. Stealth was no longer an option in this broad, open wasteland. He would have to trust that the developer, in his greed, would spurn the costly addition of a night watchman. There was a company trailer located near the middle of the site, and a single, bare bulb cast a weak pool of light for a few feet's circumference around the trailer door.

Earlier that day, through his binoculars, Garrett had observed one of the workers padlocking the door shut for the night. Then he watched every single man climb into trucks and ride away, some to eat cheeseburgers and drink beer with the guys, perhaps, while others, he presumed bitterly, to return home for a quiet evening with their wives and families.

Garrett had no quarrel with any of those men, he thought, as he approached the bulldozer. He understood that a person had to make a living, that none of them intended to do any harm. Their jobs were part of a larger process whose end results were homes where people could live and enjoy their own hard-earned comforts. These workers probably saw themselves as just one link in a chain that would exist with or without them. Somebody would operate the equipment, drive the machines, uproot the trees, move the dirt, level the hillsides. If they occasionally felt a twinge of guilt at the destruction they caused, the habitat they destroyed, they would surely bury these thoughts as deep as possible, refusing even to acknowledge their existence. Garrett could certainly sympathize—when he had retired he was vice president of engineering for Stephenson Co. The clearing of land was a matter of course, an almost perpetual task. He wondered if he had ever put some stranger in the situation he now occupied. After thirty years with the company, he must have.

When he reached the first bulldozer and located the gas tank, Garrett unzipped the backpack and went to work. The funnel fit perfectly, and he emptied a three-pound bag of sugar into the tank without losing a single grain. He tried to imagine the impotent rage the developer would feel, shelling out thousands of dollars to overhaul the damaged engines. That arrogant prick, that White Hat, would know who had wreaked this

vengeance, but he would have no means of proving it to anybody. Garrett would sit calmly in his house, waiting for the police to arrive for questioning. He would tell them that yes, of course he had been upset by the damage to his property, but he was not a vigilante. He would advise them, in an affected, feeble-minded manner, that he had read about bands of eco-terrorists who roamed the countryside in search of just this kind of opportunity. The police would ask politely if they could look around a bit, just to follow procedure, and he would graciously give his assent.

Garrett replaced the gas cap and closed the metal door with gloved fingertips. He folded the empty bag of sugar carefully, replacing it and the funnel in the backpack, and moved on. The second machine left onsite was an earthmover, used to transport large amounts of dirt from higher elevations to lower, the primary tool for leveling a plot of land. The gas tank on this one was tougher to locate, but he eventually found it, what looked like the gas tank at least, high up on the front end near the enclosed cab. He had to balance on a kind of metal shelf partway up the machine. Since his position up here was exposed to the wind, he poured with exceeding care but could not help losing some of the sugar when a gust swirled up. After emptying the second bag he climbed down and brushed at the dirt with his feet. He had not spilled very much; he was confident nobody would suspect anything before starting the engine the next morning.

He suddenly felt like a special agent involved in a covert operation. He was a highly skilled saboteur, whose mission was necessary to defend his homeland from imminent destruction. He must not allow his land, his territory, to be dominated by an outside force. Garrett felt, somewhere beneath the veneer of fantasy, that his twisted

sense of grandeur was dangerous, but he couldn't help seeing himself as a mysterious and powerful man.

The backpack dug into his sore collarbone, so he shrugged his right arm out of the strap, putting the full burden on his good shoulder. He suspected the wound would never heal completely. Finishing the deck with his collarbone still in the process of knitting was certainly the most difficult thing Garrett had ever done. And he had never felt a greater sense of his own isolation than when the deck had been completed and there was no one to help him celebrate. He realized he had spent innumerable hours piecing together an ugly wooden platform where, in days to come, he would sit alone and watch the sunset. This vision of a solitary figure engulfed by the endless expanse of earth and sky made him wish he could bring Beth back to life. Even if he were forbidden to talk to her or touch her, he would listed to her humming softly to herself and smell that strange, verdant smell on her hair and hands after she came in from the garden. He wanted to watch her watering and pulling weeds, even if that were all she did, even if she never came inside to eat dinner and watch television when night fell. It was at that moment, surveying his finished project, that Garrett decided to go to work on the garden, which had been ravaged by the onslaught of weeds and bugs. He tore up the soil and started over; he wanted it to look the way it had when Beth had tended it—vital and colorful, but carefully controlled and balanced. He was ready to start planting when the first rainstorm of early spring hit, and he sat at the window watching the desolation occur, helpless to stop it.

As he approached the third Caterpillar—the bulky, evil-looking track-hoe with its claw stuck in the ground—he gazed over the fence into his mud-filled backyard, feeling

more righteous with every step. Unscrewing the gas cap, he imagined the angry foreman calling for big-rigs to come and cart away the machines. Work would stop for the day; the workers would go home to their families. Maybe he would ask Karen to come to dinner. They could talk about who to involve in the project, how the development might be halted for good. They would reminisce about better times. Garrett emptied the last bag of sugar and, careful not to spill a single grain, he stashed it away and shouldered the backpack once again. Turning his face to the south, he headed homeward for the night.

In the morning he rose and went immediately to the window. Through his binoculars, he saw the men arriving for work. They yawned and rubbed their eyes, holding Styrofoam cups of coffee. Garrett decided to make himself a pot. He felt oddly domestic in his robe and slippers, reading yesterday's paper in front of the window.

When the first engine revved to life, he glanced up. Soon after, a second engine roared. He wondered how long it would take for them to quit running—probably just a minute or two. The coffee was hot and he drank it eagerly, burning his mouth. He adjusted the binoculars. The machines were still running, and now they began to move, sweeping across the dead plain. Then one—the earthmover—stopped, and Garrett's heart leaped against his ribs. Another man jumped on a step to speak with the driver; after a moment's word the machine lurched off again. Somehow both machines were running fine. The third one, the track-hoe, still sat silent, but now two men came ambling down the slope toward it, just over the fence line. One of the men was White Hat, and he appeared to be giving the other man instructions. This man climbed into the cab, turned a key, and began shifting levers. The mechanical arm pivoted and swung toward Garrett,

claw outstretched, and he put the binoculars down because he could see fine without them. The arm began to descend, but there was a metallic screech and it lurched to a halt, claw dangling a few feet above the ground. He heard the engine slow to a chug, then one massive clunking sound, and then silence.

Garrett exulted silently. At least he had gotten one of them. Maybe the other machines' engines were built differently, or maybe he had filled the wrong tanks with sugar. This was a start, at least. The man in the cab yanked at the levers, and White Hat yelled and bent down to peer under the machine. Then he did something odd. Shielding his eyes, he turned and looked across the fence at the kitchen window. Garrett kept still, wondering if he could be seen here in his robe, with his coffee mug.

As soon as White Hat turned away, Garrett got up and went to the refrigerator. He would make an omelet to start the day off right. Thinking about the men out on that dirty plain with the sun beating down upon them made him feel restless. He was not hungry, but he would prepare and eat the omelet anyway. In case something came up, in case he had to go somewhere, it would be better to have some food in his stomach. He ate standing up at the counter, not wanting to go back to the window. The other two machines moving and digging the earth taunted him. He felt a sudden weightlessness, the kind of vertigo one feels when an elevator lurches downward. The used dishes sat in repose on the counter; all the objects in the house remained motionless, and he could sense the inertia, more powerful than he, that would allow them to stay that way.

Garrett picked up the phone and dialed the number for his old office. He had not talked to those guys, his former co-workers, for months. Surely they could use his help with something. He got the secretary, who didn't recognize his voice but put him

through to Dave, the regional office director. Dave hollered into the phone, laughing, telling Garrett how glad he was to hear from him. Things were going great, he said. They had just approved a new drill site west of town, near the river, where oil companies had been drilling for sixty years. Garrett asked if they could be sure they would find anything.

"Oh, we'll get something," Dave said. "The first wells only went down to about twenty-five-hundred. We're pretty sure if we take it down to three thousand we'll come up with something."

Garrett had to agree they were probably right. Mentally, he searched for any possible danger in drilling on that site. Dave was telling a story about some funny thing one of the guys had said at lunch the other day. Some joke about gas prices and everyone riding bikes in the streets like they do in China. Then he asked Garrett how his daughter was doing.

"Karen? Oh, she's doing great. She's working in a law office now, and she's doing just great."

"Good, good. Listen, I've got a meeting in about two minutes, so…"

"Oh, right." There was a dead space on the line, and the phone felt strange and heavy in Garrett's hand. "Well, hey, if you need any help on the new project, don't hesitate to call me. It can be tough digging in that sandy soil, and you know I've done it a time or two."

"Sure thing, I might just take you up on that. It was great talking to you, buddy."

After putting the phone down, Garrett sat in his recliner for a long time, looking at the pictures on the walls—prints from museums and some original pieces Beth had

bought at local art shows—wondering why they held so little meaning for him. The sound of machinery was constant but removed, like a hazy memory replaying in his head, over and over again. A bird flew into the front window and Garrett did not move. He was no longer startled by anything. Minutes passed slowly; then he looked at the clock and it was afternoon. Had he dozed off? He must have been asleep to allow so much time to slip by unheeded.

He heard a car coming up the driveway. When it came into view of the window, he saw Karen's purple coupe—some funny little import she got a good deal on because of a dent in the back fender. Garrett had wanted to help her buy something nicer but she had refused. She told him she was a grown woman and could take care of herself. He heard the car skid to a stop on the gravel. Had he called her and invited her over? He could not remember talking to her.

She entered without knocking, as always. As they greeted each other, Garrett found himself wondering where this tall, dark-haired woman who moved with such confident grace had come from. Certainly this was not the girl he and Beth had raised, though it was, perhaps, the girl they had *wished* to raise. That other girl, the one he knew so well, had moved out years ago and at some inexplicable time had become this calm, self-assured person. Garrett could not remember when the change had occurred, and he tried to think back to pinpoint a specific date. Was it before or after Beth died? Beth, he felt sure, had always seen the greater potential in Karen—the person she might become—and he could not remember if the two women had ever met. He felt a sharp, acidic pain boil up from his gut and sensed, fully for the first time, the injustice of his life with Beth gone. If he could change places with her, he would do so gratefully.

"Hi, Dad."

"Hello, my child." Karen laughed at his assumed gravitas, and Garrett silently rejoiced that the old trick still worked. "Did I summon thee, or dost thou come unbidden to my chamber?"

She stooped to kiss his cheek, and this movement, with its ease and ordinariness, signaled the end of his game.

"I'm surprised at how clean the place is," Karen said. "Last time I came you were wallowing in your own filth."

"I've found new life, my dear. I have a new project, something in the works." He had already decided, however, not to tell her about it. "I just talked to Dave from the office, and he says they might have a consulting job for me."

"That's great, Dad, but don't commit to too much. You moved out here to take it easy, remember?" He watched her struggling to say what she meant. "There's plenty of things for you to do out here, taking care of the place." Her eyes drifted to the kitchen window. "What about the garden? It's springtime now."

"I know," he said. "We'll see."

They were at an impasse. Garrett wanted to tell her everything, to spill all his thoughts out at her feet for her to sort through and make sense of. Instead he sat silently, staring at her feet. She shifted her body and became suddenly businesslike.

"Well, I have these papers for you to sign—the ones finalizing the sale of the old house. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah, sure. Don't I have to get them notarized, I mean, sign them before a notary public?"

"I *am* a notary, Dad. Remember I had to get certified for my new job?"

She handed him the papers, and he fished on the side table for his reading glasses. When he found them, a knock sounded at the door. He looked up at Karen, and the knock came again, as though to assure them of its reality. Karen went to the door and opened it. It was White Hat.

"Is a Mr. Goodwin around?"

"Yes, he's here."

"May I speak with him? It will only take a moment."

She stepped aside and White Hat crossed the threshold, looming in the entryway. The toe of one of his muddy boots kissed the edge of the carpet. He became conscious of the hat and took it off, smoothing his hair back.

"Mr. Goodwin, I just wanted to ask if maybe you heard anything last night, down toward the south."

Garrett shook his head.

"Reason I ask is that our track-hoe broke down this morning, and I'm wondering if it might have been tampered with. It's only a couple years old, you know, and it was running fine yesterday."

"No," Garrett said. "Can't say that I heard anything. That doesn't mean nobody was there, of course. I'm a very sound sleeper."

"Well, okay. I figured it couldn't hurt to ask. It'll be fixed by next week, though, and we'll be right back on schedule."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Uh-huh. You'll let me know if you hear anything tonight, won't you?"

"Sure. Sure thing."

White Hat smiled broadly and stood for another moment in the entryway. Then he muttered his thanks, nodded to Karen, and left.

"What's that all about, Dad?"

"Bastard thinks he can intimidate me."

"What's going on?"

"Have you seen the backyard?"

"I came out and saw it the other day, remember? We agreed you were going to call a lawyer." Karen glared at him. "I take it you haven't."

"Even if I wanted to plant a garden I couldn't very well do it now, could I?"

"You could if you got a lawyer and forced them to clean up their mess."

"That's just what I need—more bulldozers in my backyard."

"What else are you going to do? Mess with their equipment at night until they catch you?" She shook her head. "This is not what Mom would have wanted you to do."

"Bullshit," he said. "Don't tell me what she would have wanted." Garrett felt sick, as though his guts had twisted unnaturally. "She would have understood perfectly. She would have stood by me." He wondered, briefly, if this were true.

"Okay, that's enough." She grabbed her purse and walked to the door. "Call me when you're willing to be reasonable."

"Karen," he said, but she was already out the door. He sat alone again, listening to the car door slam, the engine sputter to life, the sound of the coupe retreating down the

driveway. He would call and apologize, but not yet. Not until all this was over. He rose and walked to the kitchen window.

For the rest of the day, Garrett watched and brooded. The track-hoe loomed, abandoned near the fence-line, but the other machines churned and leveled as usual. One bulldozer piled its load right up next to the fence line, and he saw tiny avalanches of dirt spilling over the edge onto his property. Sometime in the late afternoon, two flatbed trucks arrived to cart away the wounded track-hoe. The bulldozer continued to work, eventually moving away from the fence. As the day wore on to evening, still he sat by the window.

After a late dinner, two cups of coffee, and three bourbons and water, Garrett crept out the back door. This time he carried with him only a pair of bolt cutters, big enough to snap through hoses, rods, springs—whatever it took to disable the machines for good. White Hat's attitude earlier today had been too much for him to take. Even if there was a greater risk involved, he needed to send a message. He had thought the sugar-in-the-gas-tanks bit was clever, but it had proved ineffective. The time for brute force had arrived.

He chose a spot to cross the fence line where the earth remained undisturbed. Luckily, the ground had finished drying in the hot afternoon sun; he walked without leaving a trace on the hard-packed dirt. When he reached the bulldozer, he slipped underneath it and went to work. Garrett took his time under there, slicing through everything the bolt cutters' jaws would fit around. The sound of snapping metal sent a thrill through his body; his heart was racing. After he exhausted the possibilities with the bolt cutters, he dug a knife out of his pocket and started looking for wires to cut. By the

time the bulldozer's underside had been thoroughly ravaged, his forearms were burning from the repeated strain. He crawled out and used the bolt cutters to bash a few holes in the glass-sided cab, just for the hell of it. There was no point in trying to conceal his crimes this time.

Garrett looked across the plain to the north, where the earthmover had been left. A much larger machine, the earthmover would surely have even more parts to sabotage. The company trailer stood, squat and ugly, in between. As he approached, he had to look away from the light bulb above the trailer door; even such a weak light was blinding when it was the only artificial illumination for miles around. He stopped walking for a moment and closed his eyes, letting them adjust. When Garrett opened his eyes again, his gaze drifted sideways, past the light bulb, along the roofline, and directly into the lens of a surveillance camera. He stiffened instinctually, as though remaining motionless would somehow conceal him. But of course it would not, he reasoned after a moment, and so there was only one thing to do. He took a few more strides toward the trailer, hefted the bolt cutters, and swung them in a high arc. They made solid contact, and one side of the camera crumpled with a satisfying crunch. A second swing, a few inches higher, severed the camera from its flimsy, metal frame, and the whole apparatus tumbled to the ground. He saw a bundle of wires running from the back of the camera up through a small hole in the trailer's siding. The tape, he realized, must be stored inside.

Garrett was still thinking through this new development when the trailer door burst open and a young man leaped out. The young man looked spooked, and a spiky crew-cut only added to the impression. He held a baseball bat in one hand and a can of mace in the other.

"Drop your weapon," he said. For a moment, Garrett had trouble processing what the man was trying to say, until he remembered the bolt cutters. He loosened his grip and they thudded to the ground.

The young man took two tentative steps forward, moving more into the light, still brandishing the mace. Garrett saw that his khaki uniform was cheap-looking and too tight around the midsection. The security guard's eyes were bloodshot, and Garrett wondered if he had been sleeping. Not that it mattered—he was wide awake and jittering with energy now.

"I have a legal right," the guard declared, "to use force to defend myself against any act of aggression."

Garrett held his hands up, palms forward, to show that he intended no aggression. "Listen, kid," he said. "I've got no problem with you. I'm just defending my home."

"Tell it to the judge," the guard said. "I'll be taking you into custody for trespassing and destruction of private property." He dropped the baseball bat to pat his back pockets, but he wasn't finding what he was looking for.

"Sir, please place your hands against the wall and remain still." The kid ducked inside the trailer again. Garrett figured he had forgotten the handcuffs—he must have taken them out of his pocket when he decided to sneak a few winks.

"Call your boss, or the cops, or whoever you want," Garrett shouted at the trailer. "Whenever they get here, I'll be in my garden."

He turned and started walking toward the fence line, hearing a loud thump from the trailer, followed by a string of curses. He did not turn around. When he had almost reached his property again, the guard called after him in a shrill voice.

"I'll be maintaining visual contact with you until the authorities arrive. Don't even think about running off."

"Where the hell would I go?" he muttered, as he climbed back over to his side of the fence.

Garrett tried to think about what would happen next, but he had trouble seeing more than a few seconds into the future. Karen would think he'd gone over the deep end—that much was sure. She'd probably him to go to some kind of therapist or shrink. Either that or the judge would order it, along with whatever other penalties and embarrassments he'd have to suffer. But he would suffer them all, for as long as he must. He won't leave his home, no matter what anyone says.

Looking over the area that used to be Beth's garden, Garrett made a silent vow that it would soon be a garden again. He'd have the mud removed, even if he had to do it by himself, one shovelful at a time. Then he would till the earth into rows for corn and tomatoes and green beans, and he would leave large square patches open for lettuce and spinach and asparagus. The season was right; the timing was perfect. Before summer, he would plant a hedge along the fence line, as well—the tallest hedge he could find. He would make this house as much of a home as it should have been.

Garrett could hear the young security guard's voice in the background, talking on his cell phone, but he tried to ignore the sound. Instead, he looked slowly about, surveying the future garden. She should have been buried here, he now realized, right where she fell. He should have knelt by her body with his hand on her head while the words of an unknown prayer died on his lips. He would have said nothing, no word to anyone; no doctor, no priest would have stolen from him the last sight of his wife. He

would have risen in silence and cast the rich, brown soil over her face. A mound he would have raised over her body, and stones he would have set atop it, and the dark earth would have enfolded her to its breast.

A Heap of Ashes

Berkman crouched down to get a better angle, feeling the snow seeping through his jeans at the knees. Adjusting the camera's aperture, he barely had time to focus and snap a few shots before a boy on a yellow plastic sled came sailing off the snow-ramp and landed a few feet to Berkman's right, continuing down the hill. The first boy's brother followed close behind, skimming down the incline until he hit the ramp, where he went a bit sideways and grew suddenly larger in the viewfinder. Berkman twisted out of the way, sheltering the camera with his body. He had been hired at the paper just two months ago—when he came back to town at Christmas—and he'd be damned if he was going to lose his job before the season even changed.

The sled missed him narrowly, and the two boys collided with each other at the bottom of the hill. Berkman was able to get a few shots of them throwing snow at each other. They tired shortly, though, and Berkman was glad of it—the day had already been long. He walked down the hill to get their names from their mother, where she was keeping watch. After jotting them down, he thanked her and plodded back to the parking lot where his pickup was parked. The hinges groaned as he yanked open the door, and

the engine coughed several times before finally turning over. Just make it through the winter, Berkman pleaded silently. At least one more winter before you give up the ghost.

Back at the office, he turned in pictures of snowplows attempting to clear the streets in the first light of morning, a fundraising brunch at the Wake Forest Alumni Center, a groundbreaking ceremony for the future site of a telecom company, and the two sledding brothers. These last pictures fell into the "loose art" category—those general interest photos that don't accompany a story but, rather, illustrate the diversity of life in Winston-Salem, at least according to the editorial staff. But while the other photographers hated taking these "fluff pics," as they called them, Berkman liked them more than the hard-news type photos. For him, since there was no planned and scripted event on which the shot was based, loose art seemed a little more honest, if not always as exciting. He felt better, not worse, about his job when taking these pictures.

By the time he arrived home, the sun had set. Nathan, his roommate, offered him a drink as he came through the door. Berkman sniffed it.

"Manhattan," Nathan said. "We're going high-class tonight."

Thursday night was always movie night at Nathan's place, the night when the remnants of their group of college friends gathered to reminisce and relive their glory days at film school. James and Elizabeth were there already. They were still waiting for Molly, who always seemed to arrive late. The five of them were the only ones left in Winston-Salem from the original crew of well over a dozen. All the rest had gone to L.A. to work as grips or extras or production assistants (the catchall term for a number of unglamorous little jobs). James was the one who found Berkman the job at the *Register*—he wrote for the paper as a sort of all-purpose media critic. The editors were

using him to try to raise their profile. Elizabeth had taken a job at Wachovia, a bank headquartered in Winston-Salem, soon after graduating. Molly was the only one who still did anything in filmmaking, working for a small-time editing studio, cutting training videos and commercials for local businesses. Nathan had gone back to school for an MBA, and Berkman was a photojournalist, something that would have been unimaginable just a few months ago.

He gulped away half his drink and went back to the kitchen to add more whiskey.

"There he is," James proclaimed. "I knew the Berkman of old would return someday. I just didn't think it would take so long."

"No, this is the new Berkman," he replied. "The old Berkman would be hitting on your wife by now. Either that or throwing up on your shoes."

Everyone laughed. Berkman liked to humor them when they wanted to bring up his once-legendary status. He considered it a harmless, if somewhat vulgar, activity, kind of like adjusting oneself in public.

"I haven't gone out with the Berk-meister in years," Nathan said. "But the last time I did, he got so hammered he puked on a police cruiser as soon as we stepped out of the bar. We had to run down an alley and hide in a Dumpster."

Berkman had no memory of that incident, but he supposed it might have happened. He was always surprised by how many of the stories they told about "the old days" were unfamiliar to him. Sometimes he wondered whether all the exploits they had stored away in their memories could really have taken place. He barely remembered some of the people and places they talked about so familiarly. He was relieved when nobody else wanted to tell a Berkman story.

Instead, the conversation drifted, as usual, toward films. While few of them had put their education to any professional use, they all maintained a healthy interest in film, especially independent and foreign films. They still gathered once a week at Nathan's house to screen the latest from Lynch or Jarmusch or von Trier. Even if none of them actually worked on films anymore, they could still watch them and speak about them intelligently. Berkman, however, was quite a bit behind, having dropped out of the School of the Arts film program after three semesters. After leaving, he had returned only rarely for the next six years, until coming back this past Christmas. Film school, he had realized, was a place where the sons and daughters of suburbia, those with artistic pretensions, came to ensure their future job security. After all, the business of film and video studies was booming. The kids were enchanted with the promise of a hedonistic haven for young intellectuals, while the parents capitulated because at least their children would not end up with hundred-thousand dollar degrees in studio art or philosophy. Film school, for thousands of families, was a generational compromise. For Berkman, who had never had a father to pressure him into a real career, it was a joke. If he had wanted to go to Hollywood, he would have gone, film degree or no. If making connections was all that mattered, he could have figured out which bars to frequent. Finding work had never been a problem for Berkman.

Nathan had begun talking about his plans for Spring Break.

"I want to go on a hiking trip. Has anyone ever been to the Smokies? They're only like four hours away." No one answered, so finally Berkman nodded.

"Yeah, I've been out there a couple times," he said. "It's beautiful, but in March it'll still be pretty cold."

"That's okay," Nathan said. "We'll wear our mittens. I'll get you guys the dates, and we can put something together. And hey, Berkman can be our guide, since he knows the area."

Berkman decided to go along without protest. He wondered if Nathan remembered the last time the group had been camping, at least when Berkman was present. It was right after his mother died, and he had just decided to leave school. At the funeral, he ran into an uncle he'd never met before, and this uncle offered him a job with his construction firm. The firm employed small crews that traveled the country doing disaster-reconstruction, following the seasonal patterns of hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, wildfires. To Berkman, that sounded like a welcome escape from Winston-Salem, a town that held too many memories. After he took the job, all his friends had driven out to Pilot Mountain for Berkman's farewell. He sold or gave away most of his possessions and packed what was left into his pickup, taking it up to the campsite. There they built a bonfire and held a ritual sacrifice. Everything flammable they burned, and everything else they tossed off the side of a cliff, while they reeled about the rocks, listening for the crash. Fortunately, nobody followed the stuff over the edge. Berkman had left town the day afterward.

Since Molly still had not arrived, he decided to go upstairs to take pictures. The second-floor room had once been Nathan's, but when the old roommate moved out, Nathan took over the downstairs bedroom. Berkman was glad; he liked the upstairs room more. Though small and drafty, the room had windows that offered a view of the dense elms and birches in Henderson Park, as well as the Winston-Salem skyline in the

distance—including the Wachovia bank building, a tall structure, rounded off at the top, which lent heavily phallic overtones to the landscape.

Berkman had set up his tripod next to the window and kept his camera there whenever he wasn't at work—might as well reap the benefits of the brand-new Nikon his boss had just purchased, he figured. He took the same picture every day, a shot of whatever was happening in a certain corner of the park, with the sky and the downtown buildings in the background. Today, the landscape was covered with snow, an oddity for North Carolina in late February. The window was frosted over, so he opened it. Cold air rushed into the bedroom. When forced to rationalize the pictures he took, he thought of himself as a documentary photographer who had no inclination to document anything beyond his own life. Sometimes, he felt, the simplest ideas were the best. When he was honest with himself, however, he admitted that laziness might also be a large reason for the nature of this project.

He heard the front door open downstairs, and from the tone of the welcoming shouts, Berkman knew Molly had arrived. That was fine, he thought. They could start the movie without him. He removed the lens cap, bent over to peer through the viewfinder. He adjusted the focus and clicked the aperture open a little wider. After printing the first set of pictures from this camera, he had abandoned the automatic function altogether. For such an expensive piece of equipment, the camera still could not operate itself as effectively as a human being could. Berkman preferred to be in control, anyhow. That way, if he screwed up his pictures, he could blame only himself.

He heard footsteps approaching from the hardwood floors in the hallway. A hand fell on his shoulder just as he clicked the shutter, jostling the camera and, no doubt,

ruining the shot. He turned to see Molly, cheeks flushed, wearing a knitted stocking cap over her thick, dark curls.

"Hey," Molly said. "I'm supposed to tell you they're starting the movie." She surveyed the camera setup. "You take pictures out this window a lot?"

"Twice a day," Berkman said. "One at sunrise and one at sunset."

He realized how cheesy that sounded; Molly laughed.

"Is this the Berkman I used to know? You're like Monet, only without having to paint anything. What are you going to call it? Oh, wait, how about, 'Dawn and Dusk: A Study of Light and Shadow from the Artist's Window?'" She spread her fingers wide and gestured at the landscape.

"Ha, ha," Berkman said. "Actually, I take pictures at sunrise and sunset because it's more convenient that way. And, if you must know, because the contrasts are better at those times."

"Yeah, sure," Molly said, "and because you've gone all soft and sensitive on us. Do you set your alarm every morning so you won't miss it?"

"No, the sun wakes me up," he said. Berkman had to give her points for candor because he sometimes suspected what she said was true. How ironic if his three-plus years as a migrant construction worker had turned him soft, when three semesters of film school had failed to do so. To show her he had not become a complete jellyfish, he grabbed her stocking cap and tossed it out the window.

Berkman had imagined that the cap would sail into the backyard and Molly would be forced to walk downstairs to retrieve it. Instead, the red, thickly knit hat landed near the edge of the roof, which sloped gently downward from the window.

"Shit," Berkman said. "Hold on." He moved the tripod out of the way and, without hesitation, swung his legs over the windowsill. He made it down to the hat just fine—the snow gave him some traction on the icy roof—but near the bottom, after he'd picked up the stocking cap and turned around, his feet slid out from under him. He managed to grab an overhanging limb on his way over the edge, keeping himself from falling. As he stood there, balancing his feet on the gutter, arms over his head, grasping the bare branch, looking at the frozen ground twenty feet below, he realized that his life had not flashed before his eyes, and he wondered if that was good sign or a bad one.

Berkman began to shift his weight forward, slowly twisting his body. The gutter creaked under his feet. He tugged on the branch and got a better hold, trying to transfer some of his weight off the straining gutter. His body swayed like the tree to which it was attached. Several withered pecan husks fell to the roof, dotting the snow.

The open window framed Molly's face, a caricature of shock. If her face had been the subject of a photograph, Berkman would have called it "Laughter Turns Deadly." Her hat, which had flown from Berkman's hands in the confusion, had come to rest about halfway up the roof, bridging the gap between them, a stepping-stone to safety and warmth.

"Are you okay?" Molly said.

"For right now. I could use a hand, though."

"What do I do?"

"Grab a rope or something. There's no way I can climb back up by myself. Too slick."

"Hold on," she said and vanished from the window.

"Don't have much of a choice, do I?" Berkman muttered.

She reappeared after only a few moments, but Berkman's fingers were already numb. He was wearing only a T-shirt, and his hands felt frozen to the tree branch. Besides, the breeze had picked up and even Berkman, whose concern for his reputation once would not have admitted even the semblance of fear, was beginning to get nervous.

"What now?" Molly said. She had an extension cord coiled in her hand.

"Tie it off on the bed frame. Double-knot. Then toss the other end down here."

When she had tied off one end and assured Berkman of the quality of her knot, she threw him the cord, a bright orange line snaking across the snow. He leaned forward, still holding the branch with one hand until he could reach it. The branch snapped upwards and the cord went taut. More pecan husks fell. The bed frame creaked. He took a step forward, concentrating on his balance. He took another step, checking to be sure there was enough snow there to keep him from slipping.

"What's the matter?" Molly said. "Slick out there?"

"Don't forget your hat's still out here. I could always toss it into that tree for you, if you want to laugh at something."

"And I could always untie my beautiful knot, and we'd see how far you get without my help."

"All right, all right," Berkman said.

When he reached the hat, he crouched gently and picked it up. It was dusted with tiny frost particles. He worked his way up slowly, step by step, until he was at eye-level with Molly. He held out the hat, keeping a firm grip on the extension cord. She snatched the hat, dusted it off, and put it back on her head. Berkman leaned forward, grabbed the

inside of the windowsill, and somersaulted inside. He lay on the ground, shaking. Molly pulled in the cord and coiled it around her hand.

"Good thing I was here to save you," she said.

"Save me? This was your fault to begin with." He stood up carefully, rubbing his bare, frigid arms.

"You're the one who threw the hat out the window, idiot."

"I'm not sorry," Berkman said. "You deserved it. If I had it to do over again, I'd do exactly the same thing."

They shared a tense moment in silence. They were standing close, both looking out the window. Berkman felt a little ridiculous, a teenager's sense of natural intoxication. Finally, Molly spoke up.

"So, you're leading our little expedition over Spring Break, huh?"

"I guess so. You're coming along?"

"Of course. Why—don't you think I can handle it?"

Berkman started to respond, but Nathan's voice cut him off, shouting up the stairwell.

"We're starting the movie now. Get your asses down here if you want to see it."

Molly turned immediately and walked out of the room, which seemed eerily silent after she left. Berkman considered setting the tripod back in place and taking his picture, but the sun had gone down and the light was a little too dim. He shivered and shut the window.

The movie they watched was set in a South American slum and followed the rise and fall of gang leaders through many years of city warfare. Berkman was impressed

with the sound and editing techniques, but some of the other guys praised the grittiness and unflinching realism on the part of the director. He wondered how they could judge whether the portrayal was realistic or not.

During the next few weeks, Nathan assembled gear for the trip, making checklists and buying expensive gadgets and clothes. The items were inevitably made from slick plastic and state-of-the-art synthetic fibers, miracle fibers that retained body heat "while wicking away perspiration," whatever that meant. Berkman had little to do with any of the preparation. Nathan seemed to enjoy the process of buying and organizing more than he would have and, he had to admit, Nathan was a lot better at it, too. Foresight had never been one of Berkman's strengths. The night before the trip was set to begin, James and Elizabeth dropped out, saying they had both come down with a virus, leaving only Berkman, Nathan, and Molly. Nathan was adamant that the three of them go ahead, though he seemed disappointed that their numbers would be so few.

They left early on Monday morning, Nathan piloting them in his Yukon. The horizon was clear and sunny when they started, but by midday a gray shroud had moved in from the west to cover the sky. By the time they reached the tourist town of Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, right outside the National Park, the temperature had begun to drop. Nathan turned on the car heater. Billboards sprang up by the roadside, announcing miniature theme-parks, country-and-western shows, and $12.99 dinner buffets (KC Strip Steak! Fresh Maine Lobster!). Molly, in the passenger seat, craned her neck around to catch Berkman's eye, and pointed to the sidewalk, where a family ambled along wearing brand new, matching cowboy hats—all except for the youngest, a boy of five or six, who

sported a miniature coonskin cap. Berkman, glad that the traffic was stopped, rustled around in his backpack until he found his camera. He pointed it at the family and snapped a picture. Nathan glanced at him in the rearview mirror.

"You're not taking that thing with you on the trail, are you?"

"Of course I am," Berkman said. "I just bought the damn thing; I might as well get some use out of it."

"That thing's heavy," Nathan said. "It's at least three or four extra pounds."

"Then you can be glad I'm the one carrying it."

"Plus," Molly broke in, "he has to continue his daily series, 'Sunrise and Sunset: An Artist's Pictorial Autobiography.'"

Nathan and Molly both had a good laugh at that one, so Berkman laughed along with them. He knew no other way to defend himself.

By the time they reached the park headquarters, the wind had picked up significantly, blowing cold air in from the west. They registered, bought their camping permits, and set out again as quickly as possible. The trail they had chosen was another hour-long drive away, along curving mountain roads and through darkened tunnels. They did not reach the parking lot next to the trailhead until nearly four o'clock. When they stepped out of the car, the effects of the higher altitude were immediately apparent. The air was frigid now; it stung their exposed skin. Nathan wanted to double-check their packs to make sure they had everything, but Berkman said they should hit the trail right away.

"The first marked campsite is about three miles up the mountain," he said. "We need to get there before dark, if we can."

Nathan protested again, but Molly sided with Berkman, arguing that he was the official guide, so Nathan gave in and they set off.

The trail was steep and rocky right from the beginning. Nathan walked in front, with Molly in the middle and Berkman bringing up the rear. After half an hour of swift hiking, they began to encounter patches of ice on the trail. Berkman was surprised at first, because he had broken a sweat under his thick layers of clothing, but he soon noticed he could see his breath every time he exhaled, so the air must be close to freezing. When the trail led them deeper under the trees, they saw several large expanses of snow back where the sun had not reached. Berkman wondered if these expanses had remained untouched and unmelted since winter. If so, the snow had fallen before his grandmother had died; it had sat on the same ground since long before Berkman returned to Winston-Salem. The Smokies were not nearly as high in altitude as the Rockies, but he was sure that somewhere, on one of these peaks, there was perennial snow, layers of frost that never melted.

Nathan had stopped, and he turned to face them. "Did we pick the coldest trail in these mountains? What's with all the snow?"

Berkman said he did not know. He pulled a canteen out of his backpack's side pocket and took a few swigs. Nathan and Molly did likewise. Since they were stopped anyway, Berkman shrugged the pack off his shoulders and located his camera bag. He dug it out, removed the camera, and snapped a few shots looking down into the valley. A long way off in the distance, beyond the range of his lens, he could see the town of Pigeon Forge, clumped gaudily at the feet of the mountain. He felt like an Olympian god gazing down upon the inferior beings who inhabited the polis. The feeling disappeared

when the wind blew frost from the branches, carrying tiny crystals up his sleeves and under his collar to melt against his skin. They stood around stamping their feet for a couple of minutes, until Molly said she was getting cold and wanted to keep moving.

When they finally reached the campsite, night had fallen. Berkman and Molly pitched the tent while Nathan struggled to keep the camp stove lit. He insisted on boiling water for hot chocolate before they bedded down, though nobody felt like cooking dinner. After the tent had been set up and the sleeping bags laid out, they ate granola bars and watched Nathan fumble with the stove. Molly abandoned the effort and crawled inside the tent. Nathan gave up and started to put away the stove, but Berkman said he wanted to stay outside for a few minutes, so he volunteered to clean up and hang the packs. The wind had died somewhat, so the cold was not quite as bitter as before. He played with the stove's miniature pump and fuel valve until he figured out how to keep a constant flame. Sitting on a log, crouched over the stove, he wished the night were clear so he could see the stars. After about ten minutes, he boiled enough water for three small cups of hot chocolate and handed two of the cups through a narrow opening in the tent flap to be grasped by frigid hands.

Berkman waited until they were finished, then rinsed out all three cups, dried them on his shirt, and packed them away, along with the stove. He then hung their packs, using the thick steel cables that had been strung between two trees for that purpose. After emptying his bladder off the side of the mountain, he joined Nathan and Molly in the tent. Nathan lay curled, fully clothed, in his ultra-light backpacker's sleeping bag. Molly looked just as uncomfortable. Berkman crawled into his bag, a heavy, ugly, Army

surplus job that Nathan had mocked the night before. This bag, he thought, would keep him warm in the middle of a blizzard.

Berkman lay awake for an indeterminate amount of time, dozing fitfully but never really sleeping. He thought about the places he had worked in the past four years, from roofing jobs on the Texas coast to laying brick in New Jersey. Now that he began to reflect on the choice, he could not be sure what had pushed him to take up that lifestyle in the first place. He supposed he had wanted to feel like a man—and working those jobs had done that for him, in a way. The skin on his hands had grown coarse and callused, while long, ropy veins sprang out on his forearms. He let his hair grow through the winter, only to chop it all off in the summer. He often went for days without showering, for weeks without shaving. He spent endless nights swilling beer in anonymous bars, surrounded by older, rougher men and the women who enjoyed their company. Occasionally, if he was feeling lonelier than usual on an evening, he would pick out one of these women at the bar and take her back to the motel. They never refused; he was ten years younger than most of the men on the crew. He rarely enjoyed the sex, but he desired the human contact, the warmth of another body next to his.

Berkman awoke in the night to find he was not alone. Molly had unzipped his bag and crawled in next to him, using her own bag to drape over them as a blanket. She wore long underwear tops and bottoms, as well as her red stocking cap. His bag was big enough for both of them; there was plenty of space. Still, he felt immobilized by her closeness, and even though their skin did not touch, the intimacy of her action was overwhelming. All at once, Berkman felt the great weight of her trust, and he wanted

more than anything to deserve it. He did not fall asleep until the first rays of sunlight began to creep over the horizon.

Berkman awoke cold, though his body was sticky with sweat. Molly had rolled halfway out of his sleeping bag, but was still covered by her own. Nathan's bag was empty. He could not get up without jostling Molly, but her eyes fluttered open just a few minutes later. She yawned and asked what time it was. He said he had no idea.

"Well," she said, sizing him up, "maybe you can't tell time, but you can sure keep a girl warm."

"It's nice to be appreciated," he said. Molly slid out of her bag and began putting on her shoes.

"I'm going to have to find a ladies' room."

Berkman left the tent soon after she did. He found Nathan kneeling by the stove, boiling water; he seemed to have figured out how to keep the flame burning. Berkman dug into the food bag and pulled out three packets of oatmeal and some more granola bars.

"Well," Nathan said. "You looked pretty cozy last night."

"What do you mean?" Berkman said.

"I mean you looked pretty cozy. Both of you did. Jesus, that's a good thing, all right? I've never seen you look that way before."

By the time Molly returned, he and Nathan had breakfast ready. They ate in silence. When they were finished, Berkman rinsed the dishes out and packed up. Molly

rolled up the sleeping bags and took down the tent. Nathan gazed at the map and announced that they had almost reached the top of the peak.

"Just another mile or so and the trail turns and wraps around the other side of the mountain," he said. "It's a longer stretch, but it looks fairly level."

The sun was directly above them by the time they set off. The next mile of the trail was almost dangerously steep in places, and it took them more than two hours to hike it. Just when Berkman began to think Nathan must have misread the map, they reached the spot where the trail turned. Berkman stopped to take pictures from a rocky promontory that jutted out into the air over a frightening cliff edge. Since he was the only one willing to have his picture taken standing on the windy point, he handed off his camera to Nathan. He took a few steps out and sat on the side of a boulder, trying to look casual, his body tingling with the awareness of all that empty space below him.

They cooked Ramen noodles for lunch and ate some dried fruit and more granola bars after that. They took double servings of everything, as though they had not eaten in days. When they finished, they lay around in the sun, enjoying the incredible warmth. Berkman could not remember the last time he had felt so comfortable; he did not want to be the one to get them moving. Finally he decided he had to, when the sinking sun became impossible to ignore. Before they left, while Nathan was busy looking at the map, he and Molly filtered water at a pool fed by a narrow trickle of water running down the side of the mountain. Berkman pumped the filter while Molly held the canteens. After several moments with only the sound of running water filling the air, Molly turned to look at him.

"Who the hell are you, anyway?" Before he could ask what she meant, she continued. "I've known you for almost seven years—even though you hardly ever came to visit when you were gone—but I still don't know your real name."

"Berkman is my real name."

"You know what I mean. Your first name. Is it a secret or something?"

"No, no secret." He hesitated. "It's Francis. My first name's Francis."

"Oh," she said. "Well, I could see why you might not want to stick with that. But what about Frank? There's nothing wrong with Frank."

"Frank is my dad's name. Since I never knew my dad, I always thought it was stupid to be named after him."

"Maybe so. But since you didn't know him, you can't really be named after him, right? At least not for you, since you have nothing to attach the name to." She closed the canteen and screwed on its cap. "I don't think there's anything wrong with Frank."

"Well, you can call me that if you want. But don't get offended if I don't answer to it at first."

"Deal," she said, and they shook hands.

They stopped at dusk, just as they reached the campsite, which was much nicer than the previous night's. This site had a stone fire ring with several thick logs arranged in a square around it. After setting up the tent, they spent half an hour searching for dry firewood, but they finally found enough for Berkman to build up a nice blaze. They cooked dehydrated meals, a bland mush that they all found surprisingly delicious. When they had finished dinner and cleaned up, they sat around the fire and made lazy

conversation. Nathan griped good-naturedly about school, and Molly complained about her boss at the video-editing studio.

"It's the answer to every student filmmaker's dreams," she joked.

Berkman realized he had forgotten to take a picture this evening, so he retrieved the camera from his backpack. He took a few shots straight into the wooded darkness, marveling at how the flash lit up the forest, imprinting that split-second image onto his brain. Then he turned to get a couple of pictures of Nathan and Molly in the firelight. In order to fit both of them into the frame, he took several steps back from the fire. On the final step his foot caught a rock and he went down, losing his grip on the camera as he fell. His head smacked against a log, so he did not see where the camera landed, but he heard a sharp crunch.

He stood up, rubbing his head, and looked down. The camera had struck one of the stones in the fire ring, and the lens had cracked. The three of them stared in silence for a few moments. Nathan and Molly seemed to be waiting for Berkman to say something, waiting to see how he would react.

"Well, shit," he said. "There goes my favorite job so far."

Molly let out a short laugh, but stopped herself, seemingly unsure whether or not he was joking. Berkman was not quite sure, either. He reached down and picked up the camera by its strap. Taking a step forward, he held it out over the fire.

"What are you doing?" she cried.

"I'm going to burn it," he said. "It's useless now, and the paper's going to fire me, so I might as well put a real end to it."

Molly jumped up and wrapped her hands around the strap below his.

"Don't do that. You never know; someone might be able to fix it." She pried his fingers loose and carried the camera over to his pack, placing it back in the insulated case. "Besides, only the lens is broken. The body's okay."

Berkman slumped onto a log and retreated into silence. Soon afterward, Nathan said he was exhausted and retired to the tent. Molly followed a few minutes later. Berkman sat by the fire as it burned down to embers, flashing bright red signals from beneath a heap of ashes. After scattering the coals one last time, he climbed into the tent, took off his shoes, and crawled into his sleeping bag.

Berkman lay awake for a long time. He hoped Molly would join him in the sleeping bag again, but he supposed it was not cold enough tonight. Her red stocking cap would be enough for her. He thought about slacks and ties and job applications, taking the bus to his interviews so that prospective employers wouldn't catch sight of his truck. He imagined what his desk would look like, with a nameplate and a pencil holder but lacking pictures of family members or friends.

Sometime later, deep into the night, Berkman heard Molly turn over and whisper to him.

"Hey, Frank," she said.

"What?"

"You'll be glad you didn't burn that camera. I don't think the paper will fire you, after all."

"How do you know?"

She did not respond, and he said nothing more. He wanted to reach out to her, to pull her close and enfold her in his arms. The air was not as cold as it had been last night,

though, and he wondered whether his sleeping bag would still look as enticing as it had then. He thought about the technique that trappers, highwaymen, and hobos had used for hundreds of years to stay warm on a cold night—burying the coals from a fire under a thin layer of dirt. Achieving the perfect balance was critical. Too thin a layer of dirt and you might wake up with your trousers toasted. Too much dirt and you'd smother the coals, end up sleeping on a heap of ashes, and maybe freeze to death during the night.

Berkman watched Molly's sleeping bag move gently up and down as she breathed, and he prayed for the night to turn colder.

The Real Deal

Paul was standing by the planetarium's exit doors, watching the audience file out, when he first considered stealing the meteorite. Leah, his assistant, was thanking everyone for coming, asking them to please visit us again, a duty that Paul should have been attending to, as well. Instead, he stared at the meteorite as children crowded around its thick Plexiglas case, their sneakers shuffling along the gaudy stars-and-planets carpeting. He imagined holding the meteorite in his hands, feeling an electric thrill run up his arms as he touched those scarred and alien surfaces once again.

As the last stragglers made their way out of the theater darkness, a young mother walked up to Paul with her son in tow. After thanking him for the wonderful presentation, she apologized for the question she was about to ask, but she said she absolutely must know. Did he ever do kids' birthday parties or, um, anything like that? Paul raised his head, meeting her eyes but continuing upward, until he was gazing at the apex of the black dome behind her. He manufactured a smile.

"Sorry, miss, but I'm afraid this show doesn't travel."

"Oh, really? Because I'd be willing to—" But Leah hustled her off with the usual litany of thanks and encouragement to return soon. The young mother said her son had enjoyed the show so much, she thought maybe they just would.

Once the crowd had dispersed, Leah turned and said she would start setting up everything for the next program. Paul only nodded, but he wanted to ask her how she did it—remained cheery about the whole never-ending process. She came to work every day seeming fit and energetic in her khakis and white Science Center polo, hair neatly arranged, makeup applied. She was pretty, in a wholesome, kindergarten teacher sort of way. In ordinary conversation she was soft-spoken and reserved, but being around the kids seemed to loosen some inner restraint; she became more animated and would joke around with them. Paul, on the other hand, could barely summon the resolve to show up each morning, and his mood usually darkened as the day progressed. This gloomy attitude made him feel old, though he was only eight or ten years older than Leah. But he also blamed his irritability on the repetitive nature of the job. The show started every hour, on the hour, and it ran from nine to five, with an hour-long break for lunch. The same show, the same kids, the same parents and teachers chaperoning, the same brats asking questions like, can you show me where Uranus is?

Paul stepped over to the case that housed the meteorite. He inched up close to the glass, which was smudged by innumerable greasy fingers. The meteorite had not lost any of its dark allure, even after nearly two decades in this unnatural confinement. The softball-sized space rock still shone with an indefinable luster, a strange illumination that seemed to radiate from deep within. The outer surface was torn and scarred, the result of

a bumpy ride through the atmosphere, but underneath the ugly brown exterior, Paul could sense something beyond the inert, something vital and animate.

He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and cleaned the display case. Inside the planetarium, Leah would be picking up discarded brochures, trashing half-eaten sticks of rock candy, and prying dried gum loose from under the seats. Even a few years ago, Paul could not have imagined that he would spend any part of his workday cleaning up after children. Leah was amiable about this part of the job, too, and he suspected that her occasional splenetic remarks were reserved for the moments when he was feeling most annoyed, near the end of his rope. She was perpetually trying to raise his spirits. After learning that she had been born in California while Reagan was governor, Paul started calling her the Great Commiserater.

Around the corner of the planetarium, people were queuing up for the next show. Paul took one more look at the meteorite, hoping that some of its energy would cling to him, if it could ever escape through two inches of high-density Plexiglas. Inside, Leah was fiddling with the projector, an antiquated piece of machinery housed in a tall, circular booth at the center of the theater. Paul checked his watch and pulled the laser-pointer out of his pocket.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "Until Davidson buys us a new projector, the sky will just have to be slightly off-center."

"I've almost got it. Hold on."

"Come on, nobody will notice anyway. If someone does, I'll say it's slanted on purpose to demonstrate the tilt of the Earth's axis. They'll eat it up."

She tried to hide her smile, but Paul caught it. Leah stepped down from the little aluminum ladder and folded it against the side of the machine. He reached out and gave her shoulder a brief squeeze.

"I guess someone around here should give a shit, huh?"

Leah looked as if she wanted to protest, try to encourage him, but she turned away instead. She walked over to the instrument panel and began dimming the lights. Paul worried that he might have offended her, or worse, that he had infected her with his negativity. If Leah ever grew as morose and cynical as he was, this job really would be unbearable.

"You ready?" she asked. Her finger was poised on the switch that would let the crowd in for their forty-five minutes of lukewarm lecture, what the Science Center referred to in its literature as their "astronomical experience."

Paul returned home that evening to an empty house. There were no messages. He turned on the oven to preheat and grabbed a pizza from the freezer. While he waited for it to cook, he skimmed through the latest issue of *Astronomy and Astrophysics* until an article caught his eye. He sat at the kitchen table and read about a new theory to explain the Oort Cloud, the massive sphere of comets and other debris that encircles our solar system. A group of cosmologists speculated that this cloud might contain matter that has been exchanged with other systems, perhaps infinitely, without ever being drawn into the orbit of a star or planet. Some of this matter could potentially have originated from the galactic core and if so, might help to uncover the secrets of the galaxy's formation. Paul had done research into this very area when working on his PhD. He had,

in fact, suggested that some meteorites already on Earth could have originated from the Oort Cloud. Most of his colleagues had greeted this idea with skepticism; the research had been interrupted and never finished.

He ate in the living room while watching television. His plate rested on the coffee table, the same one that had stood in his parents' house for decades. It was a beautiful mahogany table with a sheet of beveled glass cut to fit on top. The current glass had lasted over twenty years, custom-made when Paul was a senior in high school, after the first sheet of glass had shattered, after the event that had become his life's fulcrum, the point upon which it turned.

When the meteor smashed through the ceiling of his parents' living room, fell through the coffee table and landed on the floor, burning a hole in the rug, Paul did not leap from his seat. He did not cry out. He felt pinned to the cushions, and he stared, mesmerized, as though he had stumbled upon a great chasm in the earth, black and fathomless. Slivers of wood and plaster floated down from the ceiling. He did not feel surprised or afraid—his mind seemed to have adjusted instantly to this new development. The meteorite came through the roof and traveled perfectly across his field of vision as it shattered the table, not more than two feet from his head. The whole experience felt clearer, sharper, more real, than anything he could remember.

He leaned forward and put out his hand, feeling the meteorite's heat, wondering how old the dark hunk of mineral at his feet was. What if it was once part of some other solar system that lived out its life, grew, shrank, and exploded when its sun went supernova? This rock may have been part of some ancient alien civilization's holy shrine eight billion years ago. It may have fallen from that planet's sky to the surprise of those

strange creatures and been worshipped as a symbol of the universe's eternal life force. The meteorite could, in fact, be one of those creatures, having been vaporized in a supernova the size of ten million hydrogen bombs, only to reform as this ugly rock and travel halfway through the galaxy to deposit itself, like a celestial gift, at his feet.

In years to come, Paul realized that the meteor's strike had been transformative, the moment when he sloughed off his old self, as though shedding a layer of dead skin. Paul had been fascinated by outer space for as long as he could remember. The telescope his parents gave him for his sixth birthday remained for years his most prized possession. His father used to keep a special calendar to mark dates of astronomical importance: lunar and solar eclipses, the visibility of comets and planets, meteor showers. Paul and his father would take the binoculars up to the roof and lie there for hours watching the sky, Paul wondering aloud about space travel, extraterrestrials, even the existence of God. He told grownups for years that he wanted to be an astronaut, then an astronomer, then an astrophysicist. But in his teenage years, he began to neglect these aspirations. In keeping with the boys he befriended at school, he suddenly developed a great interest in sports, cars, and girls. These were the areas of expertise necessary to maintain one's place in the social orbit. At fifteen, he threw away all his old astronomy magazines; at sixteen, he boxed up the telescope and moved it to the attic. At seventeen, he announced his intention to become a sports broadcaster. And then the meteorite struck.

When his parents got home, Paul was holding the meteorite and staring at it intently. He was reluctant to put it down and did so only at his father's insistence. He told them the meteorite was his, that it had fallen next to him for a reason, and that he would discover that reason no matter how long it took. His father looked puzzled but

said nothing at the time. The next day, when Paul came home from school, the meteorite was gone. His father had donated it to the Science Center, where their family friend, Bill Davidson, was in charge of procurement. Paul, outraged, cursed at his father and kicked the furniture. When he left for college a few months later, he was still embittered, but he had given up the idea of sports broadcasting entirely.

The next afternoon, during the question-and-answer session that followed each presentation, a boy asked what a shooting star really was. Paul began by explaining that what we call "shooting stars" are usually small chunks of an asteroid or a comet that have broken off due to solar wind or gravitational forces.

"No, that's not right," the boy interjected. "They're really called meteors; that's the real name for shooting stars."

"Well, yes," Paul said. "As I was beginning to explain, when an asteroid—"

"They're called meteors," the kid repeated, as his mother whispered furiously in his ear. Paul stood silent, feeling dozens of eyes assailing him. Out of his periphery, he could see Leah inching her way out of the projection booth, ready to come to his aid if necessary. He could feel a headache building behind his eyeballs. Paul took a deep breath, thinking how bad it would be to end the program on this note, and continued.

"Well, son, you're mostly right about that. Actually, there are three distinct stages in the development of a meteor. First, it breaks away from a larger body, and in this stage it's called a meteoroid. Then, once the Earth's gravity draws it into the atmosphere, it becomes a meteor. Almost all meteors burn up before they reach the Earth's surface, but if it doesn't, once it lands and cools, then we call it a meteorite."

Paul forced a smile and swept his hand around toward the exits. "Okay, thank you so much for coming today, and as you leave the theater you can view an actual meteorite, up close and personal, that landed in this area several years ago."

Paul decided not to worry about the goodbyes this time. He did not think he could keep a straight face while asking this crowd to come back soon. Leah stepped out of the projection booth shaking her head.

"I think that boy has a very bright future ahead of him in the cable-news business," she said. "You handled it well, though."

"Are you kidding? I froze up; I almost blew it." He paused, considering whether he should lay all his cards on the table. "I think you should do the last presentation today."

Leah laughed and looked as though he were joking with her.

"I'm serious. You've listened to me so much, I'm sure you have the program memorized. Plus, you know, I won't be around here forever. You should be ready to take over when I leave."

"I don't want to."

"You think I do? Anyway, you'd do a much better job than I do."

"You're the real astronomer, though. This is just a job for me."

Leah held his gaze a moment longer before looking down. She shuffled across the interstellar carpeting to pick up candy wrappers and Popsicle sticks. Paul wanted to help her out with these tasks, to chat about something, even if it had to be Science Center gossip or the weather. He hesitated a moment, listening to the sound of crumpling paper, before he walked outside to look at the meteorite.

The glass case was surrounded by chattering kids, all elbowing and shoving for a better look, arguing about the meteorite's physical properties. One brazen, young girl held out that the space rock was not even real, that she could make one just like it out of paint and papier-mâché.

"Why do you think they keep it behind glass?" she said. "So that nobody will find out it's a fake."

Paul stood in the doorway, surveying the rest of the Science Center. Children scampered everywhere, around the simulated tornado and the earthquake room. They built towers out of wooden blocks and then demolished them with a rubber wrecking ball hanging from a scale-model crane. They put their hands on the static electricity globe and watched each other's hair stand on end. They took off their shoes by the dozen to enter the mirror maze.

When he had accepted the job, Paul thought associating with children all day would be refreshing, a way to reintroduce himself to the real world. That's how Bill Davidson had pitched it to him a year ago, when Paul returned to town for his father's funeral. He had been working in Canada for the previous five years on a privately funded meteor-tracking program. Paul had been seduced away from finishing his doctorate by this program, operated by the Talbot Observatory in the mountains of northern British Columbia. The idea behind the program was the theory, advanced by a few astronomers at the time, that a small percentage of meteors come from beyond the solar system, traveling at speeds so high that they avoid being pulled in by large stellar bodies until they collide with one directly. The astronomers at this observatory bought into the theory

early on, further proposing that these high-velocity meteors could have exploded from the galactic core in the immensely powerful reactions that take place there all the time.

Paul was swept away by the sense of possibility. He had been working on research that lent itself to a much more plausible explanation, but he dropped it for the chance at true discovery. If the Talbot astronomers were right, some of the meteors that hit the earth's surface could contain evidence of the originating galactic forces that laid the groundwork for humanity's existence. Leaving his dissertation half-written, Paul went north to join the team, flush with confidence in the machinations of fate. He had no doubt that they would soon find evidence to prove their theory correct. And once they had isolated the exact chemical properties of these "core meteors," perhaps they would receive authorization from various museums and institutes all over the world to reexamine many meteorites that had once been deemed ordinary, nothing more than a random collection of dust particles. Paul had no doubt that his meteorite would be the first of many. He worked for five years, charting stellar maps and testing space rocks. They found nothing—no evidence whatsoever. When his father died, following his mother by a mere four months, Paul had returned to his hometown feeling defeated, an intrepid voyager come back alone without any greater wealth, either of gold or knowledge, than when he set out.

He heard Leah's footsteps approach from behind him. She tapped his shoulder.

"Showtime."

Paul began to compose himself.

The last program of the day crept by so slowly that Paul wondered if his watch was broken. Finally, the lights came up and the Q&A session began, but the first hand to

shoot up came from a determined-looking boy, the same whose mother had asked about birthday parties the day before. Paul pretended not to see, waiting for another hand to rescue him, but after a solid ten-second count he pointed to the boy, who stood up to speak as though reciting a lesson.

"Mr. Astronomer, I heard that the meteorite outside isn't real. I heard it's fake."

"Well, actually, young man, it's funny you should say that, because I can speak personally regarding the meteorite's authenticity. You see, when I was much younger, only a few years older than most of you, that meteorite shot through the atmosphere and landed on my parents' house. It came straight through the roof and—"

"Nuh-uh," another little boy shouted. "You're making that up."

"Yeah, he's just telling us a story," the first boy echoed.

"Nobody's going to believe that. We're not dumb."

Paul felt sucker-punched. He felt his heart pumping blood to his head, causing his face to heat up. Leah was already out of the booth, opening the doors, thanking everyone for coming. Paul suddenly laughed.

"I wouldn't expect you to believe it," he said, as perplexed kids and perturbed adults filed past him and out of the theater. Leah walked over, concern etched on her features.

"Listen," Paul said, before she had a chance to console him. "I don't care about that. Why the hell should they believe me? It's a ridiculous story, doesn't matter if it's true or not."

"I know it's true," Leah said. "For whatever that's worth."

As they cleaned the auditorium and began shutting down all the equipment for the night, Paul watched his coworker's simple, efficient movements. Leah never appeared to be thrilled with her job, but she seemed to have reached a level of contentment that Paul could only imagine. He wanted to feel as content as she always seemed—not just with his job, but with everything. Maybe, he thought, Leah could show him how.

"Thanks for watching my back all day," Paul said. "I can definitely use the help."

"That's what they pay me for," Leah quipped. "But it beats polishing galvanized steel all day, like I did when I worked over in the air-and-space wing."

"Why did they move you here?"

Leah gave him a secretive smile.

"I requested the transfer when I heard you were going to be the new planetarium director. I had to hassle the big-wigs about it for weeks—I think they approved it just to get me off their back."

"But why?"

"I wanted to work with a real scientist. Our last planetarium director was a hack—he had a beautiful voice, but he couldn't have told you the difference between a quasar and a neutron star. I heard you were the real deal."

Paul felt an instantaneous sense of gratitude wash over him. He could not remember ever receiving a compliment so artless and direct. With no more than a handful of words, Leah had validated all the years of fruitless labor he had spent, chasing his fantasies through a telescope. Before he had time to think about what he was doing, he had blurted out an invitation to dinner. Leah took a step backward and looked at him carefully, as though she was having trouble seeing in the still-dimmed light.

"I don't think that's a good idea," she said. "You're my boss."

"You're right, you're right," Paul replied, speaking quickly now, trying to reassure her. "I don't know what I was thinking. Please, forget I said anything."

Leah nodded and said that was okay, but he could sense her keeping an eye on him with quick, low glances across the auditorium. After a few minutes of tense silence, Paul said there was some paperwork he needed to get done, and asked Leah to lock up when she left.

He walked back to his office in the administrative wing of the building. Most of the staff was heading the other direction, going home to their families. Paul's temples were throbbing with a headache he'd had since the early afternoon, and he wanted to sit in the cool darkness of his office for a while, in complete silence. He sat down at his desk and laid his head on his folded arms, just like he used to do in grade school. Murmurs passed in the hallway, but after some time they disappeared. He watched the sunlight on the floor of his office, cut into thin strips by the lowered blinds, recede and finally disappear. In the twilight, the shapes of the furniture and the framed pictures became gray and indistinct.

He realized that he had probably ruined, with a single misplaced question, the nice working relationship he had with Leah, which had taken over a year to reach its current comfort zone. Work would become infinitely more tense in the days to come, with Leah now fully conscious of how he felt about her. She would begin to suspect he was leering at her every time she went around the auditorium, picking up trash. After a few weeks of awkwardness, she would be quietly transferred back to air-and-space, or to some other faraway corner of the Science Center. She would be replaced with someone

as callous and bitter as he was, someone who would not care about Paul's credentials as an astronomer, or about making sure the projector was in working order, or about whether the meteorite in the glass case was real or not. He did not think he would be able to cope with such a change.

As Paul rose to his feet and left the office, he could feel his heart thumping, reverberating all the way up into his skull. He found a maintenance closet and rummaged around until he found a tool that would do the job. Carrying the crowbar over his shoulder, he walked out of the administrative wing and onto the main floor of the Science Center. The planetarium loomed near the center of the floor. Making his way over to where the meteorite was encased, he looked around quickly, checking for anybody who might have lingered so long past closing time. As far as he could tell, the entire building was empty. Good, he thought, I wouldn't be able to talk my way out of this one. But even if someone were still around, he had to take the chance. If he could only reclaim the meteorite, he felt sure, everything else would fall into place.

When he reached the meteorite's case, he wound the crowbar over his shoulder like a baseball bat and swung. It smacked into the Plexiglas and bounced back, sending painful vibrations through his hands and up his forearms. He dropped the crowbar, wincing, and examined the damage to the display case. It was nearly unscathed. The metal had left a shallow divot in the Plexiglas, less than a centimeter deep. His hands were still aflame with the metallic vibrations. He picked up the crowbar and swung again and again, ignoring the pain that erupted with each strike. In fact, he began to enjoy the feeling of the impact and the cracking sound it made. When he finally stopped, his chest was heaving and sweat had broken out on his forehead. One side of the display case was

now covered with scratches and another tiny divot, but he was no closer to breaking through. He stood hunched over the meteorite, catching his breath, adjusting his grip on the crowbar.

When he had recovered a bit of energy, he tried again. He threw all his weight behind each swing, focusing on hitting the same spot every time. If he could just create a weak spot, maybe he could break through. When his hands were throbbing and using the crowbar became too painful, Paul raised his foot and thrust his heel at the damaged case, kicking it again and again. The Plexiglas might as well have been steel, for all the good that did. Finally, with sweat running down his forehead and his knees going wobbly, he gave up and settled onto the floor.

How, Paul wondered, had he come to be where he was tonight? Looking back through the years, he could not see any logical path that led him here. The events of his life seemed less like a chain and more like a collection of incidents, just one damn coincidence after another. But he was here now, he had come this far, and there was no sense in starting over. After sitting calmly for several minutes, he rose to his feet again and picked up the crowbar.

Flyover

Owen shifted in his seat, turning away from the window as the plane tilted toward the setting sun. He sipped his cranberry juice and looked over at Nora. She was sleeping, or appeared to be—she slept so demurely that Owen could never be sure she was not actually awake. He liked to tease her that she used up all her peacefulness when sleeping, so she had none left when awake. And she could drift off anywhere, on planes or buses, in cars, at a movie, and once, even in a restaurant. He sometimes wished he possessed a similar talent, but he often had trouble sleeping in his own bed, much less in an airplane seat, and the excitement of his first trip to New York erased any possibility of rest. Tapping his fingers softly against the window, he wondered if it was too late to ask for some vodka for his cranberry juice.

"Owen." The urgent whisper came from the aisle, across Nora's sleeping form. It was Barb, Nora's mother, with a pair of foil-wrapped packages in her hands. Inexplicably, she now abandoned the whisper for her usual ringing tone. "Here's sandwiches, in case you guys need more than pretzels—I know I do. We might not eat again until late tonight, after we get to the hotel."

He saw Nora stirring as he took the sandwiches, and wished Barb would go away before she woke up her daughter. If Nora opened her eyes, Barb was sure to stand in the aisle chatting for as long as she could, and this would likely put Nora in a foul mood. He saw Barb purse her lips, a sign she was searching her brain for something else to say. Luckily, she came up empty and returned to her seat, six rows back.

Owen had never really liked the idea of Nora's parents coming along for the trip, but he did not know how to object without seeming rude or ungrateful. They were paying for the plane tickets and the hotel rooms, and they even had the decency to allow the young couple their own room, though it was still part of a suite that the four of them would be sharing. But sleeping arrangements were the least of Owen's concerns. He and Nora had been living together for six months, after all, with no serious objections from her parents, even though they were not officially engaged. No, Owen was much more concerned about what their first impressions of New York would be, and how those impressions might affect Nora. She had the regrettable habit of automatically disagreeing with her parents' judgments, and then ending up doing exactly what they wanted her to do anyway. He had seen this happen many times in the past couple years.

And, as if that weren't enough, Dwayne and Barb were just so *nice*. There was no other word for it, no matter how hard Owen tried to think of a more pejorative one. They came from a long line of Midwestern, Lutheran stock, raised to be hard-working, dutiful, and sunny of disposition. That's how he imagined Dwayne and Barb—plowing fields and knitting sweaters, slaughtering hogs and making preserves—though Dwayne worked for a shipping company and Barb was a nutritionist. Still, their heritage could be gleaned through observation, in Dwayne's iron-handed grip and tendency to mispronounce long

words, in Barb's gleaming white teeth and admonitions to eat three square meals every day. Aside from these simple charms, they had accepted Owen as Nora's intended with a genial good-humor that had completely disarmed him. Thinking back on it now, he could not remember ever feeling unwelcome.

An hour after he finished his sandwich, the plane was coasting in over Manhattan. The sun was gone, but the island of steel and concrete below shone brighter than any constellation. Owen considered waking up Nora so she could see their approach, but he was not sure she would be grateful. She might glance out the window, say, "That's nice," irritation creasing lines into her forehead, and close her eyes again. In Nora's view, sleep was sacred and should be interrupted only for the most vital occurrences. Owen was still in the process of learning which occurrences qualified as vital.

Owen's side of the plane dipped downward, giving him a better vantage. It seemed beyond reason that the crown jewel of the greatest city in the world—Manhattan Island—could be contained within the frame of a single porthole window on a common passenger jet. No single human should be allowed to hold such a sight within his purview, but there it was all the same. In those buildings and cars, on those bridges and streets, millions of minds drove onward into the future, as though on the very edge of night, reaching the new day before anyone else in the world. Tomorrow, Owen would descend into its midst, and in a matter of weeks, with determination and a little luck, he would take his rightful place among them.

The taxi thundered over the bridge, crossing a large body of water whose name Owen wished he knew. He felt sure that it was important, that he must have read the

name many times in books or magazines, seen shots of this very bridge in movies, and he wanted to know the names so that he could make a mental note. East River—check. Brooklyn Bridge—check. But he had no way of knowing if these were the right names, and he doubted if anyone else in the car knew, either. The cabbie would surely know, but if Owen asked he would run the risk of exposing himself to that particular brand of New Yorker contempt that he had heard so much about. Dwayne, sitting in the front seat, had already been touched by this embarrassment. As they were leaving the airport, he had asked how long the drive would take. The cabbie, a short, sullen, olive-skinned man, had flexed his hands on the steering wheel and stared straight ahead.

"Depends," he said. "The traffic might be bad."

"So, are we talking like, twenty or thirty minutes here?" Dwayne, evidently unsatisfied by the answer, had pursued.

"Could be twenty. Could be an hour. I cannot tell." After that, Dwayne lost interest, and all conversation in the car ceased. The radio was tuned to a Latino station, but the volume was turned down until it was barely audible.

Nora snaked her hand under the edge of Owen's jacket and put her hand on his leg. He wanted to cover it with his own, to move it slowly upward. He had to resist the urge to kiss her neck and marveled at her power over him. In just a few seconds, and with only a few fingers, she had utterly seduced him. He began to picture her in their bedroom back home, her sleek, black hair whispering across her bare shoulder blades as she stood in front of the mirror, wearing jeans and nothing else, looking at herself from different angles as Owen lay on the bed, ogling her. She liked to see herself in the mirror, knew how to package her soft, curving figure for maximum effect. She possessed

the specific kind of plumpness that men find irresistible, and she knew it. Owen had caught her many times, at a party, glancing at her own image in a mirror from the corner of her eye, while still carrying on a conversation, and nobody but him the wiser. In moments like those, he wanted to drag her away from the party, take her into a coat closet and fuck her until she screamed. He actually did it one time, and all the other guests—mostly an older crowd, friends of Nora's sister—must have, after wrapping themselves for the chilly air outside, become overwhelmed by the lingering pheromones on their garments, and gone home to ravish their partners. A woman like Nora could cause such things to happen; of that, Owen had no doubt.

After arriving at their hotel, Nora and Barb went to check in while Owen and Dwayne helped the cabbie with the luggage. Once they navigated the giant circular doorway and found a bellhop, they were left standing uncomfortably together as the ladies finished up at the desk. Dwayne, Owen had noticed, could never stand quietly with a person for longer than a few seconds without becoming visibly nervous and breaking the silence. Or maybe that's just the way he was with Owen.

"So, are you and Nora planning on scoping out the housing situation, while you're here?" Without giving Owen a chance to respond, he continued. "I only mention it because this is the most expensive city in the country, and you might be surprised when you see what rents are."

"Yeah, it's expensive," Owen said. "I've checked a few listings on the Web, and most places we'd be looking at would be in the range of fifteen hundred a month."

Dwayne whistled and nodded. "Yep, it's like I said. And that's probably the lowest of the low. Places where you couldn't get Nora to set foot, much less live in."

Well, Owen thought, that avenue of conversation has gone as far as it's going to go. Luckily, the ladies were walking over from the front desk, and the four of them, along with the bellhop and luggage, all piled into an elevator. They stood stiffly, looking at everything except each other for the several long seconds it took the elevator to rise thirty-six stories.

Some hours later, Owen sat perched on a small end table gazing out the window, as the air conditioner blew frigid air in his face. The window afforded a strange view, with only a tiny patch of street visible two hundred feet below. The rest of the space was crowded with buildings, mostly old brick ones, not many of the new steel-and-glass numbers in this part of town. The exterior of the building to his left was dominated by a mural, perhaps fifteen stories high. The mural depicted a dozen or more famous monuments from all over the world—Big Ben, the Coliseum, the Golden Gate Bridge, Mt. Fuji, the Taj Mahal—with an airplane aimed upward above them all, a contrail billowing behind it. Must be an advertisement for an airline company, Owen thought, but he could not see a name anywhere on the mural, no words at all. He had not seen any of those sights in person, none of those depicted, but that was okay. Once you've seen a thousand pictures of some object, can the real thing ever compare to that amalgam of images in your head? Strangely, no famous New York City landmarks appeared on the mural.

He turned to look at Nora, who had flipped on the television immediately upon their arrival in the room and then promptly climbed into bed and fell asleep. The TV was still on, though Owen had turned the volume down low, and its bluish glow tinted the

entire room. Over the hum of television voices, he could hear Dwayne snoring in the suite's adjacent room. Just as he was turning back to the window, the blankets rustled and Nora opened her eyes.

"Come to bed," she said, her voice husky with drowsiness.

"I can't sleep, baby. It feels too weird being here. I need time to adjust."

"Can't you adjust in bed? How am I supposed to sleep with you hovering over there?"

"Oh, you'll manage," Owen said, trying at the last instant not to sound sarcastic. He did not mean it sarcastically. Nora's eyes had shut, so he began to swivel back toward the window, but she was not ready to give up yet.

"Well, fine, if you won't sleep, neither will I." She propped herself up on an elbow, brushed hair away from her face, and yawned. "So. First impressions?"

He thought for a moment, trying to decide how to put his impressions into words, which seemed inadequate.

"This will probably sound ridiculous," he said, "but the thing that strikes me the most is the smell. I started to smell it on the cab ride, with the back windows cracked, as we drove over the bridge. Then, when we stepped out of the cab, it hit me full-force."

"I guess I didn't notice it so much. What's it smell like?"

"It smells like a city. I don't know how else to describe it." But then he paused for a moment, and decided to try anyway. "It's metallic, mixed with a deeper, earthier smell, like sediment in a river. But that's just on the surface; there's a stronger odor underneath, concealed, which I think is the people. Thousands, millions of people: their clothes, their sweat from standing close on the subway, the food they ate for breakfast,

their cigarettes and cologne and chewing gum. All those things. That's what it smells like."

"Wow." Nora had closed her eyes again, but still seemed alert. A smile fluttered on her lips. "And I thought it was just all the trash in the streets."

"Maybe so, maybe so." He reached over to the bed and tickled her under the ribs. She let out a burst of laughter and swatted at his hand.

"Quit it," she said, instantaneously serious. "Don't wake up my parents."

"Okay, okay." He withdrew his hand. "So what about you? First impressions?"

"I don't know. I guess my first impression is just how big everything is. Don't laugh at me; I know that sounds stupid. But until you really see it, how all the skyscrapers are crammed together until you can't see the sky without looking straight up—well, it's just overwhelming, that's all."

Owen nodded. He had been staggered by the size of the city as well, but had been telling himself to get over it. Of course the buildings were tall. That was something one would have to get past, or adjust to. If the city was big, one might just have to grow accordingly, until one no longer felt small and out-of-place.

"So are you coming to bed now?" Nora rolled over and grabbed his pillow, clutching it to her chest and curling her body around it.

"Yeah. Soon."

Dwayne and Barb woke them up early the next morning, and they rode the elevator up another ten stories to breakfast in the Sky Lounge. Nora groused about the early hour—eight o'clock—but Owen seemed to have located a reservoir of energy

somewhere. He had slept no more than three or four hours last night but still felt rested and ready to go. Gazing out one of the floor-to-ceiling windows into the morning fog, he could almost feel the chill in the air and was impatient to be in it. The rest of the family took their time. Nora poked at her cereal and sipped coffee. Dwayne read the paper. Barb looked over a subway map and tried to plan out their route, stop by stop, for the rest of the day.

The Sky Lounge was packed with people of all description, most of them seeming to be travelers from different parts of the world. Two tables down, Owen saw a European family, eating croissants in silence. His eyes were drawn to the daughter, a Nordic-blond wearing tight black jeans and a red T-shirt. She seemed bored with her family, and her lips were set in a petulant way that reminded him of Nora. Without intending to, he began to imagine a chance meeting in the hotel lobby at night, after everyone else had gone to bed. He could not help it; he had been fantasizing about vacation trysts with strange girls since he was a boy. And it was not just the sex that tantalized him, that caused his mind to wander. It was simply the idea of anonymity he found alluring, the possibility of sharing intimate contact with someone strange, someone he would never see again. As Owen sank into this fantasy, the girl's eyes met his for a brief instant before she turned back to her breakfast. But on those full, pink lips, he was sure he detected a smile. He wished he could find a way to ask what her name was without arousing any suspicion.

"So, Owen, have you called Betty yet?" Dwayne asked.

"No, but I will when we get done with breakfast." Betty was Owen's grandmother, the woman who had taken care of him for as long as he could remember.

His mother had left him when he was three, and Betty, though she had already raised four children, took him in. It was either that or a foster home. They had scraped by on the Social Security check and her dead husband's pension. They never went hungry, and Owen seemed to have turned out all right, at least as far as he could tell. Dwayne and Barb were always very solicitous toward Betty—they dropped by her little house to visit every so often, and even insisted she join the family for Thanksgiving dinner the past two years. Those two dinners were the only times in Owen's life that he had experienced a fully-functioning family gathering, and he had felt distinctly misplaced. He did not mean to be ungrateful, but all the unknown relatives and home cooking and holiday sweaters had made him feel claustrophobic, and he left early both years. And each time, after leaving, he had realized how foolishly he was acting, but knew it was too late to do anything differently.

"Okay kids," Dwayne said, folding his paper and laying it over his cereal bowl. "I think we should discuss this idea of you two moving here."

"Nothing's decided yet, Dad," Nora said. "We still have to start applying for jobs and see what's out there. And anyway, I'm still thinking about grad school."

"There are more than enough colleges here," Owen said. Nora kicked his foot under the table, but if she was trying to warn him away from this subject, the damage had already been done.

"That's true," Dwayne replied. "There are lots of colleges, lots of jobs, lots of apartments. The question is, are you two ready to go out and find them? And if so, are you willing to make the necessary sacrifices that living here would require?"

"Dad, can we not talk about this now? You're getting way ahead of yourself."

"Let's wait a few days," Barb chimed in. "You guys can get a taste for New York and, who knows, maybe you'll decide this isn't the place for you, anyway."

"It's like I've always said," Dwayne added. "Nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live here."

Owen wanted to ask if Dwayne had come up with that gem on the spot, but he held back. The last thing he needed was for Nora's parents to turn against him. He realized that he would probably never get their support for this plan, but he felt like he should at least have their acquiescence. Otherwise, even if they didn't act any differently, Nora would be unhappy about the move.

The itinerary Barb had developed during breakfast was as follows: 1) walk to Times Square to buy theater tickets for this evening, 2) take a ferry to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, 3) take the subway uptown to the Empire State Building, 4) return to the hotel to change clothes, 5) go to dinner at a fancy Italian restaurant, 5) see the play. She had mapped out exactly which subway lines they would need to take and where they would need to change trains. Tomorrow would be the museums day (the Met, the Guggenheim, the Natural History Museum, and MoMA, in descending order). On Wednesday, they would see Wall Street, the New York Public Library, Ground Zero, and then catch a Yankees game in the evening. Thursday would be a free day, meeting up in either Chinatown or Little Italy for dinner, and Friday morning they would fly back to the flatlands. Barb did not like leaving anything to chance. Nora kidded her mother for being so precise, but did not put up any resistance to the plan. Owen wished the itinerary could be more flexible, but he looked forward to Thursday as a day when he and Nora could explore the city on their own.

After packing everything they would need for the day in a small backpack—a burden that Dwayne insisted on taking upon himself—they took the elevator back to ground level and hit the street. Times Square was not far, but after only a few blocks, Owen could see that walking as a group would be a problem. He and Nora went in front, but Dwayne and Barb kept falling behind. Owen and Nora would cross a street, only to turn and see that her parents were waiting for the light to change to "Walk." Even on the sidewalk, they were unwilling to move through or around small knots of people, and thus joined the ranks of the slow-moving traffic. Nora laughed about their rate of progress, but Owen was starting to get annoyed. They could be moving along at twice the pace they currently were. Aside from that, having to constantly look back at Dwayne and Barb to see where they were, Owen began to notice how they were dressed. Barb's embroidered denim shirt and sun visor, when paired with Dwayne's white tennis shoes and mesh hat, fairly screamed "tourist." Not just tourist, but "tourist from some bland, Middle America suburb." Owen could not tell whether they knew they stuck out but did not care, or whether they were really so oblivious as not to notice.

"You're getting pissed already, aren't you?" Nora asked, as they waited for her parents to find a suitably large break in the traffic so they could cross the street.

"No. I just think this is going to be a long week if we have to travel as a group the entire time."

"Maybe so, but that's how Mom wants it. I don't see why you can't just relax and enjoy yourself."

Owen could think of lots of reasons, but none of them would sound nearly as justified if spoken aloud. He was aware enough of his own natural impatience to see that.

Still, he could not help feeling shackled by Nora's parents, and it was an unfamiliar experience for him. Maybe Nora was so accustomed to feeling constrained that she no longer noticed it. Or maybe she found the feeling comforting. As they watched Dwayne and Barb cross the street, Nora slipped her hand into his and squeezed it. In those few moments, Owen saw an entire life spreading out before them: their many exploits in Manhattan, meeting a dynamic group of friends and compatriots, their increasing success in their careers, starting a family, moving out to Long Island (regretfully, but admitting that they're not so young anymore), seeing their children off to college. Or maybe not, maybe sticking it out in the grit and sludge of the city, maybe remaining childless. But whatever happened in that future, at least they would not be bored. At least their kids, if they had kids, would not have to grow up in the same flyover backwater that their parents did, and their parents before them, and their parents before them. He and Nora could fly back to the Midwest for holidays periodically. One or two trips per year should be enough to keep her content.

As the day wore on, Owen kept restraining the urge to find a way to get lost in the crowd. He could meet the family back at the hotel later in the evening, in time to make dinner and the play (*Chicago*, which Dwayne grumbled about until Nora told him it was probably the most risqué show on Broadway right now). Owen just had very little interest in seeing the Statue of Liberty or any of the other attractions. He wanted to roam through the streets and soak the atmosphere into his pores. The radio waves from shop windows would beckon to him. Newspaper kiosks alight with tacky baubles would seem to hover inches off the ground. A man sitting on the sidewalk, playing his harmonica with one hand, would rattle a cup with the other. Owen would drop in a twenty dollar bill

out of sheer exultation. He wished he had a video camera, wanted to document everything he saw. Instead, he had to stand in front of various landmarks with an arm around Nora and hold a smile while Barb fiddled with her Nikon. The whole process made him feel like a plastic figurine in one of the numberless souvenir shops they passed along the way. They spent an inordinate amount of time in these shops, where Dwayne and Barb bought items they could just as easily have picked up at home (a "signed" photo of Tony Soprano and an "I ♥ NY" beach towel, respectively). By the time they made it to the top of the Empire State Building and stopped to watch a hazy sunset, Owen was agonizing over how to avoid three more days like this one. The strange thing was, he knew that Nora's parents should not bother him nearly as much as they did. They were a bit dim but well-meaning to a fault. He knew he should put up with their quirks and be endlessly grateful for their generosity, but he just wasn't. And this tension caused him to grind his teeth and want to run away, which only made the awkwardness worse.

"Let me see your camera," he said to Nora. She handed it over. "Look," he said, pointing to the shot he was attempting to line up. A few blocks away, the airplane mural he had seen from the hotel window last night rose up the side of a building. Several hundred feet above it, a real airplane rose into the clouds, tilted at the exact angle as the one in the mural. He held the shutter button, but nothing happened.

"Oh, oops," she said, and took the camera back for a moment to fix the problem. By the time she handed it back to him, the airplane had risen out of sight.

"That's okay," he said.

"Can't you still get the picture?"

"No, the airplane's already gone. That's what I wanted to get. The image of a thing, twenty stories high on a building, with the real thing just above it."

"But you could still get the mural if you want to."

Owen shook his head and said nothing. She did not get what he was trying to do, and he did not feel like explaining it. Nora shrugged and walked away.

For dinner, they chose a cozy place called Trattoria della Cittá, a few blocks away from Broadway. Owen was genuinely cheerful for the first time all day; he even ignored the fact that Barb felt the need to attempt to pronounce everything on the menu and that Dwayne asked the waiter if he could just get "a plate of spaghetti and meatballs." After directing Dwayne to the right item and pouring some wine, the waiter asked where they were from.

"How could you tell?" Barb said, laughing uproariously. "We're from Nebraska. The kids go to school at NU in Lincoln. You ever been out our way?"

"I don't think so," the waiter replied. "I guess I probably fly over you guys every summer, when I go to see my brother in Frisco."

"Well, next time you should drive. You're missing a lot of good sightseeing along the way."

"Maybe I will," the waiter said, as he was walking away.

After dinner, since they still had an hour to kill before the play, they ordered coffee and made conversation. Barb was very interested in knowing what each person's favorite sight was, although she seemed less than pleased when Owen said his was the Canal Street subway station. After a few moments of awkward silence, he assured her that he was just kidding.

"Actually," he said, "I loved the view from the top of the Empire State Building."

"Oh, wasn't it just gorgeous?"

"I just wish I could have taken that picture I wanted. It would have looked good in my portfolio."

"What portfolio is this?" Dwayne asked. Owen explained that he was putting together a collection of his writing, photography, and graphic design work to accompany his resume. Dwayne asked if he had any ideas about where he might like to work. So he told them about *BTP*—short for *Beyond the Pale*—which proclaimed itself as "the publication for transgressive thought, art, and action." Mainly, the magazine published witty and vituperative indictments of American consumerism and anti-intellectualism in the form of essays, poems, photographs, interviews, fiction, nonfiction, or anything else the editors deemed appropriate. The magazine, founded on a large private grant, refused to include advertisements and would rely on actual sales for growth. Owen thought it had potential to expand, and if it did so, they might need a few extra hands. For a startup, they had landed some prominent figures for their first interviews, including Noam Chomsky and Adrienne Rich.

"I guess I'm supposed to know who those people are," Barb said.

"Beats me," Dwayne said.

"Well, they're very well known in certain circles," Owen concluded, realizing how lame that must sound.

"I'm not trying to be a downer here," Dwayne said. "I just hope you've got some kind of backup plan."

"Dad, we don't have *any* plans yet," Nora said, shooting Owen a look that was clearly meant to silence him. "In fact, the more I think about it, the less appealing New York looks to me. It's so big; I think I'd feel overwhelmed. And there's nothing green, either. That would get depressing after a while."

"There's Central Park," Owen said.

"That doesn't count. It's still surrounded by buildings."

An awkward silence ensued. They all finished their coffee quickly and left, even though they would get to the theater early. They strolled down the sidewalk as newspaper and other trash drifted around their feet. Dwayne and Barb chatted to each other, while Owen and Nora walked silently, hand-in-hand. Nora's hand was clammy, and Owen found the sensation of holding it unpleasant. Still, he knew he could not let go, because Nora would take it the wrong way and there might be a fight. He wanted to avoid that at all cost. They were turning onto Broadway, when Nora dropped his hand and stopped walking.

"Shit," she said. "I left my purse at the restaurant."

"I'll go back with you," Owen said. He nodded to Dwayne and Barb. "You guys can go ahead."

"Don't be silly," Barb said. "We'll all go back together."

But when they got back to the restaurant, the purse was nowhere to be found. The waiter said he had not seen it, so Dwayne and Barb wanted to talk to the manager. In the meantime, Nora checked the bathroom, while Owen stood by awkwardly, hating the idea of being watched by all the other patrons in the restaurant. Barb was raising her voice to the manager and seemed on the verge of causing a scene. Nora came back from the

bathroom empty-handed, declaring that someone must have stolen her purse since she remembered hanging it on the back of her chair when they first sat down. The manager tried offering them dessert on the house, but Nora and her mother were in no mood to be pacified. At that point, Owen decided to wait outside. He leaned up against the building, hands in his jacket pockets, the first traces of steam beginning to appear each time he exhaled. When Nora and her parents walked out several minutes later, the play had already begun, and the only thing anyone wanted to do was go back to the hotel.

"I just want to live here for a little while," Owen said, "if for nothing else than to feel that I've been a part of something grand, even if it's only for a couple of years."

"But you know how you are," Nora said. "You like to pull yourself back from the world. If we move here, it will just get worse. You won't know anybody so you'll isolate yourself. From other people at first, and pretty soon from me."

They were lying in bed, staring at the blank television throughout this exchange. The air conditioner had cooled the room until it was uncomfortably frigid, until they were both shivering, but neither of them had gotten up to turn it down. They could hear Dwayne snoring from the suite's other bedroom.

"No I won't," Owen said. "I know I'm kind of a loner. I can't do anything about that. But I won't isolate myself."

"To be honest, Owen, I'm not sure I want to risk it."

"Well, you haven't made a habit of risking things, so why start now? We'll just spend the next three days in this purgatory and then fly home to green grass and blue skies, right?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Owen saw Nora's mouth twitch, but she said nothing. He thought there might be tears now, and he was sure already of the regret he would soon feel. But not yet. He did not feel it yet. Instead, he stared straight ahead at the blank television screen, the glare from the lamp throwing his own reflection back at him. Still, he did not look away. The screen seemed to collapse inward like a tunnel, and Owen could see countless hours spent like this, watching himself as though in third person, saying cruel things, building a wall of contempt around himself. The two of them fighting for bits of turf, defending their own fiercely. He saw it all, how it would go, but he could not look away.

VITA

Brian Gebhart

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: AN APARTMENT IN VIAREGGIO: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Education: BA, University of Missouri, English, 2004. Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts degree with a major in English and a specialization in Creative Writing at Oklahoma State University in May, 2007.

Experience: Graduate Teaching Assistant, Oklahoma State University, 2005-2007.

Name: Brian Gebhart Date of Degree: May, 2007

Institution: Oklahoma State University Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: AN APARTMENT IN VIAREGGIO: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Pages in Study: 157 Candidate for the Degree of Master of Arts

Major Field: English

This collection represents stories written during a three year period, from the fall of 2004 to the spring of 2007. All of the stories, with the exception of "Flyover," were written for fiction workshops at Oklahoma State. The work follows in the tradition of the literary short story, with themes including: travel, pop culture, the relationship between people and their environment, the struggle to achieve meaningful human contact in the contemporary world, the transition between adolescence and adulthood, and the essential loneliness of the human condition.

ADVISOR'S APPROVAL: Toni Graham