# BEAVER AT HIS PARENTS': EPISODE 1

## "Reasonable Foreseeability"

**by Norman Crane**

## About the Author, i.e. me

I live in Canada. I write books. I'm also a historian, a wise guy and a cinephile. When I'm not writing, I'm probably reading or trying to cook. Philip Dick, Haruki Murakami and Graham Greene are some of my favourite authors. I enjoy fiction that makes me curious because curiosity makes me creative. I peer under mossy rocks, knock on hollow trees and believe in hidden passageways—not because I have proof of their existence, but because imagining them is itself the reward. I like non-fiction for the same reason. I also like computers, text editors and mechanical keyboards.

For more info and links to my writing, please visit my website: normancrane.ca

## "Reasonable Foreseeability"

The restaurant's windows face the street. Nobody passes outside. The falling snow scintillates like television static. Inside, the electric glow warms us in orange. I glance at the Christmas tree standing in the corner, whose lights fade in and out of white, then close my eyes. I hear forks striking plates, pasta being sucked into mouths, children laughing, every note of the synth-heavy Christmas instrumental playing on the radio.

"Are you all right?" Rosie asks. She always says all right as two words. She never says OK.

I open my eyes and smile. "Perfect."

She wipes the corner of her mouth with a napkin, folds the napkin and puts it back on the table. I don't know how to fold napkins. I have to concentrate not to wipe myself with the back of my hand. Embarrassed, I look at my feet, which fit snugly into the first pair of elegant winter boots I've ever had: dark leather that shines because I've been pasting it every night before bed. Everything here shines, and Rosie most of all. She has beautiful skin, beautiful eyes and she's so well groomed the only creature I can think to compare her to is a horse, but even in my head that sounds ridiculous. No woman wants to be compared to a horse. A mermaid? I imagine Disney's Ariel but perhaps that's too nauseatingly romantic even considering the season. Perhaps it's also too childish. I'm not a child anymore. And mermaids probably smell like fish. Rosie smells like Jamaican rum and peaches.

"Did you enjoy dinner?"

"Yes," I say. I don't don't remember what we had, but it was delicious.

She reaches over the table and puts her hand over mine. “Because you’re speaking in syllables again, and I know you well enough to know that a silent Charlie is a troubled Charlie.”

Genuine concern gazes at me through her pupils. And love?

*And love.*

“You feel like spring,” I blurt out.

“What?” She takes her hand away, and mine immediately freezes over as if I’d punched the window and stuck my fist into the snowstorm raging outside. “Charlie, my God.”

My cheeks burn. Apparently my weather’s all confused. I need a weatherman. A weather*person*. There’s a gorgeous one on the local news, but the last thing I need now is an erection. One radio song ends, another begins. This one sounds like the theme from Tetris. Blocks fall from the top of my mind. None of them fit. My screen fills up. Game over, I think. I think: I wish I could tell you the truth: I’m happy: happier than I’ve ever been. “I don’t want this evening to end.” I don’t want this life to end. I don’t want us to end. What I want for us is the sprawling backyard, the picket fence and the house full of kids. My God, anything but domestic fantasies. I’d rather fantasise about the weatherperson again. Men don’t have fantasies about weddings and interior design. I learned that in third grade with the force of a well placed punch to the liver and the trauma of being told I was a fag.

Now Rosie’s hand feels icy against my cheek. “That is utterly romantic.” Her lips pulling away from mine taste of wine. “I didn’t know you were a romantic, Charlie.”

I love the way she says my name.

“Neither did I.”

She says it the same way she stands in court and says the name of one of her deadbeat clients, imbuing it with dignity and respect, if only for a single second of one court appearance.

She’s not the first woman I’ve ever been in love with, but she is the first I’ve been in love with this much. I want to see her body clad in a wedding dress, her face behind a veil. I’m already wearing a suit. The veil fades in and out of existence in tune with the Christmas tree lights. I have to blink to make it go away.

“Are you trying to tell me something?” she asks.

I expect a punch to the liver.

But I gather my courage, pick up my glass of wine and down what remains in it only because I’ve seen that done in movies and it looks dramatic, and say, “I want to tell you…” (I love you.) There wasn’t nearly enough wine. There are too many people and what if they’re staring at me,

expecting a marriage proposal, waiting for the right moment to clap and offer their anonymous congratulations.

"Yes?"

I can't believe I've stood up in court rooms and told barefaced lies. I can't believe I passed my bar exams. I'm in third grade again. That's why everyone in the restaurant is staring. I've aged backwards in one swig of white wine. Of course, I know that's not true. I know nobody is actually staring, and Rosie is looking at me with the quizzical expression of a lawyer watching the other side's key witness implode on the witness stand. I'm to the point where I don't even need any helpful goading. I've already dug half of my own grave. I brace myself for an explosion of laughter. Or silence. For which, behind the wall of Tetris blocks in my mind, waits an army of crickets. "I want to tell you that I like being with you every day and I want to take our relationship to the next level."

Rosie smiles but doesn't laugh. I cringe. The next level? "What I mean," I add before she can say anything, "is that I'm thinking seriously about our relationship and I'd like you to do the same." I highlight the last clause of that sentence and backspace it out of existence. What is said cannot unsaid, but it can be said over. "I *wish* you will do the same."

"Is that your Christmas wish?" she asks.

"It's my Christmas wish."

"And can you verify that with documentary evidence?" She flashes a smile again. "Say, with a letter to Santa?"

"An email."

"Will the email prove admissible?"

"I believe the court may be persuaded to accept such documentary evidence under the business records exception."

"I like you, Charlie," she says and bends sideways to paw around in her handbag.

It's close to but not quite the word I wanted to hear—or to say myself. But it'll do. My heart begins its descent from my throat. "What's *your* Christmas wish?" I ask as an earnest form of misdirection.

She pulls out a key and holds it out to me. I take it. "I want you to live with me in my apartment," she says.

This time I rise, lean over the table and give her a kiss, hoping that I'm doing it properly, with enough feeling and without dipping my tie into the leftovers on my plate like an uncultured slob. When we separate I discreetly slide my fingers over my tie checking for wet spots. I feel none.

I'm satisfied. Rosie looks satisfied too. I've never wanted to appear as professional as I do now. Rosie has such a professional approach to everything. "Has Winterson or one of the other partners spoken to you about a place at the firm after you finish your articling term?" she asks.

They have. "I haven't signed anything but I've been promised a place," I say.

"It's best to get it in writing."

And we both burst out laughing no less maniacally than the kids at the nearest table, who are watching YouTube videos on a smart phone.

Whenever she laughs, Rosie's face loses its smoothness and reveals the lines, creases and wrinkles around her eyes and on her neck. Her happiness reveals time, a revelation that is itself sad because it suggests all happiness—like all time—must pass. Rosie is almost a decade older than me. I am thinking about neither of these two things.

"Good," she says after we settle down.

Although she rarely allows herself such moments of unbridled enthusiasm, whenever she does she follows them up with an equally intense dose of seriousness. "So what's going to happen to Boris?"

Boris is the other articling student at the law firm Winterson & Partners. For the last nine months we've been competing for the same job. "I'm sure he'll find a place at one of the other firms. He's a smart guy and he'll be a smart lawyer," I say.

Rosie nods. "But he's not as smart as you."

Compliments from Rosie are rare, so I cherish every one—with an awkward silence, because getting a compliment is too much like getting a gift, which is nothing less than becoming a lab rat in an experiment run by people who sincerely care about you. Rosie watches me for any reactions. I try to have none. "Oh, I'm sure it was my vast arsenal of social skills that won it for me," I joke.

I pay for dinner because that's what men do and when we walk outside into the voluminously falling static I put my arm around Rosie's waist with as little hesitation as I can muster. Confidence is a sham, but projecting it is a skill and anyone who says there is no magic outside of books has a limited definition of illusion. Mine works, just as it works in the courtroom, over the phone and in examinations for discovery. Rosie snuggles against my shoulder. The snow piles up on our heads and shoulders. The Ontario cold snaps at my skin. I barely see where I'm going. I vaguely remember where I parked. I'm proud of myself for telling Rosie some of what I feel and thrilled she feels some of the same. Although I've always associated winter with cleanliness and death, tonight I learn to also associate it with love. Love by me and love for me. Even when it is only implied, love can be real. Much of what we value is inexplicit: God, innate human goodness, tomorrow. We enjoy belief. I enjoy believing Rosie loves me and I love her, as she snuggles tighter against my shoulder and I can feel her body shiver from the cold. It's my

role not to shiver. It's my role to be her unshivering warmth. It's irrational, then, that I take off my winter hat—green and woollen, one of the remnants of my unrefined life before law school and entry into the upper tier of society—and pull it onto Rosie's head, messing up her dark hair but vindicated by the happiness in her eyes. Real happiness, or reflected? I don't believe in illusion; I know it exists because I stand tall under the scrutiny of those eyes despite still being a teetering tower of Tetris blocks inside. Several times in my life I've had the realisation that this time I truly am an adult, shed of all the toys of childhood. Each realisation rendered the last one false. Tonight, finally catching sight of my car, I know something else: I know I've found my place.

The next day I call my mom and listen to her voice falter as I tell her I won't be visiting for Christmas. I lie about the reason but she knows as well as I do that I don't just mean this Christmas. I mean every Christmas. "Goodbye," I say before hanging up.

"Goodbye," she says.

Or I imagine her saying it, because by then I am no longer listening.

## Seven Months Later…

Having stated my case I sit down. The defence counsel, sitting beside me, rises to begin to state his. We're in the pre-trial room on the third floor of the old courthouse. The room, or perhaps the judge, smells like history: musty. There's an air conditioner in a window to my left that's been improperly installed and wobbles as it works. I let myself get lost for a few seconds in the sound of humming air coupled with the rhythmic banging of the unit against the window frame. It's not so different from the jargon-filled legalisms being spouted by the defence counsel. The goal of any pre-trial conference is to aid the process of settlement by forcing both parties to sit with a judge who will be barred from presiding over the eventual trial and hear his opinion about the outcome. It's in nobody's interest to go to trial. The justice system is overloaded and both sides will incur mounting legal costs—are already incurring them. My own client, Mrs. Johnson, is waiting on a bench on the main floor of the courthouse, paying Winterson & Partners $350 for every hour I'm here. The conference was supposed to begin at 10:00 a.m. It's already 10:42 a.m. and I only spoke for five minutes. By the time the conference is over, Mrs. Johnson will owe my firm at least an extra thousand dollars: two hours of preparation and an hour of conference, most of which I will spend listening to the air conditioner and worrying about an unrelated settlement conference I have scheduled for the afternoon. This pre-trial is a waste of time. Potential damages are small and the chances of success are split. The settlement conference is high stakes. It's real. It's the most real case I've had so far, and I have a decent shot of ending it today. If the other side signs on the dotted line I will earn my firm a small windfall. When I said it's in nobody's interest to go to trial, I lied. It's in the lawyer's interest. But an early settlement can be lucrative too.

The settlement isn't the only thing on my mind. Today is also Rosie's birthday and the gift I ordered for her, a collection of Finnish bath soaps, has been giving me a headache with shipping. I've been assured it will arrive today at the address of Winterson & Partners, but I'm still nervous because I don't have a backup if it doesn't.

I notice the defence counsel has stopped talking.

He sits down.

"Thank you, counsel," the judge says in an ancient voice in preparation for clearing his throat. He pans his attention from the defence counsel to me, and back to the defence counsel. Then he looks down at the thick, bound binders lying on the table in front of him: our respective materials: a few pages of facts—about which no one disagrees—followed by a few pages of basic arguments, followed by a few pages of expert opinions, followed by hundreds of pages detailing how qualified those expert opinions are.

A drop of sweat sprouts on the judge's eyebrow, travels down his nose and lands on a binder.

*Splat*.

I want him to hurry up. I want to leave here as soon as possible. I even want to plan how to avoid meeting Mrs. Johnson downstairs, but even my weak and atrophying conscience knows that won't happen.

"It appears to me thus…" the judge begins.

I focus on the air conditioner again. The defence counsel peers down at his tablet, where he's stored all his notes. I know he's actually reading his email. I have a tablet in front of me too. The judge has a yellow pad of paper and a pen. He also has a reputation for falling asleep during trials and of possessing a memory so bad he sometimes asks the same question three times in one day. He speaks slowly and with authority, saying nothing that the defence counsel nor I don't already know. Despite being a fifty-fifty case, everything about it from a legal standpoint is simple. Mrs. Johnson went to the hospital with a pain in her breast. The doctor on call noticed a lump and conducted a biopsy. The wound resulting from the biopsy developed an infection. The complications from the infection caused Mrs. Johnson to lose her nipple by surgical amputation. I emphasise in both my written and oral argument that it was "the right nipple" for no reason other than that it makes a greater emotional impact to lose something that's right. The defence counsel calls it merely "the nipple". That, in a nutshell, is the heart of the matter and the practice of law.

The single issue in question is whether the hospital, through its employee the doctor, acted negligently to cause the infection. Because the three of us in the pre-trial room are trained in law, not medicine, and know less about biology than a typical high school student, we cannot resolve this issue. That's why we've brought in experts. "Brought in" is a euphemism. We paid people with acceptable credentials in a particular field of medicine to give opinions supportive of our cases. I have two experts, for whose opinions Mrs. Johnson paid $10,000, and the defence counsel has one. The defence counsel's expert, however, has a more expansive C.V. It runs hundreds of pages. I don't know how much the defence counsel paid for his opinion, but hospitals have deeper pockets than Mrs. Johnson.

At 11:12 a.m. the judge offers his take. “After perusing the submitted materials, I find the case of the defence more persuasive than the case of the plaintiff,” he says.

The defence counsel and I thank the judge. He shakes our hands and wishes us luck with this case and with our budding careers. Then the defence counsel and I shake hands, turn off our tablets and pack them into our briefcases. His is nicer than mine. He’s from Toronto. He offers to treat me to coffee, but I have my settlement conference to prepare for and therefore have too little time. I politely decline. His plane doesn’t leave until the morning so I suggest ways for him to spend the evening, but he appears to know the area already. There’s a glint of victory in his farewell smirk.

Mrs. Johnson spots me in the main floor hallway.

She asks how the pre-trial went. Like most of my clients, her body language betrays how out of place she feels in a courthouse. Her questions are inflected with uncertainty.

I tell her the judge leaned toward the hospital but that this judge won’t be the one hearing a potential trial.

“Can we still *go* to trial?” she asks.

“We can,” I say. “But the outcome of the pre-trial means the hospital is less likely to settle, and we’ll also need to get at least one more expert witness if we want to win.”

Mrs. Johnson already knows that doing anything means spending money. She remains silent and still. “Did you tell them that I lost my nipple?”

I nod. I explain that the judge wasn’t unsympathetic to her troubles, just more inclined toward the medical opinion of the hospital’s expert witness than ours, and that the effects of Mrs. Johnson’s amputated nipple only come into play at the damages stage. The greater Mrs. Johnson’s losses, the more money she’ll get. That’s an argument I’ve not yet started to construct.

“What’s the chances we win at trial?”

I say they’re about thirty percent. I’ve no way to know that but Winterson himself taught me to always communicate vague notions in concrete terms to give clients the impression of authoritative knowledge. I say nothing about how much a trial costs, how far into the future it would be or how much stress and disruption it would cause.

“And if we win, the hospital would still pay me one hundred thousand dollars?”

“That’s just an estimate, but it’s a reasonable one,” I say.

I watch dollar signs plaster themselves across Mrs. Johnson’s eyeballs. I’m used to them. Mrs. Johnson is sixty-one years old and makes about $30,000 a year. Her husband, Jack, is unable to work because of a back injury he suffered seven years ago and spends his time at home. They

have two adult daughters who don't speak to them and an unemployed sister who mooches. "I don't have no more money, that's the trouble," Mrs. Johnson says. "Unless I mortgage the house."

When she looks at me this time I know she's searching for help. She wants me to tell her something impossible. I can't predict the whims of judges. Some go by the letter of the law, others bend the law to fit their personal sense of right and wrong. "Are you and Jack comfortable doing that?" I ask, mostly to buy time and remind her that she should go home and speak to her husband before making a decision.

"One hundred thousand is a lot of money," she muses.

I can't argue. I also can't violate the golden rule of being a lawyer: advise your clients but don't make decisions for them. Every day at the office I get calls from people who've been wronged and are desperate to find help. I listen to their stories and feel for them, but to most I say as gently as possible that if they're looking for help they should call someone else. I often suggest the police. They retaliate with the threat they'll call another lawyer. I know no other lawyer will listen past their first few sentences. It's my job to sue people, I want to tell them. I work for a business, not a counselling service or a church. I'm only interested in your pain if you have enough money to pay me to sue someone with even more money to pay the both of us. I'm more diplomatic in my actual choice of words. Winterson sometimes listens in to how his lawyers respond to cold calls. He's praised me more than once for knowing how to separate the gems from the dead wood without making the firm appear heartless. Legend has it that he once convinced a man who was afraid his wife's lover was plotting to murder him to come into the office and do up a will.

"What should I do?" Mrs. Johnson asks.

You should walk away and cut your losses, I think. "You should take time to think and talk to Jack," I say.

She pats me on the shoulder. "You're always so careful, Charlie. But I've already used up all my savings on this thing. It doesn't make no sense not to put the house on the line too. Am I right? I sure could use that hundred thousand to set me and Jack up for a while."

I don't say either way. I only conclude, not for the first time, that the trouble with flashing absurd amounts of money in front of people's eyes is that it's akin to leaving an alcoholic alone with an open bottle of vodka and repeating to yourself that the choice to drink is his. If Mrs. Johnson couldn't mortgage her house, we'd be parting ways because she'd have no means by which to pay our bills. Because she still has an asset, I need to abide by the golden rule and advise without interfering. "Just think about it."

Leaving the courthouse, I wave to her.

In the parking lot, I daydream about having a newer car as I turn the engine of my current one and wonder if that's greed or just realism.

I pull into traffic.

The going's sluggish. The heat is turning the asphalt of the city's streets to mush. I punch the clock on the car's dash to bring it back to life, and it informs me I still have half an hour to noon. So there's no rush yet. The legal profession runs in increments of about six minutes. Driving in the direction of the firm's office, I call Amanda, the firm's receptionist and unofficial office manager.

"Winterson and Partners. Amanda speaking," she says in a voice both cheerful and deceptively deep. In the flesh, Amanda is about five feet of skinny.

"It's Charlie," I say.

"Charlie!"

"I'm out of the pre-trial and on my way to lunch, and I'm wondering if there's a package waiting for me."

I stop at a red light behind a semi-trailer truck that should probably be on the highway. "Let me check, Charlie," Amanda says. When I first started articling at Winterson's I was put off by the way Amanda repeats the name of everyone she speaks to, but after about a month I realised she's usually involved in so many simultaneous conversations—spoken, written and from behind her desk—that repeating names serves to remind her which mental window she's kept open. "Sorry, Charlie. No package."

I curse silently and punch the clock the again. "Can you check an order status for me online?"

"Sure thing, Charlie. Carrier and tracking number please."

I tell her. I've checked the status so often in the preceding week I know it by heart.

Amanda's fingers hit keys. The light in front of me turns green and the semi-trailer truck and I accelerate slowly as cars on either side of us breeze by. I wonder what the truck is carrying. Finnish bath soap? "Looks like it's not going to be here until Monday, Charlie. Routing error," Amanda says.

So much for that. "Amanda," I say, borrowing her habit of direct address, "what's a gift that I could buy within the next few hours and that would make a woman happy?"

"Rosie?" she asks.

"Yes."

"Charlie, every woman loves flowers."

I think flowers are a terrible gift, overdone and inappropriate because no matter how well you care for them they die, but I thank Amanda and consider myself out of options. Rosie doesn't like chocolate, and I don't know enough about wine to buy a bottle without making a fool of myself. I turn on the radio and listen to news and traffic to drown out my anger at my lack of carefully selected Finnish soaps. A sports segment teases me by playing an interview with Teemu Selanne.

After pulling into the small parking lot behind Gianfranco's Deli, I pick up my briefcase and head in through the glass front door that's been painted in the colours of the Italian flag. Although Gianfranco's is mostly a store, it does offer a few tables for select customers—those who can name a dozen members of the current Italian national football team. Because I'm an immigrant, that poses no problem for me. The air smells of delicious freshly baked bread. A few other patrons are already seated, eating pasta or drinking cappuccino with newspapers spread on their knees. Boris is among them. He's reading The Globe & Mail. Because he's also an immigrant, he also has no problem with the football requirement. "Andrea Pirlo!" he greets me on sight. "Mario Balotelli," I respond, taking the seat across from him.

"How was your pre-trial?" he asks.

Giancarlo brings me my usual sandwich, for which I thank him with a nod of the head. "Down but not out. Their expert saved Liberia from Ebola so he's more learned in infectious diseases than my university researchers."

"I saw his bio. Picking it up developed my biceps," Boris says. He's wearing a white shirt, navy suit and crimson tie, and he has perfectly rehearsed posture. He looks very much like a lawyer. "But I suppose the better question is: are you going to nail that Tabatha Holdings settlement? I hear Winterson actually cares about that one."

Boris works at Winterson's too. After ten months of competing against each other, the firm decided we were both too good to pass up. It fired a family lawyer who'd been there for eleven years, split his salary between us and put up a divider in the building's suddenly vacant corner office. We didn't complain. We never did stop competing.

I take a bite of my sandwich. The bun is still warm, the lettuce is light and crunchy. Plus, I'm a sucker for tomatoes. "I sure hope so. Otherwise it's going to be a bad fucking day."

Out of the corner of my eye I see the deli's front doors open and a man walk in. I recognise him as Frank Delaney, a former client. I only worked one Small Claims case for him, but I won it and Frank Delaney liked the way I handled myself against the self-represented greaseball on the other side. I grab my sandwich, excuse myself from the table and saunter to where he's leaning on the counter, picking out cookies.

"Mr. Delaney," I say.

He spins around. “Charlie! I’d shake your hand but I almost cut it off this morning on the table saw.” He holds his injured hand up. It’s bandaged. “Hurts like hell, and I can’t guarantee it won’t piss blood on you.”

Frank Delaney can be a son of a bitch when it comes to business, but in private he’s one of the most cheerful people I know. I’ve yet to encounter him in a bad mood. “Ouch,” I say. “I assume there was no negligence involved or I’d already have an email all about it. Unless, Mr. Delaney, you’re cheating on me with another lawyer…”

“Never, Charlie. Never,” he says with expressive actor’s eyes. He’s playing, but only his delivery is exaggerated. Frank takes the idea of loyalty seriously. He drops his wallet on the counter and with his good hand crosses his heart while presumably hoping to die. “Fidelity above all else, my dear. Till death do us part.” He grins. “So, tell me, what’s new in the exciting world of ambulance chasing?”

I summarise a few of my recent triumphs, my pre-trial and my upcoming settlement conference.

“Then what the fuck are you doing standing here talking to me for? Prepare. Win.”

I hold up my sandwich.

“Yes, eat too.”

Back at the table, Boris finishes reading a page of the financial section, flips to the next and looks at me over the top of the newspaper like a spy. Giancarlo comes around in an apron covered with flour and asks if I’d like a coffee or a cappuccino. I take a coffee, finish my sandwich and ask Boris about his plans for this afternoon. He shrugs. “I’m still working on the dodge ball case.”

My tablet alarm goes off in my briefcase. I reach in and turn it off. I know what it means without checking. The clock has struck noon. I have an hour left before I try to settle Tabatha Holdings.

I down my coffee in one gulp, burning my throat, and make to leave. “Hey,” I say, “if you were going to buy flowers for someone, what kind would you buy?”

“I say dodge ball and you think flowers?”

“Yes.”

“Well, is the context romantic, amicable or funerary?”

“Romantic.”

“Roses,” Boris says.

I try to leave money on the table for Giancarlo, but Boris waves it away. “I got it.” Does he owe me something? “Oh, and by the way,” he says. “Ollie’s hosting a little soiree this Sunday. No special reason, but there’s a big pool in the yard and they’re calling for a thousand degrees for the weekend again. So if you’re free and willing, come on by. You know Ollie’s address.”

I do know it. I also kind of know Oliver. He’s a young criminal lawyer who studied law in Wales, which means he couldn’t get into a school here but had parents wealthy enough to send him overseas. Not that I judge. Based on what I’ve heard Oliver is a good guy, and Rosie says he’s a hardworking and competent lawyer. He works at Stephenson Ashford, the firm Rosie wants to work for one day. His father is a nationally renowned surgeon. “Thanks, I might just take you guys up on it,” I say.

Seated safely in my car, I take deep breaths and open the navigation app on my tablet to double check the location of the hotel where the settlement conference will take place. The route seems simple enough, and I have at least four six-minute increments to spare. Exhaling, I put the key in the ignition. The engine gives me a fright but starts on the second try. Wanting a new car is definitely realism, not greed, I assure myself.

Traffic moves more smoothly than before.

The local university radio station plays one of my favourite songs and I drum along to the beat on the steering wheel.

I hit an empty patch of street, lower the the driver’s side window and accelerate to ten over the speed limit just to hear the wind rush into the car and feel it flow through my hair. It’s not going to be a bad day. The sun is shining. The weekend beckons.

A flower shop appears.

I’m feeling just pumped enough that I hit the breaks, change lanes and roll into a spot directly in front of the shop. I have ample time to get in, order flowers and get out. I slam the car door behind me, flatten my tie against my chest—I may not always feel lawyerly in the company of other lawyers, but amidst the general public I feel like Atticus Finch—and walk in to the tune of twinkling bells. A guy watering flowers puts down his watering can and takes his place beside the cash register. “I’m here to buy flowers,” I say.

“No shit,” he says.

I remain pleasant in the presence of the wise ass. “They’re for a woman.”

“And I ain’t here to ask, man.”

“Two dozen roses,” I say because that seems like the standard size of bouquet to order according to my boyhood education in romance.

The guy slides a pink form toward me. “Fill her out and scribble down your personalised message.”

I follow his instructions, choosing a simple white card adorned with a golden heart and the following message: “Dear Rosie, I’m still mad about you. Love, Charlie.”

The guy takes the form.

My phone rings.

I accept the connection, put the phone to my ear and hear “Beaver?”

It’s my mom.

The guy reads the form and scoffs. He shakes his head.

“Hello, mom,” I say.

“Beaver, I hope I didn’t catch you at a bad time. I can hear people… I think. I can call later.” Perhaps like most loving mothers, mine has never fallen out of the routine of calling me by the pet name I answered to as a child. Because English is her second language she is unaware of the connotations of that particular animal. She does, however, take pride in it being a particularly Canadian creature. She takes pride in being Canadian.

“I’m on my way to an important meeting but I’m not busy at the moment so go ahead.”

“Oh… it’s not—I’m just calling to remind you that it’s your dad’s birthday in two weeks and I thought it would be nice if you could maybe visit next weekend…”

I feel like I’m drowning in birthdays. “Sure,” I say. Ever since I stayed away on Christmas, my parents have been conspiring to reel me in for any other occasion. I’ve already agreed once before and had to cancel at the last minute. I’ve no intention of keeping my word this time, either. It’s tough love. They have to learn that the break was permanent, that unless they have another child their nest will remain empty.

“So wonderful,” she says. “Your dad will be so happy.”

I feel a twinge of guilt.

“That’s it. That’s all I wanted to say. You don’t have to bring anything. You don’t have to call ahead. Just come.”

“I look forward to it,” I say.

“Beaver—” My finger freezes over the end call button. The flower shop guy waves the form I filled out. I assume he’s getting impatient so I fish out my wallet and reveal my credit card. “How’s your work?” my mom asks.

“Great,” I say, “but I have to go now if I don’t want to be late, mom.”

She says goodbye.

“Roses?” the guy asks with raised eyebrows.

“That is correct,” I say.

“You’re buying roses for Rosie?”

“Is that a problem?”

“Not for me, but unless your girl likes guys with zero imagination it might be for you. Use your head for a minute, man. Do you know how many times Rosie’s gotten roses? You don’t need to answer that. It’s rhetorical. And do you know when she started getting sick of them? Stay mum here too. I’ll handle it for you. After the first, fucking time. So go ahead and do yourself a favour. Get her tulips.”

Roses, tulips. “Whatever, just be quick. I’m kind of in a hurry.”

I’m also starting to feel bad: because I wanted to buy roses for Rosie, because I’m lying to my own mother, because maybe I’m not as prepared for this settlement conference as I thought I was. My heart hurts like a muscle, pumping my lungs, which start the spin cycle on my guts.

“Man, you OK?” the flower shop guy asks as he passes me a beautiful bouquet of tulips.

I answer by giving him my credit card. He runs it through the machine, prints off a receipt and hands it to me. It gets shoved into my pocket along with my hand, which I’m forming into a fist.

I stomp out of the shop feeling like I just ate playdough for lunch. For whatever reason, I believe if I can make it to my car everything will be OK. OK is the superior word to alright, which in turn is superior to all right because that’s two words. Language is malleable and justice is expressed in language. Love is expressed in language. And one of the three is now constructing buildings inside my body: sickeningly unnatural architecture…

I don’t make it to my car. Two dozen steps before, I keel over and empty my stomach of its bilious contents, managing to get it all over my shoes and to stain the bottoms of my pant legs.

I try not to think how much they cost.

I think about soaking them in hot water and rubbing soap into them with a brush.

The smell of the puke is horrible, but the worst thing is the people in the street—staring. Normal people, people not wearing suits. Old people, unemployed people, kids. They probably think I'm a businessman who couldn't take the stress. Or else that I'm junkie executive whose expensive habit just caught up with him. A more pathetic Patrick Bateman. I hear something honk behind me and I realise I'm blocking the way of a teen riding a Segway. She's flanked by stacked boxes. She looks like a delivery driver. I crawl forward to pick up my scattered tulips, get to my feet when I have them and lurch toward my car. The people are still staring but fuck them, they don't even read books or watch intellectually stimulating movies, I tell myself. They're just a bunch of Mrs. Johnsons. Then I think of Frank Delaney with his cut up hand and his goofy smile and joyful theatricality. That calms me down, helps me get my mind somewhat under control. If Frank Delaney can do it, I can do it because: I'm not worse than Frank Delaney. I can't fathom being worse than anyone. But that the throngs of people beyond the walls of my Fortress Honda with its dying engine and stupid, fucking clock—I bang on it.—are inferior to me, now that's a thought that comes easily. I earned a law degree, for God's sake!

The clock on the dash flashes 12:23 p.m. in my face.

"Fuck," I yell.

For a second, I seriously consider rolling up my pant legs and walking into the settlement conference room, but when that becomes apparently ridiculous I remember the spare suit in my office at Winterson's. That's closer than Rosie's apartment where all my other clothes are. So with twenty-four tulips on the seat beside me, I drive.

The world around me blears.

I mix and match lanes like a madman.

But only for a while. After that I start to feel progressively better, my control over everything seeping back. I loosen my grip on the steering wheel and ease up on the accelerator. I haven't had an episode like this since high school. I hate losing control.

I park with one wheel over the curb and race past Amanda's surprised face and up the stairs leading to my shared office with Boris on the second floor of the Winterson's building.

I pass Winterson himself—

He stops me with a firm grip of my shoulder, circles until he's directly in front of me, scans me up and down and says, "Jesus, Charlie."

"Nerves," I say.

His firm grip turns into a fatherly one. "Been there myself."

He glances at his watch, which I interpret as my cue to leave, so I do, and burst into my own shared office glad to have escaped the attentions of everyone else. I lean my back against the

door after closing it. That Boris is here, reclining in the ergonomic office chair behind his desk, doesn't especially shock me. Giancarlo's is just down the street. But he immediately stops talking, and it's the person on the other side of the conversation whose presence knocks my compass needle askew. "Hello, Charlie," Rosie says. She's wearing her favourite grey skirt and white blouse. She looks hot. "I didn't expect seeing you here."

I know there's something off: about the situation, about her tone. But I don't have time—

"Did you vomit on yourself?"

Comedy is my eternal shield and sometime tool of self-delusion. "I'll have to ask Giancarlo about what he puts in those sandwiches."

The joke falls flat. No matter. I reach for the clean suit hanging on the divider between mine and Boris' half of the office and start to strip out of my current one. "I hope you don't mind the show."

"Leave it on your chair and I'll drop it off to get dry cleaned," Rosie says.

"Why are you here?" I ask back.

"One of my clients thinks he has a case against the city."

"He slipped on the stairs leading up to the police station last December and we may have proof that the company hired by the city to care for the property in the winter failed to do its job up to a reasonable standard," Boris says.

Rosie smiles sweetly. "I wasn't going behind your back, Charlie. If that's what you're thinking. You and Boris can split the case if there's anything to it."

I'm fully in my new suit now and therefore feeling less grimy, more traditionally polite. "Thanks for the dry cleaning offer," I say to Rosie.

"That's what relationships are for. Sometimes you make a mess and sometimes you clean a mess up."

It's a pragmatic view, I suppose. Rosie has always been a pragmatic person. I hope even pragmatic women enjoy receiving two dozen slightly damaged tulips for their birthdays. "Fill me in on Monday?" I ask Boris.

"I can fill you in tonight," Rosie says.

She sounds seductive but the clock in the office keeps ticking and I have to bolt.

Boris tosses me a travel bottle of mouth wash. "You're welcome."

“Thanks,” I say.

“You’ll still make it. Don’t speed. Don’t sweat. Listen to smooth jazz, do your box breathing and then walk in, set down your briefcase and convince them they’ve no choice but to sign on your terms and your time frame.”

“Thanks, honey,” I say.

And all the way down the stairs I worry that was either too possessive or too unprofessional.

“I’m off,” I tell Amanda on my way out the door.

I pray that my car starts and when it does I thank my grandparents for sending me a special Catholic prayer card to keep in the glove compartment. Maybe someone up there is looking out for me. Pope John Paul II observes me from the prayer card. Being Polish-Canadian might have its advantages after all.

Driving, I keep one eye on the road and the other on the clock. The car’s tires seem to scrape the red illuminated minutes away. Whenever I get nervous, I take Rosie’s advice and slow my breathing, all the while remaining vigilantly positive: I won’t be late, I’ll make a good impression, I’ll get the signature I need that nets Winterson’s a vault of money. I’m aware that getting this done will make me valuable to the firm, but more than that I just want to win. Everything else is secondary. I pass a minivan from whose back window kids make faces at me. I want kids of my own even though all other kids annoy me. I inhale, hold for two seconds and exhale. I’m positive my kids will be quiet and tactful by virtue of genetics. The minivan becomes the past. As I feather the brake pedal, the light ahead of me turns from red to green and I glide through an intersection. Because my emotions are under my control now, time is also under my control. I will myself to be on time. Even at 12:55 p.m. I will it, and because some people are born to rule a world which others serve, I see the looming shape of my destination and know it could be no other way. Pulling into the parking lot is like fitting into a new suit: expected. I gargle with the mouth wash Boris gave me, step out of the car and spit. The few people in front of the hotel entrance—travellers, tourists, businessmen—are looking at me, but this time I’m not puking and they’re not staring. As I meet each of their gazes, they turn theirs down and away. They are frightened of me. They are in awe. I cross the asphalt to the tune of my clicking heels and pass under the roof that protects the hotel doors from rain, sleet and snow. The air is cooler here. I am cool. With my briefcase held firmly in my hand, I enter the building. One signature, I repeat silently to myself, is all I need. At the reception desk I ask for Conference Room C and the woman receptionist kindly points the way. Your colleagues are already waiting, she says. They’re not my colleagues. I’m readying myself, giving myself the pre-game speech I imagine the best coaches give the best hockey teams. I am Manifest Destiny, I scream at myself—quietly. There are only a few steps left separating me from my ambition. If Mrs. Johnson popped out from behind a corner, I wouldn’t recognise her. She is inconsequential. I reach Conference Room C’s double doors. They’re closed but from behind them I whiff the smell of money and make out the machine gun sound of self-absorbed laughter. I push the doors open, both of them because that’s the entrance I want to make. And as I instantly assess the geography of a room I’ve never seen, the faces turning toward me and falling quiet are familiar. They’re the weathered faces of

businessmen and experienced corporate lawyers. It hardly matters. By walking in, I've already shut them up. I've soaked up their attention without saying one word. In the past hour, I've practised in my head nothing of what I will say. Saying is the domain of arguments, which are an expression of reason. This, all of us in the room know, is politics: is—definite article—law; and what are reason, justice or common sense in the face of the law but *ex post* justifications put forth by weasels and academics. Law, stripped of these pretensions, is little more than impressions, of which I, the centre of attention, am currently God. Fuck their experience. Fuck their precedents, factotums and standards of proof. Some time ago, I was on my knees unloading the contents of my stomach onto the tips of my shoes, but they don't know that. They can't see that. What they see is a mask of composure through whose brilliant eye holes glitter the consequences of misreading reality as a bluff. I open my mouth to speak.

"We've agreed to settle," one of the opposing lawyers says.

And my mouth closes.

"On the terms you laid out in our last series of email correspondence," he adds.

"It's Friday," says another, his forehead a mirror of sweat. "Let's get out of here and enjoy the weekend."

I set my briefcase on one of the room's long tables and extract several copies of the draft settlement agreement I typed out two weeks ago. I pretend not to be shocked, though in fact I am so shocked by this turn of events I may have peed myself a little. My boxers feel wet underneath my dress pants.

I want to rush, to throw down the sheets of paper and snatch them back as quickly as possible, but I steel my nerves. The copies make the rounds methodically and each representative of the opposing party scrawls his signature. While this is not the document that officially ends the case, what follows will be mere formalities. Blue ink has locked out all other possibilities. And as the men add their successive scrawls, I watch their expressions and their body language, eager to identify the one detail that convinced them of the impossibility of their victory. I want to remember my winning play. My search, however, is fruitless. I'll never know why they settled just as they'll never know the weakness of my case. What to them seems inevitable I know to be otherwise. When the documents are all signed, I add my signature too. Then I pick up the pages, knock their edges against the table to make them straight and neat, and replace them in my briefcase. We shake hands, the victor with his row of vanquished foes, and because we are men civilised enough to know when to act with modesty, we immediately begin to chit-chat before, with smiling faces, retreating into the hotel lobby and outside to our parked cars, knowing that over the course of our careers we will all win and we will all lose and that our brotherhood relies not so much on the game we play as it does on the means by which we play it: other people's lives and other people's money.

The way back to Winterson's feels like a parade. I'm not bothered by the unending heat. I am sublime. My car sails on a river of the melted insignificance of lives that aren't mine, which the summer boils into a gas that flows through my nostrils and fills the expanding cavity of my

ballooning ego. The tulips beside me are wilting. I must be sucking out their vital juices. I make a note to water them only after remembering who they are for. How strange that they are not for me. I drive under the limit in the left-most lane without the intention of ever turning left, because I can. I only make way for an ambulance because its sirens slice through the density that is my arrogance. And then, all at once, I feel horrible again, like I did in the flower shop. The car behind me rejoins traffic but I stay pulled off to the side with my right blinker flashing. My body goes through the motions of vomiting without anything coming up. My throat is an empty conveyor belt. For an instant, I feel generally empty: a petrified body housing no mind, no emotion and no soul. Except the tulips still smell despite being baked inside the interior of a car—and the smell reminds me of Rosie, who is always reasonable. I can almost hear her voice telling me that my feeling of being devoid of emotion is itself an emotion, thereby making my entire fear irrational. But even in my head, she says nothing about my mind or soul.

Rosie's no longer at the office by the time I get back. I'm disappointed. I've already forgotten the strangeness of her being there earlier and I just want to see her again. I want to make her happy with flowers. That Boris also isn't there, I'm glad. My desire to gloat is gone.

Winterson's office door is closed and I slip past on my way out without making a sound.

Amanda smiles in reception from behind her desk and doesn't ask how things went. She's too wise to make that mistake. Her job is to keep track of where *her* lawyers are and to make sure we make our appointments. Results are beyond her domain. I wish Amanda a happy weekend. Her sons are going to be in town.

I take the direct downtown route to Rosie's building, avoiding rush hour because I ended work early, and ride alone in the elevator to our apartment to which I let myself in with the key she gifted me in December.

Rosie's not home yet, which isn't unusual. She's trying to earn her way into a more prestigious criminal law firm and you don't do that by cutting corners on a Friday.

Although I'm in a better state of mind than at almost any time today, I still don't feel sufficiently at peace. I remember my feeling of elation after leaving the settlement conference and want that elation back. I'm a winner and I deserve to feel good. I don't want to remember how I felt—how I still feel—about Mrs. Johnson.

Spreading the curtains of the twelfth-storey window overlooking the city, I take this apartment for granted. I take the existence of both my nipples for granted. Mrs. Johnson has a nipple less than me and the odds are she'll lose her house if she gambles on the outcome of her case. It's a probability I want to forget. Ever since law school, I've had it drummed into my head that I need to learn to separate my clients' lives from my own, but how does one do that? Comparisons are inevitable. Mrs. Johnson is poor and I am on my way to being wealthy. Once I pay off my student debt, I'll remove my shackles and hand them to Mrs. Johnson, who'll add them to the shackles she already wears. If she wins her case, I win. If she loses her case, I still win. Either way, I've done compensable legal work, but my ill feeling festers. Most people believe justice means matching a certain action with a sensible reaction: a transgression with a punishment.

However, there's a well known theory of justice which argues something different. According to this theory, justice has nothing to do with action and reaction and all to do with predictability and universal application. A society is just if all its members know the punishment for a crime and that punishment is equally applied to all transgressors. This is a democratic theory. A virus is also democratic. It wants to spread to everyone. If it's a deadly virus, it will kill everyone. Maybe I've been watching too many zombie movies, but I don't think a normal person would claim a virus is good simply because it predictably ends us all equally.

"That's hyperbolic," Rosie tells me after I present the same metaphor to her during dinner. I still haven't given her the tulips. They're waiting in a jug of water in our apartment bathroom. "Moreover, there is no one fairness. Fair is always a subjective, not objective, valuation. Pretending otherwise can too easily serve as a shield for injustice."

She makes a valid point.

"And, Charlie, you're not in ethics class anymore. You don't have to worry about this. Leave it up to the legislators. They work for you, and you work for your clients. Keep it simple or you'll go insane."

"I'm sorry. I had a stressful day, I guess," I say.

"You don't need to be sorry."

"It's your birthday." Rosie's thirty-seven today. "I don't want to ruin it with philosophising and pointless moaning."

"You already ruined the cranberry sauce," she says—in jest, but it sounds mean anyway. Nevertheless, I like having a relationship solid enough not to have to rely on politeness and biting one's tongue.

"Can I be honest with you?" she asks.

"You just were."

She ignores my sarcasm. "When I was first starting out, I did a lot of public defender work. The government would pay my airplane ticket north to a remote town and I would do my best to defend domestic abusers, gasoline sniffing thieves, prostitutes and the bluest-collar cheats you can imagine. It paid well but I considered it the garbage of legal work, a necessary gauntlet that all lawyers had to pass to join the club. I was sure it would get better, or at least cleaner, once I established myself. But the truth is it never gets better, only less pure and less direct. Today I deal with the same garbage. I successfully defend people who deserve to get punished. I fail to successfully defend some who don't. I don't fly as much and sometimes I have a junior do my leg work, but it's otherwise identical. What has changed is my position vis-a-vis the constants. I don't let the rot get to me and I don't try to change the world. It makes me a better lawyer. I'm focussed, I'm sharp and I represent all my clients to the best of my abilities. When I lay down at night, I fall asleep without trouble. You said you had a bad day…"

"Stressful," I correct her.

"Thank you, counsel. A stressful day. What made it stressful? You attended a pre-trial, the judge preferred the opposition. You had a settlement conference, you won the conference. In between, you had to change clothes, you ate lunch and you went home early on a Friday."

I open my mouth to object but don't know to what.

"You're still green as a lawyer, but what you did today is light. I say this with the greatest regard for you both as a person and a professional. If you can't handle today being your every day, you might wish to consider an alternate career."

I bite my tongue. Maybe our relationship isn't yet as solid as I'd like, or maybe I'm not used to talking shop with Rosie. Because I feel like a scolded child, I emphasise the petulance in my voice. "Pass the potatoes, please."

She passes me the dish and I take it. "Charlie, I'm serious."

"You're seriously trying to convince me I'm not cut out to be a lawyer over a birthday dinner I made for you?"

I can see her jaws grind against one another. She's tense. I'm tense too. "First, the dinner is wonderful and thank you. Second, I'm not trying to convince you of anything. I'm giving you my honest advice. Third, you were the one who started whining. Unlike you, I forgot my workday at the fucking door."

*Fucking* door? I stop chewing my potatoes. Rosie never swears. In the entire time I've known her, I've heard her say the word "fuck" in a non-sexual context less than ten times. "Is everything OK?" I ask.

"Everything is all right," she answers.

But I can see that it's not. Behind her forced smile, something's wrong. Her knuckles are white from holding the silverware too firmly. Under the table, her leg is bouncing up and down, bringing the end of the tablecloth up and down with it. Details are off. Rosie is usually still. I'm the anxious one. As she holds her smile, the creases and wrinkles on her skin catch shadows, making her look aged.

I stretch my hand toward her. "Did you have a bad day at the office, honey?"

She recoils.

"Nothing extraordinary."

Several thoughts burst from the gates and race through my mind. The first is that Rosie is repulsed by me as a bad, whiny lawyer. That can't be true, however. I'm about to ask if she'd

still love me if I wasn't one, but backtrack once I realise the word itself—love—has never been exchanged between us. Rosie, who is proud of her sharp, stinging candour, has not once told me she loves me and I've not had the bravery to tell the same to her.

"I'm so sorry," she says without explanation.

"For what?"

The tiny space between her nose and upper lip twitches. I love that space. I want to use the word aloud in any context. "Rosie, I—"

"For ruining your birthday plans for me. Your mood. This dinner."

"I love doing stuff for you." This time it's my turn to force a smile, not because I don't mean it but because I'm ashamed of the juvenile way I just phrased my adult feeling for her. My smile is a cover-up. "And you didn't ruin anything. I want your advice, your true opinions and feelings. It's one of the things I love most about you."

I grip her hand.

It feels cold, and tears well in her eyes.

She rips free of me, pushes her chair neatly back under the table and whispering another apology makes for the bathroom.

I stay where I am. "Rosie?"

"One second, please." I hear the bathroom tap turn on, water splash. She must be washing her face. She must be composing herself in front of the mirror. I wonder suddenly how many times she's done this before, not with another man but because of work, which I refuse to believe is not to blame for our spoiled mood. I feel guilty for not asking more often about her day. In hindsight, I've been selfish, self-centred. I vow to change—

Rosie exits the bathroom holding my bouquet of two dozen tulips.

Water drips from their severed stems to the floor.

"For me?" she asks.

"Of course they're for you," I say, already striding across the dining room to wrap my arms around her.

The hug I give her is as loving as it is romantic, and I don't stop giving it until she covers my cheeks awkwardly with kisses. The tulips smell good, but as usual Rosie smells better.

When I finally let her go, she backs away clutching the tulips to her chest. “I apologise for my behaviour,” she says.

I shake my head. “You’ve no reason. I adore you. Don’t hide yourself from me.”

“And you’re right that it *is* work. I’ve been working so hard lately, trying so desperately to stand out and make a good impression. My career is important to me, Charlie. I need you to know that.”

I take her hand and absentmindedly play with a ring on one of her fingers. “Of course I know that. You’re a great lawyer and you deserve the best.”

“Thank you, Charlie.”

“For the tulips?”

“For the compliment. For the flowers. For understanding, most of all.”

I don’t have any Finnish soaps and I messed up the giving of the flowers, but if I could make her happy tonight, I might be able to forgive myself. “If I ever quit being a lawyer, maybe I’ll go into the understanding business,” I say to try to lighten the mood.

She responds with: “Let’s drink.”

Soon I hear the clinking of glass bottles, a sound both familiar and distant, drift toward me from the the kitchen cabinet where Rosie and I keep our alcohol. The cabinet is seldom opened. I rarely drink with Rosie and she rarely drinks at all, but she returns holding two glasses filled with what looks like rum and coke and an unopened bottle of brandy.

I take the glass she holds out to me, bring it to my lips—and hesitate.

Rosie takes a sip of her drink. “Let me correct myself,” she says. “Let’s not just drink. Let’s get drunk.”

A reality hits me. I’ve never seen Rosie drunk.

I down half of my drink at once.

I want to see her drunk. I want to steal her inhibitions, force her to let loose, help her do whatever it is people do when they let themselves get carried away on a tidal wave of booze. But as Rosie takes merely another sip, another reality hits me. This one’s a sucker punch. She’s never seen me drunk either. I finish my drink to stop the flashbacks of my first year of university that I’m about to have, but the shame’s already creeping up on me. I vaguely remember pool parties, dopey sex, awful sing-alongs on public transportation and my own awkward goofiness.

Rosie refills my glass. “Give me your phone,” she says.

“Why?”

“Because I want to remember you like this.”

I fish my phone out of my pocket and toss it to her. She makes the one handed catch with no problem, flicks the screen a few times and points the phone’s camera at me. I raise my glass and smile. “Pour yourself some brandy,” I say.

She ignores me. “Smile.”

I smile, and she snaps a photo.

“Now pout.” I pout. “And drink.” I drink. “And now a monkey face.” Pretending to be a chimpanzee, I am in awe of Rosie’s voice pronouncing the words “monkey face”.

“Brandy,” I remind her.

She pours one but gives it to me instead of drinking it herself. Or maybe that’s hindsight. “Now Chinese,” she says.

“What?”

“Make a Chinese face.”

I put down my glass, thin out my lips and use my fingers to slant my eyes.

I drink brandy.

“Dance.” I dance. “Take off your belt.” I take off my belt. “My turn,” I say, already feeling a gentle slur, reaching for Rosie and the phone she pulls playfully away from my grabbing hand. “Not yet. Get more alcohol in you first.” I crawl toward her. She takes a swig of brandy straight from the bottle, lets me kiss her and spits the brandy into my mouth. It burns. Rosie burns. Rosie is hot. “Call me a nigger,” she says. “What?” She responds by sliding a tulip into my mouth. The phone is between me and Rosie. “Call me a bitch.” I call her a bitch. Lights keep flashing. “Now drink this.” She gives me a bottle that I take in both hands, raise above my head and whose contents I let flow down my throat, into my gut. It’s not brandy. It’s rum. I cough at the sweet, leathery taste and knock the bottle over trying to find the floor with its bottom. My eyes fog up from the inside. I can’t find the switch to turn on my windshield wipers. Dummy, I think. Windshield wipers only go back and forth on the outside. I no longer remember how long any of this has been going on. “What do you want to do to me?” Rosie asks. “Fuck you,” I say automatically. We’re in the bedroom. We’re almost naked. I have an erection and the aftertaste of beer on my tongue. The ticking of the clock is driving me mad with its irregularity. And those lights. Faulty mechanism. Faulty mechanism. Faulty. “Monkey face again,” Rosie says. “Now Chinese again.” Slanted, enchanted. I burst out laughing. Rosie and I fuck. I think. There, that fixed the clocks. Rosie wipes her face. Rosie sounds funny, like a furry frying pan bouncing on a

glass stove top and when I give her a hug she feels like it too, and under her eyes I lick at drops of brandy that taste not like brandy but like salt and I fall soundlessly asleep.

It's dark when I wake up. The blinds are closed. My first instinct is that I napped, but one shake of the head dissuades me of that silly notion. My head hurts. I'm hungover. I'm also naked and alone. I put on a pair of boxers, slide across the bed, noting the warmth on the mattress beside me, and rubbing my temples stagger out of the bedroom.

Rosie's sitting in the kitchen. She doesn't look hungover but she doesn't look good either. "Good morning," I say.

"Good Saturday afternoon."

I open the fridge, take out a bottle of water, crack open the top and drink all of it in one gulp. If it's Saturday afternoon that means I slept for a long time.

Rosie's already dressed. "How long have you been up?" I ask. I barely remember anything that happened.

"A while."

"Is everything OK?" I ask.

"Every is all right, but I have to go into the office for the evening."

She's being formal. I run my hands through my hair. Perhaps I should be concerned but I'm not. Rosie is just being Rosie, after all. I can't expect her to change because of one wild night. Still, watching her, I'm certain whatever we did last night was a good step in the direction of being OK with being embarrassed with each other. We opened up. We let loose.

"I have to run now," she says. "I was just waiting for you to get up."

"When will you be back?"

"In a few hours. I don't know precisely." And, heading through the door, "I left your phone on the desk by the computer," she says.

When she's gone, I dress myself in jeans and a t-shirt and flop down on the couch, trying to decide if I'm hungry or not. I decide I'm not. I stand by the living room window instead. I look at the city, then slide open the window and breathe the city in. Fresh air is what I need. I grab my wallet and my phone, which is indeed by the computer, and take the elevator down to the main floor of the apartment building. My head is throbbing by the time I take my first step outside but I ignore the suggestion to stay inside and bum around. I've been drunk enough times to know that exercise, air and coffee is what I need. Leaving my car behind, I take off down the sidewalk. There's a coffee place nearby but it's posh and I don't want to go to it. I want to go somewhere else, somewhere cheaper, somewhere where normal people go.

The farther I walk, the better I'm able to form coherent thoughts. Boozy cobwebs crumble away from my brain. When I feel satisfactorily sharp, I duck into the first Tim Horton's I see.

The place is almost empty.

I'm glad.

I order black coffee and a bran muffin and sit by myself at one of the tables pressed against a wall of windows looking out on a sidewalk along which nobody passes. By most standards, it's a beautiful summer day but the streets are devoid of humans. Only cars stream by, streaks of colour smeared by the unclean glass. My coffee is hot and double cupped. I let it steam. Because no one's ready to order, the guy behind the counter steps out and starts mopping the floor. He adjusts a bright yellow "Caution: Wet Floor" sign. I bite into my muffin, which tastes fine, and consider the benefits of non-carpeted floors. It's not a sincere topic. It's a roundabout way of imagining the house Rosie and I will have.

A bell dings, announcing the arrival of a new customer.

The guy with the mop leans it against the sign and scurries behind the counter, fixing his cap. I place silent bets on what the order will be. What kind of person comes here on a Saturday afternoon: lost, friendless, poor?

"One large coffee, double double. And give me one of those chocolate peanut butter chip cookies. They look good today," the customer says.

I don't recognise the voice right away, but when Mrs. Johnson turns it's too late for me to look away:

"Charlie!"

I take a deep breath. "Mrs. Johnson."

"Can I join you?"

I smile in lieu of an answer, hoping to twist my mouth into an expression of sarcasm, but it either doesn't work or Mrs. Johnson is wilfully oblivious because she wastes no time dropping into the chair opposite mine.

"I sure as heck didn't expect to see you here," she says.

"A pleasant surprise."

She eyes my plate. "I see you got yourself a bran muffin there. I don't like those myself. I prefer something with a little more flavour that satisfies my sweet tooth."

Considering her mood when I saw her on Friday, Mrs Johnson is oddly chipper. I therefore proceed with caution. “I’m watching my waistline. Can’t afford to buy a new suit,” I say.

It must dawn on her I’m not wearing one. “I knew there was something different about you.”

I look like you, I think. I say, “Casual Saturday.”

“You look…” She pushes her cookie into her mouth and chews. “You look like you could be the one going to see a lawyer today, not the one being one.”

“A real person with real problems?”

She scratches her head through her green hat. “Yeah, just like that,” she says, and her subsequent smile is the opposite of sarcasm. “I’m not here to take up your time, though. Don’t worry about that. I just wanted the company.” She pauses, before saying in a single breath, “Jack and I decided to mortgage the house to have enough money to keep suing the hospital.”

I want to tell her that’s a rash decision. I want to tell her the law moves slower than a tortoise through condensed milk and she has plenty of time to make up her mind. I want to tell her not to mortgage the house! But I’m no longer drunk, which means I’m back in control of my honesty, which means I’m no longer honest unless it suits me, so I bite my tongue, then scald it by drinking hot coffee, and nod stupidly, repeating to myself Winterson’s legal mantra: advise your clients but don’t make decisions for them.

“I’m really not here today as a lawyer, Mrs. Johnson,” I say, borrowing some of Rosie’s formality. “But if you want to proceed with the case, we’ll proceed with the case.”

We finish our pathetic meal in silence.

I bid Mrs. Johnston goodbye at the door, weaving out of the way to let a group of Goth teenagers amble by, and turn my back on her. I’m far from home and don’t feel like walking anymore, but somehow calling a cab is even less appealing. I might catch a glimpse of my face in its rear-view mirror. Plus, it’s still a beautiful summer day and the sidewalks are still empty. Making use of them will be my act of rebellion for the day. Tiny and insignificant, it’s all the independence I can handle. Any more and I might just break my back. Because although I’m not spineless yet, I’m getting there. One of these days I’ll have to learn to slither home.

I don’t realise just how sour my mood is until I re-enter the apartment. Rosie’s not back yet and the entire place reeks of sweat and alcohol. I turn off the air conditioner and open all the windows. When that doesn’t immediately help, I take a shower. Then I change the bedsheets and bring the dirty ones down to the laundry room. Waiting for the laundry, I hop upstairs, intentionally ignoring the elevator, and end up taking out my aggression on the sofa cushions while trying to rearrange them. I retrieve the wash, wondering what it is I’m angry about. Maybe Rosie was right. Maybe I don’t have what it takes to be a lawyer. What if I lack the mental toughness? Rosie would tell me to leave work at the door. Mrs. Johnson’s life is not mine and beyond this line only my life enters. But Rosie’s *at* work. I pass a miserable Saturday evening

binge-streaming The Good Wife and when Rosie finally gets back, we eat a reheated dinner and go to sleep with our backs facing toward each other and our attentions elsewhere.

Sunday morning dawns. Rosie and I take turns showering, brushing our teeth and making food. I brew tea, Rosie fries eggs. The breakfast smells overtake the lingering odour of drunkenness and when I finish eating, wiping my plate with my last piece of bread, I feel at ease again. I shouldn't get so emotional, I conclude. Rosie flips virtual pages of the New York Times on her tablet and when she speaks it's with her eyes cast down. She responds to everything I say but doesn't say anything on her own. Despite the lack of attention, which I still ascribe to Friday night, I desire more than anything to make her laugh. I'm unsuccessful, so I wash the dishes instead. She keeps reading. I ask her what's happening in the world. She pronounces the words of a headline. I ask her if anything's the matter. She pronounces the word "no". "Do you regret what happened?" I ask. She reminds me that I'm supposed to meet with Boris and Oliver. I didn't even know she knew about that. "Call me on your way back from the pool party," she says, pointing at my phone, "and I'll make dinner." I dress in an old pair of dress pants and a shirt, and take a pair of swimming trunks just in case. Looking outside, I see the sun burning its way through the atmosphere, changing the world to jelly. Boris was right. It's going to be another hot day.

Oliver's father's house sits in the hills on the outskirts of the city, where the snaking streets make it easy to lose one's self, so I drive slowly, passing between sprawling green lawns and their imposing houses, set comfortably away from each other and well back from the street, keeping one eye on the fresh asphalt and the other, squinting, on the numbers and surnames written on gates, boulders and ornate mailboxes.

I honk as I pull in to what I believe is the correct driveway, but the gate is already open. I sense the gaze of cameras.

My tires roll.

A mansion approaches into view: crimson brick, white trim, black roof. I stop in front of the garage beside three other cars, all more expensive than mine, and get out. I don't know if I should knock on the front door or not. My phone buzzes. The message from Boris tells me to come round the back. I suppose there are more cameras here. Their hidden but theoretically necessary existence disconcerts me, like dark matter. I put my swimming trunks under my arm and stroll along the edge of the house on a path of patio stones. The stones are perfectly placed. Not one blade of grass grows between them. Weeds are almost extinct in the hills above the city.

"Charlie!" Boris yells.

He and Oliver are sitting by the pool, whose still water shares the same vivid green as the grass, drinking beer. Oliver smiles and tosses a can to me. I drop my swimming trunks to catch it. Approaching, I scan the area for more people, but see no one. Not that I mind. Boris picks up a chair, snaps it open and places it beside his own. I snap open my beer, sit and take a sip. The taste stings with memories of Rosie's face. One day, we, too, will have a place like this, I hope. Then I use my lawyerly confidence to transmutate that hope into a certainty. Although as Canadians we like to consider ourselves different from Americans, if there are two things we've

picked up from our southern neighbours it's an addiction to suing people and a sincere belief in the power of positive thinking. I think positively about owning a big piece of land with a big brick mansion on it. The beer stings a little less.

As three young professionals, naturally all we talk about is work.

"Ollie's getting fed up with criminal law," Boris says at some point, and Oliver nods his approval. "He says all his firm's clients are depressing. I keep telling him that we don't deal with the most upstanding people, either, but he says at least we get to go on the attack once in a while, and at least when we deal with corporate or institutional clients, they pay up, and I can't really counter that line of argument. Can you?"

"Not at this point in time, your honour," I say.

Oliver's eyes twinkle.

Around senior lawyers, we keep our mouths shut and our opinions to ourselves—baby vultures hesitant to wedge their pink faces between the hardened wings of experienced buzzards pecking at a newly dead carcass—but when it's just us, safe in our shared lack of wisdom, we banter and expound like nobody's business. All the better if there are laymen around to hear us. We might even slide a business card into one of their pockets…

"Is that a problem particular to Stephenson Ashford or with defence work in general?" I ask, remembering how many long nights and weekend evenings Rosie's been pulling because she wants to work at that firm.

"In general."

Shirtless, sweaty and with a pronounced belly, Oliver resembles a plastic buddha.

"So would you recommend it to him?" Boris says.

Oliver's belly deforms as he swallows a loud swig of beer.

"Recommend what?" I ask.

"Private civil practice," he says.

They both stare at me. "It's pretty good work," I say, wondering how I would fare as a criminal lawyer, arguing at bail hearings and criminal trials, trying to convince a judge to lower a sex offender's sentence, standing up in front of a jury and quoting from the constitution as if it's the word of a God whose presence has been expunged from our courthouses and minds, replaced by the all-knowingness and infallibility of another supreme being: the Supreme Court of Canada.

Really, I know squat about criminal law. "Civil certainly pays better," Boris says to Oliver, and they exchange devilish grins. "But Charlie knows all about that, having just settled a case worth some fine coin."

"How much?" Oliver asks.

"That's privileged."

Then "Shit!" Boris yells so suddenly I bounce in my chair, nearly spilling what's left of my beer. He leaps toward a pile of clothes by the pool, rips out a phone, explaining to us that he forgot to call a client, starts walking away to find some privacy, yells "Fuck!" even louder, and curses out his dead battery. "Guys, I need a phone here pronto."

Oliver shrugs. "Inside."

I retrieve mine and hold it out for Boris to take.

"May I use your phone?" Boris asks.

It's a bit of a strange question. "Sure," I say. "That's why I'm giving it to you."

"Thanks."

He snatches it and stalks away, disappearing eventually behind the pool house.

Oliver shifts in his chair. "So, how's Rosie doing these days? I see her in court sometimes, but she always looks like she's got more work than time to do it in."

"That's about right. She's pretty busy," I say.

After what seems like an hour of idle chatter with Oliver, Boris reappears. Red-faced, he hands me my phone, picks up his clothes and tells us he's got to fly. "Client's pissed, have to go to stroke his ego awhile." I feel the urge to ask which client, but Oliver's here and I don't want to spill any of Winterson's secrets, so I wish him luck instead. Oliver tosses him a beer for the road and waves. I sit by the pool, shooting the shit with Oliver for another thirty minutes, before the increasingly uncomfortable atmosphere becomes so oppressive I make up an excuse and leave. Driving back into the city, I tell myself that Oliver and I don't know each other, and that's the reason for our awkwardness, but even then I know that's not the truth. We come from different worlds, rich and middle class? Maybe. I don't want to think about it. I call Rosie like requested, and when I step through the apartment door dinner's almost ready. She lays it out for me like a royal meal. Emotionally, she remains distant. We discuss politics to avoid talking about reality. Dusk comes. Followed by Sunday night, which falls as cleanly as a guillotine.

I go to work early on Monday. Opening the firm's front doors several minutes before 7 a.m., I'm still tired after a sleep so heavy its weight lingers on my body, but at the same time I'm glad to be starting another week of activity. I stop in reception long enough to finish a yawn, smile and

say “good morning” to Amanda, who, seated behind the front desk with her Bluetooth headset already firmly positioned on her head, appears to have been here for hours. She types something into her computer, returns the greeting and says, “Mr. Winterson wants to see you in his office, Charlie.”

“Thanks, shoot me an email when he gets in.”

“He’s already in.”

That can’t be right. I glance at my wrist; I’m not wearing a watch. I glance at the clock hanging over one of the firm’s recently purchased pieces of local abstract art. Impossible. “*In* his *office*?” I ask, mostly to justify the dumb openness of my mouth.

She nods.

And I jog up the stairs to the second floor, where Winterson’s office overlooks the jewelry store on the opposite side of the street. We’ve had their business for over twenty years. That’s a factoid Winterson told me the day he hired me. I supposed then it was an acute lesson in loyalty. Now, despite the distance from the bottom of the stairs to Winterson’s office door being less than twenty metres, I imagine the various emergencies that could rouse Winterson sufficiently to get him here at the break of a Monday dawn. None make sense. Before walking in, I nonetheless compose myself and tell myself that whatever happens he’s also going to commend me on my performance on Tabatha Holdings.

“Shut the door,” Winterson says.

He’s standing at his desk, facing the far wall, with his hands hidden behind his back and his desktop monitor turned abnormally away from everything.

I can hear his breathing and the buzzing of his computer.

I close the door per his instructions.

“Sit,” he says.

I sit.

He inclines his head, looks at me from a spot somewhere above his bushy moustache and below his severe eyebrows, sighing shakes his head, and paces the full perimeter of his office, lined with diplomas, historical memorabilia and fishing trophies, before returning to the other side of his desk. He also sits. His leather chair exhales. Without a word, he next rotates the monitor to face me—I see the familiar logo and layout of YouTube—clicks his mouse and says, “This is on the internet.”

The video comes to life.

Pixels move.

But the video is not a video but a mirror, because what I see on the other side is myself. Except this other me, the YouTube me, is not sitting and watching himself, barely moving a facial muscle; the other me is holding a rum bottle and drinking, slurring his words, dancing, giggling over the mispronunciations of racial epithets, slanting his eyes, talking about sex, stripping off his clothes—

Winterson stops the video with a mouse click.

"Is that you?" he asks. His jaws grind together so hard his cheekbones threaten to distend his face.

The question is a formality. It's plainly me on the video. I know it, the beads of sweat leaking through the pores on my cheeks know it, and Winterson knows it. I can almost hear his teeth gritting.

"Yes."

"What the fuck were you thinking?"

I want to answer him, but I can't because I'm too busy staring at the frozen image on the monitor, staring at myself sitting on a bed decorated with scattered tulips. "Charlie, fuck."

"I'm sorry," I say.

I note the video is twenty-seven minutes long. I've only seen a fraction of it.

Even through a fuzzy memory, I know it gets worse.

Winterson rests his hands on his desk and slides them apart and toward me until he's leaning forward with his head a foot off the desk's surface. He looks up. He sighs. "I've been in here since four in the goddamn morning, dealing with this shit. Talking with the partners. Trying to figure out what to do. And not one of us has come up with an alternative. Not a single one. Can you come up with an alternative?"

"An alternative to what?"

I can pose formalities as questions, too. To be fired: it feels like someone froze my insides and lit a blowtorch next to my face. I expect, at any moment, to start bubbling.

"You caused harm to the firm, Charlie."

I babble another apology—

“Shut up!” Winterson booms, pushing himself off the desk, scattering his assortment of pens. “Don’t talk anymore. Shut up, sit still and listen. I like you, Charlie. I hired you because you were personable and had potential. You made clients comfortable. But now? Now you’ve made a public mistake. You’ve fucked up for the whole world to see. Whatever reputation you had, it’s shot. I don’t give a crap about how this video came about. Whether you don’t do shit like this or you do and make sure none of it sees the light of day is not my concern. It’s not the firm’s concern. But your reputation *is* the firm’s concern. Because your reputation is not just your reputation but *our* reputation. When we do good, you gain by association. And when you fuck up, Charlie, we lose by association. You know how long I’ve worked to build this firm. You know I won’t stand to lose face, directly or otherwise. I will not,” he says calmly, pausing for effect before exploding: “lose clients due to some junior associate’s Bacchanalia!”

He’s been rehearsing that line. I take that as my cue to stand up. As I do, Winterson squares up to me. “It disappoints me to have to say this. It truly does,” he continues.

So say it, I think.

He says nothing.

We stand like that for several elongated seconds before it hits me that he expects me to quit. I refuse in silence.

Finally, he shakes his head. “You’re fired, Charlie.”

The sweat on my skin freezes as the block of ice within me erupts with magma.

Winterson holds out his hand to me and for no good reason I shake it. At least I think I shake it. My whole body is shaking: at the firing, at the existence of the video, at those scattered, half dead tulips…

“You have the rest of the day to clean out your office. Leave your building keys with Amanda when you leave.”

As he releases my hand, Winterson does a quarter turn away from me and, apparently overcome with emotion, jerks his knuckles into his mouth with about as much subtlety as an amateur stage actor playing Hamlet for the first time.

I leave.

In my office, I shovel my belongings into several cardboard boxes and walk the cardboard boxes out the back door, to my car. It takes less than forty minutes. Whenever I pass a clerk or secretary in the hall, I drop my head. In shame? To avoid sentimentality? One of those. Otherwise, I take turns dragging my feet and rubbing my eyeballs, which I feel I’m inflating with each haggardly step. I must look bug-eyed, inhuman. The last time I leave the building, I leave through the front. Amanda says nothing but I can tell she knows. Amanda knows everything. She is the hub of all information. I hand her my building keys and wish her a pleasant day. She says

young people always have so many more chances. But she doesn't punctuate her sentence with my name, and that's how I know I'm not a lawyer with Winterson & Partners anymore.

I walk the length of parking lot, turn back, walk it again, and lock myself in my car with the windows closed. The temperature rises immediately. I could roast in here, but I push back my seat, open the door a crack and stare through the front windshield at the firm's building instead. I have a good view. I watch the lawyers park their cars and enter a place I no longer work at, and only gradually do I realise how hard my heart is beating. My pulse isn't high, just powerful. I punch the clock on the dashboard to its beat until the LCD display shuts off and no longer comes back to life. If someone looks my way, I sink in my seat and pretend not to exist. Who cares if they see me or not, I think. But if that was true, I wouldn't be sinking down in the first place. I cannot refute my own argument. I win, I lose. I couldn't feel any worse. I see Boris' car stop on the street, put on its blinker and wait for opposing traffic to clear before pulling into the parking lot. I watch its spinning, sparkling hubcaps, its cheaply tinted windows, through which I see the outlines of two figures, and take note of where they park. Boris gets out of the driver's side. Oliver steps out of the passenger's side. He's laughing. Boris is talking. I can't hear his words, just a faint, monotonous drone peppered with nasally chortles. In one angry motion, I stab the ignition with my car key, turn the engine, and shoot out of the parking lot in the direction of Rosie's apartment building.

A car honks—

And I punch the break with my foot.

That's the extent of my pissed off, who-dares-wins attempt at reckless driving. With the Winterson & Partners sign still in my rear-view, I exhale and merge politely with traffic.

I'm so disoriented, I mess up a route I've taken almost every day for over six months.

Approaching intersections, I say the colour of the light out loud because otherwise I'm afraid I'll drive straight through a red.

In the apartment building's parking lot, I park across two spaces, leave the car door open and run up the stairs, slipping twice to my knees, because I can't stand waiting for an elevator. I have no plan. I'm just mad, hurt, confused, and with no place else to go.

I sprint the length of the hall to our door.

But it's locked.

I unlock it.

I turn the knob, and push—

Right into a deadbolt.

“Rosie!”

No answer.

I rattle the door.

“Rosie! Let me in, please. I know you’re inside. I know you are.”

I bang the door open as far as the deadbolt allows and peek inside, contorting my body and craning my neck to get all the possible angles of sight.

“I’m sorry,” Rosie says.

I can’t see her but I back away, leaving the door open.

“Let me come in.”

“No.”

“Come on. Are you afraid?”

No answer.

“You’re afraid I’ll do something? Seriously, you’re out of your mind.”

Now I see her. She’s standing a dozen feet away, in the living room. There doesn’t seem to be anyone else inside. “It sounds like you’re out of yours, Charlie.”

I ignore that. “Why’d you do it?” I ask.

She returns my ignoration.

I try a different tack. “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?”

Nothing.

I inhale, and scream “I love you!” at the opening in the doorway: through which I spy Rosie’s posture wilt.

“You don’t,” she says.

“I want to have kids with you, a family…”

She steps closer. I press my face nearer the door. We’re maybe three feet away from each other. At any moment, I expect her to slide the deadbolt out and let me into our apartment.

But she doesn't. "You're a fool."

Now it's my turn to be silent. She continues, "And if you ever thought we'd have that, you've no business being in a courtroom or representing a client, because you'd only be a gullible liability to them. I'm thirty-seven years old, Charlie. Do I have to spell it out for you? If I wanted kids, I would have had kids by now." Each of her words is a vice, every pause a pair of jaws. "You asked me why I did it. I'll spell that out, too. I'm a good lawyer. I care about my career. I can't have the kind of relationship you want because I don't care about the things you care about. Our priorities are vastly different."

She keeps talking, but I no longer listen. It's not that I doubt her sincerity—I know she's being painfully honest—but the entirety of the conspiracy has thrust itself over my head like a burlap sack, dulling my senses. I fall against the wall, and drip to the floor. Rosie wanted to work at Stephenson Ashford but there wasn't a spot. Oliver was working there but wanted to work elsewhere, in civil practice. I was working in civil practice at Winterson's. Winterson couldn't be bought, hence my spot couldn't be got by money. However, it could be gained by reputation. By destroying mine, I vacated what was wanted by Oliver, who vacated what was wanted by Rosie, who traded me for the advancement of her career. Cold, efficient, professional.

"Charlie?"

"Yes."

"It wasn't personal. An opportunity presented itself and I took it."

"At my cost."

"I didn't upload the video," she says.

I rip the metaphorical burlap sack off my head. These attempts at legalistic justification are where I draw the line. "Maybe you didn't upload it, but you manipulated me and you embarrassed me, and you did it knowing the video *would* get uploaded."

"You willingly gave me your phone. You saw I was recording."

"I trusted you!"

Two people down the hall are staring at me. A middle-aged man and a little girl. He's holding a black garbage bag. She's holding his free hand. I suppose I *am* making a scene in an apartment building where rent's expensive and few scenes play out. Let them watch me:

Pound on the apartment door with my palm—

*Bang!*

Rosie instinctively jumps back.

“I loved you,” I say.

She brushes locks of hair out of her eyes. “In which case you made an elementary mistake,” she responds. “You became emotionally involved in a practical matter.”

“I’m not talking careers.”

“There’s nothing else to talk about.”

The man with the garbage bag takes two steps forward and asks if everything is OK.

“Everything’s alright,” I say, and ask Rosie, “So now what?”

“Now you leave.”

“I’ve got no place to stay.”

She sighs. “Surely if you graduated from law school you’re capable of paying for a hotel room and finding your own apartment. If not, stay with a friend. Email me the address and I’ll have your things delivered.”

I have no friends. I had Rosie, I knew Boris. I gave my phone willingly to him, too. He uploaded the video, sure, but he didn’t take it. Oliver only smiled and tossed me a beer. Winterson fired me. A convenient division of guilt made possible by a worldview saturated by theories of liability. I don’t want to be alone, not tonight.

“That’s it?” I ask.

I slap the door again. Harder this time.

“Don’t be pitiful, Charlie.”

“I’m sorry.”

For a second, I think the words are mine, but actually they belong to the man with the garbage bag. “I’m sorry,” he repeats, “but I do believe the woman wants to be left alone. I don’t know where you’re from, but around here we find this type of loud and violent behaviour unwelcome and upsetting.” The little girl holding his hand has brown eyes the size of mini-CDs. “If you don’t leave, I will make a call to the police.”

“I am leaving,” I say rather ostentatiously to Rosie.

I remember last Christmas, how magical it was, how delighted and welcome I felt, and I want those feelings back. There’s even a cancerous part of me that still desires nothing more than to make Rosie smile. I observe her face through the space between the door frame and the door. Then I reach deep inside myself and cut that cancerous part out. I throw it on the floor. I stomp

on it. “I don’t hate you,” Rosie whispers. “I know you must think I do, but I don’t. Do something with your life. Find what you love and make it great.”

“Goodbye, Rosie.”

Passing the man holding the garbage bag, I feint and he drops his garbage to cover his face in anticipation of a blow that never comes. The garbage spills onto the floor. I hope the guy’s married. I hope his wife is cheating on him. “Fucking Chink.”

Before I get to my car, my phone rings.

I accept the connection, ready to explode at whoever has the indecency to call me at a time like this, when I hear: “Morning, dude. How’s my favourite lawyer doing today?”

It’s Frank Delaney. “I… uh…”

“You ‘uh?’ Well, that’s boring. Better spill the beans about that big settlement meeting you had on Friday. Did you kill ‘em? Did you grab ‘em by their throats, electrocute their balls, rub their snotty noses in their own senses of entitlement and force them to sign on the dotted line?” He clears his throat. “Or whatever it is that goes down during these fucking things.”

“I got the settlement,” I say.

“That’s ace!”

“And how’s your hand, Mr. Delaney?”

“Bloody, painful, still attached to my arm. It’s healing.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Charlie, be honest. Are you really glad? Because you sure as shit don’t sound like it.”

I reach my car. Nobody stole anything despite the door I left open. Not that I any longer have anything worth stealing. “I’m sorry, Mr. Delaney, but I have to go.”

“Spot a juicy ambulance?”

“I…” I jump up on the hood of my car, recline, and with a burst of outraged brevity usually reserved for my best Statements of Claim, I tell Frank Delaney everything. I lay it out bare. It’s not a confession, but it sure feels like one, and when I’m done I feel both exhausted and expunged. Through the silence that follows, I wait impatiently for the one sentiment I’m desperate to hear, that I so selfishly crave above all else.

“Damn. That’s rough. Those cunts,” Frank Delaney says.

I need this.

“They fucked you over.”

Sympathy. Being told I’ve been wronged. Knowing that someone cares about and understands my side of the story. It fills with me energy, and I don’t care how temporary or superficial it is. I see the world sharply again. I get off the hood of my car, stand on the asphalt and realise that for the first time I know exactly what it’s like to be the voice on the other end of the telephone call, the nail biter waiting in reception to complain to a lawyer about the injustice done to him and seeking to be made whole. I always knew what the client needed. Now I also know what he wants; and how easy and disgusting it is to take advantage of that to make money.

“Have you planned your next move yet?”

“Not yet.”

I hear the crumple of paper, a drawer closing, footsteps. “And this video they got, think you can get it taken down?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m poison,” I say. “No firm in the city will take me on.”

“So try a different city.”

“Maybe.”

“Hey, Charlie?”

“Yes, Mr. Delaney?”

“Call me Frank. Also, you have to get those fuckers back.”

I stay quiet. “Revenge,” he clarifies. “If they want to play life by business rules, we’ll play life by business rules. How lucky for you that I’m a businessman, eh? Listen, you ever hear of Vlad the Impaler? Actually, you know what? Never mind.” He gives me an address. “Meet me here in an hour. Just make sure you’re not being tailed.”

He hangs up before I can decide if he’s being serious or deadpan, but the address is legitimate. I look it up on Google Maps. It’s in an industrial district and looks to be some kind of storage complex. Because I figure I’ve got nothing left to lose, I start the engine and go.

Frank Delaney is already waiting when I arrive. He waves to me with his bandaged hand, which thankfully is no longer stained with blood, and I pull up slowly, taking in the landscape of low, long buildings, before stopping my car beside his. There’s not a third person in sight. I could have driven to the moon or into the post-apocalypse, for all I know.

“Your old office,” he says. “Can you still get inside?”

I've already handed over my key, but Winterson did say I have until the end of today to get my belongings. "I should be able to," I say. The "Why?" is implied.

"Great."

I follow him down an alley between two rows of numbered storage buildings to #11. Like its neighbours, #11 is divided into a dozen sections, A through L. Frank Delaney kneels before C, inputs a code, unlocking its orange, garage-like door, and pulls the door up—revealing: shining guns mounted on a wall rack.

My bones stiffen.

Before I can say a word, he ducks into the storage shed, removes one of the guns and points it at the wall.

"Frank," I manage to say.

Even if I wanted revenge, which I'm not sure I do, because I'm not sure of anything other than wanting to be told I've been cruelly mistreated in the Holy Trinity of love, friendship and employment, I surely don't want this flavour of it. Whatever Frank Delaney's planned, it's insane. Events have blown by me and are rocketing farther and farther forward, leaving me alone and behind. I need a place to stay, for Christ's sake, not a weapon!

"Watch this, Charlie." He pulls the trigger.

The gun barrel spits out a metal shaft topped with a white flag that unfurls lazily, revealing the message "Bang!"

My skeletal systems remains intact.

"Ever been to The Joke's On Us downtown?" Frank Delaney asks, pushing the shaft back into the gun. It resists.

"I don't think so."

"It's a gag store I bought into a few years ago. The owner, Bob Bittlesworth, keeps his excess merchandise here," he says, finally succeeding in returning the fake gun to its natural state. He hangs it back in its place. "Bob's got some real gems stashed here. Some of them not exactly legal. But, cross my heart and hope to die, I believe we'll find exactly what you're looking for." That's unlikely, because I don't know what I'm looking for, but I don't say that and, instead, let Frank Delaney show me object after silly object. He explains the use of each in tender detail: from the obvious, like stink bombs, to the more technologically advanced, like tiny speakers that moan in sexual ecstasy, as if you're watching porn. I'm relieved he doesn't want me to threaten, injure or kill anyone. In the end, I leave storage shed #11C with a wide sampling of gadgets for what Frank Delaney calls "our first salvo against the enemy".

Armed with this weaponry of mischief, I approach Winterson & Partners.

It's fitting I don't remember the drive over here. I was on the moon, now I've stepped into a western. In my head, I'm wearing the white cowboy hat, and the black one, blown out of all proportion, rests crookedly on the building itself. Not only has Frank Delaney succeeded in sympathising with me but he's also infected me with his boyish exhilaration of life. Truthfully, I don't know what the fuck I'm doing. I've been an automaton since last seeing Rosie's face, but automatism is a valid criminal defense in many common law jurisdictions, including Ontario, where it complicates the mens rea, or guilty mind, which along with the actus reus, the guilty act, is necessary to prove guilt. There are exceptions. We are speaking of the law, after all. The law excepts: this is the law. And I, of the white hat and fart spray in my pockets, am merely its humble servant, the lawman, whose justice shall be done to the tune of an Ennio Morricone score playing in my head…

"Good afternoon, Charlie," Amanda says to me in reception.

The music stops.

Immediately, I sheepen.

"You already returned your keys. Are you here to see someone or did you forget something?" Perhaps she spies something unusual in my eyes, because she continues in a less formal and more maternal tone, "Talk with me a minute, hun." She takes off her headset. She stands. We're both standing, and she's so much shorter than I am but she commands my attention. I take my hands out of my pockets out of fear of accidentally setting off a moan or an unpleasant odour. "Will you listen to a story?"

I nod, certain she's figured me out. But how?

"Really, it's not even a story. It's about my sons. You've seen them, right?" I have. They're big, wide guys who play football on college scholarships in the States. "And you also see me. Long ago, I stopped being able to force my sons to do what I want. You can't scare seventh grade six-footers with an ear pulling if you can't reach their ears. That would be ridiculous. Yet I couldn't let them do what they wanted. That would have been irresponsible parenting. So do you know what I did?"

"You reasoned with them?"

Amanda's phone rings. She picks up, does her standard greeting, and puts the call on hold. She moves her attention back to me. "No, Charlie. If I was good at reasoning, I would've become a lawyer. Besides, reasoning usually answers the question: what can I get away with? Sometimes you can get away with things you shouldn't be doing. Life's not always about consequences. When my sons were acting in a way I thought was wrong, I asked them merely to consider how their actions reflected who they were. Because unless you stop living, you can get rid of everything you own, end all the relationships you have, and move half way around the world to start over, but the one thing you can't leave behind is yourself. So even when I couldn't reach

high enough to smack my sons upside their heads, I could still ask them: is this who you are. Is this who *you* are, Charlie?"

Her eyes are drills. "I'm a lawyer," I say.

"That's what you do, not who you are."

But what we do is a fundamental part of who we are. It's shorthand for class, education, erudition, and a hundred other categories. Actions, the saying goes, speak louder than words. Though not all actions are dictated by our jobs, and that I'm a lawyer does not mean I have to act lawyerly in every sphere of life. And there *are* other spheres. Rosie was right to draw the border at the apartment door. Here the job ends, and private life begins. In theory. In practice, she became synonymous with her legal sphere, which obliterated her private life and encased her like a bubble. I don't want to be like that. My mind's a mess, but Amanda's question cuts gracefully through all the gunk sliding down its walls. I answer more forcefully than I expect:

"I don't know who I am."

"Then it's best you figure it out before committing."

That night is the first night I spend sleeping in my car—or, more accurately, tossing and turning while parked next to the curb. The seat makes an uncomfortable bed, and I could easily afford a hotel room, but the dimestore romance of being on the street is too much to pass up. It's an experience, a story to tell, and I need those in my life. Of course, the romance is tinged with reality. I'm finished as a lawyer and it's easier to repeat that I don't want to be one, leaving on my terms, than to accept that I can't be one, at least not now and in this city. But that doesn't change the outcome. At some dark hour of the early morning, as I'm flitting between dreams and cramped wakefulness, unsure if I'm out of job and out of Rosie or suffering a nightmare, I remember my dad's upcoming birthday and make the decision to go home early. Home, I think, is a flexible concept. Since January, Rosie's apartment was my home. I've regressed to an earlier definition, rolled back to a older version of myself. Am I a child again? Was I ever an adult? To visit my parents, to see Quarterville again after psychologically cutting myself off from both—to go home early: I sleep on the idea.

The dawnlight, however, changes nothing. I use bottled water to wash my eyes, then buy a full tank of gas and hit the highway. I try calling Rosie once while I'm still within city limits. She doesn't answer. She's probably still asleep. It's early. The road is clear. I turn on the radio and listen to music for a while. At around nine I call my mom. I have plenty of fabricated explanations ready for when she asks why I'm on my way, but I don't need them. "Of course you can come today. Of course you can stay here," she says, her voice unable to mask her enthusiasm. She covers the receiver with her hand and calls out to my dad, "Beaver's coming home!" Then, back to me: "You didn't have to call to ask. This is your place as much as ours, and it always will be."

That leaves one more call to make.

For this one, I stop at a service station. My hands tremble as I dial the number. Winterson's voice booms, but only in my imagination. He's not the one I'm calling. "Hello?" Mrs. Johnson says.

"It's Charlie." Birds fly overhead. "I'm not going to be your lawyer anymore."

"What?"

"I'm no longer at the law firm. Someone else will take your case. They should get in contact within a week or two, but if they don't, you get in contact with them."

"Charlie, what happened?"

"It's not important, Mrs. Johnson."

"Jeez, I can't say I was expecting this. I don't know if I like it. What if this new lawyer ain't up to snuff."

"Mrs. Johnson," I say, "may I tell you something as a friend?"

"Shoot, Charlie."

I remember Frank Delaney's toy guns. I'll have to pay him for all his stuff I never used.

"Don't proceed with the lawsuit. Don't mortgage your house, don't sell your assets. When Winterson's talks to you, tell them you want to end it."

"I don't know… I've already spent so much money. Those experts, and your fees…"

"The hospital won't settle and you'll lose at trial."

"But you said we had such a good chance. Thirty percent of one, you said. And we could win so much money. Charlie, you know I'm hardly drowning in savings. And Jack. It would help out a lot if we won."

"Thirty percent is a ghost," I say. "It's a number pulled from the air. Even if it's true, which I doubt, that's a seventy percent chance of losing."

"So you lied to me?"

I don't know. "Yes, I lied."

A stretch of silence separates me from Mrs. Johnson, who is no longer my client and was never my friend, and I struggle to conceptualise our relationship. We are strangers.

She hangs up.

I try the number again. No luck. I get out of my car and stretch, pushing my arms toward the July sky. My body crackles, complaining about how I've treated it. At the same time, the sound reminds me of eggshells breaking. I have a craving for pancakes. Although I may not know who I am, I have an idea of who I want to become, and that's a start. I get back in the driver's seat and turn the ignition. Ever since I knocked out the dashboard clock, the engine's been purring like a kitten. Coincidence? Undoubtedly. I return to the flow of the highway. Traffic's picking up and I've hours of driving left to go. My stomach makes itself known and, for once, I can hear it clearly over the rumblings of my other noisy companion: my conscience.

Perhaps it knows I'm heading home. Perhaps it's not so broken yet.

I am optimistic.

I will put myself back together again.

But there are hundreds of cars on the highway and in each sits a person just like me. My optimism wavers. I am not alone. I am in competition with these other drivers. We all want to be ourselves, whole and happy, but there is a limited, shared pool of the materials we can use achieve this universal goal. Jobs, friends, apartments, lovers, money. We need, want and are these things, and my supply of them is dangerously low. My tank is almost empty and all the positive thinking in the world won't fill it with anything but illusions.

Ahead, a car's hazard lights blink at me from the paved shoulder of the highway.

I'm in a fix.

Reality is an axeman.

Over the the past four days, I've lost everything: my love, my job, my professional future. Sleeping in my car for a night and vowing to change who I am is fine. Returning home is fine. But they're not answers to the one question that's tethered to my brain, the one that comes flying back, unsatisfied, each time I smack it with an idea. It's a question I already posed to Rosie through the open sliver of our apartment door. She answered purely for herself. "Now you leave," she said. Now I keep trying to answer for myself.

And I can't.

The axeman lifts his weapon above his head.

He, too, is waiting for the answer. He says or I say: "So now what?"

## Attributions

Thanks to flickr user emilykneeter, whose photo "suburban sunsets" I used to make the book cover. Because she's an awesome photographer, you should also check out her website.