

WELCOME GAMBLERS

by

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for Vanessa

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Way to go, hero.

Brian saw light only when he probed the wound. Ice-blue stars exploded. It was like a kind of game or toy, and he knew he'd better quit playing with it, better quit now, because every time he knuckled his gut he grew weaker. He was dying one queasy poke at a time.

So safety tip: stop touching yourself.

Or what, I'll go blind?

Funny. Watch me die laughing.

Stay, he commanded his hands. Stay still. Stay here, he said to his life. But it amused him, this starfield, this classic screensaver of the mind. These bright fireworks of pain. They drained him and sustained him. It was the skullbound light show for his deathday party.

Brian chuckled, gurgling blood. Blood in the mouth? That's not good. Nah, not good at all. No, wait. He hit me. Hit my face. That's it. A busted lip. Knocked out tooth. Wishfulfuckingthinking, Bri. This is the way the world ends. Not with a whisper but a silent, silent bang. Touch. Floom!

Brian shifted, and reapplied pressure. He flattened his hands onto the soaked polo shirt, pressed down evenly and felt the thick blood rise and goosh through splayed fingers. He almost swooned. Swoon? Faggots in velvet waistcoats swoon. Romantic poets swoon. Brian was no poet and no Romantic but he damn near swooned and the word swoon, what it felt like, was incomparably perfect.

Focus! Brian squinched his eyes and opened them as wide as he should. Didn't make the blindest bit of difference, ha!, it was so dark. In the dark, all bitches look the same.

Now that's poetic.

Hard to concentrate. Not fair, he couldn't even peek. How much blood had he lost? How much loss could he survive? Not just blood. This alcove blotted out sight and sound. That was its design. His design. Chalk up two more losses, then. No, three. His sense of touch was useless.

Drowned. The bench was wet. Jeans sodden. How embarrassing, he wet his pants. That was true; that was for sure. Fashow, fashow. His gut oozed and oozed. The pool of his gore rose. His gorge — beautiful word, gorge — rose.

His hands caged over the prisoner that lazily seeped free. He did twist the blade, didn't he? Sure he did. He knew every move from every crappy movie he ever saw, so why not? Why not gut-stab ol' Bri the way they do in the

*... * ...*

Wake up! Wake the fuck up, Brian. Open your eyes. Ha ha, joke's on you, they are open. It's just...dark. Way past dark. Past the tipping point. Ha. Now you're bein' cruel.

Lenny should've laid the signs flat. Simple as that. Those signs started the whole business. That yellow one. They leaned so carelessly against the wall. If they had tipped a fraction more, slid out a degree and fell flat and were lost, might it've have made a difference, that little thing? Might it've spared his life?

If only he could stretch his legs. Something hurt. He was going numb, all cramped up like this. But the bench was the room, and Brian was entombed in the womb of a room. Fortress of Solid Doom. He did it up right, though. Hung the thick ply and set the soundproofing and bolted the reinforcements himself. Nice job.

Be nice to stretch his legs, though. Test to see/not see if the pool was deep enough yet for him to float. Drift...

Monica should see this. See him ending up in the Meditation Room. See him ending. He knew what she'd do. She'd laugh. Brian heard Monica laugh, and for a second he could not unhear it. He shuddered.

He had do something. What? Can't coagulate or cogitate, then ya better meditate. You in dah Meditation Room, suckah. Meditate on your sins, mothersinnerfucker. He laughed, and Monica laughed with him.

*Brian spat a fat clot of something
(tooth, hopefully, nothing but a tooth)
and barked in all the voice he had left.*

“I do not deserve this death.

“I do not. Deserve. This death.

“I do not. Deserve. This death.

“I do. Not. Deserve.

*“... * ...*

“...this...”

“Welcome Gamblers”— Chapin
Page 3

I
BET

We are so fond of each other because our ailments are the same.
— Jonathan Swift

THE BAND

1

Lenny’s sense of etiquette came from a rude gags catalog. He put novelty coasters under their Bud Lights and Yuenglings, stocked the poker table with memo pads stamped BATES MOTEL and provided tip-and-strip pens from Denmark. No one ever wrote anything down, not even Brian, the group’s would-be writer. No one minded slopped beer, either. Gracious living wasn’t the point.

Lenny offered Round Tuits and gen-you-wine wooden nickels. He set out bowls of X-rated fortune cookies, anti-vampire garlic mints, and green gummy boobs. For birthdays, there were corset cakes with cinnamon red hots for nipples and “*the best is yet to cum*” icing. The hard-to-blow-out candles sparked and the matches exploded. A guffaw was better than applause to Lenny. Nothing pleased him more than to provide creature comforts for his friends.

“Know what this town needs, Len? Just for you? A Dirty Old Man Dollar Store,” Jeremy said. “Check.”

“There was one,” Peter said. “Lenny bought it out. Check.”

“Bid a dollar,” Brian said. “Lock, stock, and barrel of fake dog poo.”

“Don’t knock fake poo,” Lenny said. “That’s funny stuff. In.”

“He’s blushing. Look, he’s blushing,” Todd said. “That’s sweet. Dealer folds.”

“Fold.”

“See a dollar,” Peter said.

“Who needs cards?” Todd said.

They played cards.

2

It took months for them to settle on the convenient lie of poker night. None of them would last five minutes gambling online or at a real casino table, and they all knew it. They dealt five card draw and seven card stud, and sometimes added Spit in the Ocean or Wild Widow (which Peter used to play with his father). Omaha and Texas Hold Em were banned after Lenny and Todd almost came to blows over lammers and buttons.

“Look at the table,” Todd said. “There’s no lammer, there’s no button. What *difference* does

it make? Deal!”

“The dealer *is* the button, fucknose,” said Lenny, his nostrils flaring. “But the button can mark lammers.”

“Which are what?”

“They’re buttons!”

“I’m gonna *lam* you in the hospital, worthless prick! Right now!”

Brian and Peter had to haul Todd back to his seat. Jeremy was no help, he was laughing too hard.

The variants on poker night were enjoyably hit and miss. They smoked weed when they had it, and occasionally drank at sports bars or titty bars. They rooted for different teams, and all hated the Redskins. They bowled, threw darts, shot hoops, and shot pool. They argued religion and politics, but rarely attended services or rallies. They did not race or fix cars, and none owned a waterworthy boat. They were too old for paintball and laser tag, irredeemably lousy at golf, and formed a unanimous aversion to board games, Renaissance fairs, and all forms of open mic night. Musical tastes differed. They talked about road trips and road rage, women, racquetball, batting cages, women in cages, skiing, and bungee jumping. They didn’t trade porn, attend trade shows, or hunt together, although only Brian didn’t keep guns.

It went without saying that none invited wives or girlfriends.

Poker night at Lenny’s became their fallback activity, and so Lenny liked to joke what a thrill, that made Doris their fallback girlfriend. Lenny’s jokes had a knack for landing wrong.

Doris lived with Lenny for coming on two years. No one understood her staying power. Doris had stringy, long straight hair, no figure to speak of, wore faded peg jeans, and favored tee shirts of rock bands that quit touring decades ago. She had a coarse laugh and a pat line to explain life with Lenny. “I have a high threshold for bullshit.” When the boys would come over, if it wasn’t too cold, Doris would excuse herself to the front porch with a beer and a pack of Parliament Lights.

Mina stayed in her room. Of Philomena’s babyfather, Doris once said he was a tryst with a twist. No one knew how to get around that line, and everyone accepted that was the point.

Mina’s whole existence was a closed subject, and the nine-year-old acted accordingly. She was a moon-faced girl, rendered nearly mute by shyness and a slurring lisp, and did things with a slow, incurious heaviness.

“Only you, Lenny,” Brian once said. “Only you would have a daughter named Phil.”

“Fuck you. She’s ain’t ‘Phil’ and she ain’t mine.”

Closed subject.

When Reddy Freddy Flasher ended up in the Mina’s orange crate of Barbies, Webkinz and Happy Meal toys, the shit hit the fan. Doris went into the little girl’s room one day and found Mina sitting criss-cross applesauce atop her coverlet, the leering bobblehead in her lap. Mina made Reddy Freddy’s kung-fu action phallus, huge and brutal as a scimitar, swing out, retract, and swing out again from under the rigid plastic raincoat.

For a while after that, being around Lenny and Doris was about as soothing as taking a dip in a tankful of piranha fish.

“Remember Wade? Big Wade? He rides with Hells Angels, Leonard, I hope you remember that! He loves me. If I blow him one time, Wade will *come* to this house, he will *cut* your throat, and he will bury you somewhere you will *never* be found. Wade knows how to do it, I swear to god!”

“Let him! Get him! I got a Schlage deadbolt on the door and a double aught in the closet, so anytime you and Captain Herpes are ready, Doris. Anytime!”

They stood a-tiptoe and raged until ropy veins bulged from their necks and their faces turned purple. They yelled at each other *you get the hell out* and roared back *no you!*, and each dug in. The vendetta was on. Doris went to the mattresses, and Lenny went to the couch. Noise was the weapon of choice. Screaming matches, slammed doors, hissed hellos, and mutual stalking conducted in majestic silence.

Two Thursdays later it was over. Mina stayed in her room, Doris went back to the porch with her beer and her smokes, and Lenny had to stow his crapola in one place.

Lenny’s study — the glorified breakfast nook where the guys played poker — became stupendously jam-packed now with brain floss, boxes of spare eyeballs, and a never-used toilet screamer. Reading material hung on the walls. Centered around the giant molded ear, vast as a Thanksgiving dinner platter (the walls have ears — get it?), were bumper stickers, tattered pin-ups, and etched placards suggesting CLOTHING OPTIONAL BEYOND THIS POINT or TAKE YOUR EX OUT TONIGHT (ONE BULLET OUGHTA DO IT). Shelves were a dense jumble of oddities: snakes in a can, switchblade comb, titty salt & pepper shakers, a superbright Jesus light.

Then there were the three tin signs in the thin brown sack. Leave it to Lenny to stumble across shit he forgot he ever had.

Shush...shush...shush. Big traffic on a wet, wide street. A stream of trucks. *Click*. What the hell? Todd took a solid minute to work out where he was, and another minute to remember how he got there.

Motel 6. Off the, oh for fuck’s sake, what exit? Between the 95 and Route 17. That one. He hadn’t checked in at this sleazepit since marrying Sandy, must be for almost a year, but here he was.

Everything throbbed. Todd’s tongue felt swollen and dry. Rocking his head made the room tilt crazily. The thin walls of faux cherrywood paneling were stacked badly. Stacked against him. Todd woke up in a house of cards ready to collapse. It was scary and funny. He had been here before, all right.

He rolled over. Flattened pillow beside him. Beyond that, lumps on the night stand, silhouetted by the colorless curtains that stirred slightly. Shush...shush. Todd watched until the shapes on the night stand took meaning. His wallet. Keys. Flattened tube of K-Y Jelly. There it was; that was it.

Todd brought back the night in big, loose chunks. The girl who slipped. She had on damntight jeans and had a fat as hell nose and drank Corona Light. He brought her here. She had done something. Mashed that wide nose of hers hard against his pubes and sheathed him to the hilt and even lapped out her tongue.

“How do you do that?” Todd gasped.

She slid up to grin. “Easy,” she said. “But don’t make me talk with my mouth full. It’s rude.”

“Won’t do that,” he said. “Wouldn’t dream.”

She giggled in her throat.

She had done something else. Screamed into the flattened pillow, burying that ugly face. He had the K-Y Jelly. That deed was darker, lost to shadows. Todd felt himself stiffen for the memory that coyly slipped away. Too bad the girl was gone. But maybe not. Time to head home to Sandy, whatever time it was. Besides, his hard-on hurt.

Todd replayed it, filling in gaps.

It was Lenny’s fault that Todd had gone on pussy patrol. Lenny canceled poker night. He had shown the dull little girl one of his porno dolls or something. Doris was on the rag about Lenny being a sick fuck, like that was really the Eleven O’Clock News.

Being an old married man brought order to Todd’s life, and Order Number One was, Never

surrender a Thursday night. Besides, to stay in with Sandy would only botch her routine. She used Thursdays to iron and fold laundry, mate socks, nurse a glass or two of Merlot, and glue her gaze to a lineup of crap TV. “I like my weekly zone out,” she told Todd. “I’d be darn exhausted if I had to do what you do to relax.”

Maybe she knew. Maybe Todd going out even without a place to go was his crazy way to be helpful. The only thing he knew was the shit he got into once in a while wasn’t all his fault. If you came right down to it, none of it was. He liked a good time. Nobody *blamed* him for that, but sometimes people took advantage.

Todd had a beer at the Irish tavern by the train station. It was too early. The place was dead. Three skanks at a table waited for Sean at the bar to set up the karaoke machine.

At the CVS pharmacy on U.S. 1, Todd bought a three-pack of condoms and K-Y Jelly. He paid cash. Todd couldn’t say anymore there was no thought of cheating on his wife, but god’s honest truth there wasn’t any plan. Preparation was different. Preparation meant better safe than sorry. He pocketed his wedding ring. What he was doing, arguably, was not only thinking of Sandy, but actively protecting her. And what thanks could he expect? He knew the answer to that one.

He went to the brickfront bar & grill on Princess Anne Street, wedged mid-block between an auto inspection station and a row of puny, wood-sided residences. The bar & grill was fronted with mirrored plate glass, and ran a rope light atop its neighbor’s splintery picket fence. It was a dive that knew it was a dive, and locals who wanted to get drunk or laid or both went there.

Todd had a beer and a shot, and then another. He swivelled on his stool and propped his elbows on the bar. When a passing girl slipped on somebody’s spilled drink and teetered into him, Todd shot out an arm. “Watch it,” he said. Instead of muttering sorry, the girl said thank you. So Todd played the gent and bought her a drink. The lady drank Corona Light with a wedge of lime, and for hours she had done her best to boost the profits of Grupo Modelo and the citrus industry.

They got to talking, and soon favored leaning their foreheads together and mumbling. Todd found out her name and what she did for a living and by the time she was halfway through a story about her cat with an eye infection, Todd realized he’d forgotten her name.

The girl had a nose too big for her face. She had vivid green eyes and a sensual mouth, but that huge nose made her look more friendly than sexy. It was distracting as hell. She wore a scoop blouse to show off her good-sized boobs. Her painted-on jeans were pinched so tight at the crotch that a perfect diamond of light shone through. Todd focused on the diamond.

The girl played lightly with Todd’s moustache, first with her fingertips, then her lips. Todd looked at her, and decided he could live with the nose. For an hour or so. She was no one-fifty-niner, at least, the nasty take-home play you don’t hit on until exactly one minute before closing

time.

“Let’s go,” Todd said. He paid both tabs. They went out.

“I’ll follow you,” she said.

“Oh, no shit,” Todd said. “Better safe than sorry.”

They kissed on the street. Todd led the way to Motel 6. She swung her red Nissan into the parking slot next to his. He might have told her something about his place being no good for them because he just had it painted and it stunk to high heaven. The story wasn’t great, but it wasn’t questioned, either.

She waited in her car while he paid for a single. They went to the room. She made him take a shower with her first. He tried to do her in the stall, but they were both too unsteady. The girl saved the moment. She spun and knelt to him and let the tepid water splash on her hair and back and butt and soles of her feet.

He took her to bed, his purchases already on the night stand. She pointed at the condoms and said put one on, okay? Todd pretended to fumble with the box and then the foil until she grabbed him with both arms and moaned *come on* and pulled him onto her.

Later, when he tipped her over and knelt behind her knees and expertly uncapped the K-Y Jelly, she said no I don’t want that. He said sure you do, relax. He pushed her head down into the pillow but the girl didn’t relax. She pushed back against the headboard with outstretched hands like a cat making bread with its paws.

“Look, wait, I don’t like it. I don’t want you to,” she said.

Todd laughed. “Sure you do,” he said. He entered her. “You *do*, you *do*, you *do*,” he said in a rough rhythm. She screamed into the pillow. After a while, though, she backed against him, making their bodies bump harder and harder. Todd knew he was right. He could tell from the harsh way she panted oh god, oh god, oh god.

Todd spooned with the girl after, and soon they slept. He liked a good time. No one blamed him for that.

Arcs of light splashed through the room, like one last sweeping look. He heard the little car finish backing out and then pull away. She left first. Click. That’s what woke him, the shutting door. *See ya*, Todd thought, *wouldn’t want to be ya*. It worked out fine. Primo perfecto. No promises to break about meeting again, no scrap of paper with her phone number on the night stand. This was it; there it was. *Have a great life with your gummy-eyed cat*. Todd faced the dim light of

the parking lot and heard the slick susurrus of traffic and wondered about his annoyance that the girl left first.

He moodily inventoried the night stand. Motel lamp, keys, wallet, squashed tube of K-Y Jelly. Something was wrong. *She had done something*. There had been condoms on the night stand. No, that was all right. He had dropped those to the floor, unused. Spent tube of lubricant? He hadn't used the whole fucking tube, had he? Funny if he did. His faithful wallet? His wallet...*had been in his pocket*.

“Shit!” Todd bolted upright and snapped on the lamp. His headache bellowed. Pain crimped his groin. Todd ignored everything but the wallet. Bitch had cleaned him out while he slept and what could he do? Go to the police? Swear out a complaint against an unnamed cunt with a big nose and a sick cat?

No, here it was. Cards, cash, everything. But what was it doing on the night stand? The adrenaline surge made Todd snatch up his jeans and first thump then fish through the pockets. He crazily confirmed the wallet wasn't there. Nothing was there. Every pocket was empty.

“OH *SHIT!*”

She took the wedding ring. Jesus H. Christ, she found the goddamn wedding ring and took it. Fucking whore! Thief!

He would find her, goddamn believe it! He would make the bitch sorry. She'd pay. He'd lay wait. He knew how, he knew where. Let her gloat to her girlfriends. He'd come up behind her and smash her face into the lacquered bar. Over, over, over! Give her the free nose job she so desperately needed.

Cocksucking slut had no right to mess with a man's marriage! Sandy would be heartbroken. Todd could laugh off mislaying the wallet, but not the ring. Never the wedding ring. What was he going to say? Todd knew at once. He wasn't going to say shit. He was going to get the ring back, and now.

He threw off the covers and stood, as if righteous vengeance alone would guide him to a swift and just confrontation. Pain collapsed him. Todd sat down on the bedside and cried *oof*.

The source of pain gave a glinting golden wink from his lap.

The girl hadn't stolen the ring, after all. She had forcibly returned it.

Blood-red letters on both sides of the wedge-shaped awning lit up the night:
EMERGENCY/TRAUMA CENTER.

At 1:52 a.m., Todd Heath hobbled to the rounded reception desk. He grunted and cawed as he came, filmy with sweat, liquor on his breath, holding up his splayed open jeans with one fist, his tighty-whities tenting out.

“I need-a see a doctor.”

The charge nurse and a guy in scrubs looked up. “What’s it about?”

Todd goggled at them. His mouth worked, and loose spittle trembled.

“Sir?” the nurse said.

Todd swayed and began to leak tears.

The nurse pushed forward a green clipboard with some forms. “If you could please take a seat and fill these out.”

Todd pounded the overhanging clipboard. It banged and tiddlywinked across the lobby. “SAID I NEED A DOCTOR!”

The guard by the door took notice. He stood up, right hand dropping to his hip.

The guy in scrubs also rose. His badge said he was an R.A. named Barry. “Listen to me. If you have an emergency...”

“Yes,” Todd sobbed.

“Then we can help,” Barry said. “So calm down. We’re here to help. But you have to help us. Means no tantrums or you getting loud, understood? You keep it together, we can take care of you. Otherwise, he takes care of you.”

The guard planted himself at Todd’s side.

“I un ersan,” Todd said, a hitch in his voice.

“Beautiful,” Barry said. “One thing at a time. Before we can do a thing, all right, we need some information.”

Todd nodded, and tumbled his wallet onto the counter. “Tay toff,” he said.

“What?”

“Take it off.”

“Take what off?”

Todd shook his head a little. He stared at the charge nurse, who remained seated. Her name was Diane. It was on the badge on her breast. She wore a shapeless smock and had uncombed brown hair and no makeup, but she was trim and nicely tanned and her thin eyebrows arched. Todd babbled at Diane with the hidden nice tits. “Take it off I can’t take it oh please take it off oh please take it please.”

“Come on, buddy,” the guard said, “time to go.” He took a firm hold of Todd’s elbow. Todd tried to flail free and his jeans plopped around his ankles.

“Bitch should rot in jail!”

“None of that,” the guard said. “Pull your pants up, Romeo, and say nighty-night to the nice people.”

“You see what she did to me?” Todd said. “See what she did?” He hooked a thumb under the waistband and yanked the front of his briefs wide out and down.

They saw. Everyone in the lobby saw.



Barry and the guard shuffled Todd into triage. A CNA named Kim retrieved the clipboard and barraged Todd with ten thousand questions, not one of them about the wedding band choking his penis. She showed Todd where to sign. He scrawled on the form and whimpered, “Can I pay cash for this?”

It was a 23 minute wait for Dr. Freeman, the on-call urologist, but once he showed up, everything happened fast.

7

At intake, Todd’s member was a livid purple. It had swollen literally like a tick, engorged with blood. As he collected vitals, Barry also took mental notes for the story he would tell at parties for years to come. *This guy’s dick, I shit you not, it looked like Elmer Fudd’s thumb after getting whanged with a hammer. It went ba-boom, ba-boom. You could hear the drum.* Todd’s penis continued to swell and darken. It became the bruised-black color of the goop in a jar of pitted olives; it began to smell rancid, and gave off a febrile heat.

“Sir. *Sir!*” said an R.N. named K’Neisha. “You settle down now okay cause there’s three things here can happen.”

“I don’t wanna be awake for this.”

“Three things: I’m talkin’. You can control yourself, or you can be put in restraints, or you pass out from the pain.”

“Please, I can’t be awake for this. Call my friend. Page him.”

“Hear what I say? You can fall down, be lashed down, or *settle* down. Only one of them is in your control.”

“Can you call — I hear you — please page Dr. Jeremy Lorenz. He’s here, at this hospital. He works here. Anaesthesiologist. And if he’s not here, he doesn’t live far. I know where his house is. I, I swear to you, I cannot be awake for this.”

“Mr. Heath, there ain’t no time. What we has to do has to be done *now.*”

“Then I’ll come back tomorrow. Fine. Fuck you all.”

A short, jovial man in a lab coat squeezed in. “Good evening, or good morning to you, rather. I’m Dr. Freeman. What’ve we got here?”

“Foreign body causing priapism.”

“Oh, goodness. Indeed, indeed.”

“Here’s the chart,” said Barry, handing over his paperwork and Kim’s.

“He’s fending us off, Dr. Freeman,” K’Neisha said. “Every possible way. He hollers and thrashes. He refuses Lidocaine because the injection would go into the shaft, and he don’t want no EMLA cream because it has to be...”

“Slathered onto the afflicted area. Yes, I see. Well, understandable, to an extent.”

“So he’s had nothing for pain.”

“Or nothing but pain,” said Dr. Freeman.

“He also freaks out about the ring cutter,” said Kim.

“Does he?”

“Don’t cut the ring!” said Todd. “You haveta not cut the ring.”

“Son, I’ll give you your options in a minute,” Dr. Freeman said. “And we’ll deal with it based on what you say in another minute and a half. Sound fair? But let me lay out what’s happening here. Priapism means you have blood trapped in the penis. You have swelling and depleted oxygen levels. Any swelling that compresses the tissue is very, very painful. Extraordinarily painful, and it doesn’t go back to being okay by itself or through light exercise or pure thoughts, ah, no. Furthermore, if you don’t have me correct this situation pronto, it goes toxic. That’s automatic. Your blood in the erectile bodies will sludge and cause fibrosis, which is scarring, and *that* leads to loss of elastic properties. In terms of your manhood, that means disfigurement and dysfunction. And if that doesn’t stir your coffee and say good morning, there’s thrombosis and gangrene to look forward to.”

“Just...please don’t...cut off my...wedding ring.”

“Son, here are your options. In ninety seconds, something gets cut off. Make a good choice.”

Dr. Freeman nodded to K’Neisha, “Please get me a 16-gauge needle and have the ring cutter ready.”

“Yes, doctor. Are we going to try the Lidocaine?”

“No, it’s too late. It won’t do any good.”

“Don’t wanna be awake. Will you just...help... Do this when I’m knocked out, please. Please get Jer’mey.”

“Mr. Heath? Todd? There isn’t time,” said Dr. Freeman. “We’re taking emergency

measures for an emergency situation. Now what I have to do and do right now is aspirate your penis.”

“What?”

“The blood in the spongy tissue. Remember what I said about toxic sludge? That’s what it is now. We will do our best to save your wedding ring, Todd, but I’d rather save your life if you don’t mind. Just understand: this will hurt unbearably. So there might be a silver lining, because you will almost certainly pass out from the pain.”

Todd nodded, his eyes glazed, his lips making a fast and endless “muh-muh-muh-muh” sound.

“Here we go.”

“How muh-much...blood will you take from it?”

Everyone gaped, amazed that Todd could still be lucid.

“We’ll drain only what we need,” Dr. Freeman said with a slight bow. “Between 60 and 200 cc’s is my guess.”

“Can some-muh-mone hold me?”

“Nurses?”

Kim and K’Neisha tried to take his hands, but Todd’s hands eluded theirs and he reached out and scooped the ladies around their waists and fiercely pulled them toward him. He lowered his head and squeezed his eyes and brought in his arms, so K’Neisha’s world-class jugs were almost against his right cheek and Kim’s not-so-great-but-still-serviceable rack brushed his left.

“You’re going to feel a push.”

It wasn’t a push. In the darkness, Todd felt a hand-hewn electrified spear the length of a railroad tie driven by a clumsy, hate-filled sociopath go into his dick and then it could not get out again. Todd screamed. For all the screaming he did that night, it was amazing he had any voice left.

“Hang on,” said Dr. Freeman, in his soft voice. Then, about an hour and a half later, he said it again. “Hang on...almost done.”

“*Oh, fuck Jesus!*” Todd howled. K’Neisha tried hard then to wrench free, but Todd redoubled his grip, pushing his face into her.

“All right,” said Dr. Freeman.

Bit by bit, Todd realized he was supposed to let the girls go. He didn’t want to. When he opened his eyes, he saw the fat syringe on the steel tray. The fluid in the mostly full barrel was purplish-black, like the spoor of an oil tanker disaster. Todd stared at it and breathed raggedly.

He saw his face in a wall mirror. He had lost color. He looked down at his cock, which Dr. Freeman was handling now so delicately, Todd couldn’t feel him do so. He had lost color there, too.

“No, I’m sorry,” said Dr. Freeman. “It’s not enough.”

“Not enough what?”

“Todd, we have to cut off the wedding ring. To try to wrench it across this damaged tissue...

”

“Fine. Cut. Just shut up and cut. Will anyone hold me?”

Neither girl came within arm’s reach of him. Barry offered a hand.

“Never mind,” Todd said. He gripped the gurney’s sheeting with both fists.

Dr. Freeman took up the ring cutter. It looked to Todd like an extravagantly curved and shiny old-fashioned can opener, the kind with a twisty key.

“Are we up on our tetanus, Todd?” said Dr. Freeman, trying to fit the curved hook between the ring and the base of Todd’s wounded dong.

Couldn’t the old pervert shut up and do his job? And why did he have to sound so *happy* about everything? “We don’t know.”

“Well, there’s another thing, then, that — oops.”

Between them at eye level arced a thread of dark blood, faintly whistling like a firecracker.

“Sorry.” Dr. Freeman adjusted the angle of the curved hook. “Here we go, then. Ready to cut. You’ll feel a pressure.”

The *pressure* was not a fraction as bad as the *push*. He felt the ringsaw come down on the wedding band and spin. It grinded with a gritty slipping. Todd let himself go to a shadowy place without pain or the need for thought. Shush...shush...shush.

“How — I cannot help but ask — how, Todd, did you even manage to fit — ?”

“*I have big hands!*” Todd said, loud and annoyed.

Kim whirled at once and began to sort medical supplies.

Dr. Freeman’s voice, of course, never went up or down. If the man had to shout orders to a firing squad, he would do so mildly. “Makes perfect sense,” Dr. Freeman said.

K’Neisha turned to help Kim. Todd stared at their backs until he realized that they faced a blank curtain and there was no gauze there for them to roll or instruments to arrange. They pretended to be busy. But what they really pretended was that they were too decent to laugh in his face.

They were more than hiding their faces, though. What they were doing was actively and literally turning their backs on him. He came to them wounded in his hour of need. And how did these angels of mercy react? Like this. *Don’t look, he’s not gone yet. Pretty good joke the asshole suffered such pain and humiliation. Can you imagine if he died? Man, if that happened, we’d wet ourselves, guaranteed.*

“Do I have your permission?”

“What?” Todd said.

“I have to make a cut on the other side. To...free you.”

“Go the fuck ahead,” Todd said. “Sorry. Long night.”

Guess he deserved it, eh, ladies? He smiled hard at their backs, watching them still playact, side by side. What had he done? He picked up a skank and didn't tell her something that wasn't any of her business or that she ever asked about. And the obvious, civilized response to that was for said skank to commit an act of felonious assault on him while he was asleep, run out in the night and not give a shit or a heads up that what she did damn near left him maimed for life. No, that was clearly his fault. Totally his fault. What was he thinking? He deserved it, one hundred percent.



“We got a wall full of brochures,” K'Neisha said. “But none for...”

“No, thank goodness.” Todd said. He smiled. Because it was funny in a way, that she had no clue what he was thinking.

“Don't forget your prescriptions. You get Dilaudid for pain. Half a pill, every four to six hours, as needed. It's powerful stuff. Don't overdo it.”

Todd took the slip. “I won't.”

“This is to fight bacterial infection. Keflex. It works like Erythromycin. Instructions will be printed on the bottle.”

“I'm sure,” Todd said, taking the slip. “Thank you.”

“I'm sorry you had to go through that.”

“Sure.” Todd smiled at her face of sympathy. He gave as good as he got. “At least it ended up okay, thank god.”

“Yes.”

He nodded and started to turn, then swung back. “Hey, how did yours end up, by the way?”

“What?”

“Your inventory, I guess. Towards the end, I saw you and the other nurse working at...”

“Oh! Well, we couldn't do nothing more for you by then.”

“No, of course, by that point.”

“It went great,” K'Neisha said. “Everything right as rain. But we do it all the time.”

“I'm sure you do,” Todd said. “I'm sure you do.”

“Wait. Now you remind me. There's some things to watch out for. Shit. I should've — do you want me to write them down?”

“No,” Todd said, everything but his voice smiling. “You tell me what to watch out for. I'll

remember what you say.”

“Okay. For the next few days, you want to observe the area, of course. Look for redness or if it gets hot to the touch. Also, call a doctor if you run a fever. Swelling. If it swells all over, see a doctor. If you notice a foul odor of any kind, or if it drains pus, I mean from anywhere, that kind of goes without saying. Watch out for long red streaks to appear, not banding but down the length...and...any questions?”

Yes. You’re a bald-faced liar, same as me. Difference is, I almost end up castrated tonight and you laugh about it. Explain the justice.

“No, I think I got everything,” Todd said.

“Well, good luck.”

“You, too.”

8

On his return visit to the condoms and lubricant-dispensing CVS, Todd noticed that the pharmacy had the same blood-red illumination that the hospital used. He waddled in at 3:22 a.m., snagged a basket, hooked a left, and went directly to the back, solidifying the plan to shoot himself in the thigh tomorrow — no, later this afternoon — with his 445FS Pneumatic Stapler or probably his 445 FLEX Power Roller. It had to look serious.

The night pharmacist, a runt named Monica with a face too small for her big curly hair and owlsh glasses, got busy with his order and didn’t give him a word of lip.

He went down the aisle, comparing first aid kits, antiseptics, and gauze bandage rolls. He put items in the basket.

What sounds worse? Getting shot with a two inch nail or a two inch staple? The whole question is stupid. Say Powernailer, and people easily imagine a villain’s gory death in any action movie’s fight scene at the Abandoned Building Site. Say stapler, and even if you *show* them the 445FS, people think office product. Ironically, the staple does more damage because two inches of nail and two inches of staple are still two inches of metal. And an industrial staple is two inches of metal, twice.

So tomorrow — today, probably just before lunch, all he has to do is ease the 445 FLEX onto his leg, line up a trajectory that goes through plenty of meat and no bone, then let go one quick puff of the air compressor.

Good thing he’ll be pumped to the gills with pain killers by then.

His apprehension was mostly shame. Nothing disgusted Todd more than a worker careless

about tool safety.

So he hollers and thrashes. The question was, after tonight, did he have any of the loud “Oh, holy crap!” shit left in him to be convincing?

Back to business. Here’s where it gets tricky. He’s wounded, but must at least *say* he’s okay to drive himself to the hospital. No, he has to be okay enough. This is important. Put the nail in the *left* leg. He goes to the truck with a nail in his left leg. He goes alone. Drives away. When does he call Sandy? Now? No. What if she rushes to the e.r.? He powers down the cell phone then until after lunch. He finds a spot. A parking slot at WalMart, it doesn’t matter. Yanks the nail. Cleans himself good. Cleans the truck. Bags the supplies. Dumps the bag. Has lunch. No place he’s known. Stays a while, but no beers. Doesn’t linger, doesn’t chat. Calls Sandy. It’s all done. Sorry, baby: a little owie. Careless, dumbass me. Hospital took care of it. He heads home. Now the beers. Check out what’s on cable.

Ta dah. It hangs together. It will work.

He had the ring in two pieces in a tiny ziplock bag. That was a later problem.

Took forever for those dumbasses at the hospital to let him discharge A.M.A. But they also refused to revisit his billing, and let him pay in cash. So there would be a credit card charge, and a hefty one, from the e.r. There was no going around it.

It worried him for a while, until Todd really thought it through. Did he honestly worry the medical invoice would read, “Patient had wedding band choking off his lubed-up dick thanks to a polluted skank he tapped earlier that night”? That would be a clear violation of the doctor-patient confidentiality. Or privilege. Whatever the hell the term was.

Sandy wouldn’t be curious and he wouldn’t be paranoid about any plastic-windowed envelope from the hospital. Because, sure, she’d remember, Todd ended up at the e.r., when was that?, must’ve been a week or so ago. He was billed; the bill was paid. There it was; that was it. Silly man: he shot himself in the foot.

“Mr. Heath?”

“That’s me.”

“Check your name and address here and sign, please.”

Todd checked and signed. The pharmacist unclipped the envelopes and the pills in the bottles rattled mischievously.

“That will be \$20.00. Cash or charge?”

“And these.”

She added the contents of the basket.

“\$51.11. Cash or charge?”

Todd said, “What the hell,” and swiped his card.

9

Todd slipped into his pajamas as if the buttons were rigged to set off a four county fire alarm. He crossed the darkened room and crept into bed.

“Innit hear wadder.”

“What?”

“When did you get to shower?” Sandy’s slurry voice suggested she wasn’t awake or planning to be awake but also that she wasn’t angry or planning to be angry. “You’d better be clean. These are fresh sheets.”

“I was out all night. It’s four, almost four. Please, Sandy, I gotta get a couple-a hours,” he said, and blessed inspiration struck, “or I’ll be *dangerous* tomorrow.”

Without rolling over, she flopped backwards twice, so their curled bodies approximated spooning.

“Nobody to blame but you. I waited for you, that’s all. What were you doing all night?”

“Hm. Talking Lenny off a ledge. Doris nearly threw him out, you know. I bought him coffee, and it was one of those all night, bottomless cup places. Honey, I’ve got to sleep.”

“G’night.”

“Good night. Sorry I stayed out.”

“You’re a good friend.” She reached behind and companionably cupped his balls.

Todd screamed. For all the screaming he did that night, it was amazing he had any voice left.

At daybreak, his marriage was all over but the shouting.

By full light, he finally lost his voice. And Sandy. And everything.

10

No one checked out his hand. He was with four guys he had known for years, and for about half an hour Todd felt like some dumb, newly-engaged debutante. But no one noticed. They played poker. He tried for a while to do everything with his right: toss the ante, collect cards, rake in the odd pot. But when the deal passed to him, he thought *fuck it* and brought into play his unadorned left.

Todd glared at his buddies, and no one got it. He snickered in heartfelt amusement, and no one asked what was funny. They were so selfish and clueless. But last week he had been one of them. He *was* one of them still, and that was the joke.

“Study?” Jeremy said. “Lenny, this ain’t no study. Sorry to burst your bubble.”

“Too much crap,” Peter said. “No offense.”

“You know what this is?” Brian said. “This is a card table in a cyclone of kitsch. This is a booth in a, a booth in a creepy ass theme restaurant.”

“Sickos Diner.”

“Dildos Buffet.”

“No, I got it! The International House of Perverts.”

They hooted and stomped. “Fuck you all,” said Lenny, deeply pleased. “At least we got a place.”

“More than I can say,” said Todd.

“No one’s breaking your balls we don’t have a place, Lenny,” Jeremy said. “We don’t have *room*. I tried to sit down. There’s a parrot keychain crawling up my ass.”

“Did you hear what it says?” Lenny said.

“I don’t give a shit it sings opera, Lenny. It’s too much.”

“There’s stuff,” Peter said, “not even opened. Stuff in boxes and bags. Where are you going to put it?”

Lenny picked up a thin sack and peeped into it. “Shit, I forgot about this,” he said. “Check these out.”

He pulled out three tin signs, pre-drilled for hanging, each bigger than a sheet of typing paper, but not by much. The first was retro: muted blues and two swollen balloons of red, old style roadhouse artwork, showing two guys in hats and a big-chested broad at a bar.

Low Cut Blouses are looked DOWN upon
in this Establishment

The second was modern and spare, as stark as could be.

Love Sucks
True Love Swallows

The third was yellow, its artwork consisting of four aces and a brace of old-timey six-shooters, real cowboy stuff. In tall, playbill letters, it read:

“Welcome Gamblers”— Chapin
Page 21

Welcome Gamblers
Leave your gun at front desk
Liquor in front
Poker in rear

“Maybe you’re right,” Lenny said. “I don’t know what to do with these.”

“That one,” Todd said, with unexpected force. “That one you hang up. I mean it. That one gets place of honor. That one deserves its own clubhouse, in the name of fucking god.”

TIPPING POINT

1

When Doris came in because she was getting bug-bit even though it was full dark, she found the guys in the living room. There were dead soldiers all over the coffee table, and Todd hunched over them like the general who lost the battle. Doris cocked an eyebrow.

“Todd and San split up,” Lenny told her.

“Oh my god,” Doris said, sinking onto the arm of Lenny’s Laz-E Boy. “What happened?”

“She just got tired of me. My ways,” Todd said to the empty beer bottles. “I would have shot myself for that woman.”

“Oh, hun,” Doris said. “Is it nothing you can’t work out?”

Todd shook his head. “She drank,” he said. “It’s my fault because I wasn’t around. That’s...all there is. It’s my fault.”

2

By next Thursday, Todd made his eleven-month marriage sound like a tedious summer cold, something that he was bound to get over without it deserving much thought or discussion. Sandy had flown home to Michigan, to be comforted by her folks and her trust fund. She would reset her biological clock for someone else. Now she wanted out more than alimony. Todd had to sell the house in town and send her half the assets. He could keep his flooring business, the Dodge Ram 3500, and the property way out in the sticks that Todd’s great-uncle had given them as a wedding present.

They had visited it once, after the honeymoon. It was 416 acres worth of property taxes, with a once-working farmhouse, some big, rusted equipment under rotting tarps, and the shell of a vast barn. The busted generator had a yellowed maintenance sticker from a company called Never Dark. Vines choked the huge satellite dish out front. The fields had long gone to seed and nettles, but there were new growth woodlands of oak and tulip poplar, abundant signs of deer, a wide, swift-flowing stream skirting the property and another unsurveyed one that narrowly snaked through it.

On the spot, Todd and Sandy decided to grow wine grapes, raise horses, and shore up the farmhouse. The back porch would be converted into a solarium for Sandy’s herb garden. Todd

would gut the kitchen and both bathrooms. He would bring in top-of-the-line appliances and restore the once-glorious porcelain, claw-footed bathtub, now crusted in crud. He would strip and paint and plushly carpet the nursery. Everywhere else he would run rose-hued 3/4" oak flooring, dark enough to take mud stains, but light enough to catch and reflect sunlight.

Their enthusiasm for the work didn't even last the ride back to town.

Within the year they would part and never see each other again.



Lenny stowed the tin signs atop the Ikea bookcase that was too stuffed for books. The signs leaned against the wall, the yellow one in front, and Todd stared up at it as he played cards.

“Bet's to you,” Brian said. “Yo, buddy. This property you want me to do something with. What exactly do you want me to do?”

“I want you to...” Todd tossed in two Bettie Page poker chips. “Make it into a dungeon chamber for my sex slaves.”

Everyone drew in a breath to laugh at the joke but no one laughed.

“Are you serious?” Brian said.

“No. What the fuck. Trick it out into the Batcave and we'll use it to fight crime.”

Lenny snickered. “I could go for that.”

“Fix it up, flip it and sell it. If that's possible. You tell me.”

“Call,” Jeremy said.

“Three-of-a-kind, German virgins,” Brian said, laying them out. “Nein! Nein! Nein!”

“Shit,” Todd said. Players threw in their cards.

“There's more money,” Peter said, pushing his glasses back onto his nose, “in the sex trade.”

Now the guys laughed in earnest. But Peter kept his head down, his eyes on one of his few remaining chips. He had it balanced on end, as if he might spin it. “If you're interested and willing. That's all I'm saying. If you can manage the risks. If you're serious.”

“He's not,” Jeremy said. “He's never serious. Look at him. Todd's a total pussy. What you should ask is, does he *want* to be serious, just this once?”

Slowly everyone — even Peter — looked at Todd.

Todd laughed and loosely waved his hands. “You guys are fucking crazy. Are we gonna play cards or what?” Then he said: “I just want to do something with it.” He looked up at the yellow sign. Then he said: “I want to do something.”

The Curtin Group, Architecture & Engineering, employed an aquarium maintenance specialist. There was a night cleaning crew, keypad security, and 24/7 video surveillance. IT, CPA, and marketing/advertising services were under contract. Horticultural Help sent a girl three afternoons a week. She had the HH logo on her canvas apron, her scrunchie, and her secateurs. She watered the spiral ficus, snipped at the jade pothos, and misted the trained ivy. A breakfast cart from Hugs & Quiches rattled through twice daily, with coffees, teas, and pastries at 10:15 a.m., and fresh wraps, salads, and sodas at 12:45 p.m. The Curtin Group employed three secretaries named Marie, Paula, and Evelyn, who pulled double duty as bookkeeper, office manager, and receptionist, respectively. Mr. Curtin had two full partners, three senior associates, and seven junior associates.

And almost no clients.

The firm went upscale just as the economy hit its downturn. Everyone knew what this meant and did their best not to acknowledge it. Résumés were burnished twice weekly but not sent out. The phones stayed busy. The upstairs neighbor, Estate Financial Planning Solutions, modeled itself after an Edwardian hunting lodge and somehow remained solvent. There was time. There was hope. There was pretty much nowhere else to go.



Paula freshened her look at her desk. She debated whether to napkin her lipstick. *Too glossy? No, leave it; it's fine. Jesus, that line, though. It's deeper than it was yesterday. Than it was this morning. Too bad the Botox is in the other purse, then. Just go with it, Paula. You're fine. You're fine. You're fine.*

She went to the copy room and fixed the cup of coffee. The party napkins were gone. She had to take one of the cleaning crew's tri-folds. That was all right. Her hands were rock steady. Her fingernails were perfect.

She strode back toward the admin area, heels clicking briskly, then veered toward the smallest cubicle at the far end. *You are six years older than he is, Paula. You work in the same office. So? Nothing is happening. Nothing has happened. And six years is nothing.*

“Better not work so hard. You make the rest of us look bad.”

Brian blinked away from the AutoCAD rendering. “What's this?”

Before offering it to him, she cuddled it a little more to her chest. “It's old but it's hot.” *God. Way to go, Paula. Obvious much?* She gave Brian the coffee. “One creamer, two sugars? You missed the morning cart.”

“Thanks.” He set it down carefully without taking a sip. His desk was at a wonky angle.

“Just doing my part,” Paula said. “Morale booster.”

“You boost with the best,” Brian said. “I said ‘best’, right? Not...never mind.” He appraised her sidelong, nothing creepy in it. Brian was a puppy. She matched his grin, then blushed.

“You don’t,” she said, and began again: “Doesn’t it ever get to you?”

“Doesn’t what get to me?”

“Being the low man on the totem pole?”

“Nope,” Brian said. “It might if I was.”

“You’re not? You think you’re more important?”

“Lord, no. Less, I hope.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, structurally, the low man on the totem pole bears all the weight. The whole crew sits on him. He’s the foundation. Remove him, everything topples. I’m not cut out — or carved out, if you will — for that responsibility. I like to stand on my own. When I want to move, I move. When I get wanderlust, I...wander.”

“What do you do,” Paula said, feeling her heart pound, “when you get hungry?”

Six years is nothing.

4

“Plus, it rains sulphuric acid. Not ideal for most crops. Not even algae, which is all you’re going to be able to grow for decades. And I’m not talking like acid rain. This is the kind of rain that if it puddles on metal, it burns right through it.”

“I just want to get him talking,” Paula had said.

“Uh-huh,” Marie said. “Talking.”

“See my face? This is what it looks like ignoring you.”

“Duly ignored. Gonna wear cougar print underwear?”

“Banter first. Then B-E-D maybe. But I’m too old for him, Marie. Let’s be realistic. Don’t you think?”

“You like him. I think you like him.”

“I do. He’s funny. What he says. The things he comes out with, the word play. And he’s so fast.”

“Well, that’s kids. Great reflexes.”

“Stop.” Marie saw she meant it. Paula’s face went suddenly heavy, as if even to shift her gaze required brute physical effort.

“I’m sorry,” Marie said. “I’m stupid, I didn’t mean it.”

“I pulled his file. Definition of pathetic, right? We’re six years apart, almost seven.”

“That’s nothing. He’s not a baby, Paula. He’s thirty...”

“Five. That’s not robbing the cradle, is it?”

“What? No!” Marie said. “Borrowing from it a little.”

“So the answer is a tokamak,” Brian said.

Paula snapped to. “A what?”

“A giant, orbital, self-powering tokamak, possibly in synch above the floating city or cities I was telling you about. How else would you terraform Venus?”

“I can’t imagine.”

“Well, I can. But this is more than imagination. This would work.”

“That’s...Brian, I don’t know what to say.”

“What’s a tokamak?”

“What’s a tokamak?”

“That was your question, right?”

No, actually, it was more who turned you into a high school science nerd on PCP?

“Sure.”

And what can be done to stop it?

“Two problems. Suck out the greenhouse gases, get rid of carbon in the atmosphere, there’s way too much, and at least reduce the ground temperature to the boiling point of water. That’s one. And, critical but interrelated: deal with the rain. You need an agent to break up sulphuric acid and introduce it into generated water. But that’s what a gigantic fusion tokamak reactor *does*. It produces electricity, hydrogen, oxygen (therefore water), and helium.”

“For the floating city’s balloons?”

“Absolutely! Perfect!” He jotted a note on his napkin.

Oh my god, he’s writing this down.

“Brian...” *I’m gonna hate myself for this.* “What is a tokamak?”

“It’s the device that contains the plasma generated from fusion.”

“Oh, okay.”

“No, not okay. I...sorry, sorry. I just want you to grab the concept first.”

I want to grab an ax.

“Imagine a gigantic donut — that’s its shape, a torus — the walls of which are lined with enormous electromagnets. The force *created* by these electromagnets can squash together anything, including the high velocity plasma to prevent it from touching the walls, because plasma is so incredibly

hot that no Earth material can hold it.”

“Plasma? Like in blood?”

“No no no. A tokamak collects hydrogen, right?”

“If you say so.”

“Well, it does. It just does. And from anywhere. Outer space.”

“There’s hydrogen in space?”

“Sure. Certainly. You know what a nebula is made of?”

Thanks. Did you know I took two hours tonight to get ready to be a fucking moron?

“Hydrogen. And if you heat hydrogen, especially the isotopes deuterium and tritium...”

“What are they?”

“Isotopes of hydrogen. Deuterium has two neutrons and tritium has three. I think that’s how it works. I’m pretty sure. Yeah, tritium is tri.”

Brian Hayward Andrews, age 35, I will crawl under this freshly ironed tablecloth in the middle of this restaurant and take your thing out of your pants with my mouth if you will please shut up.

“You heat it high enough, it becomes plasma, which is ionized gas at super-high temperatures. Super high. Operatively, I mean, at least over 100 million degrees Celsius. That’s no exaggeration. Therefore, you must use *magnetism* to create an invisible barrier to prevent the plasma from touching the walls of the tokomak. Now, when deuterium and tritium become plasma, fusion occurs. This produces, like I said, hydrogen, oxygen, and helium. Hydrogen and oxygen can be bonded to produce liquid water. I mean, can you believe it? Water, energy, oxygen, all kinds of good stuff. And no harmful by-products. Practically no chance of meltdown.”

“Chance.” Paula raised her hand. “In fact, certainty. *I’m* in meltdown, I’m afraid.”

“Oh Jeez, I’m sorry,” Brian said, “but you asked.”

On Tuesday, you had a Post-It stuck to your shoe. It said, DESTABILIZE THE PLANET!!! I asked what that meant. If you had a working time machine, Brian, to take me back ten minutes ago so I could cut my tongue out with this nice little butter knife here rather than ask the question I asked, I would gladly do that.

“No, no,” Paula said. “No. It’s just...alarming how much you know about this stuff.”

“I’m the one who’s alarmed,” Brian said. “It’s so much to take in. And so hopeless to sort out. That’s why I haven’t told anyone about this. I’m scared out of my gourd. It’s such a — I don’t have a word for it — such an *idea*. Turn Venus into Earth before we turn Earth into Venus. But that’s the easy part. How do I turn all this into a novel?”

His hand fell on hers when he said he was scared. It remained there, his on hers.

“You can’t,” Paula said. “It’s impossible.”

He looked at her. Finally. “What do you mean?”

“No one can write a novel. It’s too big. But you can write some words, a line that’s true, a scene maybe, then a chapter. And eventually... Someone, I don’t know who so don’t quote me, said that writing a novel was like driving across country at night. You only see as far as the headlights, but you can make the whole journey that way.”

He looked at her, almost comically amazed, as if aware for the first time that they were together on a date.

“I want to buy a bottle of wine,” Brian said. “Would you object?”

“Yeah,” Paula said. “I should. I mean, I shouldn’t. I get tipsy. Two glasses and I’m anybody’s.”
Oh Jesus take that back.

Brian ordered them a bottle of wine, selecting from the wine list. He looked at her. His hand went on hers and it was no accident. Paula turned her hand palm up and oh so gently moved her fingers.

“So,” Brian said, “do you write?”

“Poetry, yes. I try. I mean...yes, I write. I write poems. I...oh dammit, I fill notebooks.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s not a bad thing. I hope. It’s just something I...don’t make common knowledge.”

“Why not?”

“What do you think?” she said, “I’m shy.” He laughed. “I am! Don’t you dare laugh at me.”

“I can’t help it. Do you know this one? How can you tell if an engineer is an extrovert?”

“How?”

“He stares at *your* shoes when he talks to you.”

Their hands never slid apart. Neither pulled away. Paula ducked her head. “That’s funny. That’s really funny.”

“Of yours: tell me some.”

“*Poetry?*”

“Yes.”

“Right here?” There it goes, her heart again. She wished he could feel it. Pound pound pound. “I can’t, Brian, truly. I don’t have any with me. They’re not memorized.”

His middle finger curled and caressed her palm with the edge of his nail. “Tell me some.”

Breathe, Paula. You’ve got this. Just breathe. She exhaled, and their mutual smiles widened.
Ohhh, you’ve got this.

“What you were saying before, it made me think...

‘A soft air fans the cloud apart; there comes

A glimpse of that dark world where I was born.’”

Paula curled her lower lip between her teeth, waiting.

With his free hand, Brian reached unexpectedly for his glass and nearly knocked it over. He sipped wine. “That’s...forgive me, I don’t know poetry. That’s not you, is it?”

“No, it’s Tennyson.”

“Is that it? I mean, is there more?”

Oh my heart! “Sure. It’s a long poem. Later at the end it goes:

‘Release me, and restore me to the ground;

Thou seest all things, thou wilt see my grave:

Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn;

I earth in earth forget these empty courts,

And thee returning on thy silver wheels.’”

“Whoa.”

“It talks about Venus in there, the planet. It’s very sensual and sad, that part. That’s what made me think—”

They had their first kiss right then in the restaurant, across the freshly ironed tablecloth.



They made out in his car, in front of her apartment. Paula panted, gnawed his ear, went back to his warm mouth. He fondled her breasts, her belly, and slipped his hand, fingers splayed, between her thighs, but not pushing up her dress. She had to move this upstairs before any of the neighbors saw. She wanted Brian in her life, in her apartment, inside her. *What do I say? wanna hear some of my poems? Or go total cliché and invite him up to see the ol’ etchings?* It was right on the tip of her tongue. No, the hollow of his throat was on the tip of her tongue, and she felt his wide, masculine back arch and lengthen. *Let’s go upstairs, Brian. Say it as simply as that. Nothing fancy. Let’s fuck.*

She grabbed his hair with both fists and pulled their faces apart, but still leaned into him. “So, Mr. Spaceman,” Paula said, “wanna come up to the docking station?”

He caught his breath, too, grinning. “We’re like a couple of teenagers.”

“That’s an affirmative, Houston,” Paula said. “But is that a yes?”

“You’re funny...Paula. You’re sexy as hell. You’re smart.”

“Then?”

He sat back in the driver’s seat, shook his head and laughed a little. “I’d love to. But I can’t. It’s not right.”

Careful. Careful. “Why, may I ask?”

Six years is nothing. Catherine the Great had ’em lots younger, and not just the horsies. Eleanor of Aquitaine had a good decade on Henry II. Khadija had even more on Mohammed.

“I guess what comes to mind,” Brian said. “I’m an engineer with a novel in the works, and you’re, forgive me, a secretary who writes poetry.”

No air. Meltdown.

“Oh.”

“I didn’t mean that,” Brian said. “It sounded bad. I respect you, I do. I really goddamn admire and...desire everything about you.”

“So which is it?” Paula marveled at her own calm voice, her muscles straining out a smile. “You didn’t mean it or wished it sounded better?”

Brian looked stricken. *Look at your own shoes*, she wanted to say, and didn’t know why.

“Goodnight, Spaceman.” Paula fled the car. He called after her, but whatever it was was lost. She slotted the key into the building’s security door by muscle memory, as the whole toxic world went smeary.

5

Brian sat at his computer for three hours that night. Technically speaking, he only put in ten minutes on the book. He added Paula’s suggestion about helium to TP Notes.docx. He then tried to write her thing about car headlights and book writing, but he couldn’t remember how it went and it didn’t Google well, either.

He thought maybe if he cleared his head it would come to him, so he played online Sudoku. Keeping his writer’s wits sharp, Brian only ever played at the Evil level, which is harder than Hard.

When his guesses outnumbered calculations, he beat off to porn.

Then he played more games of Sudoku to take the edge off of having taken the edge off. He really really really wanted to get back to the book. There was a magical word for it that he dared not breathe aloud, not yet.

Manuscript.

A manuscript had heft. Awesome word, *heft*. All the words about finishing his book reminded him of high-ceilinged, richly wood-paneled rooms with ridiculously ornate roof beams. All the words were good. Not *submission* so much, but *author*, *published*, and *novelist*.

Peter would read his manuscript. Brian wasn’t sure what, but he got the sense that Peter read a shitload. And Paula, if she’d ever talk to him again, would be another great resource. She’s bring poetic flair, and he could always pull it back if her ideas got too flowery.



In the fifth grade, Brian wrote WE HAVE MADE A EARTH. It was about scientists who secretly

construct a giant globe, like a crystal ball but the size of a house. They inject chemicals and gasses and molecules and BANG! the thing goes pitch dark.

No one knows what to do. Break it, power it down, start again? Then this one guy, our hero, says Look! Deep in the globe emerge fuzzy pinpricks of light scattering all over, but getting sharper. The kind of star rush you can sometimes make when you mash your eyes shut as tight as you can.

Pretty soon the scientists realize that they have perfectly recreated the universe. And it is so small and so fast that they can witness its formation happening. It goes through almost a billion years of cooling and expanding every two days. By star maps, they figure out how to train the Elbuh microscope (Hubble spelled backwards) on the speck-sized solar system where Earth should be. Sure enough, on the nineteenth day, new Earth acquires mass and aligns orbit.

One scientist freaks out about God’s will. He, Kevin Shirley (Brian’s worst enemy since second grade), rats out the project to the military. The military despises scientists.

For a week there’s an armed standoff, while, on new Earth, the Age of Dinosaurs comes and goes in an afternoon.

Finally, the military busts in and shoots everybody. They smash the globe. Stars fall. The heavens collapse.

The hero (badly wounded) tells them they are fools and ruined everything the very second that new Earth time caught up with real Earth time. What if molecule-tiny scientists were wiped out while protecting *their* experiment? Could there have been, in new Earth, a universe with *its* Earth and *its* universe, getting smaller to infinity? *And what if it works in reverse!*

Just as he says that, the wounded hero sees the universe snuff out.

Brian wrote the story, four double-sided pages in scrawly cursive, in a single sitting when he was eleven. Mrs. Kelish was blown away. She had him sign a blank index card, said he was destined to become a hotshot writer so she wanted his first official autograph. Until he got to do what Laura Esposito let him do in the band room office four years later, it was the best feeling of his life.



Brian’s destiny, according to Mrs. Kelish, went a long time unfulfilled. But the more he put off writing the Venus novel, once he got the idea for it, the more it kept coming to him, getting better and better.

What if the doomsayers have it right? Mankind rapes the Earth, and the men who can stop it only bicker and wring their hands. When Earth suffers runaway climate change, mankind’s answer is to run away. Twin space armadas blast off to terraform Venus and Mars.

Mars colonization, the better bet on paper, goes wrong six ways from Sunday. First, the giant mirrors in space aiming solar power at the ice caps lose tracking. A blistering ten-mile-wide scar gouges

Mars from pole to equator. Welles Colony 2, in its path, is scorched to a crisp like an anthill under a magnifying glass.

Igniting fissionable materials on Phobos, the larger moon, to turn it into a small sun, works as a desperate stopgap, and also somewhat counteracts Mars’s diminished gravity. But, in a ghastly ironic twist à la *War of the Worlds*, Martian aquifers contain heat-activated bacteria that wipe out the Earthlings in less than a month.

Brian loved the Mars disaster stuff so he could toss off the factoid that iron-rich, ancient Mars appears red because it is rusty.

Unlike Mars, Venus has its own radiation shielding, and home-style mass and gravity. But the good news ends there. On the surface, if the high winds don’t knock you down, the pressure will squash you flat. It’s equivalent to being a mile under the ocean, except with no ocean. The surface temperature is about nine hundred degrees, and you can’t air condition a planet. Venus is a planet, not an apartment. Volcanoes ooze magma 24/7, or 5832/7, adjusted to backwards-orbiting Venus time.

But like on Earth, pressures ease and temperatures cool with altitude. There is exactly one Earth-like sweet spot in the solar system, and it’s 35 miles above Venus, just on top of the sulphuric acid cloud deck.

In a carbon dioxide atmosphere, oxygen is a lifting gas. On Venus, if you make an envelope of air big enough, it won’t just float. It will carry you, your friends, and the city you live in. You don’t crowd the gondola under the balloon because you live *in* the balloon. You have sunlight above and storms below forever. The floating cities of Venus are giant bioluminescent jellyfish drifting on currents that never abate.

For years, Brian toyed with the title THE 35 MILE HIGH CLUB. But he got to thinking about it more seriously. Where’s the threat? Mankind abandons Earth without saving her, and that’s the happy ending? Screw geoengineering when you’ve got an interplanetary time share.

Brian dreamed about Venus because he despaired about global warming. Hello, drought and hurricanes, goodbye Greenland ice sheet. More hybrid cars won’t do shit. Brian gloried in the mad scientists who want to dump planeloads of iron dust into the Pacific to grow carbon dioxide munching plankton, or run up a garden hose to God by weather balloons and pump sulphur particles into the stratosphere, simulating the ashy shade made by a Krakatoa or a Vesuvius.

Why not tell that story? What if a geoengineer living in a floating city begins to make real progress? He atom bombs the fissure lines of Venus’s tectonic plates, loosening up the crust. He seeds algae and kelp and plankton. He runs a skyhook from a tokamak-powered, oxygen-pumping, extra-orbital station.

And his work nearly annihilates what’s left of Mankind.

As the Venusian carbon dioxide level drops, so droops the floating city, listing like a sinking ship, getting hotter every hour.

Everything hit in a flash. Brian got the title, the tension, and the theme all at once. TIPPING POINT will be the story of one man’s brave fight to arrest humankind itself from sliding out of balance.

6

“May we have our phone books back?” Paula said. “If you’re done with them.”

Brian went blank. He had rehearsed, of course, their next office encounter a dozen different ways in which he always ended up witty and winning, but those scenarios never began with her at his work station looking bored and demanding phone books.

“What?”

“The ones under your desk,” she said, “for God knows what reason.”

“Paula...”

“Mr. Andrews,” she said, and boy howdy she had rehearsed this meeting more thoroughly than he had. “Just return the Yellow Pages. They’re for the office, not to provide an incline for your Hot Wheels track or whatever.”

“What business is it of yours?”

“What *business*?”

Shit. Blowing it big time. Charm her, you fuck. Get into her head. It used to be easy.

“I guess what comes to mind,” Paula said, “I’m the office manager here, and you’re, forgive me, a junior associate. In fact, *the* most junior associate.”

“That’s a nice bitchy way to put it.”

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing.”

“What...did you call me?”

“Nothing. I didn’t call you anything, Paula. I said you had a way of putting things, all right, and I used a describing word to describe it, Paula, I’m sorry.”

“Do it again, Brian. Pull that stunt again, and I will have you fired. In fact, I will fire you myself. So let this be a warning.”

“You can’t fire me.”

Their gazes locked. *She’d come before. She’d visited my station before I got in. She had to crouch to see the phone books. She had to search for something to fight about.* Paula turned to go.

“I’m an asshole,” Brian said. He meant to say stop or come back, but it worked. Paula stopped.

She came back.

“You have a gift,” she said, “for the obvious.”

“That I do. And I’m sorry. I am obviously, obviously sorry. Would you like some coffee?”

“I like my coffee the way I like my men,” Paula said. “Ground up and in my freezer in little airtight bags.”

Man, she’d rehearsed. He felt flattered, in a way.

“Ow.” Brian guessed they were the same age, but Paula stayed in better shape, physically and mentally. “Lookit, I know we can’t go back, but...”

“But what?”

“I could really go for a cuppa joe.”

“Really.” Paula narrowed her eyes, then nodded. “Black, please, three Splenda.”

She returned to the admin area. Half a minute later, Brian realized what she meant. He reached for his keyboard.

7

The strong orange light of the long Venus dusk settled over Jon Ransom’s office. The cloud deck wasn’t visible anymore, unless one climbed to the windows and looked down. Ransom’s office was in the part of the city with the most upward tilt. Some in Landis IV grumbled that it was intentional, that Ransom planned to be the last to survive after the rest of the city plunged and burned. They were fools. A: if Landis IV ever reached the tipping point, it would be all over for all of them in a minute. And B: Ransom didn’t want anyone to die. He wanted the city to live and he wanted the planet to live, too. By his calculations, he had only mere hours, at day at most, to save them both.

Prudence, his secretary, came in. The ascent to his desk stretched her calves to perfect roundness. All of her curves were perfect, and her breasts, he knew, were natural. They had to be. Silicone gel packs on Venus tended to explode, for some reason.

“For your signature” she said, placing a report on his desk.

“I don’t have time for paperwork,” Ransom muttered contemptuously. He savagely signed his name and, without thinking, put the pen atop the desk. It rolled off and skittered across the floor.

“What do you have time for?” Prudence inquired suggestively.

“Hope,” Ransom responded, returning to the intricate calculations on his hyper-computer.

“Really? Is there hope, Jon?”

“It springs eternal,” Ransom winked, “sayeth the poet.”

“But not for us,” Prudence groaned, her face unprovokedly going hard and cold.

“Can’t apologize 5832/7,” Ransom grinned wryly, in spite of his exhaustion from not having slept. “Can’t go there. But I could go for some coffee. Would you mind?”

Prudence’s lips twisted into a tight little snarl. “Not at all. Black, please, three space sugars.” She spun on one stilleto and went out. Ransom watched her go, half-admiring, half-regretting. She must be, he thought, part mountain goat to negotiate Landis IV’s fourteen and a half degree tilt in those come-fuck-me heels.

He had to almost laugh at it. In the last, desperate hours of the human race, what was important to his secretary was a power struggle over who made who coffee. Ransom shrugged it off. The mug would probably spill at this angle, anyway.

Besides, if his calculations were correct, he may have found a way to correct Landis IV’s downward tilt! Secure the emergency escape hatch air envelopes to the lowest part of the city and substitute the air in them for helium, which he could program the tokamak station to pump down through the skyhook. The station wouldn’t synch in orbit above Landis IV for another eleven hours,, 38 minutes. It would be tight and dangerous and someone, Ransom himself of course, would have to go outside onto the gridwork for the solar panels, but it was just crazy enough to work, knock wood.

As a boy on Earth, Ransom had seen in a museum the finest furniture wood eever, Swietenia mahogani, that was forested out of existence in only fifty years. Ruining Earth’s resources was nothing new! The supple and lustrous mahogany grew only in the Caribbean in the earlhy 1800s. Chippendale used it for his chairs. Shame there was nothing like it on Venus!

8

Paula was at his work station again. “What are you doing?”

This time, Brian jumped a little. “Working.”

“No you’re not.”

“On my book. I wrote a scene. I had an idea for a scene.”

Not yet, not yet! Share it later. Have her read it when it’s finished. Don’t be so needy.

“That’s what you’ve been doing,” Paula said, “for an hour?”

“Well, yeah. I’m sorry about your coffee. I just...you understand. Inspiration. I’ll fix you a cup now, if you like.”

“What do you think,” Paula said, “we do here, Brian? This is a place of work. I don’t compose poetry at my desk. No one builds model rockets here or adds to their stamp collection. Only you, it seems, are exempt. How is that?”

“I do my work.”

“Let me choose my words carefully. I don’t want to make this about the other night.”

“No? That’s good. Appreciated.”

“The only angled desks in my office should be architect’s desks. You with me so far?”

You bitch. You patronizing bitch. Brian nodded. *Go on.*

“Also, the work that gets done during office hours should be, and correct me if I’m wrong, work done for the office.”

“I DO MY WORK!”

Brian slapped his desk and before he could react everything slid off it and crashed to the floor. A ceramic keepsake exploded. The monitor shattered. Paula skittered back to avoid flying glass. The squat CPU banged apart, and its vents spewed nasty smelling smoke.

Commotion spread as colleagues converged in a curious hurry, but Brian and Paula remained silent and still. They surveyed the wreckage. Then Paula left.

Forgot to save, Brian thought, although saving to a fried hard drive wouldn’t do a fat lot of good anyway. He had one scene done of his book, and now it was gone. At home, he had 47 single-spaced pages of notes, but those were mostly cribbed from Wikipedia. What was the point? Who was he out to kid?

Paula returned. Brian looked up at her. She looked helpless.

“Leave.”

At a burger and beer franchise with bubbly, leather-cushioned booths, Brian rehearsed in retrospect what he could have said or done. He muttered “you lack the authority” over and over, until he no longer knew to whom he meant to say it, or what it meant at all.

An hour later, he found his personal effects from The Curtin Group on his doorstep in two carefully packed boxes.

9

“It’d help if you told us. Todd, where the hell are we going?” Jeremy said. “This place of yours, can we get a hint? A time zone? Seriously, pal. Are we still in North America?”

“We’re almost there,” Todd said. “And fuck you. Seriously.”

“Almost where?” Peter said.

“Exactly 25 minutes from nowhere,” Brian said.

“Then we should be getting close,” Peter said. He resettled against the rear passenger window and closed his eyes.

“Worst. Road trip. Ever.” Lenny said. The line got a laugh the first time he said it, but this was

the eighth.

“So you’re looking to sell this property?” Jeremy said. “To which foreign government?”

“I invited you, I didn’t ask you,” Todd said. “So doc, shut the fuck up. We’re almost there.”

But he *had* asked the guys, and all of them remembered Todd’s challenge word for word.

“Any of you motherfuckers wanna see my future sex dungeon?”

10

They broke out three flashlights even though it was only late afternoon. In the lengthening shadows and surrounded by its forest of weeds, the weatherbeaten house and farm resembled a horror movie set more than a potential winery and homestead to thoroughbred horses.

“Boy, you weren’t kidding,” Lenny said.

Lenny and Peter took one flashlight and, based on their automotive parts retail experience, went to look at the generator. Todd led Jeremy on a tour of the house. Brian took the last flashlight and explored the barn.

Brian preferred to venture off by himself, to find things out his own way. As a boy he used to climb as high as he could into a neighbor’s loquat tree and stay there for hours, marveling that no one knew where he was: not his father, who was usually gone in the first place (or making fun of him in the second, third, and fourth place); not his mother, who’d call his name twice and then give up; and not his sister, if her life depended on it. Brian loved to be alone where no one could find him, and never minded that it took his family hours and hours to start looking.

The slatted barn looked like it could be knocked over with a sneeze, but the post and beam structure was deceptively durable. It had been painted and repainted red at least four times. The broad roof bore the remnants of a slogan, SEF RCKK CIY. Brian doubted that even when it was freshly painted this had ever been a likely spot to advertise.

Inside, a homemade ladder rose to a hayloft under the gambrel roof. Brian resisted the urge to see what was up there. He let the flashlight stay dark and advanced into the barn, inhaling its ancient must. There were shadowed stalls and thin strips of amber sunlight that colored the dancing dust motes. Brian stood entranced, wholly alert, and utterly at peace.



They met up on the front porch.

“The generator is shot-a-roonied,” Lenny said.

“You could do something with the house,” Jeremy said. “Preferably involving kerosine and marshmallow sticks.”

“Thanks,” Todd said.

“What’s below?” Brian said.

Todd shrugged. “Cellar. Usual. Laundry room. Shelves. Old jigsaw puzzles that the pieces are probably like carved from wood.”

“No, I meant below the barn.”

“Nothing. There’s a loft but no cellar.”

“You sure?” Brian turned and walked off the porch. “I think your cellar extends,” he said over his shoulder.

The others followed him to the barn.

“What are we looking at?” Todd said.

“L-bracket. That big ol’ lead thing. This corner of the barn is bolted down.”

“So?”

“The others aren’t. Those posts are countersunk. Which is unusual in itself. There’s something under here. Solid or hollow I don’t know. But stamp on the ground between here and the house, it’s the same.”

“*The Red-Headed League*,” Peter said. “Very nice.”

Lenny began to pant like a dog that needs water. “Is there a trapdoor in the barn?”

“Not that I could find.”

“Let’s take another look,” Jeremy said, “at that cellar.”



Three flashlight beams penetrated the gloom, played over the gray joists and cobwebbed timber posts.

“What’s that stink?”

“Gun oil, termite poop, and old flooding.”

“Todd, who was your uncle’s decorator, the Unibomber?”

“Worst. Road trip. Ever.”

“Shaddup, Lenny.”

They spread out and shuffled around in silence for a while.

“Guys?” Brian said. “Todd and you guys?” He reached into the backless cubby of an empty workbench and flipped a Master lock. It hung through a hasp on the mildewed plank wall. The hasp wasn’t attached to the workbench. “Bet you anything that’s a door,” he said, “and behind it’s your dungeon.”

Without another word, they moved aside the workbench and crowbarred the lock. Lenny began panting like a dog again. The door was heavy, steel-reinforced. Three of them had to pull.

The men entered the echoey bunker with the reverence of breaching the Lost Tomb of the Pharaohs.

“Fuck. Me.” Todd said.

“Careful what you wish for,” Jeremy said through his teeth. “This is definitely the kinda place those kinda wishes come true.”

Scarcely breathing, Brian smiled into the gloom. *It was happening. Here it was. It was actually happening.* The dumb jokes would come next. His automatic go-to defense mechanism against nervousness or excitement.

“Todd, got any missing relatives you know of?”

“What *is* this?” Lenny flicked the wall switch without result.

“Underground sideways corn silo?”

Jeremy shouldered past Brian. “The fuck you talking about?”

“What’re those?” Lights crisscrossed on far, dark rectangles.

“Okay, those,” Brian said, “definitely not *The Price Is Right* showcase.”

He couldn’t help it. It was happening. It was actually happening. Brian had craved exactly this for as long as he could remember.

The secret room was about thirty feet long and ten feet wide, with bare concrete floor, walls, and ceiling. Metal shelving held dusty boxes and plastic jugs of water. On the far wall were mounted large twin cabinet doors.

“What *was* this?” Lenny said. “Gun storage? Bomb shelter?”

“Probably,” Peter said. “Probably bomb shelter. From back in the day.”

“Or a two-lane bowling alley,” Brian said. “Minus the ball return.”

They reached the far wall. Peter sniffed the cabinet doors without touching them. He blessed himself and backed away.

“Not liking this,” Todd said.

Lenny said, “If there’s a body or weird shit in there, I’m gonna lose it. I will. I’ll fuckin’ lose it.”

“Never woulda guessed, Len,” Jeremy said, in the same singsong undertone. “Thanks for letting us know.”

Jeremy threw open the doors, giving way to a bare concrete alcove, like a deep cupboard without shelves. Brian craned his head in the recess. No trapdoor. “Curiouser and curiouser,” he said.

“Well, that’s my goddamn house,” Todd said with a snort. “Think you can do something with it?”

“Whatever you want, Todd,” Brian said. “Whatever you want.” He had only explored

“Welcome Gamblers”— Chapin

Page 40

underneath. Yet without seeing the house, Brian was alive to its possibilities. He was hooked by the mystery, the adventure of the thing. It was an unrealized novel come to life.

BACKHAND

1

“Let’s be clear and fair,” Jeremy said. “Peter has one shot to get a girl, and it ain’t eHarmony. It’s Stockholm syndrome.”

They played cards. Brian dealt. Jeremy had out a pack of Camels that he shared with Todd.

“So you’re saying I have to renovate my uncle’s farm in order to get this dipshit laid?”

“What are friends for?”

“What’s a dungeon for?”

“Get us *all* laid,” Lenny said, craning his head to make sure Doris was still on the porch.

“That’s true,” Brian said. “In terms of sexual hostage occupancy, a cage is one. A dungeon is two or more.”

Jeremy toasted Brian with a tipped Heineken.

“I wanna hear what Peter had to said about making money,” Todd said.

“Fuck money,” Jeremy said. “Money later. Do this as a labor of love.”

The guys laughed. Lenny thumped down his Bud Light. “Goddammit. I snorted beer out my nose. Warn me next time, you prick.”

“Warn you what? I’m about to say something smart or you’re about to do something dumb?”

“*In* the ashtray,” Lenny said. “Loser. I thought you quit.”

“Anybody can quit smoking,” Jeremy said. “It takes a real man to face cancer.”

“Cigarettes,” Brian said. “The sooner you light ’em, the less you need ’em.”

“I could think of one bitch I’d put in a dungeon,” Todd said, mashing out his butt.

“Me, too,” Brian said.

“Me, three,” Lenny said.

“Here’s the crux of the thing,” Jeremy said. “It’s not who they are, it’s who *we* are. We’ve each of us, at some time or another, I dunno, lost women, loused up women. We got hurt. We’re the ones who got hurt, if anyone’s keeping score and being honest about it. If we could...”

He took a drag and let the smoke seep out.

“Control. If we could arrange things. If we could...”

He glanced at his cards and threw them in.

“Reshuffle. If we could for once in our lives stack the deck in our favor. I’d give anything for

a second chance like that. To be in control and stay in control. Not fuck it up. At least not in so...public a fashion. And it wouldn't take much. It wouldn't take much at all. A single piece of scratch paper.”

“A what?”

“Forget it. Crazy theory of mine. Wouldn't want you ladies to get your panties wet.”

“Tell us the theory, doc,” Brian said.

“You're taking this too seriously.”

“Tell us.”

“That *is* the theory: you're taking this too seriously. I have another one, though. The scratch paper theory.” Jeremy drained his beer. “Famous last words of Sigmund Freud: ‘What do women want?’ Man was a genius, father of psychiatry. You'd think he'd have a clue. No, it killed him.”

He tipped ash into the empty Heineken. “Okay. Okay, the theory. You know how you'd take a test in school, like calculus or some shit? You take out a piece of scratch paper. And every piece of thinking you have to do, every mistake you make, it goes on that piece of paper. That one piece. The *test* is just the answers, the end result. The test is clean. The scratch paper... you don't mark up and waste a page for each question. You use one piece, right? It's good for the whole test. What if we could get a woman like that? Think of the service she'd provide.”

“You are so fulla shit,” Brian said, “it is scary.”

“Think about it!” Jeremy said. “One woman bears all the mistakes you make in a lifetime. In a *lifetime*. You emerge a cleaner, better person. And at the end of the day, nobody sees the errors, because what do you do? You never turn in the scratch paper. No one sees it. And, bonus, you don't waste other paper marking perfectly good sheets all to hell. It's win-win-win. Well, win-lose-win, but it's a good theory, and I don't know what you think is so funny, neither.”

“And it could be for all of us, right?” Lenny said. “One piece for all of us?”

“Lenny, cut this dick off, now,” Todd said. “No more beer. You are fucked in the head, Jer. You want us to drag a bitch to my dungeon and, what?, we all use her—”

“Designate,” Jeremy said. “It's nicer. Not drag. We designate a woman of our choice...”

“For scratch paper!” Brian fell off his chair, laughing.

“What's wrong with that?” Jeremy said. “You think it's never done? It's never happened? I bet it has. It has, I *tell* you it has.”

“I could tell you what not to do,” Peter said, almost to himself.

“About what?” Lenny said.

“The whole thing,” Brian said, climbing back onto his chair.

“Be like me, just read books,” said Todd, mimicking Peter.

“What not to do so you don't get caught,” Peter said.

“We’re just fucking around, Peter. Relax. We’re just fucking around,” Jeremy said.
“That,” Peter said, “is how you get caught.”

2

“Shoulders back, tits out,” 19-year-old Jeremy said, “is the posture you want, and these,” he pointed with the scalpel, “are the muscles you want for a killer backhand. Lats, external rotators, paraspinal stabilizers, and especially the rhomboids. Thank goodness it’s Ambrose on the table and not Satterwhite. We can find muscles on Ambrose.”

“You’re a riot, Lorenz,” Satterwhite said.

“That’s the legend, don’t wear it out.”

“Ready for me to dissect?” Bauman said.

“Uh-huh,” Jeremy said. “Sharp away from you. The brachial plexus makes an M.”

“There it is.”

“Poy-fection, Bauman. Okay: five anterior rami of the spinal nerves. Who gets what? I call wishbone.”

They had been working on cadaver 0674-AMB, who Jeremy nicknamed Ambrose, for three weeks. That morning, Bauman brought everyone in the lab group net bags of scented soaps that she found in Little Havana. “This works,” she said. “Unless you want it following you home on your hands after class.”

Gross Anatomy was the University of Miami School of Medicine’s way of saying hello. This was a few years before the Powers That Be renamed the school in honor of construction king Leonard M. Miller, who died and left it a ton of cash. Miller did not bequeath his cadaver.

No one blamed him. Cadavers, most of them the dull yellow of portioned chicken flesh, were done enormous, semester-long violence at the inexperienced hands of first year med students, five or six to a lab group. For the first month, at least, a cadaver’s head, hands, and feet remained wrapped in black plastic.

“You don’t even take notes.”

“Let it go, Satterwhite,” Bauman said.

“Can we just — just, please,” Alvarez said.

“Can’t do everything, Louis,” Jeremy said. “Had to choose. Take notes or take charge.”

“Ask you something, Lorenz. You’re here on a, what is it, athletic scholarship? Partial? You got pre-admittance because you play *tennis*. You don’t study. At all. What gives you the balls to want to be a doctor?”

“Dunlop,” Alvarez said.

“Nice one,” Jeremy said. “I’m in it, Satterwhite, I wanna be a surgeon because no other profession rates as high in suicide, addiction and divorce. No, sorry, that’s your reason.”

“What’s yours?” Bauman said.

“I loves me the mask, toots,” Jeremy said. “Wish it came with a sword and a cape.”

“I wish I could transfer lab groups,” Satterwhite said.

No one said anything.

“One last thing, Lorenz,” Satterwhite said. “How far are you going to get on sheer arrogance?”

“How far?” Jeremy said. “Depends. At least I know how to travel in style. You know what, Satterwhite? Here. Take my rat-tooth forceps. Go make yourself happy. And make sure you use a tissue. Clean up afterwards.”

3

Jeremy dedicated his freshman year at UM to hijinks.

During an away game, hundreds of used tennis balls filled to capacity Coach Simone’s Jaguar XK8.

The e.r. nurses at Jackson Hospital, where Jeremy pulled required night shifts, fell prey to triage sheets that had them call into the waiting room for Angie O’Plasty, Anita Bath, and the always high-larious Emma Royds. Real Bart Simpson stuff.

Jeremy mastered the art of squirting a syringe of ice water down the back of co-eds’ scrubs, and he could flick up to twenty feet the perfect flaming mouth swab.

He found public ways to guzzle apple juice from urine specimen jars.

He sent the more gullible of his peers on urgent quests for vaginal rakes, trays of fallopian tubes, and to vent fire doors.

He deadpanned the rumor that along Biscayne Boulevard bums were getting paid six hundred dollars to have PROPERTY OF U OF M MED SCHOOL tattooed on the soles of their feet. Not long after, these unfortunates became (he was not at liberty to divulge how) the cadre of cadavers on the steel tables, the kind of tables with matching steel pails on hooks under the feet of the “donors” wrapped in black plastic. “Why do you think,” Jeremy said, “we don’t see the feet for so long? They use henna tattoos. By the time we see them, there’s nothing to see.”

By midterm, Jeremy racked up scores of pranks that he was widely credited for but never officially proven to have done. The best by far was the incident on the Rickenbacker Causeway.

At the time, the toll to head down to Virginia Key and Key Biscayne was a dollar. Not everyone

paid it. Dade County, in its wisdom, posted a sign. DON'T SPEED PAST TOLL BOOTH: YOUR HAND COULD GET CAUGHT IN BASKET! This was so idiotic Jeremy couldn't resist.

Late one Friday night, he snuck into the Anatomy Lab, fired up a bone saw and borrowed Ambrose's right hand. He was meticulous. Saturday morning, Jeremy squished a fresh chicken liver into the well-scrubbed stump, super-glued a dollar between the hand's thumb and forefinger, and hit the road. He sped through the CASH ONLY lane at 1:12 p.m., tossing quarters and a treat into the basket, and went to feast on crab cakes and margaritas at the Rusty Pelican.

When questioned by campus authorities a week later, Jeremy's defense was that even if he could conceive of an act so sick, vile, and reprehensible, how could he be so dumb and obvious as to mutilate his own group's cadaver! That, among the UM underground intelligentsia, was the masterstroke. Jeremy was let off with hard looks but no official reprimand.

Also by midterm, Jeremy committed drug-induced date rape sixteen times.

4

“Taking great risks does not make you a great gambler,” Paul said. Paul was a small guy who grew hair well. His moustache was luxuriant, and he seemed to be either working on muttonchops or overdoing sideburns. Paul was the RA where Jeremy lived, and he let Jeremy sit with him in the lobby office to watch the Australian Open.

“Tell me more, o Confucius of Boca Raton,” Jeremy said.

“Want me to tell you something? Okay, I'll tell you something: I'm getting complaints.”

“No wonder, the way you run—”

“About you.”

Jeremy sipped his soda. “From?”

“You're reckless, man. You're reckless and people can't handle it. Jer, I don't think you can handle it.”

“Yeah, I've been meaning to get more reck. You know how it is. Can't get down to the Reck Store.”

“There are girls, here, who complain. So will you shut up? I'm trying...I'm trying to do something for you here,” Paul said. “I'm letting you know straight. You creep them out.”

Jeremy put down his soda. He blew out a sigh. “Okay, two questions. Who and how?”

“No.”

“Who and how?”

“I'm not going to tell you that.”

“Not letting you off the hook, Paul. Who and how?”

“Ain’t happening.”

“Who and how?”

“No names. And for how, I don’t know how. They don’t say how. It’s a vibe, man. You give off a vibe.”

“A vibe?”

“Yeah! Don’t play dumb. The rumors about you. The little jokes. ‘A woman is a life support system for a cunt.’”

“It’s a *joke*, like you said!”

“The thing about the toaster.”

“What thing about the toaster?”

“The one about the woman and the toaster and the washing machine?”

“Oh, yeah,” Jeremy chuckled. “And the garden hose.”

“It’s that. That kind of shit. In the right time and place, then fine. Not PC, but who gives a rat’s fart? But you don’t know the right time and place, Jeremy. Or you know but don’t care.”

“What if I said they were lying?”

“Who?”

“Whoever,” Jeremy said. “Look. You know me. Everything I do is for shits and giggles. I’m not out to hurt anybody.”

“I know that. *I* know that. But co-eds, man. It’s their first time away from home. Some of them’re from out of state.”

“It’s a big, bad world.”

“Well, stop being the Big Bad Welcoming Committee!”

Jeremy laughed. “Are you shitting me or you serious?”

Paul pointed to the TV. “Agassi. What did you call him? A dope dealer?”

“He’s a pusher.”

“A pusher. He takes too many chances.”

“He pushes opponents out of their comfort zone.”

“He takes too many chances.”

“He wins.”

“He’s a pro,” Paul said. “You’re not.”

“Two blinders, please,” Jeremy said. “That okay?”

April looked like fun. Pale, small-chested, lively brown eyes: it didn’t work if the chick didn’t have plenty to lose. They got to chatting in line for a midnight screening of *Breaking the Waves* at the Cosford Cinema. Now, three nights later, they were on a date at a place with a busy bar in Coconut Grove.

“What’s a blinder?”

“Scotch, grenadine, and grapefruit juice.”

“No! Uh-uh. I can’t do grapefruit juice,” April said.

“Scotch and grenadine yes but no to grapefruit juice? My kind of woman,” Jeremy said. “What do you say to a Man of the Moment?”

“Who’s that, you?”

“It’s,” he shifted closer so as not to shout, “Scotch, grenadine, Grand Marnier and lemon juice.”

April broke into a grin. “I say hi-de-do, mister.”

“Two Man of the Moments,” Jeremy said. “Men of the Moment?”

“So, then. Are you an alcoholic or a bartender?”

“I can’t be both?”

“Maybe,” April said.

“Med school student. Third year.”

“Ah. Alcoholic.”

“Touché,” Jeremy said. “And what are you, that you pay to see Norwegian porno all by your lonesome?”

“Scottish.”

“What?”

“It was set in Scotland. The director’s Danish. The *husband* was Norwegian.”

“Knew it was Norwegian somehow. Oh, you’ve got a...there’s something...” He gestured vaguely at her face.

April fished a compact from her purse. “What?”

“I don’t know. Can you see it in this light?”

“Excuse me a moment.”

She went to find the ladies. It took longer than a moment. The drinks came, and Jeremy doctored hers at the bar with 2500 milligrams of GHB. Because he wasn’t furtive, no one noticed him do it. He even complained, when she returned, that his drink tasted a little salty. April agreed, hers too.

But the next round tasted yum.
It was so fucking easy.

6

Experience taught Jeremy that the more brisk and businesslike he was now, the better the result. He got April to accompany him to his car while she could still walk more or less unassisted. He drove them without conversation to a place he liked on West Flagler, where the towels were like sandpaper but the mattresses were firm, the beds wide, and the bedposts solid brass.

“Wait, where are we?” April said, leaning forward and peering up at the red and blue neon sign.

“This is where we’re going to fuck.”

“Nah. I don’t...go to bed...first date.”

“Then it’s a first, first date fuck. Besides, you told me to drive us here.”

“I did?”

“Yeah. This is your idea. You said to come here.”

“No, yeah, well, I change my mind.” She fiddled with her blouse.

“That’s okay. Always your prerogative. Wait here, I’ll just give back the key.”

“The key?”

“I already got us the room.”

“You did?”

“You told me to.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not mad.”

“You’re not?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Wait here.”

He went in and paid for the room and came back for the girl and the zippered sports bag in the back seat. This wasn’t a matter of desire, it was servicing a need. One doesn’t *want* dinner, one eats dinner.

“Come on, April. Alley oop. Let’s go.”

“Where are we?”

“You tell me. Ladies choice.”

“Did you give back the key?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Let’s go.”

He got her into the room and undressed her without much fuss. *Black lace bra and French cut panties. Bullshit you don’t screw on the first date.*

“What are we doing here?” April said.

“Whatever you want.”

She kissed him full on the mouth, putting her whole body into it, then pushed off, confused. She made that fiddling with her blouse gesture again, though she was naked.

“I’m tired.”

“Go to bed, then,” Jeremy said. “You want to go to bed?”

She nodded. Her eyelids fluttered, and she seemed to have trouble keeping her head balanced on her neck. “No monkey stuff.”

“Don’t worry.” Jeremy kissed her forehead. “Let’s start with doggie and see how it goes.”

He stripped, and watched the girl climb ponderously onto the bed. He had to laugh.

“You hungry?” he said. “What are you chewing, April?”

Smacking her lips, she caught sight of him by accident.

“C’mere,” she said.

“No rush,” he said. He unzipped the bag and came out with the camera. “The big EOS Rebel,” he said, in the TV commercial voice. “Image. Is everything.”

“Don’t take my picture,” she said, sounding more discouraged than frightened.

He clicked one-two-three-four quick shots. “Too late,” he said. “Put your arms down. Do what I tell you. Do what I tell you.”

She did what he told her.

After a while, Jeremy put away the camera and came to the bed. He told her to do other things, and she did those, too.

She said, “I don’t wanna be here.”

“I know,” he said, his sweat dripping onto her. “But here you are.”

After he finished, he checked her pulse and went to the sports bag again and got out the travel alarm clock and the Ziploc baggie with the small steel keys and the handcuffs.

The girl’s eyes widened, even through her fog.

“Nah-uh,” Jeremy said mildly. “Not for you. You don’t ask, you don’t get. Go back to sleep. Do what I tell you, bitch.”

She lay still, belly down, uncovered. Only her eyes tracked him as he moved, and even that effort

was hit and miss.

It was a terrific turn on, her watching. Jeremy made a show for the girl of transferring one small key from the baggie to her jeans pocket. “It’s here,” he said. “All right? Don’t forget it.” He waggled the jeans, then tossed them back to where they were. The way GHB worked, there was no way in hell she’d recall any of this.

He lay down with her. “You’ve done really well. I mean that. We’re almost done.” He busied himself with setting the alarm. “I’ve got class first thing, so d’you mind if we end this at five, or is four-thirty out of the question? Not too early? Swell. Thanks.” He put the clock and handcuffs on the night stand.

As soon as he switched off the light, the fantasy revisited him, unbidden, insistent, more ravenous than ever. The girl o.d.’s and he balls the corpse. He brutalizes the body. Jeremy flinched as always. He loathed and doted on the images, so repulsive and scary. What was wrong with what he had? A paralyzed girl: aware, in his fantasy, of everything he does to her but powerless against him. And grateful. Boundlessly grateful.

Jeremy slept.

He woke four minutes before the alarm would buzz, went to pee, washed his hands and brushed his teeth. No bad dreams. This would tide him over through finals. Jeremy left the bathroom light on, returned to the bed and checked the girl’s pulse. Strong and steady. Her hips rested on a sodden circle. She had either leaked or peed herself, but that was part of the joy of GHB.

Jeremy lay beside her for the last time and got ready. With a deft backhand, he flipped a cuff against the top bed rail: steel spun and ratchets caught. *Not a pro? Dream on, you hippie runt.* He palmed the spare key and closed the other cuff around his right wrist.

“Snug snick,” Jeremy said. All right. All set. He prodded the girl hard with his left hand until she groaned. “Uppy-yuppy time,” he said. “Fun’s fun, I get it, but enough’s enough. Let’s go. Get me out of this, hey. *Can you fucking get me out of this?*” He put real tension in his voice. Maybe he should try out for one of the plays at the Ring Theatre.

The girl groaned again.

“Let’s go. I’m scared.”

“What?” The girl pushed herself up on one elbow, not yet with it enough to turn around.

“You put me...in handcuffs,” Jeremy said, trying hard to sound like he was trying hard to sound reasonable. “I’m handcuffed to this...damn bed. I’ve been sitting here like this all night.”

The girl didn’t do anything.

“Just get the keys, huh, wherever you put them, and let me go.”

He actually liked this part, letting himself gradually and grudgingly be persuaded not to go to the

cops. Dumb cunts always gaped at the discovered key. *Did you check your purse? Is it in your pocket?* Then, all abject and apologetic, they made his arguments for him. Hey, no, listen. We were consenting adults. It was a mistake. Things went too far. Please don't tell. One freckled grad student even offered to have sex with him again to secure his silence. Jeremy refused with cold formality. Let's, he said, just never see each other again. She wilted. It was perfection.

“Baby, please. I am just...scared.”

“Bad,” the girl said. In that one syllable, Jeremy heard the difference between playacting and real life.

She sat bolt upright. “Oh, bad! It's going to be a bad one!”

“What's bad?” He could just reach her shoulder. “Tell me what's bad.”

Her head came around in jerky stop-motion. The girl's pupils were gone. Only whites showed below fluttering eyelids. Her head canted over, ear to right shoulder. Muscles stood out everywhere like ridged furrows. Her hands knotted up and shook and curled inward like arthritic claws. One side of her mouth dragged down at an impossible slant, as if an unseen, weighted hook yanked fiercely at the edge of her lips.

“*Guhh!*” the girl said. “Agg! Agg! Guh-guh-guh!”

Her back arched and her shoulder blades strained to touch each other and she flopped off the bed.

In the shock of the moment, Jeremy fumbled the spare key and it fell with a soft, faraway clink under the railing.

7

Life lasts about a billion heartbeats. By that count, Jeremy squandered half a year of his lifetime before sunrise.

He leapt to help the girl, but the steel cuff savagely bit his wrist and he tumbled back. He stared up at what held him with the wild panic that any trapped animal feels, not recognizing for fear-explosive seconds the glinting thing on the rail or its purpose or who put it there.

In the unseen space between the side of the bed and the wall, the girl cawed and convulsed. Jeremy heard the back of her heels thrum against the carpet.

It gave him a second to think, but too many thoughts crowded at once. *Help her! — GHB metabolizes, 24 hours. — Bitch didn't tell me! How could she not tell me? — It'll stop. It'll stop by itself. — Tomorrow it's not there but if she goes to the hospital now you're screwed asshole, it shows up on a test! — The fuck! Dropped the key! Get the key!*

He got to his knees and leaned over. She was on her back, still seizing, her unseeing face creased

and contorted, her palsied fists up by her shoulders, making her little boobs jiggle. Her pubic hair stood on end. Her bladder let go as he watched. *What do you do for an epileptic woman in the bathtub?* flashed through his mind, and the punch line hit with awful force before he could stop it: *throw in the laundry.*

Jeremy’s right arm extended far back, elbow slightly bent, in the classic form to swing through a ground stroke. He sat back on his haunches. His gaze swung to the phone on the night stand.

No, it should stop. They don’t last. You’ll get in trouble. You’ll get you both in trouble. Think! She’s on the floor. She can’t hurt herself. Wait it out. It’s physically impossible — think — it’s physically impossible, yes, for anyone to swallow her own tongue. What’s the rule? They hadn’t fucking covered this! Medical emergency if it lasts more than, okay be careful... Five minutes. Or is it thirty something? Seconds or minutes? No: more than five minutes is danger. Are you sure? Yes. It’s not even thirty seconds. It won’t last. Wait. It will stop. It will stop.

Jeremy stared at the phone. It was in his hand. He reached over and recradled it.

Jeremy spun and reached down the top of the mattress, groping for the key. He got nowhere. He bucked twice in fury and frustration, trying to pull the mattress from the wall with him still on it. Stupid! Jeremy climbed out of bed, right arm at an awkward stretch across his body. But there was no way he’d set foot off the bed on her side.

He bumped the night stand, and everything on it fell. Something in the lamp shattered. It might have been the base or the bulb or both. Jeremy yanked at the mattress left-handed. It slid only three inches, caught on the brass foot rail.

He clambered back to where he was and slid his hand down past the elbow, but he couldn’t reach the floor. He bounded to his knees again, and saw the girl. She was still at it. It was more than thirty seconds and he thought *just die!* and wished he could take the wish back the instant he thought it and it was a minute now probably *more* than a minute.

Her angled head twitched on its side, as if she watched something idiotically amusing going on under the bed. Maybe a wee hollow-barreled key dancing the macarena with the dust bunnies.

“Stop!” he shouted. “Stop it! Wake up! *Stop!*”

He could shout for help, of course, but how was that any better than calling 911? Paramedics and police fill out reports. But a neighbor putting it to the neighbor’s wife might not. Did they even *have* neighbors? It was mid-week. The parking lot had been near empty.

The pants! Where were her jeans? Middle of the floor, past the foot of the bed. He might haul the whole bed over, if the opposite wall didn’t stop him. Or he could lasso the jeans to him somehow.

The telephone was an almond-colored clunker with a six-foot handset cord. It might work. Jeremy gathered it up and sat on the edge of the bed, as far down as he could, which wasn’t far. He

pinched the base between his naked thighs and fished sidearm with the handset. The first cast was too short and the second too hard, it flew back like a paddle ball.

Jeremy concentrated. His next throw went exactly where he aimed, but the handset bopped ridiculously on the cheap carpet. It couldn't hook the jeans and lacked the weight to rake them.

Jeremy pinched out the wall line. He stuck the handset between his thighs and lobbed the base. Two things happened at once. The base landed squarely atop the jeans and the cord popped. It snaked away like a shot rubber band. “Fuck you!” Jeremy threw the handset at it, and missed.

“HELP!” Jeremy shouted. “HELP ME!” He did an instant's calculation. “HELP US!”

No one came.

The rattling and raspy, wet gasps from beyond the far side of the bed did not stop.

Without deciding to, Jeremy went blank. For how long, he would never know. He slumped where he sat without thought or action, without recourse to fight or flight, and the noises behind him were as meaningless as pattering rain.

Then he hopped off the bed and spun and wrenched hatefully at the headboard. He meant to hurl the bed itself across the room. Nothing. It stood away from the wall three inches at most.

Jeremy squeezed his right hand with his left with all his might. It almost worked. The cuff slid up the wrist and wedged on a protrusion of bone. If he could dislocate the metacarpal, he might have it.

The only thing working in his favor was the double-locking system of Smith & Wesson handcuffs. Flailing won't make them ratchet tighter.

Jeremy knelt on the bed again, facing the wall. He spared the girl a glance. “Hang on,” he said. He was cuffed to the top rail, so it was no problem putting his right hand, fingers down, thumb tucked in, in the gap between rail and wall.

He grabbed the bedpost with his left hand and lunged with his right shoulder, like Sipowicz busting down a perp's door on *NYPD Blue*.

Pain lit up his arm to the elbow, but all he did was cave in the drywall. He saw a framing stud inside the wall a few inches from the hole, so he slid over, braced his throbbing hand in the new place, sure there would be no give this time, rocked back hard, and slammed again. He wasn't one tubby cop's shoulder, he was a goddamn police battering ram!

The wall dented but held. Jeremy's hand shattered. Four bones pulverized. Weeping and bleeding, he slid out of the restraint.

Jeremy walked around the bed to see the girl. There was nothing he could do, and he had known that for some time. The pale body skittered nonstop, as if the patch of carpet covered an electrified grid. So much froth spat from the girl's lips that it began to crust. Jeremy lingered, then turned away.

He went to her jeans and got the phone. He had to look for the handset. It was in the corner, by the door. The earpiece was cracked. He plugged the phone back together, and into the wall. His broken hand shook too badly to tap three numbers.

He put the phone on the pillow and went to the bathroom. He used one scratchy towel to wrap up his injured hand, and another to spread over his loins when he sat down.

He dialed with his left.

“911. State the nature of your emergency.”

“A girl’s in seizure. We need help. Grand mal seizure,” Jeremy said. “It’s been going on...” He sobbed, let the phone droop. He rocked back and forth, keening in pain. He lifted the handset, nodded deeply at the dispatcher’s voice. “Sir? Sir?”

“It’s been going on,” Jeremy said.

8

Jeremy had the paramedics bring along his personal effects in the ambulance. The police never found out about the camera.

Nine days later, his right arm casted from forearm to fingertips, Jeremy listened to the Dean of the University of Miami School of Medicine explain at length what rights he would forfeit by signing the papers before him, and also what charges, both civil and criminal, he would surely face if he did not sign.

The other men in the room never said a word.

“She told me,” Jeremy said, “that she didn’t do grapefruit juice.” No sound followed but the heavy, authoritative cadence of the room’s grandfather clock. “She didn’t say anything else.”

Jeremy picked up the pen left-handed and scrawled his life away. He left Florida forever that week.



By fall, he was accepted at a Midwest medical college with lax admission requirements and a strict no scholarship policy. Not that he had much left to trade on.

Bones don’t heal. They mend. They never regain one hundred percent. Jeremy’s fine motor skills allowed him to flawlessly perform any layman’s work, but surgeons and tennis pros aren’t layman.

He studied anaesthesiology. He buckled down, seldom drank, never acted wild, and took his Master of Science degree with honors. He waltzed into an internship at a hospital back East.

He drugged and raped two more women, but these were joyless, disconnected acts that left him glum and sweaty and tense.

Though he signed the agreement that he could go to prison automatically for doing so, Jeremy made some calls and found out about the girl. He learned her last name. Her medication regimen. He learned why patients on Tegretol avoid grapefruit juice, and how GHB disrupts anticonvulsant inhibitors.

She had under-control epilepsy and he had an out-of-control hard on. They didn't know enough about each other. It was almost blameless.

An epileptic fit, he learned, is like an electrical storm in the brain. If it rages long enough, the storm devastates everything.

He was her last great time, then, and because of him she didn't even know it. She got a job, after, wiping tables at a restaurant with an outreach program for the mentally challenged.

She died in her sleep not two years later.



Sometimes Jeremy wakes up — or dreams that he wakes up — in his own bedroom, his own apartment, in the here and now. It's bright morning. He rises and almost steps on the girl on the floor by his bed. She writhes at his feet, naked and so young, her pussy hair electric. Her eyes are rolled up all white. She shivers with pleasure. Inward twisted hands extend to draw him down into her embrace.

“Hi-de-do, mister.”

9

“You're not listening, Todd,” Jeremy said. “Don't bring me no bullshit about a second chance at love. What're you, fourteen? This ain't about love. *Or* chance. It's got nothing to do with chance. It's about the removal of chance.”

“All I'm saying is,” Todd said, “as a way to cope with divorce, it's pretty radical.”

“True dat,” Jeremy said.

“And I'm pretty wasted, so good night,” Todd said. “See y'all next week.”

“You okay to go home?” Lenny said.

“Yeah, I'm okay.”

“The couch pulls out.”

“No, I'm okay.”

“Godspeed,” Peter said.

“He puts it away these days,” Jeremy said after Todd lurched out.

“Another erudite evening, gentlemen,” Brian said, pushing back from the table. “Thanks so much, all, for the conversation and for your cash. And Jeremy? Seek help.” Brian mugged at his friend, then bust out laughing. “Nah, I'm fucking with you, I don't mean it. I love you, brother. But seriously:

Seek. Help.”

Jeremy held his smile as Brian brayed laughter. “I just did,” Jeremy said.

“You keep working on that theory,” Brian said. “It’s a killer. Ha-ha-ha! No, I mean it. Every opportunity.”

“Brian,” Peter said, “you ever read *The Art of War*?”

“Can’t say as I have,” Brian said. “Sun Tzu, though, right?”

“It’s an ancient text on military strategy. One part goes, ‘Opportunities multiply as they are seized.’”

“Okay,” Brian said, “By ‘seized’, was he talking like Hooters waitresses and shit?”

“It’s an interesting book, that’s all,” Peter said. “What doc said reminded me of it.”

“That one thing Todd mentioned?” Lenny said. He waited shyly. The others looked at him. “I don’t know about you guys. But I am living my second chance. At love.”

“With Doris?”

“Good luck!”

“God love ya, Len, you gotta get out more.”

“No, I — look. I know what she is, but I know what I am. I *know* what I am. Nobody ever looked at me. Not when there was anybody else to look at. She’s the same way, so what? She’s my second chance. That’s all.”

No one knew what to say.

“Good night, Lenny,” Brian said. “Tell Doris thanks for the Fritos.”

“I will,” Lenny said. “Good night.”



Halfway across the lawn, Jeremy overtook Brian and plucked the keys out of his hand. “I’m your driver.”

“Like hell,” Brian said. “You had more than I did.”

“I’m your driver,” Jeremy said, “because we should talk.”

Brian went to the passenger side of Jeremy’s car and reached in through the window. “Just gimme my keys.”

“Get in,” Jeremy said.

“Wanna do something with me for shits and giggles?”

“Like what?” Brian said.

“Help out our buddy Todd,” Jeremy said. “Can’t do this by myself. I need a wingman.”
Then he stopped talking and just drove.

“Well, what?” Brian said. “Is it a secret, or am I supposed to guess?”

“Not a secret,” Jeremy said. “More a surprise. Just getting my thoughts in order.”

“Why you want to do something for Todd? He’s no better or worse than the rest of us.”

“He’s stuck on Sandy.”

“A week after a divorce, that can happen. Let the ink dry.”

“Todd’s pussy whipped.”

“To you anybody who’s *dating* is pussy whipped,” Brian said. “Anybody who ever knew anybody female in their *lifetime* is pussy whipped.”

“It’s a working definition.”

A low Lexus zoomed around them and hit a hard left, burning rubber. “Yowza! Go, baby, go,” Jeremy said. “I’ll be cutting *your* pants off later tonight.” He flashed Brian a grin. “Anaesthesiology humor.”

“There is such a thing?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s a gas.”

“So what’s this thing we’re doing for Todd that you have to think about and say in private and it’s all for shits and giggles?”

“This...mythology he built up about a Dungeon Party Central.”

“Ah, no,” Brian said. “Todd may have started it, but *you* built it up.”

“I proposed a theory,” Jeremy said. “And theories can never be proved. Only demonstrated.”

“So what are you going to do, set up a demonstration?”

“No,” Jeremy said. “We are.”

“We are?”

“Don’t worry, nobody gets hurt.”

“Peachy. Because you know, doc, I wasn’t actually worried anyone would get hurt until you *said*, ‘Don’t worry, nobody gets hurt.’”

“Not if you do what I say.”

“Which is what?” Brian said.

“You took French in school, right?”

“Four years.”

“You know the expression, *trompe loyal*?”

“Louey, you ignorant corn dog on a stick,” Brian said. “Not loy-al, not *le* oil. Lou-ee. *Trompe l’oeil*. Means trick of the eye. Something looks real but isn’t.”

“And there are none so blind as those who will not see,” Jeremy said. “What we do, we set up a somewhat rigged eye exam, you and me, and we provide our friends a little vision.”

“Vision?”

“For Todd and the Pep Boys.”

Brian turned to stare at him. “Of a real-life, torture sex chamber?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And how do you propose we provide that?” Brian said.

“*Cherchez la femme*, my baby,” Jeremy said. “Ain’t a party if they ain’t be ladies.”

THE CARD

1

They met Tuesday at dusk at the Waffle House on Old Plank Road. Lenny and Peter came directly from work in their matching bright blue shirts. Todd, Brian, and Jeremy got out of Todd’s truck to greet them.

“Ain’t we going in?” Lenny said. He had to U-turn from the restaurant door because no one followed him.

“What for?”

“Supper.”

“You out of your mind?” Brian said.

“Isn’t that...what...? This is where you said to meet.”

“No, *this* is where I said for us to meet,” Jeremy said. “The parking lot. Look around you, okay? Look at this lot. What do you see? Cars, or not cars? Not cars, Lenny, gives us a place to talk. And not cars should give you a clue.”

“About what?”

“The pet food with three kinds of syrup,” Todd said.

“I like Waffle House,” Lenny said. “I like Burt’s chili.”

“Oh, what the hell,” Brian said, “our plan isn’t dangerous enough. You want to make it a suicide mission, knock yourself out. Chow down.”

“No, I only said,” Lenny said. “I was looking forward.”

“What’s ‘our plan’?” Peter said. He shivered a little, as if readying for a fist fight.

Jeremy gazed at him. “Show them the bag.”

Brian reached into the truck and brought out a grocery sack, folded closed, bearing the slogan, I GOT MORE BAG FOR MY BUCK.

“Giant gives paper?” Lenny said. “I always get plastic. I didn’t know they give paper.”

“You have to ask for it,” Brian said.

“It’s a nice bag, Jeremy,” Todd said. “Snazzy. Do we get to peek?”

“Once it’s opened...” Jeremy said.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Todd said.

“He’s not being dramatic,” Brian said. “I know what’s in it.”

“This is a one time deal,” Jeremy said. “If we do it. It is harsh and hardcore and any of us commits the least fuck up, we all go to prison. So. Yeah. Got your attention? We’ll show you what’s in the bag, lay out the plan, and you make the decision. If we’re not unanimous, then this never happened? Clear so far?”

Todd, Lenny, and Peter grunted assent.

“Now,” Jeremy said, “we’ll go one step at a time. Everybody signs off as we go along. You don’t understand something, we’ll explain it. You don’t want to do something, then we’re done.”

“The reason we’re here,” Brian said in his Explaining-to-Idiots voice, “is because if we do this at Lenny’s and Doris or the kid walks in and sees what’s in the bag, then Doris or Phil has to die.”

“Mina,” Lenny said.

“Those are the stakes,” Jeremy said. “So we all know. Again, this is a one hand game. Anybody who’d rather pussy out than ante up, now is the time. Now is the only time.”

Todd said, “Let’s see what’s in the bag.”

Brian unfolded the top and held it open.

“Holy shit,” Lenny said. He reached in.

“Don’t take anything out,” Jeremy said.

“This a fucking joke?” Todd said.

“What do you mean?” Brian said.

“Your grand idea is we knock over a convenience store?”

“No,” Jeremy said.

“Black masks and gloves? A semi-9?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“We meet on Thursday, same as always, right?” Jeremy said, “Regular poker night...but at your place.”

“No way.” Todd said. “My place? We wouldn’t fit. Fucking try to eat breakfast, the Rice Krispies echo.”

“Your place in the country,” Brian said. “The one with the dungeon for your sex slaves.”

“Oh.”

Jeremy watched them think about it.

“Guns are good,” Peter said. “Don’t like knives.”

“Duly noted. What we do, we allow ourselves,” Jeremy said, “a one time treat. To see how it feels. Unless one of us has previous experience with sexual correction, then the only part that *isn’t* new is a collective...unsatisfied...curiosity.”

“Holy shit.”

In the silent aftermath, Jeremy wished badly for a soda from Waffle House. He was suddenly thirsty.

“What we do is we do this,” he said. “We construct an event. No one gets caught. No one, and this means, I want to stress this, no one gets killed. This goes down practically harmless. But this thing is an experience we’ve all— Shit, there’re no words for this. It’s *outside*. All right? It’s—it’s outside of everything. How it changes us, whether it changes us, doesn’t matter. We go there. Once and once only. When it’s done, we return to our lives as they were before. Is *that* clear?”

“Think of it as the thrill ride version of a thrill crime,” Brian said.

“Um, whatever,” Jeremy said. “Put a name on it, it’s rape. Okay. That’s the term. No evasion. The fantasy isn’t sex. It’s power and control. And how do you achieve power and control? You you plan and execute it. Nothing spur-of-the-moment. You know how many pervs actually jump out of bushes? Not many.”

“Good news, Lenny.”

“Shut up, Todd.”

“We turn...” Jeremy said, then shook his head. “Don’t do that. Don’t interrupt me again. We turn the facts to our strength.”

“Who’s *we*, kimo sabe?” Todd said. “*We* is gang rape. But you say no one gets hurt, no one gets killed, no one gets caught. Just, we do it at *my* place. Right? Basically?”

Jeremy gazed at him, his eyes gone flat.

Todd snorted. “You got anything to say?”

“You got anything to add?”

“Gang rape accounts for 43 percent” Peter cleared his throat into his fist, “of reported cases of sexual assault.”

The others stared at him. Peter shivered again, and swallowed hard.

“43?” Jeremy said.

“Yes.”

“That a fact?”

“You mean is it accurate?” Peter shivered and shrugged at the same time.

“How do you blurt out a statistic like fortyfuckingthree percent?” Brian said.

“I read stuff. I tend to retain what I read.”

“Pal, what the fuck do you read?” Todd said.

“We’re getting off track,” Jeremy said. “Todd: yes. We’re talking this one thing, this one time. And it has to be at your place. Because it’s the safest. Are you in?”

Todd stared back, then broke eye contact.

“Is anybody out?” Jeremy said.

The men stood breathing shallowly, as if atop a high mountain.

“All in?” Brian said.

“All in,” Peter, Lenny, and Todd said.

“Then let us keep the bag,” Jeremy said. “Let us take the key to the farm. On Thursday, that’s where we meet. Eight o’clock. We’ll have everything set up. You three get ready. Wear the masks. Wear the gloves. Nine sharp, Brian and I will bring them. They will not be known by you, and you will *never* be known by either of them.”

“Either? You mean two?”

“Yes.”

“They’re picked out?”

“Yes.”

“Who— How did you already do this?”

“Ask yourself,” Brian said, “how much do I need to know?”

“Victims usually know their rapists,” Jeremy said, “right?”

Everyone looked at Peter, who only nodded.

“That’s dangerous,” Jeremy said, “so we’re not doing it that way. We create no unnecessary problems. We don’t invite complications or make mistakes. We leave no clues. Swear to god, that night, I walk in and see any of your faces hanging out, I will personally shoot them off. Dicks are okay.”

“Don’t laugh,” Brian said. “What’s it going to be? We need an answer.”

Todd, Peter, and Lenny looked at each other. Todd dug in his pocket and came out with a key ring. He selected a dull gold key and spread and twisted the ring around it until it came free. He handed the key to Jeremy. Jeremy put it in the bag, and Brian refolded the bag and gripped it by the top.

“I can’t get over that Giant gives paper,” Lenny said.

“Then we’re on,” Jeremy said.

“For real and fashow,” Brian said.

“Let’s not go crazy,” Jeremy said, “but on Thursday at Todd’s place in the country at nine o’clock sharp, we’re going to rape us some fucking whores. B.Y.O.C.”

“B.Y.O.C.?”

“Bring your own condoms.”

“I can’t breathe!” Lenny said. He popped snaps and tugged zips and yanked off his mask.
“Jesus! Sweating like a stuck pig.”

“Your own fault,” Peter said.

“Swear to god. Couldn’t breathe.”

“You wanted the one with the zippers,” Peter said.

“There’s no air.”

“Pipe down,” Todd said. “It’s nine o’clock.”

“There’s no air in this *house*.”

“Yeah, well, no fans, no electricity.”

“Did we have to light *every* candle?”

“Those were the instructions,” Peter said.

“Which I suspect are bullshit,” Todd said. “This room looks like an Army emergency room in a zombie movie.”

“At least we’re not in the dungeon,” Peter said.

“Doubt it’d have less air than here,” Lenny said.

“Where’d they’d get *army cots*?”

“And down is cooler,” Lenny said. “Why is every goddamn window closed?”

“Jeremy’s idea of a joke,” Todd said, looking around.

“Can’t we crack a few?” Lenny said. “Get a cross breeze going?”

“Crack a few brews,” Todd said. “What’s the time?”

“The instructions said lock and block the windows.”

“Yeah, well, my house and I say bullshit.”

“Talk about torture,” Lenny said, “try wearing that sunnuvabitch mask for twenty minutes.”

“Nine oh six,” Todd said.

“That’s the torture!”

“You don’t see any hidden cameras, do you?” Todd said.

“No,” Peter said, “but if there were any, why should we be able to see them?”

“How convinced are you, Peter, that this is bullshit?”

Peter turned his mask to face Todd.

“You knew at the parking lot,” Todd said. “You knew, didn’t you?”

“Knew what?”

“That number. The statistic. We all looked at you and you just nodded, like don’t bother me.

You know more than you say.”

“I don’t remember.”

“How many rape victims already know their attacker?”

“About 70 percent.”

“Yeah. Yeah, Peter. How do you know that?”

“Told you. I read.”

“*Why* do you know that?”

Peter’s mask swung away. It cocked slightly to one side.

“Here they come.”

They heard the crunch of tires on the drive. The car came slowly, heedful of the gravel ruts.

“Get your mask on.”

“Yeah,” Todd said. “Or Jeremy’ll shoot you.”

Lenny mopped his brow and grinned.

Outside, brakes squealed and the engine cut off. Doors opened and closed. Then someone popped the trunk.

Lenny fumbled with zippers. “He wouldn’t do that, really.”

“Get your mask on, Lenny.”

3

Mrs. Dibble said Mrs. G wasn’t doing a joke that I could get an A if I wrote this story. I thought it was a joke because I don’t get grades until the fifth grade. I only get numbers. I get mostly 4s but some 3s and a 1 on verbal participation and that means needs improvement. I can talk, but I don’t always. 3 means that you meet expectations and 4 means that you exceed expectations. A 4 is like an A, but not until the fifth grade.

Mrs. G said I should write about whatever I want but please do the story about my parents. I said I can’t and she went why and I went because I don’t know who my daddy is and she went quiet and her counselor room got hot and I went is it OK if I do a report about mommy and Mr. Lenny and Mrs. G went perfect.

I have to ask Mrs. G if I get the A can I use it in the 5th grade because I want to get all A’s in school so I can want to go to college and learn to be a dentist and fix mommy’s teeth because mommy says that’s the only way it’s ever going to get done. Mommy has a pretty smile except for her teeth.

If I don’t be a dentist, I hope I’ll be a 2nd grade teacher like Mrs. Dibble. She makes everything we do fun. When you work with her, it’s fun. Unlike other classes, work is boring. I saw into other

classes one time and the kids had their heads down on their desks. They were doing worksheets with no pictures and the teacher was mad at them. In Mrs. Dibble’s class, it is just fun. I don’t know how to describe it but it’s always fun.

Mrs. Dibble lets me read books all the time. I read every book on her three bookshelves. Goosebumps, picture books, chapter books, tall books, short books, long books, thin books, like so many different kinds of books. I read her Goosebumps over and over again. She has about ten. Ten is a good amount.

Mrs. Dibble is about four foot nine, so she’s small. She has short brown hair that curls at the tips. She is 52. She collects turtles. Her husband has cancer so once in a while we have a substitute. She is in charge of the class at my school, Alexander D. Lamb Elementary, Room 24, on Learning Lane, which is just the name of the hall. She usually wears a skirt and cowboy boots with an exotic shirt. Sometimes she wears necklaces or bracelets to school. Her favorite one has a turquoise turtle from New Mexico.

Every day we would do something different. One day we would have popcorn or maybe a popsicle party. The next day we would go outside for ten minutes extra. We always do something different.

Room 24 has two paper wasp nests hanging from the ceiling. There are no wasps in them, even though Isaiah says he saw them hiding. But Isaiah always tells lies on people. Do you know what paper wasps are? They are wasps that take sap from trees and mix it with this special ingredient and it makes a paper-like substance and the wasps use it to make a nest. Therefore, they’re called paper wasp nests.

4

There was a girl named Philomena Elizabeth Osborne. My brother was born first and then I was born second. My brother didn’t thrive and I don’t what happened to him but he didn’t live. Mommy said he saw me when I was a baby, but I don’t remember. I asked if my daddy saw me too when I was a baby and mommy said no.

Mommy has funny sayings. One of them is the flower of womanhood never grew on a bar stool. That means nice women don’t meet men in bars. Bars are where people go at night without kids.

Mommy met Mr. Lenny in a bar and when I ask why come she went there, mommy laughs and goes it proves she isn’t a flower of womanhood, she’s a rank weed. I don’t know what a rank is but weeds aren’t nice, our lawn is full of them and they have scrapy edges. I tell mommy she is a flower and she goes thank you sweetheart.

Another of mommy’s sayings is unless I marry a rich man I can forget college and just go to her college which is the School of Hard Knocks.

The first time she said it to me I went that’s not a college, that’s a school.

Most times, she goes, it’s the only education you get.

Here’s how mommy met Mr. Lenny.

She went to a bar to take her mind off. Mr. Lenny was there. He likes to make lots of funny jokes but not everyone understands his jokes or thinks they’re funny. For example, one of his jokes is golfers wash their balls and I don’t get it. Anyway, Mr. Lenny went to the bar to give women this card for a joke and when he gave it to mommy that is how they met.

Mommy kept the card. It’s in her memento box, the one covered with sea shells that has pretty red fabric inside. One time she showed me the card. It said IF YOU'RE IN THE MOOD FOR (please forgive me for using this word it starts with S and ends with X) Keep this card and smile. If you're not in the mood TEAR THIS CARD UP.

I went that’s nasty and mommy said tear the card up then.

I said why didn’t you tear it up and she went you tear it up. So I tried but I couldn’t do it and mommy laughed and then I got the joke. It’s a joke card that you can’t tear up unless you were the Hulk.

One time when I was little but after we came to live with Mr. Lenny I asked mommy what’s (that word I said earlier).

She got a funny look and went quiet and asked why I wanted to know but I went I just wanted to and then she went (that word) is what you do when you love somebody.

Do you love Mr. Lenny I said.

Not really so much she said.

But you make (the S word) with him.

Oh, mommy said. Then I love him, I guess.

That’s how I found out mommy’s secret, that she loves Mr. Lenny.

5

My most favorite thing to study in Mrs. Dibble’s class was mealworms. When other classes were working on the life cycle of mealworms, such as on paper and with pictures, we had actual mealworms. We grew them in a box. There are four stages. They are 1. egg, 2. larva, 3. pupa, and 4. adult.

We didn’t name the eggs. Mostly we studied the larva. The larva are caterpillar-like worms with three legs on each side. They molt and molt and molt. There were lots of little cases in the cage. Cases are thrown away skin called exoskelton. We called the box a cage but it was really a box. It had raw oatmeal bedding that was their food. Mrs. Dibble also put in slices of apple and banana so they wouldn’t try to escape. The box had no lid. As far as the kids were concerned, when you went to school, there

wasn't a lid. Even if you were the last to leave the classroom, there still wasn't a lid. I think they liked us looking at them.

Every mealworm didn't exactly have to look alike. There would be some little detail and then you would recognize that detail and you would get to name it. Usually kids named their larva after themselves or some boring name. Jordan named hers Jordan II. That was how they usually did it.

A few kids' mealworms died. They had to choose new ones and name them, but I chose a really, really pale bright pink one that made it through the life cycle and I named her Pinky.

I named it she because I'm a girl.

Because they're high in protein mealworms are usually bred to be sold as bird food or fishing bait. Ours were just for study. A mealworm goes into the four stages of a butterfly but instead of going into a butterfly it goes into a black beetle. Mommy said just my luck I'm a human mealworm. That was another funny saying she did.

A lot of mealworms died in the pupae stage. A bunch of kids waited around the box for their mealworms to hatch into beetles but they never did.

Pinky made it through. She became a bright white and pink beetle, so she was an albino. It died two weeks later, though. But that was typical.

Once they're an adult they can fly. They didn't want to fly unless they were provoked but occasionally they would fly. Kids would have to go and catch them but that was fun.

In the end we set them free in the wild. Then the adults lay their eggs and they die. And it goes all over again.

6

When me and mommy came to live with Mr. Lenny I was in first grade with Mrs. Wilden in Room 12 on Cooperation Blvd. She was OK but Mrs. Dibble is so, so much better.

This is the part Mrs. G wants me to do about. I don't know all of it but I'll do my best.

Before the time mommy met Mr. Lenny he lived with another family. They were a mommy and a little girl. The mommy was Mr. Lenny's girlfriend then. She was estranged, which means she used to have her own husband but they stopped. The little girl was sad and her mommy told her the notion that she and the mommy could get their stranded daddy back by saying bad stuff about Mr. Lenny.

Mommy told me this story when we first moved into Mr. Lenny's house. I have a bedroom and not the couch. Mommy let me drink Mr. Pibb in my bedroom this one time while she talked. I said, like what bad stuff?

Never mind mommy went. You don't want to know.

Yes I do.

Well maybe I don't want you to know mommy went.

Then why did you tell me? I asked.

Mina, mommy went, this is serious. That B-rhymes-with-something-you-have-to-scratch made big trouble for Mr. Lenny and we must never talk about it.

But what did she say? I said. What stuff.

Lies, mommy said. Disgusting lies.

Did she get a whipping? You whip me when I'm bad.

This girl didn't get anything and mommy's face went mean. She had a history she said.

I didn't know what that means. But Mr. Lenny got in trouble. He had no hint or warning. One day the policemen came and took him away and stole his computer. They found downloads on his computer that he put there on accident. If any were about kids, mommy said, that would be it.

What do you mean?

Mommy just looked down. I think she cried then because I saw a drop hit the bed and the circle got dark.

You told me to ask questions I said, as gentle as a mouse.

I know, she went, I did I know. I just need to know, mommy said, if Mr. Lenny ever talks to you.

About what, I went.

It doesn't matter. Anything. Anything in private. He is not to talk to you. Period. He and I had a discussion and we agreed.

I felt scared. That's why I get 1 in verbal participation.

Except in my presence mommy went, he is not to talk to you.

What did I do, I went, really scared now.

Nothing, sweetheart, nothing. But if Mr. Lenny makes any funny jokes or asks you to keep secrets or if he touches you for any reason whatsoever you tell me right you'd know to come and tell me mommy said.

Yes.

Promise.

So I promised. Then I asked what happened to the little girl.

Mommy shook herself and went oh in a way that sounded like a cough. She basically said everything she could to get back with her daddy. She told lies. Very mean lies and nothing happened to her.

That isn't fair I said.

Who told you anything's fair mommy went. Sides, she was trapped herself. If she took back

them lies, *she'd* get in trouble. What did she have to lose? It was her word against his. The little bee—another-word-for-scratch went fancy free and Mr. Lenny bore the brunt.

I didn't know what a brunt was but a bore is someone who tells very long bad stories and Mr. Lenny does those, I'm sorry to say.

Mommy kept telling what happened. The girlfriend all of a sudden went into the wind and needless to say...

She looked across my new room and didn't say nothing.

Then she went, the big thing that they didn't do was a physical evidence kit. Not that it mattered a whole H-E-double-hockey sticks of a lot. Mr. Lenny almost got (I'm not going to even discuss the word that goes here) on the kid's history alone.

She pushed her face dry with the back of her hand. Okay, kiddo, mommy said. (She meant me.) Are we okay?

Yes mommy.

Drink up she went. No sodas in your bedroom from now on.

So that's why Mr. Lenny pretends I don't exist or sometimes he makes mean jokes at me being ugly and even if I don't like the jokes I should just understand and take it and call him Mr. Lenny instead of daddy.

I feel bad for the other girl. Mommy never said what happened to her. Mr. Lenny would get mad if I asked him.

But I can't help feeling sorry. If somebody told me what to say to bring home my daddy I would say it.

7

How is the story coming along asked Mrs. G today.

I go it's okay. She waited for me to say more so I said I wrote about mealworms.

Isn't that interesting she said and the way she said it I didn't know if it was a question or not.

That's why I get nervous every time I go to the counselor room. I always do and I can't help it. I just get nervous.

Mrs. G then goes at me in a voice like someone playing with the volume control, have you included information about your mommy and Mr. Tamiroff?

Mr. Tamiroff is Mr. Lenny's other name. Mrs. G has another name too. Mrs. G's name is super long and hard to say. It ends with an O. She tells kids to just call her Mrs. G it's easier. But it's not easy to tell personal stuff to someone I don't know their real name.

I’m not finished with the story yet, I go.
Well I can’t wait says Mrs. G, giving me a giant big smile.

8

I decided I don’t want to show this story to Mrs. G even for an A because of the part I’m about to do.

Today after school I came home and Mr. Lenny went to me, did I want to watch cartoons with him because the TV in the living room gets more channels. So we watched cartoons and now I wish I never see another cartoon again as long as I live.

Mr. Lenny has a big brown chair that if you pull a lever it goes back and the foot-thing kicks out. He asked if I wanted to try it with him and I said no thank you.

Why not he said. It’s fun.

I’m not supposed to talk to you or touch you.

Who said that he said.

I didn’t want to tell so he went who who who all the time with a wet smiling face so I said please be quiet I’m watching this.

And he went what? and caught a bubble (that’s what Mrs. Dibble says to get the class to be quiet fast, she goes, Catch a bubble!) what did you say, he said.

Without even thinking about it, I went shut your face hole.

Then Mr. Lenny surprised me. He laughed really loud. He said come here. And I was so relieved I went to him without thinking and he put his hands on my shoulders and kissed me on the forehead and let me go.

OK he went. Friends?

I was breathing pretty big and it felt like I couldn’t move.

Look I didn’t hurt you, he said. Did I hurt you? Are we friends?

Yes I said.

Well, that’s all I wanted Mr. Lenny went. That wasn’t so bad. Was that so bad?

No.

Then why are you standing there you (then he said the F word plus I-N-G and called me four eyes like he does). And he went, what do you want from me?

I didn’t know what to say except Nothing.

We’re friends Mr. Lenny went and went hey! Do you know what a vacation is?

I said yes.

We’re friends on vacation he said. Nobody has to know. We had a little vacation and nobody has to know and now its over. So bye-bye.

Bye-bye I said.

Why aren’t you going? Then he said hey wait come back here.

I turned around but before I even turned I smelled him. He had a sweaty smell all of a sudden even though he never moved or did anything for phys. ed but sit in his chair.

Don’t I get a goodbye kiss?

I said I’m not supposed to.

I know, Mr. Lenny said. Not on a regular basis. But this is the end of our vacation so it’s OK to say goodbye. Tell you what. You give me a kiss and I won’t tell your mother. I gave you a kiss and so you give me one. That’s fair. One kiss and it’s a done deal. We’re quits. No one has to know. But if you don’t give me a kiss then I’ll have to tell your mother what happened and what you did.

No don’t I went, really scared.

Yeah but I’ll have to, he went, and looked all sad and serious. Just run over here and land me a peck on the cheek. That’s all it has to be.

I thought about it and watched him. Don’t move, I said.

I won’t move, Mr. Lenny said.

And don’t touch me, I said.

Tush me, he said. What’s tush me? (He was making fun of my speech.) You shink I want to tush you or someshing. Then he went no come back it was a joke.

I didn’t come back or go away. It was a bad joke. I stood there crying. I don’t like when people make fun of the way I talk.

What do you think? Mr. Lenny went. No, I’m sorry. What do you think? Have I moved at all yet? I’m not going to move. I’m not going to touch you or move or anything. I swear. Your mommy won’t have to know.

I went over and kissed him, then stepped back.

See? he said. Was that the end of the world?

No I said.

No Mr. Lenny said. Know what it was? The end of vacation. Then he said Mina. And his lower lip started going in and out of his mouth. Do you think you want to know how to kiss someday.

I said I know how to kiss. I just did.

Like grown ups do Mr. Lenny went. Do you know how grown ups kiss?

I said how.

Mr. Lenny went, Grown people kiss with their lips.

I went, That’s how I do.

No, both people together he said. On the lips.

I didn’t say anything.

Do you want to try it like that he said. His voice was quiet.

I said someday.

Someday who with, he went.

My husband, is what I said.

Yeah, he said, and he sort of went down into his chair like a balloon losing air. That will be good, he went. Good for you. That’s how you should do it. Then he said, listen, this show’s stupid. Do you mind?

He shut off the TV but kept looking at me. The house got so quiet it only made things worse with his big lower lip going in and out of his mouth.

No I said I don’t mind. I have to do homework anyway.

I went into my room and shut my door and put the chair against it and hid in the closet and pulled my knees against my tummy and thought I might have to throw up but Mr. Lenny never tried to get me.

I don’t want to write anymore. But thanks for reading this, even though you never will.

XXXOOO

9

It was surreal. It was goofy. Brian couldn’t find the word for it. Here he was in a car with two actual, paid hookers, one riding shotgun with Jeremy and his — he already thought of Elaine as *his* — beside him in the back. He grokked the whole scene. That was it. Grok. Perfect word.

Brian had been on a Robert E. Heinlein kick since grokking Dina Meyer’s tits in a bargain DVD he scored of *Starship Troopers*. The sex scene wasn’t in the book, but he read more Heinlein anyway, being a science fiction adept himself. Reading the Great Works was grist for the mill. Brian really grokked *Stranger in a Strange Land*. That was him tonight, a man from Mars, radiant and open to the wonders and ways of Planet Call Girl.

“Your friend’s name is Candace?” Brian said.

“Yeah?” Elaine said.

“It just seems maybe a better name for her might be Candy. Professionally.”

Elaine glanced at him, then shrugged. “Her name’s Candace.”



The girls worked out of a house of therapeutic massage two counties south. The “house” was

Candace’s trailer. Jeremy found them. “Hospitals and cop shops,” Jeremy said. “Where to go for what ya gotta know.”

Jeremy was masterful. Not only did he handle negotiations, he dickered for a group rate. When Jeremy set out the terms, and it shocked Brian the way Jeremy just *said* it, that Candace and her friend would be driven to a remote farmhouse, gagged, blindfolded, roughly handled and fucked freestyle (that was his exact phrase) by up to five guys wearing masks, Brian feared Candace would whip out pepper spray, blind them, and maybe holler for the cops.

Instead, she looked Jeremy in the eye, glanced at Brian, then looked back at Jeremy. “I don’t do that shit.”

“Just deep tissue massage and the odd reacharound?” Jeremy said. “So be it. We’ll go. I just need to ask you one thing, Candace. Candace, right, and you’re Elaine? Why would I be here? Call you from work, make the appointment, drive down here, the *two* of us, and lay out this crazy/scary plan if we actually meant to do *anything* that was in any way, shape, form, or fashion *actually* crazy...or scary?”

“I don’t know,” Candace said. “And I don’t care.”

“What we want,” Jeremy said, “is a fantasy. Plain and simple. I’ll tell you where this thing gets scary. For us. We’ve never done this before. Have you?” He meant Brian.

“No,” Brian said.

“You know who he is? Know who I am?” Jeremy said. “Long-time fans, first time callers.”

Brian nodded. *Shit, I should be writing this down!*

“This is me.” Jeremy put his wallet on the table. “You need to know I’m real. So browse. Ask. Bing. Google. Look me up on any database you want. We don’t budge ’til you’re satisfied. There’s eight hundred cash in there for you and your friend, for the night. You can draw your pay now, and let the wallet sit where it is for security ’til I bring you both home again safe and sound.”

Candace pulled the wallet toward her. She unslotted Jeremy’s bank card and studied him against the photo ID. She riffled the cash but didn’t remove it. She put the wallet back on the table.

“A thousand. Each.”

Jeremy winced. “Tsk. I don’t hear it, Candace.”

“Hear what?”

“The New Yawk accent. To go with da New Yawk prices.”

Candace held her poker face, then smirked. “You’re a real smart ass. I bet you were cute once.”

“Maybe twice.”

Candace pushed the wallet. “It is what it is.”

“And it ain’t what it ain’t.” Jeremy took it up and pocketed it but didn’t stand. “Our friend we’re doing this for is newly divorced.”

“Jumping Jesus,” Candace said, “Can’t we party instead of you give me your story?”

“It’s his story. His fantasy. We want to make it come true. In a safe, pretend way. What’ll probably happen is we’ll scare the piss out of him so bad, he’ll never touch you. The other two guys are, and I say this with love because I love them, even bigger losers. Practically guarantee they never touch you. You keep your pay.” Jeremy leaned back. “And if it’s the deal breaker, *we’ll* never touch you.”

“Hey, now, whoa,” Brian said. “Eight hundred bucks.”

“Eight bills buys me and my friend BJ’s from you and your friend when we get there,” Jeremy said. “No rough stuff. It’s all fake. Anything anybody else does, that you agree to, that’s extra.”

“Rape’s not an extra.”

“Ain’t on the menu, Candace. Never was. That’s why I told you up front. It’s an act. We got your back, like your bodyguards. You’ve got each other, and you should bring along your purses, cell phones, whatever makes you feel safe. After the BJ’s, any swinging dick wants a pop, which is, considering the fear factor, doubtful, that’s two bills extra for whoever takes it. After that, an extra hundred if things go bukkake. We have you cleaned up, refreshed, restored, and returned here by dawn or that’s an extra five for you to split. So maximum payout is nine-fifty. Each. Close enough?”

“Jeremy, you don’t sound like this is your first time,” Candace said.

“Been laid, never paid,” Jeremy said. “Never raped nobody, neither.”

Candace and Elaine gazed at each other in expressionless communication.

“Which situation’s more dangerous,” Jeremy said. “Going off with the clients who tell you everything in advance, or the ones who don’t?”

“Stop selling me,” Candace said.

“I’m only saying. You have a hard way to make a buck. Hats off to you. It’s risky as shit,” Jeremy said. “We’re trying to help with that. My buddies see we’ve got you scared, *they’ll* be scared. I fuckin’ promise.”

“Think of it,” Brian said, “as a singing telegram of sex.”

For the first time Candace fixed her full attention on Brian.

“I used to do those,” Candace said. “Back in the day. Birthday parties. Not the singing. I was the go-along stripper.”

“Well, there you go,” Jeremy said.

“Know my gimmick? What I used to do: stick lit birthday candles on my nipples. I invented that.”

“Ow.”

“Doesn’t hurt if they blow ’em out before the wax melts. Boobs come bigger than mine, I know that. But I tell you what. When I split ’em, lick ’em, stick ’em and light ’em, you can’t tear your eyes

off them puppies.”

“I’ll bet,” Jeremy said.

“You have split nipples?” Brian said.

“Honey,” Candace said, “him I don’t know, but *you* ain’t done this before.”

“No,” Elaine said, “that’s for sure.”

“Let’s see that wallet again, Jeremy C. Lorenz,” Candace said.



Candace and Jeremy were having a good time in the front seat, leaning close and sharing cigarettes. Candace told Jeremy she had a dickotine fit and Jeremy laughed himself to bits. Brian wished all over again that he was taking notes. There was no way he was going to remember all this amazing detail for his new book.

For example, Candace tore two strips of duct tape. She stuck them onto her jeans, peeled them off, then took away Jeremy’s cigarette and duct taped his mouth.

“Ready?” she said. Candace yanked the strip off.

“Ah!” Jeremy said. “Still too tacky.”

“Aw, wamme kiss it and make it better?”

“Yeah, would you?”

“Later, alligator.”

“Cig back?”

“I was thinking of putting it out.” She poked it at him, teasing little jabs.

“Oh, ho,” Jeremy said. “Thank you, Mistress.”

“Been there, done that, got the tee shirt,” Candace said.

“And the rubber whip.”

“And the whip.”

Brian turned to Elaine. Sitting in the backseat with her, he felt like a teenager being driven on his first date. “So, how long have you been...”

“Don’t go there,” Elaine said, putting no emotion on it.

“I’m just curious.”

“I don’t know you well enough for you to be curious.”

“You know me well enough for us to...fuck.”

“Yeah.”

Brian said, “I’m sorry.”

“No, look. You’re not a bad guy,” Elaine said. “But what you want to know is a buzz kill. Take my word for it.”

Elaine leaned over and kissed him, opening her mouth. Then she slumped back in her seat and looked out the window.

Brian tried to work out what to say to win her trust. Telling her about the loophole probably wasn't the ticket. Jeremy's wallet left back on Candace's table was no security at all. In a real wet ops scenario, a killer would simply return there after he was done and let himself in using the victim's key.

“Thanks for the kiss,” Brian said. He listened for her to say you're welcome, but she never did.

“Right on time,” Jeremy said. “Here's the turnoff. Here's where we get into character.”

He stopped the car. Everyone got out and stared up. The country air was crisp, the horizon low, and the night full of stars. They smelled dry grass and the musk of some animal.

“Where's the farm?” Elaine said.

“A couple hundred yards up that drive,” Brian said. “I'm restoring it. I'm in charge.”

Jeremy pulled duct tape off Candace's pants. There was almost no stick-um left. He affixed a strip to Candace's mouth, then to Elaine's.

“These go on you,” Jeremy said, “and you go in the trunk.”

Jeremy turned and unlocked the trunk. He took out two cloth hoods and two whippy lengths of plastic.

“These are zapstraps,” he said. “Hands in front of you will be more comfortable.”

Neither girl moved. Jeremy tossed a discipline mask and a set of gloves to Brian. Candace pulled off her gag.

“Take my purse.”

“No one's gonna steal it.”

“Take my purse in. I want it with me.”

“All right.”

“How do I look,” Brian said, modeling the mask.

“Scary,” Elaine said.

“Really?”

“Sort of.”

“No fucking around now. Hands in front. Or behind.” Jeremy took a step toward Candace with the zapstraps.

“Do what I tell you,” he said, “please.”

Jeremy parked at the foot of the porch, popped the trunk. Gloves and the mask made him

clumsy. With the headlights off, Brian and Jeremy were almost as blind as the hooded girls. They helped them out, half carrying them. In the stillness, everyone heard the cooling engine ticking.

Jeremy muttered a muffled, nonstop monologue to Candace. “They’re not watching, far as I can tell, but they’re there. Three cars parked around the side. Got your balance? Get ready to do your thing the second we get in. Brian’s got your purse and your friend’s, so relax.”

Jeremy reached into the trunk and took out a zippered sports bag. He closed the trunk, set the bag on it, and pulled the zip.

“Hang on a sec,” Jeremy said. He withdrew a black shape, shouldered the bag, and took Candace by the arm. “Okay, this way. Level ground. You’re doing great. We’re coming up to the porch. Four steps. Here we go, step one. Upsy daisy. Wish you had those birthday candles on you. Can’t hardly see shit. You’re not missing much. Hold up. Wait for Brian and Elaine.”

Not until he mounted the porch did Brian make out the Clint Eastwood-type hand cannon in Jeremy’s grip. Brian started to mouth a question, then remembered about his mask.

“I’m going to take my hand off you,” Jeremy said to Candace, “and open the door. Okay, you ready?”

Jeremy turned the knob and pushed the door and shoved Candace open-palmed across the threshold. She gave a cry.

Brian whispered, “It’s showtime.” Even with her mouth taped and a bag over her head, Brian heard, or thought he heard, Elaine giggle.

THE VOTARY

1

“DINNAH IS SERVED!” Jeremy said.

He grabbed Candace by the shoulder before she could totter into a candle filled table. He hauled her back into a loose armlock, and put the gun to her temple, but not close enough that the barrel would touch her hood.

“Oh shit oh shit,” Todd said, like a chant.

“This is the law,” Jeremy said. “Hear me, bitch? You have five masters in this room. You are nothing. Your friend is nothing.”

Brian shook Elaine by the arm. “Hear that,” he said, and stalled, not able to decide quick enough whether to add *bitch* or *nothing*. Jeremy’s monster pistol threw him off. Was it real? How come he didn’t get a gun? What did he get? Two ladies’ purses. Oh, joy.

Brian unslung the purses and chucked them in Peter’s general direction. “Guard these.” Peter pushed his glasses back onto his mask and did as he was told.

“You got one sole purpose,” Jeremy said, and he was really good, making his voice seethe with menace. “Satisfy your masters. You do that, we let you live. You do it well, we let you go. You got the law? *Do you understand?*”

Candace’s hood jerked.

“Goes double for you,” Brian said, and lamely shook Elaine’s arm again.

Jeremy smoothly spun the gun and sheathed it in the open sports bag. “Behold!” He whipped off Candace’s hood. She was good, too. She looked plenty scared, with her head tilted far back and wild focus in her jittering, downcast eyes. Only Brian and Jeremy saw that Candace had sweated off her gag, and this pantomime balanced it on her face to save the last wisp of stick-um. Jeremy clamped a hand over her mouth.

“I’m taking this off,” he said, “so you know we don’t care if you scream. Jackal, we care if they scream?”

“No, Rocket, we don’t,” Brian said. They took their code names from the five top cards of a playing deck. Jeremy chose Rocket. Todd was Cowboy, for king. Peter didn’t mind being Mop Squeezer. Brian called dibs on Jackal, which left Lenny as Mr. Dime.

Brian/Jackal put his hand to Elaine’s hood. “Don’t. It’s gone,” she hissed. Brian let go as if

stung.

“Scream your head off,” Rocket said, “no one can hear you. But here’s the catch. What are you, right? You’re nothing. Our slave. You know that, that you’re our slave?”

Candace nodded in what Brian understood to be deep relief.

“You’re noth-thing,” Rocket said. “And does a little nothing slave make a sound without permission? No. No, it doesn’t.”

It rubs the lotion on its skin, or else it gets the hose again, Brian thought irresistibly, and almost giggled himself. What the heck was that old movie? Jodie Foster was in it. Jesus, Bri, fuck Jodie Foster. Focus!

Jeremy crooned to Candace. “But how do you know, little slave, screaming won’t do you any good? Tell you what. Just this once. I’ll demonstrate.”

Jeremy screamed full blast and threw underfoot the useless gag. Brian experienced a surge of admiration for Jeremy, for *Rocket*. His scream covered the nonexistent rip of tape from flesh.

“You see?” Jeremy said. “Whaddaya like on your plate, Cowboy? Leg, or you more a breast man?” Jeremy hiked up Candace’s blouse and flipped a cup of her bra. He pushed her, half-naked and shuffling, toward Todd, who retreated a half-step.

Brian couldn’t breathe. *Make a wish, he thought insanely, and blow out the candles.* But what was wrong? It should be funny, not shocking. This was a prank, a stupid, mean game. He was in on it. Candace and Elaine were in on it. They were hired for this. This was their way of life, to show men their flesh, to rent men their bodies. This was normal.

Brian wanted to go badass, too. Expose *his* whore’s titties. But his hands shook and he quailed. He managed to untuck Elaine’s shirt from her jeans. She moved so little she seemed dozy.

“Why are you doing this?” Candace said.

“Because we hate you,” Lenny said.

Candace gulped air. “Why are you guys doing this?”

“We’re pretty, ha, cold-hearted, so to speak,” Todd said.

What was scary, Brian realized, was that no one sounded scary. It was talk, like regular conversation. A few men in rubber masks and a wrists-bound, half-naked girl. But none of it was real. How was it supposed to sound?

“All you motherfuckers stay put,” Jeremy said, and *he* sounded fake. Too *Grindhouse* Marathon. Brian’s admiration for him slipped a notch. It was working, though. Todd and Lenny stood as if rooted, and poor Peter sat stone still on a love seat with the purses beside him.

“Since me and Jackal had to go get,” Jeremy told them, “we gets to go first.”

“Hokey,” Brian said between his teeth. “Careful with that.”

“What?” Elaine whispered.

“Nothing. Not you.” Then Brian said, louder, “Come on, piece of ass! Let’s get busy!”

Jeremy and Brian pushed their girls into the maze of camo-pattern privacy screens. On Tuesday, they lucked into a dozen of the frames and fabrics on sale, along with the camp cots and the gross of citronella candles, in a dusty-shelved Army & Navy Surplus. They drove out to Todd’s farm this morning at first light and staged the room the way they wanted. Worth every penny.

2

Elaine flinched and twisted as Brian took hold of the hood.

“No, it’s okay,” Brian said, “it’s good, it’s good, it’s me. They’re not here.”

“Fuck a duck,” Elaine said. She took in their surroundings: a cobwebby corner of a large room, blocked off by an L of splotchy green and tan privacy screens, a cot with sheets and a pillow, a wooden chair, some dildos, steel handcuffs, and a battery-powered Coleman lantern atop a card table. “That damn tape. Scared me to death,” Elaine said. “Soon as you lifted me out of the car. Poof, it just fell. I thought you must’ve caught it or saw it or something. I thought, *say something*, but I thought how could I, I’m supposed to have this stupid gag over— What’s that for?”

In the gloom, Brian was careful opening the hasp knife.

“Hands,” he said.

“Oh.” Elaine offered her wrists. Brian snicked through the zapstraps.

“You got the indoor spooky campfire thing going,” Elaine said.

“Yeah. Crossed with Castle Wolfenstein.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“Classic single shooter. I don’t know if you ever played...”

“Honey, can you do me a favor?” Elaine said.

“What?”

“It’s no sort of. You do look scary.”

“Oh.” Brian pulled off his mask. “Sorry. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, no, I’m...that was freak-ee.”

“Shh!”

“Did they buy it?”

“Big time,” Brian said.

“Are they coming back here?”

“Let’s hope not.”

“Better make it look good if they do.” Elaine pulled off her tee shirt and threw it on the card table. Her bra was lavender, dark against her skin in the dim light. “Why were you playing with my shirt back then?”

“I...I was going to lift it up. Show your boobs.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know.” Brian shrugged, and caught a glint off the knife. He fumbled it closed. “Guess I don’t know you well enough to flash you.”

Elaine leaned back on one foot and studied him. “Thanks.”

“Da nada.”

“WHAT I *TOLD* YOU!” Someone — Candace — fell or was pushed onto a cot. The legs squeaked protest and the canvas groaned. Jeremy’s voice was a brutal, muffled roar. The partition fabric shook and a rounded shadow swooped across it.

“Oh my God!” Brian said.

Elaine sat on the chair. “I knew it.”

“What’s he doing?”

Elaine sighed. “Saving money.”

“What?”

“He’s saving money. Your friend’s cheap.”

“He’s *killing* her!”

“Mm,” Elaine said. “That’s one way to do it.”

“What are you— *we have to do something!*”

“You shh. And don’t get me into it. It’s your show.”

“Show?” Brian said.

“We scare your friends, nobody touches us, we don’t get a bonus? I heard that. Where were you?”

“Oh my God,” Brian said again, but this time more to himself. He got it now. Realization came in a rush, dislodging all kinds of junk. His father’s voice. *Brian, your mind works like lightning. All zigzags, and only in flashes.* The reason this night seemed fucked up beyond belief was that it *was* fucked up beyond belief. What the hell were they playing at, *Saw* or spin-the-bottle?

The unseen Candace gave a cry that choked off in a wet gurgle.

“So it’s up to you,” Elaine said. “You want head?”

“What?”

“Want me to give you head now?”

“Put your hands up,” Brian said. “On your feet. Put ’em up.”

“Whatever tickles your pickle,” Elaine said. She stood and raised her arms. Brian pulled down her left, took aim at her right.

“It’s gonna hurt,” Brian said.

He smacked her hand. It *sounded* like a face slap. Elaine cried out. They matched grins like kids.

Elaine went to the table and took up the Coleman lantern.

“Hold, please,” she said. Brian obliged. Elaine curtsied. “No-no-*NO!*” She screamed and kicked the table over. Flying dildos punched the front partition. They heard Todd’s muffled yell, “Oh, *shit!*”

In unison, Brian and Elaine clamped shut their mouths, wild with mirth.

The unseen Candace panted, “Help...no more...help...”

Elaine hooked a hand around Brian’s neck. She drew him to her, gave his ear a nip. “We can do better.” She picked up her shirt, then tossed it aside again and pulled the sheet off the cot. She held the edge taut and bit it and looked at Brian.

Brian opened his hands in welcome. *By all means.*

“*Don’t! Please, no!*” She tore the sheet apart. Elaine silently shouted laughter. This time Brian came to her, put his hand on the warm flesh of the small of her back.

“I’m Brian,” he said.

“What?”

“Brian. That’s my name.”

“No, uh-uh.”

“It is. The Jackal thing, that’s a goofy code.”

“Honey, you’re John.”

“No, it’s Brian. Really. You already know who Jeremy is. I just want you to know—”

“Can you not be stupid? You and your friends. You’re all John. It’s not *who* you are, that’s *what* you are.”

Brian stepped back and swung without thinking, never aware if he caught her open-handed or with a fist. Point of impact was just below the right eye. *Dad would be impressed.* Brian struck like lightning.

3

"A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control." — *Proverbs*
29:11



Isabel Krue’s lips thinned the way they do as Father Keller meandered through the rite of baptism, which he must’ve taken to be the *screen* door to the church. The liturgy for the renunciation of sin, for example, demands five responses. Father Keller settled for two, obviously deeming “Do you reject the glamor of evil, and refuse to be mastered by sin?” and “Do you reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness?” as trite or outdated. Father Keller was known to be good-natured, but what, Isabel Krue reflected, was good about nature?

Peter Edmund Krue was born on Christmas Eve and consecrated, more or less, in the name of Our Savior Jesus Christ in holy baptism on the Feast Day of St. Agatha.

When Father Keller named St. Agatha the patron saint of bakers and bumbled the blessing of loaves in her name, Isabel Krue was set to spit nails. Enough was too much! Obviously, she said not a word. It was not her place. But honestly! Priests should study and convey the clear and definitive teaching of the Magisterium, and not content themselves with some loosey-goosey notion of the Gospels coupled with a glance or two at the writings of the Saints.

What had St. Agatha to do with baked goods? Lazy man’s iconography! The twin mounds she bore on the tray were not fresh loaves, but her own severed breasts, hewn from her by torture as part of her passion and martyrdom.

Anyhow, it was done. The first of the three Sacraments of Initiation was bestowed, despite the paunchy fool’s ignorance. Isabel Krue gazed down at her son and her thin lips parted. “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you,” she said.



Peter’s earliest memory was in Technicolor. Big sister Lucy could see from the backseat, but Peter needed to horse-ride Mama’s thigh to peep over the dashboard. *Quo Vadis* played at the Red Bird Drive-In. The grey, slatted box that hung on Papa’s window made the inside of the car boomy and the people on the wide, far screen sound like they spoke through mouthfuls of Grape Nuts.

“There you are,” Mama said, prodding Peter awake. “That’s you.”

She meant Simon-called-Peter, a man with snowy white hair and Jesus robes and a kind, sad smile.

“To die as our Ord eyed is ore wan I deserve,” Simon-called-Peter said to the caped superheroes Mama called Centurions.

The chief superhero nodded. “We dan change that.” They led him up some rough, stone steps.

The next image seared through Peter’s eyes and lodged forever in his sub-cortex, coiled in a death grip to his lizard brain.

Above spooky, swift-moving mist on a river, atop a black, jagged rock, against a sky splashed with blood red clouds, Simon-called-Peter, wearing only a diaper, was crucified head down.

Mama’s rapturous tears dripped like acid on Peter’s collarbone.
Peter’s first recurring nightmares were in Technicolor, too.



“Hollow be thy name.”

“Hallowed,” Mama said. “Say it right.”

“Hallowed.”

“The whole thing, Petey. From the beginning.”

He was four, or perhaps three and a half. If he could recite the Lord’s Prayer, Mama would give him a Bible shelf with a figure of Christ for over his bed. “Our F-father, who art in...in...”

Mama’s lips thinned the way they do and she hissed like steam bursting a pipe. “Can it! You know this, Petey. I know you do. You don’t fool me with your waterworks.”

“No, Mama.”

“You want to cry, buster, I’ll give you something to really cry about. You want that? Try me.”

“No, Mama.” But he cried anyway.

“Don’t you start.” Mama slapped him. “Don’t you even.” She slapped him again.

“I know,” the boy sobbed.

Peter knew the Lord’s Prayer, of course. He knew it word for word, frontwards and backward, though saying it backwards would summon the Devil.

“You want your Bible shelf or not? *What’s the problem?*”

Mama could not shake or slap the answer from him. The problem was he didn’t want the Bible shelf. He feared it. The thought of the pale as bone Redeemer, every raised rivulet of alabaster blood lovingly carved, crucified above him on the wall every night, was too horrible. He would never tell Mama the Lord’s Prayer front to end. Never! It was far better to bear God’s wrath than to witness His suffering.



Show me, show me, show me!

He was five years old. He lay rigid atop his made bed in the middle of the day in all his clothes, clenching every muscle.

Show me a sign! Prove me You! Prove me You! Prove me You exist.

The featureless ceiling refused to crack open and pour forth heavenly radiance. Pale crescents appeared in his palms because he made such tight fists, but those weren’t stigmata, the Marks of the Lord. It was settled, then. There was no God.



In early July when he was seven, Peter tried to force feed a lit sparkler to a skink, but the lizard

bit him and wriggled away and Peter had to stamp it with his shoe.

4

The chintz sofa was the locus of instruction. Mama had Peter sit beside her. They watched the Eternal Word Television Network, until Mama got fed up to death with the incessant harping
(Keep us between your gas and electric bill!)

for donations, and if there wasn't a sword and sandal epic on one of the other stations, they would just “be company” in the gloom and Mama would stroke and pluck at the boy's hair and tell him things he ought to know about the saints.

“Your middle name, do you know his story?” Peter shook his head, thinking about the commercial Mama had clicked through before thumbing off the TV. *Unsolved Mysteries*. What was that show about? “King Edmund ruled East Anglia. And he was crowned on Christmas Day, 855, when he was fourteen years of age. Imagine that. That was supposed to be your birthday, Christmas Day. But you just couldn't wait...”

Peter tensed. He knew what was coming next in the story, but not if Mama would tell it or instead get mad about something all over again like his wetting the bed or Lucy wanting to wear pants to school instead of a skirt.

“What do you know,” Mama said at last in her faraway voice, “about King Edmund?”

“He spent a year learning the Psalter by heart,” Peter said, almost spasming with relief.

“Good. And what happened when he was captured by the great heathen army? The Northmen?”

“You tell it, Mama.”

“They... said renounce Christ. But Edmund refused. So you know what? They scourged him. And in their whips they knotted broken shards of glass, to flay his flesh. Then they bound him alive to a tree and shot him so full of arrows that he bristled with them, like a low creature of the woods. But he was a man, a great man who feared God. So Hingwar the Boneless said cut his head off and throw it into the forest where it will never be found. But do you know what? His head was found intact the next day because a wild wolf cried all night, Heeere! Heeere! *Heeere!*”

Mama kissed Peter's brow.

“That's the story of your middle name.”



No doubt, being an acolyte was cool. Peter donned a long robe and then a light robe over that. It wasn't much of a superhero costume, but good enough for an imaginative nine-year-old. The swinging brass censer, pungent with smoke, was his smouldering, steel-spiked mace and chain, forged in the

vented volcanoes of perdition. He swung it with couched menace, measuring cadenced steps to the tabernacle, as he studied the backs of bowed heads. Candle wax sometimes dripped from on high onto his hair and his glasses but he never minded. Thudding organ music and incense made Peter logy with desire. He visualized the mighty, out-of-the-blue swing, heard the sharp *crack!*, and saw this or that skull *detonate* in a cataclysm of blood and sparks. By the time he ascended to the altar of the Sacrifice, he wore a look of purest rapture.

If he behaved and stuck with the program, Peter might get to carry the Cross itself one day. Sheldon let him try to lift it one time. It was gorgeously heavy.

Sheldon invented the game with the Diamond strike-anywhere matches. Sheldon was the oldest acolyte, fond of whispering things to Lucy, Peter’s sister. He carried the Cross single-handedly, and didn’t care if he wiped his nose on the sleeve of his alb. There was no more reckless kid on the face of the Earth.

One time during Mass, Sheldon showed Peter and Dave the coolest trick ever, how to deftly rake a thumbnail across a match head and catapult the fiery missile toward the pews. It wasn’t the whiff of sulphur but the riot of giggles that made Father Keller whirl and glare them into submission.

Minutes later, they were on the vestry porch in the bright sunshine, shorn of their acolyte robes forever. Peter wept inconsolably. Sheldon’s chatter was a mix of raw nerves and practiced exasperation.

“Did you guys catch that wave?”

“What wave?” Dave said.

“Man, I got this *wave* of *goddammit be quiet!* It was *huge*, especially coming after ‘love thy neighbor’ and that shit.”

“Don’t say that,” Peter sobbed. “It isn’t right.”

Sheldon crouched down, hands on his knees. “No, it isn’t right,” he said. “But it’s true.”

“It’s my fault,” Peter said.

“How?” Dave said. “What is? Lookit, Peter. We didn’t do a dang thing wrong except get caught.”

Sheldon and Dave decided to go bike riding and were long gone by the time Lucy came to find Peter. The sun had moved and the boy huddled in the shade of the church, keening *it’s my fault, it’s my fault*. Lucy sat by him on the hard porch and took his thin frame in her arms. Her assessment was even more concise.

“Fuck ’em,” Lucy said, “for they know not what they do.”

5

Peter foraged the VHS out of a Pampers box at a yard sale.

“Mama, can I have this?”

“What is it?”

“It’s fifty cents.”

“What *is* it?”

“It’s, um, I think about butterflies.”

He showed her the cover, a butterfly with two human heads against a black background, and pointed out that the director, William Wyler, also made *Ben-Hur*. Mama fished out change as Peter snuck a second look at the back. *The most disturbing movie of all time! A lonely clerk (Stamp) kidnaps a beautiful art student (Eggar) and holds her prisoner until she agrees to fall in love with him.* No need to give Mama the whole song and dance. It’s not a sin if you don’t get caught.



“Wonder is the desire for knowledge,” said St. Thomas Aquinas, and Peter’s sense of wonder was boundless. *The Collector* had to be a true story. It was too sick. The main character, a man like Papa, lean and meek and thunderously reserved, let a girl die in captivity and buried her and then stalked her replacement and God never saw fit to punish him.

Peter’s investigations surprised him twice. *The Collector* turned out to be a made-up story by a man named John Fowles, but other real-life men, a scary lot of them, declared that book their guide and inspiration for even more horrific crimes.

A man named Wolfgang Priklopil snatched a young schoolgirl and kept her hidden under his kitchen for eight years. That girl escaped, unlike Miranda Grey in the story. Her captor, unlike the fictional Freddie Clegg, did not go unscathed. As the police closed in, Priklopil threw himself in front of a train.

Christopher Wilder cheated Man’s justice, too. Wilder read his copy of *The Collector* to tatters, and committed most of it to memory. He expanded on its themes with as many as a dozen victims. He sluiced heated superglue onto the eyeballs of a teenager so she couldn’t identify him. He violated, stabbed, and dumped bodies of would-be models in canals from Florida to Texas to Nevada to Utah to New Hampshire. Cornered at last, Wilder shot himself in the heart with a Magnum .357, and the huge bullet blasted right through him into the chest of the arresting state trooper.

Leonard Lake and Charles Ng scooped out a woodland hillside and constructed a cinderblock bunker for the purposes of abduction, rape, and murder. Lake dubbed the work Operation Miranda. They called their hostages “M” girls. At least two complete families perished at their hands. Ng loved

to giggle and chant, “Daddy dies, Mama cries, baby fries.” Since they burned and crushed and scattered the bones of their victims over acres of California mountaintop, nobody knows exactly how many were killed. Ng, it turned out, shared Peter’s birthday, Christmas Eve. When he read that, the coincidence jolted Peter so, he had a spontaneous orgasm. His first.

There are over 10,000 Roman Catholic saints. Far fewer serial killers, at least those we know of. But the lives of the former and the exploits of the latter, to Peter, were nearly identical in tone. The need to study these men (they were nearly all men), to parse every lurid detail of their deeds, consumed him.



Two nights shy of his thirteenth birthday, Peter set fire to both storage buildings adjacent to St. Mary’s. He was no good at it. It was too cold and wet. Only one shed burned, and the only good it did was to partly melt some disused weed whackers.

6

“Don’t do this. I beg you. On my knees I beg you.” Peter dropped before his parents on the chintz sofa, never breaking eye contact. “Please don’t do this.”

Papa made a snort of disgust and looked away. Mama said, “Get up.”

“I won’t move,” Peter said, all bony angles and burst pimples and fear. “I won’t budge unless you let her come back.”

“*I will not! Let a whore! In my house!*” Mama hissed. She began to rock in tight little bobs.

“She’s no — how can you say that?”

“I say what the Holy Scripture says. Nothing more, nothing else. ‘Let her therefore put away her whoredoms...’”

“Don’t! You don’t have time for this.”

“‘And her adulteries from between her breasts.’”

“Stop it! She’s out crying on the *sidewalk*.”

“Lest I strip her naked, and set her forth as in the day she was...”

“Lucy! Your *daughter*.”

“‘And make her as a wilderness...’”

“All right, fine! In that same book, in that same book! ‘I will heal thy waywardness...’”

“‘And set her like a dry land...’”

“‘And *love her freely*...’”

“‘And slay her with thirst...’”

“For my anger has turned...’ Mama, *please!* If she goes away, you’ll never get her back.”
Papa said, looking at nothing, “She’s gone.”

Mama lips thinned the way they do. She resumed rocking to and fro. ““And I will not have mercy upon her children...””

“Lucy doesn’t want mercy, she wants an abortion.”

Silence boomed. No one dared breathe.

“She has nowhere to go.”

“Don’t say that word again,” Mama said.

“She’s not an adult. She’s not out of high school. She needs you. If I could prove to you, Mama, prove by His word, that what she needs... that it’s right, that it’s no sin, will you listen?”

“Don’t act smart,” Mama said. “Don’t you dare.”

“*Will you listen?*”

“The Didache,” Mama said. “Familiar with it? Oldest teaching of the Catholic Church. ‘You shall not kill the embryo by abortion and shall not cause...’”

“Oh! *You* can say it.”

“Peter,” Papa said. “Enough.”

“What your sister has done *already* is a mortal sin. You better pump your brakes, mister! You want her to incur automatic excommunication? You want that, too? You want to make it *worse* for her?”

“I can’t, with you around!”

“Watch your lip,” Papa said, still absorbed elsewhere.

“You know about the Church so good?” Peter shouted. “Ever heard of the Pope? This is holy *law*, Mama. Innocent III. Twelve-something-something. He had to choose, was this murder? A monk got his lover to get an abortion. He used poisonous herbs—”

“Who are talking to, you get this filth?”

“No one!” Peter unbuckled his knees and towered over them, trembling. “I read the books you leave around the house! I read all I can get!”

Papa swung his absent gaze up at his 14-year-old son. “Watch it.”

“Know what he said, the Holy Father? He went, it’s not murder unless the fetus is ‘vivified’. Know what that means? Means it has *life*.”

“The *soul* is life.”

“Read your own books, Mama! The ancient Hebrews didn’t have a *word* for soul, the didn’t have the *concept*. The soul is a Greek idea. It shows up in the New Testament, not in the Old. The closest Hebrew word was *nephesh*. It means to breathe. It means throat. When does a fetus breathe

through its throat? And you know where he *got* this idea, the Pope?”

“Shut your mouth,” said Mama. “You’re not too high and mighty I won’t come up there and smack it shut for you.”

“From Exodus! From the Bible! Familiar with it? ‘If men strive, and hurt a woman with child, so that the fruit depart—’”

Papa stood suddenly and punched Peter in the mouth, sending him sprawling across the room, his glasses flying off his face.

“I said,” Papa said. And he sat down again.

Peter tasted his own blood before crawling to all fours, head lowered, looking at them through his hair.

“A man who makes a woman with child,” he said, “lose that child shall be punished.” He spat on the carpet and pushed himself back on his haunches. “Whatever the judges decide. But it’s *payment*. Not to her, but to her husband. And it’s not blood guilt. Not eye for an eye. Not life for a life. Because the fetus is a *thing*. According to the fucking Bible!”

Mama clamped a hand over her mouth and blessed herself.

“You can get out, too,” Papa said, but not sounding like he cared one way or the other.

“Sorry you don’t like it,” Peter said. “But it’s what it says. The book you’re using to justify throwing your daughter out on the street.”

“She threw her *life* away, Peter,” Mama said. “Her eternal life.”

“And what? She can go to hell?”

“She will. Oh, she will! Much as it breaks my heart.”

Peter pushed himself to his feet. “Why should it? You’ve given her such a good head start.”

Francis Gabriel (“Frank”) Krue, 46, of Wilkes Run, departed for a better life on Thursday, July 23, following a heart attack. He was a clerk and seasonal accountant for Dixie Auto Parts for many years. His legacy will be carried by his family, co-workers, and fellow worshipers in Christ, who will always remember his honesty and precision. Survivors include his beloved wife, Isabel, and adored son, Peter. He was preceded in death by his parents and two brothers.

Visitation will be held from 6 to 8 p.m. Monday, July 27, at Covenant Funeral Home. A funeral mass will be celebrated at 10 a.m. Wednesday, at St. Mary Catholic Church, with burial to follow at St.

Mary’s cemetery.



Ted Bundy was a compulsive nose picker. He was a triple threat on the highways: he stole cars, drove badly and lied like an idiot when he got pulled over. Twice he busted out of jail. In college, he manned a rape crisis hotline. After he killed his women, Bundy often went back to have sex with the corpses.

Peter’s studies deepened.

The Vampire of Dusseldorf, Peter Kürten, killed men, women, children, and animals, killed anything he found, killed with his bare hands, hammer, draper’s scissors, or clasp knife. One night of luckless hunting, Kürten crept onto a frozen pond and bit off a sleeping swan’s head, ejaculating as he placed his mouth over the gushing, severed neck. Soft-spoken and courteous, Kürten arranged for his unsuspecting wife to claim the reward money for his capture.



Peter fell off freshman honor roll in a big way and didn’t mind it a bit. Everyone assumed it was grief for his father’s passing, and who was Peter to correct them?

He was an uncle for two weeks before he knew it. His sister the harlot gave birth. To what, he didn’t ask. Lucy apparently found shelter at the Paul Stefan Home, near Unionville. It could have been the far side of the moon.

Lucy’s namesake, the third century martyr, had her eyes removed with a fork. Or she gouged them out herself. Accounts vary.

Peter Kürten’s last meal was Weinerschnitzel, fried potatoes and a bottle of white wine. He enjoyed it so well, he ordered it seconds.

“Tell me,” said Kürten, dabbing his lips with a linen napkin, “after my head has been chopped off, will I still be able to hear, at least for a moment, the sound of my own blood gushing from the stump of my neck?”

No one knew what to say.

Lucy called when she knew Mama would be at Mass. At her first sobs and gasps, Peter recradled the phone.

“That,” Kürten said, “would be the pleasure to end all pleasures.”

8

Peter means rock. The word is *Kepha* in Hebrew. When Jesus says thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church, it’s the Bible getting off one of its few decent puns. Ha ha, good one, Lord.

The rock is unmoved and unmoving. Things slither and coil and sleep under the rock. Hidden things. The rock itself has no interest. It has no heart. It has no breath or throat or soul.

The rock is the perfect disguise. Sunlight does not faze it. Tempests and oceans cannot make it shed a single tear. The rock, both steady and treacherous, never gives up its secrets.



After all the trouble she caused, Lucy’s by-blow, Shannon Germaine Krue, gave up the ghost before she was four months old. The counselor who knocked on their door told them it was SIDS. There was no cause and no one to blame, but Lucy was in a bad way. Could Mama come? “She let it sleep on its stomach,” Mama only said, more like an observation than a question. “No one knows,” the counselor said, shifting her weight on the porch. But Peter knew. The baby’s death was God’s test of *him*, to see if the Rock would crack. It would not.



In the room painted coffee and teal, Mama perched on the short exam table, her bare ankles crossed, careful not to let the paper sheeting crinkle. The room smelled of ammonia and peanut butter crackers. Peter listened to Dr. Donato explain about Mama’s “numb moments”. Her condition was called multi-infarct dementia. It was progressive. A series of strokes was bashing her to bits from the inside out. There was practically no help for it and definitely no cure. It was all Peter could do not to laugh.

The Lord is my ballbuster, he thought. *I shall not crack*.



Lucy called from the Taos County Sheriff’s Office to beg Mama for bail money. She was in lockup for vagrancy and solicitation. She wanted to get clean. She wanted to come home. She wanted Mama to come get her. Peter pointed out that Lucy was nineteen now, so her business was her business. Besides, Mama was sick. Mama had trouble *recognizing* money, let alone Paypaling bond. And if she could hardly cross the living room unaided, where did Lucy get the gall to ask her to cross the country?

“We pray for you, sis,” Peter said, and hung up.



They were worse than the songs that get stuck in your head, the little phrases Peter came across in his studies. *No kill, no thrill. No gun, no fun. If you’re going to do something, do it well, and leave something witchy.*



First he stopped going to Mass, then he stopped taking her. The chintz sofa became once again the locus of instruction.

“What’s this?” She sat beside him on towel-sized plastic because she sometimes had accidents.

“*Turistas*. It’s an doctor movie, Mama. These doctors come, they harvest organs. That whore in the bikini, she’s going to lose her liver. It’s good Christian work. You’ll love it.”

“No, I don’t...think so.”

“We’re watching it, Mama. There’s nothing else.”

“I don’t like this. Turn...it off.”

“Go ahead. Man proposes, God disposes. Isn’t that what you say, Mama? Or is it hack ’em and stack ’em? You like that better?”

“I...don’t know.”

“No, you don’t. So how about you be quiet like a good girl? Watch the screen. Or I’ll slap you. Want me to slap you?”

Mama’s head shook like it was swarmed by nits.

“Ah,” Peter said.



The rock slipped only once. It was the night of the Sadie Hawkins Dance at James Monroe High School, where Peter transferred

(Go Yellow Jackets!)

in November. They couldn’t afford tuition to Sacred Heart anymore, with Papa’s meager life insurance no bulwark against Mama’s mounting medical bills.

Somehow Peter was outside with Nancy Criscuolo, kissing under a large oak tree. The cafeteria wall thudded with the bass beat of dance music. Nancy and Peter shared a class together, but if you held a gun to his head Peter couldn’t tell you which one. Nancy put her tongue in his mouth and moved it like an eel. His hand rose and rounded on her breast. Nancy didn’t pull away. In fact, her hips ground against him and she moaned with her eyes closed.

Peter brushed her nipple and closed his fingers and, without hardly meaning to, savagely twisted it.

“That’s what you want, huh, slut?” Peter said, moaning in kind. “That’s what you love.”

Nancy shoved away then, yipping in fear twice as she tripped over an above-ground root. She fell on her bottom. Peter stepped forward and gravely offered a helping hand. But Nancy scuttled from him crablike, dirtying her dress. She fled in tears.

Peter found himself alone in leafy shadows, walled off from hundreds of strangers yelling and dancing and having fun. It was how it should be.

Two days later, the Criscuolo brothers and a pair of their friends jumped him after school. Halfway into the beating, Peter started to laugh. He brayed so loudly it frightened them off. Peter lay there for a while, then gimped across Jeff Davis Highway and vomited over a chain-link fence. He

turned left then right and got 16 stitches in his face and a cast on his mashed right wrist from Mary Washington Hospital.

Peter said nothing about the ambush because there was no one he could confess to about the stolen kiss, not even Father Keller. Peter had to work out the penance for himself. He worked it until it bled.

9

The day after Lucy’s body was found behind a truck stop near Albuquerque, Peter placed Mama in a hospice care facility with on-site bereavement services.

Things smoothed out to oiled perfection. He dropped out of Germanna Community College, and accepted the promotion to assistant manager at Pep Boys. The house was his. He kept it spic-and-span, and slept, as he had from birth, in the small, mid-hallway bedroom. He returned to his pew at St. Mary’s, and celebrated Mass three times a week. Father Alvarez succeeded Father Keller. Peter visited Mama like clockwork, and the nurses adored him for it.

“You again!” they pretended to scold.

“Can’t keep away!” Peter said. He pretended to blush, and then pretended to be Irish. “Begorrah, the best years of me life, I spent in the arms of another man’s wife! How are you, Mama?”

Isabel Krue did not, could not, answer. The last big stroke left her mute and almost blind. She cringed now whenever anyone touched her, even her own flesh and blood.

But Peter seemed not to mind. “She’s the only girl for me,” he said, and the nurses gossiped well and truly on that lovely remark as soon as he was out of sight. They had no notion how wrong they were.

Peter had become, in his own way, a votary. His vows were sincere and unrestrained and darkly inward. He did not know, in all honesty, if Mama would be his only girl, but she was his first. Right out in the open. And he was glad to make her last.



At first he thought he was having religious nightmares. But as the dream recurred
(in glorious Technicolor)

he began to rely on it. He walked in a darkling forest. Above him, gnarled boughs tangled with crucified bodies. Everything dripped blood. Peter bore aloft a golden bowl. He joyously heard wet drops tink and tap into it. There was a cloying, faintly metallic odor, as all around him the barks and roots and soil ran red. The forest floor became spongy. The wind moaned. Pale-as-bone bodies moaned. Hot wax sizzled on his hair. Peter knew if he could fill the sacred chalice and drink the blood, he would be redeemed, and suffer the dream no more. On he staggered, aching with thirst, as ahead of

him in the dark a wolf with his sister’s voice howled “Heeere! Heeere! *Heeere!*”



Co-worker Lenny Tamiroff excited a mild, clinical interest. Peter recognized in the sweaty little slob something familiar, something Peter could name but probably Lenny himself could not. Among Lenny’s pals, Jeremy Lorenz, the glib cocksmith, also commanded attention. Another secrets keeper, he was sure of it. The last two Peter dismissed as only interesting to themselves. He had no trouble letting Todd and Brian believe he held them in awe.



“Will you look at that!”

“He’s at it again?” Nurse Madison said, letting the grey dishes cart slow to a stop.

“Bless his heart!” Nurse Joely said. “Every visit, for hours! He sits there on that couch and all he does is whisper to her what’s on TV. Look at that smile on him!”

“That’s love,” Nurse Madison said. “That’s love.”

“And her stone blind. Do you think she even knows what he’s saying?”

“She knows. She must. She gets so agitated when he leaves.”

“Well, he’s all that keeps her going, of course.”

“Such a nice man!”

“He is,” Nurse Joely said. “He is.” They shook her heads in admiration.

“I only hope my son turns out like Mr. Krue.”

“How lovely, the both of them.”



When it was time to go, when Peter had, in his hushed way, spewed his poison sac empty, he rose and bent and touched a gentle kiss to her papery forehead. Isabel Krue’s thin, cracked lips shifted soundlessly the way they do.

“Goodbye, Mama”, Peter said, and dipped his lips to her ear.

“Hollow be thy name.”

10

Elaine was up like a shot, furious and wary at once. She screamed at Brian. “You fucking hit my elbow!”

“Oh, God. I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Brian said, hands wide apart, palms down.

“No! You bust my lousy *elbow!* What’s wrong with you?”

Nothing!, Brian wanted to explain. What a mistake! He didn’t beat people. The last time he

swung a fist was at Kevin Shirley in the fourth grade. And he missed! “I GOT CAUGHT UP!” he said.

“You got *what?*”

“Are you okay? Are you hurt? Are you okay?”

“No! Look at my ELBOW!”

“But I hit...” Brian had read about survivors of car wrecks and airplane disasters, and always marveled at their ability to recall the instant-by-instant sequence of trauma. No such luck here! *He* was the one stuck in slow motion, paralyzed by guilt and the girl’s frenzy, unable to think or to move.

Elaine snatched up her shirt and pushed her way out, the shirt balled in her fist, and it was all a dangerous blur to Brian.

Elbow! *Safe word!* Oh, shit. He never *touch*ed her elbow. That was her code to Candace, let’s blow this joint. Eight hundred bucks and his first chance ever with a professional and it was gone, ruined, ruined for everybody, all thanks to stupid stupid him!

“Wait!” Brian said.

Elaine yanked on her shirt. She stood in the center of the room, glaring at the uncertain trio of men in discipline masks.

Jeremy, in a stained wife-beater, stumbled out too.

“Stop her!” Jeremy said. “Don’t let her leave! *Block that door!*”

Then Jeremy’s ankle caught on a screen support and the whole flimsy partition crashed down.

Brian’s eyes widened. It *was* true. He saw and processed everything at once in crystalline and brutal detail.

Jeremy, slumped and rounded, his jaw jutting low and loose, looked like a bear. The stains on his Haines made sense. Behind him, lamp-lit, Candace was handcuffed by her right wrist to the cot rail at the join. She was naked, on her back, left knee bent. Her fingernail polish was dull cinnamon. Beside the cot, Jeremy’s sports bag stood open, the top of a jar visible. Candace’s head flopped over the top of the cot, as if to let her watch the proceedings upside down. Only she didn’t. The gash across her throat was the deepest, but there must be stab wounds — god, dozens of them! — up and down her chest and belly and legs to account for all the blood. She seemed painted in it.

Elaine screamed. She peed her pants. Brian saw that too, the stain spreading.

Then Peter — who had been caught in error only once since he was an altar boy of nine — Peter the Rock — stepped quickly to his left and blocked the door.



This was his room. Had been hers, now was his.

For the millionth time, Brian flexed his foot against the gallon jug of water. It sloshed under protest, and that was the jolliest goddamned sound in the world. It made him so proud, that full plastic jug. It was heavy. It was his. It was another two days of life. More, if he rationed it the smart way.

Shit, he survived eight and a half months at The Curtin Group, this should be a breeze.

The umbilical tube provided plenty of air, so that was his, too. Air and water. He even had the proverbial pot to piss in. An embarrassment of riches.

Riches of stitches. Had the wound clotted? No idea. He hadn't fussed with it in hours. Or minutes. He couldn't tell. Not riches. Snitches. Snitches get stitches and wind up in ditches.

Not funny. Not funny.

He knuckled his gut and floom! — the lights rushed at him in his skull. Hiya, guys. Were they dimmer? He thought they were.

“Stop playing with it,” Brian said. Even at a faint croak, his voice echoed. “I mean it. Stop.”

It's a game, an inner voice replied. Chill, dude. Just a game. Let us play. Find a last new way to study your navel.

Then, It's an innie!

Then, There you go. Oh, there you go.

Just trying to shed some light on the subject.

It made sense now, that time Monica went crazy. They came in here to get her that one time and Lenny made the mistake of putting his hand flat on the alcove floor to reach in. The second it touched down, Monica pounced on it and bit his wrist like some damn zombie, drawing blood. Lenny howled, this chick clamped on his arm, rrah-rrha-rrha-rrha! It was total batshit for a minute there, until they dragged her out. Then she went catatonic again, as usual. It was kind of funny. Then.

Brian understood it better now, her freakout. Outside, she could be violated. What else’s a sex dungeon for? If she couldn’t stop it from happening, she stopped herself from happening. That meek, limp way she had wasn’t her personality, it was the absence of her personality.

But when they crammed her in the alcove, the dark hole became her place. Her castle keep. Great noun, keep. Hers to wildly defend with her life. Her air. Her water jug. No one else breathed it. No one else drank it. Brian understood.

Would they come and haul him out? Why hadn’t he wondered about that before? Because it was too weird. They were too extreme, the possibilities. The square door would swing open, searing light would blind him, and he would either get a bathroom break or his throat slit. A pat on the back and a sorry, man, or chunked up in lawn bags and left in the garbage can. He needed to go to the hospital, that was what.

If they did come, and what if the “they” was the police, what would they haul out? Him, or the absence of him?

Wow, that’s cheerful. Man, you are all gallows, no humor.

What would he get? Life sentence, at least.

Keeping his left hand flat on the wound, Brian reached across his knees and brought up the gallon jug. He popped the lid and took a swig, then another.

Tell you what you’d get. He would get in all the newspapers for what he did. CNN would do a special report. Anderson Cooper would be too disgusted to even say his name.

If he lived, he would get six hours of lights out, no more. He’d get at least an hour of exercise and recreation. He would get a bed a sink a floor a desk.

Writing paper. Time.

It’d be better. Better than this.

But maybe not. If he was left in here and no one found him for dozens or hundreds of years, that might be better. Time enough for forgiveness. It won’t take long for him to die, here in the dark. Cramped up, no food, wounded. The wound. It didn’t hurt. When did that stop? That should mean something not very good, probably.

He took another drink, long and slow, and thought about it.

The open courtroom. All the attention. Fame at last. That would be an embarrassment of riches, truly. Key word, embarrassment. So which did he deserve? Which was better than he deserved?

“This is better,” Brian coughed in the darkness. “This is better.”

And he said it again.

“I do not deserve this death.”

II
RAISE

*I am myself indifferent honest;
but yet I could accuse me of such things
that it were better my mother had not borne me.*

— William Shakespeare

CLUBHOUSE

1

“Too long or too short?”

Jeremy gave Lenny his patented *You dumbass* look. “I’m handing it back to you to saw, what do you think?”

“But how much you want off?”

“Gimme a C.H.”

“What’s that?” Lenny said. “I dunno what that is. You make this shit up?”

“I’ll do it,” Brian said, taking the one-by and laying it perpendicularly on the table saw. “Hold that end.” Brian pushed it through and, when the blade stopped, held up a sliver of wood. “Here, Lenny. In construction, C.H. is a cunt hair and C.C.H. is a curly cunt hair. Got it?”

Lenny’s bug-eyed reaction got bigger and bigger. He looked like a bullfrog puffing itself up. “The fuck!” he said. “I never heard-a that!”

“Now he won’t talk about anything else,” Todd said.

“Bet you’re right,” Peter said.

“My bad, should’ve given him a better referent,” Jeremy said. “Lenny’s never seen a cunt hair, straight or curly.”

“What about Doris?”

“Doris’s shaved.”

“How can you tell?”

“She’s scared of crabs.”

Even Lenny laughed at that.

They were down in Todd’s uncle’s bomb shelter, which Brian took to calling the Clubhouse. Brian was tasked with putting a salesworthy gloss on the property, the house, barn, and even the grounds. But to him the heart of the work was here, in this secret bunker, in the hard-walled recess of its odd, useless alcove.

“Okay, here we go,” Brian said. “Presentation. And if you didn’t grow up dying to have one of these in your house, you were never a kid in America.”

He led them back to the alcove. “The interior, I went simple luxuriance. Rolladeck mat, cedar and hemlock slats. Bingo, instant sauna bench. Slide it out — easy-peesy to clean.”

“To clean what?” Todd said.

Brian shrugged. “Depends on what you put inside. Do one of them 48-bottle wine coolers from Costco? It’d fit. Doubt it’d ever leak, but...”

“Okay.”

“Or if you don’t want to store *Château Lafite Rothschild*, wham in a good little gun safe. Or a good big gun safe. Plenty of room for a pretty fair fuck-you-world-I’m-ready-for-Armageddon armory.”

“Or?” Jeremy said.

Brian shrugged again. “Bed pan and water jug. Yours for just \$19.95, the Gentleman’s Exclusive Sex Slave Hidey-Hole. Call now. Operators are standing by.”

“Don’t say that,” Todd said, “after what happened.”

“Sorry. You do whatever with it, Todd. What you get, though, is a frickin’ cool secret hole in the wall! Step back...”

They stepped back as Brian used two fingers to pivot into place a floor to ceiling entertainment hutch, its shelves already stocked with beer steins and a poker chips carousel. The unit clicked shut on a hidden latch.

“Ta dah,” Brian said. “Best part? No one knows it’s there.”

“Awesomeness!”

“Thank you, Lenny, you’re a gent and a scholar. And check this out, your contribution...” Brian tapped the securely mounted *Welcome Gamblers* sign. He then touched the underside of a shelf and the tin plate swung out on invisible hinges.

“You watched a ton of *Batman* growing up,” Jeremy said.

“Nick at Nite was my home,” Brian said. He pointed and explained. “Sound baffles go out and down, but this is a direct feed. Eighteen inch tube, two inch diameter, completely hidden.”

“Direct feed of what?”

“Air.”

Todd peered at the tube, then reopened the hutch and looked at it from the other side. “Why does a gun safe need air holes?”

“It doesn’t,” Brian said. “Want me to seal it off, I will. Just reduces your options, is all.”

Todd said, “Leave it.” And he didn’t say anything more.

“Get a pull-out couch in here, I’ll do you hidden manacles in the armrests,” Brian said.

“So what the fuck is this?” Lenny said, doing his thirsty dog voice again. “Is it for real or what?”

“I don’t know,” Brian said.

“It’s up to Todd,” Peter said.

“Could be just for shits and giggles,” Jeremy said, thumping Todd on the shoulder. “Your sex

Batcave.”

Brian backed off from the hard sell. “Like the man said.”

2

“She stays here,” Jeremy said. He rose to his full height, flecked with blood all down his front. Aside from Peter blocking the door, no one moved.

Elaine’s arms rose away from her sides, as if she were treading water in rough seas. All eyes were on her. No one said a word.

Brian felt a roiling surge of emotion, a quick lurch of jealousy. Jeremy killed somebody. He went all the way. How come he never got ahead of the curve like that? The best Brian could do was pop his whore in the eye. And when she cursed him, he was all *oh please no I’m sorry*. Story of his life, right? Nice one, hero. Dream big and act small. Sudden revulsion rose like vomit and restored his sanity. A girl was dead. It was nothing to goddamn *admire*.

Now’s your chance! Do it! But do what? Brian’s clearest thought was to wonder if he was about to faint.

Lenny began to shamle toward Elaine. The roundshouldered man seemed galvanized by a strong but erratic force.

Stop it! Brian thought. *Stop him! Somebody do something!*

Candace blew a chunk of snot. She came up suddenly, laughing and snorting. “It got in my nose! Oh, God!”

Jeremy whirled to her and laughed like hell to see the woman he murdered alive again.

“Oh, shit,” Todd said, which seemed to be all he was capable of saying tonight.

Elation flooded through Brian, but he couldn’t trust it. He gawped at Candace’s bare, unbloodied back. She sat on the cot and worked the handcuff key without hurry.

“Bitch!” Elaine screamed. “Oh you bitch!”

“We got you!” Candace spun and grinned, her teeth white against the mask of gore. “We got y’all good!”

Todd pawed off his rubber mask and hooted laughter. “Primo perfecto! There it is! That was *it!*” he said, which made no sense at all. Lenny laughed to see Todd laugh.

Brian blanked. He got punked, along with everyone else. How? Jeremy couldn’t even pronounce *trompe l’oeil* without his help. “I’m your driver,” he said. Understatement of the year. *You are plagued, Brian*, dad had said, *with delusions of adequacy*.

The jar in the sports bag. Talk about a bag of tricks! What’d he slather her with? Stage blood,

pig’s blood, or a couple of filched units of O neg from the hospital? He still couldn’t tell if Jeremy’s Peacemaker was lethal or the kind that popped out a stick with a red, yellow, and black flag emblazoned BANG!

“In my U of M glory days,” Jeremy once said, “I majored in hijinks.” Boy howdy. He could play a joke right to the limit. But how would he do up against the Master? *Anytime you feel man enough for a rematch*, Brian thought, *we’ll see who blinks first*. Because that’s all it was, a blink. Brian believed what his eyes told him for what, a nanosecond?

Jeremy was their poker buddy. No way could Dr. Sandman savage a girl for no reason, no matter how many poontang jokes he cracked.

Brian felt again that nauseating battle of emotions, wretched fury that he had been duped, and relief that it was over and no one got hurt.

Look, everyone was laughing. Todd, Lenny, even Elaine. Todd tossed her an ice-cooled beer, and she flipped him the bird for thanks. Todd laughed harder. Brian gutroared laughter, too, hoping to sound like the Master that he was, nevermore to drop behind the curve, never to be bested again.

3

Jeremy took forever getting back from driving the girls safe home. Sure, they lived way to hell and gone out near Goochland, but even still. *He scored the BJ’s*, Brian brooded. *Son of a bitch*.

Candace and Elaine booted out of there like the big finish of a nightclub act. Candace showered and dressed in three minutes flat. She wouldn’t even take a beer for the road, though she smiled and swore they had a blast. Every guy got a kiss good night, although Elaine had to peck the cheek of Peter’s mask. He wouldn’t show his face until they were gone. *A toss up between shame and lust*, Brian figured. *The Catholic perfect storm*.

The cooler held only slivers of ice and a few floating cans. Todd had the most to drink, but Lenny was the one to get bobbleheaded. “What a crap party,” he said. “No one got laid and no one got dayyyd.”

“You motherfucker,” Todd greeted Jeremy upon his return. “You. Mother. Fucker.”

“I don’t lie,” Jeremy said. He swished the water chasing a beer. “But I deliver. No one got caught, no one got killed.”

“Didn’t say a liar. Did I say liar? Said motherfucker. Which you are.”

“Nothing maternal about those girls.”

“I knew it,” Brian said.

“Don’t be bitter.” Jeremy stared at him evenly over the top of the can.

“Some ballsy stunt, though,” Todd said. “I’ll give it that.”

“What was?”

“That you pulled. Hope you enjoy scraping out blood. You got mess everywhere.”

“I’ll scrub your floors, Todd,” Jeremy said. “But that was no stunt.”

“Oh? What was it, then?”

“One crap party.”

“Shaddup, Lenny.”

“It was an experiment,” Jeremy said. “A very useful and telling experiment.”

“In what?”

“Us. What else?” Jeremy said, tossing the empty. “God, it’s astounding.”

“What is?”

“How Budweiser manages to fit those itty-bitty cans under the Clydesdales. D’you think Miller Lite goes under the sick ponies? They must do. Where there’s a swill, there’s a way.”

“You think you’re funny,” Todd said.

“I’m a slave to popular opinion,” Jeremy said. “So what do you think happened, Todd? I played a trick on you? Lenny? Peter? Brian?”

“Looks like it.”

“Looks like it. Who’s the Sherlock Holmes fan here, I forget, Peter or you? ‘You see, but you do not observe.’ What’s the value of a nine hundred dollar prank?”

“*Nine* hundred?”

“I left a tip.”

“Jesus!”

“Too right. What did I *observe* for that money? What made it worth it?”

“Us looking stupid.”

“No offense, Lenny, but I get that lots cheaper. No. Nine hundred to hand you your dicks is a bit rich for my blood. No pun intended.”

“So what did you *observe*?” Brian said.

“What every experiment provides: a reaction. It can be chemical, physical, what-have-you. Social. So long as the test conditions are strict and yield a result. Now, good science says you can never prove a hypothesis. The sun rises in the East. Well, no it doesn’t. Earth spins. You see? You can only *disprove* a hypothesis. But if you’re lucky, you don’t.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Hang in there. Repeated observed phenomena becomes accepted hypothesis. Accepted hypothesis is known as a theory. All right? A theory is not a guess. Evolution is not a guess. Dinosaurs

were never ‘Jesus horses’. Sorry, Peter.”

Jeremy splashed up some of the water from the cooler and rubbed his fingers on the back of his neck. “What happened here tonight was my little test. And you failed, gentlemen, to disprove my hypothesis. In other words, you failed to fail with awesome flying colors.”

“Doc, you wanna run that again,” Lenny said, “in English?”

“No one was out to make fun of you,” Jeremy said, his voice low and serious. “No one *is* out to make fun of you.”

“Well, that’s damned comforting,” Todd said.

“The object was to see what you would do in a certain high-stress moment. What we would do, collectively. If there was a girl here, scared as shit, totally in our power, what would we do? Open the door? Apologize? Dial 911 and hand her the cell phone? I don’t know, what would happen? Are we loyal to an abstract moral code, or to each other? Are we loyal to *us*? What’s our bottom line, do we serve society or self-interest? That was an experiment worth testing. And Peter, man, you were a star.”

“How?”

It struck Brian this was the first word he heard Peter utter in hours, maybe all night.

“Because I now have a theory,” Jeremy said, “that if we want it to be, this site is operational.”

BANG. There it was. So soon. Brian had to grin. *Rematch on.*

“Absolutely,” he said. “So when do we go for the real McCoy?”

“We don’t have to,” Jeremy said. “I merely point out we have the means.”

You are so going to blink, motherfucker. I am going to enjoy making you blink.

“No one ever invented an unpulled trigger,” Brian said. “Temptation wins out. Sooner or later.”

“All right,” Jeremy said, their gazes locked. “So those are our new parameters, then. Sooner...or later.”

“I dunno, shit,” Todd said, a chuckle scraping his throat. “You fucking mean it?”

“What you did,” Peter said, “was stupid and dangerous. Good night.” With no wasted movements, he left.

“I may’ve been wrong,” Jeremy said, his eyebrows raised and his voice low. “That lad might prove a liability.”

“Say the word, I’ll kill him,” Brian said. “Gut him like a fish, wrap him in paper. All for the greater good, right? There’s plenty of acreage here to dispose of a body or three, that is, if Todd doesn’t mind.”

Todd shook his head and rapped a table, poker-speak for “pass”.

“That’s the spirit,” Jeremy said.

Lenny looked from one to the other of them, his lips wet and loose. “You guys!” he said. “You

guys must be so drunk!”

4

It’s him, Todd thought, in a dizzy misfire of reality. He stepped off the shaded porch and squinted against sudden sunlight. No, the old guy by the dusty pickup wasn’t great-uncle Tim, but damn it was close.

“I’m Wade Nesbit, your neighbor,” the coot said, scuffing a plank-sized palm against his jeans before extending it to shake. “You Todd Heath, Joanie’s boy?”

“Yessir.”

“Knew her, your mom, in a holiday picnics sort of way. Is she...”

“In Florida. Ft. Meyers, which she calls God’s waiting room. She’s remarried. Loves shuffleboard, apparently.”

“Well, God bless her. Send my best, not that she’d ’member who I am. These your crew?”

Brian and Jeremy had wandered out to the porch, both wearing tool belts.

“Some of them.”

“Hi,” Jeremy said.

Wade Nesbit nodded. Frameless glasses perched on his long beak of a nose. Everything about him seemed loose and creased and well worn. “Won’t disturb. Just thought I’d stop by and see how you were getting on, wish you well. Any plans for her?”

“Who?” Brian squeaked.

“Taking things one a time, one room at a time,” Jeremy said. “See what’s possible.”

“Heh,” Wade said, watching them.

“We’d like to...I don’t know,” Todd said. “I don’t even know what the best crops are.”

“Best meaning what?” Wade said. “Profitable?”

“Profitable, sure.”

“Wacky-tobacky’s top of the heap. It’s a cash crop, easy to grow, but I don’t recommend it.”

“No,” Todd said. “No, I’m not into that.”

“Heard you came out here with your bride,” Wade said. “This time last year, maybe July. Looked the place over and left.”

“We, uh, didn’t work out.”

“I’m sorry to hear,” Wade said.

Todd waited, then filled the pause with a short laugh. This old guy sounded friendly and down home, but man it threw him the way the geezer’s dark eyes glinted.

“What, uh, would you recommend,” Todd said, “I could...?”

“Real tobacco’s next most. If you can stomach that a third of all ciggies get lit up in China. Me, I’m against givin’ the Chinks any more’n they got, as they ’ready own most our goddamn gummerment. Excuse my French.”

“So, that leaves...?”

“Hay. Grain corn. Anything but apples. Apples are a pain in the ass. Don’t start with apples.”

“I won’t, thanks.”

Wade chewed his lower lip and looked across the wilderness of weeds. “It’s not for everyone. What goes on out here.” He spat to emphasize the point. “Everybody gets to know everybody’s business, just nobody gets in nobody’s way. It’s good. Good way of life. Hey, I tell you what! Know what you used to need, around here, to get mail delivered?”

“No. What?”

“First name and zip code. And that was it. I mean I-T *it!* No road, no last name, we *knew* each other. How it was.”

“Well,” Todd said.

“I’ve taken up your time,” Wade said. “You’re working. Good to see you. I’m up that road, maybe a mile or so, you need anything.” He peered over his lenses. “Hope you make a go of it, young man. It’d do your uncle’s heart good.”

Never mind it quit beating six years ago, Todd thought. Wonder what Uncle Tim’d say about our sex murder show in the room he used to set up his Christmas tree?

“You have a real chance here,” Wade said, his dark gaze fixed on Todd, “to do something right.”

There it is. That was it, Todd thought, alarmed and weirdly elated. He knows! The fuck do I say? Todd worked with his hands all his life. Even so, this farmer’s big dry fist smothered his. What’d I do wrong? Nothing. There’s your answer.

“Thank you,” Todd said.

“Do right by the land,” Wade Nesbit said, climbing into his truck. “You’ll never regret it. Be seeing you.”

5

“Dr. Lorenz? What are you looking for?”

“A...preventative measure,” Jeremy said. “In case I run into trouble.”

“Trouble how?”

This, for instance. Duty nurse Susan Flicker blocked the door of the cage, so named for its two

walls of close steel mesh and old-fashioned lock plate access. Though Jeremy had full meds room privileges, rummaging in the narc box was nothing to flaunt.

“Got a 67-year-old woman tomorrow, presenting with severe hypertension and adult-onset diabetes. A sturdy vasodilator would be handy, just on the off chance her cardiac-output dips.”

“So what are we looking for?”

“Nitropress? Sodium nitroprusside?”

“Good God,” Susan said.

“No fooling,” Jeremy said. “I don’t *want* it.”

“Why would you?” Susan crouched before a floor-level box and fitted a key into its front and pulled. Twin trays of flip-top vials slid out. “Fifty milligrams?”

“Perfect.”

“You be careful,” Susan said, handing up the vial.

“Always am,” Jeremy said, opening a notebook chained to the counter and pretending to scribble. “I’m sure I won’t need it, but if you have to need it then you sure better have it, right?”

Susan straightened. “Just be sure you log it out.”

“Already have.”

Jeremy gallantly waved Susan out before him.

(Rushing the net, Agassi style.)

Less chance for her to check the log.



Finding the book was easy. Choosing how to purchase it presented a qualm. Heeding a level of caution he objectively knew to be absurd, Peter split the order, buying two copies off Amazon and two off ebay.



“If you wanna play Mr. Fix-It all of a sudden, I got your list right here,” Doris said. “I got a list as long as your arm!”

“Oh! What *don’t* I do? Tell me! What don’t I do?” Lenny said.

“Think of us, once in a while! We live with you, Lenny. We *clean* this shithole. Mina does her homework on a card table too wobbly to—”

“Who pays rent? Who pays the gee-dee *rent* on *my* house?”

“So what am I, your whore? You pay and leave? Is that it?”

“I can’t be two places at once!”

“Your place,” Doris said, her teeth grating, “is here. Your place is with us. Helping *us*. Said it and I *mean* it, Lenny, I’m all for you helping your friends, but hell! You act like they need you and

we don’t.”

“You don’t understand,” Lenny said. “Leamme alone.”

“I’m not the one doing that,” Doris said. “You’re leaving *us* alone. You have people depend on you. Me and Mina, whether you like it or not, we’re your family. You’re the only one of them who even *has* a family. And that doesn’t fucking register for some reason. It’s just not fair the way we always come last.”



Brian thought long into the night about the way Jeremy tried to flash the charm
(*See what’s possible*)

at that old farmer and got nowhere. Old guy had seen right through him. Old guy had probably *seen* Rock City, that was fashow.

(*Can’t do this by myself. I need a wingman.*)

What was *that* about? Keep your friends close and your enemies closer? Were they enemies, he and Jeremy? Why couldn’t he *see* it?

Mind like a steel trap, son, dad said. One that’s been pried open and left to rust.

Nana Emmie used to tell him tales of *her* grandmother, who attended performances by the Chicago Grand Opera Company and went home in the snow by horse and buggy. When asked how she liked the opera, Brian’s ancestor sighed, “Oh, it was divine. But what a pity they overlooked so many opportunities to stop.”

He had forgotten that story, at least he thought he had. What did it have to do with Jeremy? With any of them? He played a surreal game of blind man’s bluff. Deep into the night, the connections he flailed for taunted and eluded him, their substance maddeningly out of reach.

6

“You’re not playing, you’re just gambling,” Jeremy said, raking in a pot, smiling at Peter. “Son, ah say son, put your wallet away or get your head in. What’s the problem?”

“I don’t know, you tell me,” Peter said. “Have you been arrested?”

“Have I been what?”

“Have you ever been arrested, Jeremy?”

They were back at Lenny’s, throwing Bikini Watchers Club chips on a brand new card table. Doris was on the porch with her Parliaments, and all was right with the world. Peter pushed his glasses onto his nose and waited.

“This a joke?”

“No. Don’t laugh. Do not laugh at me. Were your fingerprints ever on file any— Do. Not. Laugh. Anywhere, any time, for any reason?”

“What do you want to know that for?”

“I don’t want to, I have to know,” Peter said, “about all of you. But you first, doc. You most.”

“Whoa,” Lenny said. “We got a friendly game.”

“We had,” Peter said. “But someone got carried away. Someone jumped the gun. And you know what?”

“Why are you being so serious with this shit?” Todd said.

Peter ignored him. “You know what, Jeremy? I hate to say it, but it might’ve been you.” He withdrew an unfolded newspaper clipping from his shirt pocket and placed it on the table. “Was it?”



Woman fatally stabbed in trailer park

Police identified the woman found fatally stabbed Monday in her Dabneys Royal Park trailer home as 27-year-old Candace Cain, from Prince George’s County. Ms. Cain lived in the trailer park located in the 7900 block of State Route 611 for 2 years, and had been employed part-time at Rose Retreat Farm Airport.

Attempts to reach relatives were unsuccessful.

Police would not divulge the nature or extent of the attack. Neighbors reported no disturbance, and investigation ruled out forced entry.



“Knives are messy,” Peter said.

Jeremy paled, blinking rapidly. “Where did you get this?”

“Goochland Gazette. Apparently it was big news there a week ago.”

“Why would you— Is this for real?”

“It’s real. There’s no photo, so it might not be the same woman, but I’m guessing it was Candace?”

“No,” Jeremy said. “I didn’t— I don’t have anything to do with this.”

“All right,” Peter said. “You’re the only one of us who could. But benefit of the doubt. Outside chance of Brian.”

“I— what?— *no!*” Brian said, reading fast.

“I ask again, though. For my own safety, if not all of ours. Have you ever been arrested?”

“Lenny, go lock the door,” Todd said.

“Doris is on the porch.”

“That’s the point.”

“But—”

“If she knocks, we’ll let her in,” Todd said. “Go lock the door.”

Lenny obeyed and came back. Everybody watched Jeremy fidget.

“Doctors who dispense medicine have to have all kinds of clearance. Including fingerprints.”

“What else?” Peter said.

“What do you mean what else?”

“Any time, anywhere, for an—”

“Florida. I was a kid. It was stupid stuff. A prank.”

“Care to tell us about it?” Brian said.

“Not particularly.”

“What’d you do?” Lenny said.

Jeremy ground out the butt, then reached for the pack.

“No one got caught, no one got killed?” Todd said.

“Something like that.” Jeremy shook out a fresh cigarette. “You guys want to darken the room and shine a hot light in my face? I mean, while we’re at it.” He lit up and sucked down smoke. “There were no charges. It never went to court, god’s honest truth. I just don’t, Jesus, dwell on it.”

“Then we won’t dwell on it,” Peter said. “Brian?”

“Clean. Not so much as a speeding ticket,” Brian said. “Ever.”

“Me, either,” Peter said. “That’s three down, two to go.”

“I’m trying to think,” Todd said. “I’m bonded, for my job. But did that involve fingerprints, I don’t remember.”

“Any trouble with the law?”

“No. Never. Wait, I’m trying to think... No.”

“Don’t fuck around. We’re all in this together.”

“We’re all in *what*, Brian?” Todd said. “We’re in what, exactly?”

“Keep your voice down.”

“I’ve never been arrested!” Todd said.

“Keep your voice down.”

“All right?”

“Fine. We believe you.”

“Lenny?” Peter said.

“This is bullshit.”

“Everyone else went,” Brian said.

“Lenny?” Peter said.

“It was bullshit. Okay? Total bullshit. Charges were dropped.”

“Do you go to jail?” Peter said.

“Two weeks. For *bullshit!*”

Brian laughed.

“Ain’t funny.”

“No, I’m sure it wasn’t,” Peter said. “We’re all friends here. Let’s settle down.”

“What was the point of that *Law & Order* episode?” Jeremy said.

Peter sighed. “We’re assigning jobs.”

“*Assigning jobs?*”

“As opposed to assigning blame, yes. The point wasn’t who *did* what, but who *does* what. If we go forward. Did you kill that girl, Jeremy? When you took her home?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“The fuck stupid question is that?”

“I need to know.”

“I didn’t kill. Anybody.”

“And that’s your proof?” Todd said.

“I don’t *need* proof, Todd. You need proof if I did something, okay? That’s how it works.”

“His fingerprints would be at the crime scene,” Peter said. “And he just admitted his fingerprints are on file.”

“So he didn’t do it?” Lenny said.

“Don’t act so happy for me,” Jeremy said.

“Sorry.”

“The point is,” Peter said. “You and Lenny’ve been booked. So you two get to guard the home front. Whatever we do, no matter what, you play nanny. Nothing more.”

“Meaning what?” Jeremy said.

“You don’t choose the cooze,” Todd said. “You don’t make the grabs. Only me, Peter, and Brian do.”

“Exactly.”

“Wow-ee,” Lenny said. “Listen to us!”

“Yeah, listen,” Peter said. “This day and age, there’s no room for error. With DNA, with fingerprints, with any of it. Let’s answer one more, and that’s enough for tonight. Who’s videoed themselves having sex?”

“Jesus!”

“Can we do this without taking the Lord’s name?” Peter said.

“You are funny, man,” Jeremy said. “You are funny.”

“Jeremy?”

“I have,” Jeremy said. “You got me. Why not? In HD and Blu-ray. Also got a look-see at some of my better looking neighbors.”

Simultaneously, giggling like schoolboys, Brian, Todd, and Lenny put up their hands.

“This is a relief,” Lenny said. “I can’t begin to tell you.”

“Great minds think alike,” Brian said, “and so do ours.”

“Fine, then,” Peter said. “I’m with the heathen. New world order. The farm stays off the grid. Understood? Videos, stills... Whatever we capture...about what we capture, it never leaves the farm. No thumb drives, no cell phones, no images, no tweets, nobody *follows* nothing. This is and has to be writ in stone. Agreed?”

“Agreed.” The boys lowered their hands.

“You can unlock the door now,” Peter said.

“What about you?” Todd said.

“What about me what?” Peter said.

“How about it?” Brian said. “Any nudge-nudge, wink-wink, *candid* photography?”

“No,” Peter said. “Oh, no. The, uh, conditions haven’t been right...yet.”

The guys gossiped well and truly on *that* remark as soon as he was out of sight. They were more right than they knew.

8

Although Brian continued as site foreman, Peter assumed the mantle of guiding architect. He took charge. He gave orders. The work took shape as if he had planned this campaign his whole life. First order of business was to chainsaw new growth trees and reclaim arable fields.

“Wanna tell us *why*, Farmer John?” Jeremy said.

“Because it is a farm,” Peter said. “And it has to look like a farm.”

Brian and Todd manned the rental stump grinder, while Peter and Lenny got the yellow front

loader working. Lenny adored driving the compact loader, keeping the bucket low and level to the ground, tearing up swaths of tall fescue, uprooting shrubs and small trees. He sang the *Green Acres* theme at full blast over and over, though he was hazy on the tune and remembered none of the lyrics. What came out was, ‘Da-da da-dat-dat! *Bum bum!* Da-da da-dat-dat! *Bum bum!* Da-da da-dat-dat, da-da da-dat-dat, da-da da-dat-dat! *Bum bum!*’ In one weekend, the guys hauled away eleven truckloads of brush and vegetation.

Next, they brought in and spread sixty mounds of top soil. Lenny angled the front loader bucket teeth down and backed all over the property, contouring the soil. Finally, Jeremy walked a spreader, depositing thousands of fertilizer pellets.

“Now what?” he said, when he had finished.

“Now nothing,” Peter said, “for two weeks. We can plant after that.”

“Is it the season?” Brian said. “I don’t think we’re even close to the right season.”

“How much of this are we going to do?” Todd said.

“All of it,” Peter said. “House, farm, fields. Whatever’s visible has to make sense. And what’s invisible has to stay that way.”

Todd had his head down. He sat on the porch steps, elbows on his knees, watching one boot noisily slide dirt specks back and forth.

“Just saying, Todd,” Brian said, sinking against a post, “you’re buying us pizza and beer for the rest of your life.”

“That guy who drove up, your neighbor,” Jeremy said. “You never saw him before?”

“No,” Todd said.

“But he knew you came out here with Sandy. He even knew roughly when and probably why. Peter’s right.”

“It’s a lot of work,” Todd said, “for a lot of risk.”

Peter shook his head. “The work diminishes the risk. And the way I see it, Todd, you’ll turn a profit on this place, one way or the other.”

“From dirt poor to dirty rich,” Brian said. “Hey, instead of a farm subsidy can you get a fuck subsidy, like if you nail a girl in the Clubhouse who’s a lousy lay...”

“Grow up,” Todd said, and went into the house.



Brian and Jeremy shared a place in line at Home Depot rentals, returning the spreader and the stump grinder.

“How does he seem to you?” Brian said.

“Who?”

“Todd.”

Jeremy shrugged. “He’s Todd.”

“Well, you were so concerned before. I was just asking.”

“Before what?”

“Remember? Labor of love? Help out our buddy Todd? Dungeon Party Central?”

Jeremy darted several irritable glances around before facing front again. “What about it?”

“That was all you. Your *concern* got us started. So I’m asking, how does he seem to you?”

“Sounds like you’re asking a question you want to answer yourself.”

“I want to know if he’s bipolar.”

“If he’s what?”

“Some days he acts so into it, you know? Other days he couldn’t give two shits.”

“And how is that our responsibility?”

“I just want to know if you’ve noticed.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“And?” Brian said.

“What? How the hell should I know?”

“You’re the doctor. You got letters after your name.”

“I put people to sleep, Brian. I make them stay asleep comfy-cozy, and then I wake ’em up. That’s my job. What they dream about is not my job. What goes on in Todd’s head is not my business. End of story.”

“My fingerprints were all over the scene,” Brian said.

“What scene?”

“The *scene*. So were yours.”

“You want to talk about something pleasant?”

They stood in silence until the Home Depot guy called “Next?”

9

“I’m beginning to get the sense that the stuff we show each other in bags is bad news,” Brian said.

Peter upended the cardboard sleeve above the poker table. Four paperbacks tumbled out.

“Books?” Lenny said.

“Everybody take one,” Peter said.

Lenny handled his copy like it was a fish that had died earlier in the week. “What are these for?”

“Well, generally,” Brian said, “books are used to bind all mankind in a communal furtherance of knowledge and ideas. In your case, Len, use it to level a table.”

“I’m not much of a reader,” Lenny said.

“You need to read this,” Peter said.

“The Collector?” Todd said. “Wasn’t that a movie?”

“Several movies *called* The Collector,” Peter said. “The only one that counts is from the sixties. This is the book it was based on, and this is *the* book for what we want to do.”

“Pete, is there a study guide?” Brian said. “Cuz I know just lookin’ at you, there’s gonna be a quiz.”

“Bottom line us a reason for this?” Jeremy said.

“Two reasons,” Peter said. “The hero does everything right, and he gets away with it.”

“Love it. How to Abduct an Art Student,” Brian said, fanning the pages. “It can go on my shelf next to How to Kill a Mockingbird.”

“If it goes anywhere,” Jeremy said, “it goes next to the Salinger thing. Catcher in the Rye. Wasn’t that the Bible *de jour* for celebrity assassins?”

“It was,” Peter said. “Mark David Chapman, who shot Lennon. John Warnock Hinckley, who shot Reagan. Robert John Bardo...”

“Why do they all have three names?” Lenny said.

“Why do you *know* them?” Todd said.

“Try these. Charles Ng, Leonard Lake, Christopher Wilder, Wolfgang Priklopil, Robert Berdella...”

“Whoa, slow down.”

“I’d be here all night if I slowed down,” Peter said. “It’s quite a list.”

“Who are they?” Jeremy said.

“Devotees of this book. Documented, direct adherents. Killers. Sadistic rapists.”

“That’s us, huh?” Brian said.

“That is us,” Peter said.

“Sadists?”

“He didn’t say that,” Jeremy said. “He said *sadistic*. There’s a difference. Tell him, Peter.”

“Sadistic rapist is the term.”

“Unless your idea is we snatch a girl to give her scented baths and back rubs.”

“Shut up now, doc,” Peter said.

Jeremy blinked, affronted. “Hey, I’m on your side.”

Peter ignored him. “There are three or four types of rapists, depending on who’s doing the

grouping.”

“Or groping,” Brian said. “Sorry. Go on.”

Peter pushed back his glasses. “Sadistic is the most dangerous, the hardest to catch. That’s where we want to put ourselves. That’s what we aim for. It’s a safety issue. Sadistic is only a term, Brian. Only a term. A handle, like anything else. How much sadist, how much rapist, we can work out the niceties later.”

Blink! Somebody fucking blink! Brian thought. *Because I can’t hardly breathe.*

“In The Collector, if this helps you out, the guy never rapes the girl. Hardly even touches her. Toward the end, she does more real violence to him than he ever does to her.”

“But doesn’t she end up dead?” Brian said.

“Her own fault,” Peter said. “The choice to disobey leads to the slavery of sin. That’s not me. That’s catechism. That’s basic stuff.”

“Riiiiight,” Todd said.

“Are you out to,” Peter said, as if distracted by music from another room, “humiliate a woman? Spit on her, shout obscenities, physically brutalize, defile and degrade her? That your goal, Brian?”

“Works for me,” Lenny said, hoping for a laugh.

Brian paled. “No. No, it isn’t.”

“Then you’re not an anger rapist. Congratulations. So go up a type. You keep buying drinks for the girl who says no?”

Mock baffled, Jeremy pointed to his own face. “Who says no?”

Peter turned to him. “Is it all about your inadequacy?”

Jeremy’s smile fell off his face. He matched Peter’s blank gaze.

“How do you show who’s boss?” Peter said. “Verbal threats? Intimidation? Can you tell the difference between conquest and closeness? Or do you do one to get the other, even if it doesn’t last? It never lasts. But she enjoys it, right? The way you do it? And you know what, afterwards? Ask her sweet, she just might go on a date with you. Because by then, she’s trained. So...it’s easy. That’s the kind they call the power rapist.”

The others looked down as if invisible hands had been dealt them, and it was time to call bets.

“If that sounds closer, don’t sweat it,” Peter said. “It’s the most common type in this country. Murrigan rapists are power rapists. Fantasy first, then rape to fuel more fantasy. The more they resist, the more they’ll submit. That’s what we want, right? Because that’s what *they* want. Our fantasy is that we’re fulfilling *their* fantasy. Once we realize that, well. If this one doesn’t work out...maybe Miss Next will be Miss Right. Because we’re such helpless, helpless, helpless romantics. We need more. We always. Need. More.”

Jeremy sniggered, then sang, “Lookin for love in all the wrong places.” He struck a match and put fire to a cigarette. “So where does that put us?”

“In the big leagues,” Peter said. “Have kit, will travel. The higher order of...us will wear a disguise, blindfold the grab. We’ve done this. We’ve done it *instinctively*. Let’s get past ‘Do we dare?’ and accept *we already have*. At the same time, we line up with the profile just as we’ll never-ever be put on a line up. Why? Because we’re Caucasian, mid 30s. Little or no arrest record. Reasonably well educated. We keep our cars clean, we keep our noses clean. We hold jobs. We fit in. Even that dumb schlub Ed Gein was the neighborhood babysitter. Big Ed Kemper hung out with the cops working his crimes. Gacy volunteered for the Jaycees. The Green River Killer was a journeyman painter for 30 years. His nickname was Smiley. After two plus decades and fifty-odd victims, he lost *count*.”

Peter placed both hands flat on the table. “And you know who these are? These are the losers. These are the ones who got caught. And even then...! Charles Ng stole a bench vise. Dumb. Bundy got pulled over for a driving violation. Kemper, he just got tired and turned himself in.”

Peter sighed as if he too was tired. “None of them had what we have,” he said. “The other four watching our backs. Read the book, gentlemen. If we’re not greedy...or messy...we can have this. For as long as we want it. All we lack are some garbage bags and rope. For me, Brian, and Todd, when we go out.”

10

“I thought I was the bookworm.”

Peter glanced up at Brian, then returned his gaze to a wind break of pines. Brian took this as invitation enough and sat down. It was two days later, after an afternoon of work on the farm.

“You know an awful lot,” Brian said. He tried to look at the trees the way Peter did. “Why’d you guess I could’ve killed that woman?”

“I didn’t guess. I said outside chance, Brian. Would ghost of an outside chance satisfy you better?”

“I never even got the address. I just went along for the ride.”

Silence.

“I never killed her.”

Silence.

“I don’t think Jeremy did, either.”

Silence.

“Okay, look. You don’t want to talk...”

“Jeremy...” Peter said, and cleared his throat. “I think Jeremy wants to confirm something he already is. Just the way Lenny’s out to prove he’s something he’s really not. Todd will either man up or short circuit. You’re the only one I can’t figure out.”

“I’m not a killer. If that’s what you mean.”

“Then why do you deny it so much?”

“Are there really...”

“Really what?”

“People doing this?”

“Doing what, Bri? Sitting on porches?”

“People who...keep slaves.”

“I don’t have any *names*, in case you feel the urge to chat. And this doesn’t exactly show up on census forms or IRS returns. So I’m oh for two there. But, yeah, I can tell you what’s estimated. In the world now, there’s between 25 to 30 million slaves. Traffickers being what they are, I’d say estimate high.”

“Where’s that, mostly Africa?”

Peter shrugged. “It’s everywhere. Eighty percent are sex slaves. Average age of entry into the trade is between 12 to 14 years old. Parts of Europe, they got this system down. Greek brothels truck their pregnant girls to Bulgaria, where the babies get sold to pedophile rings.”

“Wow. Sick.”

“Money is amoral.”

“And you know these numbers, like off the back of your hand. And it doesn’t bother you, how many little kids—”

“Here, between 100,000 and 300,000 children. With less than 1000 arrests a year.”

“Where’s that? Africa or Europe?”

“That’s here, Brian.”

“Come on,” Brian said, “this is fucking America.”

“Yes. This is,” Peter said. “It’s fucking America more than you think. More than you can imagine.”

MONICA

1

Person of interest named in trailer park slaying

Goochland police placed Roswell (“Jerry”) Cain, 32, under custody as a person of interest regarding the stabbing death of his estranged wife, Candace.

Cain was apprehended for unrelated warrants. He was charged with burglary, theft, criminal mischief and criminal trespass.

Police say Cain fled when approached at his Sheppard Town Road apartment. He was found moments later behind a parked truck, where he was arrested and identified as Cain.

Police say next to the truck was a backpack full of cigarettes and boxed batteries. Also found were a knife, a black ski mask, and a glass punch.

Cain was taken to the Henrico County Booking Center, where he was arraigned by Magisterial District Judge Bruce Callandar.

Cain has not yet been charged with the October 23 slaying. He is held on \$650,000 bond at the Henrico County Jail.



Once Jerry Cain was brought in, details of the murder began to come out.

The deceased received 82 stab wounds. Defensive cuts indicate she fought back. She hadn’t screamed because her throat had been hewn past the windpipe. When the first blade snapped in her torso, the killer got a fresh knife from the kitchen. Neither robbery nor sexual assault seemed to be a motive.

“And she worked *so* hard to get the blood off,” Jeremy said. “Only to... oh, well. You know the irony? If she wasn’t in such an all-fired hurry to leave that night, she’d be alive today.”

Jeremy relayed the details with savage defiance. His copshop pals from the Boonies were certain they had the right man. And it wasn’t him and it wasn’t Brian so fuck you, fuck you, and fuck especially you, said Jeremy.

“Here’s what I don’t get,” Lenny said. “Goochland. What is that? Who names a town Goochland?”

“Goochlandiers,” Brian said. “To celebrate the migratory home of the wild North American

gooch.”

“What the hell’s a gooch?” Todd said.

“Go to Goochland,” Brian said. “It’s lousy with them. During the season, they have to put up Gooch Crossing signs.”

“Gooch is another name for the taint,” Jeremy said.

“Are you serious?”

“What’s the taint?” Peter said.

“Wait, I’ve *heard* that,” Todd said.

“I buy it,” Brian said. “Between the nutsack and the asscrack of Virginia lies the Land of the Mighty Gooch!”

The boys cracked up. “Are we done?” Jeremy said, the smile stuck to his face.

Apparently not. “Here, goochie, goochie!” “Don’t scratch a sweaty gooch!” “It’s the bird with the itchy plumage.”

Through tears, Lenny noticed that Jeremy was still waiting. “Wh—what’s up?”

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter,” Jeremy said. “You’re not ready.”

He headed downstairs.



After a bit, they followed him to the Clubhouse. He had the entertainment hutch sprung open and was in a sort of crouch in the alcove, intent on his work. Jeremy dug and scratched at the concrete high in the side wall with a buck knife.

Todd peered over his shoulder. “O-N ...no, O-M... what’s omm?”

“Not omm, it’s *ohm*,” Brian said. “Jer wants us to have a meditation room. A few incense cones and a black light pos—”

“Operation Miranda,” Peter said. “It’s what Lake and Ng carved into the inside wall of their dungeon.”

“No shit,” Lenny said.

They drifted to the card table and sat down and waited for Jeremy to finish and join them. He came wiping the knife blade on his jeans, leaving smears of white grit.

“Am I the only one who takes this seriously?” he said.

“Look at this place,” Brian said. “Look at what we’ve done. How much more seriously do you want?”

“Last week, everybody here thought I was a killer.”

“I-I was never... convinced,” Lenny said.

“It crossed your minds.” He set the knife down heavily on the table in front of him. “And it

crossed my mind that any one of you could’ve picked up the phone and said, ‘Hey, I know the guy who drove that girl home that night. Kind of a funny story. He pretended to stab her to death as a joke just a few hours before she ended up stabbed to death. I’m sure it’s a coincidence. Crazy, huh?’”

“No one would do that,” Todd said.

“That’s comforting to know in hindsight,” Jeremy said. “We didn’t even *do* anything and we almost fell apart.”

“Well, what are we *going* to do, I mean seriously,” Todd said. “Kidnap, rape? Are we really thinking about this?”

“Tell me you’re thinking about anything else,” Jeremy said.

The table went silent.

“I was accused of something like this once before,” Jeremy said. “I won’t be again.”

“You were accused of killing someone?” Lenny said.

“Not quite, but close enough. I was young. I wasn’t ready.”

“Ready for what? You keep saying ready,” Todd said. “Ready for what?”

“Ready to go all the way, if necessary. Ready to take total charge of my life at any time.”

“You’re not making sense,” Brian said.

Jeremy unpocketed a small pill bottle and carefully spilled eight oval pills on the table, each about the size of a pea.

“I made ten of these. That’s two each, for all of us. Take ’em, don’t have ’em, I don’t care.” He flipped up his collar to show them the small plastic packet pinned by his throat. “But me, I’m keeping mine close from now on.”

“What are they?” Brian said.

“What you think they are,” Jeremy said. “The ultimate sleep aid. Cyanide capsules.”

“Cyanide!” Lenny said. “They’re brown. I thought they were supposed to be black.”

“The brown is a rubber coating. Inside is a thin-walled glass ampule that contains concentrated potassium cyanide that I made from sodium nitroprusside. You only need one pill. The other’s a backup. It’s important not to swallow them whole. You bite down as soon as it’s in your mouth.”

“Eww,” Lenny said. “Bite into glass?”

“Brain death occurs in a minute or two, or a few seconds in your case. A little after that, no more heartbeat. It’s quick and relatively painless.”

“Thank you,” Peter said, and slipped two pills into his breast pocket.

“And it’s as extreme as fuck!” Brian said. “What are we, Nazis in the bunker? What’s all this talk you told me, nobody gets hurt? It’s all for shits and giggles.”

“We’re past that,” Peter said.

“Past that how?” Brian said. “I don’t remember signing a pledge. A suicide pact!”

“Nobody dies,” Todd said, taking a brace of pills, “unless it’s necessary.”

“Wow-ee,” Lenny said.

“What did you do,” Brian said to Jeremy. “When you drove them home? What did you do?”

“Nothing,” Jeremy said. “I swear.”



On Friday, Goochland police issued a brief statement that while Roswell (“Jerry”) Cain was remanded for burglary and criminal mischief, no evidence connected him to the untimely death of his ex-wife. His alibi held, and he was no longer a murder suspect.

2

Even though it was a hike and a half, the boys got in the habit of meeting up at the farmhouse. Todd seemed not to care about their comings and goings. He signed the checks for the new generator and the commercial-grade dehumidifier that unstunk the basement in a week.

Even though it was his farm, Todd was the least reliable presence. He would show up late on most poker nights, beer on his breath, sit for a few hands, and then go upstairs and pass out on one of the Army cots.

No one begrudged him. A pall had fallen over the group. Peter had gone back to being silent and watchful. Brian made too many jokes, his “tell” that he was hyped up and nervous. Jeremy, once again the last known person to see Candace alive, was edgy and defensive. Even Lenny got snappish.

“Thaaank you,” Brian said, taking in a pot.

“You’re not welcome, you’re just lucky,” Lenny said.

“Why am I lucky?”

“Cause I don’t bluff.”

“You do bluff, Lenny. You don’t bluff for shit. Or you bluff *with* shit. But whichever way that goes, you’re a shitty bluffer.”

“If I get a good hand, I play a good hand,” Lenny said.

“Yeah, how’s that working out for you?”

“*I don’t lie.*”

“Then don’t play poker.”

“Don’t laugh at me.”

“No one’s laughing,” Jeremy said. “Deal, willya?”

“Everybody in,” Brian said. Antes were thrown. Cards were dealt. Jeremy rapped, check. Peter

bid two bucks.

“Shit,” Lenny said, and threw down. Brian folded, and then Jeremy.

“Brian, do you go out of your *way* to deal trash?”

“Well, that was exciting,” Brian said.

Peter took in the meager pot. “How much time,” he said, “are we going to give this?”

“Give what?”

“To decide. Whether we bet or fold. There’s another hand on the table, a richer hand, and no one’s playing it.”

“We’ve gone over and over it,” Jeremy said in a husky moan.

“And what have you put down?” Peter said. “Poor you. All the pressure. Are you a murderer? Even your best friends don’t know. You tell us you’re not. You had opportunity but no motive. No clues tie you to the crime. The police don’t even know you were there. No wonder you’re climbing the walls, Jeremy. You know, you’re not as good at this as you think you are.”

“Way to go for a pep talk,” Brian said. “Ever thought of coaching Little League?”

“And you need to get over wondering who’s going to play you in the movie,” Peter said.

“What?”

“Brian. Five guys that pull off a crime, that’s an adventure. That’s what this is to you. A chance to do something bigger than your life. You’re in it for the romance. That’s what I couldn’t figure out. How naive you are. You keep dreaming this is some caper, some heist, some Mission: Impossible shit. It’s not. It’s kidnap and rape, like Todd said. We’re not going to steal jewels or knock over a bank or get revenge on the mob. We’re going to do the most sinful thing there is. Why? Because we feel like it. There’s no one rooting for that, Brian. This ain’t a feel-good lousy movie. No one wants us to win. The only winning move we have is that we don’t give a shit what anybody else wants.”

“Well.”

“Got something witty to say?”

“No.”

“About time. Maybe you’re learning.”

“You’re a true sick fuck, Peter. I never knew.”

“You knew. You never realized.” Peter pushed back his glasses.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Lenny said to the floor between his legs.

“You sure? I think I do.”

“Doesn’t us being friends matter?”

“No.” Peter watched him. “Do I have your permission or do I just go for it?”

“Go for it,” Lenny said.

“You’re the angriest person I know. But you hardly ever let it out on anybody else. Not really. Because you know what it does to you. You eat yourself up for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, Lenny. I watch you. The gags, the blow-up toys. It’s like a drunk trying to forget his troubles. The more you make yourself stupid and jolly, the more miserable you get. The more you keep thinking of it.”

Lenny shuddered spasmodically. “Stop.”

“I can. Can you?” Peter said. “How old is she?”

Lenny shoved the table as hard as he could. “STOP!”

Peter moved the table edge away from his gut as gently as if he was shooing a sleeping cat. “So do we get up from it,” he said, “or do we play?”

“I’ll play,” Jeremy said.

“I’m in,” Brian said.

“Whattthehell,” said Lenny.

Peter nodded. “Go wake up Todd.”

3

“No more Mother-May-I. No more votes,” Peter said. “I told you I’d do all in my power to protect us in the event this thing moves forward. The way it looks, the event is a done deal. It’s down to a matter of when.”

“So wass to discuss?” said Todd, still slurring.

“What we’ve hardly touched on. The most dangerous aspect of this enterprise. Should our guest die...”

“She won’t,” Brian said. “We’re not killers.”

“We’re not anything yet,” Jeremy said. “Give it time.”

“No one,” Todd said, “gets killed in this house. My house, my rule.”

“Wasn’t the idea,” Lenny said, “we just try it out, like a one-time thing? Keep the risk low. Now, yeah?, killing? What’s more risky than that?”

“Not killing,” Peter said.

“What?”

“It would have helped us out enormously, Jeremy, if you *had* murdered that woman,” Peter said.

“Sorry. Wasn’t thinking.”

“How?” Todd said. “It would’ve popped our collective cherry?”

“Crudely put,” Peter said, “but yes. Returning our guest to her life someday requires special forethought and certain protocols. For one, she never sees our faces or learns our names. Does that need

explanation? For two, until we choose to release her, this room is it. The only world she knows. Here and the alcove. The, whaddayacallit, Meditation Room. She eats in here, sleeps in here, does her business in here. We...know her here.”

“How does she never see our faces?” Lenny said.

“Masks for us, blindfold for her. Ideally, both. This is not to be cruel. It’s to help her survive. Because if she, for whatever reason or by whatever accident, can ever identify any one of us or this place, then either she’s dead or we’re all dead. And I know my vote.”

“Mine, too,” Jeremy said.

“It has to be unanimous.”

The others nodded.

“I thought you said no more votes,” Brian said.

Peter ignored him. “With that, this too: no guilt. No matter what happens. The same way we control her fate, we must accept ours.”

“One more thing,” Todd said. “Just spitballing this. We all get a turn, right? Or turns. Whatever. But it’s nobody’s idea that we all go at once, right? Okay. Just winging that out there in advance, so it’s clear.”

“The book I gave you,” Peter said, “is not about rape. It’s hardly even about the threat of rape. It’s about power. In fact, Fowler intended to show that everybody’s a prisoner according to their class and social standing.”

“Ohhh,” Lenny said.

“Don’t shit me. You haven’t read it.”

“I was going to,” Lenny said. “I’m not much of a reader.”

“I skipped around,” Brian said. “But I totally get that class thing.”

“I ain’t read it,” Todd said. “I ain’t gonna.”

“When you get a new tool, do you read the manual?” Jeremy said.

“Yeah.”

“Then you should read the book.”

“This is going to happen soon, gentlemen,” Peter said. “I feel it.”

“So what do we do about the damn book?”

“Cram.”

All the self-reassurance alone about how careful and safe he was told Jeremy that he wasn’t being

careful and he wasn't safe.

Injectable morphine was about the strongest the narc box would yield, and Jeremy disappeared too much of it for it not to be noticed. It was easier when he was a student. They didn't even *stock* GHB anymore. He had chloroform, of course, but was leery about how often it induced fatal cardiac arrhythmia. Rompun he could scam through Todd, probably, even though the farm had no horses. He scored OxyContin for himself. He wanted to be prepared for all contingencies. It was a start.

Still, he felt good. He buzzed on the thrill of pushing it. Rushing the net. He was capable of anything, and everyone either knew it or imagined it of him. He had Candace of the hot-lick candles to thank.

“Know what happens when you bitch too much, Lenny?” he said the other night. “You *become* the bitch. Doris gives you shit all the time? So shit on her. Bring her in, big guy. Bring her in.”

“Bring her in where?” Lenny said.

“To the farm,” Jeremy said. “I know you can't. And I can't. But Brian can. Peter can. Todd can. All it takes is a phone call. You're out of town visiting your sister or whoever. You're gone a week, two weeks. And right in the middle, Doris goes into the wind. Her and the kid.”

“Mina?”

“Think about it. You like the idea? Does it blow up your skirt?”

Jeremy didn't mean a word of it. It was all for shits and giggles. But it was so fucking easy.

And it was funny the way Lenny didn't say yes or no, with his dumb mouth hanging open and his big lower lip pooching in and out.

5

Two meat and one vegetable lasagnas, a tuna casserole, and a Bundt cake. Peter surveyed the memorials in food to the life of Isabel Krue and thought *Perfect*. He threw it all away.

One bright Good Friday, Big Ed Kemper bludgeoned his sleeping mother with a claw hammer. He had oral sex with her decapitated head before using it as a darts target. He shoved her vocal cords down the garbage disposal, but the disposal spewed them back up. “That seemed appropriate,” Big Ed chuckled later, “as much as she bitched and screamed and yelled at me.”

The worst Peter could do was to have Isabel Krue's remains cremated. There would be no resurrection in the flesh, mama. Burn. Burn, and I hope to Christ you get used to it.

Peter sat on the far left side of the chintz sofa, where he always sat, and watched an Eli Roth movie. The house was somehow more silent, his solitude oppressive. There was no god for him, no family, only flickers on the TV screen and his place on the sofa. The left side of the sofa had been his

place always, rooting him with childhood tales of the devout and the good.

6

Lenny and Brian took in an early evening screening of the new movie about the 26th Century cyborg assassin with the big tits. At the food court, Brian tore holes in the story, something about a grandfather paradox, and Lenny bemoaned that the lead only got majorly naked twice, and never flashed her bush.

“What about her?” Lenny said.

“Her who?” Brian said.

“That one!”

“Nice.”

“You think?”

“No, nice: ‘Girl vanishes from mall, film at eleven. Do you recognize these men pointing?’”

“Oh, shit,” Lenny said, cowed at once by security cams.

“Just go a little more subtle, Dick Dastardly.”

“Got it.”

“Anyway, you were saying? You’ll never get married. Why not? Ferrets look cute in tuxedos.”

“The last time I veered away from the altar my ex got her eight-year-old to say I touched her, and I almost landed in federal prison for twenty years as a child molester.”

“Oh my god.”

“True story.”

“I know,” Brian said. “I mean, I didn’t— You alluded to it, but you never said.”

“You know what they call those kind of guys in prison? Short eyes. You know the life span inside of someone accused of that?”

“Oh my god, Lenny.”

“The cunt wanted me dead.”

“The child?”

“Her mother.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“They get solitary confinement 22 hours a day. The lucky ones. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I understand.”

“That’s what’s on my record. That’s why I can’t be like you and choose who to snatch.”

“I don’t know what to say. But Doris and you are different people. And I’ve never seen you even

look at Phil.”

“Exactly, thank you! I ignore the living shit out of that kid on purpose. On purpose!”

“No question.”

“How do you think that makes me feel?”

“Ah...bad?”

“Sick to my stomach!”

“But you don’t have that kind of relationship. I mean, with Doris. Since when are you discussing marriage?”

“She’s knocked up.”

“What?”

“Doris is pregnant.”

“Oh. Oh!”

“Don’t grin like that.”

“Dad! You dog!”

“This is serious!”

“I’m happy for you. Can’t I be happy for you? I mean, should I be happy for you?”

“Yes. I just...have to make a decision. Wait: that one.”

“What one?”

“Eight o’clock.”

“My eight o’clock or your eight o’clock?”

“I can’t see my eight o’clock.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Slowly!”

“I know! Turtleneck?”

“Yeah.”

“What about her?”

“That’s what I say.”

“Dude, it seems awful random.”

“That’s the beauty of it,” Lenny said. “It’s better if it’s random. Don’t you like her?”

“No, I do. I like her.”

“Then?”

“I don’t know. What do I do? Follow her out to her car? ‘Pardon me, madam, may I wonk you on the bean and drag you off to this secret lair where me and my pals bang the bejesus out of you?’”

“Well, you have to do *something*.”

“Fun people-watching with you, Lenny. Real fun. You bring a whole new dimension to it.”

“She’s gone. Forget it. She’s gone.”

“Plenty more where that came from.”

“She was perfect.”

“She was all right.”

“No, she was...” Lenny sighed. He picked up his cup and set it down without sipping from it.
“Maybe it’s best.”

“What is?”

“We’re not...these guys. None of us. We only pretend we are when we’re all together. And it’s...don’t you feel it? Like a dare almost none of us wants to take.”

“And none of us can say no to,” Brian said. “Yeah, I feel it.”

“That’s what I mean. If ever there was a time for me to stop, it’s now. And I know it. I know it, Brian.” Lenny’s head bobbed as he tried to work out an emotion. “You and me, we’re always the most comical. I mean by that, we make the most jokes.”

“Thanks. That’s what I’d *hope* you’d mean.”

“But I also think that makes us the only grownups. You and me... when we play with toys, at least we know we’re playing with toys. The others, I don’t think they have a gee-dee clue what they’re playing with.”

7

Jeremy fumed as Lenny raked in a moderately sized pot. It had been a long, wasted night.

“Todd doesn’t show up again, we’re going to have to learn how to play fucking bridge,” Jeremy said. “Or whist.”

“I remember how to play hearts, a little,” Lenny said.

“Shaddup, Lenny. Never mind. Not the point,” Jeremy said.

“You know what I would call him?” Peter said.

“I did call him,” Brian said. “His cell phone’s off, or dead.”

“No, when he gets here,” Peter said. “Jeremy, you know what I would say to Todd, when he gets here? If I were you?”

“What’s that, Peter?”

“Motherfucker. I would say, You. Mother. Fucker.”

“Enlightening,” Jeremy said.

“After all, that’s what he said to you, if I recall, the time you came back so late from Goochland.

All those lost hours you were gone.”

“All those lost— if you want to say something, then say it!”

“We have,” Peter said. “You never answered.”

Brian filled the awkward silence with what sounded like an apology. “You never have.”

“What do you want to know?” Jeremy said.

Brian stopped shuffling. Everyone straightened a little.

“After you left here,” Peter said, “you drove them both home?”

“Yes. No: the other one, Elaine, she had her car parked at Candace’s. Once we got there, she drove herself.”

“Did you follow her?”

“No.”

“Do you know where she lives?”

“No. How could I?”

“I don’t know. So what did you do?”

“I stayed.”

“With Candace?”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“A while. Come on, is this necessary?”

“Why did you stay?”

“To get a blow job. All right? Happy now? That was part of the deal.”

“Did you get it?”

“No.”

“But you gave a tip,” Brian said.

“I lied.”

“What else did you lie about?” Peter said.

“Oh, god,” Lenny said.

“Nothing like that,” Jeremy said. “She said the deal was she owed me a BJ when we got here, meaning here. Once I took her home, she said the deal was over and the window was closed.”

“What did you do?”

“We fought about it.”

“God-god-god,” Lenny said.

“I told her I wanted some money back. She refused. It wasn’t worth fighting about, so I left.”

“But you said you fought about it.”

“It wasn’t... Nothing physical happened. I never touched her. I called her some names and I left.”

“Did you hang around?”

“No.”

“Did you go back?”

“No.”

“Where did you go?”

“Gentlemen’s Club, in Henrico. Hot and Ready, or something.”

“I’ve been there,” Lenny said.

“Basic strip joint. That’s where I spent the C note. I bought drinks, tipped the dancers. Was going to check out the VIP Lounge, but I noticed I hadn’t cleaned all the blood off *me*. The fake blood, thank you. So I left. It was dark. No one noticed. No one gave me a second look, at least. I was there about an hour. Then I came here. End of story.”

“And you never saw Candace again?”

“No.”

“You didn’t kill her?”

“No, Peter! Use your ears. I never killed her,” Jeremy fairly screamed. “*Never said I didn’t want to, though!*”

“Okay, doc,” Peter said, nodding slowly. “Very good.”

Todd’s big truck scrunched gravel outside, braking in a skid. They heard his door pop open and bang shut.

“What about the so-called best friend,” Brian said, “the other one who was here? Elaine? Where’s she in all this? How come we’ve never heard a peep from her?”

“I had more time,” Peter said, and tossed a pair of driver’s licenses onto the table. They landed face up. Candace L. Cain and Elaine D. Thompson.

“You...” Brian said. “You had the purses...”

“Is there a question in there somewhere?” Peter said.

“Why?”

“I told you I’d do all in my power to protect—”

“Short of murder!”

“I never said that,” Peter said, pushing back his glasses.

“Whoa,” Lenny said.

“What did you do to her?” Brian said.

“She’ll be discovered sooner or later. Or maybe not. I went as remote as I—”

Todd burst in, one eye blackened, his lower lip split, mud on his clothes, and blood caked on his

brow. “Good, you’re still here. You guys want to suit up and help me out at the truck? I got one.”

“One what?” Jeremy said.

“A tenant,” Todd said. “The start of our collection.”

The men heaved themselves up in a hazy jumble of motion, like firefighters underwater.

“Peter killed them,” Lenny told Todd.

“Killed who?”

“The women. The two women,” Lenny said. “Those whores that were here? Peter killed them.”

“Did he?” Todd said, tugging on his discipline mask. “Wow.”

8

Todd wouldn’t confess to himself that he was still searching for her. But the truth was, he was: he never stopped looking.

When he spotted her in, of all places, the Irish pub that was going upscale like crazy, what he thought was, *There it is; that was it.*

She was in the back, in the large nook across from the bar, sitting at one of the high, square tables, opposite two guys. Her hair was a little longer and she had lost some of her tan, but none of that nose.

The pub tried to be Irish through and through, but there was one incongruous design element, and the threesome sat right in front of it: a mural of a black jazz combo in full swing, with a black cat perched on a ledge above them, its back humped.

They probably haven’t noticed, Todd thought, nursing his Harp at the corner of the bar proper. Here they were in a pub reeking of the Emerald Isle, nine traditional brews on tap, and the bitch was drinking CoronafuckingLight with a wedge of fuckinglemon in a glass.

Todd felt fury at the sight of her, not only for himself but for the honor of the place. He liked the high-ceilinged main room with its ornate globe lights and plain broad tables. The passing waitress in her tight black I [SHAMROCK] [GUINNESS] tee shirt *belonged*. Todd was especially proud of the deeply lacquered two-and-a-quarter-inch oak flooring, one of his first ever installs, that stood up so brilliantly to all these years of heavy foot traffic.

The bitch with the wide nose and the wider mean streak didn’t *fit*. Not here, not anyplace. No...there was one place Todd knew she could go. One place he could put her.

He could see her face almost full on. If she gazed even slightly to the left, she might spot him, or any other patrons she attempted to maim or kill earlier that year. But she never did. Todd tried hard to eavesdrop on their conversation from across the room, but it was impossible. He thought he heard one of the guys call her Marcy or Marsha, something with an M. Marcy sounded right, but Todd couldn’t

remember. Never mind. He would find out later. He owed it to himself for them to get reacquainted.

Todd paid for his drink and went out the back, tipping his face away just in case. Todd gulped air as soon as he was outside. It cleared his head. He was in no rush. He could think what to do.

Todd’s truck was in the perfect location, opposite the main back door but on the far side of the lot. He had even backed in, ready for a fast getaway, as if he knew somehow this night would require it.

The pub had two back doors, one with a ramp from the kitchen, and a fancy front entrance streetside that seldom got used. But seldom wasn’t never.

Todd paced the parking lot, and found his second piece of good luck in seconds. Marcy or Marsha’s red Nissan was directly under a sodium arc lamp, in excellent sight line from his truck. He inspected the car to make sure. There was a UMW student decal on the windshield, a soccer ball decal on the rear window, and a bumper sticker proclaiming CATITUDE! It wasn’t much to go on, but it was enough. Hadn’t she told him about a cat of hers that was dying or just died, something like that? He was almost sure she had.

Todd got into his truck, content. He jotted down the Nissan’s license plate number. Now there was nothing to do but wait. Mostly he watched the main back door, bracketed by two faded flags, a green one sporting ERIN GO BRAGH! and the flag of Ireland.

Todd watched people come and go, mostly go, mostly in groups. The dinner crowd was done. One of the guys that was with Marcy or Marsha left by himself. *You don’t know how lucky you are, buddy*, Todd thought. One down, one to go.

It took another half hour for them to emerge. They kissed in the parking lot, and Todd wondered if she would go home with him, or him with her. Todd would follow, in either case. It was a strange thing, watching them kiss. He felt no jealous pang, only a dull sense of déjà vu. He thought, *Get on with it*. He thought, *Enjoy this one, sweet lips*. *Next one’s gonna get lots rougher*.

The lovers parted. To Todd’s surprise, the guy got into a late model Mustang and just left. The wide nosed girl lingered, flashing his rearview the ASL sign for “I love you.” With no real hurry, she ambled toward her car, fishing in her purse. She never looked up. Why should she? She was in a well-lit public space, in a pretty safe part of town, in a town that was pretty safe to begin with.

Primo perfecto, Todd thought. He stepped down from his truck and strode from the shadows.

Todd grabbed her just above the left elbow the instant she got her keys out. She spun to him and Todd smoothly stripped the keys from her and pocketed them. He walked her back toward the Dodge Ram and for the first few steps she was too stunned to resist.

“I want to show you something,” Todd said.

“What is this?” Marcy or Marsha said. “Who are you?”

That took the cake! *Could she possibly not remember?* Todd whirled and glared at her. Her eyes widened. She remembered, all right.

“Oh, shit,” she said.

“I want to show you something,” Todd said, and he was pulling her now. The truck was only steps away.

“No no no,” she said.

“Who you messing with, chief?”

Two guys lumbered across the narrow divide of cars, converging on them from the left. Where had *they* come from, the kitchen, or the pub? One guy had sandy, close-cropped hair, and the other wore a no-emblem blue ballcap. Both were over six feet.

“Let me go,” Marcy or Marsha said. “This faggot’s been following me all over, trying to feel me up!”

“Let her go,” Skinhead said.

“No — that’s a lie!” Todd said. They’d walk away if they knew the truth, but how could he tell them?

“Now,” Ballcap said.

“Last chance,” Skinhead said. But he didn’t give him a chance. He grabbed Todd’s arm and wrenched it hard, making him release the girl.

“He was going to rape me, I think,” the girl said. “I’m sure of it.”

“Want us to call the cops?”

“No, I just don’t want to see this fucking creep,” Marcy or Marsha said. “Keep him away from me.”

“Will do,” Skinhead said.

“She’s lying,” Todd said. “Wait a second!”

“My keys,” she said. “He grabbed my keys! They’re in his pocket.”

“What the hell, man?” Ballcap said, peering at Todd in disgust.

Skinhead patted Todd down and dug in his pockets. Todd tried to squirm away. “The *fuck* you have any right!” he said.

“Here you go,” Skinhead said, all courtesy.

“Those are his, these are mine,” she said. “Thanks.”

Skinhead let Todd’s keys drop as though they were filth in his fist.

“Sure you don’t want us to get the cops?” Ballcap said.

“I’m sure,” Marcy or Marsha said. “I just—” She held up her hands and closed her eyes as if to ward Todd off by force of will. “I have to go.”

“SHE’S GETTING AWAY!” Todd strained after her, and Ballcap took his other arm.

“Yeah, I think so,” Ballcap said. “Come on.”

They spun him and started to move. “My keys,” Todd said. Skinhead scooped them up and jammed them in Todd’s pocket. “There’s my car,” Todd said. They ignored him this time.

The guys frogwalked Todd across the street and up a sidewalk with a rising slant of parched grass on their right and Lafayette Boulevard on their left. There was little traffic. The block ahead was the train station. Todd laughed. “What, you gonna run me out of town?”

They crossed the next street and veered right. The platform was upstairs, accessible from the back. “Something like that,” Skinhead said.

Dozens of stone pillars supported the platform. At the perimeter, they were thick square uprights, but in the gloomy recesses, many pillars yielded to graceful archways, as if remnants of a older platform foundation, before the VRE and Amtrak. Some years ago, this perimeter had been fronted with tall, close iron bars, to keep winos and meth heads from nesting underneath.

Skinhead front-kicked the perimeter gate. It banged open. *Uh-oh*. The knew the lock was busted. Skinhead and Ballcap had access to this forbidden place. This was not good. This was *not* good.

“You like beating on people?” Ballcap cooed. “You like it?”

They shoved him inside, letting go of him simultaneously. Todd could sprint for the shadows to hide or evade, or he could turn to face them. Before he could choose, one of them shoved him again, harder. He stumbled forward, catching his balance with his hands.

“Be a lousy dick all you want,” one of them said, he wasn’t sure who, the voice echoing. “But not at our place.”

Todd turned to face them. “I get it, I get it,” he said. They kept coming. “Two against one. Not exactly fair odds.”

Something hard out of the darkness smashed into his left ear. Before he went down, a kick exploded into his ribs, and another punch caught him on the neck.

Todd had no idea how long the beating went on. He was stood up twice, at least twice, so each of them could take a turn at his face. He may have blacked out. There was no memory of the punishment ending, or of them leaving. There was only the rumble, after a time, of a train overhead, going from somewhere to somewhere, but not stopping here.

The dirt and dust against his cheek was moist, almost wet, but the subterranean vault stank dryly of rat turds, cigarette butts, and old chewing gum.

“You forget,” Todd said, but found it was too painful to speak. *You forget, bitch. Got your*

number. Got your license. You're traceable. You're mine.

As soon as he could figure out how to stand.

10

The five of them were suited up for the second time in their lives. All the men but Todd were struck by how bizarre and frightening they must appear, a pack of guys in full-head leather masks and black gloves, descending the unlit porch of a remote farmhouse. What Todd thought was, *I did it.*

Brian thought, *It's too late. It's too late! We were talking about this. It was nothing but talk. Shooting the shit. Now people are dead. Murdered. Vanished. There's a girl here kidnaped, about to be raped. No one blinked. Goddammit, no one blinked!*

Todd opened the driver's door and inserted the key in the ignition. He turned it just enough to allow him to power lower the crew cab window. Before he withdrew, he handed out a white and red plastic bag to Jeremy.

“Hold,” Todd said. “Got your knife?”

Jeremy unpocketed the knife that had carved the initials for Operation Miranda.

“Could've used this earlier,” Todd said. He reached in and down through the crew cab window and sawed through something in three strokes. Then he opened the door.

She lay sprawled along the crew seat, eyes wide and wild, duct taped at ankles, mouth, and wrists. Her arms were stretched overhead, and her wrists were further duct taped to the far door handle. Todd had untethered her bound feet from the driver's side door.

She wore sneakers, slacks, and a short sleeved lab coat. Embroidered in crimson on the right chest was the word PHARMACIST, and pinned to her left chest was a red and white badge. The badge displayed the CVS logo at the top, repeated PHARMACIST at the bottom, and in the white middle, in black block letters, gave her name.

Monica.

SCRATCH PAPER

1

“Excuse me,” Todd said. “What do I take for something like this?” He pointed to his face.

The CVS night pharmacist didn’t gasp, but composing herself required visible effort. “I would say a visit to the e.r.,” the chick said. This was a night of encores. Todd remembered her too, the runt with the blonde curly hair too big for her face and the huge, owlish glasses.

“They’ve got a nine hour wait,” Todd said. “And this won’t wait nine hours. Please. They didn’t break or take anything. Just pounded my pride a little.”

“They?”

“Ah, I got mugged,” Todd said. “Two, I-don’t-know, jerks. Teach me to venture on the wrong side of the tracks.” *Underneath them, specifically.*

“Do you want me to call the police?”

“Ugh.” Todd shook his head and smiled. It was nice, at least, *him* being asked that question. “I want to go home, lick my wounds, drink ten beers, and forget the whole thing.”

“If you’re sure,” the pharmacist said doubtfully.

“Head wounds always look worse than they are.”

“Have you seen these?” she said.

“Ha ha,” Todd said. “Where do I go?”

“Right behind you, sir. 16A is pain relievers, and 16B is first aid.”

“Convenient,” Todd said. “Thanks.”

He stowed necessities in a handbasket and added a chilled Dr. Pepper from an end-aisle fridge. He went out to his truck parked around the side, swigged down twin doses of ibuprofen and Advil, and promptly passed out.



Shush...shush. Shuffle, shuffle.

Traffic opposite the windshield, and something else. Someone approaching. Todd had been out of it for how long? Minutes, or hours? He had no idea.

He snapped to with total clarity. The girl, the night pharmacist, passed the back of his truck. It must be shift end. She was on her way home. Hours, then. Todd was moving before he even thought about it. He snagged a bottle of analgesics.

Not a runt, Todd thought, *she’s practically my height*. In his childhood, druggists worked from a raised dais at the back of the store, like imperial judges. This CVS pharmacy had to be on floor level.

As that registered, he was already out of the truck and heading after her. “Excuse me, remember me?” Todd said. “I can’t read this. How soon can I hit another dose?”

“Let me see,” the chick said, taking the pill bottle and peering at the directions.

Todd gawped, registering something else. “You’re prettier,” he said. When she looked up, he hit her square in the face. She collapsed bonelessly, her purse still looped over her shoulder.

There was no one in the parking lot. He hadn’t even checked. Christ, what was he doing? His body seemed to know. Todd hoisted the girl up and drew her into the semi-shadows beside the Ram’s driver’s side. He opened the crew cab door and hefted her inside, sliding and pushing her the rest of the way.

Rope. Peter said he had to have rope, and what else? Bags. Garbage bags. What for? For one wild flash, Todd thought about buying some from CVS.

He had duct tape in his Homak tool box secured in the pickup’s bed. Todd got it. By sheer chance, he caught a glint off the girl’s glasses. They lay under the rear tire of the car next to the Ram, probably her car. Todd got the glasses, careful not to touch either the pavement or her car, and looked around. Nothing else.

Todd went to the passenger side and opened the crew cab door. He tossed the glasses onto the footwell, and wound tape around and around her lower face, sealing her mouth. There was a single pinprick of blood high on her left cheek, or maybe not even that, just the start of a rising bruise. Todd kept busy. He bound the girl’s wrists and laid them in her lap, then closed the door. He rounded the truck, opened the other side, and taped her ankles together. How long had all this taken? Not even minutes. Seconds. Todd closed the door on his victim, his prize. What else was there to do?

Todd got into the cab, slid open the partition plexiglass, and leaned way into the back. He cinched the bind between her ankles to the door handle with another few loops of duct tape. Then he did the same for her wrists, after raising her arms overhead. Her head lolled and she sounded a sleepy “Mnnn.” It didn’t matter. They’d be long gone before she came to.

Todd homed the ignition key, but froze. What else was there? Something. *Get going!* No, he had been too damn lucky. There had been *something*. Give it a second. Give it...

He gave her pills to look at. The bottle had prints on it, both of theirs. Oh shit, where was it? Todd got out of the truck again, and because the search was frenzied it took longer, a lot longer, or at least that’s how it seemed.

The bottle was dead center under his own truck. Todd hiked his sleeves over his hands, scuttled

partway under, and swatted the bottle clear. He retrieved it gingerly, and got back behind the wheel. With enormous satisfaction, Todd returned the ibuprofen to the CVS bag. Then he started the Ram, backed out, indicated, and drove away.

2

“Whoever get it gets to tap it,” Todd said. “Isn’t that what you said?” They gathered in the ill-lit basement, in a semi-circle around the Clubhouse door.

“I said something of the kind,” Jeremy said.

“Right. I’m first.”

“Wait, right now?” Brian said. “We’re starting now?”

“Might we... Brian’s right. Might we,” Jeremy said, “be better served if we brought her in slow?”

“Slow?” Todd said. “She’s here. That’s as brought in as it gets, you moron.”

“That’s not what he means,” Peter said. “We need to make her understand.”

“That’s what I’m gonna *do*,” Todd said, with a tug at his crotch.

“It would be nice,” Jeremy said, “to instill some cooperation. To make her even slightly on our side.”

“Our *side*?” Lenny said.

“How the hell does that happen?” Brian said.

“I talk to her,” Jeremy said. “I make her see the situation. She will last longer if we...don’t break her. No one disputes your dibs, Todd. You did an excellent job. You’ll go first. But let me talk to her.”

Todd thought about it, scowling. “I trust you,” he said.

“I know you do,” Jeremy said. “Thank you, Todd.”



She was handcuffed and manacled to the futon. True to his word, Brian had devised a hidden compartment for the chains in an armrest.

“Thank you for not trying to remove the blindfold,” Jeremy said.

The hood pivoted a little, finding him by the sound of his voice. “I don’t have money,” she said, her voice low and steady.

“We know,” Jeremy said. He let the moment play out. “But you have enemies.”

“Enemies?”

“You were targeted for ransom, first of all. But you can’t pay it. Your parents can’t pay it. You have no one. So...why are you here?”

She began to tremble. Jeremy heard her breathe fast in and out through her nose.

“You’re very brave,” he said. “I would like to remove your blindfold. So we can discuss this a little more openly. Would you mind if I did that?”

She said nothing, only waited.

“I have a mask on,” Jeremy said. “Don’t let it scare you. It’s for your protection that you can’t recognize me. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

Jeremy drew off the hood. “Here are your glasses,” he said, and fitted them onto her face. “Just...” With the hood, he dabbed away the sweat on her brow.

Monica took in the Clubhouse in rapid, sidelong glances, never letting Jeremy out of her sight for more than a second. Chemical toilet. Sink and wash-out basin. Mini-fridge. Octagon-shaped table with green cloth and cup holders. A floor to ceiling entertainment hutch. “What is...this place?”

“Your home, for the present,” Jeremy said. “And that’s rather extraordinary.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re not supposed to be alive. The guy who grabbed you...was supposed to kill you. He didn’t. We’re taking a big risk, Monica. But we want you to live. In a few weeks, if we can arrange it, we want to set you free. How does that sound?”

She watched him, breathing heavily now between slightly parted teeth. Tears began to spill down her cheeks.

“We’re offering you protection, and hope,” Jeremy said. “We’ve never made this offer before, that’s the truth. You’re blameless.”

“Let me go” came in a shaky whisper.

“We can’t do that yet. Much as I would like to.”

“What do you want?”

“Favor for favor. We give you something, you give us something. The more you trust us, the more we can trust you. Doesn’t that sound fair?”

Her head shook and the corners of her lips turned down. “No one wants me dead.”

Jeremy waited out her resolve. “It doesn’t matter,” he said, steel in his tone, “what you believe. The story I told you is the only one you get. So if I were you, I’d learn to live with it.”

After a moment he leaned forward and keyed open her restraints. “Make yourself at home, but let me show you something.”

He led the way to the locked door and the keypad, not even looking to see if she followed. “This is the only way in and out, and you are not to mess with it. Not only is it electronic, it is booby-trapped. Again, this is for your protection. Enter the wrong code — I’m only telling you — and see those slits?” He pointed to the featureless ceiling. “Zyklon B will fill this room and you will be dead in four to six

minutes. You can treat this as a joke, Monica. But I assure you it’s not. I assure you it’s not. Favor for favor. It’s up to you. Sheets, towels, a blanket, and feminine needs are in that chest. I’ll let you get settled.”

Jeremy keyed in a passcode. The thick door popped open slightly. He pushed through and shut it behind him.

3

It changed everything, at least to Brian it did, to throw cards with the guys with a hostage stuffed into a dark, soundproofed alcove not ten feet away. Maybe the others felt it, too, and were going bats as badly as he was. But they never showed it. Welcome to the shining world of poker.

The other thing that freaked Brian out was Peter’s gun. It was no less a monster than Jeremy’s Peacemaker, but in Peter’s small grip, it looked doubly enormous.

“What is that?” Brian said.

“S&W 500 Magnum with an 8½” barrel,” Peter said.

“Magnum? A Dirty Harry gun?”

“His was a Model 29, chambered in .44 Magnum.”

“So this is bigger?”

“Fires bigger ammo.”

“Why? I mean, what’s it for?”

“Defense.”

“Against what? Drone missiles? Jesus!”

“Someone has to get serious, Brian. If it’s not you — it doesn’t have to be you — it still has to get done.”

The previous night, Jeremy became enraged at some imagined infraction Monica committed against the rules. He ordered her confined to the alcove until she could learn to be better trusted. It took three of them to force her in there and shut the hutch against her. Jeremy and Peter agreed this was proper discipline, and they were making excellent progress. From what Brian could tell, Jeremy just wanted an uncomplicated poker game, without the stupid masks and gloves.

“What’s this come to?” Todd said, frowning at a sheet of yellow-lined paper covered with Peter’s scrawls and figures.

“Eight and change.”

“Thousand? Eight thousand? For corn fertilizer?”

“That’s a shitload of money for a shitload of shit,” Brian said.

“It’s a good deal of fertilizer and can certainly be *used* as fertilizer,” Peter said. “But the proportions might suggest a different use.”

“Might they suggest it any louder?” Todd said.

“That’s the recipe, with a few tweaks of my own, that McVeigh used to do the Murrah Building.”

“The what? I’m lost,” Lenny said.

“Jesus wept,” Peter said. “Anything before this Millennium never happened.”

Brian thought of another wisecrack when he suddenly remembered the hostage in the alcove. She couldn’t see or hear him, obviously, but still he felt ashamed, and kept his remark to himself.

“Timothy McVeigh? Home grown terrorist? Anniversary of the Waco Siege? Parked a truck bomb with 7000 pounds of fertilizer in front of the Arthur P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City?”

“Oh, shit, yeah,” Todd said. “Yeah yeah yeah.”

“168 killed, over 800 wounded,” Peter said. “Destroyed or damaged 300-plus buildings in a 16-block radius. Caused over \$650 million in damages.”

“We get it,” Jeremy said. “We remember.”

“On a five thousand dollar budget,” Peter said. “Five grand. That’s a penny on the dollar to what those pussy terrorists shelled out for 9/11. Budgets being equal, McVeigh alone would be responsible for more than five times the loss of human life.”

“Your precious Freddie Clegg never blew up anybody,” Jeremy said.

“No,” Peter said, “he managed to stay quiet and keep his experiments going. My preference, too. This is a just-in-case plan.”

“Just in case what? Rape gets old hat? We get bored?” Todd said.

“Not bored. Boxed in. Guys who suicide when a cop even looks their way are pathetic. This is more hands on and, to my mind, heroic.”

“Heroic?” Lenny said.

“Blaze of glory,” Jeremy said.

“We don’t *have to* get boxed in or blow ourselves up, all right?” Brian said. “Let’s think outside the box right now. What if we take the girl, right now, blindfold her, lock her in the trunk, whatever. Drive. Go anywhere remote, remote as hell. Give her a soda and some granola bars. Say, ‘Don’t remove the blindfold for twenty minutes. We’ll be watching.’ And we drive away. Just that. Just drive. Think about it. Perfect crime has been committed. No one got hurt. No one gets caught. Wasn’t that the idea, the challenge, the whole damn goal?”

“It was,” Jeremy said. “Life happens. Brian, you’re shaking like a leaf.”

“You want us to put her to the side of the road,” Todd said, “now? After all we been through?”

“I want us to put it to a vote.”

“You do, huh? All right,” Todd said. “I’ll abide by it. One time, one vote, straight up or down. And it’s strictly your vote.”

“Mine?” Brian said.

“Hell, yeah. You’re a leader of this. You spent, hell, tens of thousands of my hard-earned money making this room — this whole set-up — exactly perfect. This what you did it for? To get us all worked up, take all these major risks, just so you can say, ‘Aw, guys, we shouldn’t.’ Is that your vote? That’s what we should do?”

“Todd...”

“No, I want to hear it. Is that your vote, Brian.”

“No.”

“No? Then thank you. So shut the fuck up.”

“Generous of you, Brian,” Peter said, “to forget the two people already dead. But nothing ties us to them. Or to this one. Relax.”

“We’re also talking about mass murder. Hundreds of victims. Do we get to vote on *that*, even?” Brian said. “I didn’t ever figure you for political.”

“I’m not,” Peter said.

“Then why a federal building?”

“Who said federal?”

“Okay, whoosh,” Jeremy said. “With you until a second ago.”

“Shoot, even I know this one,” Lenny said. “Peter’s Catholic up the wazoo. He wants to blow up a church.”

Lenny succeeded at what no one else had ever been able to do before: make Peter squirm.

“Is dat what you want from Santa, Petey?” Todd said. “A rental truck of high explosives you can drive up to God?”

“I took a drive, Todd,” Peter said, his composure reclaimed, “that you might be appreciative of. Went to your CVS. Hence this delicious party bag of Twizzlers. I saw no police presence, no xeroxed signs, no collection cup on the counter. They might not know yet, depending on her schedule. What I did see, and lots of them, were surveillance cameras. I counted at least a dozen in the store, and five in the pharmacy section alone. But there are only two outside, one directly over the entrance and one over the drive-thru pharmacy window. Neither of them has a view of where you say you parked your truck. In other words, if you tried boosting a packet of Ricola throat drops, you could be in real trouble. But nabbing the pharmacist, not so much.”

“Thanks.”

“Not yet. We still have a timeline problem. You were mugged at about nine and you made the grab at eleven. But you had two periods in there in which you passed out, and you don’t know how long either one lasted. Meaning there could be an hour or more difference between when you talked with her and when you grabbed her, and that would be good. Or it could be three minutes. That would be bad. You don’t want to be the last one seen at the counter on the security cam.”

“I don’t think I was,” Todd said.

“You don’t think based on what?” Peter said.

“I don’t know.”

“Okay, that’s useless.”

“Ouch! Harsh,” Brian said.

“How much time were you face-to-face?”

“Less than a minute.”

“You never touched, exchanged paperwork?”

“No.”

“Did she come around the counter?”

“No, I would’ve known she was taller.”

“What?”

“Never mind. I bought what I came for.”

“Where did you pay for it?”

“Up front.”

“Good. Charge card?”

“Cash.”

“Even better. Last question. Did you renew your prescription for Dilaudid?”

“What?”

“You have a renewable pain killer prescription at that CVS. Did you use it?”

“How did you know about that?”

“Not important. Did you use it?”

“It *is* important. How did you *know*?”

“I told him,” Jeremy said. “During your...procedure, you kept asking for me. A couple of days later, a guy who was there, a resident named Barry, sought me out and filled me in. I never told anyone.”

“Except Peter, obviously!” said Todd, spittle flying as he spoke.

“Jeremy was coerced,” Peter said. “I know a story *he* doesn’t want divulged, so he tells me things I need to know.”

“What story?” Todd said.

“A bad time in April long ago, let’s leave it at that.”

“I don’t understand a gee-dee thing anybody’s saying,” Lenny said. “What procedure? What bad thing in April?”

“Not *important*,” Jeremy said.

“Did you renew the pain killers the night you made the grab?”

“What happened in April?”

“Leave it!”

“NO! You happy?”

“Relieved,” Peter said.

“Who gives you the fucking right,” Todd said, his voice ice, “to know all this shit about us, you little sperm stain?”

“I told you I’d do all in my power to pro—”

“Who gives you *the right*?”

Angry words and a gun on the table make a bad cocktail, Brian thought. “What church?” he said.

4

“I come in peace,” Brian said.

He set the Starbucks espresso grande down on Paula’s desk and let it speak for itself.

“Brian! How are you?”

“Can’t complain. How’s life in the salt mines?”

“We’re managing. To what do I owe the honor?”

“Nothing. In the neighborhood. Just thought I’d give a friendly hi.”

“Hi,” Paula said.

“Hi,” Brian said. “Three Splenda. How is it?”

“Haven’t tried it yet.” Paula took a sip. “Ahhh. Hits the spot. Thank you. So, are you...working now?”

“Supervised a good-sized renovation,” Brian said. “Modernized a nearly derelict farmhouse. Gave it all the bells and whistles.”

“Well, that’s great.”

“It’s almost done,” Brian said. “I was just wondering if there was any work going here.”

“There isn’t,” Paula said. “I’m sorry if that came out abrupt. Your position got absorbed. Business has been off, as you know. Mr. Curtin declared a hiring freeze.”

“A freeze. I see. Well, you’ll let me know if it ever thaws?”

“I surely will,” Paula said. “Are you, uh, seeing anybody?”

Brian gave a mirthless chuff of laughter. “Sort of.”

Paula’s eyebrows raised. “Sounds serious.”

“It is, in its way. Very.”

“Well, good luck with that.”

“You look really good, Paula. I just wanted to... I want to do *one thing* right, do you know what I mean? And it seems like the longer I can’t, the more it feels like I never will. That girl I was telling you about? Can I tell you something really, really important?”

“No, actually,” Paula said. “No, please. I’m sorry I brought it up. This isn’t the time or place.”

“No, of course. Sorry to intrude. I’ll hear from you if...?”

“Yeah,” Paula said.

Brian saluted her, did a British officer’s about face, took one step, then turned back. “I really liked your poetry.”

It was Paula’s turn to give a sour laugh. “You never heard any of it.”

“I didn’t? But I googled it, or tried to.”

“What?”

“That one line, ‘Release me, and restore me my life.’”

“It’s ‘return me to the earth.’ That’s Tennyson.”

“Return me to the earth. Oh. Well, I bet yours is just as good.”

“Thanks. Goodbye, Brian. Take care.”

5

Brian found them in the kitchen, Jeremy, Peter, and Lenny, empty beer bottles filling the farmhouse table.

“Who’s winning?” Peter said. “At any one time, hi, Brian. Any one time in America, conservative estimate, there are 35 to 100 thrill killers operating. But how many bonafide saints in the land, how many saints walk the Earth today? Take a guess.”

“Us...four,” Lenny said.

“To what do you ascribe this inequity?” Jeremy said.

“Women,” Peter said. He must be drunk, he actually grinned. Peter had a goofy grin. “I blame women. Augustine did. Paul the Apostle. Martin Luther. I’m in good cumminee.”

“The true man wants two things,” Jeremy said, forefinger aloft. “Danger and play. For that reason he wants woman, as the most dangerous plaything.”

“Here, here,” Lenny said.

“That’s a quote,” Peter said. “That’s somebody.”

“Neitzche,” Jeremy said.

“I was wondering when that Nazi-propheying windbag would raise his syphilitic head,” Brian said, tipping back a bottle of his own.

“You’ve got a real thing for Nazis, Brian,” Jeremy said. “I just noticed.”

“I do not,” Brian said. “I’ve got a thing *about* Nazis, not *for* them. No one halfway sane’s got a thing for Nazis.”

“Considering we’re...” Lenny said, “who we are, we shouldn’t act so snobby.”

Everybody broke up at that, and Lenny beamed.

“Neitzche,” Jeremy said, throwing silly emphasis on the name.

“God is dead!” Brian said.

“*I am not!*” Peter said, and broke into fresh giggles.

“You’re God?”

“Course I am. I’m God. And this is my wrathful arm.”

“Put that away.”

“Say I’m God.”

“You’re drunk.”

“Say I’m God or I shoot you in the face.”

“In that case, you’re God.”

“Damn straight,” Peter said, fumbling away the unwieldy gun.

“You’re not on a God trip, you’re on a power trip,” Brian said.

“What’s the difference?” Peter said. “God is Power. God isn’t Love. If God was Love, why does He want us on our knees? You think any of us want that slut in the Clubhouse on her knees because we love her?”

Lenny tried to snigger at that, but he was the only one. Brian craned his head to peer into the semi-dark living room. “Where’s Todd? Sleeping one off again?”

“Todd’s downstairs,” Jeremy said. “But I doubt he’s sleeping.” He poked a straight finger in and out through a circled thumb and forefinger.

Brian’s heart fell. Todd was in the Clubhouse with Monica. While they were up here drinking and joking, it had begun.

Brian burst out of the kitchen with the boyhood impulse — compulsion, really — to climb a tree and hide there. There was a stunted magnolia on the lawn, but that was it. Besides, he was a grown man now. Options weren't what they were.

He could get in his car and drive. He could drive off, and be done with it. Drive, and never come back. Or he could bust out his cell phone right here in the yard and when 911 went *what's your emergency?*, he'd tell. He would finally tell someone all about it.

The boyhood imperative thing was too strong. Brian needed someplace secret and alone to think this through.

His steps guided him to the barn, and to the slender ladder up to the hayloft. About halfway up, Brian began to wonder how many years or decades it had been since anyone chanced their weight on these slat rungs. As a kid, he would stretch out with impunity on the slenderest loquat branches. Now, as a grown man scaling a man-made ladder, he felt pissless scared that he might fall and die.

The loft had been pitchforked empty long ago. There were no beds of straw, just dried, darkening piles that could be gathered into a pillow. Since Brian was not enamored of lying his head on generations of rodent nests, he explored the loft for a while, using his cell phone as a pale flashlight. Frail floorboards that screeched under pressure made him sit, knees drawn to chest, where the planks crossed a joist.

Brian unpocketed and regarded the cell phone. He even punched in 911, but didn't hit send. He set it down and slid it away out of reach. Its keypad buttons glowed for a moment and then went dark. Brian let himself soak in the gloom. Dusk gathered outside. Soon it would be pretty fricking dangerous to descend the ladder, if it wasn't already.

He came up here to figure out what to do, and the only thought that stuck was, *Any second now this damn floor's about to give*. Helpful. One false move and he would plummet through and break his fool leg or something worse, and no one would hear his cries for help. He thought suddenly about the girl he'd come up here to think about, and felt even worse. He began to really dislike the effect she had on him.

The childhood refuge failed. The so-called grown man was too flustered to offer any advice. The still, small voice he yearned to hear was a garbled jibber-jabber.

For cryin in the bucket, Brian, dad said. Learn from my mistake. Use birth control.

It boiled down to a stark either/or choice: rescue her, or protect them. His decision couldn't wait. Every second that ticked by implicated him deeper into Todd's and Peter's crimes, and the girl suffered. On the other hand, every second that ticked by bound Brian more truly to the group. By default, every second of hesitation made him more loyal.

He inched out on hands and knees towards his cell phone, like a man groping across thin ice. *If I made the right decision, I won't die*, Brian thought. *I won't die.*

The first half of the climb down, Brian thought, *I'm sorry, I'm sorry*, and the second half he thought about having another beer.

7

Jeremy called them Clubhouse privileges, reserved for whoever “entertained” the resident of the alcove. She remained confined almost around the clock now, let out for meals, cleaning, and “entertainment”. Only Jeremy enjoyed this kind of talk anymore. And only he and Todd indulged in Clubhouse privileges. The difference was, Jeremy went in whistling and toting his yellow sports bag. Todd suited up for his sessions with the look of grim pain guys get who overdo it at the gym because they've been away for too long.

The others hung back. Lenny seemed content to watch the videos Jeremy took of himself and the resident. Peter announced that he would go 100% last.

“By then, there might not be almost nothing left,” Todd said.

“I'll be fine,” Peter said. “There'll be enough.”

“Would that be last like dead last?” Jeremy said. “So you're free to kill her?”

“You're free to do whatever you want,” Peter said. “You're free to drag this out for years. But when you're done, when everyone is happy and done and done and done, you let me know. And by then, what do you care?”

Peter only rarely felt the weight of his friends' troubled looks.

“And no, I don't...plan to kill it,” he said. “I just want to go last, that's all.”

“It?” Lenny said. “You mean her.”

“I said her,” Peter said. “Why, what did I say?”

Brian felt squeamish. All the rich talk from before tasted foul to him now. The Clubhouse itself stank of violence and sweat. One day Monica's lab coat, shoes, pants, and shirt were heaped at the foot of the pullout futon. The next day they were gone. Had they been returned, burned, or laundered? Brian punished himself inwardly with the question, like probing a rotted tooth with the tip of the tongue.

Jeremy dangled the mask with zippers and snaps in front of Lenny's eyes, and then laid it on top of his head. He mimicked a schoolyard chant. “Lenny, Lenny, ain't had many...”

“No, ah, no, I'm good, I'm good,” Lenny said, making a feeble brush at pushing away the mask.

“All the girls want to know why.”

“I can't breathe in that thing.”

Jeremy softly lobbed gloves at Lenny’s face one at a time. “It’s not that he’s hairy...”

“Some other time, huh?”

“It’s not that he’s scary...”

“I will, I promise.”

“He’s just got this enormous...*cherry*.”

Lenny handled the mask and gloves with delicacy and respect, as if they were opulent jewelry.

“Really? Now?” he said. “Really?”

“And that ends now,” Jeremy said, in his best count-backwards-from-a-hundred voice.

By common consent, poker was done before it got started. The guys would repair upstairs, and Todd would make a KFC run for a bucket and sides. They might make a picnic of it. But first they were divvying gloves and leather masks and suiting up.

“We’ll help you—”

“Your first time—”

“We all will—”

“Like hell,” Lenny said.

“Get her started.”

“Out of the wall—”

“That’s the only tricky bit.”

“Once she’s out, she’s good to go.”

“And we are *gone*.”

“Suit up, Casanova. It’s time.”

8

“Who’s for Cici’s?” said Lenny.

“Pizza?” Mina said. “You m-mean it?”

“Why not?”

“Wish you called,” Doris said. “I just put on mac-cheese for supper.”

“Aww,” Mina said.

“How put on is just put on?”

“The noodles are cooking.”

“Well, stop when they get to *al tempe*. Put the pot in the fridge. Tomorrow I’ll cook up some burgers. Chop them up with an onion. We’ll have meaty mac-cheese. How does that sound?”

“And family night out now? You don’t have to twist my arm. But I look a wreck.”

“No, you don’t. Mina, go get ready.”

“Get a sweater.”

“On it!” The girl bolted from the room.

Lenny leaned in, smiling, to Doris. “I’ll twist your arm anyway, and maybe twist something else later.”

Always careful not to grin because she hated her yellow teeth, Doris couldn’t help herself. “What’s got *into* you?” she said.



Lenny loaded up his plate with Buffalo chicken pizza, and Mina asked for a whole pie of pizza Alfredo. Only Doris bothered with a salad, along with breadsticks in sauce and a slice of pepperoni.

“What’s that?” Doris said.

“Hah?”

“Didja cut yourself? On your wrist?” She reached for his arm but Lenny flinched it away. “Lemme see.”

“It’s nothing. Stupid accident.”

“An accident? Let me see. I won’t bite.”

“Well, that’s what it was, actually. I bit myself.”

“You what?”

“At work. Dropped a whole crankshaft on my foot. Hurt like sumthin’ else. Didn’t want to scream or anything, so I bit my wrist a few times.”

“Ah. Can I see now?”

“It’s nothing, okay? Stupid.”

“Those ain’t your teeth marks.”

“Doris, I told you—”

“Yeah, you crushed your foot. Which one?”

“The uh, the...left.”

“And it hurt so bad you bit your wrist like that?”

“Yes.”

“Then why aren’t you limping?”

“...I was! At work!”

“Don’t like to me, Lenny,” Doris said. “Don’t lie.”

“Wait a second.” He peeled off two greasy singles from a thin billfold and gave them to Mina. “Go win something in the arcade.”

“Really?”

“What do you say?” Doris said.

“Thank you, Mr. Lenny!”

“You did a real good job...” Lenny said, watching her go.

Doris cut him off. “Who bit your hand?”

“Zombie apocalypse won’t do it?”

“I’m *trying* to quit the cigarettes and *you ain’t helping.*”

“Hold it down! We’re at Cici’s.”

“I don’t give two shits where we’re at, Lenny. Where were *you*? Who did this?”

“I can’t...tell you.”

Doris watched him, her eyeballs and chin rotating slightly, out of synch to each other. Finally she nodded. “I want to go.”

“Doris, wait!”

“Right now! I want to go, I want to go.”

“*Listen!* Sit down. I can’t tell you the thing you want. But I can’t lie to you, either. So listen to me,” Lenny said. “There’s no one, you understand? There’s no one but you and Mina and...” he opened his arms toward her belly, “and whoever this will be. I won’t endanger that for anything in the world. I swear it.”

“Not good enough, Lenny,” Doris said. “Not good enough.”

“All right. All right, look. This is like top secret. I could get in real trouble for telling you. There’s a girl, at the farm. Todd brought her. She’s a little crazy. And today, for no reason, she just bit me. Out of the blue. That’s what happened. The others laughed. That’s the truth, on anything you want.”

“Just bit you? Why?”

“I said! No reason! She’s a little crazy!”

“That makes no sense.”

“Jeremy’s been spending time with her. He gives her these crazy dares. He thinks he’s being funny. She’s Jeremy and Todd’s friend. I—I don’t know...! I don’t even know this chick! I know her well enough to say hi to, and I don’t even do that.”

“You sure?” Doris said. “You’re sure that’s all?”

“On our baby’s life,” Lenny said. He took a deep breath and nodded. “I want nothing to do with her. Believe me, Dor. It’s true.”

“Don’t lie to me again.”

“I won’t. Ever.”

“And stay away from this bitch. She sounds like bad news.”

“She is,” Lenny said. “It’s not her fault. But she is.”

9

Jeremy swerved a tiny jot to avoid crushing a box turtle on the road and nearly flipped the Lexus. He was soaring home, doing 92 in a 35 mph zone. Shit, whose fault was that? There was no one on this back country two-lane, ever, and certainly not in the middle of the night. He had to get back to the city, to be on-call at the hospital by 6:15. Rural speed limits were for pussies — until you blew them off by one tiny jot. Until you felt the 6000 lb. curb weight, with you in it, surge skyward, banking a little to the left, like a taxiing-for-liftoff airplane, taking a line into a sturdy headwind.

Yowza! His catchphrase for bad drivers
(*“I’ll be cutting your pants off later tonight.”*)

formed unbidden on his lips. Jeremy eased off the gas and engaged cruise control at a copsafe 42 mph.

It’s just that the fantasy made more sense when he went fast. He was borrowing the resident for the weekend, to party at his place. Sometimes she was riding bound and gagged in the trunk, but more and more often she was up-front next to him in the passenger seat, a big grin on her wide lips, belting out with him classic rock hits that came on the night radio as the powerful four wheel drive ate up the miles.

The idea of sweet talking the others, especially Peter, to allow the furlough was ridiculous. Peter had no shits & giggles filter to the world.

Jeremy had no idea why or if the resident would be any fun away from Dungeon Party Central. He just wanted to see. If nothing else, it was nice to have someone else wear the handcuff. Since the very funny munch-out on Lenny’s arm, Jeremy insisted that the resident wear a leather ankle restraint (courtesy of the hospital) with a chain and cuff that had to be fastened to something — a bed frame, a table leg, a pipe on the wall — something. Not that this, he knew, did diddly for security, he just liked the notion.

Image. Is Everything.



Todd poured himself capfuls of Johnnie Walker Red until he lost the cap. Then he had to guesstimate. Todd lost the night in big, loose chunks.

Four times in his career Todd had sent his crew out to do an install without him. Each time it was because he was halfway dying of the flu. The first time it was for real, just a few weeks after he met Sandy. The last three times were lying excuses because he was drunk off his ass, and they were all this month.

The dumb song lyric commandeered his head. It was the start of one of Uncle Tim’s old favorites,

and Todd knew he botched the lyric, but that’s what made it so great. “How ya gonna keep ’em down on the farm,” he sang, “after they’ve had nookie?”

He took a drink and considered how much time he had before he had to hit the sack or find another bottle. He didn’t have energy for either, but the Johnnie Walker was walking away fast.

No one blamed him. Todd liked a good time, was all. The best times were him and whoever and both of them laughing, with a drink or two under their belts, and soon their belts and all their clothes on the floor and them on the bed or up against a dresser. And he never wore no mask and she never had no damn chain on her leg.

Todd had done the girl from CVS six times, and he had pretty well gotten used to it. It bothered him. He went down and pulled a girl from a hidden shelf, had sex with her any way he wanted, and when he was done, he put her back on the shelf, like a broken toy more busted than before, and shut the lid. And damn, it bothered him how easy it was. No, that wasn’t it. What bothered him was how easy it was to like it.

There it was; that was it.

10

Brian found Peter in the basement, in the pool of light cast by a Coleman lantern. Peter had browsed the old plank shelves and come away with Gilbert’s *Mysto Magic Set*. He twitched three linked metal rings. Nothing happened. Peter squinted closer at the yellowed instruction book.

“Any luck?” Brian said.

“It’s magic. Not supposed to rely on luck.”

“Any magic, then?”

“Funny.”

“What are you doing down here?” Brian said. “Where is everybody?”

“Can’t say as to the second question,” Peter said. He gave up on the magic trick and stowed away the Chinese rings and the instruction book. Under the box lid was the huge gun. “I *should* clean out the compartment and let her clean herself up. Unless you want to do it.”

“That’s Lenny’s job.”

“It’s just you and me now, sport,” Peter said.

“Is that...? Where’s that from?”

“It was from the poster art for *Manhunter*. 1980...I want to say 5. First appearance of Hannibal Lechter. Played in scrubs and white tee shirt by Brian Cox.”

“Okay, enough! I yield.”

“Considering the source material, Red Dragon, it could’ve been a lot scarier and bloodier,” Peter said. “Instead, the director opted to do a big screen episode of Miami Vice.”

“Wait, did you ever *see* Miami Vice?”

“The TV series? No.”

“Then how do you *know* it?”

“I never saw Christ scourged, but I know how many lashes He suffered.”

“39,” Brian said. “I, uh, know that from studying how to get into Mary Magdalene’s pants during a college production of Jesus Christ Superstar.”

They laughed at that, fond and unforced and like the old times.

“Mind if I ask you something?” Peter said. “Have you been an outsider all your life, Brian, out of habit or by choice?”

“Nice buzzkill question, Peter.”

“I asked if you minded,” Peter said. “It’s just that I noticed, you never go for the gusto in life. You get yourself pointed in the right direction, but when push comes to shove, you...”

“What?”

Peter pointed with his chin to the sliding shelving unit that masked the Clubhouse door. “Why don’t you go in?” he said, “You designed it. You never got to use it.”

“The guy who designed the guillotine got to use it — once.”

“Go in,” Peter said, as if Brian said nothing at all.

Brian said nothing at all, watching Peter take the Magnum 500 from the table and heft it onto his lap.

“I’m not going to shoot you if you don’t,” Peter said. “This is supposed to be fun. I’m used to you not having fun.”

“I have fun,” Brian said.

“Prove it,” Peter said. “Have some now.”

“By committing rape?”

“The thrill ride version of a thrill crime,” Peter said, “I believe is how you put it.”

Brian shifted weight. He licked his lips that went suddenly dry. “If I don’t go, you don’t go,” he said. “Because you want to go last.”

“That’s true,” Peter said. “Always thinking of others first, aren’t you? The lonely Superman.” Peter leveled the gun at Brian. “Faster than a speeding bullet.”

“Don’t do that.”

“You watched Batman,” Peter said. “You never watched Superman?”

“I’m plenty selfish,” Brian said. “All I am is selfish.”

“Are you?” Peter said, sighting down the barrel. “I think you’re more comfortable in a red cape than a mask.”

“You’re wrong,” Brian said. “Man, you are so wrong.”

And he suited up.

When he was done, Peter said, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“I don’t think I’m capable.”

“Ha,” Peter said. “I doubt you are.”

Brian unlocked and slid aside the shelving unit and, at the keypad, turned to look at his friend by the Coleman lantern. “What does it feel like,” he said, shy as a child, “to kill someone?”

Peter pushed his glasses back onto his face. “When you come out of there,” he said, “we’ll swap stories all you want. Got the key?”

Brian patted his right pocket where he put the handcuff key.

“Don’t forget to chain her to something as soon as you get her out. Got condoms?”

Brian patted his empty left pocket.

“Have fun.”

“What happened to her clothes, do you know?” Brian said.

“I burned them.”

THE GAME

Nuts to this not being a caper, Brian thought. He went into an automatic semi-crouch, all nerve endings alert. It was the mask and gloves, he knew. Thanks to them, he didn't walk, he prowled. Crossing the familiar but now empty and still room became a ballet of danger. To heighten the thrill, his goal was the secret latch to a hidden compartment that only five guys in the world knew about. Inside, forbidden treasure.

By the time he stood at the hutch, however, reality set in. Giddy excitement ratcheted to a fearful dread. Peter was right. He wasn't out to loot mob blood money or to liberate a fortune in diamonds. He was to clean the piss and shit bucket of a scared, abducted woman. What if she was dead? What if, in the long hours of silence and blackness, she had managed to open her wrists with her teeth the way she had gone at Lenny's? Or her glasses — could she have smashed them somehow, and dragged a broken lens through her throat? Or was she crouched in there, tensed for hours, half-moon shivs in her fists, ready to pounce at him with her improvised razors the instant the hutch swung out?

Did common people, Brian wondered, even *dream* of the hell it was to possess a writer's mind?

Brian clicked the latch and pivoted the hutch open. All Monica did was close her eyes against the light and turn her face slightly to the inner recess. She appeared to be mildly depressed more than mad with desperation. Brian wondered why this did not come as a relief.

He took advantage of her closed eyes to finger out a loop of chain. From there, he pulled free the empty handcuff and let it dangle to the floor from her tethered right ankle. That way, if he had to, he could haul her out bodily rather than grab for her inside the alcove. One potential debacle averted. Great word, debacle.

Brian watched and waited. It was her move, but she didn't make it. “Hey. You want to come out?” She sat with the impassivity of a beast at the zoo, one that was too long inured to yells or bangs on its bars to care or notice them. “I want to clean your area in there for you.”

She wore bra and panties and was very pale. Her owlsh glasses were on her face, ready to correct her vision should she open her eyes.

“Can, uh, do you want help?” Brian said. He stepped forward and gave the chain a hopeful tug. Her foot shifted, but that was all. “You have to get out of there,” he said. “You can't want to be cooped up forever.”

Nice one, wordsmith. Anyone heard of tact where you come from, or are they all like you?

Annoyed, Brian gave the chain a steady and deliberate pull. The girl's tethered foot fell out, and

she swung her hips and hopped the few inches from the alcove, head bowed. Brian gave a happy gasp of surprise. It wasn't just a chain of command, it was a line of communication. He tugged the chain again and she shuffled a step or two forward, the Bride of Frankenstein on a leash.

Once in motion, the hostage knew the route. She headed for the futon. Brian swerved to block her.

“Let's not go there...yet or...anything,” he said.

They stood facing each other, the girl slowly blinking, neither certain of the next move.

“You may address me as Jackal,” Brian said. He clinked the chain. “Come, come,” he said.

He drew a chair for her at the poker table. For the first time, she met his eyes, to confirm this is what he wanted.

“Who the hell did that to you?” Brian said, as the girl sat. There were bands of bruises below her panties, going down the back of her legs. Brian whirled his gaze to the alcove, recognizing in horror the pattern. The bruises were slat-wide bed sores, from motionless hours on the Rolladeck mat without pants, without a sheet or a pillow to sit on. The bastard who hurt her this way was him.

He saw the room of his design all at once, all the criminal stuff compounded by thoughtlessness. No Chinese screen to shield the chemical toilet. Result: when the girl voided her bladder or bowels, she had either subhuman anonymity or zero privacy. Not even a cheap stick-and-press light in the alcove. *Hey, kids, let's make this lady even more depressed! Kill her dopamine and serotonin neurotransmitters through light deprivation. Good thought, whizbang.*

“Wait here,” Brian said. He forget the chain in his hand until it took up slack. Brian crouched and secured the handcuff to a table leg. He tried to make eye contact with the prisoner a second time, but her gaze floated a little over him and to the side. “If you need to go anywhere,” he said, “like to the facilities, you can just lift the table, I guess. I'll be right back.”

The stench from the alcove was incredibly foul. Brian switched his black leather gloves for blue disposables. His stomach flip-flopped. Even as a kid, he almost gagged every time mom made him bag up the dried dog poo in the backyard. Brian hoisted out the nearly full bed pan and brought it to the chemical toilet, trying hard not to look at the contents or think about what made the weight shift. He splashed everything into the bowl and did gag at the sound, but managed not to puke.

The worst was over. Brian worked the joystick flush back and forth and the waste sluiced and chugged away, the toilet sounding like a dying dorm hall washing machine.

He rinsed the bedpan in the wash-out basin until it gleamed. Was she watching him, noticing the pains he took on her behalf? Just in case: “Let's tackle *this*,” he said, a little too loudly.

With Formula 409 and Pledge and a fresh roll of Bounty, he went back to the alcove. The plastic jug of water was mostly empty. “Care for me to top off your drink?” He took the jug to the mini-fridge

and peered inside. “Ice. You like ice? We have no ice. Oh, well, shoot. Sorry.”

Help abduct a woman to be raped and the first thing you apologize for is no ice. Classy.

“How does a cold soda sound? We’ve got beer, Sierra Mist, and root beer. What sounds good? And you up for a spot of food, maybe? I could rustle up a sandwich or...Hot Pockets! Perfect! Pepperoni or Philly steak and cheese, any preference? Tell you what. I’ll nuke ’em both and you can choose then. Ladies pick! Top off your refreshment while we’re waiting, and Mr. Multitask will, uh, spruce up your, uh, room.”

He was babbling. The discipline mask made him sweat like a stuck pig. He tapped a cook time into the microwave and pressed start. At the alcove, he sprayed Pledge on the Rolladeck and got it off with four swipes. Under the mat, some of the girl’s pee had splattered and pooled. Brian lifted out the mat and switched to Formula 409. Easy-peesy. He bagged the trash, filled the gallon water jug at the sink, and replaced the jug in the far corner of the alcove just as the microwave *binged*.

“Let’s give this a real good airing, what do you say?” he said.

She said nothing, gave not a glance, and barely stirred. Brian felt a mixture of deep pity and annoyance, pity still holding sway. *Under the circumstances*, he thought, *I might not be too forthcoming with thank yous, either.*

“Hardly *haute cuisine*, but at least it’s hot,” Brian said, serving the pockets on folded paper towels. “I don’t know which is which, does it matter?” He waited. “Apparently not.”

Brian twisted open a beer for himself and popped a soda for her. “*Et pour mademoiselle*, un crisp, refreshing Sierra Mist.” He waited. “*De rien.*” Annoyance was gaining ground.

Negotiating the mask’s zippered mouth slit took some doing. He wasn’t sure why this made him more annoyed at *her*, but it did. “You got pepperoni,” he said. “Dig in, please. They don’t call ’em Cold Pockets.”

Just as he thought he’d have to stand and cram the pastry down her throat by force, the girl picked up her meal and nibbled at it. Her forlorn way to eating, as if she was only doing it as a big personal favor, pissed Brian off even more.

“I’m not one of the bad guys,” he said. “I’m...one of them, but I’m not.”

She put down her Hot Pocket as if he had slapped it out of her hand.

“No, eat,” he said. He had finished his and she had hardly touched hers. “For god’s sake, eat. I won’t *watch*, if that helps.”

He got up and paced the bomb shelter. If she took no interest in him, two could play at that game. What he spotted on a shelf of the opened hutch changed his mind.

“Poker,” Brian said, sitting and shuffling the cards almost at once. “Please tell me you know how to play poker.”

Please tell me I'm a stupid ass fuckhead if it'll get you talking. The girl gave an almost imperceptible nod. She knew poker! Brian blurted a short whoop of joy.

“All right! We’re in business!” he said. “Straight five card stud, nothing wild, jacks or better to open. We’ll play a few hands for fun, just to warm up. Your cut.” She didn’t move, didn’t look at him or the cards. “Trust the dealer?” Brian said, cutting for her. “That was your first mistake.” He dealt.

By the time he shot her the fifth card, he knew she wouldn’t touch them. He sat opposite a mannequin. *She'll last longer if we don't break her*, Jeremy had promised. If this wasn’t broken, what was?

“Shall we,” Brian said, “review a little? Start out slow? I’ll help you. See what you’ve got, see what I’ve got.” He turned over her hand, then his. “Ooch! You’ve got bupkis, I’ve got bupkis. Go again.” He gathered up cards and dealt. “No wonder you didn’t want to touch that hand. Would’ve stinkied up your fingers. You *know* this game, don’t you? You’re a hustler. I can tell by your eyes.”

Brian flipped their newly dealt hands. “All right!” he said. “Lots better. See what you have? Three of a kind — three treys, rocket and a hockey stick: ace and a seven. Me, I got a pair of German vir— pair of nines, cowboy high. But! Four of my cards are clubs, so I have a shot at puppy toes. That’s a flush.”

The girl lowered her eyes. Brian couldn’t tell if she was checking out her cards or just checking out again.

“So,” Brian said, “you can bet. You open. I wouldn’t go too crazy, and let’s say I call. Now you choose. How many cards do you want? If I was you, I would give up either the ace and the seven and go for two chances at a four-of-a-kind, which is frickin’ unbeatable, or just the seven and go for a full house, threes full of aces, or a book of threes.”

Her moving finger shook as if palsied. She placed it on the seven and pushed that card toward Brian.

“All right, excellent!” Brian said. *Welcome to Special Olympics poker.* “I’ll go for the flush, kill the pair, so one for you, one for me.”

The old witch hand moved again. She must be used to gin rummy, dealing to herself. Brian had to stop her.

“Not from there. You draw from *this* stack, the fresh cards. This other stack’s the cards that’ve been used. Nobody wants them anymore. It’s called the muck.”

“The muck,” Monica said.

Had she stood and screamed like a banshee, Brian could not have been more startled. Gooseflesh prickled the nape of his neck.

“Yeah, the muck pile,” Brian said. “So, a fresh card for you, one for me. I called, I go first.

Queen of diamonds, no help. I lose, busted flush. What did you get? Flip it over.”

This became too much for Monica. She began to tremble all over, her breath coming in short hitches.

“I’ll see, I’ll do it,” Brian said. He flipped the card. “Damn, you *are* a hustler. Ace!”

“What did I do?” Monica said.

“You won,” Brian said. “You creamed the pants off me.”

“You...chose me,” she said. “What did I do? I think...all the time. All I think about. What did I do?”

Brian looked stricken. “Nothing,” he said. “It has nothing to do with you.”

She shook her head violently. “That can’t be.”

“It is.”

“What about Satterwhite?”

“Who?”

“Your ringleader. Who ordered me d-dead.”

“I never heard of anybody,” Brian said. “That’s...no.”

“What did I do? Please.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“*Please!*”

“You’re not even part of the *equation!*” His shout slammed her against the back of her chair, where she slumped, half-stunned. Brian downed the last of his beer. His chin went wet. Some dribbled into the mask.

The girl made a noise. It could have been words, or just a whimper.

“I didn’t catch that.”

“Scr-scratch paper,” she said.

“What?”

“One of the guys who...” She clenched her teeth a moment. “The taller one...once he said I was a piece of scratch paper.”

“What did he...say he meant by that?”

“He didn’t explain,” she said. “He didn’t have to.”

“The same one who told you we had a ringleader?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t listen to him. He lies. It’s all shits and giggles to him.”

“It’s what?”

“A joke. A bad joke that got out of hand.”

“Oh, god,” she said. “Oh, god.”

“Don’t cry.”

“Or *what?*” she spat out, not within a million miles of tears. “You’ll rape me, too?”

“No,” Brian said, not knowing until that moment whether he would or not. “I don’t want that. I want us to be friends and...play some cards.”

She laughed in his face. The laughter was full of air and hardly made a sound.

“What’s crazy about that?” Brian said.

“Nothing,” she said. “It has n-nothing to do with you.”

“Would it help if I said I’m not sure either how this thing happened?”

“No.”

“You’re smiling, at least.” It was mostly a lie, but her expression *had* changed, a little.

“Are you?” she said.

“Am I what?”

“I can’t see your face. Can you take off the mask?”

“I can’t do that. It’s for your protection.”

“You’re going to kill me. Anyway.”

“No. No one’s doing that. That’s not the plan.”

“The other one... the other one...”

“What other one?”

“He choked me. He couldn’t put it in. He cried like a baby and went, ‘I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you.’”

“How many times was this guy here?”

“Once. The time b-before you.”

Lenny. “You don’t have to worry about him,” Brian said. *Meaning he’s not the one you have to worry about.*

“No? What do I,” her gasps were huge, “have to worry about?”

“If anybody knew,” Brian said, as if to a toddler, “I let you see my face, you would be dead. Do you understand?”

“It’s scary as hell! Do you understand?!”

It’s no sort of. You do look scary. The girl who told him that — who told him that in this house, almost directly upstairs — that girl was killed, her body not yet found. The guy who murdered her was on the other side of the door, messing in the dark basement with a vintage magic set, waiting for his turn to come in here and...and what? Peter refused to say. What right did Brian have to refuse this terrified woman anything?

He unmasked.

The girl stared at the empty mask on the table longer than she stared at his face. “Why do you wear it?”

“I was told to.”

“Is there a ringleader?”

“Not really.”

“How many...know about this? About me?”

“Five.”

“Nobody’s named Satterwhite?”

“No.”

“You said,” her voice was low and careful, “there’s no plan to kill me.”

“That’s true.”

“Is there a plan?”

“Not really.” Brian made a helpless gesture. “Can we play cards?”

“Is there ransom?”

“A ransom?”

“For me. Has anyone been t-told I’m alive?”

“I don’t think that’s going on.”

“So no one knows?”

“We’re not...professional at this.”

“But you get orders.”

Brian made a face. “Orders...”

“You’re told what to do.”

“Yes.”

“Like the mask.”

“Yes.”

“Were you sent in to kill me?”

“No.”

“Were you sent in to rape me?”

“Yes.”

She thought about it. “Make me understand.”

“Understand what?”

“This. Why this is happening to me. Why I think I’m going to die soon but,” her voice jangled apart, “it has nothing to do with me. I...can’t understand that.”

Brian stared at her. He pushed back from the table, went to the mini-fridge and brought them each

a beer, twisting hers open for her. “Then can we play cards?”

“Yes,” she said. “Sure.”

Brian ran his fingers through his hair. Make me understand. If a writer can’t do that, he can’t do anything.

“I don’t know how it is for the others,” he said. “And I keep asking myself...tons of questions. The best I can do is tell you a story. I don’t know how it fits. But it seems to.”

Brian opened his own beer and clinked glasses with her. “*Tchin-tchin*,” he said.

“When I was a kid, we had landlines. I guess it wasn’t so unusual then. We’re so used to cell phones now. But we had a phone jack in every room. When I was small, I wanted a phone. My own phone. Don’t ask me why. I didn’t have anyone to call, especially. We were a family that...fed on ourselves. I was about to say kept to ourselves, but...fed on ourselves is better. Anyway, I got a phone from the Goodwill for, I don’t know, a buck. I plugged it in, it worked. It was my phone. But it had a number on it. The previous owner’s number. Written in pen under the plastic circle in the center. This was a dial phone. Probably the last Princess phone in America. I got to thinking about that number. It haunted me. Who owned this phone before I got it? And what else did we have in common? So one day, on a whim of some kind, I was alone, I called the number. On the third ring, a woman answered. My mom’s age. Pleasant. And I explained this funny coincidence, that I had their old phone, and I had her number. What I *didn’t* have was any friends. So if she didn’t mind, I said this, maybe we could be friends? There was an...absence of sound for a second. As if she had sucked the air from the receiver. She said to me, ‘We have all the friends we can handle right now. Don’t call here again.’ She hung up. And I was embarrassed, as you can imagine. Totally baffled as to what I had done and why I had done it. The truth was not too elusive, even at that age. It was just powerful to confront. I was lonely. And she was scared. This weirdo kid scared her badly. Do you begin to see? She gave me a gift, this woman I never knew. She gave me power over her. And from that day on, I wasn’t as lonely. Not in the same way.” Brian took a long pull of beer and looked at the girl across from him in her thin bra. “Reach out and touch someone,” he said.

Monica searched his face. This time it was Brian who eluded eye contact.

“Did you ever call that number again?”

“No need.”

“How old were you?”

“Old enough to know better. And not care.”

“Is my being here some kind of gift to you? Is that what you’re saying? Your control over whether I live or die isn’t some punishment to me, it’s a present to you?”

“I haven’t thought about it.”

“Whoever you are, I want to live. I’ll be your friend, if that’s what you want. But I don’t want to die here.”

“You won’t.”

“I don’t want to be locked in a closet. I don’t want to be hurt anymore.”

“I know, I know that.”

“Can you help me?”

“If I can.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“I have friends now,” Brian said. “Can we play cards?”

Monica discreetly placed both hands on the table, as if to steady herself against a toppling wind. “Yes, please,” she said. “That’d be fine.”

“I’m not usually so fixated,” he said.

“It’s okay.”

“I’m not an addict, I just like to play. I’d chop up my credit cards before I’d ruin my playing cards.” He tried a trick backhand shuffle and the cards spattered away from him. “As you can tell, I’m not exactly Vegas material.”

“That’s okay.”

“Want to see it once, though. The slots, the shows. The pumped in perfumed oxygen and no clocks or windows. I wanna see the one city in the world that is referable by the single word *glitz*. Lost Wages, here I come. How about you?”

Monica shook her head.

“Is there a place in the world that calls to you?”

She nodded, and now for the first time the tears came.

“Hey, what’s wrong, what’s wrong?” *There you go, apologizing again. Studly as hell, Brian.*

“Machu Picchu.”

“What?”

“I wanted to see Machu Picchu. I speak lousy Spanish. I can’t eat anything with chili peppers. I hate hiking. But I promised myself since I was a teenager that I would stand in the Temple of the Sun. I wanted to go to the Netherlands and stroll the botanical garden at Leiden, where my parents got engaged. I wanted to stay up all night outside under the aurora borealis. I wanted to bicycle along fields of giant sunflowers in France. I wanted... I kept going over it in my mind, in the dark, in that...” She pointed to the alcove even as she ducked her head away from it. “I wanted to pare every plan down to one essential. One perfect focus point. But all the things I wanted to do, the list kept getting longer. I couldn’t stop it getting longer.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Brian said.

Monica’s voice sounded scraped on glass. “It’s all in the past tense.”

Brian absorbed what she meant. Muscles constricted in his chest. *Peachy time for a heart attack.*

“You’ll get out of here,” he said. “You’ll do that stuff.”

“Will you do it? Will you take me out? Will you save me?”

“You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“Then it’s you. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Brian waited a respectful moment for her to get over it. “Five card stud,” he said. “Nothing wild. Pair or better to open.”

Cards flew.

“What do we bet with?” she said.

“Good point. And pardon my saying, you’re at a distinct disadvantage for strip poker.” He went to the hutch and brought back a case of poker chips. “House fronts: forty dollars to you, forty bucks me. Ante’s a dollar.” He tossed in a white chip and waited for her to match him. “Can you open?”

“What happens,” she said, “if I win?”

“Doubt it,” Brian said. “I’m pretty good.”

She tossed in a blue chip. “Bet ten.”

“See, you don’t have very much,” Brian said. “That’s your tell. Rule of thumb is, weak means strong, strong means weak. So I call. How many cards do you want?”

“Three.”

“Three cards to the pair, probably not too impressive. Dealer takes two.”

Monica studied her hand. “How do I not bet?”

“Say check or pass.”

“Pass.”

“Fifteen,” Brian said.

“Do I have to bet that?”

“If it’s worth it to you to see my hand,” he said, his face giving her nothing.

“It’s not,” she said, and folded.

Brian gathered the cards and raked in the pot. “Not a game for fish.”

“Tell me something,” she said. “What happens if I win?”

“You keep the money, how’s that? What do you want to happen?”

“You let me go.”

He stared at her. The meek, tormented creature who couldn’t meet his gaze was gone. The grim firebrand in her place startled him. “Forget it,” he said.

“Why?”

“Ante’s a buck.”

“Why?”

“Ante up, sister.”

She threw in a chip. “Why?”

“When I came in here, there was a guy on the other side of that door with a gun. A fucking thing like *this*! He’d already killed two women who were here before you. All they did was help me and a friend pull a prank. But he didn’t want them knowing about us. So he followed them home and he killed them. He killed them both. That’s not a story. That’s a fact.”

Monica scarcely breathed, but she didn’t look away. “Is he there now? Is he there all the time? Does he sleep there?”

Brian glared in exasperation. “Can you open?”

“No.”

“Dealer bids two.”

“Fold.”

“Did you even *look* at your cards?”

“No. What happens if I win?”

“Can’t we do anything just for fun anymore?” Brian said. “I guess not, huh?”

Monica said, “I guess not.”

“Nothing happens,” Brian said. “Win or lose, you stay here.”

Monica took off her glasses, folded the wings, and set them down. Brian fetched Kleenex for the coming waterworks. When he returned to the table, Monica sat ramrod straight. She wore the discipline mask.

“What are you doing?”

Monica didn’t answer.

“Take that off.”

Monica didn’t move.

“You look stupid.”

“You wouldn’t know,” she said. “I hid my face. That’s its purpose. I don’t want you to see me.”

“Take it off, please.”

Now she *was* crying, her sobs choked behind leather and steel. “I may never want to show my face again, no matter what happens to me.”

“You will,” Brian said. “You will go to Peru. And the worst thing that will happen to you there is Montezuma’s revenge. Except he’s Aztec, and Maccu Picchu’s Incan. So you might get lucky and

have them cancel each other out. Please take off the mask, it’s scary as hell.”

He heard her snuffle at his joke.

“I’m sorry I’m not giving you the chance I should,” he said.

“Why not?”

“It would betray my friends. I can’t take that size risk.”

“But you love games of risk.”

“True.”

She pulled off the mask and dropped it to the floor. “Your friends will understand.”

Brian shook his head, smiling. “House stakes don’t go that high.”

“Why not?”

“Management has to okay it.”

“Who’s management?”

“All of us. We all are.”

“Five of you. No ringleader. It’s a gamble,” Monica said. “Don’t you take gambles?”

Brian stuck out his chin. “What do you put up?”

“What?”

“Match the stakes. What happens if you lose?”

She thought about it. “The same thing that happens anyway,” she said at last.

“I told you,” he said, “I won’t rape you.”

“If you win,” she said, putting equal emphasis on every word, “you won’t have to.”

They mirrored respect. There was nothing either of them had left to be put out on the line. They were all in. Monica thrust out a hand. Brian took it and they shook. The bet was made.

“How do we do this?” Brian said. “Cut for high card?”

“Sounds okay.”

On a mutual impulse, they stood. Brian gave the cards a last shuffle and placed the deck between them.

“When we got into this,” Brian said, “we made a promise of no, uh, regret, I think it was. We have to accept our fate, no matter what.”

“That’s too hollow for me. I’m giving up my life,” Monica said, “to the turn of a card. That’s chance, not fate.”

“Yeah, well, then,” Brian said. “Good luck.” He didn’t begrudge her not saying you, too.

Monica cut the deck and turned up a card. “Ten.”

“Of spades,” Brian said. “That’s the highest suit. If I get a ten of anything else, you win.”

“Oh.” Monica stared transfixed at the ten, then looked up. “Wait,” she said. “What are aces?”

“Aces?”

“Are they high or low?”

“In...high card, I always played they were low,” he lied.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’m ready now.”

Brian cut. He glanced at the card, showed it to her, then replaced it in the deck. “Queen.”

They sat down. It soon became too painful for Brian to look at Monica in the face. To give himself something to do, he gathered and shuffled the cards, then dealt. “Ante up.”

Monica removed her bra.

“Tainted bet,” Brian said, trying to sound gruff. “I’m not cashing in.”

“You won.”

“Yeah, well,” he said. “To win that way, that’s too hollow for me.” He looked away from the table, his head at an angle. “Please, could you put that back on, and let’s just play cards? You owe an ante.”

She threw in a chip, but left the bra where it was. She dabbed behind her glasses with the greasy folded napkin, then picked up her cards and stared at Brian, dry-eyed.

“Can you open?” he said.

“No.”

“That’s really distracting.”

“Your problem.”

“I won’t ever hurt you,” he said. “Bid four,” he said. “And I won’t let anyone else hurt you.”

She gave him a long and appraising stare. “Call,” she said.

“How many cards?”

“How are you going to do this?”

“Do what?”

“Protect me. Are you going to get a gun, too? Sit outside? Sleep there?”

“I won’t let them come in here to hurt you.”

“That’s all they come in here to do.”

“I could let you go if it was just me,” Brian said. “But it’s not.”

“Then I’m dead,” Monica said, staring nowhere. “I’m dead.”

“Please trust me,” he said. “I’ll handle this,” he said. “How many cards?” he said. “You’re not playing your cards.”

Monica dropped her gaze and watched the cards tremble out of her grasp. “I don’t have any to play.”



He could smell his pee but not the shit in his pants. That was bad. Strong urine smell equals dehydration. There was a slosh or two left in the jug, but he was trying to save each sip now for when his lips caked.

Besides, it was vital not to utter a sound. They were talking about him, palling around the poker table, well lubricated and laughing. He couldn't hear any words, but their voices were clear enough: Jeremy, Peter, Todd, and Lenny, all mentioning his name and making merry. That was cracked enough to be sure, but his father was in on it too, telling nine thousand funny stories about what a screw up he'd been as a kid.

Stop it! The smirking voices ceased so suddenly, his head ached with the echo.

Fuck deserving. Bring death on. This was too weird.

He pressed the wound to shoot another flare into the dark. The starburst was dimmer. Batteries must be dying. He needed some D cells if he was to survive for la policía to put him in de cell.

Who was it who was always going on about solitary confinement, Peter or Lenny?

That's funny, I don't remember being absent-minded.

Lenny. Who would never get prison or solitary. Because it was his, Brian's, fate. It turned on a card, a low card in a stacked deck, and he had to accept it. That calls for a drink. Let 'em eat caked lips.

Miscalculation. There weren't two shurps left. Just one. The water was gone. He shouldn't have done that. Big symptom of dehydration: poor decision making. It's a vicious cycle.

Ending in lights out.

Half of prison suicides take place in solitary confinement. Now he heard a man screaming. Right

on cue. Sounded like Todd. Right on, bro! Don't let 'em take you alive!

Suicides in solitary. Did he want to kill himself? ...No. Had to think about it, though, didn't ja? Might be a trick question. Hate to lose his writing time. Bed sink floor desk. They were out to trick you. Bri, they were out. To trick you. That's what they're doing. Palling around. Laughing it up. Be careful. Be careful, now. You could wind up dead.

Die, my dear doctor? That's the last thing I shall do! So swoons another romantic faggot in a waistcoat.

What would his last words be? What had they been? Couldn't remember. Couldn't think. Non cogito, ergo fucked in a hole.

Don't let it end like this! Tell them I said something! Viva Pancho Villa for that one, if apocalypse. A pox on your lips. Apocryphal. Thank you; bless you. That was the word he wanted. Leave me apocryphal. Not apocryempty. All the great words were slipping away. Like dimming stars.

That was so funny about the Meditation Room. It forced you to meditate. But without the ability to shift...

Oh, shit, not again. Gears? Words? Focus! Shift focus. Yes, you can't shift focus. Leads to fixation and paranoia.

Heard about the paranoid with low self-esteem? Nobody important was out to get him.

Shut up, it was funny. Monica would laugh.

Thum! Thum! Thum! The hollow jug bonged musically. He had his finger curled through the handle and was rocking his hand. So little a thing like that could make music! Life was miraculous.

Bang the drum slowly. Wasn't that a poem, something about baseball? He let the jug slip away and fall.

All the poems he read. The books he meant to read...and write. The work he meant to leave. I didn't mean to leave. He was crying. Fer cryin' inna bucket. Stupid waste of water. I didn't mean to leave. Forgive me!

I do not deserve this death. He said it over. He said it over and over, until he no longer knew to whom he meant to say it, or what it meant at all. It's just what you say, I guess.

What was it they say about solitary? A psychotic incubator. Perfect phrase. Apt and descriptive. In the Clubhouse, they were five guys in solitary. They didn't know it, is all. They thought they were together, palling around and making merry, but they were each of them alone, going psychotic. The alcove was part of the Clubhouse, and it was the most extreme part. But it was no different, really. Way to go, hero, for figuring it out.

His gut was too mushy or his fingers too numb for him to probe the stab wound. No starfield. No supernova. He was going the other way, to the black hole. He was just about at the tipping point —

“Welcome Gamblers”— Chapin
Page 173

ha ha, epic fail — *the point of no return. The boundary in spacetime that traps everything in a...
...psychotic...?*

... * ...

*Wake the fuck up, Brian. If you die while you're passed out, you'll miss it. Then where will you
be?*

Event horizon. Yes. What pulls you in. Cool word, horizon.

The place where things sort of flatten out...

III
SHOWDOWN

Where do murderers go, man!
Who's to doom, when the judge himself is dragged to the bar?
— Herman Melville

TUBE

1

“Dr. Lorenz?”

Jeremy knew who the men were before they even pulled IDs. “Yes?”

“I’m Inspector Rabson. This is my partner, Officer Lee. We’re awful sorry to surprise you at work. Please, is there a place we can talk for a few minutes?”

Oh, you look sorry, Jeremy thought. You look sorry as all get out. An ambush? Gee whiz, our bad. At least they’re obvious about it. “I only have a few,” he said. “What’s this about? If it concerns a patient—”

“It doesn’t.”

Okay, pills, then. That was a little faster than expected. “Am I in some trouble?” Jeremy said.

“Nothing like that.”

“You could help us understand some things,” said Officer Lee, in a voice so deep it made James Earl Jones sound like a choir boy.

“Okay, well, let’s talk. Can we do it here?” *Can we establish that you don’t have shit? Because I don’t see any handcuffs yet.*

“I think it would help us out if we could all sit down,” said Inspector Rabson.

“I think that sounds like more than a few minutes,” Jeremy said with a smile and a wink, followed by a frown at his watch. “I’d love to, gentlemen. But there’s a multi-hour operation scheduled—”

“In an hour and a half,” Officer Lee said. Jeremy heard ominous thunder.

“That I have to prep for, I was about to say.” *Okay, they’re good. Don’t get cocky.* “But what the hell. I’m sure I can find us an office. Can I get a hint, please, what this is about?”

Inspector Rabson drew a photograph from a blue folder and handed it to Jeremy. “Do you know this person?”

Jeremy slapped on his poker face. He shrugged. “Should I?”

“No, sir,” Officer Lee said. “No reason you should. The question is if you do.”

Thank goodness for small favors. Inspector Rabson only slipped him the *Before* image. He had the *After* pictures, too, Jeremy was sure of it, in that blue folder of his. For shock value, if nothing else. *Stall. Find an office in another wing.* It was enough of a shock to be confronted by the cops with a close up photo of that late, great entertainer Candace Cain.

Leading the way in his scrubs, Jeremy felt better with each stride. He found them an exam room, to reinforce that they were on his turf and not theirs. Jeremy took one of the consulting chairs and Officer Lee the other, leaving Inspector Rabson the angled table with the tear sheet. Rabson crossed his ankles, the telltale tic of medical anxiety. *Now you look sorry. Or at least foolish*, Jeremy thought. “Should I have a lawyer present?” His smile was big and sincere.

“Can’t think why,” said Rabson. “You’re not charged with anything.”

Good. Keep reminding yourself, Jeremy thought. “So this is...?”

“A conversation.”

“This is a citizen helping us out,” Lee gently boomed.

“This as an interview, not an interrogation. You have the right to leave or not answer any questions you don’t care to at any time.”

“No no no. You save me ridiculous lawyer’s fees, I’ll save you all the time and trouble I can! How can I help?”

“The woman in the photograph?”

“Blank. Never saw her before.”

“Would you like to see the picture again?” Lee said.

“It won’t help, I’m sorry. You say she’s not a patient here?” *Keep it in the present tense, Jer. You don’t know her, and you especially don’t know she’s dead.* “It was obviously a mug shot. So my first question is, what’s she done?”

“In late October,” Lee said, “she was brutally murdered in her residence. Her name was Candace Cain.”

Here it is. Play it small. A drop shot. “Wow. I’m sorry.”

The men watched him. Jeremy’s look of bland bafflement was nothing short of brilliant. “But you knew her?” Rabson said.

“No. I said. Never laid eyes on.”

“How about this woman?” Rabson slipped another photograph from the folder.

“Nuh-uh,” Jeremy said. *Hello, Elaine. Are there a gallery of After shots of you, too, or was Peter as good as he thinks he is?* “Who’s she?”

“A sometime partner of the deceased.”

“I...pfffft!” Jeremy said. *Easy! Don’t get showy; don’t overdo it.* “If I never saw the first one, officers...”

“It’s all right,” Rabson said, filing the picture away. “We just want to make sure.”

“Of course. And what did this one do...or, I hate to ask, what happened to her?”

“We don’t know,” Lee said. “She’s missing.”

Attaboy, Peter. “Okay. The second question arises. What does all this have to do with me?”

“Do you know Sheriff’s Deputy Randolph McLaughlin?”

“Randy? Yeah, sure, I know Randy. We’re friends.” *O shit o shit o shit o shit.* “Boy, twenty questions really means twenty questions with you guys!”

Lee said, “Did you know Deputy McLaughlin’s suspended?”

“From the force? No, I didn’t. Holy cow. What did...” Jeremy gave a quick shudder. “He’s not your suspect?” *Nice cross-court backhand. Return that, motherfuckers.*

“No,” Rabson said. “He’s not our suspect.”

“Then, what’d he do?”

“Narcotics possession, for one,” Lee said. “Other charges may follow.”

“I didn’t know that.” *Nothing like the truth to give sincerity that little extra zazz.*

“Deputy McLaughlin also knew Ms. Cain. Who also had a record of narcotics possession,” Rabson said. “And back in late September, your friend the former deputy said he gave you her phone number.”

“At whose request?”

“At yours.”

“What the hell for?” The officers gave him a hard stare. This was it, or something very close to it.

“Part of your duties here,” Lee said, “include dispensing controlled substances?”

“I’m an anaesthe—” Jeremy said, and the “got it” switch flipped on. He almost laughed. “Drugs? You think I sold them drugs?”

The officers stared at him. Bull’s eye.

“A cop and a... what did you say this woman did?”

“We didn’t say,” Lee said.

“Ms. Cain had a number of on and off-the-record jobs.”

“She was a prostitute,” Lee said.

“A prost— really? Great! Randy might be a dumb ol’ good ol’ boy and we shared some shits and giggles, but that’s the end of it. I don’t *sell* medications. Aside from the not-small matter of an oath and professional ethics, I’m not crazy about the risk-to-reward ratio. Look, we don’t have a lie detector *here*, but if you have one at your place, I’ll be glad to come in.”

Nip this in the bud. Dumb and wrong as their theory was, the last thing Jeremy needed was for law enforcement professionals to scour the narc box records, watchful for his name. Time to slam the

dipper. When all else fails, dazzle 'em with the truth.

“This woman, wait,” Jeremy said. “Where did she live? Like hours away from here?”

“Yes,” Rabson said.

“And she made her living...was she also a stripper?”

“I think so.”

“Okay. Coming clear. Did Deputy Randy tell you *why* I wanted this woman’s number?”

“Why don’t you tell us?”

“This is stupid. I spoke to her. On the phone. I wanted to hire a stripper, a couple of strippers actually, for a party. We didn’t come to terms. So that’s why I didn’t know her face. We never met in person. I spoke to her last year. Once.”

Rabson and Lee exchanged a look.

“It was a lot of nothing, I’m sorry,” Jeremy said. “I hope that clears it up.”

“It sounds like it does,” Lee said. “What was the party?”

“Beg pardon?”

“What kind of party?” Rabson said. “What was it for?”

You know, the usual. Dry run of rape and torture. “Oh, um,” Jeremy said. “Bachelor’s.”

“I see,” Rabson said. He tapped the blue folder. “Well.”

“Sorry to take up your time, doctor,” Lee said.

“Oh, no problem,” said Jeremy, standing. “We all have jobs to do.”

“I hear that,” Rabson said. “Who was the lucky guy?”

“What?”

“The bachelor’s party. Who got married?”

“I...” Jeremy said. “Oh, he was...sorry, I was thinking of something else.”

“It gets that way,” Rabson said. “A million details. They all add up.”

“Yeah,” Jeremy said with a little laugh. “They sure do.”

“Though that name...” Rabson said. “It’s kind of hard to forget a wedding you helped organize.”

“It’s unusual,” Lee said.

“It, um, never happened,” Jeremy said. “The wedding: it never came off. My friend, Lenny...Leonard Tamiroff — I’d be lying if I pretended I knew how to spell it — he got his long-term live-in pregnant. We thought, this is it. Another one bites the dust, right? But they chose not to go through, for whatever reason. I mean, they’re having the *baby*. Just never had the wedding.”

There were cordial smiles and handshakes and goodbyes. It was a pretty good recovery there at the end, Jeremy thought. But it *played* like a pretty good recovery. And nobody was fooled for an instant.

“The first thing we do is we don’t do exactly what we’re doing right now,” Jeremy said. “We don’t meet up. We don’t meet here. *We* don’t exist. We don’t know each other, at least not too well.”

“Even if two of us happen to work in the same store?” Lenny said, crossing his arms.

“*You* are the only one who comes here.”

“Why me?” Lenny said.

“You feed the resident,” Jeremy said. “Twice a day if you can manage it, once a day minimal.”

“Why him?” Todd said. “It’s my place.”

“Your place is at your work,” Jeremy said. “Not inside a fucking Cuervo bottle, where you’ve been for the last two weeks.”

“Step down, motherfucker,” Todd said.

“Jeremy, if you were this calm and cool with the authorities,” Peter said, “how could they possibly suspect any of us?”

“You shut up!” Jeremy shoved Peter in the chest, making the small man stagger backward. “It’s your ass on the line more than ours.”

Brian blocked Jeremy. “He’s just saying you can calm down. You’re with us. We’re together. We can...look at this. Calmly. We can plan something. At the hospital, nothing bad happened, did it?”

Jeremy sighed noisily.

“Did it?”

“No.”

“All right. I can see why you’re freaked. We all can. But you’re right: it’s weak, it’s weak. They have nothing.”

“Next to nothing,” Peter said. “Real nothing we wouldn’t be here.”

“Don’t,” Brian said, “provoke.” He held up both pointed fingers, as if this could magically stop everyone in the Clubhouse from moving or talking. “We do...what Jeremy says. Go radio silence for a week at least. If the cops come looking for any of us, they don’t find us here.”

“Why not?” Lenny said.

“Because we don’t want them finding *her*,” Todd said. “Stupid shit.”

“Then why’m I the only daily Papa John’s delivery?” Lenny said.

“I’ll do it,” Brian said. “I’ll come.”

“No,” Peter said.

“Why the fuckety-fuck not?” Lenny said. “Let him!”

“Because every time Brian talks about the resident,” Peter said, “he asks why can’t we let her go.”

Do we want him asking that question without us?”

A wobbly silence prevailed.

“We’re a team,” Brian said. “This is nuts.”

“Team decision is you stay put,” Jeremy said. “Leave it to Lenny.”

“Thanks,” Lenny said. “Thanks.”

4

“Heading home?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Todd said.

“Shame you didn’t share. It’s like that the first time, sometimes. Want one?” The stranger held out an open pack of Marlboro Reds.

“Sure,” Todd took a cigarette and nodded thanks.

“Lost a bet with myself,” the guy said, lighting his lung dart first, then holding out a shaky flame to Todd. “Name’s Mark.”

“What’d you bet?”

“That you’d share. Looked like it was killing you not to talk. I noticed that.” He flashed a grin. “Didn’t catch your name?”

“Todd.”

“Todd. Right. Todd.” Mark nodded vigorously, as if this was something he should’ve known but forgot. More than a dozen men loitered on the wheelchair access ramp to the white clapboard Baptist church, one block off the main drag of Old Town. The meeting had just broken up. In the basement, volunteers were folding and stacking metal chairs.

“This is where the real thing happens, anyway,” Mark said.

“What real thing?”

“Afterwards,” Mark said. “Where you go from here. Look how nobody’s leaving. Most of us, we find a place to talk, really talk, get some coffee. Me, I’m dying for some real coffee, know what I mean? Not that third grade battery acid they serve. I swear, you gotta drink it fast cuz it eats through the Styrofoam cups.”

“It was awful.”

“Wasn’t it?” Mark said, pleased as hell at his new friend’s wit. “Want some coffee, Todd?”

To Todd, Mark looked like an elf gone to seed. His hair that must’ve once been fine, flowing, and blonde was now lank and the color of pee. Dimples that once crinkled were now permanently creased. The black muscle shirt was twice the wrong idea, too little protection from the weather and too

much showcase for the shouldertops’ copious dusting of dandruff.

Still, Todd liked the quick energy that danced through the stranger, and truth be told he was too wired himself to give up the rest of the night so soon.

“Where?”

“Hyperion’s open. But wait, is this Sunday? No, it’s not. Closes at eight on Sunday. Shit, this town keeps its bars open and closes its coffee shops, you ever notice? Like *there’s* a commitment to recovery.” Mark flicked ash over the railing. “Know what’s good? It’s a little dangerous for guys like us because it’s really more of a tavern, but man do they brew a mean pot of joe. The Irish place by the train station. Know it?”

“Oh, yeah.” Todd couldn’t help but laugh. “It’s a little too dangerous for me.”

“Why?” Mark said. “I’ll be your sponsor for the night. Keep your nose clean. We go in for coffee, we get coffee. Scout’s honor.”

“No, I got thrown out last time.”

“So? I get thrown out that place five times a year! What, you think they hold a grudge? Keep your picture on the wall? We need us some coffee, Todd. You want good coffee, you gotta get back on that horse. Whaddaya say, my friend?”

Todd laughed again. “Cowboy up,” he said.

“My man!”



Mark didn’t want coffee, as it turned out, and neither, surprise surprise, did Todd. They sat at the bar and chose their beers based on the ornateness of tap handles. Sean the barman kept them coming. Mark’s scam was to trade a cigarette and a glib line of bullshit for free drinks. Todd didn’t mind.

He looked, but saw no old familiar faces at the tavern and this led to a letdown akin to loneliness. Even a glimpse of skinhead or ballcap busing tables would be a thrill.

“You did good, you did fine,” Mark said. “You didn’t take the pledge, so you didn’t break the pledge. And the first thing it says anyway is I am powerless. If you’re powerless and you *know*...t-to overcome that, you’ve taken the first step. You’ve done that. You did good.”

Todd shook his head, his face twisted in wry amusement. “I could never do amends.”

“Do what?”

“The amends. Make it up to people you hurt. That part.”

Mark gave Todd another comradely thump on the shoulder. “That shit is mostly in the past. You gotta let it go.”

“Not for me,” Todd said. “My shit’s in the Clubhouse closet. Locked and chained.”

“What are you talking about?”

“And if I let it go,” Todd said, “I’ll be in shit.”

Mark snorted, not sure what was so funny. “I don’t get it.”

“Right here,” Todd said, looking at the empty tall table in front of the mural of the jazz combo. “Right here is where I thought I’d get it. Instead I got beaten down. So later I beat her down. Put her in the truck. Took it home. Put it in the closet. Primo perfecto. And there she is. There she is.” He tilted his glass in a toast and took a long drink.

“What are you talking about?” Mark said, softer.

“Why I didn’t share, amigo,” Todd said. “I didn’t share at the meeting because I couldn’t...do that. The amends part.”

“Share what, exactly?” Mark said.

“Not what. Who. I’ll share with you, Mark. You wanna get laid tonight? I’m very serious.”

Mark gaped at Todd a long moment, then put his glass down. “I’m...good,” he said.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, no, I’m good.”

“I used to be good,” Todd said.

If Mark said good night, Todd never noticed. All he knew twenty minutes later is that he left the tavern alone and feeling more miserable and beaten up than ever before.

5

Brian found her a dressing gown in the trunk, soft and shimmery and white. Monica belted the gown as Brian unbuckled the ankle restraint and its noisy chain. Her flesh there had been chafed raw. Kneeling mutely before her, Brian created the tableau of a knight of yore in obeisance to his lady. There was something wonderful and right about that.

There was no talk. This was a dead-of-night escape. Monica knew it, and she trusted him. Crossing the Clubhouse, she slipped her hand into his. Brian tapped in the access code with his left, and shouldered the door when it clicked open.

The basement was lit by a single, empty pool of light from the Coleman, and a dimmer but more welcoming glow from the top of the stairs. As they left the Clubhouse, the basement jolted with a deafening bang. Brian’s nostrils filled with the acrid stench of burnt cordite. Monica’s grip clenched, then slowly softened. Blood bloomed in the center of her chest. As it began to drip, she sank to her knees.

Gun barrel first, Peter strode into the circle of light, blue pistol smoke dancing. His flashing glasses shone with reflected lantern flame. The gun bore rose to dead level with Brian’s face.

“Abracadabra,” Peter said, resplendent in his satin black and crimson magician’s cape.

Brian shuddered awake. The damn obsession had crossed into his dreams. Sweat soaked his brow. Even when he fantasized himself her salvation, he *really* disliked the effect she had on him.

Brian shuffled to the kitchenette and chugged milk out of the carton. He leaned a while into the open refrigerator, enjoying the bracing cold.

It’s just as bracing outside, he thought. *And it’s real.*

Peter wouldn’t sit guard. The worst case scenario, Peter would click open the hutch and collect on his dibs to “go last” with the hostage, and Brian had a sick feeling he knew exactly what that meant. He also felt sure it was only a matter of time before Peter got around to it.

If he left right now, the worst he could possibly encounter, and Brian reckoned it a helluva longshot, would be Lenny. Lenny, who had no love for Operation Miranda anymore, and precious little fight in him to begin with. Lenny had a shotgun, but Brian was pretty sure it had only been out of its zippered case once, to show it off to the guys. It would take Lenny ten solid minutes of hunting through all his crazy crap just to lay hands on it. Besides, both the gun and Lenny were at Lenny’s place with Doris, not the farmhouse.

If he left right now, he could rescue her.

The thought wouldn’t leave Brian alone. It throbbed in his chest in a hurtful way.

There was no question he could do it. The first dozen or so questions were, where would he take her? Here, to his apartment? Straight to the cops? Curbside to the hospital’s emergency bay, which (at least according to TV) would be brightly lit and swarming with concerned interns? Or would he drive her to her home, the two of them side by side and silent for miles, like they had been on the longest, most awkward date ever? How about the blindfold and granola bars option, leaving her shaky but unharmed alongside a moonless forest road after making her swear to never, never tell or he and his friends would find her and kill her, and they’d kill her family and friends, too.

It was stupid. It was all so stupid. Even if she couldn’t describe him well enough for a decent forensic artist’s sketch, Todd would be a solid goner. *That one*, she’d tell the FBI man, who would freeze and enhance the CCTV image from the night she was abducted. *The guy at the counter with the messed up face. He waited in his truck for me until I was done with my shift. Oh, God!*

How long would Todd stay on the loose? Days? Hours? And how hard would it be to sweat “known associates” out of him? Not very, Brian guessed. It wouldn’t be fair, Brian knew, to give them all up just to conform to *his* notion of chivalry. But it also wasn’t fair what they did to the girl from CVS. It was pretty criminal, when you got right down to it. They all bore the guilt for that. And what Brian did to them, he also did to himself.

So the last question was, when did he want to give up his life?

Sometimes? he thought. *Years ago.*

6

Lenny wasn't *angry* about it, but it bugged the shit out of him the way Peter said he was the angriest person he knew.

Peter was smart. That was his blind spot. Smart people didn't understand what it was like *not* to be smart. Like being more than you were was just a choice you were too lazy to make. It was like Lenny didn't *choose* to understand books like Brian or have a doctor license and bone nurses like Jeremy or be handsome and his own boss like Todd. For a smart guy, Peter could be cocksucking dumb sometimes.

Being in a foul mood, at least, put him in the ideal state of mind for shitpan detail. Lenny was used to shitpan detail. He had tried the Army for seventeen months right out of high school. For seventeen months all he pulled was latrine duty. The Army recruited Lenny with the slogan *be all you can be*. To Uncle Sam, all Lenny could be was the grunt who spitshined urinals. It was a cruel joke. Lenny was used to those, too.

He bet none of the other guys were ever woken up twice a week *as a joke* by their stepfather when they were five years old and made to do what Daddy Marv whispered in that boozy breath of his, his beard-bristle scraping soft skin like sandpaper. Yessir and ha-motherfucking-ha, the *ideal* state of mind.

Jumpy and irritable, sweating half to death in that goddamn mask, Lenny clicked the latch and pivoted open the entertainment hutch. Sure enough, right away the crazy bitch lunged at him, making one long gasping sound. Lenny shoved her back, shouting “Hey!” Once in the alcove's shadows, the chick went powerless and passive, as always. Lenny pitied and hated that.

“Last thing I want to do is hurt you,” he said. “The last thing. But it's on the list.”

He pulled out the full bedpan and empty water jug, daring her with his eyes to go for him again. She didn't. In a way, he couldn't blame her for wanting out of there. The shelf where she lived smelled worse than godawful bad. Lately it smelled funny, too, like stale cheese in a Tupperware tub that had been pushed to the back and forgotten for months.

She wouldn't creep out after him, though. He could turn his back on her at the basin. Lenny had an instinct for what helpless people did and would never do, being one of them for so long. His mother put him under the roof of a quote-unquote home daycare lady when he was seven. The lady was a fat slob and her ten-year-old kid was a fat slob and fat old Donny Whitehead took karate lessons at the Ferry Farm Shopping Center and practiced his clumsy chops and kicks on the shy, skinny squirt who boarded with them. That ugly summer, Lenny taught himself to leak tears but not make a sound as he cried.

After you're broken like that, the trick isn't being strong enough to hold it all together. Lenny grew into a man plenty strong enough for that. The trick's being able to hold it together in the exact right way so that later the pieces fit. Lenny's never did. They never fit again.

His problem was the opposite of that old horror movie guy, the one who drank the formula to unleash the monster side of himself. The doctor was good but troubled. He made faggy, sad speeches and wanted to kill himself all the time. The monster, on the other hand, loved being evil. The more bad shit he pulled the gladder it made him. Lenny in the lab coat loved helping the helpless, especially little kids, like he was. But then Lenny Hyde took over, and the formula that brought him to life was jealous rage. Mr. Hyde despised the little bitches and bastards Dr. Lenny cared for. How come they got saved and he never did?

For instance, Lenny smuggled a bunch of Doris's ladies' magazines to the resident. As far as he knew, she never even looked at them. She certainly never said thanks. Lenny Hyde wanted to roll the contraband up even tighter and jam the stack down her damn throat. Let her bite on that!

The true Lenny felt sick to his stomach every time he got those impulses. He wasn't angry, and that was no lie. It was a survival reflex. But according to Peter, that was his true nature, the way he was all the time. Did Mr. Big Brain ever consider for a solitary second who *made* him that way? No. Of course not. Blame the loser. Blame the weak. Blame The Joke That Walked Like A Man.

Lenny knew he was a joke to the guys. They made no effort to hide it, the way they laughed at him. His only defense was to camouflage himself with humor. Make everything a joke. Laugh first in order to get the last laugh. Or at least sneak some crumbs of leftover respect.

Lenny loaded the gleaming bedpan with two apples, a box of Wheat Thins, and a new jar of peanut butter. He put the refilled gallon jug and the bedpan in the alcove at her feet.

“No, please, I can't breathe!” she said, as he swung closed the hutch.

“You think I don't know how that feels?” Lenny said, the latch catching hold with a solid *clack*.

He was too sensitive for his own good, he knew. Too loving. Too giving. Every time he gave into it, it poisoned him. Every lousy time. If Lenny had an ounce of self-respect, he wouldn't dream of what he dreamed of, of setting free the cowering girl on the shelf. What he would do, what he should do, the *ideal* thing for him would be to haul her ungrateful ass out right now and drag her to the futon and just do her, do her like his friends did, like they told him to do. He'd put it in her for real and choke her for real, and maybe kill her for real. How about that? Let him Mr. Hyde in plain sight. Let the others call it anger. Let them be as gee-dee ignorant of him as they always were. It wouldn't be anger, no matter what they thought or said. It wouldn't be any hair-trigger impulse.

It would be self-defense.

Aerobics Annie made a third appearance on the back deck, crooning and clicking her tongue for Ronnie or Bonnie or whatever the cat’s name was. Annie wore her Flashdance fashion top, the thin-as-all-get-out harem pants, and flip-flops. She was ready to get into the already steam-misty hot tub with hubby or boyfriend (whoever was company tonight), but the cat was a no-show.

No pussy, no pussy, Jeremy thought, and lowered the camcorder, switching the power from standby to off. It wasn’t too bad, this week of being cooped up at the townhouse, keeping a friendly eye on the neighbors. Jeremy made the best of it.

Besides, beating off to his tapes of Aerobics Annie going at it with dude *du jour*, the two of them thrashing the hot tub into a wave pool, provided Jeremy reassurance. His thing with the resident was, in order for him to get off, she had to pretend to be dead. If she moved, moaned, or even looked at him, Jeremy slapped her. The bitch got so good at avoiding the slaps, it was kind of creepy. Sure, her role was to obey, and by pleasing her master she avoided pain, but Jeremy sensed something else in it. Pity? Disgust? Well, fuck that. He was no necrophiliac, that was for damn certain. He wasn’t *that* into thinking inside the box.

The phone buzzed. “Hello?” Jeremy said. “Oh, great! What part of the *concept* of radio si— You’re *where*? Are you there now? Jumping Jesus on a trampoline! Wait, what? Say that again, who’s dead? Who’s...is she dead or is she not dead? It’s a yes or fucking no question, Brian! Hang on, no, hang on. Stay there. I’m on my way!”

Jeremy was miles down the road before he realized he felt neither alarm nor outrage. He felt exultant. He lowered the window and let the wind snap at his face and whip his hair. Enough of this tables-turned crap. He wasn’t born to sit around in a paralytic funk. Let others do that. For all his adult life, he made *others* go sleepy bye-byes, put *others* in his power, let *others* live or die at the turn of a delicate dial.

For Jeremy, to be in motion equated to being in control. Even if he was flying to his doom, and most of him believed that he was, at least his fate was his to command. Life was only shits and giggles anyway, and it made more sense when he went fast. Jeremy flipped on the high beams, cranked up 96.9 (The *Rock*), and floored it.

Where he sat the springs sagged and the cushion went so threadbare that for fun he soundlessly strummed the remaining strands, putting the old sofa on double duty as a badly strung guitar. Where

Mama sat for decades was also shiny and worn out. There were two good spots left to sit, but Peter had never been incautious about forced moves.

This is where he did his best thinking, when he didn't have a beer to drink and a gory movie to watch. But Peter hadn't cracked a brew or turned on the TV in days. He preferred thinking. He was, after all, a recovering Catholic. Rather than blind obedience and febrile superstition, Peter perforce took refuge in clear-eyed analysis and cold logic.

But old habits die hard, and undying belief never willingly unclamps its hold. Jokes at the expense of the one true faith (*So, a priest, a pedophile, and a rapist walk into a bar. He orders a drink...*) brought only spasm-short, bitter mirth. Nightly, he still intoned Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the Creed. He told the-God-he-swore-did-not-exist his cargo of sins. And if his confession was less than heartfelt and sincere, he'd do the whole thing again.

He unburdened to the Lord-not-there a litany of thoughts and deeds that he would never confide to Father Alvarez. Maybe he should climb in with the resident if he wanted the old charms of a dark box confessional. After all, he had it on good authority that she, at least, wasn't sexually repressed. Or a Jesus psychic. Also, it was a good bet she'd decree him a more colorful penance.

How many acts of contrition had he said over the whore who pleaded with him? He lost count. Would he say any over the resident when the time came? Probably yes. Not as many, but a few.

What to do about the resident resolved into crystalline focus. How to manage the others, especially Todd, required more thought. Peter was glad for the requirement, to ponder rather than to pray. He could go on this way all night. Strength, will, and dispassionate reason were vital to him, being all he had left. He excogitated and strummed the cushion as deftly and absently as he had once counted beads. The plan was all. The plan neared its flawless execution. He felt it in every fiber of his being.

The phone rang. A minute later, Satan's chaos reigned anew.

9

There was no movie star gown in the trunk, and Brian didn't bother to look for one. This was a dead-of-night rescue mission, the real deal, and he was scared shitless every step.

The odds, though, were in his favor. Radio silence was Jeremy's idea. At this hour, Peter no doubt haunted his picket fenced mausoleum. Lenny performed his cook and nursemaid duties by daylight and went home. Todd, probably drunk, stayed in town. The farmhouse was deserted.

That's not to say Brian was immune to the tingle of heightened danger. It's just that in the real world, it excited different expectations. He no longer wanted to kick tons of random ass James Bond-style. If he could just get his head lower than his knees for five minutes, that would be swell.

Brian’s fingers stuttered on the secret latch. He had enough time to wonder if this might break him. If his stupid case of the shakes might thwart the mission. No, there it was. The hutch swung open.

As before, the almost naked girl had her knees drawn to her chest and looked dully at nowhere through slitted eyes. Brian didn’t have time to coax her. He reached into the alcove and grabbed her wrist.

“I’m here to free you,” he said. “Come on, let’s get outta here.”

She came at his urging, tumbling sideways with the lazy momentum of a rucksack of rags. She overtopped the alcove’s lip and hit the concrete floor face first. Nose cartilage shattered, and she uttered a sound, not a cry of pain, but a soft plosive of expelled breath. She lay at Brian’s feet, limp and insensate.

Brian screamed. He knelt and rolled her over, saw blood gush from her nose and parted lips and knew he was about to be sick. It amazed him that he had the presence of mind to fumble out his iPhone. Thank god for Siri.

“Doc, listen, it’s Brian. I’m at the farm. The *farm*, yes. Something happened, she’s dead. Just *listen!* Dead or dying, I dunno, it’s that goddamn close. Something happened, something bad, whadda I do? Yes. Okay. Please: get here.” The disconnect buzzed in his ear. “Please,” Brian said. “Please.”

He made three more quick calls before he noticed Monica softly choking. He crept forward and rolled her onto her side so she would not drown in her own blood.

10

It wasn’t the booze. It was another almighty whack of déjà vu, worse than mistaking the farmer for great-uncle Tim or watching the wide nosed girl kiss in the parking lot. “Oh, shit,” Todd said. There was Jeremy kneeling over the resident, listening to her chest through a stethoscope. Now there was something fucked up with *her* nose. It seemed *folded* across her face, and ringed in dark, crusted blood. She lay on the futon, ankle chain unfettered, her eyes open but not seeing, not caring. More blood, a lot of it, splashed the floor and wall below the alcove, with long streaks between there and here.

The whole scene was too unreal and at the same time so familiar: him, Brian, Lenny, and Peter standing around and gawping like fools. Todd looked for the girl to suddenly belch snot and rise, laughing and snorting. *It got in my nose! Oh, God!* But for her to do that, she would’ve had to play along with weeks of imprisonment and rape. Just for a practical joke? No, that was thin. Okay, that part was the booze.

Okay, so, no, this was real. Todd had to cope with what he saw. The stethoscope was no prop. The girl was hurt, maybe dead. This was worse. This was way worse. “What did you do?” he said to

Lenny.

“Me? I didn’t, I didn’t...I just got here,” Lenny said.

“Is she dead?” Peter said.

Jeremy rocked back on his haunches. “Not yet.”

“What happened?” Brian said.

Jeremy shook his head. He pulled up the resident’s eyelids one at a time. Her face remained slack, her gaze indifferent.

“She’s gone, though,” Jeremy said, his voice tense and low.

“No puzzles, man,” Todd said. “No fucking puzzles.”

Jeremy turned and glared. He knuckled tears from his eyes, which to Todd was the most shocking thing yet. “I don’t care who it is,” Jeremy said. “I’m going to bury the piece of shit who did this. Clear enough?”

“Did what?” Brian said. “What happened?”

Jeremy strode to the alcove, careful not to step in the blood. He sniffed at the recess. “You found her like this? Unresponsive?”

“She was out of it, Jeremy,” Brian said. “She was out of it before she fell.”

“*You* found her?” Lenny said. “Wait, you weren’t supposed to be here.”

“Yeah, why were you?” Peter said.

“Later,” Jeremy said, now searching the back of the hutch, probing the air tube and sound baffles. “Help me.”

Brian went to work, glancing briefly at the back of the hutch and then rounding to the front. He fingered the underside of a shelf and the *Welcome Gamblers* sign sprang open. “Oh my god,” Brian said.

No one said a word or scarcely dared breathe as Brian searched around quickly and fetched the broom. He inserted the handle into the tube’s hollow and pushed. A thick roll emerged on Jeremy’s side. “The hell is this?” Jeremy said.

“Some magazines,” Lenny said. “Belong to Doris.”

“Magazines?” Brian said. He was so incredulous he began to tremble. “You blocked the airway with magazines? Why?”

“For her to read,” Lenny said. “They were a gift.”

“You prick,” Todd said. “You colossal prick! Did she even know they were there? How was she supposed to get them?”

Everything about Lenny retreated. “They were a gift,” he said.

“Yeah, happy birthday, I fucking nearly killed you.”

“No,” Lenny said. “It’s not my fault. Tell him. She’s okay, right? She’s gonna be okay?”

“She’s brain dead,” Jeremy said. “Her eyes don’t track, one pupil’s blown. You *asphyxiated* her. Look at her fingertips. Blue. That’s systemic anoxia. It took hours or possibly days. You killed her, Len.”

“No...”

“With Ladies Home Journal and *Redbook!*” Jeremy flung the unrolled stack in Lenny’s face. Lenny yipped. The magazines made a harsh, flapping sound as they flew and struck and fell.

Now Lenny began to cry. “It’s not fair,” he said. “I didn’t mean to.”

“How could you do this?” Brian said. “What made you cram them in there?”

“You saw the way she bit me the other time,” Lenny said. “You saw.”

“So your answer was to block her air supply?”

“No! It was an *accident!* I meant to give her something to read.”

“*By what light?* There’s no light in there, Lenny. It’s pitch dark.”

“I thought you put one in.”

“No, I never did!”

“How was I to know?” Lenny said.

Story of your life, Brian was about to say, but before he could form the words, he busted Lenny one in the teeth. He meant to hit him only once, but before he could stop himself, Brian dove on the writhing figure, pistoning down fist after fist, each punch finding its target, exacting punishment. He was going to kill him. Nothing in this fuckhole world was going to happen before he made him dead. *Kill you, kill you, kill you!* Brian thought, raining blows that splattered back blood from the wet mess of his target’s face.

Brian never knew who pulled him off, or how. Suddenly he was seated at the poker table, gulping huge lungfuls of air. Lenny rolled feebly from side to side, covering his face. He didn’t try to sit up, and no one went to help him.

“I’m not,” Jeremy said, mostly to himself. “Not prepared. Not for this, not again. Not again.”

He took a soda from the mini-fridge and left the Clubhouse. The first aid kit was in here, but Jeremy kept his hardcore pills stash in an old Stratego game box.

“You okay, champ?” Todd said to Brian. “You got it back?”

“Yeah,” Brian said, still puffing. “Oh my god, I’m so sorry.”

“Didn’t know you had it in you?” Peter said.

“Is — would somebody look? — is my nose broken?” Lenny said.

“Probably,” Peter said. “Let Jeremy come back. He’ll tell.”

Todd and Peter helped Lenny to a seat at the table. “Brian’s on a nose breaking rampage tonight,” Todd said. “Don’t think the resident satisfied him.”

“Not funny,” Brian said.

“Yeah, he hurt her, too,” Lenny said, moaning into his cupped palms, blood seeping through the fingers. “Wunn’t just me.”

“Wait for a towel,” Peter said. “Please don’t bleed on the cloth if you can help it. We’ll never get it out.”

“I’ll try,” Lenny said, tilting his head back. “Aw, fuggit! Loose toof!”

“I’m, I don’t know, Len, I’m *sorry!* I don’t know what came—”

“Thut up, Bwian. Don’t talk to me, man. Ever!”

“Here.” Jeremy crouched beside Lenny. “Swig this down.”

“What’s this?”

“It’s OxyContin. For pain.”

Lenny managed to wince out a smile and a snigger. “Not one of your l’il bwack pills?”

“It’s OxyContin. Look, I’ll have one, too.” He dry swallowed a pill. “Here, I got a root beer for you.”

Lenny nodded deeply and took the pill and drink. “Just one?”

“They’re strong. You can have another one in four hours.”

“Ree friends, doc?”

“Yeah, we’re friends, Lenny. We’re all friends. We’re at the table. We’ll get a solution. This’ll blow over. Drink up.”

“Thank you. Thank you, my fwiend!”

A light patter sounded, like rain dancing on canvas. They left Lenny at the table and converged on the futon. The girl took no notice of their coming. Her convulsions abated. A gob of spittle and blood from the corner of her lips lengthened like a thawing icicle.

“Is she in pain?” Brian said.

“She’s not in anything,” Jeremy said.

“There’s no hope?”

“Where there’s life there’s hope,” Todd said. “I’m getting a beer.”

“After massive cerebral insult,” Jeremy said. “No. There’s nothing we *can* do. All that’s left is what we must do.”

“And what’s that?”

Jeremy refused to answer.

“Bury her,” Peter said. “Tonight.”

“She’s not dead.”

“How many ways you want me to say it?” Jeremy said. “She’s not anything. She’s gone. What’re

you gonna do with her, Brian? You get a stiffie for stiffies? That’s all that’s left. You’re looking at meat with a pulse. Wanna keep that? If so, where? Not on our futon. Maybe a vegetable crisper. But hey, your thing, I don’t judge. Unless you got a kink for sadism, bestiality *and* necrophilia, or is that flogging a dead horse?”

“Shut up, I get it,” Brian said.

“Give her back,” Todd said. He stood by the open mini-fridge, leaning against the wall with an outstretched arm, bent over his beer. He didn’t even look at them. “I say we give her back.”

“Excuse me, to whom?” Peter said.

“To her folks. To whoever. She needs care. Give her back to the people who care about her. Who want to know about her. What’s the danger to us? She can’t rat on us. So that threat’s gone. Let’s please just do one thing right, even if it’s too late. I say give her back.”

He tossed the empty and refilled his fist with another can. “Or what the fuck, I don’t care. Don’t listen to me.”

“No,” Jeremy said. “You make a good point. That’s how you feel, this is your house. Let’s hear each other out, at least. A fair vote is fair. Brian?”

“I’m with Todd,” Brian said. “Give her back.”

“Okay, two votes, good. Peter?”

“Bury her. It’s safer.”

“I agree,” Jeremy said.

“Hey, Lenny,” Brian said. “Wake up. Settle a tie.”

Lenny had his head down on the green, his hand curled around the can of root beer.

“Dammit, he bled on the cloth,” Peter said.

“Lenny doesn’t vote,” Jeremy said.

“What do you mean, he doesn’t vote?”

“Cuz it ain’t a *democracy*, Brian. Our lives are on the line. Our safety is at stake. You want a guy with an IQ of 85 and a boxful of clacky teeth to *vote* on that? No! What we do is, we wrap us dead bodies and go boo-hoo later but we put our troubles in a hole *tonight* for *our* safety. For *our* lives. That’s the only collective. That’s the imperative. That’s the vote that counts. We bury her. Sorry, too bad: we bury her. And while we’re at it, we do that useless sunnabitch at the same time.”

Brian shot another look at Lenny. Lenny hadn’t moved.

Jeremy said, “Yeah, and I wouldn’t finish his root beer anybody, if I were you.”

GRAVEYARD SHIFT

1

Once in motion, Brian noticed, their actions took on almost military precision. Peter attacked the worst of the blood with Windex and a quarter-roll of Bounty. Todd carried the resident up and outside. He and Jeremy lugged up Lenny. By the time Peter joined them, Todd had already brought the front loader to the back porch and they had Lenny and the resident tucked in the scoop, with a small tarp blanketing them.

Early spring snow fell. A half moon shone, silhouetting the clouds in a pale nimbus of light.

Todd drove with the scoop boom-locked aloft as high as it would go. Brian admired the way that he, Jeremy, and Peter fell in together as the flashlight lit funeral cortege. Or was it corsage? No, that was the prom dress thingie. They marched alongside the machine with shovels on their shoulders in place of rifles — Procession! Close enough: formed a procession. They kept perfect step, that was the main point. This writing-what-you-knew business took some getting used to, but it paid dividends.

They trudged endlessly, their feet gone numb in the ankle-deep slush. Todd wanted the location to be as far as possible from the farmhouse. A stream, the unsurveyed one that snaked through the property, already swollen with icy runoff, stopped them at last. Todd backed off ten yards, lowered the scoop a little too hard, and the bodies jounced off, landing in a caricature of embrace on the snow and mud.

“Here,” Todd said, shutting off the engine. “All right?”

“Your place, your call,” Jeremy said. “But this seems good.”

“Is the, um, tool box with you, by any chance?” Peter said.

“The tool box?” Todd said.

“I was thinking — been considering this for quite some time, actually — any of you ever catch Midnight Meat Train?”

“Catch what?”

“It was a movie. Midnight Meat Train. Very classy for what it was. If you saw it, you’d know it. Vinnie Jones, Brooke Shields of all people, and the guy from The Hangover trilogy, forget his name. Came out about ten years ago, maybe a little less? Anyway, this butcher in a suit rides the subway every night with this big-ass hammer, killing commuters to feed a hoard of underground, flesh-eating ghouls. He does it like a priest almost.”

“Let me stop you. What the *hell*,” Jeremy said, “does that have to do with anything? I mean, any possible anything?”

“It would provide a frame of reference,” Peter said, “for what I hope to suggest. If you’d seen it.”

“Let’s say no,” Todd said.

“What do you *hope* to suggest?” Jeremy said.

“The guy, the killer, Vinnie Jones, he was meticulous about disposal. It really struck me. Before he fed the meat to the ghouls, he did things. Smart things. He removed the teeth with pliers, for instance. Cut off the finger ends so no identification there. Scooped out the eyes.”

“Wait, whoa,” Brian said. “You want us to carve out Lenny’s eyes and mutilate a living girl because of some scene you saw in a horror movie?”

“I was only thinking of you, Brian.”

“Oh, that’s all kinds of reassuring right there, Peter, what you said. No. You sick fuck, no.”

“Tool box ain’t here,” Todd said.

“Well, that’s all you needed to say,” Peter said. “If I’m the only one concerned about safety, fine.”

“Four hundred-odd acres here of private property where no one’s gonna come looking,” Jeremy said. “We dig the hole deep enough, we’ll be fine.”

“How do we explain the equipment going at this hour,” Brian said, “if anyone hears it?”

“New guy on the block’s nuts,” Todd said. “Loads up and drives his loader around at night for fun. Drinks, y’know.”

“That’ll work,” Jeremy said.

“Which he’s gonna go back and do right now. Can you manage with the shovels or d’ya need this bad boy to dig part of the hole for you?”

“Colder’n a witch’s tit out here, Todd, in case you haven’t noticed.” Jeremy said. “We’re a team. You and the bad boy should stay. Help us out.”

“Yeah, stay like team player Lenny stays. No, thanks. By the way, he’s crawling. Case you haven’t noticed. I thought he was dead.”

2

Crawling was an overstatement. Jeremy nudged Lenny’s shoulder with a boot tip and over onto his back he went, more helpless than a turtle.

“Man O’ *War* wouldn’t be able to stand, doped with that much Rompun,” Jeremy said. “Trust me, he’s more out of it than she is.”

“Rompun is what, the horse trunk?” Todd said.

“Yeah,” Jeremy said.

“Jer, do you even get why it’s not cool?”

“Why what’s not?”

“You killing any of us at your discretion.” Todd tapped his leg with his upholstered Glock 19.

“I get it,” Jeremy said, smiling at the gun first and then at Todd’s face. “Am I to infer you have a problem with what I did?”

“How you did it, mostly.”

“Well, aren’t you just the noblest drunk?”

“Aren’t I just?”

To Brian, Todd looked about ten million miles away from drunk. And a little over ten pounds of trigger pull away from adding to the evening’s body count.

Jeremy went on smiling. “He snuffed out her brain. Careless or not...”

“Didn’t say you were wrong, doc,” Todd said. “Said you did it the wrong way.”

“Well. Won’t happen again. Enough?”

Todd stopped tapping the gun against his leg, but he didn’t put it away, either.

Jeremy flicked a glance at Lenny. “If he doesn’t get a heart attack in the next half hour or so, he’ll revive. You want that?”

Todd regarded Lenny for a long, silent time. Lenny, his eyelids trembling, twitched on his back like a dog suffering a bad dream. “No,” Todd said. “Just in future...”

“Won’t be a future,” Jeremy said. “I mean, it won’t happen again.” Jeremy smile sloughed off in favor of something more honest. “Sorry, Todd.”

After another moment of contemplation, Todd holstered the Glock. “I’ll help dig y’all the grave,” he said. “We doing one or two?”

“One should be okay. As long as it’s deep.”

“Won’t be. There’s a mini-backhoe attachment I don’t have,” Todd said. “That’d get you six feet. If I had it. Scoop’s not a digger. But I’ll punch you through the topsoil at least.”

Todd stumbled a little remounting the cage-like cab, the only sign that he’d made a running start at the booze before the two beers he downed in the Clubhouse.

He worked the machine with expertise, though, gouging in minutes a seven-foot long by two-foot deep trough in the earth. Todd killed the loud diesel a second time, but didn’t emerge from the barred shadows of the cab. “That’s all it’ll do,” he said. “I’m going back. Leave you the shovels and flashlights. When you’re done, come to the kitchen. I’ll have coffee on and whatnot. I’m drinking whatnot. Just be sure of one thing. You come in, don’t let me see you with nothing in your hands but calluses.”

“Hey, Todd, can’t you—” Brian said, but conversation was done. Todd jabbed the loader to roaring life, and it lumbered into the night on its homeward trek.

3

Rather than grouse and gossip, Jeremy, Peter, and Brian bit down with the shovels. They attacked the earth with a vengeance. The grave deepened rapidly. About five feet down, though, the soil gave way to hard clay and rock, which would not give way at all. Without discussion, the boys clambered out.

“Okay, two questions,” Brian said. “Who’s got the gun and who’s gonna do it. I’ll lead off. Not me and not me.”

“What gun?” Jeremy said.

“You’re shitting me,” Brian said. “You two are the Wild West posse.”

“Todd has his,” Peter said. “But mine’s in the car.”

“Mine, too,” Jeremy said.

“No way,” Brian said. “We have no means...? They get buried *alive*?”

“Unless you have some other plan,” Peter said. “Or you’re up for a five mile jog.” He turned to Jeremy. “What would you say that is, round-trip? Five miles? Four?”

“Four at best.”

“Okay. Four.”

“But if you think we’re going to stamp around in the snow all night waiting for you to complete your marathon of mercy, uh, Peter?”

“No,” Peter said. “Freezing my nuts off. Let’s do this.”

“Sorry, Brian. Clemency called on account of—”

“Freezing my nuts off.”

“I’m not doing this,” Brian said. “I’m not.”

“Look. They’re both out of it,” Jeremy said. “She’s brain dead. He’s...Lenny. This isn’t fair and not nice, but it’s not Edgar Allen Poe, either. We just cover them over. There’s nothing cruel. They don’t suffer. I promise.”

“How do you know?” Brian said.

“Would it be too cliché to say, Trust me, I’m a doctor?”

Peter snickered, and Brian shot him a dirty look. “Yes,” Brian said. “I think the fuck it would.”

“Well, then you come up with something.”

“I wanted us to get professional,” Peter said. “Everybody shot me down.”

“Since when is going at human beings with pliers and, I dunno, eyeball *grapefruit* spoons

professional?” Brian said.

“Tell you what, pal. Even if we had a gun,” Peter said, “I’d say don’t use it. You want ’em dead before they go in the hole, clobber ’em with a rock. Seriously. Nobody does ballistics on rocks.”

“We’ll wait for you to find a rock...” Jeremy said.

“No,” Brian said. “Let’s get on with it.” He sat on the edge and then hopped into the grave.

“What are you doing?” Peter said.

“Hand them down to me,” Brian said, his voice tight and bitter. “Is that too much kindness?”

“No,” Jeremy said. “No, it’s not.”

They lowered Lenny first. “Don’t worry, buddy,” Brian told him. “Remember all your stories — gimme the tarp, huh? I want the tarp under him. Just *give*. Was that so hard? — all your stories about solitary confinement? You were so afraid? Tell you what. Never gonna happen. ’Sides, you’ve got a beautiful woman who’ll stay in your arms forever. None too shabby, huh? Better deal than most.”

When they lowered Monica into Brian’s arms, her eyes rolled to meet his and she shrieked wild laughter in his face.

Terrorstruck, Brian dropped her. She collapsed partly onto Lenny at the floor of the grave. New howls of laughter rose from the darkness at his feet, harsh and braying, insane and joyless.

Brian sprang from the grave, and if he hadn’t immediately tripped over a shovel blade he would’ve fled heedless as a frightened horse.

“It’s nothing!” Jeremy both helped him up and held him there. “Reflex! Nothing!”

“Ohmigod oholyshit!” Brian said. He felt his heart hammer apart his ribs. Jeremy was in his face, making meaningless sounds.

“She doesn’t know she’s doing it. She doesn’t know, I swear!” Jeremy said.

“What? What?” Brian gasped.

“It’s not conscious. It’s not. Conscious,” Jeremy said.

“Canyoustop? Canyoumaggitstop? Please canyou omigod omigod omigod.” Brian sat in the snow as his legs suddenly gave way. He managed to contort himself onto hands and knees before he vomited.

“You hear that?” Peter said.

“She’ll stop, probably,” Jeremy said. “It’s like bad wiring, an intermittent connection.”

Brian crawled a bit and found fresh snow to smear clean his mouth.

“No, listen,” Peter said. “Now *he’s* going at it.”

Under the inhuman laughter was a distinctly human voice, a soft, repeated entreaty. “...don’t...don’t...don’t...” Lenny said.

“Oh, great,” Jeremy said. “Sounds like that stupid parrot keychain.”

“I’ll get this one,” Peter said. Taking a flashlight to choose where to land, Peter jumped into the grave. Light spilled and bounced from the hole.

“Here,” Peter said. “Sing with sand.”

Monica’s raspy laugh sputtered to a soft choking. Brian felt compelled to surge to the rescue, but checked the urge. What was the point? Lenny’s soft plea became clearer. “...don’t...don’t...”

“Don’t what, Lenny?” the unseen Peter said. “You brought this on yourself.”

“...doynnbemeen...”

“Speak up!” the voice echoed, and laughed. “Don’t be mean? You have no idea, you asshole, what mean *begins* to look like.”

Jeremy stepped to the edge of the pit and looked down. Light from below painted his leering face with hideous, uptilted shadows.

“Stop it...” Brian said, struggling to stand. His ridiculously weakened legs threatened to betray him all over again.

“...dohhn...bring...Mina...”

“Mina? The kid? Doris and Mina the kid?” Peter said, sounding as pleased as punch. “Too late, Len. They’re already here. We’re doing them next.”

Somehow Monica managed to spit out or swallow enough earth so she could laugh again, her blasphemous parody of merriment.

Brian rushed to the graveside, saw Lenny’s confused eyes widen in hurt comprehension.

“He’s lying! He’s lying!” Brian said, the bleak reassurance scraping his voice raw.

Though the grave was shallow, Peter was too short to climb out of it easily. He took his time and picked his footholds. Lenny managed to clutch at one of Peter’s ankles, but had no strength to hold him.

Brian hauled Peter up in order to fling him aside. “You *fuck!*” Peter’s flashlight fell and rolled back into the grave. “What did you *say* that for?” Brian said. Peter sprawled, laughing all over again.

Brian looked in anguish at Lenny. “He’s lying,” he said. The flashlight illuminated the bottom of the grave. Monica, snuggled grotesquely against Lenny, laughed in spasms, her ribcage jutting out each time. Thin snow melted on her bare skin. Ridges of gooseflesh stood out on her arms.

Lenny had no struggle left in him. His features went slack; his lips stopped trembling. He managed to leak tears without making a sound. The despair in his eyes gave way to sorrowful resignation, which was somehow worse. The faster those haunted eyes were covered with dirt, the better.

Weeping, Brian threw rapid shovelfuls of earth on his former poker buddy and on the girl he played cards with once. Peter and Jeremy pitched in, but Brian worked like a man possessed. If there were records for such things, then they filled in the secret grave in record time.

“Not now,” Brian said in Todd’s kitchen, “now’s too soon. But the next time we’re together, we should hold a wake.”

“For Lenny?” Peter said.

“For them both. But yeah, for Lenny.”

“We just...” Jeremy said.

“I know *we just*,” Brian said. “That’s the point. No one else does. If we don’t...come out and, and acknowledge...”

“Careful,” Peter said.

“To ourselves,” Brian said, “who he was, that...” (*oh, fer frick’s sake. Why amass a sterling vocabulary if not to choke on it when it’s needed most?*) “that we knew him, then who will?” (*Brilliant! Forceful! And yet so intoxicatingly eloquent! What a gift of gab!*) “Face it,” he said. “There’ll never be a funeral, a real one. No one’s supposed to know he’s dead. Who’ll do this for him, if not—”

“The bastards who did it to him,” Jeremy said.

“Exactly,” Brian said. “Us.”

Jeremy’s chuckle built into a belly laugh. “You are *the* most demented boy scout!”

“I’m for it,” Todd said. “Hosting a wake.”

“No shit, Todd-face,” Jeremy said. “A party where you drink yourself stoned. What are the odds you’d be in favor?”

“What are the odds you’ll get off my ass?”

“Long,” Jeremy said. “You, I have no problem with. You, personally, are a prince. But when you drink, you lose control. You know you do, Todd. In case you missed the memo, we can’t afford to lose control. Not any more, not any of us. There’s too high a cost.”

“I get that,” Todd said.

“Then act accordingly,” Jeremy said. “That’s all I ask. Do that, we’ll be fine.”

“We just put one of our own in the ground,” Brian said. “And you see a path for us to be fine. *That’s* demented.”

“Sue me, I’m a optimist,” Jeremy said. “Know the difference between an optimist and a pessimist? An optimist says this is the best of all possible worlds. Funny thing is, so does the pessimist.” Jeremy lit a cigarette and sucked down smoke. “It’ll be all right,” he said. “We’ll be all right.”

“Before we do the group hug and bromance ourselves into a chorus of Kumbayah, can we decide who drives Lenny’s car back to his house?” Peter said. “It has to be there before sunrise.”



Gripping the wheel with black leather gloves, Brian drove Lenny’s POS Pontiac down slushy-wet, deserted streets and left it curbside before a house he would never walk into again. Peter had caravanned behind him the whole way. With the neighborhood sound asleep, Peter insisted they re-examine Lenny’s front seat by flashlight for hairs, fingerprints, or other clues. They left undisturbed the Arby’s bags and receipts, candy wrappers, and old, scattered French fries.

“I don’t see anything.”

“Nothing to see,” Brian said. “Do we leave his keys or take them with?”

“Leave them,” Peter said. “Did you change the radio station?”

“Never turned it on.”

“Good man,” Peter said. “Let’s go.”

They drove a while in silence, Peter giving Brian a lift home. Brian flexed his fists, making the leather creak. “How do you think we did?”

“We’ll see,” Peter said. “Got your story?”

“What story?”

“For why you called him last night. Before he drove out to the farmhouse.”

“Yeah. Told him about some porny DVDs he wanted being in the five dollar bucket at Walmart. He got pretty excited. I got the titles, just in case. They’re really there.”

“Okay.”

They came to a red light. “It was inevitable,” Brian said.

“What was?”

“Know what I did the whole ride back? Played the what-if game.”

“What’s that?”

“Tool of the trade for writers. You examine a story from every possible angle. Does this action or characterization make sense? Does it hang together? What are the weaknesses? Then you decide. Either it’s incredible or it’s inevitable. Incredible means not credible, you can’t believe it. There’s a hole somewhere. Your logic failed.”

“And if it’s inevitable?”

“Then you did it right. It couldn’t happen any other way. It’s almost like, if you think about it, we’re not to blame. For me wailing on him, for Jeremy doping him, for...any of it.”

“We’ll see,” Peter said. “I’ll take you to get your car tonight, after dark.”

“You’re awful quiet,” Brian said. “Even for you.”

“It’s going to be a long day,” Peter said. “Not to mention I’ll be short-handed at work.”

“Why’s that?” Brian said. “Oh, yeah.” He pulled off his gloves finger by finger.



Lenny bound the group together in more ways than they knew. It was two weeks before the guys gathered at the farmhouse to play poker. No one remembered to bring chips and salsa.

“Four hand poker sucks,” Jeremy said. “Who said they could play whist?”

“It was hearts,” Brian said. “And it was Lenny.”

“Oh, fuck me twice.”

They all laughed. No one had much else to say. And that was as close as they got to giving Lenny a wake.

At the end of the night, Todd said he wanted to seal up the alcove and dismantle the Clubhouse. No one much responded. And they never got around to that, either.

5

“Know what this is?” Peter said. The gadget he cradled was drum-shaped, bulky and gray, with a big black knob on top, and it looked heavy as sin.

“Yeah, what is it, amp dimmer or something,” Brian said. “My sister’s boyfriend had one. Said it made his guitar sound punchy, which I guess was a good thing. Swore by it.”

“So do Somali pirates and the Snowdon murder gang,” Peter said. “Know what they used it for?”

“I’m guessing not their garage band.”

“You hook prongs through here to your victim’s genitals and run live current. You set the voltage from light buzz to crispy critter.”

“Whoever gets to be your Secret Santa, Peter, must have a field day.”

“Wonder if it works.”

“Knock yourself out. Literally.”

“Variac!” Peter said. “Variac autotransformer.”

“That the brand name?”

“Yeah.”

“Perfect!”

As co-foremen, they were in Todd’s basement to decide what to do about the Clubhouse. Allowing themselves, instead, to make a loose inventory of the dusty junk on the long, bowed, plank shelves proved much more diverting.

“Has she stopped calling you?”

“Who?” Brian said.

“Doris.”

“About a week ago. She was still crying.”

“Heard she filled out a missing persons.”

“Well, of course.”

“We might want to do something about that,” Peter said.

“Like what?” Brian said. “Spellcheck it? Buy her and Phil agroupon to Sweet Frog Frozen Yogurt?”

“Something,” Peter said.

“Hook ’em up to your new toy?”

“Maybe.”

“No. Not even as a joke. Not even. You hear me?”

“I hear you,” Peter said. “Can’t help but wonder why you said it, though.”

“You creep me out, you know that? You always do. Even in my dreams.”

“In your dreams?” Peter said. “What’d I do in your dreams?”

“It was...no. A magic trick or something, I forget,” Brian said. “But it was creepy. You said Abracadabra.”

“Ha!” Peter said, and the sharp laugh echoed. “That’s a real incantation, you know. That word. Goes back hundreds if not thousands of years.”

“Go play with your ball lighter,” Brian said. “Oh, shit!”

“What?” Peter said.

“I had one of these,” Brian said. “Ho-lee Jeez.”

“What is it?”

Brian showed him the black plastic cube, like an undersized Jack-in-the-box with a slot on top instead of a crank handle. “It’s a toy bank,” Brian said. “Stand a coin here and the thing rattles and bumps and a little plastic hand comes out and steals your money. I used to love this gizmo until my dad...” Brian *tsked* and put it back on the shelf.

“Your dad what?” Peter said.

“He called it a suicide box. Because that was its function. It turned on in order to turn itself off. Once he called it that, I...I...I was really young. Kept seeing the guy trapped in the box. Killing himself going crazy trying to claw his way out. Into my bedroom. No, thanks!”

Peter regarded him with that empty stare he used when he was making a decision. Then he said in a rush: “Almost got given a Bible shelf like that.”

“A Bible shelf?”

“Plastic Jesus. With plastic nails and plastic thorns and plastic wounds. Way too graphic.”

“For you? You *feed* on graphic.”

“It was too graphic. For me. Then.”

“Ah. Your Jesus, did he accept small change?”

“If we...” Peter said, as if inwardly listening to each word before saying it aloud, “seal the Clubhouse...wouldn’t we’ve created our own suicide box? Built something and set it in motion only to...end it, make it stop?”

“People died,” Brian said, fun time over.

“Who’s to say we don’t learn from that?” Peter said. “And yes, admittedly, yes, there were mistakes. Some errors. But rather than a giant suicide...bank with nothing *saved* in it, what if we *applied* those lessons?”

“To do what? Commit better felonies?”

“Why not?”

“Kidnap and rape? Li’l hand shoots out—”

“Why not?”

“That’s a pretty fucked up happy ending conclusion.”

“It’s the one Fowles gave in *The Collector*. Freddy Clegg started again. Decided to hunt someone more tractable.”

“Are you serious?”

“I’m only asking a literary question. Your what-if game. Was that book incredible or inevitable? The happy ending? The outcome that denies suicide? You’re the resident expert on such matters, Brian. Books and so on. What do you think? It’s only a question. Book Club-type bullshit. A harmless question. That’s all.”

6

“It’s hardly his fault,” Mrs. Melchers said. “And you make it sound like it is. Emerson is *sixteen* years old. How do you expect him hold it?”

Tie it in a knot works, thought Todd.

What he said was, “I’m sorry, ma’am, First Flooring is not liable for pet stains. It’s in the contract you signed, and we specifically went over that. Now do we come in or, I dunno, what do you want us to do?”

“He *can’t* hold it,” Mrs. Melchers said, her lower lip aquiver.

Jesus, lady! Whether doggie-poo holds it, juggles it, or can spit it five feet—

“You have my sympathy,” Todd said.

“Do I?” she said, as bitter as a whip crack.

But once Todd’s smile-for-the-customer face was on, nothing could dislodge it. “Yes, ma’am.

I have three companions myself, and one, Betsy, my German shepherd mix, passed at Christmas. So I understand your plight. Have you considered crate-training Emerson?”

“That would break his heart,” Mrs. Melchers said. “A cage!”

I could crate-train your pruny ass a few weeks, Todd thought. *That might do the trick.* “What would you like me to do?” he said.

“Fix the damage,” she said. “Free of charge.”

“That I cannot do, sadly.” What was sad was being called back here twice in three months. What was sad was not yet seeing dime one for the previous repair. What was over-the-moon intolerable was this vestibule faceoff, playing Mother-May-I? with this prim bat, his crew lined up behind him and not earning money. “If you let Emerson relieve himself indoors day and night, Mrs. Melchers...”

“There you go again. As if we let him.”

The snap in Todd was so clear he could practically hear it. “All right, you want the repairs, you don’t wanna pay, you don’t wanna impound poochie,” Todd said. *Not out loud, dickface!* “I see three options here. Have me rip up this primo perfecto floor and put down tile. You pay for that. Or you can put down newspapers. *That’s* free of charge. Or you can put down...”

“Oh my god.”

“Or put to sleep,” Todd said. “I don’t care, pick your cutesy idiom of choice. You called us here because your doggie makes you unhappy, basically. But it’s not his fault. We don’t come in until we understand that, fine. Do you understand we don’t *have* to come in? Look, it’s not my place to say, but if the damn mutt’s quality of life is so impaired that it’s destroying *your* quality of life, not to mention the floor every month...”

“You’re right,” Mrs. Melchers said, “it’s not your place to say. Be careful, Mr. Heath. Be especially careful. I already dinged you on Angie’s List. I can make your life rough, buster. Darn rough.”

Todd stepped close, his fixed smile nowhere in his eyes or his low voice. “Wanna go rough? We can go right now, bitch. I’ll put a stain in this floor where you stand they’ll talk about for years.”

Mrs. Melchers paled. Her crossed arms finally fell apart so she could raise her hands in futile defense. Richard DiPeppe, Todd’s crew chief, sped around his boss and led the lady to an embroidered loveseat that once belonged to Franklin D. and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Excuses jangled through Todd’s skull. Even if he had time to sort them, at best they’d only come out a childish sing-song, *The blame is not on me, the blame should be on the rancid cof-fee that could-n’t halt the hangover I got from bury-ing the thought of bur-ing the girl I grabbed in the lot be-cause she was hot that we all fucked a lot in the dun-geon room that me and Bri and Peter and Lenny and Jeremy built!*

Emerson dumped his head into Mrs. Melchers lap. She patted him with a fluttering hand. Richard

DiPeppe excused himself and went to the crew at the doorway, not sparing his boss so much as a glance. He spoke to the guys in the same too-soft-to-hear voice he shared with Mrs. Melchers. They hefted their tool boxes and supplies and trooped into the living room as quiet as mice.

Todd hadn't moved. He wasn't altogether sure he could. Some vital gear seemed irreparably shot to hell. At last, Richard came to him.

“Why don't you sit this out in the truck?” Richard said, still using the soft, damage-control voice. “We won't take long.”

“What did you promise her?”

“Twenty minutes, max. Get some rest.”

“What did you promise her?”

Richard blew a long sigh of exasperation. “This job free and also the last one. Said I'd eat the cost out of my own pay if necessary.”

Todd said, “You don't have to.”

Richard's snort of laughter was both pitying and unsympathetic. “Go sit in the truck, Todd. Do yourself a favor.”

“I should apologize first.”

“No. Just go sit in the truck.”

“Thanks, Richard.”

“Just go.”

7

The communication panel slid back, revealing gloomy fretwork framed in the wall.

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,” Peter said, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.”

“How long has it been since your last confession?” said Father Alvarez.

“I don't know. A few weeks. A month or so.”

“Are you here now to unburden your soul?”

“I don't know that, either.”

“What does it depend on, my son?”

“Beats me. Either blind faith or blind chance.”

“No frippery, if you please,” said Father Alvarez. “This is God's house. Not a place to play games.”

“I'm sorry, Father,” Peter said. “But it is. Has to be. If Hell is gateposted Abandon Hope, then

the sign above Heaven is Welcome Gamblers. Look what happened to Marion Parker.”

“To whom?”

“Let’s start again. Father forgive me, for I have sinned. It has been two months since my last...kneeling here.” Peter laughter surprised them both. “You see, so much, so *much* of this is habit! I say I’ve sinned. I *know* I’ve sinned. And ipso fucko mea culpa. At 14, you know what I decided? The church was a den of iniquity. The Church itself. It murdered my sister. There was no act of contrition for that. On, no! No, sir! The church never stood in error. It was in its right, being right with the Lord. I was the sinner. She was the sinner. And when I *confessed* that the church had every right to dispose of her, like trash, that was *my* sin. My transgression. But the church, having supped its bowl of blood, said to me, Go thou and sin no more. Go with Jesus. Go with God. And whoever does that, right?, whoever obeys that precious edict with their whole heart, how are they to sin? In anything they do? Do you see what I mean? In anything.”

Peter took off and pocketed his glasses. His headache was throbbing so, the weight of the frames became intolerable against the bridge of his nose.

“Know what I did? I built my own den of iniquity, Father,” Peter said. “Stone by stone. I followed God’s example. It was my creation. A tidy thing. Peopled it, even. My perfect little garden. My Kingdom of Sin. And I did it better than He could. My throne, at least, I shared.”

“I will not hear blasphemies.”

“Ah, but you will take confession. All right. All right. Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. All for my sins.”

“Yes,” Father Alvarez said. “True.”

“There was a man named William Edward Hickman. He was one of many men I discovered after I left the church.”

“Discovered in what sense?”

“Don’t be vulgar, Father. Hickman tried to walk with the Lord. But he needed money to enroll in Bible school. Or buy a motorcycle. Accounts vary. He forged a check at the bank where he worked as a messenger. He was caught and given probation. The bank manager refused to give him his job back, or to give him a reference to work anywhere else. Was that sinful? Was that the mistake right there? You’re not answering, Father.”

“Go on.”

“Mr. Hickman showed up at a certain junior high school in Los Angeles. This was winter, 1927.”

“Nineteen what?”

“Twenty-seven. Do you want to hear this or don’t you? He told the clerk, he told her the bank manager had been gravely injured in an auto accident, and would someone fetch his daughter? Which

one? There were twins, you see. Oh, the littler one. The girl they brought was named Marion Parker. She was 12 years old.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Patience, Father,” Peter said. “Hickman took the girl away, and soon the ransom notes came. Telegrams, really. Signed the Fox. And Death. And Fate. Hickman had already strangled and slit the poor girl’s throat and began to disembowel her when he discovered that she was still alive. And he thought, Oops, the father might not want to see this. Natural, sane thing to surmise. So he tried to piece her back together. With strings and rags for stuffing. This after he cut off her arms and legs. She was dead by then. He wound her neck through and through with wire to keep her head from toppling off, and with black thread he sewed open her eyes to make her look...aware, I suppose. Then he propped this...creation into the passenger side of his *coupe* and drove to get the ransom. The father saw little Marion in light very much like this. He tossed in the money and Hickman sped away, pushing the body out of the moving car. Onto a soft, grassy lawn. Some accounts say that the packaging split upon impact. Imagine being the father, taking *bits* of your daughter into your arms. But my question, though, is this. If Christ suffered and died all for our sins, what did Marion Parker suffer for? Wasn’t His sacrifice enough? You can answer anytime, Father. Just, please, no ‘mysterious ways’ bullshit.”

“You should go,” said Father Alvarez. “You should leave now, my son.”

“I’m *atoning* for something,” Peter said, his teeth sharp and grating. “Atonement? At-one-ment? Becoming *at one* with the Father. It’s all a scam, isn’t it? Can’t you confess that? All of us good little Catholics, we’re so trained, aren’t we? Trained from *birth* to aspire to be like Him. But we fail. Always and inevitably, we suck, we fall. Why? Because we’re ordained to be Less Than. What loving God demands that? God can’t have it that way *and be loving*. Unless the game’s rigged. Unless it’s rigged, and rigged from the start, the House always wins. Welcome Gam—”

The communication panel, made of walnut, slid closed with a hard whack. Peter purred mocking laughter in the darkness.

8

“Okay, that one’s dead,” April said. “I’ll give you that.”

They stepped around the shaggy corpse, Jeremy and April to the left, and Monica circling to the right, each taking care to avoid the widening pool of blood.

It was a beautiful spring day at the National Zoo, the sky so blue it almost hurt your eyes to look at it. The orangutan evidently fell from the “O-line”, the overhead cables that linked the Think Tank and the Great Ape House. Its head had burst open on the walkway.

April and Monica relinked hands, and Jeremy trailed behind them. He watched how they walked, the swish of their short dresses, their nice legs pumping in long strides. Jeremy reasserted his claim that all the animals were dead. No way, the girls said. It must be nap time. This went on. It was an amiable quarrel, nothing to get heated about.

There wasn't an ice cream vendor to be found for love or money.

But they looked dead, the animals. Jeremy could not recall ever seeing a living elephant keeled over on its side. The air was still. Not even birds sang.

We'll settle this, the BFFs declared, and steered their steps to the petting zoo. Jeremy hung with them, but his dread mounted. This was a horrible mistake. All the beasts were dead, the laughing girls before him were dead (he had no idea how he knew this, but he knew), butterflies did not flutter, no bees buzzed.

Two women with their mouths taped shut stood at the petting zoo entrance, handing out bright red balloons. Something in Jeremy's balloon sloshed and shifted, casting a dark, amniotic shadow.

“Shh,” Monica said. “They're having a snoozie.”

The childless petting zoo was populated with king cobras and wildcats, plump tarantulas, a crocodile and grizzly bear, all motionless and heaped together.

“Touch them,” April said, “you want to be a healer. You can wake them up.”

“Touch them,” Monica said.

Against his better judgment, Jeremy reached out a hand. The thumb jutted crookedly and he bled from the torn wrist handcuffed to the balloon and fresh blood was cascading down the string.

Jeremy woke, flinching in terror.



He bumped Nurse Flicker reaching past her for a coffee stirrer, and gave a grunt in lieu of apology.

“Excuse you,” she said.

“Gimme coffee or gimme death,” Jeremy said. “Thomas Paine or Patrick Henry, not sure which.”

“Holy smoke,” Nurse Flicker said. “Are you drunk?”

“No. Went fifteen rounds with the pillow, though. Restless night.”

“Know what causes a restless night?”

“Please god don't tell me.”

“A bad conscience, bad company, or bad dreams.”

“Cluttered...dreams. Cluttered. See you in the monkey house.”



He would kill for another OxyContin, especially with Monica joining the retinue of his

nightmares. But he slammed his last Big Blue dose an hour ago, and the cage wasn't the easy mark it once was. He was being watched. Never mind by whom, it was happening; that was key. Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you. Was paranoia one of Oxy's storied side effects, along with respiratory depression, clammy skin, and piloerection? No surprise if it was. He knew what he needed. He needed to score one more goodly haul from the narc box to tide him over while the hoo-ha at Todd's farm sorted itself out and died down.

Things had to get better. They would; they *had* to. Common Room coffee scalded the roof of Jeremy's mouth. To hell with waiting. If he wanted a hit, he'd take one. He earned it a dozen times over. He meant to reload his stash before lunch anyway, and that took steady nerves. Especially with all these damn people watching. *All these damn people*, Jeremy thought. *Peter had the right idea. Or the right movie quote, at least. Kill 'em all, let God sort 'em out later.*

He would kill for another Oxy. No damn joke.

9

To begin at the beginning, Trent's friend Lester was a pack rat, a hoarder extreme, and one with an exquisitely wrought soft spot for sleaze. If it hadn't been for the thin sack with the three tin signs, Trent decided, none of the horror would've happened.

The boys played poker when they got together, despite the fact that none of them would last five minutes gambling online or at a real casino table. They played five card straight, mostly, nothing wild. Omaha and Texas Hold Em were banned after Lester and Terry almost came to blows over lammers and buttons.

“Look at the table,” Terry said. “There's no lammer, there's no button. What difference does it make? Deal!”

“The dealer is the button, fucknose,” said Lester, his nostrils flaring. “But the button can mark lammers.”

“Which are what?”

“They're buttons!”

“I'm gonna lam you in the hospital, worthless prick! Right now!”

Trent and Damian had to haul Terry back to his seat. Jared was no help, he was laughing too hard.



Brian decided to write it out as a novel.

He would not have it published, of course. There was

(no such thing as an unpulled trigger)

no way he'd be nuts enough to allow that. But he would write it out, warts and all, and then review and see whether the linear action was inevitable, or if it contained some overlooked twist, some untugged loop or kink, some way to've altered events before the girl in the wall and the carnage.

Sure, he now kept a big secret from his best friends on Earth. A secret so dangerous that Peter, for one, would kill him on the spot if he ever found out about it.

But wasn't that the hallmark of great writing, that sense of danger? Brian superstitiously nixed dwelling on the thought. Recipes for blockbusters were recipes for disaster. O that way mediocrity lies, let me shun that.

It felt good to be writing. It felt better than good. Normally, Brian would've ransacked the thesaurus already for the most exigent or dulcet way to describe how better than good it felt. But he felt...*better* than that now, not in need of such a crutch. He was writing every day. Never mind that to brag about it might (scratch "might", *would*) get him killed, Brian didn't *want* to brag, that was the weird-as-all-get-out truth. The writing was good. It felt better than good, and he left it at that.

10

You couldn't ask for a more gorgeous Saturday. It was the kind of drive into the country that demanded your ride be a flashy ragtop with a boss sound system. Brian made do. He played his Nick Cave CD top volume and kept the A/C vents open all the way.

He'd never appreciated the ride before, and boy howdy, he got the full whop of *those* metaphorical implications! Brian grooved to the early season pleasure boats strutting on Lake Anna, and grinned at the rural yard sales, testaments to spring cleaning, with their uniform divisions of crap: bright, plastic toys and dark, rusted tools. Any hidden metaphor there? Nah, probably not, but the notion was fun to bop around in his noggin for a few miles.

He passed a herd of white llamas grazing on a plantation's front lawn. Brian had to stare to make sure that's what he saw, and then he wanted to laugh.

For once, there was no urgency or queasy apprehension about getting to the farm, and it blew Brian's mind how great a relief that was. Apparently Todd rethought what to do with the Clubhouse, and wanted the gang's input. Pulling up, Brian noticed Lenny's POS Pontiac parked in the shade. Serious spring cleaning, indeed!

Brian homed in on the clatter of plates and muted chatter. Rounding into the kitchen, he said, "We're gonna get rid of the car, too? I thought—"

Todd and his guests, Doris and Philomena, looked up from the table. Jeremy and Peter stood by,

each with a plate in one hand and piece of chicken in the other. Brunch was a bucket of the Colonel’s secret recipe, sides of corn, slaw, and goopy mashed potatoes, all washed down with tall glasses of Sprite.

“Saved you a seat,” Todd said.

“Hi, tiger,” Doris said. “Long time, no see.”

“Hey, Brian,” Peter said. “Guess who called? Lenny said for the girls to come over, and here they are. Isn’t that great?”

STRANGE VISITOR FROM ANOTHER PLANET

1

The Thousand-Year Saturday

Might as well give the puppy a title, Brian figured, seeing as it was bound to be a chapter unto itself of his upcoming novel. From the second he walked in on brunch, this roller coaster day shot from the gate, and only now was it rounding its final, slow turns, seven hours later.

All said and done, the day registered more as motion than moments. How could he do it justice, with all its twists and turns and strange conversations? There was a Post-It in his head as big as a yellow bedsheet. It read BUY DICTAPHONE. *Good! You suddenly got that?*, dad said. *Let me get on my hands and knees and help you look for your IQ.*

Brian felt buzzy and unsettled from information overload. He hardly had time to catch his breath, let alone take notes. Mental notes, even! Peter was the master at that business, who said what and what events went when. The little weasel could quote you bull sessions word for word months down the line. It was eerie. But Peter listened more than he spoke. That was a talent or a luxury that Brian himself either never had or today couldn't afford. Today he talked himself silly. He talked turkey. He talked as if lives hung in the balance, and ultimately, they did.

Truth was, though, he had never been much of a listener for the same reason he had never been much of a reader. He'd been too eager to be himself the shaman, the skald (what an immensely great word!), the teller of tales. He longed to take the high seat at the campfire, sit plucking the lyre before king and warriors, stand at the podium for the bookstore reading, adjust the mic, and hold with his beautifully chosen words the rapt audience captive. Christ, he spellbound himself, just thinking about it.

And if he could get it right, this might be the last chapter. He wasn't sure, but it might be. There were no other inevitable actions he could foresee. Jeremy, Peter, and Todd's life of crime — and his, for that matter — were over.

It had been his doing. Today cinched it. He had, as he suspected from the start, proved himself the linchpin. The maker and unmaker of the unholy gang. He had summoned chaos and today he brought order out of it. There would be no more days like this, he knew. No more nights when with such calm and confidence he'd declare “all in” on the last, big stakes hand. For once, he reaped all the winnings and held the big guns. Well, a big gun, anyway.

But thanks to him, everyone ended up safe and happy, more or less, because he spilled the honest

beans, more or less, about multiple homicides. Go figure. All in all, quite a day.

2

“Could I see summa you guys,” Brian said, “in the other room? Just real quick?”

“Want us to leave?” Doris said.

“No, no, you stay,” Jeremy said. “Won’t take a minute.”

Todd pushed away from the table. “Lotsa meetings on ren-o-vation,” he said. “Emphasis on no.”

“It’s so good to have ladies ’round the farm again,” Peter said, tipping an imaginary hat.



The front room seemed bigger because it remained so barren. Stands of camo-fabric flattened upright in a corner.

“Whose idea was this?” Brian said.

“What difference does it make?” Peter said. “They’re here.”

“Yours.”

“So?” Peter said.

“I— hardly know what to say, where to start.”

“Nothing’s set in stone,” Todd said.

“They’re free to leave? They go after lunch, then?”

“Nothing’s set in *stone*, Brian,” Jeremy said.

“Oh my god. You guys, my god.”

“You said it yourself,” Peter said. “We should hook ’em up to the Variac.”

“It was a joke,” Brian said. “I meant, I said it *wasn’t* a joke.”

“Easy,” Jeremy said. “Take it—”

“Easy *what?* The girl, too? We’re into that, now?”

“Got a better figure than her mother,” Todd said.

“Better teeth, at least,” Peter said.

“Have you seen her teeth? Does she smile, ever?” Jeremy said.

“What are you doing, Jeremy?” Brian said. “Those are our friends. One’s pregnant, one’s in like *fifth* grade. You got a *kid* in there. What are you doing?”

“What *we* are doing,” Jeremy said, “and sorry this is so out-ray...”

“*Outré*, asshole.”

“Fine. Like I give a *merde*. We are having lunch. With our friends. I would say acquaintances, for me they’re acquaintances, but if you feel that strongly: Friends Over For Lunch. There’s chicken and

shits and giggles. Nothing else on the menu, nothing else planned. So join us.”

“What do you mean planned?”

“Oh my *god*, Brian! If there *was* a plan, I could tell you.”

“Keep it down,” Todd said.

“What’s this ‘call from Lenny’?”

“Peter can tell you. It—”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Brian said. “We don’t. Hurt them.”

“Why would we?” Jeremy said. “Or, to play devil’s advocate, why wouldn’t we?”

“She’s a fucking child!”

“*Voices!*” Todd said.

“A *fucking* child?” Peter said. “That’s descriptive.”

“I always say, if there’s grass on the field, play ball,” Jeremy said.

“Old enough to bleed, old enough to breed,” Todd said.

“Eight and over, bend ’em over,” Peter said. “Lenny used to say that all the time.”

“About Phil?”

“No,” Peter said, “not about her, he wouldn’t dare. He was too scared. Scared of what he might say.”

“I’m scared of what you might do.”

“We barely know what we’re *capable* of, Brian,” Peter said. “That’s the whole blessed point. What we did this for! Who the fuck *knows* what we’re going to do? That is freedom. That is power. No forced moves, no small choices. Thinking and being inside the box is over. There’s more than one kind of captivity. I will not go back.”

“Said it once, I will gut you like a fish,” Brian said. “Hurt either of them, swear to god, Peter, I will stab you to death.”

“It’s harder than you think,” Peter said.

“You would know,” Brian said.

“Aaand, he went there,” Todd said.

“Don’t like knives,” Peter said. “Said it and said it.”

“Kinda funny, coming from you,” Brian said. “Master of every zombie/samurai movie ever made.”

“Wake up and smell the gun oil,” Peter said. “I’m a gearhead. I sell *auto* parts. Know what a gun is, to me? A miracle machine. The first and best point-and-click technology. A bullet’s a thousand mile-an-hour leap of faith. It is not — to obliterate a life that *fast* — it is not godlike: it defines the *proof* of god. The evidence of things not seen.” Peter pushed back his glasses. “Just don’t like knives.”

“What do we do, then, about Doris and... Jesus, you *got* them here. What do we do?” Brian said.

“You want first dibs this time?” Jeremy said, “Todd won’t mind. Will ya, Todd?”

“Pass,” Todd said.

“This isn’t a joke,” Brian said.

“No, it’s a test,” Jeremy said. “And we got here two pieces of scratch paper. Do we use them?”

“We turned a girl into a zombie *twice*,” Brian spat. “Now you want to build on that success?”

“Friend of mine said that shit’s in the past. You gotta let it go,” Todd said.

Peter twitched, as if a mosquito had flown into his ear. “Friend of yours said that about what?”

“The situation,” Todd said. “Nothing.”

“What situation? Our situation?” Peter said. “The situation with us?”

“No,” Todd said. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“Fuck me,” Brian said under his breath.

“What friend would this be?” Jeremy said.

“Friend. I dunno. Someone I met.”

“You met? Met where?”

“Who have you told about us?” Peter said.

“No one,” Todd said.

“Who have you told about us?”

“No one. Some guy from AA.”

The others swapped looks. Todd snorted exasperation. “I forget his name. It’s *Anonymous*. What do you think anonymous means?”

“Fuck me,” Brian said again.

“We were drunk. Okay, you wanna know? That happened. But nothing else. Nothing *specific*. I promise you.”

One by one, the guys exhaled, as if losing a contest to see who could hold their breath the longest.

“Less than a hundred years ago, Todd,” Peter said, “they worked something called The Cure. Medical profession swore by it. They locked up drunks, but gave them all the booze they wanted. Loaded them to the gills. Whiskey waterboarding, it was a sort of crude aversion therapy. Either the patient swore off the sauce...or died from it. Simple but effective, wanna try?”

“Go to hell.”

“Let’s deal with your problem first,” Peter said.

“This is why,” Brian said. “This is why we must stop.”

“*Demi-measure*, mon sewer,” Jeremy said. “We can’t stop now. Faint heart never won fair lady.”

“Or knocked up one. Or schoolgirl.”

“Man, you are *stuck* on that,” Jeremy said. “For a dude with rape and murder on his resume...”
“Because it is not *right*,” Brian said. “And you know it.”
“We know it,” Peter said. “Ask if we care. We want to know if it’s fun.”
“*Fun?*” Brian said.
“Yeah, that thing you don’t do,” Peter said. “We had this discussion.”
“I remember,” Brian said. “Me with a gun leveled at my face.”
“Well,” Jeremy said, “fun’s what you make it.”

3

Rustling in the stunted magnolia tree caught Brian’s attention. He changed course to take a look. On a fork of branches sat Philomena, reading.

“Whatcha got there?”

She gave the paperback a little shake.

“I mean, can I see?”

She showed him the cover. He recognized the iconic black and white photo of a dark haired girl.

“Oh! That’s a classic.”

Philomena nodded.

“Are you able to understand it? Who the Nazis were, and why the family had to hide and all?”

She nodded again, more slowly.

“You know, I was your age, I used to climb trees to read all the time.”

“What was your” the tiniest pause, to make sure she got the word right, “favorite?”

“Book? I don’t remember the books. I just remember the trees.”

“I luff to read. Muh-mistess Dibble lenth me books.”

“She your teacher?”

A nod.

“You looking forward to getting a little brother or sister?”

No nod this time, just a look. *Wind up, Brian.*

“Well, that’s great. That’s a great book. Good luck with it.”

“S-she was my age when she wrote it.”

“I thought she was thirteen.”

“When she tharded.”

“How big are you? You’re not thirteen.”

“I will be.”

The words almost lurched out of him. *Not if you don't get out of here.*

“Give me a taste.”

“What?”

“Read me some,” Brian said. “Tell you the truth, I missed that one. We never got it in middle school.” It was a staggering admission. Only when cornered would Brian confess he hadn't read a book. Perhaps this was part of the New Him.

“I d-don't like to read. Out loud.”

“Aw, shoot. Missed it twice, then.”

Philomena sniggered, then studied a page. She was silent so long, Brian wondered if she'd decided to ignore him. “And fuh-fuh-finally I twiff my heart...”

“No, wait, my bad. Don't read out loud,” Brian said. “Just read to yourself. But let me hear it, too.”

“That...m-makes no thense.”

“The things that work in this world rarely do.”

“Rrread...?” she said.

“Read to yourself in the voice that you read to yourself, but say *that* voice out loud. Try it.”

She searched his face for malice, and Brian, after all his years of practice, had almost forgotten what the fear of being laughed at looked like. They had more in common, the two of them, than a fondness for climbing trees. He let the girl be satisfied. Finally, she read: “I twist my heart round again, so that the bad is on the outside and the good is on the inside, and keeth...*keep* on trying to find a way of becoming what I would so like to be, and could be, if there weren't any other people living in the world.”

Brian regarded her, chewing his lip a little. He hadn't expected Anne Frank's words to come down and clobber him the way they did. “That was beautiful,” he said. “I'll leave you to it.”



He came out here for a purpose. The object in question would either be in Peter's car or on his person. No harm to take a look, other than risking his fool neck, which he did lately with increasing frequency.

Peter's car was unlocked. Within seconds, he found it under the driver's seat. Brian marveled at the word *heft* all over again. He had no skills to unchamber the weapon to check the load. But it was Peter's Magnum Six-Gazillion, so it had to be full of bullets. Brian pocketed the beast, taking it on faith.

Brian made his way through the house and didn't find anybody. To be fair, he didn't check

upstairs or in the basement. Not that, not yet: Doris in the basement.

Peter was on the back porch, on his accustomed step, facing the wind break of pines. He gave Brian a glance and a nod.

“Mind if I sit?”

“Hm,” Peter said, already turned away. Brian eased down, using his hand to holster the gun in his pocket.

“Sorry to threaten you.”

“You don’t threaten me, Brian.”

“I meant earlier.”

The conversation hit a wall. Peter communed with his trees. What the hell was he looking at? Brian waited him out.

“Had a dream last night,” Peter said. “Not my usual one.”

“Only you,” Brian said, “would have a *usual* dream. What’s it about? Your *usual* dream?”

Peter thought a moment. “Thirst.”

Brian waited. “You know, we get there faster if you break out more than one syllable at a time.”

“It has trees in it.”

“Treason?”

“Trees. Woods. A forest.”

“Oh.”

“No trees in last night’s dream. Only mention it because you were in it. This dream. I was in a dream of yours, so.”

“What did I do?”

“Pretty sure you died.”

“Thanks.”

“It was wartime. We were soldiers. World War II, I think, from the webbing on the brain buckets. Our unit’s surrounded. No hope of rescue, and precious little ammunition. We were ordered to fix bayonets. I liked the way the steel took the moonlight. We were on this sort of wide, dirt hillock. Exposed.”

“No trees,” Brian said.

“No trenches, no trees, no mine field, no barbed wire...”

“No nothing.”

“And sniper fire. Distant, but...all around us. And around me, men were dying. You died, I think, I’m pretty sure. We had with us this lady chaplain. She told us, over and over, do not despair, Christ died for your sins. And this upset me no end. I went, what about resurrection? She said, what about it? I

said, Christ suffered, died, and was *resurrected*. Otherwise, what the hell? He’s some nutjob spouting ‘I am the way’ until he gets nailed to a tree.”

“Which wasn’t there.”

Peter ignored him. “Anybody can die. She said, I’m sorry, He died for your sins. The rest is implied. I went, *implied*. Implied doesn’t help. You tell the men who lay down their lives tonight their salvation is *implied*? She said I’m sorry, that’s all I can offer. I wanted to jab her in her useless guts. I imagined doing it and shouting, over and over, ‘Death without resurrection means nothing! Death without resurrection...’”

“Did you?”

“Did I what?” said Peter.

“Kill her? Kill the chaplain. Did you?”

“No. Went in search for her, though, the rest of the dream. What’s so funny?”

“You! You, with your bayonet gleaming in the moonlight!” Brian said. “A li’l Freudian there, Peter?”

“Please. I wanted to gore the bitch, not...get gross.”

“You wanted...” Brian said. “Want me to tell you what you wanted?”

“Go ahead.”

“There was no lady chaplain. You wanted to punish the part of yourself that’s lost your faith. And you made me die because you can’t cope with my awesomeness.”

Peter thought about it, then scoffed. “You’re so fulla shit your eyes are brown.”

“No-no-no, I studied this. Dream interpretation, cows eating cows and ears of prophetic corn.”

“You studied the Bible?”

“Actually, saw the Amazing Technicolor Whatzit. Same college. Same girl, too; Mary-the-sinner-except-when-with-me. Oh, I’m up on my scripture s’long as Lloyd Webber made a musical about it.”

Peter pulled a wry face.

“Doesn’t make me wrong,” Brian said. “Does it?”

5

This time through, Brian found Todd in the kitchen, pouring himself capfuls of Johnnie Walker Red.

“You’re starting early,” Brian said.

“So are you, mom,” Todd said. He tipped the bottle in invitation.

“Eh-eh. And I wouldn’t give Peter any of that.”

“Wasn’t planning,” Todd said. “And wouldn’t dream.”

“No, don’t do that, either,” Brian said. “Changed my mind. Hit me gently.”

“Good man.”

Todd poured, and they clinked shot glasses. “Inside the perfect sunshine, this is one odd little day,” Brian said.

“Indeed.”

“Why, what’s happened by you?”

“I...revisited a bad habit.”

“Drinking at noon?”

“I said *habit*, not way of life.”

“We’ve got so many nasty habits scuttling around, which one would this be?”

Todd shook his head. “I keep telling myself tomorrow it’ll all be different. And it will be.” He popped the shot. “Can’t imagine anything more disgusting.”

“So change it.”

“Not in my power. Change the things I can...accept there’s no damn difference and...something else. Serenity. Drink to serenity.”

“To a coma, if you don’t watch it.”

“Drinking’s a slow death, my mom used to say. To which dad replied, who’s in a hurry?”

“You weren’t like this.”

“Like what?”

Brian covered his shot glass. “Still working on this one.”

“Suit yourself.”

“You’ve changed. More than any of us, I think.”

“Li’l ol’ trendsetter me.”

“Why?”

“It was my idea, Brian. I started this shit. Dungeon, I dunno what the hell I said. But I said in anger some asshole thing, and we all asshole up and did it. On my say so. And my checkbook. And then what? Grabbed a bitch who had nothing to do with nothing, that was me. We know how that worked out. Don’t think the details escape me, Brian, they don’t. I’m trying to escape the details. You can check out any time you like,” he sang, “but you can nev-ah leave.”

“That’s my song,” Doris said, walking in.

“Yeah,” Todd drawled, looking at Brian. “Couple-a fingers of Johnnie, Doris?”

“Better not while I’m pregnant and have to drive.”

“Better safe ’n sorry,” Todd said. “Whatever that used to mean.”

“We all had a hand in what happened,” Brian said.

“But mine first. Remember Lenny’s sign? I was the one to make a stink about it, sayin’ to give it its own room.”

“What sign?” Doris said.

“The one in the Clubhouse,” Brian said.

“You’ll see it,” Todd said. “We’ll give you the nickel tour in a bit. Won’t we? Because you know why? Brian and me, we go along to get along. Works out just...that...well.”

“Ease it back, Todd,” Brian said.

“Unless some people, out of some horny greed, just want to get what they want to get. Then it all goes to hell,” Todd said.

“You son-of-a-bitch,” Doris said, as pale as paper. “You have to do this in front of him?”

“What?” Brian said.

“Stay out of it, Bri,” Todd said.

“Out of what?”

“Do they all know?” Doris said.

“I think Brian does, now.”

“Oh my god,” Brian said.

“Sure about that drink, Dor?” Todd said.

“Son-of-a-bitch. You had to tell.”

“I didn’t, actually.”

“You two are—” Brian said.

“Habit forming,” Todd said. “He didn’t know. You told him.”

“Oh, shit,” Doris said, clamping her mouth for a moment. “Brian, I’m sorry.”

“Me? Why apologize to me?”

“You’re here,” Todd said, then mused to himself: “People wonder why I drink. I don’t understand that.”

“I am so fucking ashamed,” Doris said.

“But not vice versa.”

“Shut up.”

“Doris, you are not a bad person,” Todd said. “Or a bad lay. That you can be talked into going upstairs, trust me, is no big deal. Around here, it hardly *rates*.”

“No,” Brian said. “Yeah.”

“Don’t tell Lenny?”

“He won’t,” Todd said.

“Goes to the grave.”

“Ha!” Todd said. “That’s the spirit.”

“Doris — I never got the story — was Lenny supposed to come here?”

“That’s what we’re waiting for,” Todd said. “Lenny to show.”

“Why here?”

“Less chance I’d shoot him, not calling this long,” Doris said. “I think he wants you guys around for protection.”

Who protects you? It almost happened again. “Doris,” Brian said, “maybe what with everything, today...”

“Yeah, we should go,” Doris said.

“Might be best,” and he gave her his best solemn nod.

“But let’s see this famous Clubhouse first,” Doris said. “If it’s no hassle.”

Todd and Brian swapped a look. “Lady asked,” Todd said.

“You guys talk about it like it’s the shit to end all shit.”

“Perfect description,” Todd said.

“Maybe not today,” Brian said.

“Why not?”

“He’s just modest,” Todd said, “cuz it’s his baby. His design. Once you see it, you never leave.”

“Todd. The fuck you doing?” Brian said.

“Telling the truth. Stay or go, Doris, I don’t care. But that room is *historic*. People will *study* what this guy did. I see its floor plans on the Internet. With li’l numbers in li’l squares...”

“Where we ha-ha what, stashed the bodies?” Brian said.

“I drink myself blind, I’d see it.”

Todd left the kitchen, cradling the whiskey bottle’s neck by two crooked fingers.

6

“Your daughter’s in a tree.”

“What?”

“Front yard, there’s a tree. That’s where she is.”

“Ah.”

“In case you...”

“In case I’m a lousy mother. We already know. I am.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Not what I *meant*, Doris. Please. You’re a terrific mother.”

“Thank you. For a total screw up, I’m okay.”

“That describes the best of us.”

Doris chuckled. “I guess. Hey, if you’re not gonna…”

“No, by all means,” Brian said. He slid his shot glass to her.

Doris considered, then pushed it away. “No, I’ve hit my daily quota for stupid,” she said. “What you must think of me, I can’t imagine.”

“I don’t know what to think,” he said. “I don’t think it’s my business.”

“The baby’s Lenny’s. There’s no doubt. I don’t sleep around. Too often.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Todd’s practically the only one. And since Lenny—”

“I never got the story.”

“Oh, we go back, but still: the latest in a glorious catalog of mistakes.”

“I meant with Lenny,” Brian said. “The phone call?”

“Oh, that,” Doris said. “I just hope he gets on with it.”

“Gets on with what?”

“Casing the joint. Whatever he’s doing. The putz.”

“I’m still lost.”

“Any Sprite left? Lenny was lightening the cash register at work, you know that?”

Brian thought carefully before he said, “This is what Peter told you?”

“Finally. Yeah. And Peter’s his supervisor, right? *He* could get in trouble. This is why it was all hush-hush.”

“Makes sense,” Brian said.

“Our friend Dipshit embezzles about four grand. Felony time, but only small claims, you know? The store, they just want their money. Far as they’re concerned, Lenny flushed himself. But Lenny calls Peter. If he gives the money back and agrees to quit, will they not press charges? Store goes okay. Dumbass asks for severance. That’s what took so long, apparently. The legal back and forth, to keep him out of jail. It’s not all done, but it’s close. He wanted to see us, so here we are. When Double-Oh-Asshole judges the coast is clear, he’ll come in.”

“That’s,” Brian said, “almost incredible.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Good on Peter,” Brian said, “for letting you know.”

“He’s done more than that,” Doris said.

“Amen,” Brian said.

“I thought at first, hell, I don’t know. Fatherhood freaked him. Or he found out...I mean, he *knew* but found *out*. My notion of fidelity is shaky at best. I don’t keep it no secret, but I don’t broadcast, you understand?”

“Sure.”

“I was a kid, I was one fucked up case. Hated school. Got into fights. Got pregnant, got wasted, got pregnant again. This was long before... Anyways. Quit to join a band. Only thing that kept me sane. The Fem-Nastics, later the Go Ghettos.”

“I didn’t know that,” Brian said. “Were you any good?”

“Personally, or the bands? I sucked ass. The groups were even worse. We played music like we was in jail. Always behind a few bars and nowhere near the key.”

Brian laughed, “You come up with that?”

“I didn’t, no. Somebody did, I don’t know who. *Do* have a quote for you, though. Read this interview one time with the guy who managed the Runaways. Pioneer girl band. Joan Jett on rhythm guitar. Anyway, he goes in this article, ‘Rock and roll is an atomic’ — no, let me get it right — ‘a nuclear blast of reality in a mundane world where no one’s allowed to be magnificent.’ That, my friend, is a *creed*. You may not get it, you’re so nice apple pie. Some of us, though, we *crave* that reality. ‘Fore we die, we gotta know and do shit that is outside the rules, beyond the bounds, that goes completely *off*.”

Brian looked at her, then busted a grin. “Wanna see this Clubhouse I built?”

“Hell, yeah. Why not? You wouldn’t have a cigarette?”

“One quick look, then we send you home.”

7

“If this is it, color me unimpressed.”

“No-no, it’s not here,” Brian said. “The *entrance* is here. See if you can find it.”

“You hid the entrance?” Doris said. She shuffled dust with her tennis shoe.

“It’s a tricked out bomb shelter is really all it is. And no, it’s not underneath. No trap door.”

“You’re gloating,” Doris said. “Look at you gloat.”

“I’m justifiably proud of this one,” Brian said. “Give up?”

“I give.”

“I still, I shouldn’t,” Brian said, shaking his head. “It’s like our mancave version of the mafia. Code of silence...”

“Bull pocky,” Doris said. “Lenny talked this up all the time, you were teaching him construction. Some swing-out cabinet. I wanna see. Besides, you got me here.”

“That’s right, Brian,” Jeremy said from the foot of the stairs. “You got her here. Where’s your little girl?”

“Climbing a tree out front, apparently,” Doris said.

“Stay put. I’ll get her.”

Brian started at Jeremy’s voice, like a gunslinger taken in ambush. Now he hurried to him, hand on pocket. “Doc, doc!” He had to get close enough either to whisper or shoot the man in the face. “No rough stuff. I mean it.”

“On my honor,” Jeremy said. With a grin to Doris, he remounted the stairs.

All the dust of the basement seemed to fill Brian’s mouth and throat. It was check and mate, he’d thought. Have her in and out of the Clubhouse and upstairs before Jeremy or Peter found out. Then they’d never lure her down a second time. But Jeremy, simply by walking down after them, blocked that move and forced a sacrifice.

This is why Brian sucked at chess. He never thought ahead, never saw his opponent’s strategy. Unless mated early, his end game relied on the tactic called Setting Your Hair on Fire and Running at the Enemy. His pocket sagged with a stolen gun. It may come to that.

“Shall we wait for them?” Doris said.

“No,” Brian said. “It’s just a room. Nothing much once you know the trick.” Without ceremony, he trundled aside the large shelving unit that masked the door. *Abrafuckingcadabra*.

“Keypad security?” Doris said. “For real?”

“Fashow! This is *real* underground gambling!” Brian said. “I once won twenty-two dollars.”

“You *did*?”

“And change!”

“Wow.”

“Bing blang blaow, baby!” His grin fell apart. Peter had come down or was sent down. He stood by his little table. The last time Brian saw him take that watchful stance was on the night they all wore discipline masks and Peter’s glasses kept slipping off. The effect was so comic, Brian had judged him barely competent to guard ladies’ purses.

“Check out Peter,” he said. “He hates this place. He always loses. Don’t you, buddy?”

“Not always,” Peter said. He trailed them into the Clubhouse, which was noticeably cooler. “What do you think, Doris?”

“Home sweet home,” Doris said. “Is that the cabinet?”

“Show her,” Peter said.

“I would if it worked,” Brian said. “It’s not there yet. We were gonna mount a plasma widescreen behind, but there’s no wiring. Right, Peter? Not yet.”

Peter shrugged. He made way as Jeremy escorted in Philomena, with Todd as rearguard. “Here’s everybody,” Jeremy said.

“Except for Lenny,” Doris said.

“Right. Except for Lenny. Hey, you know, this is a game room. You gals up for a game or two while we wait?”

About this point Brian began to lose the thread. Philomena taught them how to play I Doubt It, and they sat and played cards at the green table all afternoon. Doris ignored the mottled stain at her place. Peter had done a mostly good job scouring the blood. From time to time, one or another of the guys would excuse himself to “look for Lenny”. Brian joined these expeditions twice, once for a word with Todd and once to go after Jeremy.

“Stop them *how*?” Todd said. “It’s too late. They’re gonna do what they damn well please and we can’t do shit. There it is; that was it. How d’you think we’re gonna walk back *our* part? No, man, they won. They already won, and we helped them win.”

The Jeremy encounter took place minutes or hours later, Brian wasn’t sure. *Made it there at last*, he thought. *Vegas, baby. No distinguishable sense of time.*

“I’m not aware of holding anyone prisoner,” Jeremy said. “Do as I say, Brian, you’ll be happier. Let it play out. Where’s the harm in that? Really? Where’s the harm?”

“Mile or so north, in a shallow grave.”

“Oh!” Jeremy said. “Fuck-you-be-that-way.”

When Philomena’s energy flagged, Peter fielded a phone call upstairs. Lenny’s cell, Peter reported, was dead and he’d lost his charger. Classic Len-Man. He was at a gas station in Goochville. Could they hang a bit longer? They hung. Philomena won the next two rounds of I Doubt It.

Todd was so long gone his next scouting mission, it seemed certain he’d bring news of Lenny, too. But Jeremy found Todd face down and snoring on an Army cot in the big room.

Jeremy brought tall glasses of Sprite for Doris and Philomena, but clumsy Brian managed to knock them over. Brian mopped up the spill and served fresh sodas all around from the mini-fridge.

By the time Jeremy polled folks what they wanted on their pizza, Peter heard the upstairs phone ring again. He excused himself and was gone some minutes. On his return, he asked Jeremy to step out into the basement. Jeremy, for his part, begged a word with Brian.

“What?” said Brian, joining them.

“This won’t take long, ladies,” Jeremy said, pulling shut the door.

“There,” Peter said, as it locked. “Snug as a bug in a rug.”

“Have you lost what’s left of your twisted minds?”

“We’re not doing anything yet,” Jeremy said. “Let’s sleep on it.”

“Oh! And if we decide *not* to restock the collection, how does that work? What a crazy prank! Was the futon comfy? Did you find the sheets and blankets okay?”

“Something like that,” Peter said.

“We don’t decide,” Jeremy said. “I told you. Let’s sleep on it.”

Brian blurted out: “Take one more step, motherfucker, you sleep in jail.”

Jeremy turned back, mildly amused. “I beg your pardon?”

“I won’t put you there,” Brian said, and pointed to the door. “They will.”

“How would they do that?” Peter said.

“You check either of them for cell phones?” Brian said. “Did you? Bet not. Oh, you’re good. Criminal, yes; mastermind, no.”

“Shit,” Jeremy said.

“Want to rush in and beat them down, three against two, or you still wanna sleep on it?” Brian said. “Or do you want to go the smart way?”

“What’s that?” Peter said.

“I’ll go in and get their phones,” Brian said. “No violence, no fuss. Like you did with Monica, that first night. In and out.”

“The three on two sounds safer,” Jeremy said.

“It is,” Brian said. “But it locks us in. What happened to let it play out, let’s sleep on it? We done with that?”

“What’s your plan, Brian?” Peter said.

“Gimme some paper,” Brian said. “Write a number on it. I go in, say Lenny wants us to call him. Can I see your phone a sec? Ah, shit, no service. You got a phone? No? Hang on, mine works. I’ll be right back. Walk out with theirs. Nothing simpler.”

Brian sucked at chess. But he bluffed brilliantly at poker.



“Hey,” Brian said. “Sorry about that. We got a call from Lenny.”

“I figured,” Doris said. “Now what?”

Good question. “He called. He called and he wants...”

“Something wrong?”

Brian gaped, held the moment too long. “Yes.”

“What?”

“This is hard.”

“Brian, for god’s sake! You’re scaring me.”

“He called and he wants...to bring somebody.”

“What?”

“Yes...somebody he met here. The person he went away with. Should we do this in front of...?” He indicated Philomena. Doris waved annoyance: *go on*. “Okay, well, there’ve been — I don’t like telling you this — people. Girls. For parties. And someone stayed here, this room, for a while. A woman. All those times Lenny... I don’t know what he told you about coming here every day?”

“He...said Jeremy’s girlfriend bit him.”

“That’s who he left with. Doris, I’m so, so sorry. You in your condition and with your little girl and all. But that stuff Peter and Jeremy have been saying, they’re false hopes. I was here the night Lenny left. He went with that girl and he’s with her now. On a stack of Bibles, Doris. God as my witness. He’s not coming back. Not ever.”



“What’s going on?” Jeremy said. “What is this?”

“Coming out,” Brian said. “They’re going home.”

“Out of my way,” Doris said.

“Wait... wait...”

“We’re not holding them prisoner, far as I’m aware,” Brian said.

“Come on, Mina.”

“Lenny’s coming,” Peter said. “I-I spoke to him. Told him you were here.”

“Lenny’s a shit and can go to hell. Tell him from me.”

“But Doris...”

Doris said to Jeremy, “Unless you got a crying need to walk funny, *move*.”

With that, Doris and Philomena were up the stairs and gone.

Brian half-heard a drumbeat in his head, *Go with them, go with them*. His Spidey-sense flared like this at odd moments in his life, *Don’t say it, don’t say it*, like when he professed love to Mary-the-sinner and she told him it was no use, they weren’t playing for the same team.

But Doris and her little girl were safer if he stayed to watch Jeremy and Peter. He had one last job to do, convince them of what he now knew for certain: this was the end.

Might as well title the puppy, Brian thought. He smiled at Peter and Jeremy’s stunned expressions and he thought Endless Weekend and then thought, no, better: The Long Saturday. He thought Day of a Thousand Hours or, wait, The Year-Long Saturday. Whatever. One of those. It might wind up a

shortish chapter, Brian figured, but it was done.

9

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” Jeremy said.

“I have every idea what I’ve done,” Brian said. “I even have some ideas about your ideas.”

“Why aren’t they going to the police?” Peter said.

“Because I gave them no reason to go to the police. I used your story and stretched it with the truth. Lenny took some money, but he left for good and he’s with a woman. The one who bit him in the arm, incidentally. Writers call that *detail*.”

“So, is this a joke or not a joke?” Peter said, taking a slow step toward Brian.

“Call it the fin of comedy,” Brian said.

“Call it the what?” Jeremy said.

“The way you’d pronounce it,” Brian said. “And that’s close enough.” He took out the gun and held it gut level, aimed at Peter.

“I thought as much,” Peter said, and visibly relaxed. “Works better with the safety off.” He eased forward.

“Ah-ah. Little L, left side of the grip, that’s for locked? May not know how to shoot, buddy, but I damn sure know how to read. Step back.”

Peter smirked and stood his ground. Brian advanced, raising and extending the gun. “We can test it. I think it’d work fine.”

“Whoa-whoa-whoa!” Jeremy said.

“Want me to pull the hammer back, like in the goddamn movies?”

Peter looked at the gun, then into Brian’s eyes. “No.”

“We can test anything. Right? Use people for lousy *scrap*. What did we *learn* from this big damn test? Give us our score, huh! How did we do, Jeremy? Did we learn fucking ANYTHING?!”

“The gun’s freaking me out, Brian.”

“Not me,” Peter said. “I like it.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get it first.”

“Mmm,” Peter said. “I was right. You are Superman.”

“Stay the hell back.”

“The red cape suits you.”

“Peter...”

“I like it. I want to tell you I like it. It’s a bird...”

“Alright, asshole, how close do you want?” He pushed Peter’s glasses back with the barrel of the Magnum.

“This is good,” Peter said, his eyes on Brian’s eyes. “You *feel* like Superman?”

“I do, a little.”

“Good. Man of Steel. I like that,” Peter said. “You know what I don’t like, Brian?”

“What’s that, Peter?”

Peter poked Brian below the ribs with stiff fingers. That was dumb. Brian could’ve shot him.

“Knives,” Peter said. He wrenched free the blade and smoothly, with his other hand, twisted the gun from Brian’s grip. Brian felt weirdly relieved to let it go. It was so heavy, and he was

(stabbed)

tired all of a sudden.

“I’ll use ’em,” Peter said, “but I don’t like ’em.”

“Huh!” Brian said. “Funny.” *A stabbing pain*, he thought. *Why they call it that? Doesn’t feel a bit like it.*

Peter examined his gun, grimaced in disgust. “*Now it’s off safety.*”

Brian thought about that, too. The words seemed important, but for the life of him...

He watched Peter claw the gun like a rock, about to swing it at his face. What did that mean?

Now it’s off sa—

10

When Todd came to, Jeremy and Peter told him the girls had left. They weren’t coming back and, thanks to Jeremy’s last minute sweet talking, they weren’t going to the cops, either. Peter and Jeremy also fessed up about locking Brian in the alcove, and for punishment he was to stay there overnight.

“He scared them off,” Jeremy said. “Scared *us*.”

“There’s blood,” Todd said.

“I maybe popped him one,” Peter said. “A split lip. Nothing bad.”

“You hit Brian? In the mouth?”

“It was awesome,” Jeremy said. “You should’ve seen it.”

“I should have.”

“You should see what he did to my poor knuckles,” Peter said.

“Too much!” Todd said. “All right,” he said. “All right.” And went upstairs.



Peter’s research on legal and illegal methods to dispose of cars, trucks, trailers, and motorcycles

was at home. Brian’s ride would keep. It had been a long, long day, and he and Jeremy would meet back at the farm in the morning anyway.

Before prayers and bed, though, Peter had some tidying to do. He’d done it before, of course, but never so well as this. Practice made perfect.

Brian’s lifestyle helped. There was no job for Brian to not show up at come Monday, so that was a plus. Peter had liberated Brian’s apartment key, and found the digs uncluttered, the computer unsecured, and the important records easy to access. There was even a document file called Passwords. Jesus wept.

Peter electronically paid two months’ rent on Brian’s behalf, and composed a short email to his landlord. “It is time that I, a Writer, acknowledge my Self, and pull up my roots and pull a Keroauc and live deliberately throughout America, mad to live, mad to talk, mad to burn, burn, burn, and suck out all the marrow of life. U can sell my stuff if I’m not back by June 15.”

The forgery was overdone, which made it a bullseye. Peter wondered whether the second of his ex-poker buddies would be offended or impressed by the On the Road/Walden mash-up. *Writers call that detail.*

Self-important asswipe had been alive when he and Jeremy closed him in the alcove. Was he now? It hardly mattered. For anyone who cared to make the experiment, he was Schrödinger’s gut-stuck cat. Any final voyage of self discovery Brian made would be assuredly a dark and lonely one.

Dead or not, friend, Peter thought, you’re already gone from the world.

THE MUCK

1

“What’s ‘*exactly* alive?’” Todd said. What the hell do you mean ‘he’s not exactly alive?’”

“I did more than pop him in the face,” Peter said.

“What did you do?”

“It was self defense,” Jeremy said. “Brian had a gun. He stole—”

“Don’t give me that shit, Brian had a gun! What did you do?”

“I stuck him with a knife,” Peter said. “Pretty deep. About here.”

“Oh my god.”

“If he’s not bled out, he’s going to,” Peter said. “You can check if you want. Go down now. I’d be curious.”

“We can’t take him to a hospital in either case,” Jeremy said.

“Oh my god.”

“We’ve been down this road.”

“Yeah,” Todd said. “Give me a second. Yeah.” He bent over the kitchen table.

“Todd? You okay?”

“Want me to bring you some water?” Jeremy said.

Todd stared in disbelief from his doubled over position. “No, doc, I don’t want you to bring me no damn drink.”

“You’re not our problem,” Peter said.

“Thank god for that,” Todd said, “because I know the way you deal with problems.”

“We’re a team,” Jeremy said.

“Yeah, we’ve been down *that* road, too,” Todd said, biting off each word. “Shit!” He strode away to the sink. “Do what you want. I’ve had it.”

Peter and Jeremy shared a weighted look.

“Needs must when the devil drives,” Peter said. “But I don’t need your help, Todd.” Todd turned to stare at him. Peter looked at Jeremy. “And I don’t need your help, either.”

“You sure?” Jeremy said.

“I got this,” Peter said. “All I need from you is the keys to the loader,” he said to Todd, “and some chloroform,” he said to Jeremy.

“I used up what we got here,” Jeremy said. “But I have some at my place.”
“Fine,” Peter said. “I’m not keen to do this before dark, anyway.”
“Chloroform?” Todd said. “I thought he was dead.”
“I said he’s not exactly alive,” Peter said. “If he’s not exactly alive then he’s not exactly dead. How many times have you told us better safe than sorry?”
“Are we safe?” Todd said.
“We will be,” Peter said.
“You sure you got this on your own?” Jeremy said.
“I got it. It’s fine. You’ll be here tonight, Todd? Let me in?”
“Sure. What the hell.”
“Midnight too late?”
Todd started to say something but changed his mind. “What the hell,” he said.
“Good. Then I’ll take care of everything.”
“Are you sure you have to do this?”
“I’m sure *we* have to do this. But I accept responsibility. For all our sakes.”
“If he’s alive...” Todd said.
“Don’t worry about it. Let him tender up on the shelf until I get here. Told you now. Leave it to me.”

2

For a while, it had been a lively evening at *Chez Lorenz*. Peter had been downright chatty when he came by for the chloroform.
“It’s been a pleasure, doc,” said Peter, giving a rare back double-tap man hug. “We said no regrets and it’s been no regrets. Thank you. Thank you for that. I count you a friend.”
“You act like we’re never going to see each other again,” Jeremy said.
“Man proposes, God disposes,” Peter said.
“That thing you had about ramming a church with a U-Haul of explosive cow shit,” Jeremy said.
“That’s not gonna be like on CNN?”
“No, course not. Why should it?” Peter said. “Be safe.”
Once Peter left, Jeremy went out to see what the neighbors were doing. They were making their hot tub go nicely splishy-splashy, but Jeremy captured only a minute of the action before Aerobics Annie up and hurried into a towel and into the bedroom. Awesome butt shot as a parting *gif*. Nighty night, lovebirds.

Twenty minutes later, the doorbell rang. Peter again, probably. Jeremy had a headache coming and almost swung by his stash on the coffee table for another OxyContin. A shame he didn't. He would have that headache for the rest of his life.



Jeremy's first thought was that the cops had seen *M.D.* on his mailbox and mistakenly brought by a crazy man for a psych referral.

“I want that tape,” the man screamed. “I want that *tape*, you son of a bitch!”

He wasn't a random crazy. It was only that Jeremy had never seen him dry, wearing clothes, or this close up in real life.

“Hold on,” Jeremy said.

“Sir, did you go out your residence tonight?” the first cop said with a soft Tidewater accent.

“I was at home,” Jeremy said. “What's going on?”

“Did you *witness* something?” the other cop said.

“What do you mean witness?”

“He took pictures! He took video!” the man screamed.

“Your neighbor alleges—”

“I saw him *stand* there! With a camera! On his damn *porch*!”

“Can you calm him down?” Jeremy said.

The cops conferred in a whisper, and then both turned on the neighbor, urging him to let them handle it.

“Thank you,” Jeremy said.

“May we come in?” the first cop said.

“You can,” Jeremy said. “I don't know that guy's *name*.”

Jeremy led the cop to his living room. “Is he nuts or what?”

“Sir, did you take any video, your neighbor and his wife engaged in a private act?”

“A private act, no. That would be them indoors. I never set foot off my property.”

“But you did take video?”

“It was a prank.”

“A what?”

“A prank; joke. Shit and giggles. I won't post it.”

“You took video, them having sex?”

“Yeah, no, look,” Jeremy said, changing tack, becoming aggressive. “Who's committed a violation here? Not me. Maybe I don't care to have couples *rutting* outside my window half the night. Kids live on this block, you know? I don't appreciate certain behavior. So I went out to get proof, all

right? I got proof. For you, you can see for yourself. Feel free.” He set down the Canon Vixia on the coffee table, making some of the loose pills jump. “Thank god you’re here, really. They shouldn’t be arrested or anything, that’s up to you. All I want is for them to stop.”

The cop put a finger on one of the blue tablets as if to pin it down. “160s,” he said. “Scuse me, sir, are these yours?”

“What?”

The cop picked up one of the four supply bottles and shook it. He didn’t set it down again. “These? They yours?”

“Those are prescription pain relievers.”

“They for you?”

“They’re mine, yes.”

“You got a prescription on all these here?”

“I’m a doctor. See on the wall? That’s my licence.”

“I’m looking for a prescription right now. I don’t see one. Don’t even see no pharm label. You got quite a number of pills here.”

“Look, fine. I want you to leave. I won’t fill out a complaint. Just leave.”

“Doctor...” the cop peered at the framed license, “Lorenz? How y’all come by so much OxyContin?”

3

“Didn’t need me after all.” Todd stood in the shadows of the big room. Its emptiness created a small echo effect.

“What?”

“See you let yourself in,” Todd said. “What’d you need me for?”

“I thought — or hoped really — that you’d help me get him upstairs,” Peter said. “That’s the toughest part.”

“Tough.”

Neither man moved, one in light and one in shadow. “So I do this myself?”

“You said you wanted to,” Todd said. “I’m fine with that.”

“You are?”

“Fine as frog hair.”

Peter sighed, making it sound like a grunt. “Can I have the keys to the loader, at least?”

“Empty your pockets,” Todd said. He took his time crossing the room, the Glock 19 in his fist.

“Aw, for—! Not again,” Peter said. “Okay, watch, doing it slowly. Keys first, right front pocket.” He drew out his keys, held them face high between thumb and forefinger, then let them drop at his feet. “Now wallet,” Peter did the same business with the wallet. “Back here. Watch me, I’m not doing anything funny.” He held up but didn’t drop a folded cloth in a baggie. “Cleaning rag,” Peter said. “That’s it.”

“Hike up your pants,” Todd said. “One leg at a time. I want to see your ankles.”

Peter did as instructed. “I have no weapons on me, Todd,” he said. “You’re not my problem.”

“Yeah, well, see about that.”

Todd approached and patted him down, pockets, waistband, and pants legs. Peter remained passive and motionless. “Where’s your gun?”

“In my car,” Peter said. “Under the seat. Are you going to shoot me?”

Todd backed off a step. “No, but I think I’ll hold onto your gun a few days, that okay by you?”

“That is fine by me,” Peter said. “May we swap keys now?”

Todd dug keys out of his pocket and handed them over. “Thank you,” Peter said. “Allow me.” He bent at the waist to get his own keys and wallet — and lunged. Peter hooked Todd’s calves as he drove forward. Todd sprawled, falling hard. Peter clambered onto him, bashing Todd’s gun hand twice with all his might against the floor. The Glock fell away. Peter shoved it skittering into shadows. Todd’s roundhouse smashed into Peter’s cheek, almost unseating him, cracking bone. Peter brought the cloth to his face as if to apply pressure. Instead he tore the baggie with his teeth and mashed the rag down with both hands, covering Todd’s mouth and nose.

The scratchy cloth reeked headily of cleaning solution, but something more — heaps of rotted flowers, sweetness overpowered by decay. Todd began to gasp and choke, breathing in the fumes deeper. He had to fight back, rise, get free. But he felt woozy and disconnected. The room blurred, darkened, and seemed to tilt. It was a house of cards, stacked against him. Familiar: he had been here before. And it had once been so full of light, when Uncle Tim put up his Christmas tree.

4

“There he is!” Inspector Rabson said, entering the room with the perf-board walls. “Pal! Oh, no! What happened? You miss us?”

“Every heartbeat,” Jeremy said. He didn’t stir from his place at the table, chained wrists on the surface, fingers interlaced.

“That’s what I like,” Rabson said. “Cool as a cucumber.”

“He is that,” Lee said, in his *basso profundo* voice.

They sat opposite Jeremy. “Arthur Rabson, my partner Geoffrey Lee, just for the record. So, since we last spoke, what? This looks bad, Jerry. I’m not happy, seeing this.”

“There is no record,” Jeremy said.

“Excuse me?”

“No one’s Mirandized me, which I take to mean I’m not under arrest, so there’s no ‘just for the record’,” Jeremy said. “Just for the record.”

Rabson made a pained face. “Well, you sorta, kinda *are* under arrest.”

“We cuff you, we arrest you,” Lee said.

“But Dr. Lorenz, you’re right. You are perfectly right. There are gradations. One threshold is, you’ve lost the right to walk out. Sadly, you have. You’ve lost that right. The next threshold, we read you your Miranda rights in order to begin what’s called custodial interrogation. You don’t want that. That’s: you’re charged with a specific crime, that’s lawyers, that’s...” Rabson sighed and turned to Lee. “What would you say?”

“Paperwork,” Lee said.

“Paperwork.”

Jeremy trotted out a sly smile. “So how do we avoid this nasty paperwork?”

“Talk to us. Tell us things. How’s life at the hospital? People treating you okay? Co-workers?”

“Isn’t that interrogation?”

“We’re not talking about a specific crime, are we?” Lee said.

“Just keep the ball rolling, favor to me,” Rabson said. “Otherwise, we *have* to ask questions, and if we *have* to do that...”

“Paperwork,” Jeremy said. “Either of you got a cigarette?”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Lorenz,” Rabson said.

“Smoke-free facility,” Lee said. “Which totally sucks.”

“What’s the world coming to?” Jeremy said. “Can’t smoke in an interrogation room. Speaking of smoking, though. You seen my neighbor’s wife yet? Aerobics Annie? That wasn’t a one-off, their little show in the hot tub. Except she entertains a *lot* more than he does. Or knows about.”

“Special guest stars?” Lee said.

“The principal cast of Iron Man 5, I’d say. I shot more. You should check it out.”

“May we do that?”

Jeremy shrugged. “That’s your kink.”

“Okay, then we can do that.”

Lee scribbled a note and passed it to an officer at the door.

“I don’t hear a Miranda warning,” Jeremy said. “Guess that wasn’t a specific crime.”

“Oh my god, very smart,” Rabson said. “What did I tell you? We have to keep on our toes. This is one customer: cool and clever.”

“He is that,” Lee said.



After sandwiches and coffee, Rabson checked his watch and said, “Well, gosh, I can’t go all night the way I used to. Jeremy, you mind staying as our guest for a little? We got a room down the hall. Smells pretty funky, but you get used to it.”

“Seeing as you’re the host, Arthur, how can I refuse?”

“I love this guy,” Rabson said. “Love this guy.”

“But tell me, isn’t this a lot of talk for just a few extra Schedule II meds?” Jeremy said.

“Oh, the pills?” Rabson said. “We haven’t talked about pills. Have we talked pills?”

“Not so far,” Lee said.

“Why, do you *want* to talk about...anything, Jeremy?”

Silence.

“Because I *heard*, and I don’t know enough to discuss this in a formal way, I *heard* they found enough Oxy on your coffee table to choke a horse.”

“A doped horse,” Lee said.

A swift knock and a face at the door. “Inspector? Officer?”

“Excuse us,” Rabson said.



“What’s this?”

“Thanks to Patrolman Slater here, the good doctor’s computer,” Ben Mayhew said, fingers flitting atop the keypad. “With peekaboo featurettes.”

“I don’t care about that,” Rabson said.

“Gotta tell ya, they’re sumptin’ to see. So something,” Mayhew said, “they almost had me miss me finding *these* home movies. All hidden, encrypted, all labeled ResidentOne, aaand,” Mayhew tapped a key, “not even close to softcore.”

“Oh, shit,” Lee said.

“Bring out the Gimp, right?” Mayhew said.

“Where is this? His house?” Rabson said.

“No sir,” Slater said. “Someplace else.”

“With nifty...watch this: it *swings* out,” Mayhew said. “Pretty cool.”

“What’s in the wall?” Lee said. “Oh dear God.”

“Is that him? This even him?” Rabson said. “How do we know this isn’t shared?”

“Wait a second, he says something,” Mayhew said.

On the monitor, the man in the bondage suit yanked a chain until the huddled, naked girl emerged.

“Out you get, out you get.”

“That’s him,” Lee said.

The instant she stood, the man shoved her against the wall and pressed close, a hand smothering her face. The girl writhed and struggled, but then slowly drooped.

“Jesus,” Rabson said. “Don’t tell me he just killed her?”

“Knocked her out,” Mayhew said. “Look at the hand. See it? My guess, that’s chloroform.”

“Limp gets him hard,” Lee said.

“You want to see what he does next, I’ll go on break,” Mayhew said. “Once is too much.”

“No, go back to where he gets her out,” Rabson said. “Can we see her face?”



Rabson stood at the door, composed himself into stone. “Jeremy Lorenz, you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford one, an attorney will be provided for you. Do you understand these rights as I have explained them to you?”

“As a friend and physician, Arthur,” Jeremy said, “you can’t drink no more coffee at night.”

“Do you understand your *rights*?”

“And they are *adorable*.”

Rabson slapped a picture on the table, the one used on TV for over a month. A smiling girl in cap and gown, with a spill of blonde curly hair and owlish glasses. Monica Bittinger.

“Where is she?”

5

“You snore,” Peter said.

“Peter?” Todd said.

“Better now?”

“Why am I t-tied to a chair? Why am I naked?”

“We only have until dawn.”

“F-for what?”

“Unless you manage to cut it short. But I hope not.”

“I like... I only like to have a good time.”

“I know you do.”

“And not hurt anybody.” Todd began to sob.

“Well, that’s you,” Peter said. “Don’t you remember what Jeremy said the first time we came here? You said ‘fuck me’ and he said ‘be careful, this is the place where wishes like that come true.’”

“No, Peter, no, don’t do this.”

“I’m not going to fuck you, Todd. Stay calm. I have no inclination that way.”

“Peter...”

“But I am going to kill you.”

“Why?”

“*Why?* Seriously?”

“I gave you m-money, lots of money.”

“More than you know. And thank you. I don’t know if you’re a man of prayer. I tend to doubt it.”

“Wait, *wait!* Isn’t there anything I can do?”

“About what?”

“So you’d let me go?”

“Oh, no,” Peter said. “No, no. Brian’s dead, Lenny’s dead. You should go, Todd. You’ve been mostly gone for such a long time. I’m helping you.”

“Help!” Todd said. “*HELLLP!*”

“Consider it the cure to end all cures. Me and Jeremy are the only ones cut out for this, really. We’re tapped into the gestalt. You’re not, Todd. You’re just not.”

“...somebody...please...” Todd said.

“Know what this is?” Peter said, setting the Variac on the games table and plugging it in.

6

“Come on, Jeremy,” Rabson said. “You haven’t lawyered up. My years of experience, that says you want to talk.”

Jeremy cocked an eyebrow and twiddled his thumbs.

“Trade you,” Lee said. “Cigarette for location.”

“What do you smoke?”

“Newports.”

“I hate menthol.”

“Tell me what you like. I’ll ask around,” Lee said.

Jeremy smiled at him, then at Rabson. “Your turn,” he said. “Sucks to be nice to me, doesn’t it?”

Don't hide it. I see it all the time. Even now, in your eyes, the hatred. The way I disgust you. Too bad, there's nothing you can do about it while I'm in control. Being in control, I found out, keeps me alive. I have a *lifetime* of experience with that.”

Silence.

“Is *she* alive, Jeremy?”

Silence.

“What *is* the secret,” Jeremy said. “Location, location, location. Know where you should be, you two? In a *redddd* bucket. Marked RMW. For Regulated Medical Waste.”

“You want us dead, Dr. Lorenz?”

“No, actually. Just fucking with you. What I really want is some water. I've got a helluva headache.”

“I'll get it,” Lee said.

As Lee went to the door, Jeremy's fingers went to his throat. Before the water arrived, he reminded himself what he had to do. He almost forgot that he had to bite down, not swallow. True love swallows. Death bites.

Lee returned, set down the plastic cup. Jeremy regarded it, his thoughts churning, but in a not unpleasant way.

“Peter did the killings,” he said. “The first two, the ones you showed me before.”

“Peter? Is that where we find Monica Bittinger, Peter's house?”

“No, that's at Todd's.”

“Todd? Who's Todd? Where does Todd live?”

“Look for the West Virginia state flower. I don't want to say any more.” Jeremy put a loose fist to his mouth, as if to stop his blabbing.

“Jeremy, stay with this. You're doing good,” Rabson said.

Jeremy snorted. “Image. Is everything. I'll have that water now.” He picked up the cup. The water in it sloshed and shook, creating ripples. The pity of the thing was, he once had rock steady hands. The hands of a surgeon.

“What do you say to a Man of the Moment?”

“What's that, some drink?” Lee said.

“It's me.”

The first convulsion made the cup crack. Blood and water squeezed out of his fist. His face, neck, and torso went cherry red because cyanide causes oxygen to stay in the blood and not get into the cells.

Jeremy's co-workers put the time of death at 2:39 a.m.

“It’s Rhododendron,” Mayhew said, scanning the monitor. Mayhew had one of those voices that, even when addressing multitudes, made him sound like he was muttering to himself. “Specifically *Rhododendron maximum*. Grows on a shrub, inch diameter flowers, usually white, pink, or pale purple. Hot damn, it’s got spots. It grows here, but she’s more common on the western side of the Blue Ridge.”

“So that’s what, a house with a flowering hedge?” Rabson said.

“Specialty florist? Todd’s Flowers?” Lee said.

“What are we after, sir?” Slater said.

“Lorenz said, ‘Look for the West Virginia state flower.’ Whatever the hell he m—”

“It’s a joke.”

“As may *be*, patrolman, it’s the only clue we’ve got!”

“No, sir. I mean, it’s what we call a giant satellite dish in someone’s yard. West Virginia state flower.”

“Satellite dish,” Rabson said.

“Detached residence,” Lee said. “Possibly rural.”

“Thank you, uh, officer. I’m sorry.”

“Ain’t a thing, sir. We all want her found.”



“This guy knew Dr. Lorenz. Oh Jeez, this poor guy. I call him Elmer for some reason, but he might’ve been a Todd,” Barry the R.A. told Deputy Basile, who rode in the meat wagon with the suspect, now deceased.

“You call him Dickman,” K’Neisha said.

“I do call him Dickman.”

“Cuz he was a dick,” K’Neisha said.

“Because he came into my e.r. with a wedding ring choking his baloney pony. You ever see a bicycle tire blow? That fat bubble of rubber first? *That*. All you expect is, *pwhow!*”

“But he *begged*. He begged us to get Dr. Lorenz.”

“I cannot be awake for this!’ Oh, Jeez.”

“Think you can remember or find out this guy’s name,” the deputy said. “And what address he gave?”



Jeremy’s phone records yielded up frequent calls to Todd Heath, Peter Krue, and a Brian Andrews. SWAT teams dispatched to each address, with warrants for simultaneous raids on Heath and

Krue at first light.

8

Todd didn't quite last until dawn, but points for trying.

Peter let the shower run until the hot water gave out. He pressed a bag of frozen peas to his cheek. The cut was fingernail small and the swelling nothing to write home about. The shiner, however, would be a dandy, no two ways about it.

He should hit the road; an early start was best. But it was foolish to skip breakfast, especially with all the food in the house that no one else would eat. Waste not, want not. “Well begun is half done,” Mama used to say. “Food is gold in the morning, silver at noon, and lead by night,” she used to say. He should pray for her soul, he knew, and also for Todd's. “A man is powerful on his knees.” *Yes, all right, fuck off.*

Having no appetite for it, he made a cheese omelet and drank a glass of orange juice. What gave the morning savor was the way the rising sun filled the kitchen with radiance, a benediction for his fresh start.



“Empty,” Sgt. Clark radioed in. “All of them, all three.”

“Dammit!” Rabson said.

“Peter Krue's definitely cleared out,” Clark said. “Packed his shit and left a note, ‘In the event I am killed by police’.”

“Great.”

“Andrews seems to be one of the musketeers. Emailed *sayonara* to his landlord last night. Car's gone, but he left his stuff.”

“Double great. Tell me about Heath.”

“Can't say enough about nothing. I'm in his place. It's a shoebox with a rental agreement.”

“Then he's got a secondary.”

“Roger that.”

“We'll find it. Get your men together.”



“Okay, have an address,” Mayhew said. “He pays property taxes on farmland.”

“Where?” Rabson said.

“In state. Hang on,” Mayhew said, punching up a new screen and typing commands. “Lemme check.” Mayhew babbled to the Electron Lords. “Did da goo-goo mobile do a street view? Ooh, it *did*

do a street view. I wuv oo, goo-goo.” He tapped a final key. “Show me.”

Rabson and Lee leaned in. Farmhouse and barn were so far from roadside that both fully fit in the image. So did the satellite dish, only a black moonsliver at this distance, but Mayhew pointed it out right away.

“My, what a pretty, pretty flower.”

Crisis negotiation and SWAT teams deployed within 90 seconds.

9

Stealth was not an option in flat, open farmland. They established base in plain sight, then, at the foot of the drive: two fire trucks, a white and blue EMS, gunmetal grey ARV, and five patrol cruisers, three marked, all with light bars flashing. So far, knock on wood, no news vans. Without the clowns, it wasn't a circus.

Rabson and Lee made their way to the C2, Lt. Olsen. Rabson rapped Olsen's body armor.

“Worth getting bulky?”

“Always worth getting bulky.”

It was a sort of good luck charm between them, this invariable greeting.

“What say, Zack,” Rabson said. “The boys at home?”

“See the two vehicles? Heath owns the black truck. Blue get-around belongs to Andrews. Might be others parked in the barn.” Olsen shrugged.

“Any sign since you've been here?”

“Neither hide nor hair.”

“How's the hostage team doing?” Lee said.

“Calling every number in the book, and some that aren't,” Olsen said. “So far, no contact. They've had twenty minutes. We'll give 'em ten more.”

“And then?” Rabson said.

“Then,” Olsen said, “me and the team hop in the truck, toodle on up front, and kick a door.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Wish I had a feeling, though,” Olsen said.

“What feeling?” Rabson said.

“Any feeling. Usually, within five seconds you know whether you've got bad guys holed up or it's a dry hole. This one, I don't know. I get no feeling.”

“I got one thing, make you feel better,” Lee said.

“What might that be?”

“Word on Todd Heath. Runs his own flooring business and no one we spoke to claims he’s the Messiah.”

“Hallelujah for that,” Olsen said.

Then the news vans arrived. Three of them.



As he drove, Peter kept the Magnum tucked under his thigh, snug and warm. That was a John Lennon song, *Happiness is a Warm Gun*. Peter had never heard the White Album, but he knew Charlie Manson’s take on it, and he bet Mark David Chapman could hum the tune in question.

Peter stood on surer ground with the Revealed Word. Not only had he seen the proverbial writing on the wall, he copied it out himself in a drippy scrawl above the futon. According to the Book of Daniel, King Belshazzar’s feast was disrupted by a disembodied hand that writ MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. Translation: *read ’em and weep, fuckers. Time’s up*. Peter kept it real. He also used a disembodied hand.

Jeremy wouldn’t recognize the Babylonian, of course, but he would get the message. Especially since Peter had so blatantly killed the messenger.

Would Jeremy follow his lead and bolt and run, or stay and brave it out, box up the farm and hope for the best, rely, as always, on his boundless charm? Be stupid if he did. For the Kingdom of God is not in word but in power.

Either way, Jeremy’s funeral. Both scenarios diverted police attention, and *Dr. Death Prescribed Rape* was far more newsworthy than *Cops Seek Auto Parts Salesman*.

Somewhere along this road, though (he was on the I-68, south of Hagerstown and north of Antietam Battlefield), Peter Krue would die. A new man, cleaner and fiercer, would take his place. Lucas Knight. Unless Peter chanced on a better name.

Lucas Knight rode west. No, that name was awesome. It just was. Lucas Knight was the Man With No Name who had the *perfect* name. A killer name, but not — not necessarily at any rate — the name of a killer.

There it was. A twinge of — let’s not go crazy and call it conscience. Pushback. A muscle reflex of the mind. Something not bargained for. A deviation from the plan. No, not that, either. The plan had been cherry spic-and-span. The plan worked. It allowed for a clean getaway and here he was, making it. This nameless notion, it *derived* from it. It began where the plan ended and led

(no)

(where?)

west. To Northern California.

Serial killer capital of the U.S., Peter meant to add, but felt again that

(No!)

jolt. *There wasn't anything to worry about, was there?* Peter thought, brows furrowed. *Nothing of real concern?* Squinting made his busted cheek ache.

He — that is, Lucas — was sitting pretty on a travel bag of cash, all unmarked bills: Peter's life savings combined with over twenty thousand swindled from that sop, Todd. He never took a solitary dime from the store, though. Not a dime.

\$81,413 was sufficient. It would see him — them — through. New ID, a used car in Kansas for Mr. Knight, maybe enough left over for Lasik surgery. Or contacts, at least. No more heavy frame glasses. No more recognizable Peter Edmund Krue. It was doable.

Once settled, Lucas Knight would lie low. Get a job in his
(kill zone)

skill set. He would be thrifty and risk adverse, no doubt. Neither of them was a fool. But the guy would also have to enjoy a *little* flash. Touches here and there. After all, Lucas Knight knew how to talk to girls. Lucas Knight got laid. Lucas Knight was Baptist.

With a distinct *clack*, Brian flipped a hasp lock in Peter's memory. *Bet you anything that's a door*, said Brian's ghost, *and behind it's your dungeon.*

Peter shivered, almost made the car swerve. *Now what the hell? A goose walked over my grave.*
“Stay in your own grave, Brian,” Peter said.

Annoying prick. He killed the A-hole and stuffed him in a wall and it still wasn't enough. He *stayed* irritating. This was Edgar Allen Poe shit. Brian Fortunado. The Tell-Tale Yap. And what was he? What *had* Mr. Writing-A-Book-Someday been, other than a world class never-was? He was no boogeyman. He was a nobody, a buffoon, the alpha and omega know-it-all, a consummate wannabe.
Just like you.

This time Peter was prepared to be startled. He considered with care. The Voice was not easily placed. It wasn't Brian's, Peter was almost sure. It was gentler. More reasonable. God? God at last?

Peter powered up the windows to shut out distractions. He willed the Voice to speak again. He pressed down on the gas, as if to urge the car to its limits would —

What did Brian lack?

Passion. He knew the answer without thought.

Inward silence. Was he right? Of course he was right; he knew he was right. But what in the name of little green apples did passion have to do with anything?

Peter journeyed eight miles of road, stuck on that thought.

Peter had devoted his life to passion. The Passion of Christ, first. The ecstasy of martyrs. The grim bliss of Kenneth Bianchi. Dr. Crippen. Son of Sam. Jack the Ripper.

He knew them all. He worshiped them. Emulated them. On every plane possible, he steeped

himself in the blood. He was of them. He knew their

(skill set)

passion.

You know what they did and why they did it?

Yes.

Did they know? Did the Holy Mother? Did Gilles de Rais?

No.

What did they know?

Their...truth.

Are truth and passion the same?

Yes.

Are truth and knowledge the same?

No.

Are heaven and hell the same?

I don't know.

What is heaven, Peter?

Unattainable.

Correct. What is hell?

Hell is truth known too late.

He knew the Voice now. It wasn't god.

Lucas Knight put pedal to the metal and rode west.



Sgt. Clark's team, under the personal command of Lt. Olsen, made forceful entry at 13:00 hours sharp. They secured the premises, basement to attic, in under three minutes. Nothing was found but a loaded handgun lying on the floor of an otherwise empty room and a drying dishtowel in the spotless kitchen.

“Third residence?” Clark said, as Rabson and Lee mounted the porch.

“Not possible,” Rabson said. *“It's here. It has to be here.”*

“I get it, too,” Olsen said. *“I get that feeling strongly. We missed the canary cage, gentlemen. Let's go again, room by room, top to bottom.”*

“If I may,” Lee said, *“I suggest we start at the bottom.”*



Channel 6 teased a 15-second newsbreak during The Dr. Oz Show with dull, long-lens footage and urgent, breathless narrative. “Live at five, a police raid moments ago on this Fluvanna County

farmhouse may provide answers to...”

Doris reeled, breathless. She felt the
(baby kick, practically flip-flop)

fulcrum of her world shift. Even when hard realignment is expected, it leaves a body dizzy. Where’s Mina? Bike riding out front. Riding her \$20 yard-sale bike up and down the block, still preferring the sidewalk to the side of the road. Doris would run out to her in a minute, just to check.

By the time she got back, though, Lenny’s presence would be gone. Doris was shocked but not surprised. Once the shock wore off, there would be nothing. What sucked was, for all his faults, and he had been one sweaty fucktard, Lenny’d never raised a hand against them. Give him that.

By way of farewell, she whispered lyrics from a group that fell apart decades ago.

Hope you got your things together.

Hope you are quite prepared to die.



This is what you get for not paying attention, Peter thought. *This is what you get.*

In the rearview mirror, he watched the state trooper ease onto the highway shoulder and park. What state was this, Maryland still, or West Virginia? He was just west of the Savage River Forest. Traffic was steady but fast and light, nobody giving the scene a second glance. Good.

The trooper sat in his car, calling in his 20, running vehicle registration. Let him.

All the killings had been necessary. But this one should have been avoidable. This one would be on him. His bad. Stupid stupid stupid.

What excuse could he make? Sorry, ossifer, my alter ego doesn’t have his license yet. Serial killers love to drive, it’s a *trait* with us. Both statements were true, and neither useful.

“All things work together for good to them that love God,” Peter said to the rearview. It was the truest statement of all. Two blessings occurred straightaway. First, he was back on alert; he wouldn’t slip again. Second, his bad luck had great timing. This brush with the law came early, only hours out of the gate. Todd won’t be missed for days if not weeks. Goodness knows how long it’ll take from *then* for law enforcement to ask around or — well, here’s the way it’ll work — come sniffing.

Even if the high alert went out with Todd’s first scream, though, Peter was in no danger from Officer Blueberry and his ticket book. Names put on the NCIC get routed to the station house, they’re not downloaded to every rolling bubblegum machine. It was sad. He knew more about police procedure, probably, than the doofus about to cite him.

Sure was taking his dainty sweet time about it, sitting back there. Understandable, given the off-season heat. And this nothing stretch of nowhere special made it worse, probably. Patchy yellow grass smothered in dust with thirty-foot rises of slag and scrub on either side of the highway. A ditch of some

kind bordered the shoulder. How deep, Peter couldn't judge. Enough to roll the cop's body into if need be and time permitting.

Big Sur and Santa Cruz were still in play, he decided. He had gone north and hooked left. The hunt for Peter Krue, when it got underway, would end at this spot, one state up and over from where he started. California was not a foregone destination. He could as easily be heading up to Pittsburgh, or hightailing it for Detroit or Buffalo to cross into Canada, as Christopher Wilder tried to do. He could, to play it sneaky, do a one-eighty now and head for Florida, another fantasyland for fugitives. But Peter wasn't crazy to live among alligator-eating snakes and finger-long cockroaches that fly.

Ah, here he comes. Out of the cruiser at last. Gee, hot enough for you in that uniform, wearing that heavy vest?

In any event, Lucas Knight would have to buy his used car sooner than Kansas.

It was strange. Peter had seen hundreds of movies that probed the last tick-tocks of the condemned, his last lonesome look at the world (usually a bird in flight) before the ax came down. Or sword. Or gunfire spurted. Or trapdoor sprung. Or garotte. But had there ever been a book or movie, Peter wondered, that examined the executioner's thoughts in those final, crucial seconds?

Here he comes. Traffic cops are at their most tense when approaching a vehicle. Is the driver alone? Are his hands visible? Is he reaching for something? Turning? Knowing this, Peter did nothing to alarm. He placed and kept his hands at ten and two on the wheel. He affected to look placid and mildly embarrassed.

Calm came easily. He felt no heat, no wire in the blood, no clangor to kill. It was sad how sterile it all was. This stranger's life meant nothing to him, and his death would be determined by clinical trial and necessity.

Peter pushed a button and the window slid down, emitting a blast of cold from the A/C. The gun stayed tucked and warm.

“Afternoon, officer,” Peter said. “I'm terribly sorry about this.”



Canary is police slang for hostage. They yelled for Monica everywhere and got no answer. No one expected to find the bird alive. Lt. Olsen sent for cadaver dogs to go first through the house and then grid the grounds.

Before the dogs arrived, a member of Sgt. Clark's team noticed steel tracks mounted to the basement ceiling above one shelving unit but not above the others. Men converged, prodding shelves and supports for the release mechanism. As they slid away the barrier, a low wave of blood surged from under the Clubhouse door. The men danced away from the wet push on tiptoe, like toddlers at the seashore.

Lt. Olsen employed proper caution, and requisitioned the Richmond bomb squad to deal with the keypad access, in case it had been rigged.

10

“What would you say there, driving too fast or flying too low?” The deputy — Longford, his pin said — chuckled at his own joke. “License and registration, please.”

Once again, Peter performed the dumbshow of producing his wallet. “Allow me.” He leaned over to the glove compartment, the seat belt playing out and then reeling back in. “Here you go.”

“You been in a fight?” Longford indicated Peter’s black eye.

Ted Bundy, when pulled over in a stolen VW with the passenger seat ripped out and open handcuffs in the footwell, insisted he could *explain* matters with a ridiculous string of stupid lies.

“A fight, yessir,” Peter said. “It’s not been my week.”

“Don’t take it out on the road.”

“No, sir.”

“I clocked you doing 83 in a 65 mile-per-hour zone. Would you concur that speed to be accurate?”

“I was going fast.”

“Anything fifteen or plus miles an hour above the limit is deemed reckless.”

“Reckless, yeah, sure was,” Peter said. “It’s not been my week.”

“Okay, well. This is a citation I’m issuing for you to appear in court. You can...” The deputy got busy with his pad, his profile big in the open window, unprotected. Life meant nothing. It was so sterile. Peter’s right hand dropped from the wheel to his thigh, to the seat.

“It’s not been my whole life,” Peter said. It had never occurred to him before. At least, it never occurred to him to say so out loud. It felt oddly freeing. “I should’ve stayed with God.”

“Beg pardon?”

“I tried and failed, and created a holocaust.” Though it stung his cheek a bit, Peter flashed a sunny grin.

“Mister, how about you maybe step out of the vehicle?” Longford took another look at the driver’s license. “Mr. Krue?”

“That’s not my name. I’m, no, what am I? Lucas Knight.”

“Please. Out of the vehicle. Now.”

“No.”

“That’s not a request.”

“I’m not Knight. I’m not Bundy. I’m not Simon-called-Peter. Not Kemper, Ng, Lake, the Fox, Kürten. I’m nobody. I’m nobody.”

The cop yanked his sidearm. “Sir!”

Peter said, “Guess I’m Wilder.”

He smoothly untucked the gun, fitted it in his mouth, tilted the barrel up and pulled the trigger all in one motion. The 275-grain Barnes X hollowpoint blasted the top of Peter’s head onto the car roof, where some of it stuck.



Longford did not radio in the 10-56 for some minutes. For the first time since he was a little boy, and for the first time ever out of fear, he messed his pants. Longford duckwalked down the ravine, stripped from the waist down, cleaned himself quickly as best as he could, cuffed a small hole with the heel of his shoe, and kicked dirt over his soiled Fruit of the Loom briefs. He put on his khakis without underwear and zipped up.

When Longfold climbed back to the shoulder, he saw the suspect’s car roof drizzling blood and brain, and the man, half his head gone, upright behind the wheel, held in place by the safety belt.



Time went wonky.

In no especial hurry, light detonated.

Brian was too dazzled to look for margins. Whether the light held edges or was rounded, whether it meant a door or a tunnel... he only knew that it cracked wide the world. Light struck and seared his skull. It was as if a projector shone straight into his eyes and ran over-exposed newsreel footage of atomic bombs, H bombs, plutonium bombs.

No sound.

His senses, all of them, had bit by bit been lost. This room did it. The room he got the jones for from watching tons of Batman. His Fortress of Solitude.

(Solid Doom)

No, that's wrong, that's Superman. Superman saves the day. No day here. It's dark alla time. It was dark. Did he call it the Meditation Room? Wrong word if he did. Word was deprivation. Lousy, nasty word.

Usually he couldn't sleep with a light on. Can I going sleep, mommy? Why couldn't he hear anything?

Because you're living proof, dad said, that light travels faster than sound. Know what I mean? You appear bright, then we hear you speak!

I know, daddy. You were always know what? I'm mean. We always knew. At the funeral mom said good riddance. I'm sorry you had to be that way. I'm sorry she was right good riddance daddy I'm sorry. I tried so bad to be like you. I tried so bad.

A self-made man in a self-made cage. Was anything ever so sad? Was anything ever so funny? Not in the harsh light of ... this.

What was it? It was so vivid and so nothing. A staring contest with God? Was it time for that,

for heaven? Blink and you'll miss it.

He should write that down. But nothing all his life so intimidated him as the brilliance of a blank page.

All human life is scratch paper, *he thought*. The work and the answers go together. And you can't mark up another's without blackening your own.

Wow. One radiant thought, à la carte. For here or to go, sir? To go, please. No applause, please. There's no sound, you know.

Unless this is the moment. That moment, the one he so envied, the grace of clarity known to victims of car wrecks and airplane crashes. When time, for one cut-short breath, becomes arrayed shards of image. When the world stages one last show of how incredible it is, a phantasmagoria of buckling metal that undulates like billowing lace within a sparkling storm of exploding glass.

No. He wouldn't get that, the dreamy-smooth super slo-mo of his imagination (or let's not bullshit ourselves, Brian: Hollywood's imagination). His blip, if he got one, would end up on the cutting room floor. Or filed and lost on a shelf behind a drinks cabinet.

Funny part was, though (funny peculiar, not funny ha-ha), Peter once told him to get over wondering who would play him in the movie. Brian never wondered, he knew. Superman, of course. The Last Son of Krypton. What worked in his imagination and Hollywood's imagination had to be the same, right? Otherwise, how could they rape and kill that girl and still be heroes?

He should've known. Hating Nazis all his life, and yet he forgot. The ones who call themselves Supermen are the ones who become monsters.

Something shifted in the light. Was it coming to him, or he being drawn into it? Living or dead, his final redeemers were at hand and sure to take him. But to where?

To freedom, Brian thought. Freedom, of course.

If to heaven, Nana Emmie would be there, telling him about the Chicago opera and snow falling on horse-drawn buggies and how he overlooked so many lovely opportunities to stop.

If to hell, he would hear Monica's dirt-choked laughter. And that was a sound Brian could not unhear or cover over. Not with mountains.

If left on earth, cops and paramedics with urgent voices would be all over him in a heartbeat. Less than a heartbeat. The speed of light outpaces the speed of sound by about three hundred million meters per second.

Yes! The last useless factoid! Thank you, ladies and germs, I'll be here all not.

Expanding light filled and consumed the void. Sound would follow.

Any nanosecond now...

For the first time in forever, Brian truly listened.