

Collected Short Stories: Volume I  
by  
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## Heathcliff

Saturday morning, the forest ranger in the pea-green uniform sauntered into Ryan's Diner as she did most workdays. She took a stool at the counter away from the other customers and sat staring at her raggedy fingernails. Seventeen year old Shawn Mariano, who worked weekends during high school and an occasional evening shift when one of the regular waiters called out sick, eyeballed the woman. Flaxen hair fell down over her forehead in tight, curlicue ringlets. The nose was broad and fleshy but not offensively so; the lips, thick and shapeless, eased quite naturally into an earthy, ever-so-slightly vulgar smile. The alabaster skin, perhaps her most disarming feature, was flawless with a translucent sheen. Strikingly beautiful or physically repulsive – which was it? Maybe a little of both.

"This one's yours," Trudy Falcone, a forty year old brunette who normally worked the counter and booths near the front entrance, muttered under her breath and disappeared abruptly into the kitchen. The twosome, Trudy and the ranger, had exchanged words earlier in the week and the waitress, who had a reputation for being a foulmouthed, practical jokester, came away on the short end of the stick. Since the verbal altercation, she treated the ranger like she had a terminal case of leprosy.

The day of the incident, the lithe blond ate breakfast quietly enough. But then as she was paying the tab she whispered something in Trudy's ear causing the waitress to alternately flush scarlet then blanch a ghostlike chalky white. Still trembling noticeably, Trudy got the woman's change and laid it on the counter. The forest ranger leisurely sipped at her coffee for a good ten minutes longer before scooping the money up, every penny, leaving no tip. "Stinking bitch!" Trudy hissed once the ranger was out of earshot. "Rotten, scummy whore!"

When one of the other girls tried to comfort her, Trudy ran off and barricaded herself in the bathroom. It was never made clear what the blond-haired ranger with the squat nose and platinum, Shirley Temple curls said or why the normally staid, middle-aged waitress blew a mental gasket.

"Can I help you?" Shawn asked.

"Cup of coffee and breakfast special."

"How do you want your eggs?"

"Over easy. Whole wheat toast." She raised her eyes but only slightly, never quite making eye contact. Shawn scribbled the order down and went off to get the coffee.

The diner was three-quarters full with townies and local merchants. They could get raucous and rowdy even this early in the morning, but when the food came the ranger ignored the local yokels, eating hunched over her plate. Ten minutes later, she paid her bill, swept all the loose change off the counter and disappeared out the door like a mirage.

"That weirdo gone?" Trudy had emerged from hiding. Shawn shook his head up and down. "What did Mrs. Rockefeller leave for a tip?"

"What she always leaves," Shawn replied.

"It figures."

“Do you think she’s attractive?”

“Her?” The heavysset waitress gawked at him as though the teenage boy had lost his mind. “That woman’s ugly as sin!”

“Don’t you think that’s a bit extreme?”

Trudy’s lips twitched derisively. “If you’re into dykes or the unisex, Peter Pan look, she’s the real deal.”

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The following Saturday morning the blonde forest ranger shuffled into the diner and eased down on a stool. As if on cue, Trudy ran off to make small talk with a waitress working the main dining room. “Coffee black. Eggs over easy and whole wheat toast,” Shawn said, repeating from memory her previous order.

She tilted her head to one side and studied him with a humorless expression. “Yeah, that’ll do.”

He went off to retrieve the coffee. “You’re with the forestry department?” Shawn arranged a napkin and place setting on the counter.

“Down in Pemberton.”

“What do you do exactly?”

Her eyes grazed his face like he was an inanimate object, part of the Ryan’s Diner bucolic décor. The ranger sipped at the hot liquid tentatively then added a spoonful of sugar. “Keep tabs on Mother Nature.” The terse reply wasn’t intended as a joke. Shawn didn’t know what to make of the odd creature.

When the food arrived, the girl never looked up. She ate with a focused intensity, pushed the plate away as soon as she was finished and reached for her wallet. “The Pemberton Wild Life Preserve,” she said when Shawn returned with the change, “that’s where I work. There’s a slatted walkway that extends three hundred feet out into the wetlands sanctuary with beaver dams, turtles, fox and small game, if you ever care to visit.” She swept the change off the counter and disappeared back out into the dusky, early morning light.

No, Shawn didn’t think he would care to visit. Not now, not ever. The woman unnerved him. The way she talked in that flat-as-a-pancake, gravelly monotone made his skin crawl. Her pretty-ugly face never offered up a shred of emotional warmth or human sympathy. As long as that woman was caretaker of the Pemberton Nature Preserve, he wouldn’t be visiting any time soon.

“I seen you commiserating with Pearl,” Hugh Duffy, the short order chef remarked when Shawn took a break around ten o’clock after the breakfast crowd had petered away. In response to the boy’s blank expression, Hugh added, “The knuckle-dragging Forest Ranger.”

“Where do you know her from?”

“Went to high school together.” Hugh sprinkled a generous dusting of paprika on a pile of home fries simmering on the grille. “Pearl’s father ran off when she was just a kid. Family lived in a ramshackle, sardine can of a house over by the railroad tracks - just her and the old lady. The mother dropped dead a few years back, so now Pearl resides there all by her lonesome.” The cook cracked a couple of eggs onto the grille and reached for a slab of Canadian ham.

“What was she like in high school?” Shawn asked.

“Same as now... kept to herself. Didn’t hardly talk to no one, which was no great loss.” He chuckled evilly. “I don’t think the girl ever owned a bar of soap. Her junior year, as I remember, they sent her home one day, cause she smelled like a sanitation truck in late August.”

“Trudy can’t stand her.”

Hugh flipped the eggs and checked the ham which was browning nicely. “Don’t know nothing about that,” he returned, “but I do know the woman’s got a wicked, homicidal temper.” He shifted the eggs to a plate and spread a generous dollop of butter on two slices of cinnamon raisin toast. Stacking the toast together, he cut at a diagonal. “You’ll want to steer clear of that wild woman,” the cook cautioned. “Nothing good can come of it.”

“Thanks,” Shawn mumbled weakly and went back to his position at the counter.

Before his shift ended, Shawn stopped by the kitchen. “What’s Pearl’s last name?”

Hugh looked up from the hot surface. “Singleton. Pearl Singleton.”

“Did she have a boy friend in high school?”

The cook rolled his eyes and made a dramatic flourish with the chrome spatula. “Couple guys asked her out, but she wouldn’t have anything to do with the opposite sex. Probably a lesbian, judging by the woman’s edgy disposition around guys.”

Shawn rubbed his jaw. “You think she’s good looking?”

Hugh paused to rub the sweat from his face with the front of his soiled apron. “Pearl Singleton’s no Marilyn Monroe, but, yeah, she’s wicked cute in a slutty sort of way.” The cook’s head bobbed up and down and he smirked at his clever choice of words. “Not that it does us horny heathens any good.”

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The next day it snowed all morning well into the afternoon. “Your father’s working late,” Mrs. Mariano announced as Shawn came through the front door. “Maybe you could tidy things up so he doesn’t have to kill himself when he gets home tonight.”

“Okay.”

“It’s quite cold. Don’t go back outside like that.” She pointed to his flimsy jacket. “Always dress in layers.”

Shawn went to his room and draped a sweatshirt over a cotton shirt. Back in the foyer, he pulled his warmest winter coat from the hall closet. “Much better!” His mother shook her head approvingly.

Out in the shed, he primed the Ariens two-stage snow blower, adjusted the choke and press down on the electric starter button. The engine coughed, sputtered, belched, burped spastically and gave up the ghost. He primed the engine a second time with more gasoline and the bright orange machine fired up. Backing the snow blower out of the shed, Shawn cut a path toward the driveway hurling the heavy snow thirty feet across the lawn in a shimmering arc.

Always dress in layers during the winter months. He was perfectly warm despite temperatures hovering in the low twenties. Mrs. Mariano had dozens of clever maxims and cautionary injunctions.

You’ll have plenty of time for you-know-what with you-know-who when you’re finished with college. That was another one of her favorite dictums. You-know-what was an unambiguous euphemism for sex, lechery, debauchery, lust, wanton depravity, lewd and

lascivious behavior. Shawn was unclear if his mother was speaking from personal experience or idle speculation. Every so often, he heard the bedsprings creaking unnaturally loud two doors over. There were never any accompanying noises, only the rhythmic rasping of the queen-size mattress. Kachunk. Kachunk. Kachunk. Kachunk. Kachunk. No groans, moans, whimper, sighs or passionate terms of endearment. In the morning his parents didn't look or act any different.

The previous July, a friend from the varsity baseball team fixed Shawn up on a blind date with his seventeen year-old cousin. After the movie let out, they grabbed something to eat and, later still, went parking in the woods. The girl was passably pretty. She let him touch her privates. She had bad breath, a god awful, garlicky halitosis, such that every time she moaned in ecstasy, Shawn thought he might pass out from the stench.

At the top of the driveway, the snow blower busted a shear bolt on a scrap of lumber buried in a knee-high snowdrift. Trudging back to the shed, Shawn located a pair of pliers and a replacement bolt. Standing the snow blower on its side, he wiggled the broken pin from the auger shaft and inched the new one through the mating holes. He had to remove his gloves while tightening the nut and his frostbitten hands were burning. Putting his gloves back on, he brushed the snow off his pants, fired up the engine again and made the first pass down the length of the driveway.

Just before he left work earlier in the day, Trudy cornered him over by the cash register. "That obnoxious forest ranger's got no class, no social graces."

"Okay," Shawn muttered. The waitress was pathologically obsessed.

"Come back here fifty years from now," Trudy was pointing at the stool that Pearl Singleton had been warming with her derriere seven hours earlier, "and she'll be sitting there wrinkled as a dried up prune and drooling into her home fries."

Since the same could be said about any of the customers who frequented Ryan's Diner, the gratuitous remark made no sense. Pearl Singleton never knew her father, grew up in grinding poverty and witnessed a mother die young. Social graces - it was miracle enough she crawled out of bed each morning. Of course, that wasn't what Trudy wanted to hear. "What you got against her anyway?"

"She's a hateful, vindictive bitch!" The middle-aged woman's chest heaved with rage. "What else you need to know?"

"Nothing," he said meekly. Whatever unspeakable atrocity Pearl had committed, Trudy wasn't going to spill the beans.

The woman in the pea-green uniform was loutish and low class. But she was pretty as hell. Shawn would give a hundred blind dates with teenage babes suffering from chronic halitosis and loose morals for one romantic romp with Pearl Singleton. But that wasn't going to happen. She had that 'settled' look of a twenty-something with a full-time job, domestic obligations and grownup responsibilities. About the time Shawn would be even remotely in a position to do you-know-what with you-know-who, Pearl Singleton would have slipped inelegantly away into her early thirties.

A large truck with a V-shaped plow rumbled onto the street just as Shawn finished his final pass with the snow blower. Wheeling the machine back to the shed, he grabbed a shovel to clear away the icy debris that the plow left barricading the front of the driveway.

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The first Tuesday in March, the teaching staff at Brandenburg High School took a professional day; students got to sleep late and do as they pleased. Shawn rose early and was moving briskly in the direction of the front door when Mrs. Mariano flagged him down. "Where're you off to this early in the morning?"

"Down the Cape to a nature preserve."

Mrs. Mariano turned to her husband who had just entered the room with a newspaper tucked under his arm. "In this weather, your son's on his way to Cape Cod so he can visit a nature preserve."

Mr. Mariano shrugged and glanced out the bow window. "The sun's shining and it's not really that cold out."

"You see how he's dressed," his wife was not to be denied, "with that flimsy coat and no hat or gloves?"

"If it makes you happy," Shawn countered, "I'll go back upstairs and grab some extra clothing." He disappeared and returned a moment later with a woolen sweater and stocking cap.

"What's down the Cape?"

"I already told you. There's a wilderness preserve with a three hundred foot walkway that extends out into the wetlands."

"Who are you going with?"

"Nobody. I'm driving down alone."

"To look at trees and soggy marsh in the middle of winter?"

"The winter is over."

"How much money you got?"

"I got a full tank of gas and plenty of money."

Mrs. Mariano looked for support from her husband, but he was already curled up on the sofa perusing the sports section. "In case of emergency, do you at least have your cell phone?"

"Yes I have it."

"Show it to me."

Shawn fished his cell phone from a back pocket and held it up in the air. "I'll see you later this afternoon." He fled out the door before his mother could mount a rebuttal.

Shawn located Pemberton State Forest three miles before the Bourne Bridge spanning the Cape Cod Canal in Buzzards Bay. He followed a ribbon of asphalt another three-quarters of a mile until he reached a rustic parking lot then picked his way down a gravel path to a swampy bog. The air smelled of pine and acrid clay. The sun was shining but the temperature hadn't drifted much above freezing. Remnants of the last wintry storm were evident in the murky wooded areas where snow and ice still lingered embedded in a spongy mat of decaying leaves and coppery pine needles. Only a small handful of diehard birdwatchers and nature enthusiasts were out on the narrow walkway that snaked into the chilly bog. A burst of frigid air cuffed his cheek as Shawn pulled his collar up around his neck.

"Should have brought a warmer coat." On a granite outcropping near a rough-hewn cedar bench, Pearl was leaning against a leafless oak. She wore her wide-brimmed ranger's hat and dark green winter jacket over her forestry uniform.

Shawn smiled. "Who's in charge of tours?"

Pearl climbed down from the rocky ridge. "I can take you out on the bog, if you like." The stony-faced woman didn't seem any friendlier, just less remote. She moved off in the

direction of the pressure-treated walkway leading out into the open wetlands. The harsh winter had beaten down all of the bright flowers and delicate plant life but Pearl pointed out some of the more robust species. “This rust-colored grass is called broomsedge. It grows all over the eastern United States in narrow clumps that can reach upwards of forty inches. In the summer, the young plants don’t look anything like this.”

“How’s that?”

“They’re bright green,” Pearl explained. Further along she pointed out some bishop’s weed, which was in the carrot family even though the leaves were quite flat and broad. Although the delicate ferns had, for the most part, died away by early winter, there were six species – maidenhair, ostrich, sensitive, cinnamon and royal – that Pearl could identify on sight and point out to visitors during the sultry summer months. They were halfway out in the water now. She indicated a woody pile of debris eighty feet away. “A family of beavers lives underneath all those muddy branches.” There was nothing to be seen. Either the beavers were resting comfortably, hibernating or foraging elsewhere. “Sometimes I come out here, especially in the spring, and watch them going about their business.”

Back on dry land, Pearl said, “Are you in a hurry to get back?”

Shawn glanced at his watch. It was still early, but a fast-moving bank of clouds had scudded across the sky obliterating the sun and carrying off much of the late morning warmth. “What did you have in mind?”

Pearl lead the way down a gravel path to the bottom of a ravine then headed up a steep incline. When they reached the summit of the ridge, a huge wooden structure about a mile away and still higher up came into view. “That’s the fire tower. In the dry, late summer I pretty much live in that rooftop villa.” She struck out across the rock-strewn ground. Fifteen minutes later they reached their destination. “It’s raining,” Shawn noted. He wished he had brought his sweater. The temperature plummeted ten degrees as soon as the thickening clouds arrived.

A set of stairs lead to the upper level, which stood comfortably above most of the surrounding treetops. The door was secured with a thick security bolt. Pearl selected a brass key from a chain fastened to her belt and undid the lock. But for the spitting clouds, from their vantage point they would have been able to see all the way to the Cape Cod Canal and beyond.

“What’s that?” Shawn pointed at a transparent disk fastened to a table in the far corner of the room. A topographical map of the Cape region was laid out across the flat face of the device with two sighting apertures mounted above the map on opposite sides of the ring.

“It’s an Osborne Fire Finder. Rangers use it during the dry summer months to estimate distance to suspected fires so we can call in a smoke report.” Pearl grabbed the circular rim and rotated it back and forth then bent down and squinted into an eyepiece fixed on a vertical rod. “You adjust the rods until you can peek through the nearer sighting hole and view the crosshair as it aligns with the fire. The degrees on the graduated ring tell the exact location.” She stepped aside. “Here, see for yourself.”

Shawn placed his eye up alongside the viewfinder, shifting the sighting mechanism right-to-left along the horizon. “Yeah, I get it. Very clever!” Suddenly the heavens opened up in a torrential downpour. Rain pounded the fire tower roof, pummeling the shingles but the inside remained relatively dry. “What are you doing?”

Pearl was moving around the perimeter of the small room closing the shutters. “A stiff breeze is kicking up from the north over that hillock. It’s blowing the rain at an angle. Got to close things up before we get thoroughly drenched.”

“What about the other visitors?”

“There were only two carloads before you arrived, and I saw them heading for the parking lot when we were out on the water.” She didn’t seem particularly concerned with the weather or much of anything else for that matter.

Five minutes later, they were huddled together on the wooden floor with the relentless rain lashing the fire tower. The room would have been pitch-black but for small chinks in the shutters. “What’s the matter?” Pearl reached out and touched him on the shoulder. Shawn was trembling all over.

“I’m cold, that’s all.”

Always dress in layers during the winter months! He was thinking about the plump, woolen sweater he cavalierly tossed on the back seat of the Audi.

“Get in the sleeping bag,” Pearl barked gruffly.

“What are you talking about?”

“Over there in the far corner. I keep a down-filled sleeping bag for situations like this.” Pearl rose and located the sleeping bag beside the small table with the Osborne Fire Finder, unfurled it in the middle of the room and pulled back the flap. “Get in,” she ordered.

“What about you?” he protested through chattering teeth.

“I’m toasty warm. You’re the one who’s gonna end up with hypothermia.”

Shawn was too cold to argue. He crawled into the sleeping bag and pulled the zipper up tight. “This is so embarrassing!”

“Really?” Through the darkness he could just barely see Pearl Singleton’s beautiful-ugly smile – a smile that was half leer, half grimace. Stripping off her heavy jacket, she loosened the zipper and crawled in beside him. “How’s that?”

There was no immediate reply. Five minutes later, he said, “I’m warm now. Actually, it’s too hot.” The rain, which had let up, was still coming down in a fitful pitter-patter. He wasn’t shivering anymore and had regained his composure.

“You’re okay, then?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

He felt her shifting around in the tight confines of the bag to face him. She put a hand on his chest and kissed his cheek. “I had my tubes tied.”

“What?”

“When my mother passed away a few years back, I went to the free clinic and had my fallopian tubes surgically tied off so I wouldn’t get pregnant.” Pearl Singleton had told him about a carrot that didn’t look very much like an edible carrot. She identified six species of wetland ferns that favored different degrees of light and shade. She showed him where the beavers lived and how to operate an Osborne Fire Finder. And now this. Shawn felt her hand caressing his cheek with no great sense of urgency.

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Shawn awoke buck naked. Lying next to him in the cozy warmth of the down sleeping bag, Pearl Singleton was also in a similar state of undress. It was six o’clock at night and the sun, which had reemerged after the violent storm, was quickly losing its strength and fading to dusk. “We ought to leave,” Pearl said, “before it gets totally dark.”

Shawn could smell her body, a sour, musky-sweet odor that affected him like caffeine. “You had words with an older woman who normally works the counter at the diner a few weeks back.”



“Oh, that one.” Her tone was abruptly dismissive.

Shawn reached out and fondled her smallish breasts, but she pushed his hand away. “What was that all about?”

Pearl snaked her calf around his leg pulling his body closer. He could feel the bristly pubic hair scratching his thigh. She leaned forward so that her lips brushed against his ear. “Every morning when I stopped by the diner for breakfast she’d greet me with ‘Good morning, Heathcliff!’, ‘How’s Miss Heathcliff doing today?’ or some similar, smart-alecky wisecrack.

“I wasn’t familiar with the Victorian writer, Emily Bronte, but an elderly lady behind the reference desk over at the public library got me a copy of *Wuthering Heights* from the stacks. I went home and read it from cover to cover.” She paused to collect her thoughts. A frosty stream of air puffed from her lips like cigarette smoke when she said, “I hadn’t cried since my mother passed away three years ago last August, but I lay on my bed and wept like a baby thinking what a dirty bit of nastiness that waitress laid on me.

“The next time I stopped by Ryan’s Diner for breakfast, I held off until I was ready to pay the check. Then I told that woman in a saccharine-sweet, little-girl voice that we have three distinct species of pine siskins living in the Pemberton Nature Reserve. Each bird feeds off a different variety of pine tree and their beaks are shaped differently to extract seeds from the cones.

“I told her that I recently found a full-grown siskin with a broken wing curled up under a tree. The accident must have just happened, because the injured bird was still warm and bright eyed.” Pearl ran a tongue over her top lip. “The bird was defenseless against predators and the frigid temperatures. Either way it was going to die a miserable death so, to put the injured bird out of its misery, I grabbed it up in both hands and snapped its neck, twisting in opposite directions.” Pearl nuzzled his ear with her lips. “I told the wise-ass waitress at Ryan’s Diner that the next time she made another Heathcliff crack I was going to come around her side of the counter and wring her scrawny neck just like the pine siskin.”

Retribution. That’s what Pearl handed Trudy. It was just another word for payback – a fair and impartial reckoning of accounts. Trudy thought she could mock the woman with her malicious banter, but the spunky blonde – in typical Heathcliff fashion - gave as good as she got.

Pearl crawled out of the sleeping bag, ran nimbly about collecting her clothes and dressing as quickly as she could. She didn’t seem the least bit embarrassed. When they were both dressed, they left the tower and headed back in the direction of the parking area. “I want to see you again,” Shawn said when they reached the walkway leading out onto the water. The temperature was brisk but dry and, without the gnawing, bone-chilling dampness, the cold no longer bothered him in the least.

“What happened up in the fire tower was something to be cherished, but you shouldn’t go reading anything more into it.”

“Why did you get you tubes tied?” Shawn demanded softly.

The brim of her hat was pulled down over Pearl’s hazel-flecked eyes. “I had a lousy life... wouldn’t wish that wretchedness on my worst enemy.” She smiled bleakly. “Maybe that scummy wisecracking waitress, but no one else.”

“I want to see you again,” he repeated. “We could do something normal... Catch a movie or go out to eat.”

“Do something normal,” she picked up on the first part of his remark. “I don’t know that I’m a terribly normal person.” Lifting up on her toes she kissed his cheek. “Get in your car before we freeze to death. I’ll follow you out to the main road.”

Ten minutes later Shawn pulled up to the gas pumps at a Dairy Mart. In the store he handed the clerk a twenty dollar bill. “Pump three.” When the tank was full, he climbed back in the car and dialed a number on his cell phone.

“Where exactly are you?” His father spoke in a controlled monotone. Shawn could hear his mother sobbing loudly in the background.

“I’m still down the Cape. Be home in half an hour.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m perfectly fine.”

“You went to a nature preserve?”

“That’s right?”

“Where else did you go?”

“Nowhere.”

“So you’ve been in the forest communing with nature since ten o’clock this morning?” His father sounded more confused than angry.

“I got caught in the rainstorm and had to take shelter.”

“Your mother wanted to call the police and file a missing person’s report, but I talked her out of that.” There was a tense pause. “We will need to talk when you get home.” Mr. Mariano hung up the phone.

Well, that went relatively well! Shawn blew out his cheeks, massaged his face with his hands and went back in the store. A dozen hot dogs were rotating in slow motion on a self-serve electric grill near the soda dispenser. “How much are the jumbo, all-beef franks?”

“Two bucks each,” the clerk replied. He looked sleepy, bored as hell.

Shawn bought a drink and a hot dog which he slathered with mustard and relish. Wolfing it down in less than a minute, he bought another. The dark-haired youth behind the counter watched him eat with sleepy disinterest. “How’s your day going?”

Shawn washed the spicy meat down with a gulp of cherry Coke. “Actually, pretty good.” He wasn’t about to tell the fellow that he had just made love in a fire tower three miles down the road. It didn’t seem appropriate. “How about you?”

“I’m off-duty in twenty minutes.” The youth tossed a crumpled lottery ticket into the trash. “Quite a rainstorm we had earlier today.”

“Yeah, that was a doozy!” Back in the car, Shawn flicked the heater on high. The sign for Interstate 195 West loomed directly ahead as he depressed the directional.

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A medley of comforting odors percolated through the small restaurant when Pearl Singleton wandered into Ryan’s Diner and plopped down on a stool at the counter. The sugary scent of hickory-smoked bacon bubbling on the grill merged with that of glistening maple syrup slathered over stacks of silver dollar pancakes. The paprika, caramelized onions, thyme,

rosemary and basil emanating from the home fries and specialty omelets steaming on the grill hung in the air like a viscous, redolent fog. The forest ranger in the pea-green uniform placed her broad-brimmed hat on the stool next to her but thought better of it and balanced it on the topmost peg of the mahogany coat rack over by the pastry display.

Shawn Mariano approached. “Coffee?” She nodded once. He filled a mug and placed it on the counter. “Eggs over easy, home fries and whole wheat toast?” She responded in the affirmative with another head shake plus an unintelligible grunt.

He poured a small tumbler of ice water and pushed it alongside the place setting. “I’m in love with you,” he announced bleakly.

“What’d you say?” She never even bothered to raise her head.

“Let me place your order.” The boy went off to the kitchen. When he came back, he said, “It doesn’t matter to me that you can’t have children. Couples can always adopt.”

“Oh, Gawd!” she moaned.

“I want to see you again, but a real date this time. We could catch a movie or go out to a restaurant like normal people.”

“You already dropped that line on me down in Pemberton when we were getting ready to go our separate ways.” She laughed abrasively making an obscene snorting noise through her nose. “You’re a senior in high school, and I’m old enough to be your freakin’ mother.”

Shawn pointed in the direction of the kitchen where the short-order chef was cooking up the breakfasts. “Hugh says he went to high school with you, and he’s only six years older than me.” “My mother wants to meet you,” he said shifting gears.

Pearl put her fork down and stared at the yolk bleeding out onto the plate. “And why would that be?”

“I told my parents about us when I got home.”

“There is no us, Shawn,” she spoke purposefully weighing each word like a heavy stone. “You’re delusional.”

“What happened last week in the fire tower was a figment of my imagination?”

“You can’t blame me,” she bristled, “for acts of God and natural disasters.”

He went to retrieve the coffee pot and warmed her cup. “Did you see what just happened a moment ago?” Pearl stared at him dully. “You called me by my name. You said, ‘There is no us, Shawn’.”

There were tears in his eyes. “That’s the first time,” he blubbered, “you ever spoke my name.”

When the boy was gone, an older gent with a poorly-constructed set of false teeth and grizzled beard leaned across the counter. The man shook a gnarled finger menacingly at Pearl. “I don’t know what you did to that poor boy, but you got to be one sadistic son-of-a-bitch!”

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Just Like Dostoyevsky

The mason arrived late in the afternoon. He went to the jumbled pile of red bricks, snatched up a brick in his left hand and began tapping at the crusted mortar with an odd-looking hammer - too short to pound nail with, too narrowly-constructed and lightweight for any other, practical use. Tap. Tap. Tap. Broken cement and sand flew in every direction. Sylvia Mandelstam's twelve year-old daughter, Becky, tanned legs askew, was sitting on an undamaged section of the wall talking non-stop. Lean and wiry with a tuft of curly, brown hair skittering out from under a shapeless brown cap, the mason never lifted his eyes. Finishing the first brick, he knelt down and retrieved another.

Sylvia watched from the upstairs bedroom window for a while then went into the den to edit term papers. An hour later when she looked, he was standing in the same position chipping away only now a small pile of clean bricks lay neatly stacked to the right of where the truck had crashed through the wall the previous month. Becky was still straddling the wall carrying on an intense monologue. "Strange!" Sylvia muttered.

An oil truck caused the damage. As the driver rounded the turn off Hope Street, the left front tire blew out; the errant truck with its full load of number ten heating oil as added ballast careened onto the property, raking the wall, right-to-left, for a distance of thirty feet. The insurance company settled within days. Sylvia got the mason's telephone number from a small line ad in the Providence Journal:

*Mason and general handyman;  
no job too small;  
call Danny O'Rourke at ... .*

"Fixing the wall's no problem," the middle-aged man said in an amiable tone tinged with Irish brogue, "Late afternoons and weekends. Five hundred dollars. Everything."

The insurance company settled for fifteen hundred. "Yes, that seems fair enough."

Irish brogue. From an etymological standpoint, Sylvia understood the term to have several distinctly dissimilar meanings: a heavy shoe of untanned leather, formerly worn in Scotland and Ireland; a strong oxford shoe, usually with ornamental perforations and wing tips. She glanced at Danny O'Rourke's steel-toed construction boots. "When can you start?"

Tap. Tap. Tap. Chip. Chip. Chip.

By 7:30 the light was fading. In the yard, the monotonous, brittle sound of a snare drum solo gone slightly haywire drifted through the window. Sylvia pushed the heap of papers aside. Two hours he'd been at it without a break and after a full day's work elsewhere. Becky was in the den doing homework. Sylvia went downstairs and out the front door into the muggy, July warmth. "If you'd rather purchase new brick," she said approaching from the flagstone walkway, "I'll be happy to kick in the extra money."

The hand holding the hammer drop to his side, and he looked up with clear, brown eyes. "New brick won't match weathered." The chin was broad, Gaelic - cheeks wide, sloping toward a generous mouth. "No need to waste good brick. Another day or two, I'll have these cleaned up like new." He dropped the brick in his hand onto the soft ground. "I usually deal with the husbands," he said, collecting his tools.

"How's that?"

"When it comes to estimates and repairs."

Sylvia smiled and teased a crimson ladybug off the sleeve of her blouse. "The husbands," she repeated with a watery smile, as though the term held some exclusive, hidden meaning. "Even if he were still here," she said sardonically, "my ex-husband wouldn't understand what you're doing anymore than I do."

The mason did not react. His expression remained neutral, noncommittal.

Sylvia's ex-husband, Jason, had always been an incessant talker, a shameless self-promoter. When he bailed out of the marriage, he took with him the entire Coltrane collection - 25 CD's, including several hard-to-find, bootlegged European tapes - plus the white noise of his arrogance. After publishing several clever articles on post-modern, French literature, Jason ran off with a leggy, blonde coed. Now he held a full professorship at Rutgers where, academic rumor had it, he traded the blonde for a more supple-minded philosophy major a scant seven years older than his daughter.

Even in her prime, Sylvia could never keep track of her husband's dalliances. Short and plump hers was a muted, understated attractiveness. The legs were still shapely, but hadn't always been. She had to work at it.

"Your daughter, Becky, said you teach."

"Russian literature, at Brown."

He tossed his hammer - a double flip, end over end - and caught the handle effortlessly. An involuntary gesture, she had seen him do it a dozen times or more while he was working at the bricks. "Ever been to Russia?"

"Last year. An academic seminar in Moscow."

"Like it?"

"Yes, very much so," she lied effortlessly. "A thoroughly enjoyable experience."

Moscow airport. Bleak and dismal with atrocious lighting and Spartan furnishings. At the far end of the arrivals gate, a trio of frumpy babushkas dressed in white smocks were washing the floor. One woman with a nose like an onion leaned on a long-handled pole, a 12-inch T tacked to the end. A second woman fished a rag from a pail of filthy water, wrung the excess back into the bucket and hurled the limp cloth onto the floor.

Splat! With no great sense of urgency, the woman with the pole began pushing the mess back and forth redistributing the muck in a broad arc. Smoking an unfiltered cigarette, the third woman, presumably the crew chief, showed no interest in either the arriving foreigners or her workmates. They took a brief rest, chatted, gazed dully at the empty Aeroflot planes resting on the rutted tarmac and scratched their shapeless rumps before proceeding to the next patch of grimy floor.

Welcome to Moscow!

"Danny's nice," Becky shuffled into her mother's bedroom later that night as she was preparing for bed. A lithe version of Sylvia, Becky was often mistaken for an Israeli sabra; the olive skin and chiseled nose were patently Mediterranean. "Nice and available."

"You want me to marry a brick layer?"

"Date a few months then decide. Where's the harm in it?"

Sylvia brushed the fine, dark hair out of the girl's eyes. The faint outline of a training bra was visible beneath the summer-weight, cotton blouse. Not much flesh to support. If Becky was anything like her mother, another year or two, the meager mounds - more like hillocks - would need more than a flimsy training bra to hold them in check. Her daughter's lack of curves offered

little solace; it was the potential for curves that kicked Sylvia's maternal anguish into high gear. "What did you and Mr. O'Rourke talk about?"

"The man's no talker. Hardly said two words. Reminds me of that character in the Carson McCullers story."

"Which one?"

Becky took an emery board from her mother's night table and began shaping a nail. "The deaf mute."

Sylvia frowned. "I think you're blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction."

Becky smirked, a conspiratorial gesture. "Danny's never been married. I told him you were divorced."

Sylvia felt her face flush hot. "Must I remind you, Mr. O'Rourke is here to repair the wall. And from what little you've learned, it's clear we have absolutely nothing in common."

"Daddy's Jewish; he teaches at the university. Lot of good that did!"

"Touché," Sylvia replied and kissed her daughter lightly on the cheek. "I can assure you I will, not now or ever, go out with Mr. Danny O'Rourke."

The next afternoon the mason did not return. She had paid him half the money in advance as an act of good faith. Hadn't bothered to sign a formal contract or work out the fine details - cost of labor, materials, etc. An act of good faith? More like a colossal act of stupidity! When would she stop behaving like some ditsy divorcée and more like what she really was: a single mother, head-of-household?

Another day and no sign of Mr. O'Rourke. On Friday the battered pickup with the blown muffler pulled up in front of the house. The mason went directly to the busted wall and began cleaning and stacking bricks, lingering even later into the dusky light until all the bricks - even the damaged ones - were tidied and properly stacked.

The next day he arrived before 9 a.m. and began mixing mortar in a crusted wheelbarrow.

"Gonna be a scorcher." Sylvia came out to greet him. "Temperature's in the nineties."

The mason worked the gray sludge in a figure eight pattern with a garden hoe. "Threw in some lime," he said, indicating a bag of white powder in the rear of the truck, "so the mortar wouldn't set up too fast." He dumped a shovelful of fine sand into the soggy mix. "I'll rebuild the far column first, run a line and fill everything in between."

Other tools lay on the ground, odd-looking tools she hadn't noticed before: a long mahogany-colored level with a curved, yellow bubble, trowels, small wooden blocks, string and a strange-looking tool that resembled a twisted piece of scrap metal. "That," he saw her gawking at the bent rod, "is used for tooling joints. Keep moisture off." He threw the hoe aside and began working the thickening mass with a short-handled, pointed shovel. "In winter, frozen water can crack mortar. So much for your newly-repaired wall."

Nine thirty and it was already insufferably hot. "Yes, I see," Sylvia said and retreated to the inconspicuous safety of her front porch.

Pushkin. Gogol. Turgenev. Tolstoy. Dostoyevsky. Solzhenitsyn. On the second day in Moscow, the insanity began. They were driving down the main thoroughfare, the Kremlin with its spiraling domes visible out the right hand window. A policeman waving a wooden nightstick

pulled them over. The Russian driver got out of the car. After a short conversation, he returned and they continued on their way. "What was that all about?" Sylvia asked the interpreter, Marina.

"Today is Friday," Marina said gruffly and withdrew into a wall of silence. She was a tall, stylish woman in her late twenties with thick lips and close-cropped hair.

They sped through Pushkin Square, past the Bolshoi Ballet, Lubyenka Prison. After a moment, Sylvia said, "I know what day of the week it is. Why did the policeman stop the car?"

As though locked in mutually exclusive conversations, Marina repeated, "Today's Friday, last day before weekend." They passed several government ministries and a public housing unit built with forced labor, prison conscripts, during the Stalin era. "The Russian government pays poorly. This is how the police get their vodka money. By shaking down drivers on their way home from work. A few rubles here; a few rubles there."

"And if you refuse to pay?"

Marina only gave her a dirty look and stared out the window at the crater-like pot holes and grimy snow. "Today is Friday," she repeated grimly.

On Monday afternoon, Danny O'Rourke began filling in the smashed-out portion. With the column trued-up, the work went much quicker now. "My father's a big cheat," Becky Mandelstam said. "A whoremongering asshole."

The mason wrapped one end of the discolored masonry twine around a maple corner block then stretched the line sixty feet to the far end of the brick wall where he fastened it tautly to a second, hardwood block. With the guide line in place, he came back to where the young girl was standing. "I don't know that your mother would much appreciate your sharing that information."

She stared impudently at his jutting jaw. "I'm not gossiping," she protested. "My father's infidelity is common knowledge; it all came out in court during the divorce settlement."

In lieu of a response, Danny slathered mortar on the underside of a brick and tamped it into place on the broken wall. Reaching down with the sharp edge of the trowel, he trimmed the excess cement bulging from the wet joint; the pasty mortar fell noiselessly to the ground. Edging closer, Becky fingered the white, linen twine. At first she thought his features coarse, common. But now, she noticed something terribly appealing, strong and forthright, about his brown eyes and Irish chin. "I study body language. Yours is very calm, earthy."

The mason removed his cap momentarily to wipe his forehead. A film of sweat was developing on his freckled cheeks. One of the bricks was touching the string. With the butt of his trowel, he tapped it back a fraction of an inch. "Earthy," he repeated, reaching for the 48-inch level.

"I think you and my mother could be very - " She waved an hand theatrically in the air.

"Incompatible," Danny offered. "A Jewish, college professor and an uneducated, Irish brick layer." He patted her playfully on the head with a gritty hand. "There're a half dozen words for what you're trying to say and I wouldn't repeat any of them in mixed company."

When Sylvia returned home from work on Wednesday afternoon, the wall was finished. Becky wandered into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of milk. She was wearing a halter top

and cut-off jeans. "If you won't go out with Danny O'Rourke, at least invite him over for a home-cooked meal."

"Did he see you in that outfit?" Sylvia asked.

"It's the middle of summer! You expect me to wear wool skirts?"

Sylvia shook her finger in her daughter's face. "You're not a child anymore. As a woman's body matures, even respectable men - "

"Oh, mother! Get a life!"

At three a.m., Becky came to her mother's bedroom and shook her awake. "You cried out in your sleep."

"Just a bad dream. A nightmare."

Jason, with an entourage of fawning, half-baked coeds, had returned to the misogynous scene of the crime, parading past Sylvia as though she were the nebulous figure, the one dreamed. No justice, no belated comeuppance.

Sylvia pulled her daughter down on the mattress next to her. "I'm okay now," she said and nuzzled the girl's bare arm with her cheek. Becky would stay with her mother for the rest of the night and, for that small blessing, Sylvia was thankful. There would be no more hurtful, humiliating dreams with her child close at hand.

"Got A-minus on a social studies test," Becky said, fluffing the spare pillow. "Missed the capitol of South Dakota."

Sylvia could smell the avocado shampoo Becky favored. Reaching out, she fingered a strand of silky, black hair. "Not a name that readily springs to mind."

A light breeze stirred the wandering Jew in a macramé hanger by the open window. She had all three varieties - tradescantia albiflora, tradescantia fluminensis and zebrina pendula - scattered throughout the upper level. In recent years, she filled the house with a profusion of house plants - feathery ferns, philodendrons, coleus and African violets so delicate and turgid with vitality that the brittle leaves snapped and fell away at the slightest hint of pressure.

Arranging her home as though it were a Zen garden, Sylvia favored a bare minimum of furniture. In the living room was a settee strategically placed near the bay window, a small bookcase and upright piano, separated by huge gobs of empty space. On each end table, exactly five - no less no more - National Geographic magazines, fanned discreetly in a semicircle. The magazines were not intended for reading. "A consultant from Perkins Institute for the Blind," Jason observed a week before he deserted the marriage, "couldn't have done a better job."

The capitol of South Dakota. Had she forgotten; had she ever bothered to learn the capitol of South Dakota? Or was this the beginning of Alzheimer's disease? Multi-infarct dementia?

"What's it feel like to make love?" Becky asked.

Sylvia was drifting back to sleep. The loose tether of her daughter's precious voice drew her back. "First time it hurts; afterwards it's nice."

"Oh, I see."

At twelve, she didn't see anything. And what was the capitol of South Dakota? Sioux Falls? Pierre? Boise? Helena? Cheyenne? Rapid City?

"Danny O'Rourke never damaged a single brick," Becky said.

Again, Sylvia felt the tug on the gossamer string of her fading consciousness and opened her drooping eyelids. "What are we talking about now?"



“The mason. He cleaned and stacked two hundred and thirty-five bricks and never chipped a single one! I know because, after he left, I counted them.”

“How do you figure it?” Sylvia’s brain was on automatic pilot. She wasn’t quite sure what she was saying anymore. Nor did she care. It was enough to have Becky in the warm bed next to her.

“It’s all in the wrist, the angle the blade strikes stone.”

Boise. Helena. Bismark. Cheyenne. Fargo. Broken hymens. Labia majora. Vulva. Bartholin glands. Chip, chip, chip. Tap, tap, tap. Tradescantia albiflora, tradescantia fluminensis, zebrina pendula. Unctuous, annoying ex-husbands.

And the capitol of South Dakota is ...

Sylvia called Danny O’Rourke at home the following evening. “You did a nice job.”

“Been at it for the better part of twenty years,” he said in his dull, lumpy voice. “Ought to be good at something by now.”

“About your money ...”

“Catch you one night after work.” There was no great urgency in his voice. With a queer sense of well-being, Sylvia hung up the phone.

On Thursday around six, Danny O’Rourke showed up. Sylvia brought him into the kitchen and gave him the remainder of the money. He folded the bills without bothering to count and stuffed them into his pocket. “Would you like a cup of tea, Mr. O’Rourke.”

“You have to ask an Irishman if he’d like a cup of tea?” He smiled at his own joke and promptly sat down at the table. Becky padded quietly into the room and leaned up against the dishwasher.

“Where’re you from?” Sylvia asked.

“Glendalough. In the Wicklow Mountains of eastern Ireland. Beautiful country. Not much steady work, though, for someone like myself. Saint Kevin founded a monastery in Glendalough in the 6th century.”

“I’m not familiar with Saint Kevin,” she said with a faint smile.

“Ah!” He caught the subtle humor. “No, I should be surprised if you were.”

She brought him his tea which he sweetened with sugar. “Never married?” The question was gratuitous. She already knew the answer.

“Never had the misfortune.” He continued to drink his tea in silence, the face dusted with grayish film - cement or sand - the curly brown hair drifting out from under the shaggy cap. “Not being much of a talker,... it’s a bit of an affliction with me,” he said. “Don’t know what to say when I’m around people such as yourself.” He sipped at the tea, draining the last of it from the mug. “All I can do is mend walls.”

“If people could mend walls as easily as they make mindless chatter, there’d be no need for people such as you.”

“Never thought of it that way,” he said rising to his feet. His legs were thin and slightly bowed.

“One question before you go,” Sylvia said. “The section of wall you repaired looks fine, just as it did before the accident. But now the undamaged portion somehow looks different.”

“While I rebuilt the wall, your daughter tooled the joints,” he replied, “from one end to the other. That’s why it looks spanking new.” He was at the door now. “Like I said, I ain’t much good with people, but I do a passable job with mortar and stone.”

When he was gone, Becky added, "He showed me how to use the pointing tool." Sylvia remembered the useless-looking, piece of scrap metal. "Scrape the broken mortar and stone dust from the old bricks. How to wet down the crumbling cement and reform the joints." There was more than a hint of reproach in her voice. "He's not some stupid, working-class clod, if that's what you think."

"I never, for one minute suggested - "

"And he never snuck a peek at my boobs or bare legs. Not once!"

Sylvia opted to stay at her interpreter's flat outside Moscow rather than a Western-style hotel. Tuesday the electricity was off and she was forced to carry her grocery bags up four flights of darkened stairs to the cramped apartment where they lit candles and waited for the lights to be restored. No one seemed to care. Since 'perestroika', municipal services and living conditions had deteriorated.

"Much divorce in Russia. I've been married three times, my present husband twice," Marina said. "One can't be happy when life is so hard." She lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and held the glowing weed in front of Sylvia's face. "In Russia we understand what tar and nicotine does to your throat and lungs; we know vodka pickles your brain, rots the liver." She sucked on the tobacco and blew a thick column of smoke out her nose. "We are not stupid, only weary of life."

Later that night, neighbors in the upstairs apartment began to fight. The husband was drunk; the wife hysterical. The muffled sounds of young children crying filtered through the thin walls. The screaming and recriminations rose to a crescendo and just as abruptly subsided in an eerie stillness. "When these things happen," Marina muttered, sitting in the darkness waiting for the electricity to be restored, "we have an expression. We say 'Just like Dostoyevsky!'. Do you understand?"

"Yes I understand," Sylvia said.

In the morning, she was lecturing at Moscow University. She would cover the first hundred pages of Crime and Punishment, focusing on the murder of the pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanovna; Raskolnikov's chance meeting in the tavern with the drunken buffoon, Marmeladov; the letter from his mother describing Mr. Svidrgailov's botched attempt to seduce the younger sister, Dounia; and the dream sequence predating the murders. With Dostoyevsky as a starting point, subsequent, guest speakers would proceed to the other, pre-modern, Slavic writers.

Sylvia wanted to review her notes. But without adequate light or heat - the furnace had shut down when the electricity was lost - nothing could be accomplished. "Spakonay nochee (good night)." She went into the other room, put on her nightgown and lay down on the cold, sagging mattress.

In late August, Sylvia arrived home one day to find the kitchen floor under an inch of water, an ominous, hiss coming from the cabinet under the sink. Kneeling down, she opened the cabinet and was struck full force by a blast of cold water. The blow knocked her almost to the middle of the room where she lay dazed in the cool wetness. Water was pouring from the joint where the shut-off valve ran up into the sink. She edged closer and tried to turn the valve but the spray was too intense and drove her back. Her right eye was throbbing, the vision fractured into multiple images.

Sylvia struggled to her feet but promptly fell down again whacking her head on a chair. Retreating to the den, she dialed the plumber and reached an answering machine.

Mason and general handyman. No job too small.

“Do handymen fix leaky pipes?” she mused. Placing the heel of her hand over the right eye, Sylvia dialed the number on the torn scrap of paper. The phone rang a half dozen times before she heard the familiar Irish accent. “It’s Sylvia Mandelstam.” She was crying now, making no effort to hide her distress. “A pipe broke. The kitchen’s flooded. My eye hurts. Can you help me?”

“Where’s the leak?”

“Under the sink.”

“Go down in the basement. Shut the main water supply.”

“I can’t do it,” she sobbed. “The water hit me full force in the eye. I may need a doctor.”

“If you could dial my telephone number, you can shut the water. Right is tight. Left is loose.”

“Right is tight. Left is -”

“Counterclockwise. Just turn the water off then go check the pipe. I’ll stay on the line.”

Crying, gagging, stumbling and tripping over her soggy nylons, she groped her way into the basement and fumbled with the shut off valve. “Right is tight, right is tight, right is ...” The last quarter turn was when she heard the flow choke and gradually shut down. Total silence. The water was off.

In the kitchen, a lake mirrored the fixtures on the ceiling but the deluge was over. “I shut the water,” Sylvia spoke more evenly now. “Except for the lake in my kitchen, everything’s under control.”

“What’s the matter with your eye?” More than a hint of concern crept into his voice.

Sylvia blinked several times and gazed about the room. “My eye’s okay.”

“I’m leaving now,” Danny said and hung up the phone.

While she was changing into dry clothes, Becky came home. “What happened?”

“Pipe broke. Danny O’Rourke’s coming over.”

“How are we going to get all that water up?”

“Hadn’t thought that far ahead.”

Twenty minutes later, Danny O’Rourke arrived with plumbing tools and a 10-gallon wet-vac. He vacuumed up the water, then checked under the sink. “Nothing wrong with the shut-off valve,” he said, lugging the wet-vac back out to the truck. “Copper fitting gave way, that’s all.”

She followed him into the street. “I knew enough to shut the main water supply,” Sylvia blustered. “When the water hit me in the face, I got momentarily, disoriented.” She suddenly grabbed his wrist with both her hands. “That much I did know.”

“Yes, these things happen.” Danny located a propane tank. “Have Becky open the outside faucets to drain the line.”

Why drain the line? Wasn’t it sufficient to have the water shut down and pipes dry? It was easier to learn the Cyrillic alphabet than deal with these domestic calamities. “Yes, of course,” she said and immediately felt silly.

Back in the soggy kitchen, Danny lit the gas torch and fanned the flame over the pipe. When it glowed bright orange, he clamped a vise grip on the upper stem and pulled the joint apart. Running a sausage-shaped, metal brush back and forth inside the coupling, he cleaned the copper tubing with cloth-backed, emery paper.

“What’s that for?” Sylvia asked. He was brushing a clear paste inside the joint and on the polished outer surface of the pipe.

“Flux,” he replied without bothering to look up. The metal glistened with the wet paste. “It keeps the metal from oxidizing and draws the solder into the joint for a water-tight seal.” He relit the torch, adjusted the flame to a compact, blue wedge and placed it against the metal. A minute passed. Touching a strand of solder to the metal, the silver wire dissolved in a moist blur disappearing into the faucet coupling. When the excess bubbled up over the edge, Danny pulled the strand away, flicking the torch off. “All done. Good as new.”

“My husband works for a printing firm,” Marina, the interpreter, said. They were walking in the garden of the Monastery of Saint Peter the Great. “The other day a man came into the office and requested a quote on 50,000 copies of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.” She took a draft from an unfiltered cigarette and blew the air out forcefully through her mouth. “My husband says, ‘I don’t print anti-Semitic shit!’, and the man holds up a thick wad of rubles and says, ‘I pay cash for the job.’”

Sylvia pulled her collar up tight around her throat. April in Moscow felt more like March back home. “And?”

Marina grimaced. “My husband says, ‘Go to hell!’. The man closes his brief case and says, ‘Better yet, I’ll go down the street to your competitor.’”

Becky reentered the kitchen and squatted on her haunches next to the sink. She was dressed in a tank top, leather sandals and cut-off jeans. “After what just happened, “ Sylvia mused, “I wouldn’t care if she were naked from the waist up.” She went down into the basement and turned the main water supply back on. The joint held. Danny collected his tools and took them out to the truck.

“Ask him out.” Becky put her nose in her mother’s face. “If you don’t I will.”

“Danny O’Rourke’s a perfectly nice man - a saint, maybe - but he will never be your step-father.”

“Intellectual snob! Hypocrite!”

Sylvia kissed her daughter on the tip of the nose, deftly stepped around her and went out to the curb. “How much do I owe you?”

“Thirty should do it.”

“A plumber would charge twice as much.”

He was leaning into the cab of the truck, one hand on the steering column. “I’m a mason, not a licensed plumber.” He swung up onto the seat and began rummaging in the glove compartment. Dropping back down to the ground, he handed Sylvia a wrinkled picture postcard. “Glendalough, in the Wicklow Mountains.”

Sylvia glanced at the card. The ruins of several churches with crumbling steeples lay nestled in a flowery, tree-shrouded valley; a wide lake loomed in the background. “There aren’t any homes visible in the picture.”

“They’re scattered throughout the countryside. There’s no central village to speak of.” He pushed the shaggy cap back on his head. “When you look at this, perhaps you’ll understand why I’m not so clever with words.”

Sylvia handed him back the card and stared at the parched, late-summer lawn. "Cleverness with words isn't all it's cracked up to be." An anonymous woodpecker in one of the Scotch pines that bordered the property was hammering away at the porous wood. The rhythmic clatter petered out then, after a short lull, the woodpecker resumed his frenetic labor. "My trip to Russia last year was a nightmare."

"But I thought -"

"I know what I said. It was crap."

Fifteen minutes later, Becky glanced out the bay window. Her mother had moved away from the pickup truck and was standing near the mended wall, yakking away nonstop. Danny was leaning against a slim hazel tree, his hands plunged in his pockets, eyes bent to earth.

Becky went upstairs, took a shower and washed her hair. An hour later she went to the window. Her mother had edged a few steps closer to the mason who had removed his hat and was inspecting the brim. "Strange!" Becky muttered.

When the mason finally drove off, Sylvia wandered back indoors. "Mr. O'Rourke will be joining us for supper Friday night." Her voice sounded strangely high-pitched, affected.

"A date!" Becky grinned idiotically.

"Not a date, per se," Sylvia hedged. "Just an invite to dinner. Don't you dare read anything more into it than that!"

"No, of course not," Becky said in a voice equally counterfeit.

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## A Trip to Tanglewood

Marie Augustin believed emphatically in keeping her personal life separate from the workplace. Many of her elderly clients were scheming and manipulative. When she first came to America from Haiti, they tricked her into staying longer than her allotted time. They whined and wheedled until she gave them her telephone number, then called at all hours of the day and night begging for a loaf of bread - when they already had a spare loaf in the freezer - and similar foolishness. "Better to stay outside their circle of craziness," Marie told herself a dozen times a week and defended her privacy with steadfast obstinacy.

Marie liked the widower, Mr. Marsoubian, best of all. Sent by the home care agency, she cooked and cleaned; she washed the few clothes he wore and got his groceries now that his driver's license had been taken away. His thinning gray hair falling down in his eyes, Peter Marsoubian was waiting for Marie when she arrived one Monday morning. "I need a favor."

Marie made an unintelligible sound, a cross between a grunt and a groan. Taking a rag from the kitchen closet, she went into the living room and began the weekly ritual of dusting the furniture. "What type of favor?"

"Drive me to Tanglewood in the Berkshires to hear the English trumpeter, Maurice Gordon." There was no response. "I'll pick up the tab for everything - food, lodging, tickets to the concert."

Marie considered the odd request as she guided the cloth dampened with lemon oil over the mahogany end table. The wood was old but still retained its luster. "Out of the question," the

black woman returned. She stood straight up. Peter Marsoubian stared at her short squat body with the broad nose and tree trunk of a neck. "Transporting clients is against agency rules."

Peter gawked at her with soft eyes. Everything about him was soft. His shoulders slouched at a precipitous angle and jowls sagged. It was as though someone had taken a rasp and filed away all the rough edges and sharp corners. "We've known each other a year and a half, and, in all that time, I've never asked a single favor."

"Where is this place?" Marie asked, more from curiosity. She already had dismissed the idea of helping Peter. Driving him anywhere was non-negotiable, not even a remote consideration.

"Tanglewood. It's a three and a half hours drive out of Boston. West on the Mass Turnpike."

"Why don't you just wait until he comes to Symphony Hall?"

"This is Mr. Gordon's only appearance locally. After Tanglewood, he flies back to London."

"You could buy a record."

"It's not the same thing."

Marie put the dust cloth down and glanced about the room. The furniture in Peter Marsoubian's apartment was old but durable. Near the window was a bulky chair and sofa in an outmoded flower pattern. A pair of three-legged end tables, each with a brass lamp and lace doily, flanked the sofa facing toward an upright piano. The furnishings, which in another setting might have seemed drab, exuded an air of sparse stateliness, a monkish austerity. "You know the rules," Marie said firmly. "A homemaker can't drive a client in her car." She examined the dark ridge of dirt on the underside of the dust cloth with satisfaction. Sprinkling a few additional drops of oil on the surface, she resumed her dusting.

The next day, Mr. Marsoubian was waiting for Marie in the kitchen. He had fixed two cups of tea. A plate of toast and jar of boysenberry jam were on the table. "I thought you might like a little snack," Peter said with a ingratiating smile.

Marie stared at the toast uncomfortably. In her native country when people wanted something done they frequently gave a gift; in such instances, once the money or goods changed hands, the obligation was born. "I'll just have the tea, thank you," Marie said. She took a sip. It was already quite cold.

"Why don't you sit down," Peter suggested. "It's not good to drink tea standing up." Marie didn't see why but sat down just the same. With a bony finger, Peter pushed a shiny brochure across the table toward her. There were several pictures on facing pages of smiling, ecstatically happy people - women wearing evening gowns, men in tuxedos, musicians, singers, even an elegant blonde with a bouffant hairdo plucking a huge harp in a pastoral setting.

Marie examined the pictures on the inside fold without bothering to read the accompanying text. Flipping the pamphlet over, she glanced at the schedule of events. The English trumpeter, Maurice Gordon, was booked as guest soloist on June 18th. An inset picture of the virtuoso fiercely clutching his horn accompanied a list of his numerous accomplishments.

"Two things," Marie said, tapping the brochure rhythmically with a taut index finger. "How do you think a black woman, a green card alien from Haiti, would fit in with this cheerful group?" Marie let out a gruff belly laugh and, embarrassed by her loss of control, made a mental note never to do such a thing in public again. "Ain't one person who looks even remotely like me in any of these pictures. They're all white."

"There are black musicians in the orchestra," Peter corrected. "And the conductor, Mr. Ozawa, is from Japan."

"That may be so," she reached for the cup of tea but thought better of it. "I've never been to a place like this and wouldn't feel comfortable." Marie rose to her feet and made a motion to clear the table.

"Two things," Peter blurted out. "You said there were two things."

"Fact is, I could lose my job. My husband and my children depend on the money I make. The risk is too great."

Peter turned the glossy page over in his hand and sighed wistfully. "If I hadn't lost my license, I'd go myself. Straight up the Mass Pike." He traced the route on the small map located on the rear of the brochure. "Past Framingham and Westboro, almost to the New York border. Then straight up route 41."

"Sorry I can't help you," she said, putting the dishes in the sink, and left the room. Marie washed a load of laundry and, while the clothes were drying, made a pot of chicken soup. Haitian chicken soup is what Peter called it, because, instead of the traditional ingredients, Marie used chopped scallions, thin slivers of green pepper and egg noodles. Sometimes in place of the noodles she used whole grain rice which she cooked for a half hour separately before adding it to the stock. Peter didn't seem to mind. What he didn't finish during the week was usually gone before she returned the following Monday.

When the clothes were dry, she folded and put them away. In the den Peter was practicing his trumpet. Marie was so used to the bittersweet tone, never overly loud or harsh, that she hardly noticed the music wafting through the house.

Peter Marsoubian played trumpet - first in concert and marching bands, then later in small, community orchestras. It was a hobby, nothing more. He never earned any money. Now that he was too old to perform in public, he still managed an hour or so of classical etudes and songs every day.

Though his technique was sure and supple, he never played a piece through from beginning to end without pausing a half dozen times. After each interruption, the tune would resume from the exact note where he had left off only to falter again midway through a handful of measures. "Peter, why do you stop so often?" Marie had asked him once.

"Emphysema," Peter said laying the golden bell of the horn on his lap. Where the mouthpiece rested on his top lip only a moment ago, there was a puffy, circular indentation. "Can't get enough air into my lungs anymore."

It was almost eleven o'clock when Marie finished preparing the chicken soup. "I'll be leaving now," she said buttoning her winter coat. In her homeland people would be moving about in short sleeve shirts and thin, cotton dresses. "Is there anything else I can get you before I leave?"

"A ride to Tanglewood."

"Out of the question," Marie said with a pleasant, round-faced smile. "See you tomorrow." She went out the door.

From Mr. Marsoubian's she drove across town through the Callahan Tunnel to look in on an Italian woman with cataracts and a heart condition. On the ride Marie considered Mr. Marsoubian's wacky proposition. "Here I am, barely five years in the United States - not even a

citizen - and this crazy Armenian wants me to drive him to the ends of the earth. On a whim! Just like that!"

At a traffic light three young girls in green and black plaid skirts crossed the street. The girls hugged their schoolbooks to their breasts, chattering away with breezy innocence. As they passed in front of the car, Marie felt a stabbing throb of sadness. When she was their age in Port au Prince, she witnessed a murder. Not that she had seen the actual crime. She was fourteen and on her way to school. A young man was lying crumpled up like a discarded rag in the middle of the street. A trail of dried blood had crusted over and turned black on the side of his neck where the bullet had entered. A swarm of noisy flies was circling the hole. A small crowd gathered. No one spoke. They stared briefly with severe or curious expressions and hurried away. Later that day when Marie returned home, her mother asked, "How was your day, my darling? Did anything special happen to you?"

Marie did not tell her mother about the corpse. She went and sat under a palm tree and thought about the unlucky man with the hole in his neck. On Sunday before Mass, Marie lit a candle for the anonymous dead man. She didn't know why. The sermon was short. Marie ran her fingers over the smooth, round beads of her rosary and tried to think deeply about the meaning of life; she struggled to consider her fragile existence in the urgent way that grownups did. But there was no revelation. No epiphany. "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed." When the priest placed the host on her outstretched tongue, Marie felt strangely different, as though there was the need to atone for some vague and, as yet, unspoken sin.

Beeeeep! The light turned green and Marie eased the car back into gear. She was already five minutes late and the Italian women with the milky eyes would be pacing the floor.

Peter Marsoubian lost his driver's license the previous spring in a peculiar accident in the parking lot of Richter's Hardware. The policeman who took the accident report noted that Peter had 'backed his car into a pedestrian'. Peter took issue with the officer's choice of words. "I didn't run the man down," he protested. "No one was maimed or injured."

There was some truth to Peter's account. The victim, if he could even be described as such, did not require any medical attention and, except for some lingering soreness which went away after a day, no harm was done. However, Peter had been involved in several traffic accidents over the past year and a half and, after this most recent incident, the registry pulled his license. In a letter which he received a month after the incident in the parking lot of Richter's Hardware, the registry informed Peter that, if he wished to appeal their decision, he should do so within ten days. He had every intention of doing just that but somehow never got around to writing the letter.

Through the holidays and into the New Year, there was no more mention of Maurice Gordan, 'trumpet virtuoso extraordinaire'. Peter came down with a mild case of bronchitis and spent a week in bed. In early January Marie's sister-in-law, René, came to visit. A lean-boned woman with a thick scar over her left eye, it was rumored that her former spouse - they were divorced five years now - had been an attaché, a member of the secret police, in Haiti. Marie asked her husband, Leon, about the scar. "An unfortunate accident," he said, refusing to elaborate.



"All the way from New York I sat alone on the bus. Imagine that! Not one, white bastard would lower himself to share the same seat with me!" René was unpacking her suitcase in the spare bedroom. She rubbed the jagged weal of the scar over her eye. The skin blanched then returned to its normal color, several shades darker than her regular skin tone.

"How sad!" Marie replied.

"And that old lady at the Greyhound Station! Did you see how that wrinkled-up prune behaved when you came to get me?"

Marie and Leon had gone to meet René at the Greyhound terminal near Park Square. In the lobby as they were collecting René's baggage, an elderly white woman with a peacock feather in her hat and too much rouge gawked at them rudely. When their eyes met, the white woman scrunched up her nose. But the bristling anger was dampened with equal portions of confusion, grief and loneliness. As the woman hobbled unsteadily away, Marie noted one leg was shorter than the other, causing the peacock feather to bob up and down erratically. "She's just a harmless, old fool. That white woman didn't hardly bother me one tiny bit." "No," Marie repeated emphatically, "not one tiny bit."

René ignored the remark. "Leon told me about that horrid, Armenian. The nerve of him wanting you to drive him to the ends of the earth to hear some stupid, ridiculous trumpet player! I've never heard such nonsense!"

"I wish Leon never mentioned it."

"If I was in your place and he asked me," René fumed, "I'd tell him to stick his trumpet where the sun never shines."

"He only asked twice," Marie said softly, "and never mentioned it again."

"You're too nice, Marie. Too nice and unsuspecting." René wagged a finger in the air. "Did it ever occur to you that going to the concert was just a ploy, a convenient excuse to get you to go away with him?" René placed her hands on her bony hips and sniggered as though at some private joke. "The horny, old bastard!"

An unintelligible protest welled up in Marie's throat but never quite reached her lips. She breathed out deeply and, for the first time since she had greeted her sister-in-law at the Greyhound station, looked the woman full in the face. "René, I need to say something."

"Yes?"

"Please, shut up!"

Dead ten years now, Peter Marsoubian's wife, Sarah, taught piano and gave voice lessons. He never spoke about the woman directly, only through the medium of music. "My Sarah played popular music, but she favored the classics."

"The classics. That's nice." Marie was washing the windows from the inside. Washing windows was not in the homemaker job description. It was considered chore work and the agency frowned on such things.

"Chopin, Debussy, Bartok." Peter, who was sitting at the upright piano, ran a finger over the black keys forming a perfect pentatonic scale. "My Sarah loved them all."

Though she had never met the big-boned, pretty woman, Marie was familiar with all the milestones, bits of historic and incidental trivia that chronicled the history of Sarah Marsoubian's life. She had heard them a hundred times, like variations on a classical motif and always filtered through the protective buffer of symphonies and songs. It was as though the marriage and the music had merged, annealed into one indistinct, amorphous whole.

"Here's a picture taken at a community concert at the Dorchester YMHA," Peter said removing a discolored photo from his musical scrapbook. In the picture Sarah was seated at the piano; Peter, holding a bundle of sheet music under his left arm, stood center stage. His trumpet was perched on a small stand. "We performed the Carnival of Venice with all four variations including the triplet and thirty-second note runs."

"Very handsome!" Marie said. She was looking at a picture of Peter Marsoubian in his prime. Strong and vibrant with a full head of bushy hair. "Very handsome, indeed!"

In early March Marie received a call from the director of the home care agency. Mr. Marsoubian suffered a heart attack and had been taken to Beth Israel Hospital. The case was suspended until further notice. Marie waited for the initial shock to pass. "How's he doing?"

"Too soon to tell," the director said. "I know this might seem a little bit crass, but there's another case opening up - same hours Monday through Friday, if you're interested." There was a brief pause. "Hello, Marie? Are you still there?"

"Hold on a minute while I get a pen and paper."

The new client was a sour-faced negro woman with kidney failure and glaucoma who drank cheap wine from early in the morning and was prone to mood swings. Marie's first visit to the squalid apartment off Massachusetts Avenue the black woman was waiting with a magnifying glass and sour expression. She slid the lens over a crumpled shopping list scrawled in bold letters with a felt-tipped pen. "I want Libby peaches in heavy Syrup not the shitty, store brand."

"Libby peaches. Heavy syrup," Marie repeated.

"Honey ham's on sale. Get a quarter pound sliced extra thin." She flung the words out like an accusation. Pressing a button in the handle of the magnifying glass, a tiny light bulb threw a beam of yellow light onto the list. "Camel cigarettes. Unfiltered. One carton."

Marie pointed at a metal canister propped in the living room; the steel tank was fitted with pressure gauges and plastic tubing. "Can't purchase smokes with oxygen in the home. Too dangerous. State regulations."

"My daughter'll pick them up," the black woman wheezed nastily, "when she visits Friday after bingo."

Marie drove to the market at the bottom of Chelsea Street. In thirty minutes she had everything and was back at the apartment where the client made her wait while she checked each item against the cash register receipt and counted her change. "You could of got the goddamn cigarettes!" Escorting Marie to the foyer, she slammed the door throwing the deadbolt. Click! Marie put her hat on and lumbered down the stairs.

A week later Marie called the home care agency and asked to speak to the director. "I would like to go back to Mr. Marsoubian when he comes home."

"Anything wrong with the new lady?" the director asked.

"No, she's all right. I just prefer Peter." A month passed. Sometimes when she was caring for her elderly clients or later in the evening after Marie settled her children down for the night, a fleeting snippet of brass music would come to mind. An etude from Kopprash's melodic studies in B flat or one of Brandt's melodic tunes. She could hear the soft, sinewy tone of a brass horn deftly weaving through the intricate passages. One eerie difference however: now each fragment was tied to the next from beginning to end. In the absence of Peter Marsoubian's defective heart and worn out lungs, the music became a perfectly constructed, seamless whole.

During the three weeks since Peter took sick, Marie called the hospital regularly to check his progress. 'Mr. Marsoubian's in stable condition' was the standard reply. Stable condition. Such a dry, clinical phrase. In this brief span of time, the symmetry of her life had been defaced, the delicate balance altered in a subtle way. She could have blamed the hard-drinking negro woman; the new client found fault with most everything Marie did and collected petty injustices - imagined and otherwise - from one visit to the next. But that was more a symptom than the root cause of Marie's lassitude.

"What room is Peter Marsoubian in?" Marie was on the third floor of the cardiac unit at Beth Israel Hospital.

The nurse gestured with a flick of her head. "Three eighteen. Last one on the left."

Marie went slowly down the hallway which smelled of alcohol and antiseptic solutions. An orderly wearing green scrubs went by pushing a wheelchair with an elderly man whose bushy, unkempt hair kept falling down in his eyes. Through an open door at the far end of the hall, she could see Peter sitting up. Next to the bed, a heart monitor tracked his vital signs with computerized precision. A transparent tube of nasal oxygen hung from his neck.

"Hello, Peter." Out of the corner of her eye Marie could see the steady, clocklike drip of the IV solution. Peter turned his head slowly. His face relaxed in a groggy smile. "You had a heart attack."

"Yeah, a real good one," Peter qualified. Marie pulled a chair up next to the bed. "For a while there ... " He let the words trail off.

"When can you come home?"

"Heart muscle's permanently damaged. I can't even stand up without help." Running his fingers through the thinning, wispy hair, he sighed heavily and looked away. "Next week they're shipping me out to a nursing home for a month, maybe two."

"But the heart will heal," Marie insisted. "You were sick before and got better."

Peter shrugged. "The damage's permanent," he repeated. "A portion of the muscle's dead."

"And after the nursing home, what then?"

"I come home." Peter moistened his lips and continued tentatively. "I was hoping you might come back to work for me."

"I certainly don't want to stay where I am now." Marie told Peter about the cranky black woman with the rotten kidneys. "She asked me to wash her windows the other day and I said that it was against the rules. We're not allowed to wash windows."

"But you wash my windows."

"If I like a person, I'll wash their windows." Marie folded her heavy winter coat neatly across her lap and pressed her bare knees together. "Or then again," she added, "maybe I won't. The choice is mine to make."

Peter sat up, semi-reclining with a dreamy, melancholy expression. He had lost weight; his complexion was sallow. He sat hardly making an indentation on the mattress - a thin, dry, wafer of a man. "So you will come back to work for me when I return home?" Peter pressed.

"Didn't we just have this same conversation two seconds ago?" Marie said with mock severity. The conversation lapsed. There was no reason to talk; the silence felt good, cleansing. Since childhood, Marie had acknowledged an uneasy truce with words. She preferred a short,

clipped speech with a bare minimum of verbiage. Leave the fancy talk to those with facile tongues. Perhaps it was a defect of temperament, a flaw in her genetic makeup, but she could sit for hours in a room full of people without saying more than a few dozen words and come away feeling perfectly garrulous.

Marie glanced about the room. On the bedside table were four things: a folded newspaper, the old man's toothbrush, the brochure from Tanglewood and a tarnished, silver mouthpiece. "What's that for?" Marie asked indicating the mouthpiece.

Removing the blue, oxygen cannula from his nose, Peter Marsoubian reached across with his free hand and grabbed the mouthpiece. Placing it to his lips, he blew a long sustained drone - more an atonal buzz than any distinct note. The sound reminded Marie of a duck call. Peter buzzed the mouthpiece again, tightening the corners of his lips and causing the pitch to rise several notches. "When nobody's around, I buzz for five to ten minutes to keep my lip up." He replaced the mouthpiece back on the table. Perhaps the exertion had tired him. Peter was breathing more carefully now, as though air was a pricey commodity. He took small and economical drafts - shallow, measured breaths that rose slowly, laboriously from the belly into his chest.

Marie excused herself and went out in the corridor where, with characteristic restraint, she blew her nose and blotted some moisture which had accumulated on her cheek. Stay outside of the circle of craziness. Don't step over the invisible, thin line.

Marie took a deep breath and went back into the room. Locating the Tanglewood brochure on the bedside table, she checked the listing of summer events before turning to the encapsulated map on the back page. In a voice that was cautiously enthused, if not completely steady, she read, "West on the Mass Pike past Framingham and Westboro. Continue almost to the New York border. Shortly after the Stockbridge exit, take route forty-one North to - "

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## Devotion

A squat man with bristly red hair sauntered directly to the bar at the Marriot Hotel lounge. "Gimme a boilermaker, Freddy." The fellow, who spoke with a thick Scottish brogue, sported a tuxedo with five onyx studs decorating the front of his pleated shirt below a shiny black bowtie. A strong chin complimented fair-skinned, boyish features. The bartender went off to fix his drink. "Chevas Regal," he barked. "Not that rotgut you pass off on regular customers."

The dapper fellow turned to the man seated at his right. "What you drinking?"

"Coke, that's all." Ralph Tucker lifted a glass with a watery brownish liquid. Half the ice had already melted away. "I'm trying to keep a clear head."

The Scotsman eyed him curiously. The bartender, a lanky, middle-age fellow with sagging jowls and a doleful expression, returned with the drink. "Woman troubles?"

Ralph nodded once but held his tongue. "I'm with the band," the fellow explained. "Paddy Macgregor." The two men shook hands. "We're playing a wedding in the next room over."

Having said that, he reached for the shot glass, threw the liquor down his throat then followed up with a stiff swig of beer.

"Isn't it a bit early to be hitting the sauce, if you got to work all night?"

The man's pale blue eyes sparkled as he wiped his mouth with the back of a hand. "My family hails from Black Isle in the Scottish Highlands. Unlike the stumblebum Irish, who can't hold their liquor, women, paychecks, land or much of anything else, we Scotsmen have no such problem. The man extended his right hand, palm down over the bar. The stubby fingers never trembled. Reaching into his rear pocket he removed a pair of metal brushes and began tapping out a percussive drum rhythm at breakneck speed on the mahogany surface of the bar. After a few fancy flourishes he returned the brushes to his pocket, polished off what remained of the beer and ordered another whiskey with beer chaser.

"Our friend's got woman problems."

"Don't we all," the bartender replied.

"No, it's not like that," Ralph insisted. "Years back, this girl threw me over for a guy with a six-figure income. In June her husband got caught embezzling funds at the investment firm where he worked. A week after the indictment, the chump drops dead of a heart attack, leaving behind massive debts and a mortgage six months in arrears."

"Aw shit!" Paddy sipped judiciously at the neat whiskey and ran a tongue over his lips. "When's the last time you seen this dame?"

"Twenty years ago," Ralph replied meekly, "back in my college days."

The bartender's bushy eyebrows heaved in disbelief. "Twenty years you carried a torch for some worthless female?"

"Maybe she was a dazzling beauty?" Paddy offered.

"Not especially. But she had a reasonably nice figure."

"My ex-wife," the bartender leaned closer, "was partial to dirty movies. For the first few years of our marriage, we shared a common interest." Even though the man behind the bar was a good ten years older than the drummer, his wearisome manner and dreary horse face made him seem considerably older.

Ralph shrugged philosophically. "No, we didn't have much in common. Sometimes you just love a woman for no apparent reason. The romance defies logic." He sliced the air with the flat of his hand trying to make coherent sense out of his fractured thoughts. "This woman ... I never properly got her out of my system."

"I ain't so particular." The drummer lifted his beer and studied the amber liquid briefly before draining the glass. "Anyone of the bridesmaids in tonight's wedding party, with the exception of the two-ton maid of honor, could satisfy my carnal needs."

"Ditto!" The bartender screwed up his face in masochistic angst. "Between alimony and shared assets, my spouse cleaned me out in the divorce settlement." He bent over the counter assuming a confidential tone. "I don't need no money-grubbing bitch to fill in the missing pieces or make me whole. You're problem, if you don't mind me saying so, is you're too damn nice."

"C-H-U-M-P!" With a staccato flourish, Paddy Macgregor spelled the word out, leaning hard on each letter for dramatic effect. "Once you start indulging a skirt, you lose the upper hand." Paddy threw an arm around Ralph's shoulder and pulled him close. "Don't take it personal. I'm just trying to school you in the ways of the flesh."

Ralph first heard about Becky Steinberg's troubles from a mutual friend, Sid Bentley. "Becky's down on her luck... sort of like Lily Bart, that pathetic character, in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*," Sid observed acidly. The fellow was as much an insatiable gossip as avid reader. When no comment was forthcoming, he added, "You know, the novel about the New York socialite who plummets into abject poverty."

"Never read the book," Ralph replied.

"Under the circumstances," his friend added, "maybe you should keep it that way."

It was Sid who told him about the indictment and Becky's precipitous fall from grace. The revelation left him utterly morose.

Paddy Macgregor slid off his stool and grabbed the beer. "I gotta finish setting up my drums."

When he was gone, the bartender pushed a plastic bowl of pretzels in front of Ralph. A minute passed in total silence. "Ever seen a crocodile leather belt?"

"Yeah," the bartender replied. "They're stupid looking and cost a goddamn fortune."

Ralph reached for a pretzel but thought better of it and pulled his hand away. "Ever seen an Orvis, genuine hornback crocodile belt?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Here's why I can't marry you, Ralphy." They were standing in the women's department of Ann Taylor at the Chestnut Hill Mall in Newton, Massachusetts. Big boned with prominent cheeks that sloped precipitously to a narrow jaw, Becky Steinberg was the sort of girl most men wouldn't give a second look. She was too klutzy, a regular Amazon. She walked flatfooted with her wide shoulders thrown back and weight of her body resting on the heels as though a metal pole had been taped from the nape of the neck straight down to the tailbone.

Becky Steinberg dangled a skinny, emerald strand with a gold clasp under his nose. The Orvis genuine hornback crocodile belt retailed for five hundred ninety-eight dollars.

Six hundred smackers! That was more money than Ralph would earn weekly as a college graduate at an entry-level salary! And it wasn't even all that attractive. Ralph swallowed hard. With her predilection towards plumpness, Becky's waist would swell beyond the outermost loop by early spring and then what? Did she try to sell the absurdly expensive designer original on EBay or through an upscale consignment shop? "You're gonna blow all that money on a stupid belt?"

"No," she returned the strap to the rack. "I already own one that I picked up at Bergdorf Goodman when I was in New York last month. I'm just trying to make a point."

Becky's father owned a kosher butcher shop in Manhattan. The man gave his only daughter an American Express Platinum credit card three years earlier when she went off to college. He didn't care how often daddy's-little-girl used it. Each month he paid the balance down to nothing. The tacit agreement was that Becky marry well. That is to say, the prospective groom had to arrive at the altar with a healthy investment portfolio because, once the marriage was consummated, Mr. Steinberg's American Express credit card became defunct.

"I'm addicted to fancy-schmancy." Becky ran her fingertips over the stippled surface of the Orvis original one last time, caressing the elegant hide. "When I'm in New York, a trip to the boutiques on Madison Avenue is like a pilgrimage to Mecca."

Ralph was going to point out that most Moslems could only afford the trip once in a lifetime, but clearly that wasn't her intent. "You won't marry me?"

"No and, for the hundredth time, stop asking." She leaned over and kissed him playfully on the side of the mouth. Becky, who never agreed to an exclusive relationship, was seeing other men and probably sleeping with them as well. She visited facial salons and booked regular appointments with a masseuse. Over the February vacation she joined her family at a ski resort in Vale, Colorado - all this on a part-time job and her father's American Express Platinum card. "I love spending money... it's part of my genetic makeup."

They were back out in the main concourse of the mall where a jazz quartet from the local high school was playing a Sonny Rollin's original, Oleo, on a makeshift bandstand. "All this shopping makes me horny. When we get back to my apartment, I'm going to do obscene and unspeakable things to your body."

"As soon as you find Mr. Moneybags," Ralph ignored the invitation, "you're gonna give me the bum's rush."

"That's a bit crass." The saxophonist finished the melody and now the pianist was negotiating the circle of fourths pattern that composed the bridge of the lightening fast, bebop tune. She grabbed his hand, raised it to her lips and planted a mushy kiss squarely in the center of the palm before folding the fingers back on themselves. "We get along great and always have a ton of laughs." As the last eight measures of the standard wound down, the reed player launched into an angular, improvised solo favoring pentatonic scales and broken arpeggios that ventured off from the original tonal center before the rhythm section, which had laid out for several measures, attacked the tune with renewed fury. "I'm horny as hell," she whispered under her breath. "Let's go home and get raunchy."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ten minutes later Paddy Macgregor returned to the lounge. He didn't seem quite so steady on his legs anymore, and his eyes were coated with a glossy film. "Hit me again, Freddy."

"So what's the decision?" the drummer pressed.

"Still considering my options," Ralph parried the question.

The drummer pulled the bowtie away from the collar and undid the topmost button on his tuxedo shirt. Somewhere between the bandstand and the bar, he had discarded the stylish jacket. "She cheated on you."

"We never had an exclusive relationship," Ralph qualified.

"Likeguysed," the drummer was beginning to garble his words together in a verbal salad, "the louse donyadirdy." Paddy paused just long enough to upend the shot glass, emptying the contents down his gullet. The drummer slapped Ralph on the back and winked his bleary-eyed, moral support before rushing back to the bandstand.

Ralph glanced up at the bartender. "How long have you known that man?"

"Paddy's been with the house band five years now. He's an alcoholic in denial."

"Can he make it through the night?"

Freddy shook his head. "Not hardly. I'm afraid that demonstration of fancy brushwork earlier this evening may have been his high water mark." The bartender slung the towel he had been polishing the countertop with down on the brass rail and lurched out from behind the bar. "Come with me." Freddy led the way two doors down to the Emerald Room function hall, where the band was playing a waltz, Sunrise, Sunset. Paddy Macgregor was seated behind the drums

laying down a raggedy beat with only his right drumstick and left foot. The other hand hung limply at his side and his head slouched at a precipitous angle, the chin resting on his chest.

As they were heading back to the lounge Ralph asked, "The jokes taken aside, if you found yourself in my predicament, what would you do?"

"Aw, shit, I dunno! Life's a crapshoot." Freddie spoke in a rough drawl like someone whose train wreck of a personal life had run off the rails more often than he cared to remember. "The dame has probably got a drawer full of genuine crocodile belts so why lose sleep over the selfish twit." Freddy raised a hand in the air, indicating that he had something further to add but was struggling with his thoughts. "They got a term for women like her... hedonist. Yeah, that's it! Someone who puts her own needs and personal pleasure ahead of everyone else's." Freddy seemed particularly pleased with his appraisal. "She got what she wanted and don't deserve your sympathy any more than that swindler-of-a-husband."

"Hedonist," Ralph repeated. "Yes, that's true enough. She sure as hell indulged herself."

"They're worse than atheists," Freddy confirmed, "because they got no scruples,... no morals." His droopy face convulsed with a bewildering mix of conflicted emotions. "What if you went back with this woman and she treated you same as before?"

"Wouldn't make a bit of difference."

"Squandered your money and was unfaithful as a Babylonian whore?"

"I'd forgive her on a daily basis and thank God for the privilege of a second chance at happiness."

The bartender gawked at him in disbelief. "In my capacity here at the hotel, I meet a lot of unusual people - eccentrics, psychopaths, weirdoes, homicidal maniacs, perverts and assorted whack jobs," Freddy ventured, "but I ain't never run across anyone like you."

"I'll take that as a compliment." Ralph paid his tab and wandered out into the lobby where he dialed a number on his cell phone. After a brief conversation, he left the hotel and drove across town.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rebecca Steinberg led Ralph into the living room, where the forty-watt bulb in a Tiffany lamp bathed the room in murky gloom. She pulled a white bed sheet off the leather sofa so he could sit down. Everything was in boxes, under cover or in profound disarray. "I didn't come to gloat," Ralph confessed.

"I appreciate your candor. What's it been... twenty years?"

"Closer to twenty-five," he confirmed.

"Most of my former, A-list friends," Becky observed with a papery-thin smile, "have deleted my number from their cell phones."

Ralph glanced around the dreary, airless room. The furnishings were all high end - high end and high maintenance. A sixty-inch, plasma TV hung on the wall over the fire place with a wireless hookup to an array of quadraphonic Bose speakers. The custom-built bar was trimmed with ebony and claret-colored rosewood. The exotic woods alone must have set the deceased back a small fortune. Not that household expenditures concerned the former Mr. Steinberg any more. "Have you eaten?"

"Haven't much of an appetite lately."

Ralph rose to his feet and rearranged the eggshell white, silk bed sheet back over the couch. He wanted to flee the place, which felt more like a mausoleum than a home. "Maybe we



could go somewhere and grab a coffee. I know you're busy with the foreclosure proceedings and won't keep you long."

He shouldn't have said that. Becky never mentioned anything about the bank. He learned that unsavory tidbit from Sid, their mutual friend. At some point in the near future, a marshal would arrive at the front door to put Rebecca Steinberg out on the curb. The saving and checking accounts drained dry, the woman had exhausted every legal loophole. She had even pawned all her jewelry and disposable belongings. Nothing remained.

"I'm going to live with my daughter in San Diego, while I get my affairs in order."

"That's nice."

Becky shrugged. "At this late hour, choices are fairly limited. The bank intends to change the locks and board up the windows by the middle of the month."

"What arrangements did you make regarding the property?" It wasn't so much a house as mini-mansion with kidney-shaped swimming pool, wraparound deck and two-car garage.

"Nothing really. A week from Tuesday, I'll set the keys on the kitchen table, close the door behind me and never look back."

The sun was setting casting an even gloomier pall on the soon-to-be-abandoned house situated in a swanky section of Brandenburg just over the Attleboro line. A developer constructed three, split-level capes on a generous acre of land, leaving most of the old-growth timber intact. Becky's home sloped down to wetlands in the rear of the property with a marshy pond that dried up through the late summer months. Pulling into the driveway ten minutes earlier, Ralph noticed the lawn overgrown with crabgrass and dandelions - this in a community where anyone who didn't schedule monthly visits from ChemLawn, was considered pariah! The swanky pool had been drained, the bottom coated with a greenish scum of dead algae and rotting maple leaves. "What did you do after college?" she asked.

"Opened a medical supply business. We sell motorized wheelchairs, hospital beds, inhalation therapy supplies..."

"You've done well?"

"We're staffing a third location next August."

"I chose poorly." Her resignation was palpable. "My husband, may he rest in peace, was a first-class schmuck."

Becky, who was wearing a loose-fitting shift, disappeared into the bedroom where she changed into a blouse and skirt. She powdered her face and even threw on some blush to cover a mild case of acne back to high school which left some residual scarring. "Remember these beauties?" she quipped, placing a hand over her sagging breasts. The tone was humorous, not the least bit salacious.

"I remember," Ralph replied soberly.

"After breastfeeding three daughters, there's been considerable wear and tear."

The bluntness caught him off guard. Becky Steinberg was already pudgy when they first met, but her breasts... Well, there were no proper words to describe God's penultimate creations. Ralph averted his eyes, struggling to collect his thoughts. Upon arriving, he anticipated an older, more matronly woman, but the auburn hair shot through with gray and graffiti of crow's feet littering the corners of her eyes hit like a sucker punch to the gut.

"He had a girlfriend," Becky said.

"Who did?"

"My former husband. Some ditzy twenty-something from the clerical pool. The other woman... she even had the gall to attend the funeral." Becky nodded, confirming the truthfulness

of her account. "A shrimpy brunette with wire-rimmed, granny glasses... the way she carried on at the wake, you might have thought she was the bereaved." "I'd given up on him years earlier," Becky added with an ironic smile, "so in a perverse sort of way, she was."

As she explained things, her daughters wanted their father buried through Stanetsky's Funeral Home in Brookline. Becky preferred a pine box and unmarked grave in the paupers' cemetery. "He left us penniless."

"So what'd you do?"

Becky gestured in the direction of the fireplace where a turquoise plastic urn rested on the oak mantle.

Dust to dust. A few meager cups of chalky powder was all that remained of the formidable lover who stole Becky Steinberg away. There was something unsettling about carrying on a conversation with the deceased's remains six feet away.

Near the bay window a moss green comforter had been draped over a Steinway, baby grand piano. "Do you still play?"

"Not in years."

Ralph recalled a rather eccentric interpretation of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, the melody in the right hand overpowered by booming arpeggios that transformed the lilting tune into a bombastic riot that had more in common with a Scott Joplin rag than classical music. "Come spend a week with me for old time sake. We can pick up where we left off. If nothing comes of it, go live with your daughter in California. No one need know."

Becky said nothing for the better part of a minute. Finally, she took a deep breath letting all the air out in staccato bursts through her thin lips. "I treated you badly, always putting myself first. All you stand to get are the dribs and drabs of a squandered life."

"You were honest to a fault. And anyway, that's all in the past."

Becky lowered her eyes. A Kieninger grandfather clock in the hallway stroked the hour.

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## Epistemology

Ronda Wickford, assistant manager of the Brandenburg Supersaver Grocery Mart, located Scotty Bergeron over by the leafy green vegetables filling a bin of baby carrots. "I need someone to run produce." Scotty continued to spread the individual packages in the refrigerated case. A stocky middle-aged man, his dirty brown hair was still thick but fading to gray at the temples. "There's a generous bump in salary plus benefits," Rhonda added.

What she didn't bother mentioning was that, choking back a fistful of tears, the current produce manager's wife called the previous afternoon to say her husband had been on a bender since the third week in November. Soused. Blotto. Bombed. Plastered. Four sheets to the wind. A distraught family was trying to coax Donovan O'Brien into rehab. Was it rehab or detox? Ronda couldn't recall. And this wasn't the first time; the hard-drinking employee had fallen off the wagon twice before.

Scotty stared at her with a blank expression. "Dewey's next in line for the job. He's got seniority and -"

“Dewey Epstein’s a halfwit who couldn’t tie his shoelaces without a training manual much less manage a produce department.” Rhonda lowered her voice a handful of decibels. “More to the point, since Donovan hit the skids, you’ve been doing three-quarters of his work and all of your own. Anyone with half a brain can see that.”

After Supersaver went union in the early nineteen sixties, it was harder to get rid of troublesome employees like Donovan O’Brien. Worse yet, the change sometimes afforded habitually lazy or unqualified workers leverage when a plum position came available. But Ronda possessed considerable leverage of her own in this particular instance. She wanted to sack Donovan over a month earlier, but the union representative begged her to hold off. He was going to straighten things out with the irascible Irishman, help him put his pathetic life back together. Think wonders. Shit blunders.

Pulling a box cutter out of a back pocket, Scotty slit the tape on a second carton of carrots. He glanced up but only for a split second without bothering to make eye contact. “Yes, I’ll take the job. When do I start?”

“Yesterday morning. I’m making it retroactive to the beginning of the week,” she replied and walked off.

Back in the main office Rhonda told Marna, who handled personnel, to upgrade Scotty to the new position. “Something funny?”

“A philosophy professor in charge of string beans and Brussels sprouts. That’s got to be a first for the market.”

“I thought he worked maintenance at some community college in Minnesota,” Ronda replied. She slid into a swivel chair and fired up the Windows Vista program. “He was a custodian. Twenty-six years.”

“I cleared the references when Scotty applied,” Marna replied, “the man was chairman of the philosophy department at Rutland Community College.”

Ronda watched the computer screen come to life, fleshing itself out with a dozen colorful program icons. Clicking on the Microsoft Excel tab, the circular bluish mouse symbol pulsated, waiting for the spreadsheet to load.

A philosophy professor in charge of string beans and Brussels sprouts. Something had gone haywire. A stickler for details, Ronda would never just assume Scotty was a blue collar stiff. She brought up the accounts receivable invoices and started analyzing expenditures by departments.

Wait a minute! Now she remembered - a trivial incident. The day before Thanksgiving Ronda ran into the new produce manager sipping coffee in the employee lounge. “What a waste,” Scotty muttered.

“Excuse me?” She hadn’t spoken and had no idea what he was referring to. The man gestured toward an electrician in blue coveralls removing a fluorescent light fixture from the dropped ceiling grid. “If it was just a dead bulb, we’d replaced it,” Ronda replied, “but the whole unit’s shot.”

“Yes, but do you see the round compartment in the center of the fixture?” Ronda squinted at the light just as the workman pulled the aluminum housing free of the ceiling, lowering the bulky unit to a second worker standing beside the ladder. “There’s a small ballast resistor that controls the individual lights behind that plate. All the electrician had to do was replace the part, rewire a handful of connections and the light would operate good as new.” Scotty broke a piece

off an apple Danish and washed the sticky dough down with a mouthful of coffee. “Now the store has to junk all that perfectly good metal and spend additional money on a replacement.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Ronda mused. What she opted not to mention was how many thousands of dollars corporate bigwigs routinely threw away on lavish perks and sublime foolishness. She considered herself fairly thick-skinned, but some of the extravagance made her want to retch.

That brief conversation in the employee lounge - yes, that was where she got the cockamamie notion Scotty was the hands-on type rather than an academic. Half an hour later, Marna left to deliver a box of gift cards to customer service. When she was gone, Ronda hurried over to the file cabinet. Fishing through a stack of manila folders, she found what she was looking for:

*Scott B. Bergeron age 58.  
Chairman of the philosophy department  
Rutland Community College, Rutland Minnesota.  
Marital Status: widowed.  
Children: two.*

Ronda skimmed through the references, all glowing tributes to a dedicated academic and educator.

A young Hispanic woman with a spidery hairnet covering her black curls knocked lightly and stuck her head in the door. Ronda crammed the file back in the drawer and slammed the cabinet shut. “Yes, Miriam?”

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Later that night at home Ronda tried to make sense out of fragments of reliable information, hearsay, idle gossip and innuendo she had puzzled together over the previous year regarding the taciturn enigma she had just promoted.

Widowed with two children. The wife was dead. Was it an accident, chronic illness, stroke or fatal heart attack? No one at the market had any right asking what happened. There but for the grace of God... Of course the children would be young adults now. And that business with the ballast resistor – if the man was previously married and paying a mortgage on his own place, he probably took more than just a passing interest in home repairs.

But why would a well-educated person moved half way across the country to end up at an entry level position in a supermarket? A college professor no less! The Supersaver routinely employed retirees to bag groceries, run down errant shopping carts in the parking lot and fulfill other menial positions, but this guy didn’t fit the mold. At fifty-eight he was far too young – too young by a dozen years – to be working for a few lousy bucks over minimum wage, padding a monthly social security check.

And his body language was all wrong. The tight-lipped fellow with the limpid hazel eyes that never quite settled on you for more than a fleeting millisecond, was infuriatingly disengaged. Detached from all the incestuous intrigues and petty bickering endemic to such workplaces. Case in point: in November Adrian Peters, a divorcée from bookkeeping with a stunning figure, invited Scotty over to her place for dinner. The guy thanked Adrian profusely but noted a prior

commitment. Perhaps he did have some other pressing engagement, but Scotty never bothered to follow up on the hospitality by asking for a rain check.

And regarding their brief exchange earlier in the day, Scotty seemed inconvenienced! The serendipitous promotion to produce manager - it didn't make a damn bit of difference. If Ronda had suggested, "Why don't you take my job for the next five years and I'll price baby carrots and unload tractor trailers full of vegetables," he might have just grinned foolishly and stared serenely into space. Like some middle-aged Hindu ascetic who renounces all worldly possessions, abandons wife and family to sit lotus style in a mountain cave contemplating his navel, Scotty Bergeron floated through his twilight years in a bland state of cosmic indifference.

The phone rang. "Hello mother." Ronda slumped down on the living room couch and teased a scrap of lint from her rayon skirt. "That's very sweet of you, but I'm spending the holidays with friends," she lied. "Yes, people I know from the market. Thanks for the invite." She chatted a few minutes longer and lowered the phone back onto the cradle.

Two weeks to Christmas. She had no plans other than to hunker down with a bottle of white wine and the latest Debbie Macomber novel. Ronda was addicted to the knitting series. They were holding the book, which had been out of circulation for weeks, at the front desk of the Brandenburg Public Library.

Last Christmas she was dating someone. That ended badly. Now she was alone and probably better off emotionally. Over the summer, Rhonda had come to the dour conclusion that 'romance' was highly overrated. When things turned ugly, people wielded human affection like a lethal weapon. Cupid's curse - it was an emotion entanglement with potentially homicidal tendencies. What people really needed wasn't love with all its messy excess baggage but common decency. Better they should skip romance altogether and simply be kind to one another.

What to eat? Ronda shuffled to the kitchen and peered into the refrigerator. As store manager she could purchase the freshest vegetables and prime meat cuts on a daily basis. Instead she bought odds and ends from the deli. A quarter pound of Finlandia cheese. Another quarter pound of Boarshead roast beef. A couple of torpedo rolls from the self-serve bins near the bakery. "Will that be all?" The young girl behind the deli counter flashed Ronda a sick smile. What sort of stingy slob buys their meals in such meager quantities? Answer: dirt-poor loners and romantic losers.

Last Christmas when she was hopelessly enthralled by Mr. Wrong, Ronda cooked a teriyaki pork roast tenderloin. She used the pan drippings for marinade which she brushed over the succulent carrots and potatoes. As a side dish she sliced butternut squash together with baking apples- for tantalizing flavor she always bought braeburn, northern or empire—which she heaped together with brown sugar, cinnamon and cranberries. The aromatic concoction went in the oven along side the pork.

For the piece de resistance, Ronda made a special trip five miles across town to an Italian specialty store where she bought a round loaf of panettone, which she cut up in bite-size chunks. She mixed the sweetbread with raisins and vanilla pudding. Scooping the sticky batter into a Teflon cupcake pan, she set the timer for twenty minutes. When the desert came out of the oven Ronda sprinkled rum over the toasted crust and finished the culinary masterpiece with a dollop of whipped cream - the homemade variety, not from an aerosol can.

That's how a woman cooked when she was in love. Or imagined she was before the balmy emotions soured, atrophied, shriveled up and blew away in the chilling late December wind, and she was reduced to a quarter-pound of cheese and roast beef.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Later that night in the bathroom the hot water refused to shut completely. Even when she twisted the knob firmly to the left a thin trickle of water dribbled out of the spout. Prying the plastic cap off the top of the knob with a Phillips screwdriver, she loosened the set screw, lifting the handle away altogether.

No luck! Only the metal stem protruded from the chrome housing. The defective washer was buried on the underside of the unit with no apparent access. Replacing the handle, she went to bed.

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Friday morning Ronda found a message on her answering machine.

*This is the last day we can hold  
the Debbie Macomber book you  
requested before making it readily  
available to our general readership.*

*Respectfully,  
The circulation desk  
Brandenberg Public Library*

At eleven o'clock an elderly lady slipped on a patch of black ice in the Supersaver parking lot. An ambulance had to be called and accident report filled out. After lunch, Ronda sat down – an impromptu meeting – with the New England regional buyer regarding a new distributor for cosmetics. Certain hair care products were being discontinued and a line of new items required shelf space.

The Debbie Macomber book. She made a mental note to swing by the library on her way home. Otherwise, the new release would go back on the shelves. At two in the afternoon, Dwight Epstein stuck his head in the door. "Got a minute?"

Ronda shoved a pile of invoices aside and stared frigidly at the youth. Even his appearance was offensive. Overly tall and disjointed, he seemed ill at ease in his ungainly body. The blond hair sat like a bushy mop on his massive head. Ronda doubted he owned a toothbrush much less a comb.

"Yes, Dwight?"

"I was pretty upset when you promoted Scotty. Not that he ain't a nice enough guy, but, properly understood, I got seniority. What's fair is fair."

What's fair is that you possess the maturity and innate intelligence to perform the entry-level job we originally hired you for. The previous week Dwight forgot to change the setting on his labeling machine and priced kiwi fruit at half the normal cost. Five hundred kiwi flew out the door before one of the girls at the checkout counter realized what was happening.

“As other management openings come available we will keep your name in the mix,” Ronda said. She didn’t bother to explain that placing someone’s name in the running didn’t mean the person received special consideration.

“When do you think that’ll be?”

“Don’t know, Dwight. But you have got to understand that promotions are based on merit. You have to bring certain personal skills to the workplace or it’s just the Peter Principle.”

His rheumy eyes clouded over. “Peter what?”

An unfortunate slip of the tongue. She wasn’t about to explain the facetious proposition that employees in an organization tend to be promoted until they reach their level of incompetence. “When we find a job that’s more suited to your particular talents,” Ronda parried the question, “we can sit down and talk.”

“Yeah, well I hope it ain’t too long. I sure as heck like produce, but I’m not gonna wait around twiddling my thumbs.” The youth shambled out the door. After Dwight was gone Ronda continued to stare morosely at the open doorway for a good half a minute longer.

No other employee at the Supersaver market would have dared talk to her in that tone. Ronda had slogged away ten solid years in the trenches before the promotion to assistant manager. And for that she was eternally grateful. Humbled! What was it with these addle-brained kids? They expected—no, demanded—a standing ovation for arriving to work on time. No need to serve apprenticeships, to work as journeymen perfecting skills. No, it was Dwight Epstein’s manifest destiny to start at the top!

The facetious proposition that employees in an organization tend to be promoted until they reach their level of incompetence. At a Supersaver management seminar held the previous year in Boca Raton, the guest speaker discussed long term costs to businesses when key employees quit and went elsewhere. The company frittered away skill, talent, intelligence, leadership. Intangible assets to be sure, but ones that could mean the difference between a good store and a truly great place to work.

Democracy was the great equalizer. It leveled the playing field for dolts like Dwight Epstein threatening to dumb everyone down to a uniformed mediocrity. But that would never happen while Ronda was assistant manager. She viewed herself as a benevolent autocrat. Fair. Dispassionate. An unbiased decision maker. The Peter Principle be damned! She would make sure, that Dwight Epstein’s long-term future at Supersaver reflected the man’s intrinsic worth to the company.

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A scheduling glitch in the deli department kept Ronda at work till past seven. She drove straight for the library A massive building constructed of granite blocks, the Brandenburg Library was originally built in eighteen sixty-five. When it was renovated a few years back, the architect cleverly arranged to retain many of the building’s original features. The vestibule in the entryway sported an elaborate mosaic design, the tile imported from Genoa. Mahogany wainscoting wrapped around the walls with a matching gingerbread trim nearer the ceiling.

Only a few yards from the circulation desk, she pulled up dead in her tracks. In a reading room off the periodical section, Scotty Bergeron was hunkered down at an oak table. A hardcover book lay open in front of him. Half a minute passed. Reaching up with his right hand he flipped to the next page but only briefly before lowering it back where it originally lay.

Moving quietly forward, Ronda went directly to the circulation desk. "You're holding a book for me."

"Name please." Before she could reply the front door flew open as though smashed by a battering ram and a bearded man in his early sixties staggered into the library. Disheveled with matted hair and glassy eyes, he spun about unsteadily. Almost from the moment the fellow appeared, the air reeked of cheap booze and rancid body odor.

"Excuse me." The librarian stepped out from behind the counter. "I'll have to ask you to leave." She spoke in a papery-thin officious tone.

"That so?" The man's mouth sagged open and his eyes gawked about the room without focusing on any particular object.

"You're obviously drunk," her voice rose to a strained falsetto, "and this is totally unacceptable."

"I'm drunk and you're a pain in the ass, but I don't hold that against you."

The drunk staggered off in the direction of the stairwell leading up to the second floor landing where the children's books were located, but before he reached the first riser a sturdy hand snaked around the man's shoulder pulling him back. "Hey, Frankie."

The fellow blinked twice then draped both arms around Scotty Bergeron's waist in a fierce bear hug. "Didn't expect to see you here."

"It's getting late," Scotty said, "and the library closing in fifteen minutes." Propping the man upright, he coaxed the drunk back toward the foyer of the building. "Might as well head out together."

When they were gone, the librarian noted, "That's a sad case. The man served in Vietnam during the late sixties. Came back from the war all screwed up. Frankie Manning. His name shows up on the police blotter at least twice a month for disorderly conduct, drunkenness, loitering. He finds his way in here at least a couple of times each month. We just call the police and they swing by to collect him."

"Does he live local?"

"The Veterans Administration got him a place over at Chelmsford Arms."

Chelmsford Arms – a glamorous name for low-rent housing, mostly one bedroom efficiency apartments over on the east side of town that catered to welfare types, recovering alcoholics and younger people on disability pensions. Scotty Bergeron lived there, which would explain how he was on familiar terms with the bearded man. But Scotty certainly wasn't a down-and-outer. So why was he renting in a crappy flophouse, consorting with mentally defectives and the likes of Frankie Manning? Nothing made any sense.

"I can help you now." Having returned to her post behind the circulation desk, the receptionist was gesturing at Ronda.

She didn't hear a word the woman said. Rather, her eyes were drawn to the quarter-sawn, white oak table in the reading room where a bulky text lay open. A woman with a toddler in tow pushed past her and deposited a load of children's books on the polished counter. Ronda meandered unobtrusively into the reading room where she collected the abandoned text, tucking it in the crook of her left arm.

"Wittgenstein," the librarian pressed a date stamp onto a paper flap pasted to the inside cover, "will be due back in three weeks."

"Excuse me?" In her haste, she hadn't even bothered to glance at the title.

The librarian pointed at the bulky tome Ronda was holding. "Your philosophy book."



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Ronda rushed home, took a quick shower and brushed her teeth. Drip. Drip. Drip. The pitter-patter of tepid water even more insistent now, the leaky bathroom faucet had noticeably worsened. She'd call her plumber in the morning.

Ronda massaged an Oil of Olay moisturizer into the crow's feet feathering the outer edges of her eyes. The woman first noticed the unflattering filigree when she hit the big three-0. In a mild panic, Ronda bought Frownies—packaged all-natural strips impregnated with a secret revitalizing emollient—that she plastered on either side of her face at night before going to bed. The rationale was that the strips would 'retrain' the facial muscles, help the aging tissue regain its youthful vigor and firmness. One day in late August as she was driving to work, the assistant manager glanced in the rearview mirror and spied a beige strip of tape dangling from her right cheek. Later that evening, she threw the Frownies box along with a full three-week supply of rejuvenating strips in the trash.

In her prime, Ronda Wickford had always been reasonably attractive. High cheekbones and a dainty chin were framed by a swirl of jet black hair. It didn't matter if she let the dense strands cascade down to the small of her back or nipped them in a jaunty pageboy. Either way, the effect was stunning. Now the aristocratic cheekbones had settled like a slightly tipsy structure searching for bedrock. And the irresistibly cute chin had a mate that Ronda air brushed away each morning with various shades of powdery cosmetics.

The book Scotty was hunched over in the reading room of the Brandenburg Public Library was a collection of essays discussing the linguistic philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Facts exist in what Wittgenstein calls "logical space" Logical space is effectively the realm of everything that is logically possible. For instance, though it is not true that Toronto is the capital of Canada, there is nothing illogical about supposing that it might be, so its possibility exists in logical space. Some items in logical space (for instance, "Ottawa is the capital of Canada") are true, while some items in logical space are false. True or false, everything in logical space is possible. "Love is purple" is not an item in logical space, because it is not logically possible (love is not the kind of thing to which we can ascribe a color).

"This is nuts!" Ronda fumed. "Pure and simple."

Love was not something that could be assigned a color. Sure, that made sense. But in life, nothing was ever what it seemed to be. Love could make a jilted soul feel blue with misery or blood red with homicidal rage. So how did the human heart factor into the equation? Or did the illustrious Herr Professor Wittgenstein conveniently ignore that ephemeral organ?

The world is "the totality of facts, not of things", which is to say the world is the totality of lit light bulbs, not of power sources.

"Okay," Ronda mused. "That's a bit hard to digest but perfectly manageable." Sitting alone in your comfy condo thinking about sex was not quite the same as what Wittgenstein might describe as "the totality of facts", which was a rather insipid way of saying that fornication -

raunchy, hedonistic, libidinous sex - had distinct physical and emotional advantages over its cerebral counterpart.

The phone rang. It was her mother. "Yes, I still have plans for Christmas." The conversation limped along for another fifteen minutes. Ronda's father needed a hernia repair. Nothing serious. The doctor would schedule him sometime after the beginning of the year. Married Thirty-five years, Aunt Thelma was considering divorce. She wanted a new life. A few years shy of social security and Medicare, Aunt Thelma wanted to reinvent herself - ditch Uncle Morty with his smelly cigars and penchant for soft porn videos. According to Thelma, he rented at least three or four a week from the cable TV network.

So you give you not-so-perfect spouse the bum's rush. For what? To end in a one-bedroom condo with a refrigerator stocked with quarter pounds of stale deli meats and cheeses? Nobody bothered to enlighten Aunt Thelma that sometimes, according to Wittgenstein, True Love is not an item in logical space.

Signs are given meaning through their use in propositions, so it follows that if a sign is used in two different ways we are actually dealing with two different signs. For instance, the "is" in "John is tall" is different from the "is" in "John is the captain of the guard."

Ronda Wickford "is" the current manager of the Brandenburg Supersaver Grocery Mart. That very same Ronda "is" also an unmitigated idiot who drove to the library for the sole purpose of picking up Debbie Macomber's latest bestseller, but brought home the Wittgenstein compendium.

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"Scotty Bergeron - where's he live?" Rhonda tried to affect an unassuming tone. Not that she didn't already know the answer.

Marna who was running a stack of forms through the copier, looked up. "That cheesy factory complex that was renovated into affordable housing off Busby Street." She snapped her fingers together, a repetitive motion, trying to conjure up the name.

"Chelmsford Arms," Ronda volunteered.

"Why the sudden interest?"

Ronda told her about the incident at the library.

Marna removed the original from the copier, adding it to the pile. "Can't hardly imagine," she mused, "why a guy like Scotty would be schmoozing with mental defectives and stumblebums."

"Probably saved the drunk a trip to the pokey." Ronda left the office and went directly to the produce department. A pimply-faced teenager was sorting five-pound bags of Idaho potatoes. "Where's Scotty?"

"Out on the loading dock. Eighteen wheeler just pulled in."

Ronda doubled back to the office to grab her coat. The temperature overnight had dropped to sixteen degrees with a wind chill of minus two. Out on the loading platform she found the truck pulled up snug to the cement platform with the rear door ajar. Scotty Bergeron was examining a bill of lading, while Dwight pulled cardboard boxes and thin wooden crates from a tall stack buried deep in the bowels of the container.

“You taught philosophy at the community college in Minnesota?” Puffs of steamy air like miniature clouds escaped her mouth as she spoke.

Scotty glanced at her distractedly then turned to Dwight. “What’s in those boxes?”

Dwight pulled back on a two-wheeler stacked chest-high with a green leafy vegetable. “Lettuce,” he mumbled, obviously unhappy with the extreme weather. “Romaine.”

Scotty kneeled down on the muddy bed of the truck and tore an emerald-colored leaf from one of the boxes. “That’s escarole not romaine.” He penciled a notation on the bill of lading.

“Yeah, I knew that,” the youth shot back indignantly.

Staggering forward under the heavy load, Dwight headed off in the direction of the warehouse. When he was gone, Scotty turned to Ronda. “Yes, I taught philosophy. Epistemology. That was my specialty.”

“Which is?”

“From the Greek episteme, knowledge. The study of the nature, sources and limits of knowledge.”

“Quite a mouthful,” Ronda remarked with a dry smile. “So what are you doing out here on the loading platform with the likes of Dwight Epstein, when you could be in a toasty warm classroom ministering to fawning graduate students.”

The man hauled down a column of boxes with similar markings, stacking the produce off to one side. Dwight returned looking utterly morose. Scotty loaded up the two-wheeler then helped him tip the hand cart at a sharp angle. Ronda noted that the boy’s jacket was much too thin for the frigid New England weather.

“In a warped sort of way,” he finally replied after making another entry on the paperwork, “dealing with Dwight presents even more of a challenge than a classroom full of precocious preppies.”

Ronda felt her brain going numbed, as much from the bone-chilling dampness in the carcass of the container truck as the pointless conversation. She stamped her feet vainly trying to restore some semblance of circulation to the frozen flesh. “My bathroom faucet leaks.”

“How’s that?”

Ronda told him about the incessant drip and how she had tried to fix it. When she finished Scotty said, “The damaged washer sits below on the bottom side of the unit.”

Putting the clipboard aside, he disappeared into the warehouse and returned momentarily with a vise grip. “Lock this onto the rectangular base and ease the wrench counterclockwise to break the seal.” “The rubber washer will be located on the underside of the shaft. Make sure that when you - ”

Before he could finish Dwight returned dragging the two-wheeler haphazardly behind him. “I’m going on break,” he muttered.

“Yes, that’s fine. There isn’t that much left. We can finish with it after.” Dwight shambled off.

“Right is tight. Left is loose. Just remember that. When you free the washer unit just take it to a hardware store so they can match up the replacement.” “Now let’s get out of here.” Scott tucked the pencil behind his right ear and moved toward the protective warmth of the warehouse.

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After lunch Ronda called the Borders book store at the Emerald Square Mall. “The new Debbie Macomber novel. I was wondering - ”

“Yes,” the salesgirl cut her off in mid-sentence. “A very hot item!”

“Could you please put a copy aside for me.”

“That won’t be necessary. We have dozens on display in the front of the store and boxes more in the back room.”

“Yes, I’m sure you do,” she returned curtly. “My name is Ronda Wickford. Please put one aside at customer service, and I’ll be by to get it shortly after five.”

As she was hanging up the phone, Scotty appeared. “Here’s the invoice from that eighteen wheeler.” He laid the paperwork on her desk. “By the way, make sure to shut off the water supply before you loosen the faucet.”

“I didn’t when I removed the handle and nothing leaked.”

The man scratched an earlobe. “That’s because the water pressure is below the housing.”

Ronda felt her cheeks flush. “And where do I find the water supply?”

“Under the sink you’ll see a pair of shut-off valve.” Scotty nodded and went back to his department.

Epistemology. The study of the nature, sources and limits of knowledge. Knowing about the water supply lines – an innocuous detail – had just averted a potential disaster.

Saturday afternoon Ronda tackled the leaky sink. Removing the handle, she studied the chrome base. A raised rectangular piece of metal snaked around the rusty stem. She adjusted the vise grip until it was mated to the protruding section and locked the wrench in place.

Shut the plumbing supply line! Dear God! She almost forgot the most important step. Ronda dropped down on her haunches and fished about under the sink, locating the valves. Right is tight, left is loose. She shut both hot and cold for good measure.

Gripping the vise grip with both hands, she pushed back to the left. Nothing budged. She leaned into the fitting with all her weight, but the tool didn’t moved, not even a fraction of an inch. On the third try, she felt a subtle give, a relenting of some pent up tension in the mechanism and the threaded tubing slid noiselessly in a circular direction.

Ronda felt a heady surge of adrenalin, an exuberant rush of joy. That was it! The unit was free. No need for additional leverage, she removed the vise grip and unscrewed the wobbly stem by hand. Lifting it free of the sink, she turned the grimy metal upside-down. Buried in the bottom of the stem was a badly bruised and disfigured rubber washer.

At the hardware store, a willowy sales clerk - he couldn’t have been much older than Ronda’s fifteen year old nephew - replaced the damaged washer. “That’ll be a quarter.”

“A quarter?” Ronda fumbled with her change purse. “Somehow I thought it would be more expensive.”

The skinny boy smiled good-naturedly. “It’s just a rubber washer, lady.”

“I noticed that the one you sold me is thicker and shaped differently.”

The boy leaned across the counter. “Your old washer was probably the same thickness when new.” He ran a finger over the outside edge of the new purchase. “The convex shape is just an improved design.”

The world is "the totality of facts, not of things", which is to say the world is the totality of lit light bulbs, not of power sources.

Later that night as she was getting ready for bed, a revelation occurred to Ronda. The properly functioning bathroom sink resembled a lit light bulb in that something had to happen in the finite, real world before the abstraction of a damaged washer was resolved. Now, not only did the water shut off completely, but the unnerving drip, drip, drip ceased altogether long before the handle reached to the far side of the sink. Ludwig Wittgenstein, may he rest in peace, could surely have seen the humor in that.

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“Won’t need this anymore.” Ronda handed Scotty back the vise grips.

“How did you make out?”

She told him about fixing the sink. “What type of philosophy did you specialize in?”

“Wrote my dissertation on linguistics, but I also gave several courses each year on logical positivism. “

“That’s a mouthful.”

“Logical positivism asserts that all we can ever truly know are things grasped immediately with any of the five sense.”

Ronda picked a Bartlett pear from the bin and raised it to eye level. “It you see it, feel it, taste it, the thing exists.”

Scotty smirked then patted his chapped hands lightly in silent applause. “The statement, ten thousand angels can dance on the head of a pin, may be an interesting from a theoretical standpoint but is unverifiable.”

“Santa Clause lives at the North Pole,” Ronda offered.

Scotty’s smile broadened. “Funny you should bring that up this time of the year.” His expression grew more sober. “The logical positivists would suggest that both statements are frivolous because they can’t be proven, but there’s an inherent flaw with their own argument.”

“Which is?”

“The foundation of their philosophical system is built on an a priori abstraction.”

Ronda’s brain fogged over. “You’re losing me.”

“According to the logical positivists, only that which can be verified empirically by one or more of the five senses is real.”

“Yes, you already said that.”

“The statement: ‘Only that which can be validated by one or more of the five senses is real.’ is an abstraction no better or worse than the one about angels dancing on the head of a pin.”

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For Christmas Ronda visited the Pit Stop Diner in downtown Brandenburg. No reservations required. Also, no fear of running into any of her coworkers or neighbors from the condo complex. They would all be at home with family or away visiting friends.

Except for a few elderly who had hobbled over from the senior high-rise, the diner was empty. The place smelled of fresh-baked turkey, mulled cider and sweet potatoes. Ronda slid onto a stool at the counter. A waitress approached, arranging silverware, and placing a glass of water on the Formica counter.

“The holiday special will be fine.” Ronda handed the menu back to the woman. The door opened and the bearded veteran who had staggered into the library the previous week lingered in the entryway. He looked sober and physically pulled together, but then it was only twelve-thirty. Scanning the room, his eyes came to rest on Ronda sitting at the counter.

“You mind?” He slid onto the stool directly to her left.

“No, not all.” The food arrived and she lowered her head.

“Don’t make no trouble, Frankie,” the waitress spoke with mock severity. “I got my eye on you.”

“It’s Christmas,” he returned in a soft, even tone. “I ain’t in no trouble making mood.” She took his order and went off to the kitchen.

Jekyll and Hyde. The Vietnam vet with his elbows resting easily on the counter was not the same wild man flailing about in the Brandenburg Library. His flannel shirt and Docker slacks were perfectly clean if somewhat wrinkled, and the only disagreeable odor emanating from his body was stale tobacco. “I remember you from somewhere but can’t put a time or a place on it.”

“The Brandenburg Library last Friday night.” Ronda sliced a piece of turkey breast, dipped it in the brown gravy and raised the fork to her mouth.

The man groaned and ran a calloused hand over his face. “Not one of my better nights.” The waitress returned with coffee. “As I vaguely remember, a friend had to help me home.”

“Scotty Bergeron.”

He gawked at her in mild surprise. “You know him?”

“We work together at the market.”

The man nodded and sipped at the coffee. The waitress returned and placed his dinner on the counter. Hunching over the steamy food, Frankie Manning turned his full attention to Christmas dinner and didn’t say another word until the plate was empty, the last streak of gravy wiped away with the remnants of a buttered bun. “Too bad about Scotty’s wife,” he said shaking his head with a somber expression.

The casual remark caught Ronda off guard. “He’s widowed but I’m not familiar with the details.”

“Hit and run. Some joker in a half-ton pickup ran her down like a stray dog.”

“How awful.”

“DUI. It was the guy’s eighth offense. After the funeral, Scotty took a leave of absence from the university. Hardly ever left the house except to pick up a few things to eat.”

“The college sent a chaplain over to visit. God’s appointed servant was spouting some moronic nonsense about how it was divine destiny that the poor woman got mangled and how Scotty ought to come to terms with the senseless tragedy.” He cleared his throat and fixed Ronda with a malicious grin. “Then the chaplain began preaching some gobbledygook about being washed in the blood of the lamb, and that’s when Scotty sort of lost it.”

“Lost it?”

“Went ballistic. Postal. Wiped the living room floor with the Catholic cleric.” Pulling a wallet from his shirt pocket, Frankie peeled several bills from a clump and placed them on the counter next to his plate. “When he got out of the hospital, the priest didn’t press charges. A month later Scotty sold his three-bedroom colonial and moved east.” He gulped down the last of the coffee. “Don’t you just love a story with a happy ending,” The vet rose and turned to leave.

“Merry Christmas,” Ronda finally blurted. “And all the best in the New Year!”

“Ditto.”

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On Wednesday of the following week a woman from the deli counter announced that she was pregnant and going out on maternity leave the middle of June. There would be ample time to recruit and train a replacement. In the late afternoon one of the part-timers, a high school girl, had an anxiety attack, hyperventilating and sobbing uncontrollably. On Christmas day shortly after passing out presents, the girl's parents announced they getting divorced. Happy Holiday! Ronda made her lie down on a sofa in the employee lounge and breath into a paper bag, while she called the girl's mother.

At dusk snow started falling. The weather channel was predicting a little over a foot of heavy white stuff by midnight. Ronda had just renewed the contract with the plowing company. They would wait until closing when the parking lot emptied out to begin the clean up.

Dwight Epstein stopped by "Any news?"

Ronda, who was typing up some notes for an administrative staff meeting, withdrew her fingers from the keyboard. "Last Wednesday you didn't showed up for work," she replied icily. "Never called in your absence. That's the third time in as many months you've dropped off the radar screen with no reasonable explanation."

"Grandmother died," he mumbled with a hurt expression.

"Which one?"

"What?"

"Was that your father's or you mother's parent?"

Dwayne began to fidget, rubbing his hands on the side of his hips. His features clouded over. He poked his tongue in the left side of his mouth causing the cheek to bulge freakishly. "Mother's."

Ronda tapped the snooze button on the computer keyboard and watched the screen fade to black. In no great hurry, she rose and drifted over to the file cabinet, extracting a manila folder. Pulling a half sheet of paper from the folder, she waved it in front of Dwight's nose. "Says here you took bereavement time on February eighteenth of last year because your mother's mother passed away."

"Not so!" he muttered indignantly. "Someone must of screwed up the message."

"Last Wednesdays, we had to pull Trudy Rabinowitz from dairy to help Scotty keep his shelves stocked." What she didn't bother to mention was that Scotty was so impressed with the girl that he asked if Ronda might consider transferring Dwight elsewhere and letting him keep Trudy permanently in produce.

Yes, Ronda would do just that!

With an inch-thick wad of letters of reprimand in Dwight's folder, the assistant manager could 'transfer' Dwight straight to unemployment, tell him to clear out his locker and vacate the premises without the least concern that he would ever collect a penny of benefits from unemployment.

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"That nice Jewish girl, Trudy, is moving to produce the middle of next month."

Scotty ran his pricing gun over a row of prepackaged sliced mushrooms. "Then you found another job for Dwight."

"A position that uniquely suits him," Ronda confirmed. "Got any plans for Christmas?"

"I think you might be off by the better part of a week."

“Not necessarily.” Ronda stepped closer and tapped him on the forearm. “According to Wittgenstein, facts exist in ‘logical space’, which is the realm of everything that is logically possible.”

Scotty, who was holding a blue carton of mushrooms, put the vegetables aside and didn’t respond for a good long time. “Yes, that’s so.”

“For instance,” Ronda continued, “though it is not true that Toronto is the capital of Canada, there is nothing illogical about supposing that it might be at some future time.”

“I think I can see where this is going.” The words tumbled from his lips in slow motion.

“If I were to cook a teriyaki pork tenderloin roast with baked potatoes, an apple, cranberry and butternut squash casserole along with bourbon glazed panettone topped with whipped cream, then January second - not the twenty-fifth of December could be the bearded fat man in the red suit’s special day.”

“Christmas in January.” There was a look in his eyes she had never seen before. A subtle relenting, like when the vise grip slipped effortlessly to the left and the unnerving task was done. Scotty picked up the price gun and slapped a barrage of ivory stickers on the next row of packaged mushrooms. “I’ll bring the wine.”

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## No Bear, no Forest

Around two in the afternoon an olive-skinned girl wandered down to the lake and started skipping stones across the placid water. One of the rocks almost struck Lester McSweeney’s plastic bobber. “Would you please stop doing that?”

The girl scowled then came and stood next to him. She wore tan shorts and a crisp white blouse. The face was finely chiseled with a broad sweep of delicate, ebony eyebrows. “Catch anything?” Lester reeled in, the line weighted down by a slimy tangle of vegetation. “Almost.”

“I don’t see any fish so I’ll assume you’re having a crappy day.” The girl, who spoke with a thick guttural accent, turned and stared at him impudently. The way she sauntered about, hands on hips, one might have thought she owned Lake Winnepesaukee, all the guest cabins and the humpbacked mountain range off to the east.

Lester adjusted the bobber so that the leader hung six inches lower. Having finished threading a fresh worm on the hook, he cast the line out over the water. The bobber skidded several times and came to rest near a patch of water lilies. A light breeze skimmed across the water nudging the lifeless bobber toward a rotted stump. If the hook snagged a submerged root, Lester would lose his gear, not to mention losing face with the obnoxious girl. “You see that cove off to the left?” He pointed to a curved section of shoreline fifty feet away. A ridge of emerald algae rimmed the water, which was dappled with a profusion of ivory water lilies. “I hooked a huge pickerel about twenty minutes ago, but he leaped clear of the water and threw the hook.”

The pickerel was the biggest fish Lester had ever seen—a foot longer than the blue fish he snagged in Buzzards Bay on the Cape Cod Canal. A veritable monster, Lester played him



expertly with just the right amount of drag, understanding full well that to try and haul the feisty fish in without weakening him first would have been foolhardy. But, in the end, it didn't matter. He lost the fish in the shallows no more than thirty feet from shore.

The girl scratched an earlobe. "So the fish got away?" Lester nodded. "No one else saw it?"

"Besides a collection of noisy bullfrogs and a painted turtle, no." For the first time since the pesky girl arrived, Lester gave her the once over, eyeballing her up and down. Her hair was jet black and close cropped. The olive skin was darkened, deep baked in a permanent, year-round tan. Everything about her was clean, concise and economical. He couldn't decide if she was modestly pretty or infuriatingly plain.

The girl smiled as though at some private joke, but it was not a particularly pleasant expression. "*Lo doobim v'lo ya'ar.*" Lester's mouth fell open.

"There was no bear and there was no forest," the girl translated. "It's a Hebrew expression."

Lester wished the girl would go away. Far away. To another galaxy. Instead she prattled on in her coarse, mannish voice. "A fellow wanders into the forest and is attacked by a ferocious bear. He has no weapon—no gun, knife, not even a flimsy stick to defend himself. In desperation, he punches, kicks, bites and gouges until the wild beast finally runs away. Then the fellow hurries back to town and tells everyone who will listen about his magnificent adventure."

"My name is Tovah Moshel. I am staying in Cabin 34B, if you care to visit." Her pretty hips rocking from side to side, the girl sauntered off down the gravel path toward the guests' living quarters.

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Later that evening the McSweeneys and Moshels sat at a rustic table in the main dining room of the Lake Winnepesaukee resort. The girl had a younger brother, Ari, about the same age as Lester's sister, and the two children immediately struck up a friendship. Meals were served family style - bowls of mashed potatoes flavored with cheddar cheese, string beans and baked chicken spread out across the center of the table. Mr. Moshel, a thin, fair-skinned man with the wistful, far off look of a poet or anarchist, had trouble cutting his chicken.

"Did you remember to take your medicine, Moishe?" Mrs. Moshel asked. She was a pretty woman, dark like her daughter but with a warm, engaging smile.

"Yes, I took the pills." The man's hands were trembling badly as he raised a slice of chicken to his mouth. He chewed at an odd angle, his chin tilted to one side, as though all his inner resources were focused on masticating the meat without choking to death. When he finally swallowed, Mr. Moshel turned to Lester. "Very tasty, don't you think?" Whatever was wrong with him physically hadn't effected either his sense of humor or appetite.

All the while, Tovah ignored everyone; she cleaned her plate and took a second helping of beans and mashed potatoes. The girl said something to her mother in rapid-fire Hebrew and Mrs. Moshel replied, "It is impolite to speak in a foreign language when other people are present." In response, her daughter spoke again in her native tongue. Her father smiled and shook his head.

Later back in their cabin Mrs. McSweeney said, "That poor Israeli, did you see how his hands tremble?"

Her husband wagged his head from side to side but had nothing to say. Lester was sitting at the kitchen table cleaning his spinning reel. His plan was to head out early in a small rowboat that was pulled up on the sand and look for the thirty-six inch pickerel. There was no bear and there was no forest. The Israeli girl's dismissive sarcasm stuck like a jagged bone in his craw. Just because no one was present to see the fish didn't mean it didn't exist. It was not like he lied, pretended that he actually caught it.

Mrs. McSweeney wandered to the screen door and stared out into the darkness. A powdery moth crashed into the wire mesh and flitted away. "I ran into Mrs. Moshel in the ladies' room. She confided that her husband has this rare, incurable disease. The poor man! He can't work or do much of anything these days."

"Probably came here for medical treatment," the husband added and took a sip of lemonade. Mrs. McSweeney started straightening up the room. "Yes, I would imagine." She came up behind Lester and watched as he smeared a generous glob of grease onto the main gear sprocket and began closing up the casing on his fishing reel. "The daughter's pretty, don't you think?"

"Not my type." He eased the handle forward until the metal line guide clicked into place then continued to work the reel for another dozen or so revolutions. The action was buttery smooth.

"So what's wrong with the girl?" his father pressed.

"Not my type," Lester repeated dully and left the room.

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Setting the alarm for six, Lester was fully dressed and out of the cabin in less than half an hour. The row boat would surely be where he spotted it the previous day near the cove. If he could catch the pickerel - not just any respectable fish but that three-foot brute and mother-of-all-game-fish, Lester McSweeney would march right over to Cabin 34B and lay the angler's trophy on the front stoop.

Yes, Tovah Moshel, there was a bear! Not that he had anything to prove, but the Israeli girl had figuratively tweaked his nose and the only reasonable response was probably lurking under a bed of water lilies fifty feet out in a scenic New Hampshire lake.

In May Lester and his father fished South Cape Beach in Mashpee. Lester bought a special lure for the occasion, a Rebel, Wind-Cheater Minnow. You didn't just cast the six-inch Wind-Cheater and retrieve it like a conventional lure. Savvy fishermen used a special 'rip and stop' action to mimic the behavior of a wounded bait fish struggling to regain its swimming form. Surfcasting from the sandy beach, the youth hooked a four-pound striper that fought him like a demon. The picture his father took of Lester with the bass was framed and perched on his bedroom bureau.

Lester flipped his Red Sox baseball cap around so the visor was facing backwards. When he reached the water's edge the rowboat was gone. Who besides a hard-core fishing enthusiast would be on the lake this early in the morning? He scanned the shoreline.

"Crap!" Thirty feet out in the cove the Israeli girl was rowing at a leisurely pace. "What a royal pain in the ass!" Lester decided to cut his losses and slink back to the cabin. Too late! Tovah Moshel was waving energetically. Pulling hard with both oars, the girl resumed rowing into the sandy beach.

"Were you planning to go out in the boat?"

“Well, sort of but ...” He didn’t want to commit one way or the other.

“It wasn’t a trick question. Either you’d like to use the boat or not.”

There it was again—that peremptory, autocratic tone. Lester didn’t know what he wanted anymore. This boorish girl confounded his brain, pulverized his thinking processes into mental mush. “Yes. I would like to use the boat, if you don’t mind.”

“Well, then, I’ll join you. Help you fish.”

Lester stared at her morosely. “Fishing is a solitary pursuit. It’s not like playing baseball or ballroom dancing.”

“Of course not.”

“Let me get my gear situated.” The plan was to row slowly back and forth as close to the lilies as feasible to entice the pickerel out. Conditions were ideal. The water was calm with early morning temperatures in the low seventies. It wouldn’t stay this cool for long, though. Tovah sat at the stern of the rowboat next to the rod. “It’s a good day to get a tan, don’t you think?”

“Yes I guess so.”

The girl sprawled out, her pretty legs askew and slender chin tilted up to catch the sun. Fifteen minutes passed. “Shouldn’t you have caught something by now?”

“It doesn’t work that way.” They had already made a full pass around the outer perimeter of the cove and Lester was directing the prow toward the deeper water nearer the center.

“What’s that?” The girl said, indicating a well-thumbed paperback wedged beneath a jumble of nylon leaders and lead weights. She reached into the tackle box and wriggled the book free.

The artwork on the cover depicted a band of cowboys riding through rugged hill country somewhere in the Midwest. A huge lake or river loomed in the far distance framed by a handful of scraggly pine trees. “Louis L’Amour,” Lester said. “He’s just about the greatest Western writer in the whole world.”

“Cowboys and Indians.” She tossed the book dismissively back into the box. “*Shtooyoat!*”

“And what exactly does that mean?”

“*Shtooyoat!*” repeated with the same gruff insistence. “Childish nonsense!”

A person could blaspheme God almighty—spit in the face of the Virgin Mary—but, where Lester McSweeney was concerned, you couldn’t say a bad word about Louis L’Amour. He’d read the collected short stories and frontier tales from cover to cover plus all four Hopalong Cassidy novels. Lester was halfway through the saga of the Sackett clan, averaging a book a month.

Just about everything the boy knew about life—betrayal, greed, sacrifice, courage and cowardice—he’d gleaned from his cowboy books. Lester was trying his damndest to think of something insulting to cut the snippy foreigner down to size, but all he could manage was, “Louis L’Amour’s the smartest guy I know. He’s my hero.” Almost before he opened his mouth, Lester regretted his words. The remark sounded stupid. Utterly childish and inane. *Shtooyoat!*

“Ever kissed a girl?”

His mind went blank. “What?”

The Israeli sat up now and stared at him. “Have you ever smooched, sucked face, French kissed, got it on?”

“Well, yes.”

“How many times.” she pressed.

A dragon fly flitted across the bow of the small boat and settles on the golden centerpiece of a lily. Its transparent wings were tattooed with a delicate fabric of veins. Lester was feeling dizzy, lightheaded from all the rowing and the rising humidity. "I don't know. A half dozen times."

Tovah let a hand slip over the side and scooped up a handful of water. Her expression was neutral, utterly impassive. "We went to a restaurant Sunday night." She directed her remarks at the dragon fly. "My mother ordered boiled lobster, a delicacy we seldom see in the Middle East. When you answered a moment ago, your cheeks turned the same color as the lobster's shell." Only now did she look him full in the face. "Why did you lie? Why couldn't you just say, 'No, I never kissed a girl.'?"

The boy could feel his cheeks burning even hotter than a moment earlier. This was too much! Lester threw the oars aside and began reeling in the line as fast as he could. He had to get rid of this deranged Semite.

There was no middle ground. You couldn't fish. You couldn't just laze about in a rowboat. You couldn't –

"Ask me."

He stowed his gear in the bottom of the boat and was pulling for shore with choppy, visceral strokes. "Ask you what?"

"If I ever kissed a boy."

No, he wasn't going to play this foolish game. They were less than fifty feet from shore. Lester would haul the boat up a good ten feet from the waterline, tie the mooring rope to a bush - a double half hitch to show the arrogant Israeli that he knew something about knot tying, if nothing else, and storm off. No goodbyes, no small talk, no nothing.

"As a matter of fact," she answered her own question, "I never kissed a boy. Not yet, anyway. And needless-to-say, I'm still a virgin." She made a disagreeable face. "Now was that so hard?"

Lester gave one last pull on the oars and let the boat glide the last few feet into the sandy shallows. "Congratulations on both counts."

Tovah watched him secured the nylon rope. She tore a sprig of purple lupine from the side of the trail and twirled the wildflower under her nose. "My father can't control his hands. They shake quite badly." She spoke in a casual, off-hand manner. "Sometimes I have to cut his food, help him with his socks or button a sweater. But I don't do these things in public."

Lester had already turned away and was headed in the direction of the visitor cabins. He pulled up abruptly. "He has some rare, incurable disease. Your mother mentioned it."

"A medical condition... is that what she said?" The Israeli girl sighed and threw the flower away. "Sugar-coated lies are so much easier to swallow than bitter truths."

Lester turned and came back to where the girl was now sitting in the beached rowboat. "Yes, I did hook a 36-inch pickerel over there in the cove, but the stupid fish got away. No, I never had sex or kissed a girl either." He climbed in and sat opposite. "Now will you tell me why your father's hands shake so badly?"

Fifteen minutes later, after Tovah Moshel had answered Lester's impertinent question, the boy leaned forward and kissed her on the lips—a drawn out, sweet, annihilating gesture. "We're both still virgins, but at least that's out of the way."

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At three o'clock in the afternoon the Wasserman family arrived. They drove up to the resort office in a brand new Lincoln Continental. Lester, who had accompanied his sister to the shuffleboard court, watched the family pile out of the fancy car. The mother, a pear shaped woman with calves as thick as bowling pins, had difficulty prying her rump out of the passenger seat. The father was also huge, well over six feet with a pendulous gut. A Cuban cigar wedged in the corner of his fleshy mouth, he was decked out in Bermuda shorts and a garish Hawaiian shirt. The son, who looked to be a year or two older than Lester, was quite handsome with a mop of black hair and bushy eyebrows that offset his pallid complexion.

"Hey, I like your beanies!" Sylvia shouted.

Both father and son were wearing Jewish skullcaps. The father scowled at her before lumbering into the motel office to announce their arrival.

"Cripes, Sylvia!"

Later that evening, the Wassermans sat opposite the McSweeneys and Moshels at the supper table. "Hey, boychik," Mr. Wasserman was staring straight at Lester. "Do you think the rain will hurt the rhubarb?" Lester's lips were moving furiously but no audible sound escaped his lips. "What about you, Morris?" He turned to his son. "Rain gonna damage the North American rhubarb crop this year?"

Like the straight man in a comedy routine, the boy delivered his punch line without missing a beat. "Not if it's in cans."

"Enough with the corny jokes, Herbert." Mrs. Wasserman chided.

The food, pasta with meatballs and a tossed salad, arrived and the guests began passing dishes around the table. Herb Wasserman turned to Lester's father. "What's your line of work?"

"Hardware," he replied. "And yourself?"

Mr. Wasserman took a piece of Italian bread and slathered it with butter. "Footwear."

"Which chain?"

Mrs. Wasserman laughed in a high pitched, squeaky voice. "My husband doesn't sell shoes."

"Actually," Mr. Wasserman added by way of explanation, "I buy in bulk from overseas distributors then resell in the domestic, wholesale market. Think of me as a middleman, sort of like a sports lawyer who negotiates deals." Lester glanced about the table. Tovah clearly had no interest in anything the portly man was saying, but the adults were listening attentively.

"Our town boasted several shoe manufacturers," Lester's father noted, "but they all went bust in the late fifties, early sixties. Stetson Shoe Company just up the road a piece in Randolph—they closed down. Couldn't compete with the overseas markets."

"The mainland Chinese," Mr. Wasserman noted, "can produce sneakers for pennies on the dollar. Labor and operational costs are minimal. I buy a container load—five, ten thousand at a time then locate my own markets here in the good old US of A." Lester sensed that the imposing man was getting a bit theatrical. "Admittedly it's a bit speculative, Machiavellian, but so what? As the saying goes, *carpe diem*." He cracked an insolent grin. "Make the best of present opportunities!" His wife tittered in her high pitched squeaky laugh and everyone turned their attention back to the food.

Shortly before dessert was served, Mr. Wasserman asked, "Is that an Israeli accent?" When Mr. Moshel nodded in the affirmative, the man added, "We're making *alyiah* next year."

“Immigrating to the land of milk and honey,” his wife added for the benefit of the non-Jews at the table.

“That’s very nice,” Mr. Moshel smiled pleasantly. He folded his hands in his lap, lacing the slender fingers together and causing the tremors to extend from the wrists up the forearm before petering away at the elbows.

“Do you speak the language?” Mr. McSweeney addressed his remarks to Mr. Wasserman.

“My wife and I studied at the Hebrew Teacher’s College in Brookline.” He gestured with his eyes in the direction of his son. “Morris also took a crash course last summer, but he could use some help with grammar.”

Lester stared at Morris Wasserman who, from the moment he arrived, had been ogling the Israeli girl. The Wasserman boy had changed skullcaps opting for a more stylish one fashioned from a plaid fabric and held in place by a single bobby pin. He wore a lemon colored sports shirt with an Izod logo, tan boat shoes and an expensive looking gold wristwatch.

“Say,” the wife interjected, “maybe your lovely daughter could help Morris with his dikdook.”

Dikdook. Lester cringed inwardly. The word sounded vulgar, pornographic.

“Yes, everyone struggles with grammar,” Mr. Moshel said. “It’s the most challenging part of any new language.”

“Well I assure you,” Mr. Wasserman speared a meatball with his fork and waved it in the air, “Morris will prove a quick study. He’s a straight-A student and president of the honor society.”

Mrs. Wasserman turned to Mr. Moshel. “Are you native-born Israelis?”

He nodded in the affirmative. “We lived on a kibbutz, a communal farm, in the Upper Galilee. Harvested mostly citrus—oranges, grapefruit, lemons. There was also a small herd of cattle.”

“Any problems with the Arab population?” Mr. Wasserman inquired.

“The PLO lobbed Katyusha rockets down on us from the Golan heights and Lebanese foothills. On occasion, they infiltrated at night to plant moakshim in the fields.” He glanced at his daughter.

“Land mines,” Tovah translated without bothering to raise her eyes from the food.

Mr. McSweeney shook his head somberly. “Heck of a way to live.”

“Yes,” Mr. Moshel agreed, “but what’s a person to do?” He took a sip of water. “The fruit trees, which were our livelihood, required constant care.” The brief exchange had exhausted Tovah’s father. His eyelids drooped precariously and he hunched forward balancing on his elbows.

“What part of Israel will you be settling in?” Mrs. Moshel asked.

“The West Bank ... a new settlement near Hebron.”

The Israeli woman glanced nervously at her husband and dropped her eyes. “The West Bank is Palestinian land,” Tovah entered the conversation. “It doesn’t belong to Jews.”

Mr. Wasserman who was chewing a piece of bread, choked on his food and had to take a sip of water to clear his throat. “We captured the West Bank during the Six Day War. It’s ours now.”

Tovah spun pasta onto her fork, guiding the noodles with a tablespoon. She seemed in no great hurry to respond. When the fork was properly loaded, she raised it to her lips. “If you

choose to live on land that for centuries belongs to someone else, that makes you a thief - a lousy thief and a bully.”

Mrs. Wasserman’s eyes alternately grew inordinately large then squished tightly together as though Tovah Moshel had sprayed her with pepper mace. Her fleshy chin flattened out and lips puckered reflexively in a pugnacious scowl. The woman looked like her head was going to explode. Turning to Mr. Moshel she hissed, “You allow your daughter to insult guests and fellow Jews at the dinner table in such a manner?”

“My daughter was simply expressing a heartfelt conviction and nothing more.”

The waiters were bringing out desert, a cherry cobbler with whipped cream. “And what are your thoughts about Jews living in Hebron?” Mr. Wasserman twirled his wedding band with the thumb of the same hand. The man was smiling or, at least, his lips were, but the eyes belied a ruthless, brittle-minded obstinacy.

Tovah’s father gazed congenially at the large man. He poured a splash of cream into his coffee and had to steady the cup with both hands as he raised the warm beverage to his lips. “Believe me, Mr. Wasserman, you don’t want to know what I think about the matter.” There was no more conversation, and after the meal, the Wassermans rose abruptly and scattered from the dining room.

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In the morning the McSweeney’s drove to an Audubon bird sanctuary ten miles up the road. The strip of land nestled in a white pine forest crisscrossed with rocky streams and wetlands. At the visitor bureau Mrs. McSweeney announced, “Everyone pee before we hit the woods.” Near the top of the first trail Lester’s mother spotted a piping plover with its scalloped black collar and russet colored wings. Then just a short distance away she sighted an American Golden, a close relative to the plover. “Mr. Moshel seemed a bit better at breakfast, don’t you think?” Lester asked.

They approached a small trestle footbridge that spanned a gully. “Hard to say,” his father replied. “He’s only in his forties and an invalid.”

Mrs. McSweeney hurried ahead as they approach a rest area with an information board alerting visitors to recent sightings of uncommon birds. Two American oystercatchers and a Virginia rail were seen on the island of Shoals on June first plus a Sandhill Crane only a few miles down the New Hampshire coast a day earlier. Mrs. McSweeney pulled out her Sibley’s Birding Guide for a quick reference. Sometimes she also brought along Mac’s Field Guide to water birds of the Northeast Coast. The prudent woman had sealed several pages of her Mac’s guide in waterproof plastic for easy reference; the brightly colored pictures featured head and wing markings as they appeared in various seasons. Winter plumage, which was frequently much lighter and less dramatic, could easily confuse even a veteran bird watcher.

“Seventy-five black scoters were spotted along the coast, mainly off North Beach in Hampton,” Mr. McSweeney read from the list as his wife thumbed through her manual. Neither Lester nor his father shared the mother’s passion for birding, but they readily got caught up in her zany enthusiasm. Up ahead on the trail was a tulip polar with a thick spread of golden leaves. Mrs. McSweeney located an outcropping of rocks overlooking a meadow and was scanning the brush and foliage with her Eagle Optics birding binoculars. The waterproof lenses featured nitrogen purged fogproofing. Nobody—not even Lester’s father—had a clue what nitrogen

purged fogproofing was, but it sure sounded special and his mother claimed that the lenses remained clear even in the worse weather.

“Mr. Moshel isn’t sick,” Lester said. “Least not in the conventional sense.”

“Is that so?” his father slowed to a halt and lowered his voice. “What’s the matter with him?”

“The Israeli Army court-martialed him. They sent him to a military prison for half a year.”

As Tovah explained it sitting in the beached rowboat, Mr. Moshel served three years as a tank commander in the Israeli Defense Force. Following the second invasion of Lebanon he returned from fighting in the northern campaign and muttered, “Maspeek! Enough! This is no war. It’s a goddamn massacre! I will not kill defenseless civilians.”

Bogade. Traitor.

When he refused to return to active duty, the military banished him to a prison in the Negev desert south of Tel Aviv where the food was inedible, living conditions intolerable. Eventually his health broke down. The IDF agreed to release him on one condition: the man recant his foolishness and immediately return to his military unit. Sick as he was, Mr. Moshel opted to serve out the remainder of his prison term.

Up ahead, Mrs. McSweeney waved her binoculars over her head, indicating that she had finished studying the meadow and was continuing on down the trail. Mr. McSweeney kicked at the loose dirt and a stone went skittering into the underbrush. “The War in Lebanon was an ugly business.”

“Do you think Mr. Moshel’s a traitor?”

Mr. McSweeney was staring at a patch of bunchberries with clusters of turgid, reddish fruit dangling from the plant. Further down the ravine a profusion of hollyhock, their ivory petals stained with purple bleeding toward the edges, spilled over a granite ledge. “Hell no!” He rubbed his jaw between a thumb and forefinger before bolting off down the trail without further elaboration.

After traipsing over three and a half miles of rugged trails in the midday sun, Mrs. McSweeney never saw a single oystercatcher, Virginia rail or black scoter, but she did spot a blue-winged teal, which was so gorgeous she talked incessantly about the magnificent bird all the way back to the cabin.

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*There was no bear and there was no forest.*

Mr. Moshel, the tank commander, would have stood a better chance fighting off a rabid grizzly bear barehanded! Even Lester’s father was at a loss for words when he learned what happened to the Tovah’s father. Out of a sense of decency, the boy had glossed over some of the more unsettling details! Nothing made any sense.

There was a story in a Louis L’Amour collection - Caprock Rancher - about a crusty cowboy with a broken leg who outsmarts a band of outlaws. It was one of Lester’s all-time favorites. The injured rancher shows the gunslingers for what they are: a band of cowardly hooligans. Toward the end of the story, the leader of the desperadoes, an ornery psychopath



named Hazeltine, is reduced to a whimpering bloody mess with all the piss and vinegar beaten out of him by the rancher's teenage son.

Instead of fighting off a band of unruly gunslingers, Mr. Moshel had the entire Israeli army to contend with. Not a fair fight. Short of a miracle, it didn't seem to Lester the sort of material even a literary magician like Louis L'Amour could do much of anything with. No, not even Louis L'Amour could fix what was broke on Lake Winnepesaukee. The master storyteller would have to revise the sordid history of Western civilization, rework the bogus script.

Perhaps in the new and improved version, Lester McSweeney would marry the persnickety Israeli girl and travel west. They'd build a log cabin in the wilderness country of Oregon, buy cattle, preferably Durhams that they could graze and breed on the open range. Lester would purchase a rifle, maybe a .56 caliber, 360 grain Spencer plus a .44 caliber derringer to hide up his sleeve with a rubber band. The Spencer could blast a hole as big as a frying pan in any nasty varmints, two-legged or otherwise. For horses, he would get buckskins - mustangs used to living out in the wild in all sorts of weather.

The Moshels could come and visit any time they felt the urge. In the rarified, high-country mountain air, Mr. Moshel's health would quickly be restored and the only time his hands would ever shake again would be to applaud the antics of his half dozen, give or take a few, grandkids. And of course with her nitrogen purged, Eagle Optics binoculars, Lester's mother could study native birds of the scenic Northwest. She might even spot a Beckwicks wren with its elegant brown tail arched over a slender back. Lester and his new bride, Tovah McSweeney, would live off the land, can berries and fruits, smoke fish like the Indians anticipating the winter shortages of fresh game; they would hunt and trap until their cattle business was firmly established then trade their home grown produce for cloth, spices and other necessities

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Tovah Moshel's penchant for uncompromising honesty was too much! Even Lester, recently graduated from middle school knew better than to say every fool thing that stumble-bumbled into his adolescent head. To save face and avoid embarrassment, Mrs. Moshel shamelessly fibbed about her husband's physical affliction. Tovah had no qualms about telling Lester or anyone else who cared to listen the ugly truth. If the Israeli girl chose to ridicule him over the phantom fish that got away, that was one thing. Tovah was stubborn, opinionated, arrogant, combative, insolent, uncompromising and utterly disinterested in anyone else's point of view. A boorish blockhead wrapped in pig-headed certitudes, she edited and filtered nothing that escaped her lips. Like that nutty business about first kisses and virginity - people didn't talk that way. At least normal people didn't. Later that night as he was lying in bed, a stab of pain, more like an inconsolable grief, coursed through Lester's body. The boy was shattered by the purity of his feelings. First love—it snuck up on tiptoes, beguiled, tantalized and scared the bejeezus out of him.

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The day after the trip to the Audubon bird sanctuary, Lester heard a horse whinny. Zigzagging through a stand of willows, he followed the braying and snorting to a small stable hidden away behind the main dining room. A brown mare with three white stockings from

fetlocks to knees was grazing on the vegetation, cropping the grass and clover right down to the bare earth. Lester reached through the pole fence and ran a hand over the animal's withers. Several bales of fresh hay were neatly stacked in a barn adjacent to the outdoor pen.

Lester spied a metallic object abandoned in a clump of goldenrod. Reaching down he retrieved a small cap gun. The barrel had broken off, the left side of the handle smashed. He pulled the trigger and watched as the hammer sprung back and the chamber shifted one, make-believe slug to the right. For his tenth birthday he begged his parents for a pair of cowboy guns and matching holsters. Not just any firearms. Lester insisted on Colt 45 six-shooters, the original Peacemaker model.

'You can hear the hoofbeats & smell the gun smoke of the old West!'

Or at least that's what the sappy promotional material guaranteed. The gun that tamed the Wild West. Prized by the U.S. Army, frontiersmen, cowboys and Indians as they blazed new trails. Jesse James, Bat Masterson, Billy the Kid lived by this gun. Lester's set was nickel plated even though the military version was gun blue. Another saying on the side of the box boasted: 'God made man, Colt made them equal.' Saturday morning an hour before the McSweeney clan left on their Lake Winnepesaukee vacation, Lester strapped the double holsters around his waist and stood in front of the full-length closet mirror practicing his quick draw. He could shoot from the hip and twirl both barrels simultaneously a full 360 degrees on taut index fingers. God made man, Colt made them equal. The macho sentiment had a comforting ring.

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The kiss changed everything.

Though the lake was loaded with pickerel, largemouth bass, sweet perch, slimy, bottom feeding horned pout—some people called them bullhead catfish—and god knows what else, all Lester could think about lately was the feathery caress. The way the dark-skinned girl snaked her lanky arms around him, wrapping Lester in a bear hug until the succulent kiss was finished. Even then, she held on for a full half minute longer.

The night before the vacation ended, Lester escorted the Israeli girl down to the coral. The brown mare was huddled between a swaybacked nag and sorrel gelding. He waved a bag of carrots in the air, and the horses shambled across the muddy pen to where they were waiting. They ate noisily mashing and grinding the carrots into orange pulp. "Give me a kiss," Tovah murmured. He obliged her. "The Boston Red Sox are the home team?"

Lester eyed her quizzically. She had never expressed any interest in baseball. "Here in New England, yes."

"And David Ortiz's the best hitter."

"Ortiz and Rodriquez. Manny Rodriguez. They're both batting up over three hundred."

The Israeli girl leaned against his chest and raised her chin expectantly. After a flurry of kisses she cradled her cheek against his chest. "Tom Brady?"

"The Patriot's quarterback. Their stadium's in Foxboro." The horses had drifted away and were huddled together at the far end of the coral. "Since when did you become such a sports enthusiast?"

Somewhere in the darkened New Hampshire countryside an owl hooted. The smell of fresh mown hay and fetid horse dung permeated the warm air. A good half mile away, an animal barked like a dog—a convulsive burst of short, feral yips. Coyotes had raided a chicken coop the

previous night. They also ran off with a plump bunny from the resort's petting zoo leaving only the severed head. "Our life in Israel is finished. My father says we will stay here and become American citizens."

A horse pawed the ground, a staccato pitter-patter. "Where will you live?" Lester asked  
"For the time being, with my mother's relatives in Brighton."

Lester did some reckoning. The red line MBTA train ran to Park Street where the green line ferried passengers the length of Commonwealth Ave. "I'll come visit you every weekend."

"What about your fishing?"

"Fishing?" He raised her hand to his lips, kissed the palm then all five fingers. The crickets were out in force now, beneath a full moon and myriad of stars.

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## Nothing as Whole as a Broken Heart

*"All happy families resemble one another,  
each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way..."*  
Leo Tolstoy

Grace Paulson chalked Tolstoy's words onto the blackboard. "The author's remarks from the opening of Anna Karenina... what do they mean to you? Take a few minutes. Collect your thoughts and put them down in a short essay."

A skinny girl in the front row raised her hand. "Can we give personal examples?"

"Nothing scandalous," the teacher cautioned, tongue in cheek. Students tore sheets of lined paper from loose-leaf notebooks and began scratching out their feelings about domestic bliss and the lack thereof. A lean brunette on the front side of forty, Grace scanned the mélange of sleepy faces. The fleeting thought occurred to her - in a year's time, her daughter, Angie, would be old enough to sit in her junior class. What a hoot! In the rear of the room, Jerome Spellman fumbled with a wrinkled sheet of lined paper. The boy had nothing to write with. "Jerome, do you need a pencil?"

Without raising his eyes, the boy shook his head both vertically and horizontally all at once. Grace had long since given up trying to read Jerome's body language. He picked his nose in class and scratched his privates. Or sometimes he did neither and just slumped dully like an extra in some B-rated horror movie - Night of the Living Dead.

Wednesday morning toward the end of third period, Dr. Rosen stopped by Grace's classroom. With his bristly moustache and mop of curly brown hair the school psychologist reminded Grace of a Hassidic rabbi. Dr. Rosen wore a dozen different hats at Brandenburg. He tested special needs kids to determine grade levels and where their educational weakness lay. He also counseled kids with emotional problems and ran a play therapy group at the elementary school. "You wanted to see me?"

She led the psychologist into the corridor. "Jerome Spellman's a zombie. The other kids are afraid of him." The psychologist cleared his throat but did not respond.

“You heard what happened in the cafeteria yesterday?”

During lunch at Brandenburg High School, an entire table emptied out to make room for one student, Jerome Spellman. When the boy lowered his food tray, every boy and girl within thirty feet noiselessly drifted away - a mass exodus. And there he sat - the school weirdo, misfit, whacko, loon - chewing on a boiled hot dog, oblivious to the rest of the universe. Indifferent and utterly unconcerned. “Jerome’s simple schizophrenic.”

“Simple as opposed to what?” Dr. Rosen ignored the remark. “He smells rancid lately. Several of the kids asked to have their seats moved.”

“Then move their seats.”

“That’s a convenient remedy.”

“Simple schizophrenia is a progressive disease. There’s no known treatment or cure. One telltale sign is a disregard for personal hygiene. They stop bathing... brushing their teeth.” Again Dr. Rosen lowered his eyes and stroked his bushy moustache. Everyone knew the man was brilliant. He’d passed the brutal Massachusetts psychologists’ licensing exam on the first try, a feat few professionals could boast. Only a year into his accreditation, he edited the association’s monthly newsletter. And yet, his fatalistic attitude toward Jerome Spellman was unnerving.

“What about medication?”

“Doesn’t work.” The psychologist looked morose.

“Counseling?”

He just stared at her with a leaden expression. Several students milling about in the hallway were staring at them. Grace lowered her voice so the others couldn’t hear. “The kid belongs in a mental hospital.”

“Snake pits like the MIMH are where most simple schizophrenics eventually end up. So why kick Jerome out of public school, if he isn’t going to fare any better at a state mental hospital?” The psychologist removed his glasses and massaged his eyes in an undulating motion. “Is he learning anything in class?”

“No, nothing. He’s flunked every test to date. When I call on him, half the time he doesn’t even respond so I move on to the next kid.”

“But you have a good relationship with Jerome?”

Grace blinked and peered at the man. “He’s a zombie. He lives on another planet.”

“If the opportunity presents itself between classes, ask Jerome about his plans for the future, any goals or aspirations, and let me know what he tells you.”

Goals or aspirations. Jerome Spellman was courting straight F’s. The boy had failed every test and homework assignment since the beginning of the academic year by either not participating or writing gibberish. Grace filed Dr. Rosen’s strange request away in the back of her mind. “Parent-teacher conferences are next week.”

“I’ve been in regular touch with his parents since September, and they understand the nature of the problem. It’s a pernicious disease and it’s not their fault.”

“I didn’t suggest it was,” Grace returned defensively and reached for the doorknob.

“Jerome’s not to blame either,” he added. “It’s just the way things are.”

Back in class, Grace stared listlessly out the window. The infamous MIMH that Dr. Rosen alluded to was the Massachusetts Institute of Mental Health. The state mental asylum was a dumping ground for the mentally unbalanced, criminally insane, destitute, morons and assorted lost souls. In a perverse sort of way, Dr. Rosen was right. Why subject sixteen year-old Jerome Spellman to such a fate any sooner than necessary? The bell rang. Students collected their backpacks and flitted off to their next class. All but Jerome. Passing Grace’s desk, his apathetic

eyes brushed her face, but there was no warmth, no humanity. Long after he was gone, the air reeked of the most hideous stench.

It's just the way things are.

Dr. Rosen, the school psychologist, had warned Grace never to force the issue. In early September, the soft-spoken man drew a small circle on a piece of paper, and then sketched a much larger orb next to the first. "This is the universe normal people inhabit." He waved the tip of the pencil over the larger of the two. "This nether region is where Jerome currently resides. Don't cross the invisible boundary."

The invisible boundary was a euphemism for the Minotaur's maze of insanity. Dr. Rosen didn't put it quite so bluntly, but the message was clear: crazy people can't handle stress. A belligerent tone or threatening gesture could precipitate a full-blown catastrophic reaction. Jerome's was an insidious, incurable disease. Stay outside the circle of craziness.

Now Dr. Rosen wanted feedback. Grace intended to speak with Jerome, but, when class ended, the boy lowered his head and slunk out of the room like an adolescent battering ram, almost knocking one of his classmates over as he dashed out into the hallway. Inhabiting his own hermetic universe, nothing he did was intentionally malicious. "Hey, watch it!" the offended party shouted. Jerome never looked back.

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Over the holiday weekend, Grace and her daughter were hiking the northernmost stretch of the Appalachian Trail. "Well, I guess it's just us girls." Grace's husband was away on a business trip. She was loading provisions in a backpack, the lightweight frame propped up against the door jamb. There wouldn't be refrigerators where they were going. No stoves, central heating, flush toilets or other basic amenities. "We'll park twenty miles below the base of Mount Katahdin and hike north. Climb to the summit then retrace our steps."

Angie handed her mother a stack of wooden matches sealed in a watertight metal tube. The fifteen year old girl was a plumper version of the mother with dirty brown hair and easygoing temperament. "How high?"

"Five thousand two hundred and sixty-eight feet."

"Twelve feet less than a mile."

"That's a vertical mile." Grace smiled laconically. "Only if you zoom straight up like a helicopter." She took the matches and stashed them in a side pocket next to the spare flashlight batteries. The tent was tiny, just large enough for two.

Grace was imposing a three-day moratorium on all thoughts about Jerome Spellman and similar, impending calamities. The trip was planned as R and R - strictly a mother-daughter, getaway weekend. In the morning, they drove north on route 95, crossing the New Hampshire state line around ten a.m.. They reached north central Maine by early afternoon and parked the car in a small lot just off the trail. The weather was warm and muggy. "Get your pack up high on your shoulders," Grace cautioned, "so the weight's evenly distributed."

A clutch of hikers - some lugging huge quantities of gear and others traveling light - passed leisurely in either direction. No one seemed in any great hurry. Grace knelt down and fingered a smallish leaf, red fading to yellow.

"It's just a maple leaf," Angie flexed her shoulders. The pack felt comfortable, not too heavy.

“Aspen, from the genus, populus,” her mother corrected, indicating the serrated points arranged symmetrically across the leaf. Throughout high school she had dreamed about becoming a botanist or, perhaps, an ornithologist. Plants and birds were so much easier to quantify and qualify than humans. Somewhere she got sidetracked. “The flattened stalks,” She held the delicate plant up for her daughter to see, “make the leaves tremble at the slightest breeze. A very noisy tree.” She let the leaf slip from her fingers. With the sun drooping over their left shoulders, they looked north toward the summit of Mount Katahdin in the far distance. “Let’s go!” They struck off down the gravelly path at a loping gait with Angie bringing up the rear. A half-mile down the rough trail they came to a pond, edged by thick stands of beech with a smattering of hemlock and white pine. Except for a few gray squirrels, they saw no animals. Passing through an open field at the far end of the pond, Grace pointed out the variety of wildflowers - an endless succession of lady’s slipper with their pouch-like lips, black-eyed Susan and meadow lily. “That a jack-in-the-pulpit.” She pointed to a leafy plant. “Also known as Indian turnip. The local natives ate the roots as a main part of their diet. Some old-timers probably still do.”

Around six, though the sun was still high, they stopped for supper. Using water from a nearby stream, Grace boiled a pan of whole grain, basmati rice over an open fire. As it cooked, the rice released an aromatic, nutty odor. In a separate pan she sautéed onions and green peppers. Other hikers passed on the trail. A young boy waved and his father tipped his hat. Everyone seemed intent on getting to his or her destination before the bruised light bled out of the sky. The temperature had dropped a few degrees, but it was still warm.

"Do you know Jerome Spellman?" A mental lapse, Grace had forgotten about her earlier resolution to focus exclusively on the trip.

"The weirdo?"

Grace cringed. "He's not doing well."

"Yeah, I know." There was an awkward pause. “Doris Fuller's mother waitresses over at Ryan's Diner." The girl stumbled awkwardly over several words and had to pause to compose herself. “The family lives just up the street from the Spellman's house on Hemlock Drive. Nice people. The father works for a brokerage firm. The mother sells real estate.”

“Mrs. Fuller knows the parents, then?”

Angie shook her head. “No, only to wave when they drive by in the evening. But Jerome stops by the restaurant for breakfast every Saturday morning.”

“That’s nice.”

“Not really. You see, he’s got this crush on Doris' mom.”

Grace groaned inwardly. She had met Rita Fuller, a pretty woman on the front side of forty with dirty blond hair that cascaded down her back in ringlets, once or twice at PTO meetings. Grace was trying to picture a glassy-eyed Jerome Spellman engaged in romantic repartee with a woman old enough to be his mother. “He’s got mental problems,” she stated the obvious.

“Last Saturday, Jerome stopped by the diner and took a seat at the far counter where Mrs. Fuller was working. He eats his food, then, like some under-aged Don Juan, plunks a twenty dollar bill down next to his plate and tells the woman to keep the change.” “A breakfast special,” Angie added, “costs less than five dollars, and that includes coffee with a free refill.”

“So what’d Mrs. Fuller do?”

“She handed Doris three five-dollar bills and asked her to return the money to the parents.”

Grace felt a tightness in her chest. "And?"

Angie was staring at the greasy cooking pan. The fire had died down to a pile of glowing embers that emitted a comforting, smokeless glow. "The way Mrs. Spellman apologized, you might have thought Jerome committed the crime of the century. She promised they'd make sure he only had enough cash to cover the cost of the meal and a small tip if he went for breakfast in the future."

So much for leaving the work-a-day world behind. Grace let out a deep sigh. "We might as well camp here for the night," she announced. "I'll put some coffee on before we unpack."

Angie took the blackened pan down to the stream, rinsed the last few grains of rice away and filled their canteens with fresh water. When she returned to the campsite an elderly man with a white beard and rickety legs was sitting on a stump. "Mr. Anderson," Angie's mother announced, "will be joining us for coffee."

The old man smiled displaying an expanse of pink gums but not very much in the way of teeth. Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew an ivory flower surrounded by red berries. "For the girl."

"Dogwood?" Grace said. "They seldom flourish this far east."

The old man nodded. "Some people call them bunchberry, but it's just a different name for the same plant." Mr. Anderson wore a tan-colored hearing aid and his left hand trembled when he rested it in his lap; it was unclear if he suffered from a chronic illness or was just tired. Despite the warm weather, he wore a long sleeve flannel shirt buttoned at the wrists. Grace fixed the coffee and passed around sugar cookies.

The old man's wife had passed away the previous spring. The year before she died, they hiked the Appalachian Trail as far down as Hump Mountain along the Tennessee-North Carolina border, crossing through rugged hill country where several inches of snow had fallen the previous day. "Toes got frostbitten, but it still turned out okay." Mr. Anderson took a sip of coffee and sloshed the dark liquid in the warm, tin cup. "Met some real decent folk, along the trail."

He threw the last of his coffee into the fire sending up a fitful tongue of orange sparks. The more he lingered the more melancholy the old man seemed. As the threesome rested by the campfire, Grace no longer noticed the huge gaps between the teeth that were and the teeth that might have been. The songbirds had bedded down for the night, their incessant trilling upstaged by the rhythmic clatter of crickets and bullfrogs. "Tell you a funny story before I go," Mr. Anderson said. He rested his good hand over the other and the trembling momentarily subsided.

"A boy wakes up one morning to find his faithful dog missing. He fashions a sign on a piece of cardboard. The sign reads: Lost Dog. Walks with limp - got run over, sideswiped by tractor-trailer last spring; gimpy hind leg; cataracts both eyes, left ear chewed off in mishap with homicidal pit bull." The old man paused for dramatic effect. "Answers to the name Lucky."

Answers to the name Lucky.

The two women waved as the old man disappeared down the trail into the darkness. Grace understood perfectly well that most people, regardless of outward appearances, were chewed up and run over by the vagaries of life. You could have a hearty laugh while sitting at a campfire; the trick was to maintain one's composure after leaving the solitude of the Maine woods and rejoining the money-grubbing rat race. "That's our destination tomorrow," Grace pointed at a bright star above a ridge of spruce. "Polaris, the North Star. It hangs like a jewel on the end of the Little Dipper and points the way to Mount Katahdin."

"I'm going to bed," Grace said. She wondered if Mr. Anderson's left hand had stopped trembling. And did he yearn for his soul mate when he lay in his sleeping bag? Did he dream of their wintry exploits on Hump Mountain? He wouldn't have to worry about frostbite tonight.

Around midnight, Angie heard her mother stir. Grace rolled out of the sleeping bag and went outside. "What's the matter?" Angie asked when she returned.

"Had to pee." Grace crawled back into the sleeping bag and lay still.

"I hope Mr. Anderson's all right," Angie whispered. "I mean, what if something happened to him out here in the middle of the woods?"

Somewhere deep in the hills an owl let loose with a prolonged, throaty hoot resonant as a foghorn. The crickets and frogs were unimpressed. Mr. Anderson was probably fast asleep, dreaming about his lost youth and all the wonderful adventures that still awaited him on the A.T.. Grace reached out and brushed her daughter's cheek with her fingertips. "Say a prayer, then."

"Yes, I'll do that."

Perhaps you could remember Jerome Spellman in your prayers, too." The girl grunted sleepily and rolled over in her sleeping bag. A few minutes later, Grace could hear her daughter's steady breathing.

Say a prayer... Jerome Spellman was a hopeless case. According to Dr. Rosen, drugs were useless, therapy utterly futile. A universe full of prayer and good intentions wouldn't make a bit of difference against a relentless, inexorable disease. Where Jerome Spellman was concerned, God had officially gone AWOL.

In the morning Angie woke to find her mother's sleeping bag empty. Grace returned before the girl had wrestled her hiking boots on. "Come with me!" She dragged Angie along the trail past the stream, then down a narrower footpath. At the bottom of a stony trail, the trees fell away to reveal a sandy pond rimmed with hawthorn and Canadian yew. "A blizzard of rainbow trout! Look for yourself."

Angie stood with her boots nipping the water and watched as a steady procession of speckled fish cruised in and out of the shallows. "There's enough protein to feed an army."

"Or hungry Indian tribe," her mother interjected. Grace began pulling her clothes off, flinging her blouse, bra and shorts in a pile.

Angie's face flamed brighter than a sugar maple in late October. "Are you nuts?"

"It's seven o'clock in the morning. No one's probably been by this pond in weeks. Most of the hikers won't be back on the trail for another hour or two." Her mother waded into the water up to her knees and, bending low, began slapping water on her arms and breasts. Grace's body was still strong and athletic, prettier than most women's her age.

If anyone had suggested a mere five minutes ago that Angie would find herself skinny-dipping with her mother in the boondocks of Maine, she would have rolled her eyes and deemed them certifiably insane. The young girl pulled her T-shirt up over her head in one smooth motion. "How's the water?"

"Warm as a bathtub." Her mother was floating on her back toward the middle of the pond. Angie could feel a scaly body brush against her calf as she waded up to her hips.

They reached the base of Mount Katahdin in the early afternoon, but the weather turned gray and heavy rain pummeled the trail into a muddy mess. "This certainly isn't fun," Angie grumbled. A group of hikers returning from the summit looked beleaguered, worn out and



miserable. Her mother spoke with one of the climbers. "It's tough going. There's a raw wind and, without sun, the temperature is good twenty degrees colder."

They went and huddled under a lean-to with a dozen other campers. Half an hour later the rain was still pelting the ground relentlessly. "We'll climb tomorrow," her mother announced. "I'll go pitch the tent and we'll make do until this awful weather breaks."

"Everything soaked. There's no a decent place to put a tent."

"We're all in the same boat." Grace gestured at the rest of the hikers. "You'll just have to make do." She left Angie crouched under the lean-to and went off to see about the tent.

The young girl began to cry but nobody noticed. They didn't notice because all the hikers were soaked to the bone and Angie's tears just looked like so much extra precipitation. A half-hour later, Grace returned. She managed to pitch the tent beneath a large tree. The ground was covered with a bed of pine needles, which held up reasonably well under the rain. Angie crawled into the tent and unwrapped her sleeping bag. Then she slithered in, zipped it up around her neck and, with the rain mercilessly slashing the canvas at a forty-five degree angle, went to sleep.

No matter that it was two in the afternoon, that she hadn't bothered to change out of her damp clothes or eaten anything since breakfast. Angie dozed and when she woke, she slept again. She snoozed through eleven straight hours of rain; when the girl woke, the sun was shining, she felt refreshed and sublimely happy. Her mother was already cooking up a pan of fried salami. She handed Angie a cup of coffee. They ate quickly without much conversation, and were back on the trail within an hour.

"Tuckahoe," Grace indicated a plant growing in the cleft of a lichen-stained rock. "Also known as Indian bread. The roots are quite tasty or at least some Native Americans think so."

They reached the summit of Mount Katahdin by early afternoon and lingered for an hour with a dozen other hikers. On the way down they recognized Mr. Anderson. The grizzled veteran gave them a toothless, thin-lipped smile as he plodded past. He wore a knapsack without a frame and a knobby walking stick. "Traveling light in his twilight years," Grace observed.

"How old do you think he is?"

"Hard to say. Eighty give or take a decade." Angie couldn't be sure if her mother was pulling her leg. What would make an old man in poor health want to be out in the wilderness alone and unprotected? The same torrential downpour that trapped them for most of the previous day had menaced him, too. But the adaptable and resilient old man had made it through with his sunny disposition intact. Mr. Anderson's life was a richly variegated tapestry of misadventures and blithe perambulations. At this late juncture, when the dross sifted free of precious moments, it was a life well lived.

Grace suggested that they head south until the setting sun got caught up on the treetops before pitching camp. They had been moving slowly down a rutted path when Angie grabbed her mother's arm and brought her up short. A hundred feet away in a secluded pond stood a full-grown moose. The large, palmate antlers showed that it was a male. He dipped his head beneath the water and, when the broad muzzle reappeared, it was full of soggy vegetation ripped from the muddy water. They stood and watched the animal forage its way downstream before moving off down the trail.

Later that night after they had eaten their whole grain rice and vegetables followed by scalding coffee and sugar cookies, Grace mused, "I would tell you how much I love you, my darling daughter, but something essential always gets lost in the unwieldy fabric of language,... the wordiness." She took Angie's face in her callused hands and planted a moist kiss on either

cheek. "Better that we should muck about with the likes of Mr. Anderson or watch a bull moose at dinner."

"Or skinny-dip with rainbow trout."

Grace's sly smile was wasted on the darkness. "Yes, that too."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Jerome, hold up a minute." Jerome Spellman was ready to bolt as soon as the bell rang, but Grace's no-nonsense tone brought him up short. She waited quietly for the classroom to empty out then indicated a chair next to her desk. The lanky boy slumped into the seat with his legs splayed at an odd angle.

"School year's coming to an end," Grace spoke casually. The boy's jaw was slack, eyes shrouded over. A moist blob of mucous trailed down the top lip toward the corner of his mouth. "Have you thought at all about what you might want to do after high school?"

"Get a job." His eyes drifting toward the open doorway, Jerome shifted impatiently in the seat. "Something important." He scratched his crotch with broken nails. "Investment broker, maybe."

"Well that's a fine position. Where did you get such an idea?"

"That's what my father does." Jerome sat straighter in the chair and his face contorted in a mawkish grin. "I'm gonna need a lot of do-re-mi."

"Yes, we all -"

"I'm getting married after school lets out. Middle of summer... beginning of fall."

Grace felt her casual demeanor crack. "I didn't know you were seeing anyone."

Bad move! What was it Dr. Rosen had said about staying outside the circle of craziness?

Jerome smirked and mashed a wrist over his nose clearing away the glistening mess. "I met this waitress down at the diner. She's married but gonna get a divorce so we can be together."

"You're seeing a married woman?"

A moment ago, he couldn't escape from the classroom fast enough. Now Jerome's buttocks were epoxied to the chair. He glanced up at her momentarily. "Thing is, you gotta plan ahead."

Grace felt a chill bleed through her body. The boy was carrying on an interior monologue, exclusively talking to himself. The teacher's presence in the room was unnecessary. Incidental. Jerome Spellman was a prisoner locked away in the solitary confines of his twisted imagination. He needed no one to validate his hallucinatory life view. "Most people," she said weakly, "start at the bottom and work their way up the corporate ladder."

Another plug of mucous was visible dangling in his left nostril. The wetness emerged as a turgid mass and began the slow trek south across the hollow above his upper lip. "Naw, that's not my style." Jerome rolled off the chair and grabbed his backpack. "Gotta get to my next class. Sure was swell talking with you."

\* \* \* \* \*

In late April, Principal Skinner approached Grace in the parking lot. At six foot five, two hundred and fifty pounds, even some male staff were intimidated by the hulking bear of a man.

“Last month Dr. Rosen petitioned the school committee for two hundred dollars to have a psychiatrist, at Beth Israel Hospital evaluate Jerome Spellman.”

“Does the psychiatrist come here or Jerome travel to Boston?”

“Neither,” the principal was staring at the front of the school where a caravan of yellow buses was pulling up at the front of the building. A group of walkers dragging rolling backpacks emerged from the building heading for home. “Tuesday Dr. Rosen brought his test results to the psychiatrist’s office in Boston and they discussed options.”

Options - like whether or not to keep a sixteen year-old in public school or cart him off to the funny farm.

“Excuse me just a moment,” Principal Skinner said. A parent, who was walking a large German shepherd on a leash with a choke collar, arrived to collect her child. The dog waited until they reached the bus loading area and, as if on cue, moved his bowels. The principal instructed one of the teacher’s aides to get a janitor to dispose of the unsightly mess. “Children! Children!” Two girls were chasing each other near the crosswalk as the busses were loading and the principal rushed off to settle the girls back down.

“Where was I?” the man asked when he finally returned.

“Options,” Grace said. In a moment all the buses would pull away with their precious cargo and the bedlam would fade away to nothing.

“The assessment from Boston was bleak,” he muttered. “The psychiatrist said, ‘Think positive but prepare for the worse’.”

The school spent two hundred dollars for seven words of advice. That matriculated out to twenty-eight dollars a word. “Which is exactly what Dr. Rosen told me at the beginning of the school year,” Grace replied.

Principal Skinner watched the last bus pull away from the school. Just moments earlier a custodian shuffled out of the building with a flat shovel. He scooped up the dog feces with a deft motion, dumped it in a plastic shopping bag, and then hurried off to dispose of the mess. The principal rubbed his hands together and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. “This is a public school. We have an obligation to serve the community as a whole.”

“Jerome isn’t a monster,” Grace ventured. “He just lives inside his head. Maybe if - ”

“The Spellmans belong to my church,” he cut her short. “I golf with his father. They’re decent, down-to-earth people.” He raised his arms in a gesture of futility. “How the hell do I tell them to think positive but prepare for the worse?” The man was hinting at a deeper truth. Brandenburg Middle School made every effort to accommodate students who didn’t fit the mold, but Jerome Spellman was too far gone, his behavior absurdly dangerous. The principal went back to his office.

Everyone was gone. The natural order was beginning to reassert itself. Frogs croaked in the culvert near the track field. In a cluster of white-barked birches, a chorus of raucous birds was chortling like crazy. The deciduous trees, stripped bare in the late fall, were only just beginning to bare their delicate buds. The air reeked richly of percolating promise and rebirth. A warm breeze caressed Graces neck before skittering off into a stand of Eastern white pines.

What was it she had read just the other day in a collection of spiritual verse? A quote from the 17th Century Rabbi Nachman from Bratzlav: There is nothing as whole as a broken heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

Friday morning before class, the school receptionist stuck her head in the doorway. "Principal's looking for you."

When Grace reached the administrative office, Principal Skinner and Dr. Rosen were chatting in hushed tones. A Maalox bottle was sitting uncapped next to a plastic container of extra-strength Tylenol. "Jerome Spellman's over at Butler Hospital," the principal said soberly. "Police took him last night in a paddy wagon."

"The boy barricaded himself in his bedroom," Dr. Rosen continued, "wouldn't undo the lock. When the cops finally broke down the door, they found Jerome huddled under the bedcovers mumbling incoherently. He went quietly, though... made no fuss. The admitting psychiatrist at Butler put him on a locked ward. There was no need to medicate or restrain him. The boy just wanted to be left alone."

"Orderlies gave him a bath," Principal Skinner added. "First in months, from what I gather." He poured some Maalox into a small plastic cup and tossed the pink liquid down. "We don't anticipate Jerome returning to Brandenburg High School."

"Well, at least it's not the MIMH," Grace muttered.

The boy's classmates would catch on in a hurry that something was up. The kid was never physically sick and hadn't missed a single day of school since September. Gossip and wild rumors would blossom like late summer weeds and then just as quickly wither away. The queer boy had no friends. The Spring Fling dance was coming up plus the junior class trip to New York to see the Rockets at Radio City Music Hall. Jerome Spellman would be old news long before then. Like the psychologist said, it wasn't anyone's fault. And yet, if the tortured expression on Principal Skinner's face was any indication, grownups didn't handle mental illness any better than their adolescent counterparts.

There is nothing as whole as a broken heart. "Jerome was partial to those cinnamon raisin buns they sell over at Ryan's diner," Grace's voice faltered slightly. "You know, the ones with the sugary glaze. You nibble at them with sticky fingers or unfurl the pastry by pulling the dough apart from the outside edge toward the center. They tasted just as good either way." The Principal smiled bleakly. Dr. Rosen, the man who wrote his doctoral thesis on Piaget, the Swiss developmental psychologist, wagged his shaggy head. As Grace explained it, she would stop by the diner after school let out and pick up a couple of pastries. Of course, she would call to determine visiting hours before heading over to the hospital.

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## Will the Rain Hurt the Rhubarb?

"Adrian Flanagan's working three to eleven over at the Brentwood Nursing Home." Like a poker player dealt a lousy hand and waits for his opponent to fold or raise the ante, Jason Flanagan fidgeted with his hands. "Thought I might drop by later this week to see how she's doing."

His wife, who was stuffing the washing machine with a load of soiled towels grimaced but never bothered to raise her head. The wiry, elderly man, who stood a tad less than six feet, watched her measure a cupful of Borax liquid detergent.

Kate, a petite Italian woman with a pointy nose and auburn hair streaked with gray, sprinkled softener into the machine before closing the lid. Her eyes flared and lower jaw flattened like a battering ram. “Not a good idea.”

Jason could sense his wife raising the emotional drawbridge, walling herself up behind a thick slab of brittle-minded certitudes “Why’s that?”

“The nursing home is a private business, and you’ve no legitimate reason being there.”

Jason cringed. After thirty-three years of marriage, his wife was still doing ‘the voice’. The voice was a stilted, phony as a three-dollar bill inflection that she inadvertently slipped into when out of her natural element. A set of gears in the washer clicked and the agitator began swirling the dirty clothes in the sudsy water. Only now did the woman step back, hands on hips, and look her husband full in the face. “Some things are better left in the past.”

“Maybe I’ll go see my brother.” He scratched his stubbly chin reflectively. “What’s it been... fifteen years now? I’m sure he’s heard from Adrian by now.”

Kate Flanagan cringed. “You’ll be wasting your breath talking to that moron?”

Jason knew better than to argue the point. His older brother, Jack, was worse than a moron. He was a belligerent slug who never regretted a personal indiscretion no matter how much damage caused. A pot-bellied Irishman, Jack Flanagan was a loudmouth braggart who made it big in the durable medical supply business. Adrian’s mother was a non-stop talkaholic, who would rather slash her wrists than spend two hours alone in the house with her own private thoughts.

In later years, Jason developed the bizarre notion that his niece, Adrian, was switched at birth. Her parents—that is, the bogus couple who brought her home from the maternity ward—couldn’t possibly be biologically related to this soft-spoken, angelic soul. It was luck of the draw, and Adrian Flanagan got dealt a pair of duds, imbecilic jokers from the bottom of the deck.

Fifteen years earlier, Jack Flanagan’s mug was smeared all over the Providence Journal, when the IRS indicted him for tax evasion. A private accounting firm sent to review his corporate records at the medical supply company discovered that the flamboyant businessman, who favored Cuban cigars, Lincoln Continentals and off-colored jokes, was ‘cooking the books’. A slew of hospital beds and motorized wheelchairs that never left the company showroom had been billed to Medicare along with a hundred eighty-five bogus claims for bottled oxygen. Worse yet, an elderly woman with rheumatoid arthritis receiving inhalation therapy had been deceased a half dozen years.

Rumors circulated that Jack Flanagan was heading to Connecticut for a little rest and relaxation courtesy of the federal government. Jack’s new mailing address was a minimum security facility with an outstanding law library, soft ball field and state-of-the-art exercise gym. Nolo contendere. In the end, he copped a plea, paid a hefty fine and received a two-year suspended sentence. Case closed!

Throughout the ordeal, the man never showed a speck of remorse.

The week before his final court date, Adrian’s old man was yakking it up like a remorseless jackass at a Fourth of July barbecue. Decked out in Bermuda shorts and a garish print shirt, Jack Flanagan poked fun at the district attorney. Everyone cheated on their income

tax, right? The unfortunate glitch with the hospital beds, bottled oxygen and wheel chairs was just sloppy bookkeeping. Sloppy bookkeeping to the tune of over two hundred thousand dollars!

At the cookout, not a single neighbor snubbed the man or expressed moral indignation. Even Jason's parents, who damned the thieving bastard to hell in the privacy of their own home, laughed at their son's flippant jokes and snide remarks. Jack Flanagan didn't give a rat's ass about a fall from grace.

His only regret was getting caught.

Some things are better left in the past. The Thanksgiving following the indictment Jason was visiting his brother's family. Adrian was hunkered down in the den, playing with a one-legged Barbie doll, which she was dressing in a glitzy evening gown. Jason remembered her as a round-faced imp with coal black hair cropped short — a persnickety tomboy with sparkling eyes, a burnished coppery complexion and stocky frame. Adrian snuggled up alongside him on the couch with an impishly brazen smirk. "Uncle Jason, do you think the rain will hurt the rhubarb?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Adrian," he hunched over and whispered with a conspiratorial flair, "They're forecasting a ninety-nine percent chance of torrential downpour, but if it's in cans, everything should be okay."

Adrian giggled infectiously but just as abruptly her features darkened noticeably and the girl lowered her voice several decibels. "Daddy told my mom that she's got shit for brains."

In the kitchen, the thermometer popped. Jason's sister-in-law was easing the turkey from the oven. "Cripes!" He didn't know what else to say.

"She called daddy a two-timing louse... a human turd." Adrian reached out furtively and grabbed her uncle's wrist. "My parents hate each other so much they're getting divorced. It's supposed to be a secret so don't tell no one."

For a second time in as many minutes, Jason was rendered speechless. He was carrying on a conversation with a nine year old about things that no child should comprehend. "I want to come live with you and Aunt Kate."

Jason watched as an array of holiday concoctions – string beans with almond slivers, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce and butternut squash laced with honey – was laid out on the dining room table. "That's not possible," he countered. "And anyway, I'm sure your parents will work things out."

"No, they won't," Adrian insisted glumly. "They're too selfish."

Jason stared at the crippled Barbie doll. One of her oblong breasts was jutting out from the tattered gown. "Time to eat!" The call to table rescued him from the need for any further half-truths and cowardly evasions regarding Jack Flanagan's marital intentions.

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A few months later, Adrian vanished from the home, dragged off to live with the garrulous mother's extended family. Jack remarried the following year and his new wife, who was really just a younger, repackaged, jazzed up version of his old wife, got down to business.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

They had three children, all daughters, in rapid succession. No one ever talked about Jack's first child anymore. Ten years passed. One day Jason's daughter, Rachel, took him aside. "Saw cousin Adrian last night."

"Where?"

“Outside a musical in downtown Boston.” In her early twenties, Rachel was a prettier version of the mother with an equally blunt temperament but less pointy nose. “She was in the Theater District just off Tremont Street near Park Square, working the crowd.”

Jason’s face clouded over. “I don’t follow you.”

“Adrian was gussied up like a hooker. A car pulled up and the driver rolled down the passenger side window. They negotiated a price. Adrian jumped in and they drove off.”

Adrian Flanagan as streetwalker decked out in a flimsy halter top, neon hot pants and stiletto heels - this latest bit of titillating garbage fit neatly with the outlandish potpourri of hearsay, idle gossip and innuendo that filtered back to him over the years. Jason felt nauseous, light headed. “Did you say anything to mom?” His daughter shook her head.

“Sure it was Adrian?”

Rachel nodded once. Jason’s favorite niece still wore her dark hair in a close-cropped, pixie style. The same squat, compact torso. “She’s all grown up now,” Rachel reported with a sober expression. “Got hips and breasts.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night after supper, Jason removed the food processor from the cabinet over the sink and arranged a collection of spices and cooking utensils on the kitchen table. “What are you making?” His wife asked.

“Hummus.” He ladled a healthy dollop of tahini from a metal tin into the bowl, then sliced a lemon in half and squeezed the juice into the mix. “You still visiting your brother?” Kate’s voice had mellowed since their conversation in the laundry room.

“Tomorrow morning,” Jason confirmed. Into the creamy paste he added salt and several tablespoons of olive oil. Grabbing a knife, he pried a garlic clove apart and began peeling the outer skin away from the fleshy interior. “I don’t expect much... just want to find out if he’s heard from his daughter.”

“I was a bit harsh earlier today,” Kate pulled up a chair at the table and cracked an apologetic smile, “but any mention of Jack sends me off the deep end.”

He reached for a jar of turmeric and sprinkled a half-teaspoon of the orangey powder into the food processor. “What are you reading?” he said, indicating a paperback at his wife’s elbow.

“G.K. Chesterton... Orthodoxy.” She took the lemon rinds and deposited them in the garbage. “He’s a Christian writer... very unusual.”

“In what way?”

“Chesterton felt children possess endless vitality. .. they want thing repeated and unchanged.”

“Yes, that’s true enough,” Jason confirmed.

“Here let me read a passage.” She thumbed through to a section near the middle of the book. “It is possible that God says every morning, “Do it again” to the sun; and every evening, “Do it again” to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.” She abruptly laid the book aside.

“No, keep reading,” He insisted, but his wife began tidying the soiled counter and showed no inclination to return to the book.

Jason shook a dash of cumin into the mix. From the refrigerator he retrieved a package of red peppers in vegetable bin and brought them to the table, where he sliced them methodically lengthwise into thick slivers. He was considering his niece and the rhubarb. How many times had she sprung that insanely corny, rhubarb joke on him? A thousand, ten thousand?

It never got tiresome. Every time he came to visit, Adrian set the trap. It was pure magic, a child's sacred ritual. Do it again! Do it again! Do it again!

Jason arranged the peppers on a baking sheet, skin-side up and slid them under the broiler for ten minutes until they charred. Placing the slices in a resealable plastic bag, he set it aside until the vegetable steamed sufficiently to remove the peel in one piece. Dumping the bright flesh into the food processor, he reduced the pepper to a fluffy froth.

"Here, taste." Jason tore a slice of pita bread into a wedge and scooped a generous helping of the coffee colored dip.

"Yes, that's delicious. Real tasty!" Slipping her arms around his waist, she pulled him close. "Fourth of July's right around the corner. If you hunt down your long-lost niece, invite her over for the holiday. We'll cook up traditional fare... hot dogs, cheeseburgers, potato salad."

"And red pepper hummus," Jason quipped.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I should have done something?"

They were lying in bed with the lights out. Jason comfortably nestled up against his wife's rump, an arm slung around her waist. Kate only half-heard the unsolicited remark. "What did you say?"

"Back then... before Adrian fell off the edge of the earth, I should have done something."

"Your brother's toxic," she replied acidly. "Everything he touches turns to crap."

"True enough but I should have done something."

"Like what?"

"I dunno. She was a dark-eyed innocent. What's happened over the years... it felt like a Biblical curse."

"You're beating yourself up over nothing." The room fell silent. Finally his wife rolled over and, wrapping her arms around his back, pulled him close. "The proper thing to do," she said soberly, "would have been to remove Adrian from the maternity ward the day of her delivery and place the newborn with a decent family."

\* \* \* \* \*

Saturday morning, Jason was up early and on the road. Half an hour later he pulled into the parking lot of a shabby, split rib concrete building with a sign that read Flanagan's Medical Supplies. Killing the engine, he went inside. A portly middle-aged man with sagging jowls and a bald head looked up from behind the counter. "My kid brother, Jason... what brings you here?"

"Nothing special." Jason glanced around the cluttered space. A collection of hydraulic Hoyer lifts were neatly stacked along the far wall. That was new. The oxygen canisters – portable and fixed had been repositioned further down the room. Respiratory care was a major part of Jack's business. "How are the girls?"

"Good, good..."

"And Jasmine?"



Jack waved an arm, a peremptory gesture of disgust. “Royal pain in the ass... that’s what she is. The second wife ain’t no goddamn better than the first.”

“Your daughter’s back in town.”

“So I heard,” he replied.

“You haven’t seen Adrian?”

“I’m the father,” Jack shot back abrasively. “It’s her responsibility to chase me down.”

Jack Flanagan rubbed his flabby face with a mottled hand. “The feds hit me with a stinking RAT-STATS.” When there was no immediate reply, he added, “You familiar with the term?”

“Yeah, I know what it means.” When the authorities did a Medicare audit and found discrepancies, they used an algorithm, a mathematical equation, to predict the likelihood of the event recurring over a broad span of time, usually a year. If Jack Flanagan inflated a bill by several hundred dollars and averaged seventy similar claims a year, he would have hypothetically defrauded the tax payers out of fourteen thousand dollars!

“How much this time?”

“Three hundred thousand.”

“Tough luck.”

Jack Flanagan smirked. “I’ll survive.”

“Why can’t you keep your nose clean?”

“I didn’t do nothin’ wrong,” he blustered, running all the words together. “It was a minor indiscretion... a bookkeeping error.”

An elderly woman with a pronounced limp hobbled into the store. Balancing on a three-pronged cane, she picked her way haltingly to the aisle with the motorized wheelchairs.

Between the digitalized parenteral feeding equipment, inhalation therapy supplies, hospital beds, wheelchairs and portable oxygen, there must have been a quarter of a million dollars in inventory littering the showroom floor. And that didn’t even take into account what his brother had squirreled away in the rear warehouse. With Jack, being honest earned you a comfortable living, but it was never enough. The only crime was being stupid enough to get caught.

When he reached home, Jason found his wife puttering in the rock garden. “How did your meeting with Jack go?”

Reaching down, Jason grabbed a clump of velvety blue lavender and let the delicate blossoms slip through his hand. Raising the fingers to his nose, he inhaled the bittersweet, cloying scent. “About as well as might be expected.”

His wife gestured with a flick of her head. “Did you notice the visitors?” The ripe lavender buds were loaded with golden honeybees foraging for nectar. As they descended, helicopter fashion, onto a pale blossom, the delicate pastel stem dipped precariously.

Reaching down, she fondled an emerald green dahlia. The blood red flowers wouldn’t emerge for another month or more toward the tail end of the season when all the other s, except for a handful of hardy plants like sedum asters and toad lilies, had played themselves out. Kate slowly rose from a crouched position next to the dahlias. “Are you going to see Adrian?”

“Later tonight.”

“I could come along... for moral support.”

“No, it’s not necessary.”

\* \* \* \* \*

After the evening meal, Jason drove to the Brentwood Nursing Home and sat in the car with the engine idling for a good twenty minutes before mustering the nerve to enter the building. “Adrian Flanagan?”

“Over in the west wing.” The receptionist gestured in the direction of a passageway. “Check in with the nurse’s station at the far end of the hall.”

The Brentwood Nursing Home had a distinct odor—an odd mix of body wastes, Phisohex and medicinal ointments. Several bedridden women in adjoining rooms were moaning in a repetitive, sing-song fashion. As Jason passed the elevator, an emaciated gentleman dressed in a white johnny rose from his wheelchair setting off a shrill beep. A nurses aide came running and eased the fellow back down. As soon as his withered rump made contact with the padded leather seat, the hidden monitor fell silent.

At the nurse’s station a colored woman was writing in a patient’s chart while a male nurse sorted pills in thimble-sized paper cups on a medicine tray. A stocky, attractive woman with dark hair and a pink smock exited a room carrying a carton of juice. The woman hurried past toward the nursing station. “Adrian?”

The woman abruptly stopped and came back to where Jason was standing. Staring at him for the longest time, her features dissolved in a wispy smile. “Uncle Jason!” She leaned forward and, as though it was the most ordinary thing in the world, brushed her lips across his cheek.

At the nurse’s station a telephone rang. The fellow with the pill tray was locking the medicine cabinet with a brass key. For a split second, it was like they were back on the sofa at his brother’s house. “I’m off duty in ten minutes,” she instructed in hushed tones. “Wait for me outside in the parking lot.”

Like an apparition, Adrian floated off down the corridor disappearing into an adjacent room. Jason went outside and sat in his car. He felt mildly disoriented, as though time had begun flowing in the wrong direction, bleeding back into the past and forward into an as yet, unfathomable future - Einstein’s theory of relativity turned upside down. A dozen years flushed down the toilet as though nothing changed in the interim.

A little after seven o’clock, a steady stream of employees began dribbling out of the building. “Want to grab a coffee?” Jason asked.

Adrian shook her head. “Got to get home to my little girl. But I only live a few miles down the road. You can follow in your car.”

Jason went back to where he parked. Adrian was a mother. A rumor to that effect circulated for years. At nineteen, she delivered a baby out of wedlock but signed away maternal rights at birth. A month later she was pregnant with a second child. Sadly, like everything else, the ephemeral truth lay buried beneath a bruising avalanche of tall tales, hearsay, melodrama and patently bad fiction.

Adrian lived on the second floor of a modest apartment complex in the Maryville section of town. When they opened the door, a small dog barking hysterically rushed to greet them. “My baby,” Adrian said by way of explanation. In the kitchen Adrian removed a plastic container from the refrigerator. Scooping a serving into a bowl, she warmed it in the microwave. Before offering the food to the dog, she held the container under Jason’s nose. “Bowtie macaroni, sweet potato, peas, carrots, corn, sliced apples, chicken livers and ground turkey.”

The dog, a dirty gray shiatsu, devoured a chunk of turkey then went to work on the macaroni. Wolfing down the entire bowl in less than thirty seconds, it licked its chops, and then began rushing about the kitchen with its corkscrew tail arched over the hind quarters.

“You cook your own dog food from scratch?”

Adrian nodded. “How’s my dad doing?” she asked.

“Okay. We sometimes get together at the holidays,” Jason replied stiffly. “He had three more daughters with his second wife.”

“So I heard,” Adrian’s lips turned up ever so slightly in a dry smile. “Are they nice?”

Jason hesitated. “The first two are obnoxious, but the youngest, Dawn, is sort of sweet. Reminds me of you.”

Adrian scooped the dog up in her arms and nuzzled its face with her chin. “My father got himself into a legal mess a while back. Whatever came of that?”

“He beat the rap... walked away with a lousy fine and slap on the wrist.”

“Sounds about right.” The wistful smile lingered, but now her eyes turned flinty hard. “And what have you heard about me over the years?”

The question caught Jason off guard. “A lot of hooley... lies and innuendo.”

“Lies and innuendo...” She lobbed the words back at him like a tennis player parrying a well-placed shot. “And how do you know it isn’t true?” “Other people surely heard I’m back in town,” Adrian continued after an uncomfortable silence, “but you’re the only one with the decency to look me up.” Adrian refilled the dog’s water bowl and watched as Mitzi gulped her fill. She put the kettle on the stove and, when the water sent up a wheezy hiss, poured tea and placed a plate of sugar cookies on the table.

“This young lady,” Jason reached for a physically challenged doll propped inelegantly on top of the sugar tin, “is she -”

“The only thing of value,” Adrian interrupted with a sardonic smile, “I salvaged when my parents split up.” “Did you know that Ruth Handler, a middle-aged businesswoman from Montana, invented the Barbie doll?” When there was no response, she continued, “During a European trip Handler came across a German doll named Bild Lilli. The chesty novelty item wasn’t exactly what Handler had in mind for a new product, but she purchased three of them anyway.”

“Bild Lilli?”

As Adrian explained it, the doll was based on a popular comic strip character. Lilli was a working girl who knew what she wanted and wasn’t above using men to get it. At first, the executives at Mattel, where Handler worked, didn’t like the idea so she put up her own money to bring the doll to market. The Barbie doll made its debut at the American International Toy Fair in New York and sold three hundred fifty thousand the first year.

“Is there any particular reason you’re telling me this?” Jason sipped at his lukewarm tea.

“On a merchandiser’s whim, the woman could reinvent herself... take on an endless variety of extravagant personas from astronaut to medical doctor. She held a pilot’s license, and operated commercial airliners in addition to serving as a flight attendant. In the late nineties, she even drove formula one race cars on the nascar circuit!” Adrian became more animated as she spoke. “Later, Barbie and her longtime boyfriend, Ken, decided to split up and she settled in with Blaine, an Australian surfer dude.”

“All of which proved what?”

“Despite endless permutations, Barbie was essentially an airhead – a vapid, egomaniacal, anorexic, over-sexed numbskull. But none of that mattered in the grand scheme of things,

because Barbara Millicent Roberts - AKA Barbie – was every adolescent girl’s role model. In the miraculous landscape of make believe, every woman can edit the script of her own destiny.”

Jason rose and went to where she was sitting. Wrapping his arms around his favorite niece’s shoulders, he pulled her close. “We’re having a barbecue on the fourth of July. Just me and your aunt... will you join us?”

“Yes, I’d like that very much.”

“Uncle Jason,” she murmured as she accompanied him to the entryway. “Do you think the rain...”

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## The Abode of Infinite Compassion

At 10 a.m. the Brown Book Store on Providence’s East Side was deserted except for a young girl, willowy and ascetic-looking, thumbing through a thick volume in the philosophy section. The girl’s auburn hair was soaking wet and fell down her forehead in stringy clumps. The way she read - noiselessly with only her lips moving and head cocked to one side for dramatic effect - made Marty Humphrey want to throw up on the polyurethane, solid oak floor.

“Strong stuff!” Marty said.

The girl, whose porcelain-pale complexion was offset by a healthy splattering of light freckles on the cheeks and chin, turned the book over in her hands. “Wouldn’t know. I only came in here to get out of the rain.” She replaced the book on the shelf and shuffled off.

“God, am I pathetic!” Marty thought. He browsed through the offerings for a good ten minutes before settling on a collection of essays by Sartre.

A week earlier, he came home on spring break from his junior year at Boston University and announced that he was not going back. When his father asked why, Marty sobbed, “Nothing makes any sense; I don’t know what I want to do with my screwed-up life.” The emotional outburst had a calming effect, temporarily obscuring the more obvious issue: his ‘problem’, if he even had the right to describe it as such, was far too ephemeral to elicit any genuine sympathy.

“Why is it strong stuff?” It was the freckle-faced girl with the stringy hair. She smiled and stared at him through clear, brown eyes that were inordinately large for her tiny frame.

“Celine was a bitter man,” Marty stammered, “A nihilist and a malcontent.”

She took the book, *Journey to the End of the Night*, from the shelf a second time and glanced with renewed interest at the cover. “And you read this morbid stuff?”

The question caught Marty off guard. “Well, yes,” he hedged, “but I don’t necessarily agree with everything the author wrote.”

“But you agree with most of it.”

“No, of course not!”

The girl, who couldn’t have been more than nineteen or twenty, smiled again, even more sweetly. Her delicate features had a fragile, breakable quality. “Where I come from, people don’t spend much time in bookstores. If they read anything, it’s usually the police blotter or racing form to see which horse won at Suffolk Downs.”

She brushed a strand of wet hair out of her eyes then dried the hand by rubbing it on the sleeve of her jacket. "Do you know Kupperman's Bakery over on North Main Street? I work behind the counter selling breads and pastries, though lately I've been in the rear most days running the Batter Blaster."

"Batter what?"

Blaster. Batter Blaster. Spits out 200 pounds of sticky dough for bread loafs, braided challas, brioche, croissants, éclairs, rolls and buns. Of course you got to change the computerized settings to match size and texture. Wouldn't want a puff pastry that looked like a five-pound brick."

The conversation getting weirder by the minute, Marty was having difficulty following her fractured stream of consciousness. "Would you like to go for coffee?" The girl nodded her soggy head up and down. "Better put your hat on," he added as they reached the door. "It's still raining."

"Would if I had one."

Diagonally across the street, was a House of Pancake. The main dining room of the restaurant was decorated in a folk art motif with a collection of pictures made of thinly-cut strips of basswood band-sawed and puzzled together to create country scenes. Marty ordered a coffee and cheese Danish. The girl settled on a glass of milk and the breakfast special. "I'm Rose O'Donnell." Slathering her toast with jam from a small crock, she hunched over her food with focused intensity. "My family's originally from South Boston - the D Street projects, where the pit bulls are more dangerous than the muggers." She momentarily put down her fork and rolled up the sleeve on her left arm to reveal a ragged scar that careened crazily up the wrist halfway to the elbow.

"You don't live there anymore?"

Rose's fine hair was beginning to dry and lay more evenly around her face. "Dropped out of high school three years ago; headed south to Providence and never looked back."

The winter before Marty went off to college, his father, who had business contacts in Southie, took him for a ride on the Southeast Expressway. It was early February. They exited near Andrew Square and cruised down Broadway past a row of utterly decrepit, low-rise buildings resembling something out of a Hieronymus Bosch painting. The only details missing were the demonic creatures with pointy tails and pitchforks. No trees or shrubs; no children playing out of doors; no adults in the windows or walkways. The only sign of human life was an occasional potted plant or bit of furniture visible behind a dowdy, half-drawn curtain in the fortress-like public housing.

Near an intersection they pulled up at a red light where a man with a plaid cap and no shoes or socks leaned against a telephone pole. Oblivious to the weather, the shoeless man was whistling energetically. An inch of snow was on the ground with the temperature hovering just barely above freezing. Marty's father cleared his throat as though the strange sight merited some formal explanation but said nothing. The light changed and they continued on their way.

The door opened and a boisterous group of college students entered the foyer. The waitress showed the students to an adjacent table. Rose nibbled daintily at a slice of toast while Marty poured himself a second cup of coffee, adding a splash of cream. The sticky-sweet smell of syrups - maple and blueberry - permeated every porous object. "I just dropped out of college." He told Rose what happened.

"If I'd a problem like yours," she observed, "I certainly wouldn't be burying my nose in those creepy philosophy books."

Marty wanted to say something by way of a rebuttal but could think of nothing. Finally, he said, "I felt like I was suffocating at college."

"And it's any better here?"

"No, not really."

Rose finished her breakfast and pushed the empty plate away. She had devoured every crumb and curled up on the booth with her legs tucked under her like a contented animal. "My father wants me to see a psychiatrist, a Dr. Adelman. He helped my Uncle Phil when he had a little problem with his nerves."

"What sort of problem?"

"Nervous breakdown. He didn't work or hardly talk to anyone for six months."

"What good is seeing a psychiatrist going to do?"

"You have a better idea?" Marty didn't mean to sound abrupt, but Rose's habit of leading every casual remark down an intellectual cul-de-sac was rattling his nerves. She looked up curiously through drooping, half-closed lids. Marty had the distinct impression that, if no one else were present in the East Side House of Pancake, Rose O'Donnell would have slid down on the warm, wooden bench and, with neither apology nor explanation, gone immediately off to sleep.

"No, I don't have any better ideas. If I did, you wouldn't have found me loitering in the Brown Book Store, pretending to read books I have no use for."

At the table next to them the college students were laughing raucously. One girl about Rose's age was plump but pretty - pretty in the way that girls with fair skin and virginal, non-descript features cling to such tenuous assets. A year from now, she might be heavier: despite an earthy smile, it was doubtful she would be nearly as attractive. The girl wore an olive-colored sweater made of a bulky, rough-spun yarn so heavy there was no need for a coat.

"That sweater," Rose indicated the plump girl, "I've seen them in the upscale boutiques on Marlboro Street in Boston. They're imported from Ireland and cost the better part of a week's wage." She spoke without rancor. A simple, unambiguous statement of fact. In the street the rain was finally subsiding.

"These students," she continued in a neutral tone that concealed neither bitterness nor envy, "we're all about the same age, but sometimes I feel a hundred years older, as though we're not even from the same planet." She gulped the last of her milk and dabbed her mouth with the corner of a napkin. "There's a spiritual community in Maine I'd like to visit," Rose said wistfully. "The Abode of Infinite Compassion."

"That's a mouthful." He thought the name sounded a bit grandiose, as though concocted by an advertising executive with a mystical aberration. "You've never been there?"

"No, not yet."

"Spiritual communes don't interest me."

"No, I wouldn't think so." The waitress returned with the bill; Marty paid it and left a small tip. "Thanks for breakfast, Marty."

"Good luck, Rose."

When Marty got home, he found his parents waiting in the living room. "We spoke to Dr. Adelman just a few minutes ago," his father said.

“Such a sweet man,” Mrs. Humphrey noted. “He was booked solid for the month but rescheduled a client to make room for you.”

“That's nice.” Marty went up to his room and closed the door.

Dr. Harry Adelman, psychiatrist and lecturer, was a recognized expert in a hybrid form of counseling called Constellation Therapy. Dr. Adelman did not just meet with the afflicted party but - as in Uncle Phil's case - with a cross section of everyone who ever knew him. Fifteen people - friends, family, coworkers, ex-wives - had been pulled together from as far away as Upstate New York and Fall River, Massachusetts to discuss Uncle Phil's problem. It was a regular Cecil B. DeMille's production! Ironically, Uncle Phil actually did get better and emerged from his dark night of the soul. However, as Marty recalled, he remained morbidly depressed and non-functional for many, long months after the last group session with Dr. Adelman. One day in mid-August, Uncle Phil simply snapped out of it; for no apparent reason, he experienced a spontaneous remission and started acting normal again.

The rest of the week passed like the weather, in a tedious, uneventful fog. The cars were streaked with mud and grime from the last snow storm and - for anyone foolish enough to imagine that winter was finally over - the air had acquired a raw edge that cut through a spring jacket like a knife through whipped butter. Shortly after breakfast on Saturday morning, Marty's mother came upstairs. “A Miss O'Donnell is on the line.”

“Don't know anybody by that name.”

“She says she met you at the Brown Book Store.”

Marty went to the phone. “How'd you get my number?”

“By calling all the Humphreys in the phone book.” Her voice had a bright, musical resonance - like the breathiness of a bass flute - which he hadn't noticed during their first meeting. “A bunch of friends are driving to the commune on Tuesday, and I thought you might like to come along.”

“I have an appointment with a psychiatrist on Wednesday.” Marty told her about Dr. Adelman and Constellation Therapy.

“Sounds like a barrel of laughs. You don't suppose he'd want me to attend one of the sessions?”

“That's not funny.”

“No, it isn't. I'm sorry. Look, if you're interested, we'll be leaving from my apartment around 10:00 a.m.” She gave him the address.

“Were there a lot of Humphreys?”

“What? Oh, yes. About twenty-four. Yours was two-thirds of the way down the list. No big deal.” Her voice trailed away into a reflective silence. “If you decide to come, bring a sleeping bag and warm clothes.” She hung up.

Later in the afternoon, Marty counted all the Humphreys in the Greater Providence phone book. Twenty-four people with the same name as his were listed. Exactly twenty-four. And Rose called sixteen of them just to track him down!

Tuesday morning, shortly after his parents left for work, Marty dashed off a slavishly apologetic note and loaded a sleeping bag into the trunk of his Volvo. Less than two miles from

Rose's apartment on Camp Street, he pulled into the parking lot of the Stop and Shop and shut the ignition off.

What if the ditsy girl's call was a self-serving ploy?

Her modus operandi: make the college dropout pay for everything - food, lodging, gas, tolls - on the 400-mile drive to the outskirts of Bangor. No Dutch treat on this metaphysical trip to hell! He could see the ruse playing itself out in his mind's eye. Marty - gullible idiot and unwitting chauffeur - would pull up at the curb. "My friends had a change of plans," she'd chirp before jumping into the passenger's seat. Then he'd be stuck with the cunning, little sociopath for the next four days. At that moment, he hated Rose O'Donnell more than anyone on the planet - in the galaxy!

Marty's breath was coming in shallow, jagged bursts that made his chest hurt; a heaviness, a weird torpor was settling in the part of his brain that controlled rational thought. "Get a grip!" he shouted out loud. An elderly woman lurched away from the car, almost falling on the wet pavement, and scurried into the market. Marty started the engine and drove to the apartment. When he pulled up in front of the three-story, wooden tenement on Camp Street, Rose was sitting alone, just as he had suspected.

"We need to talk," Marty said tersely, but the front door flew open and two girls and a young man joined them.

"These are my friends." Rose introduced everyone; the two girls got into the car directly in front of Marty's. "Eddy says not to worry if we get separated. We'll touch bases at the commune." The car in front pulled out, but Marty sat immobile in the front seat next to Rose. "Something wrong?"

Marty told her what had happened in the parking lot of the Stop and Shop. "So neurotic!" Rose seethed. "You deserve a Dr. Adelman!"

Marty was struck by a tidal wave of self-loathing. It was bad enough not accepting Rose's invitation at face value. By baring his soul he insured that - like everything else in his colorless, one-dimensional existence - the trip to Maine would be a bust. He was a hypocrite, a lowly slug, a worm-boy (he discovered the demeaning term in an article on women's issues in Boston Magazine). He was a sniveling coward who hid behind the soft cover of paperbacks. And what right did he have to lecture Rose about disaffected, French philosophers? He was no better than any of the revolting characters in Celine's twisted prose. "I apologize for living," Marty mumbled. He put the car into gear and edged out into traffic heading in the direction of Route 95 north. Rose sat stiffly on the seat next to him, staring straight ahead with her thin, bloodless lips clamped tightly together.

The year Marty graduated from high school, he pooled a portion of money saved from part time jobs and graduation presents for a two-week, backpacking tour of Europe. He bought a Eurail Pass and Fodor's Europe on \$10 a Day, the plan being to sleep at inexpensive pensions and youth hostels along the route. England, France, Luxembourg, Southern German, Italy and the French Riviera - the entire itinerary had been worked out in his head. In theory. But when the plane touched down at Heathrow Airport, eighteen year-old Marty Humphrey blinked, panicked. An ice pick of terror punctured his belly and sent him scurrying aboard the next, available flight back to the States. From Logan Airport, he took a taxi to his parent's home. It was one a.m. The not-so-prodigious son had been gone less than forty-eight hours! His mother threw her arms around him and cried hysterically; his father growled, "Jerk!" and slunk back to bed.



Marty Humphrey - world traveler and fearless adventurer! The idiotic bon vivant, whose European vacation lasted only slightly longer than it takes a pair of fertile rabbits to copulate. The summer passed in a swelter of self-loathing and malicious, 'backpacking' jokes. If Marty had lost his nerve and a few hundred dollars, it didn't mean he was a rotten person. It wasn't half as bad as sodomy or incest. It just felt that way through the rest of the steamy summer until he escaped to the safe haven of college anonymity.

His parents forgave his foolishness because they loved him. His friends never let up. In the end, what he needed was the humility to forgive himself his romantic and dim-witted naiveté. It took Marty a year to put the European vacation behind him. But now, once again with so many details of his life at loose ends, was this latest fiasco just one more bathetic installment in the Marty Humphrey Vaudeville Show?

They had been traveling for an hour and a half. Just outside of Newburyport, Marty pulled the car into a rest area. "I'm a paranoid asshole. Guilty as charged! Maybe it's hereditary,... a congenital defect. I don't know." Marty put his foot on the gas and moved back onto the highway. "I can't make you talk to me if you don't want to."

Ten minutes later, as they were moving over a cantilevered bridge, Rose reached into her pocket and withdrew some change. "For the toll," she said pressing the money into the palm of his free hand. They crossed into Maine and continued on in the direction of Portland.

"Foliage's changing."

"More birches and firs," Marty noted. The sun was out and, because the air was dry, it didn't seem nearly as cold. Rose opened the window a crack and fiddled with the radio. Along with the foliage, the music had shifted to a mish mash of country western and 1940's big band selections. When they hit Freeport, Marty left the turnpike and pulled into a diner. They ate quickly, without talking and were back on the road in half an hour.

They passed through a series of toll booths but, otherwise, traffic was scanty and the Volvo cruised comfortably at sixty. "After Maine, what'll you do?" Rose asked. Marty said that he was hoping she could use her influence to get him a management position at Kupperman's Bakery. "Unfortunately, my word doesn't carry much weight with Herb Kupperman or anyone else in the Jewish community."

With every revolution of the odometer, the country grew wilder, less populated. Occasionally an isolated farmhouse would loom into view as they rounded a bend in the road. The farms invariably gave way to a smooth stretch of untainted country. Five miles on, they came across a barn with a tractor and rusty harrow lying idle in a field. Then more empty space. And there were signs: Beware of Falling Rocks; Deer Crossing; Soft Shoulder (What does someone do, Marty thought, to prepare for a soft shoulder?); Next Gas Station 22 Miles.

The muck and the misery of the D Street Projects did not extend this far north, but perhaps the locals suffered from a different brand of personal blight brought on by the frigid winters, loneliness and physical isolation. Fifty feet ahead, a brown hawk nested on a scruffy pine. The bird watched the car approach impassively before spreading its massive wings and flying off in the opposite direction, beating the air with thick, visceral strokes.

Rose sat facing him, her back resting comfortably up against the side door and hands clasped around her legs. Offsetting her delicate features, her eyes held a dreamy glow, a glossy brightness that lit up her face, Marty reached out and traced the curve of her cheek down around

the lips, across the chin and lifted his hand away before the finger caromed onto the pearly neck. “What do you want from this trip?”

Staring out the passenger window at the endless procession of fat, alabaster birches, Rose gave no indication she heard the question. On a sharp descent, they passed a series of runaway trailer ramps, bottomed out and headed up another steep incline. She teased a scrap of paper from her wallet and handed it to him.

*The leaves on the trees become  
like the pages of the Holy Book  
when the eyes of the heart are open.”*  
*Persian poet, Saádi*

Ten minutes later as they passed over a ridge with slabs or marbled granite rising fifty feet on either side, the girl shifted in her seat. “I want my heart turned inside out, if that's not too much to ask.”

Marty had a mental image of the ragged scar curling crazily up the fleshy underside of her arm. “Not unreasonable,” he replied. “Definitely not too much to ask.”

Entering Bangor, they left the interstate and followed the Penobscot River in a northerly direction. The fading sunlight sifted through the treetops, but Marty felt no sense of urgency. They would reach their destination long before darkness fell.

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## The Cross-eyed Gypsy

Francine heard the sound as she was preparing for bed. A faint pitter-patter, more like the nocturnal scratching of a small rodent, filtered through the living room to the half-closed door of her bedroom. It was almost midnight. She went to the front door and peered through the peep hole; no one was visible in the hallway.

Tap, tap, tap. Francine looked a second time. “Who's there?”

The security chain firmly latched, she cracked open the door. A dark-haired boy wearing feety pajamas and a somber expression was staring up at her. Francine undid the chain. Sauntering into the apartment, the toddler wrapped his arms around Francine's thighs and shouted, “Babusssshka!”

“And you are?” No reply.

Disengaging herself from the child's arms, Francine went out into the hallway. The building was absolutely still. She returned to the apartment to find the refrigerator wide open. The boy was sitting on the living room sofa munching a dill pickle. Francine reached for the pickle, but the child scowled, twisting his body away. He had a broad face and huge, brown eyes; the skin being unusually fair, the pallid complexion heightened the intensity of the eyes. “Where are your parents?” The boy hiccupped and, stuffing what remained of the pickle in his mouth, chewed at a perverse angle. “You're mother, father?”

The pickle gone, he wiped his vinegary hands on the flannel pajamas. "Babushka!"  
"Babushka?" Francine repeated. Where had she heard the word before?

At Mary Mother of Mankind school where she worked, there was a lushly illustrated children's book, Baba Yaga - a Russian folk tale about an old woman, a babushka, who lived in the woods and communed with the animals.

Francine heard footsteps in the hallway. "Igor! Igor!" Mrs. Antonelli, the elderly lady who lived on the third floor, was yelling frantically. Francine went back out onto the landing. "Looking for the little boy?"

Mrs. Antonelli rushed into the apartment and, her chest heaving spasmodically, threw her arms around the child. The boy kissed the old woman on the cheek then buried his face in her faded, blue bathrobe. "I have no strength in my arms," the old woman whispered apologetically. "Perhaps, you could help me get him back to bed."

Lifting the child in her arms, Francine carried the boy up two flights of stairs into the old woman's cluttered den where a single mattress had been thrown on the floor. She settled the child under the covers; as she straightened up, Igor reached out and grabbed her hair. She unballled the tiny fist, prying the fingers loose one by one, kissed the palm and turned away.

"Spahseebah."

Francine turned to the old woman. What did he say?"

"He thanked you."

For what?"

Mrs. Antonelli thought a moment. "He is very polite when it comes to food. Did you give him anything to eat while he was in your apartment?"

"He found a pickle in the refrigerator."

"Well there you have it." Mrs. Antonelli cupped the child's face in her mottled hands. "Go to sleep," she said with mock severity. "And no more funny business!"

"Gdeh Atyets?" the little boy said.

"Your father's working," she replied and turned the light out.

In response to Francine's baffled expression, she noted, "A half dozen words of Russian I learned. No more no less." Like a swaybacked horse tightly hobbled at the ankles, Mrs. Antonelli inched her way back into the kitchen and put the kettle on. A thick, gold crucifix hung from the old woman's neck. Statues of the Madonna and various saints were sprinkled through the apartment which smelled of garlic and tomato sauce. "Igor lives with his father in the apartment at the far end of the hall. Moved in the beginning of September. Come from Russia via Israel."

Francine sat down at the kitchen table. On the chair next to hers was a brown teddy bear. One of the eyes was missing; the other hung from the socket by a single thread. The arms and torso of the toy animal were unnaturally thin, the bulk of the stuffing having collapsed into the animal's legs. Francine touched the solitary eye and it came loose altogether. She rolled the thin filament of yellow thread over in her fingers and watched it disintegrated into powdery fragments. A blind, edematous teddy bear of Russian parentage. Was the toy a metaphor for a way of life? Francine didn't think she would want to visit much less live in a country that produced such a physically challenged creature. "Where's the mother?"

Mrs. Antonelli raised a rheumatoid hand in a disparaging gesture. "A real pootan! After they'd been in Israel a few months, she ran off with a paratrooper." The water began to boil. She poured two cups of tea and placed the sugar bowl on the table. "Since they'd already bought tickets to come to America, the husband left without her."

"None of which explains what the boy doing in your apartment?"

“The father works at an all-night gas station. When the baby-sitter quit, he had no one to mind the child.”

“And you volunteered?”

The old woman shrugged. “How they live! A couple of folding chairs. Card table in the kitchen. No decent furniture, hardly any clothes.” She lifted the tea to her lips and blew several times before tasting. “I gave them bedroom curtains, a few towels and sheets, a spider plant.” The old woman shook several pills from a plastic bottle onto her outstretched hand. Placing one under her tongue, she washed it down with the hot tea. “Beta blockers. What a life!” She put the second pill in her mouth and took another sip. “Igor comes over after supper, watches a little television and goes to sleep. By sunrise, the father's home.”

Pointing at the plastic container, Francine said, “You're in poor health. It isn't fair.”

“You of all people,” the old lady shot back, “should know life ain't fair?”

Francine blushed and lowered her eyes. When the tea was done, she walked quietly back into the den. The boy was lying on his back with a thumb in his mouth, making a raucous, sucking sound that was both soothing and unnerving at the same time. A thin, blue vein coursed erratically across the underside of his chin. Francine knelt down, kissed the child and left the apartment.

Only a few years out of high school, Francine Spicuzza became a nun, joining an obscure order, the Sisters of Perpetual Devotion. The nuns lived separate from the community and supported themselves by manufacturing chocolates and jams which they sold in a monastery store. Unfortunately, even as a child Francine had a problem with chocolate; it made her skin break out.

Hives. Nettle rash. Urticaria. By whatever name, the malady raised itchy wheals on her back and chest. At first, she accepted her suffering as a form of spiritual penance, a mystical trial not unlike that of Job's in the Old Testament. But after three years of semi-cloistered existence, of life dedicated to prayer and confectioneries, Francine asked to be transferred to an administrative position. Six months later, she left the convent altogether. There had been no crisis of faith, no spiritual, dark night of the soul. Francine returned to Rhode Island, took an apartment on Federal Hill and found work as secretary at Mary Mother of Mankind parochial school. No one ever doubted her sincerity or religious zeal. Simply stated, the chocolate did her in.

It had been jokingly suggested that God banished Francine from the convent for being an erotic - albeit, unwitting - temptress. Her body, a Minotaur's maze of supple curves and angles, turned heads everywhere she went. The lips, too, were invitingly full with a suggestive pout. When she smiled or expressed even mild emotion, the malleable features seemed to pull at cross purposes giving her face an unpredictability that was as irresistible as it was unfathomable.

Before going to bed, Francine went to the kitchen. In a drawer, beneath a lumpy pile of dishtowels, was a gray brochure fashioned from ornate, deckled paper. For \$16,000, a person could travel - air fare not included - to the Ukraine, Moldova, Saint Petersburg or the Ural Mountains and adopt a Russian child. Two months earlier, she'd contacted the non-profit, missionary group but done nothing since. Sixteen thousand dollars. Francine could work a dozen years and not save enough money to recoup the expense. Her meager salary barely covered rent

and living expenses. Food, clothing, shoes, health care and entertainment - nothing came cheap. And would an agency even consider her, an unmarried woman with a marginal job?

An old maid cousin on her father's side got pregnant with donor sperm. The child - she was a teenager now - was energetic, a straight-A student and member of the debating society at school. Artificial insemination. Francine had briefly toyed with the idea. Very briefly. With her luck, the fertility clinic would match her with an escapee from Bridgewater, the state hospital for the criminally insane. Evil sperm. Deranged, psychopathic sperm torpedoed halfway up her vagina to the mouth of the cervix where, with predatory zeal, the flagellating monster would burrow, head first, into one of her unsuspecting ova. The grim thought sent waves of nausea knifing through her bowels.

A nun with The Sisters of Perpetual Devotion had done adoptions in an Eastern European country. Bulgaria or Rumania. Francine couldn't remember. The peasants, poor and uneducated dirt farmers, believed adoption was a sinister pretext. Foreigners 'bought' their children for body parts. The internal organs - kidneys, livers, hearts, bowels, spleens and lungs were harvested as organic replacements for the terminally ill. External organs such as eyes, hands, legs and ears were only slightly less valuable. In death as in life, the materially less-fortunate would benefit the rich.

Francine picked up the brochure again and held it to the light. Most of the two dozen youngsters pictured were orphans, abandoned at birth. Some were gypsies; others malnourished with glaring birth defects. In one picture, a darkly beautiful, kindergarten-aged child sat stiffly in a straight-backed chair, a cardboard sign draped around her neck. On the sign, which tilted at a crazy angle, was scrawled: Marina, age 6, Gypsy, severe cross-eyes.

But for the infirmity and languorous expression, the picture might have been comical - pathetically touching, even. A parody of the real thing. But crossed eyes were the sign of the devil. No self-respecting Slavic family would ever adopt a Gypsy child - certainly not one capable of the evil eye! Sixteen thousand dollars for a throwaway child no one wanted; a less-than-perfect creature possessed by demons. And her own kind, the Catholics, was serving as intermediaries, baby brokers! Francine tossed the brochure aside and went to draw a bath.

You of all people ...

Later that night in bed, Francine remembered Mrs. Antonelli's biting commentary, the brittle glint of consternation in her gray eyes. Earlier, as she was rinsing the teacups in the sink, Mrs. Antonelli asked, "What are your future plans?"

Since leaving the convent, Francine structured her life on the singular, guiding principal that complications were bad, routine and sameness the supreme good. "I'll stay with the school," Francine replied. "Another ten years I'll have my pension."

The old woman stared at her curiously, a queer smile tilting her wrinkled lips at an oblique angle. She scratched her ear and snorted through her nose, making a rather disagreeable sound. "You act like you're still married to God."

Francine winced as though she had been soundly slapped. Mildred Antonelli grabbed Francine's wrist and held it firmly. "Sweet kid like you deserves better." Her tone was strangely pleasant, confidential - like two girl friends having an intimate heart-to-heart. She didn't volunteer an explanation of the previous remark and Francine, still flustered and taken aback, never asked.

In the morning as she was leaving for work, Francine spotted Igor in the lobby next to a short, good looking man in his early thirties. The father had the same broad features and walnut-colored eyes. A blizzard of curly brown hair fell down below his collar in the back. When she approached, the child reached out and took Francine by the hand. The man quickly separated them. "So sorry," he said with a thick, guttural accent and hurried the baffled boy away.

"Babushka!" Igor shouted hoarsely just before the heavy, oak door slammed shut behind her.

One Saturday in May, Francine was returning home with a bag of groceries. Three blocks from the building, she saw the Russian crossing toward her from the other side of the street. If the Russians in 3B were poor and the slutty mother ran off with an Israeli soldier, it was not Francine's problem. She might feel sympathy - even say a few prayers - but their misfortune lay safely outside the scrupulously narrow margins of her life.

"For you I carry." He relieved her of the bag. "I gipt you back apartment."

Francine worked out a rough translation in her head and decided not to argue the point. "That's very nice. Where's your son?"

"Igor wit Mrs. Antonelli. Goot woman. Very goot woman!" When they reached the apartment, he placed the bag on the kitchen table. "I say goodbye now."

"Yes, goodbye and thank you." He smiled and disappeared into the hallway.

Later that evening, Francine went to the Russian's apartment. The man fetched his son and followed her back downstairs. She dragged a 19-inch Sony Trinitron out of the closet. "Mrs. Antonelli tells me that you don't have a television, and it just so happens I have this nice set that no one ever uses."

The Russian gawked at her with a muddled expression. "What means just so happens?"

"That's just an expression, an idiom. It doesn't mean anything." She saw that the man was even more confused. "Do you have a television?"

"No television."

"Then you take this one."

"What for I take?"

Francine began gesticulating crudely, an impromptu, Cyrillic sign language. "For the boy."

Only now, the Russian understood that Francine was literally giving him the television. "Why you gipt me?"

"I don't need it."

Noticing the empty TV stand in the corner of the living room, he replied, "You have nice TV but keep in closet." He wiped a thick glob of dust off the top of the Sony. "How long in closet you keep?"

"Two years." Francine picked up the TV stand, carried it out the door in the direction of the stairs. Igor and his father, clutching the bulky set, trailed behind.

The only furniture in the living room of the Russian's apartment was a bean bag chair. Mrs. Antonelli came over with a roll of paper towels and bottle of Windex to supervise the cosmetic restoration. Plugged in, the reception was every bit as sharp as the day it arrived in Francine's apartment. "I am Vladimir." The Russian extended his hand. "Is new television, no?"

"It hasn't been used very much."

"I carry groceries and you gipt new television. Is very confusing."

Francine shook her head violently from side to side. "No, this has nothing to do with the groceries."

"Welcome to America," Mrs. Antonelli quipped.

He turned to the old woman. "Is hard to understand American way."

Francine nodded and backed slowly toward the door. "Every culture has its subtle nuances."

The Sony Trinitron was a birthday present from Francine's brother, Mickey. The following week, he was arrested for possession of stolen property - fourteen, large-screen televisions. All Sonys.

Francine was crushed. Mickey was no better than any of the scurrilous characters running around Federal Hill with their 'hot' goods - the gold jewelry and designer jeans that conveniently fell off the back of an eighteen wheeler. There were the house parties - usually at some ratty Charles Street walk up that smelled of stale beer and oregano - where people picked over a living room full of designer clothing, the manufacturer's labels still in tact. Not that Francine was ever invited; she heard about them from friends and relatives. No one would ever think to invite Francine, the ex-nun.

"Lay down with dogs get up with fleas." That's what Francine used to tell Mickey when he went off to gamble and do whatever tough guys did at the clubs on Federal Hill. The morning after Mickey's arrest, Francine called the local parish and made an appointment to meet with the priest. "What is this in regards to?" the secretary asked.

"A personal matter that requires spiritual attention."

Later in the week she sat opposite Father Rinaldi in the church Rectory. The faint scent of incense permeated the wood-paneled room; a huge, leather-bound volume, Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed, sat on the edge of the desk. "Father, I'd like to ask a hypothetical question."

Father Rinaldi frowned. "We don't live in a hypothetical world," he returned in a slightly petulant tone, "but I'll try to help you as best I can."

"If a person received a gift and had reason to believe that the item might be stolen ..." Francine didn't quite know where to go with her thoughts and left the sentence dangling in midair.

The priest sat in a straight backed chair with his hands folded in his lap. A young man with dark-framed glasses and an over serious manner, he pursed his lips and squinted at a point directly over Francine's head where the far wall and ceiling converged. "Two questions," Father Rinaldi responded after a brief silence. "What is the nature of the gift?"

"A television."

"What type?" he pressed.

"Is that important?" The priest only lowered his eyes and examined the back of his hands to indicate the answer was non-negotiable. "A 19-inch Sony Trinitron."

Father Rinaldi blinked violently. "That certainly is a nice gift, hypothetical or otherwise." He rose and, with his hands clasped behind his back, began to pace back and forth in front of Francine's chair.

"The word 'might' is a bit vague. Either the expensive TV was or was not stolen." Now he set his clear brown eyes directly on Francine, skewering her with his piercing gaze like an etymologist's bug on a pin. "Was the TV stolen?" The priest resumed his pacing, but now,

instead of moving laterally, he was circling the chair. "Your answer makes all the difference in the world."

Francine hadn't anticipated Father Rinaldi's persistence and was beginning to feel like someone enmeshed in an unseemly act, a crime with spiritual and ethical dimensions. The only thing missing was the 40-watt bulb dangling from an overhead electrical cord. "But you see, Father, I don't know."

"There's no way you can find out?"

"No, not really." The priest momentarily passed in his perambulations. "I strongly doubt the party concerned will tell me the truth."

"Then it's a moot point," Father Rinaldi said and stopped dead in his tracks. "You can use your hypothetical 19-inch Sony Trinitron without shame or personal guilt." "In the event the set goes on the blink," he added as an afterthought, "I wouldn't advise taking it to a reputable dealer for repairs."

"No, that wouldn't be wise."

On the way out, Francine asked about the leather-bound book. The priest put a hand on Francine's shoulder and smiled wistfully. "A Guide for the Perplexed. Maimonides was a 12th-century Spanish Rabbi. He believed that only by becoming a slave to the a priori laws of God could a soul free himself from the temporal world." Removing his hand from her shoulder, he pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his slender nose. "An intriguing thought, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, it certainly is!" Francine thanked Father Rinaldi and left.

When Francine got home she went directly into the living room and sat down on the ottoman in front of the television. In truth, nothing had changed. She felt no special attachment to the Sony. It was a box filled with elaborate gadgetry and computer chips. Francine, who viewed so little TV, resolved to watch even less, a voluntary abstention like giving up meat during Holy Week.

*The a priori laws of God.* Most of the people Francine knew viewed the law as a rubber band that could be stretched many times its normal length. When the band broke, you copped a plea or, in the worst case scenario, went to jail. Only imbeciles and honest people (really one and the same) never stretched the band to see how far it would take them. Those Federal Hill types weren't 'perplexed by the law. They understood the law - judicial not ecclesiastical - with a broadness and clarity that would have put Maimonides to shame!

A week passed. One night, unable to sleep, Francine got out of bed and wandered into the living room. The Sony Trinitron rested on a walnut stand. She turned the television to face the wall. "There, that's better." She hesitated. Something else was needed. Dragging the bulky object to the opposite side of the apartment, she buried the Sony Trinitron in the hall closet under a two-foot stack of brown grocery bags.

Francine drank a cup of warm milk. She read an article in the most recent issue of the Catholic Digest about a Labrador retriever that saved the life of a little boy with a crippled leg. When the milk was finished, she put the cup in the kitchen sink, turned out the lights and went to bed. From the minute her head hit the pillow, Francine was engulfed in an utterly peaceful and restorative sleep. A blessed slumber.



In the evenings sometimes Francine went upstairs to sit with Mrs. Antonelli until the child was settled in for the night. She brought an Arthur, the Aardvark coloring book and crayons. "I saw Vladimir in the market earlier," Francine said. "The man looked a wreck. Hardly spoke two words."

Mrs. Antonelli, smelling faintly of Ben Gay, was putting the crayons away. "He got legal papers in the mail yesterday from his wife. She's divorcing him."

"What grounds?"

"Desertion," The old woman replied.

"But she ran off with an Israeli soldier."

"Since Vladimir took the child out of the country, she's claiming he abandoned her."

"What about Igor?"

"She doesn't care about the child. Just wants a quickie divorce so she can remarry." From the other room came a light, musical laugh. "Someone's having pleasant dreams," Mrs. Antonelli observed.

The following week, Vladimir was standing on the front steps of the apartment as Francine was leaving for work. His clothes were dirty and chin streaked with grease. "I am heppy man!"

"And why is that?" Francine asked.

Reaching into the pocket of his blue coveralls, he withdrew a 6-inch, rusty spring. The spring had a tight coil near the center with hooks on either end. Cupping the corroded metal in the palm of his hand, he pushed it under Francine's nose. "Is spring from rear brake shoe 99 Chevrolet. Lest night is slow to work. Boss teach me how change shoe."

"Mechanics make good money," Francine confirmed. "My brother, Mickey, is a mechanic." Almost immediately, she regretted using her brother as a role model.

"Yes, today I heppy man!" He bounded up the stairs two at a time and disappeared into the building.

Vladimir's irreverent approach to the English language mystified Francine. He eliminated every bit of extraneous - and, often, essential - verbiage. Adjectives and adverbs he threw out wholesale; prepositions, connectors, participles and pronouns were intolerable luxuries. And yet, in his clumsy hands, the language assumed a poetic austerity, a dazzling freshness and clarity. Vladimir murdered the language, sodomized it. Yet, with an ingenuous and bewitching charm, he revitalized every word.

"And I verriy heppy to you!" Francine mumbled with a goofy grin. She was totally alone now with no one to hear her irreverent parody.

On Thursday, a Hispanic boy shuffled into the office of Mary Mother of Mankind elementary school. The front of his pants was soaking wet. "You peed your pants, José," Francine said. The boy began to whimper. "Go sit over there," She said, gesturing toward an empty bench. Dialing a number, she spoke in Spanish briefly and hung up. "Your mother will be by in a few minutes with fresh clothes." The boy nodded and screwed his wet bottom firmly into the seat.

Fifteen minutes later, a nun in black habit stuck her head in the room. "An older woman is in the lobby. She needs to speak to you - a private matter concerning one of the children."

“Which child?”

“Didn't recognize the name,” the sister said and went off to fetch the lady.

The door opened and Mrs. Antonelli shambled into the room. She sat down heavily in the chair beside Francine's desk. “This ain't no social call,” she said morosely. and, raising a crooked finger, pointed at her eyes. “Cataracts. The doctor's scheduled me for surgery next Friday. I'm going to be out of commission for at least a week.”

“What about Igor?” A bell rang and almost immediately there was a huge commotion in the adjacent hallway. “José, por favor,” Francine barked. The little boy jumped off the bench, closed the door with a loud bang, and the bedlam outside diminished by half. José kept looking back and forth from the old lady to Francine. It was unclear how much of the conversation he understood. Mrs. Antonelli smiled at the curly-haired boy who shrugged and studied the wet circle on the front of his pants.

The old woman began to cry, quietly with little outward display of emotion. “For myself I don't care. It's only day surgery and the eyes will heal.” She took a Kleenex from her purse and dabbed her cheeks. “Without somebody to look after the child, everything falls apart.”

The door opened and petite, dark-skinned woman shuffled into the office. “So sorry!” She grabbed José roughly under the armpit and started whacking him energetically on the lower legs with a hand as stiff as a bristle brush. The boy howled - more from fright and embarrassment than physical pain. The woman dragged him into the hallway and shut the door soundlessly.

“Why does she hit the kid like that?”

“It's a cultural thing. They all do it.” Francine came out from behind the desk and patted the old lady's hand. “Don't worry. I'll take Igor for the week.”

“God bless you!” Mrs. Antonelli rose to her feet. “Not that I thought for one minute you'd let me down,” she added with a paper thin smile.

As she reached for the door, Francine blurted out, “These South American children don't swear. They bring their completed homework to school with no excuses. The parents have a reverence for education you won't find among the inner-city, native-born students.”

“That's nice to know.” Mrs. Antonelli went out the door just as another bell sounded and the hallway erupted in bedlam.

The following week Igor came to stay. His father brought him to Francine's apartment shortly before seven. “Is saint what you are!” He handed her a plastic, grocery bag with clean underwear and went off to work.

“Is not what you are saint,” Francine mumbled under her breath. “Is what you are sexually-frustrated, burnt-out, goody-two-shoes, ex-nun. Ist very unheppy womens.” The child stared at her with a quizzical expression. Francine knelt down and kissed Igor on the cheek. “Drink?” The boy shook his head up and down. She put some juice in a cup with a straw and handed it to him. He opened his mouth as though the straw were three inches in diameter and, with ballet-like precision, draped his tender lips around the plastic tube.

At 8:30 Francine gave him a sip of milk. She made him pee, brush his teeth and brought him into the spare bedroom. “We shall read a nice story.” Francine sat next to him on the twin bed and read from a book of fairy tales. Fifteen minutes later he was sound asleep. Francine bathed, threw her nightgown on and knelt for evening prayers.

What to pray for?

Recently, she prayed a novena for a sick friend. The friend died. She asked God to keep her brother, Mickey, out of trouble. A month later, he sold a carton of food stamps to an FBI undercover agent at the Willow Tap. Then there was the neighbor with marital problems; after Francine sought divine intercession, the husband ran off and was never seen or heard from again. Only once, did she ask something for herself. "Dear God, I'm young. I have certain cravings, unmet needs." The following week the school custodian, a disheveled man with irregular, yellow-stained teeth invited her to the Taunton race track.

In her darker moments, Francine didn't believe that people were much good. Or, more accurately, she doubted that there were enough decent people collectively to tip the balance in favor of a compassionate universe. At least, not in Rhode Island. Certainly not on Federal Hill! Her faith in God was never at issue. If prayers went unanswered (or produced frightful consequences), it reflected poorly on her own, spiritual shortcomings, not some uncooperative deity. In his inscrutable silence, God remained above reproach.

She leaned back comfortably on her heels in the growing darkness, her mind an open vessel. Half an hour passed. Nothing came to mind. She sat silently, her hands resting idly in her lap. The sun gone down, the room was drenched in total darkness. A peculiar image floated in front of her eyes: the living room of the Russian's apartment with the bean bag chair and ludicrously expensive television. Welcome to America! Finally, Francine moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Dear Lord, two things I ask," she whispered. "Let no harm come to the Russians, and teach me to pray, again, as when I was a young girl."

Having finished her prayers, she went to bed. An hour later she felt a pudgy finger jabbing her cheek. "Pee pee," Igor mumbled. She took him into the bathroom, waited while he did his business then led him back to the other room.

"Do you need a drink?" He shook his head. She turned the light out and went to bed. Thump! She recognized the muffled sound of sturdy, three year-old feet hitting the ground. Igor shuffled back into the room and climbed under the covers next to her. She led him back to bed a second time but hardly crossed the threshold before the child was picking his way through the darkness to the primordial warmth of her quilted comforter. Curling up near her stomach, he stuck his thumb in his mouth and was asleep before she could decide whether or not to let him stay. Gently grabbing the hand, she tried to dislodge the thumb, but it would not budge. She held his forehead with one hand and pulled back firmly on a boney wrist no more than two inches in diameter. The rapacious sucking sound only intensified. "Poor baby." She let go of the hand and the slurpy noise dropped away to nothing. "Poor Russian baby." She cradled him in her arms and rocked the child until she, too, was sound asleep.

Shortly before dawn, Igor woke and, hand over fist, climbed on top of her. He gazed at Francine with a look - not so much affection, but bone-deep contentment - then lay his head down gently under her chin and went back to sleep. Lying there in the darkness with the child's sweet breath on her throat, Francine tried to remember a time in her thirty, some-odd years when she felt so totally fulfilled, blessed.

In the morning she cooked cream of wheat with raisins. Igor insisted on feeding himself, navigating the spoon toward his mouth in sweeping arcs. By eight, the father returned. "Was good boy?"

"Yes, Igor was a very good boy." Holding his son tightly by the hand, he led the child back to their apartment.

By midweek, Mrs. Antonelli, who had been convalescing at her daughter's, called. The operation was a success; her eyes were healing nicely. She would be back in her apartment late Monday. "No hurry," Francine said. "Take as long as you need."

On the morning of the last day, Igor's father took some crumpled bills from his pants pocket and thrust them at her. "Is for helping me."

Francine shook her head emphatically. "I don't want your money."

"How to pay you?"

Francine thought a moment. "Maybe someday you can return the favor."

The man squinted as though staring into direct sunlight. "What means return the favor?"

"You can do something nice for me."

Vladimir's expression suddenly brightened. Abandoning his son in the doorway, he ran off and returned shortly with a Russian-English dictionary. "Pilmani. Is Russian food like dumplings."

"Dumplings," Francine repeated.

"Igor love pilmani." He smiled, a muted hopefulness tinged with sorrow. "You come join us tonight for supper. Six clock."

Déjà vu. Francine felt a lambent surge of pleasant emotions - like when, in the chalky, early morning hours, the angelic boy slumbered on her chest. She thought a moment. "I'll bring dessert."

Vladimir held up three fingers. "You, me, baby Igor," and hurried away.

Mrs. Antonelli came home around lunchtime, a thick, gauze pad taped over her right eye. Though only two inches square, the white pad effectively obliterated the entire right side of her head. Francine brought her up a pot of chicken escarole soup and Italian bread. "How do you feel?"

Mrs. Antonelli shrugged. "It would be obscene, against the laws of nature if I felt like a teenager." She asked about Igor and Francine assured her everything had gone well. "Did he get up in the middle of the night and try to crawl in bed with you?"

Francine, who had been warming the soup on the range, poured the steamy broth into a bowl and cut several slices of bread. "Pretty much every night."

Mrs. Antonelli stirred the vegetables - celery, carrots, onions, lentils - and sniffed fretfully. "You made the stock from scratch?" The comment was more like an accusation than offhand remark. Francine nodded. The old woman did not look directly at Francine but, rather, cocked her head at a sharp angle. "And what did you do, with the boy, I mean?"

"For the most part, I let him stay." Mrs. Antonelli ate in silence. When the food was gone, Francine cleared the dishes. "Last February, I got called for jury duty."

Like a Cyclops whose solitary eye had been pushed off-center, Mrs. Antonelli glanced briefly at Francine. "You don't say! What sort of cases?"

"Mostly civil. What mattered was that nobody in the jury pool knew each other. We were all strangers. Anonymous. Incognito." Francine smiled darkly. "When does a person ever get the luxury to slough off their past, reinvent themselves?"

A sputtering laugh filled the room. "In the witness protection program."

Francine reached out and touched Mrs. Antonelli on the forearm. "If you asked a mutual acquaintance about me, what would they say?"

“I thought we were talking about jury duty,” the old woman replied. She ran her fingers tentatively over the bandage to make sure the taped corners were still intact and lowered her hands in her lap. “This conversation’s getting stranger by the minute.”

“What would they say?” Francine pressed.

“They’d say Francine was a nice girl with no luck. An ex-nun, who lives a drab and joyless life.” She cleared her throat. “And if they were decent Catholics, they might remember you in their prayers.”

“Vladimir invited me to supper tonight. At his apartment. Just the three of us.

The old woman smiled slyly as though confirming some private intimation. “So being with him is like jury duty; he has no history on you.”

“And the language barrier puts us on an equal footing.”

The old woman crooked her head more sharply to the side as though she were staring straight up through the ceiling to the gates of heaven. “And how does that make you feel?”

Francine cracked a raggedy, perverse smile. “Gloriously free from the dead weight of the past.” Though her voice remained measured, self-contained, tears dribbled down her cheeks. “No longer a failed nun.”

“You were never a failed anything,” Mrs. Antonelli said severely.

Francine cleaned up the dishes and put the rest of the soup in the refrigerator. “So who is the real Francine Spicuzza - the faint-hearted mystic who works at a parochial school or baby Igor’s surrogate mother-of-the-week?”

“You are the kind-hearted soul who brought me chicken escarole.” Only now did Mrs. Antonelli lower her head and shift in her seat to face her. “Have a good time tonight with the men folk in 3B,” she said dryly, “and, for God’s sake, wear something revealing.”

The next day, Francine called the local parish and asked to speak to the priest. “What is this in regards to?” the secretary asked.

“A personal matter requiring spiritual guidance.”

Later in the afternoon, Francine was sitting opposite Father Rinaldi in the Church rectory. “Father, I have another hypothetical question.”

The priest removed his glasses and rubbed his face in what resembled a supplicating gesture. “Does this have anything to do with a 19-inch Sony Trinitron?”

“No, of course not!” Francine colored and, with a hint of embarrassment, added, “Well, not directly.”

“Ah!” The priest settled back in his chair. “As you were saying.”

“A man recently separated from his wife, comes to this country from abroad.”

“What nationality is the visitor?”

“Russian.” Buoyed by the priest’s interest in the narrative, Francine added, “The Russian wife has deserted him and run off with another man.”

Father Rinaldi rose from his chair. Head lowered, the priest began pacing the length of the room. “Did the infidelity happen in his homeland or after arriving in America?”

“Neither. In Israel.” The priest’s face clouded over, his eyes narrowing so the pupils were just barely visible. “The part about Israel doesn’t really matter,” she clarified. “It’s what comes after that’s important.”

“Yes, of course.” Father Rinaldi made a face as though he hadn’t heard properly. “So very strange! But then, every time you come to see me with a personal dilemma there’s an unusual twist.”

The intercom buzzed, but the priest ignored it. “How long did you say you and this Russian fellow -” Immediately Father Rinaldi waved a hand, canceling his own words. “I tend to forget that we’re talking in abstractions. The Russian and his unfaithful wife are imaginary characters, theoretical constructs.” The phone buzzed a second time. Father Rinaldi picked up the receiver and, after a short conversation, said, “Hold all calls. This is going to be a bit longer than I anticipated.” He turned back to Francine with a tortured smile. “Now, where were we?”

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## Sextillions of Infidels

Hazel and Jorani broke down twenty miles shy of Bangor with the late November sun fading away to bone-chilling darkness. Half an hour passed before the black, rust bucket of a pickup truck pulled up behind them. A lumpy woman in her mid-forties climbed down from the truck. "Left rear tire's all shot to hell."

Between the bitter cold and sense of helplessness, Hazel felt her brain growing numb. "I tried to change it but the wrench kept slipping."

"Tire iron," the thickset woman corrected. "It's called a tire iron." One of her teeth in the front was chipped which, along with her raggedy clothes, contributed to a slightly derelict appearance. A tangle of scruffy, blond hair was three-quarters washed away by silvery gray. "Your friend sick?" She gestured at the dark-skinned Asian girl curled up in a fetal position on the passenger side and whimpering softly.

"No, Jorani forgot to bring a warm jacket. She's just cold and upset. We drove up here from Boston. My folks have a summer cottage near Bangor."

"It's the middle of the freakin' winter." There was nothing maternal or even modestly sympathetic in the woman's demeanor.

"Yes, I know, but -"

Before Hazel could finish explaining how they traveled north on a lark, a senior year, escape weekend, the woman retreated to the rear of the car and began rummaging in the trunk.

"That old fleabag," the dark-skinned girl blubbered, "is probably an escaped lunatic from the hospital for the criminally insane. She'll change the tire, steal the car and leave us for dead."

"Shut up, Jorani!"

A minute later the woman returned. "This ain't the right tire iron. Don't hardly fit the lug nuts... probably metric."

"What do you suggest?"

The woman bit her lips and, scrunching up her face in an impatient frown, stared out into the blackened countryside. "Too late to call for a tow, and no service stations stay open this late at night." She pointed a second time at Jorani who was sobbing quite stridently now, her chest heaving with each intake of breath. "You sure she don't need medical help?"

They were stranded two hundred miles from home in the middle of nowhere on a blustery November night, and Jorani, an insufferable crybaby, was in hysterical meltdown mode. "What do you suggest?" Hazel forced the woman's attention back to the central issue.

"Name's Marla... I live just up the road a piece. If you don't mind roughing it, I could put you up for the night; we'll get your car situated first thing in the morning."

Somewhere in the thickly wooded, New England countryside an animal let loose with a mournful howl. Another beast a good half mile away picked up the plaintive note, relaying it further up the mountainside. "What was that?" Jorani whimpered.

"Hyenas," Marla replied. "Those feral buggers don't like the cold any better than humans."

"Hyenas live in Africa," Hazel corrected.

"Geography was never my strong suit." The woman grinned and pointed at Jorani curled up like a tight fist with her soggy face buried in her hands. "Probably just a pack of ravenous, meat-crazed timber wolves."

In the short time since the sun had set, the temperature plummeted another ten degrees, hovering a few degrees below freezing. Worse yet, a stiff wind curled through the hilly ravine, pushing the wind chill to single digits. Hazel removed the key from the ignition and reached for the door handle. "Yes, if it's not too much inconvenience..."

Piling in the truck, Marla fired up the engine and drove five miles down the highway, turning off on a dirt road. "That's my place up ahead." Hazel squinted out the dirty-streaked window. A smallish clapboard cabin was nestled between a stand of birch trees.

Unlocking the side door, Marla brought them into the kitchen where the room was a toasty seventy degrees. "I was just getting ready for supper and realized there was no coffee or eggs for the morning so I scooted out for groceries. Otherwise, you might have been stranded through the night."

Cocking her head to one side, Jorani, who had finally regained her composure, sniffed the air. "What's that heavenly smell?"

"Curried chicken in white wine sauce. It's my specialty." Shuffling over to a Crockpot resting on the counter, Marla lifted the lid. "If you girls haven't already eaten, you're more than welcome to join me."

"We haven't had a bite to eat since leaving Boston," Jorani blurted.

Hazel flashed her friend a dirty look. "You've already done so much for us, and it's not like you were expecting company."

"Actually, I was expecting company," Marla corrected, "but that's none of your concern." Ten minutes later the doorbell rang. A stocky man with a curly beard and red plaid jacket was standing out on the front stoop. Rather than invite him in, Marla stepped outside, closing the door behind her. They could hear the bearded man mounting a furious protest, but after five minutes the woman returned and bolted the door behind her. "Let's eat!"

In the living room, a table had been set with a linen tablecloth, salad bowls, a fresh loaf of sourdough bread and bottle of apple cider. "Spread a bed of basmati on your plates," Marla suggested, indicating a pot of aromatic rice, "and ladle the curried chicken over it." She lit a pair of scented candles. "The fruit," she gestured at a bowl of pineapple chunks, "goes on top of the curry sauce."

"What are the greens?" Jorani asked.

"Minced scallions. I throw everything in - bulbs and all."

"You invited your boyfriend for dinner," Hazel said guiltily, "and we traded places, so to speak... put him out in the cold."

Marla made a dismissive gesture. "There's an all-night diner just up the road... caters to truckers, prostitutes, local riffraff and insomniacs. Duane will grab a bite there."

He might fill his gut, but he certainly wasn't going to enjoy a fancy sit-down meal like this! If the scented candles were any indication, Hazel mused, the girls had put the kibosh on a romantic soiree. Not that Marla seemed to care. Twenty minutes later, after the curry was finished, she threw another log in the wood-burning stove and served a crumb cake with mocha-flavored coffee.

"You see how things turn out." On a full stomach, Jorani's self-possession had miraculously returned. "One minute we're stranded, half-frozen in the middle of nowhere, and now this!"

"Jorani," Marla broke off a section of the cake and waved it in the air. "What sort of name is that?"

"Cambodian... it means radiant jewel."

"You weren't looking so radiant," Hazel quipped, "when the car broke down." She turned her attention back to the older woman. "She's an instigator,"

"How's that?"

"Jorani was born here, but her parents immigrated from a farming hamlet where there was a very large, extended family. When they came to America, they bought a two-decker tenement in Attleboro and the whole clan - aunts, uncles, grandparents, nieces and nephews - moved in together."

"When my brother wanted to take a girlfriend to the movies last summer," Jorani interjected. "They sent my aunt and two nephews as chaperones."

Marla freshened their coffee. "The trip north was Jorani's idea," Hazel explained. "I wasn't so keen about traveling north this late in the season, but she wanted to get away, even if just for a night, to see what it would be like to be out from under her parents' thumb."

Ten minutes later, a muted, rhythmic sound was emanating from the far corner of the room where Jorani had curled up on the couch sound asleep. "Looks like your friend's had a little too much excitement for one day."

"We loused up your evening," Hazel repeated.

"I like it better," Marla replied cryptically, "when things don't necessarily go according to plan. With the comforting warmth from the stove, her cheeks had taken on a ruddy glow; a sedentary easiness settled over the woman, who didn't look nearly as hardscrabble or washed-out. "The past month or so, I've sort of been in a holding pattern," she confided. "I was tending bar at a lounge in Old Orchard Beach, but I got to drinking as much as I was serving some nights so I quit work." She held a hand straight out in front of her and smiled self-consciously as the stubby fingers fluttered ever so gently before the tremors melted away. "Stopped drinking six weeks ago. Cold turkey."

"You're okay?"

"I've my moments, but managed to avoid the booze." Marla gestured at the figure curled up on the couch. "Your friend's got one hell of an appetite."



Jorani devoured three helpings of the chicken curry and polished off what little was left of the fluffy rice. "Her parents are over-protective," Hazel explained, "And she's suffers from anxieties." "Jorani says her relatives suck all the oxygen out of the air with their pettiness and old-fashioned beliefs."

"And your folks, what are they like?"

"The situation's just the opposite." Hazel ran a poised finger around the rim of her coffee cup. A taut sourness nestled in the corners of her mouth as she collected her thoughts. "My parents are getting divorced"

"When did you learn this?"

"Middle of the week." A grandfather clock near the bay window struck eleven o'clock. "My father was having an affair with a coworker. Rather than repair the marriage, my mother returned the favor in kind."

An orange tabby sleeping near the stove awoke. The cat stretched, splaying its front paws. Marla fed the cat and they watched it eat in silence. When the cat was done, it hovered by the door, the plumed tail arched over its back. Marla cracked the door open and the cat scooted out into the cold.

Marla blew her cheeks out in an attitude of disbelief. "You and your Cambodian compadre are polar opposites. She's overwhelmed by an intrusive, meddlesome extended family, and your folks do all their critical thinking with the organs situated between their legs."

"Excuse me?"

"Their gonads... genitals." Marla was picking distractedly at a cuticle. "But it doesn't matter. You'll both work it out... find your way out of the mess."

Hazel felt a momentary flurry of resentment, an urge to disavow the gruff, outspoken, woman but couldn't manage to consolidate the indignation into a firm conviction. Marla's observations about the human condition were too spur of the moment, random and guileless. It cut through all the dysfunction and emotional dysphoria. "So what do we do?"

The woman let loose a commiserating chuckle. "A thousand questions in search of a thousand-and-one answers," she replied obtusely. "You don't do crap."

"That tells me nothing."

"Maybe there ain't no hard-and-fast answers, no unassailable truths in the real world. You make a life as best you can and nothing more." "Let your parents muck up their lives. It's none of your affair. In a sense they've done you a major service."

Hazel eyed the tough talking woman uncertainly. No one had ever talked to her with such crass insistence. "So it's a blessing my parents are splitting up?"

"They're role models for how *not* to live your life. Look at the faulty decisions they've made, then decide what you want for your own future going forward. Not this, not this, not this... THAT!

The room fell silent. Heat from the wood-burning stove caused the gossamer curtains over the sink to rustle gently. "When I left this morning, my father was in the bedroom packing a suitcase with underwear and toiletries."

"Going off to live with the new goilfriend." Marla intentionally mispronounced the word in derisive fashion.

"The girlfriend's got a husband and three children in elementary school. He's moving into a rooming house. A sardine can of an apartment with shared bathroom privileges."

"Seems like a smart move," Marla noted with a poker face.

"Tell me something I don't already know," Hazel pressed.

"Excess baggage," Marla tossed the phrase out reflexively, almost as an afterthought. "Everyone's got some. Trick as to keep your extraneous crap to a bare minimum."

"Okay," Hazel muttered. *Excess baggage* – the girl had experienced more than she could handle of late. This modest cabin in the middle of nowhere felt like a refuge, a no-frills sanctuary for the spiritually damaged. "And what about Jorani?"

"Jorani comes from a good family. .. a bit overprotective but well intentioned. It's you I worry about."

"Jorani's got the mindset of a twelve year-old. She still doesn't really understand how things work," Hazel spoke tentatively. "You know, life in general."

"Truth be told," Marla replied, her voice tinged with sardonic humor, "nobody ever grows up. That's just malarkey - a common misconception. You bumble along and, if you don't step on too many toes, eventually, things just fall into place." Marla disappeared into the back of the cottage. After rummaging about, she returned with a sleeping bag, blanket and pillows. Lifting Jorani's head she slipped the pillow under her cheek and draped the blanket over her shoulders. The plump girl never stirred. "Maybe when Jorani gets home, she'll realize that having a truckload of incestuous kin running about is more blessing than inconvenience." "They had that horrible war over there what with Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge."

"Where did you learn about that?"

"Being poor don't make me stupid." Marla spoke with just enough self-deprecating humor to blunt the sarcasm.

"Jorani thinks she's ugly," Hazel murmured. "She tells me so every five minutes."

"And why is that."

"Because of her weight."

"She's not that fat... nothing she couldn't get a handle on with diet and exercise."

"And her nose... she wants a perky little button nose like Barbie. Her nostrils are too wide... fleshy."

"So are mine, if you hadn't noticed."

"Yeah, but you're Caucasian. She thinks all Orientals are ugly."

"Poor kid!" She handed Hazel the sleeping bag and other pillow. "You can sleep on the rug. It's not nearly as comfortable as the couch but plenty warm."

Yes, this would do just fine - a sublimely perfect end to what might have been a catastrophic evening. Collecting the coffee mugs, her hostess shuffled into the kitchen and began rinsing out the last few dishes, while Hazel spread the sleeping bag on the floor. Marla was humming to herself in the kitchen, a James Taylor song from the late sixties, but then the impromptu music died away and the woman began speaking in a low-keyed, meditative monologue.

"What was that?" Hazel approached and stood in the doorway.

Marla was storing cutlery in the drawer. "I was saying how up here in the boondocks the neighbors don't give a rat's ass about proper etiquette. They'll stop by any time day or night to chew the fat or just to make sure you're doing okay."

"Morris, he's a good one for that," Marla continued in rambling fashion. Only now did Hazel notice the wispy grin curling up the side of the older woman's mouth. "He just shows up in the middle of the night unannounced with no clear-cut agenda." The woman gestured with a flick of her head at the window over the sink. Thirty feet away in the back yard stood a full-grown, bull moose. A full moon in a cloudless sky threw down just enough light to reveal the six-foot rack of antlers and grizzled, elongated muzzle.

"Morris forages vegetation from a pond on the far side of the hill and wanders over here most nights after supper." She dried the pot that she used to steam the rice, placing it on a shelf in one of the lower cabinets.

Ten Minutes later, there was a scratching at the back door and Marla let the cat back in for the night. Killing the lights, she went into the bedroom and changed into pajamas. "Do you like poetry?" Hazel could see the woman's bulky figure in shadowy silhouette. The countryside had gone completely silent locked in winter's icy grip.

"I guess so." Hazel wasn't much of a reader. A steady diet of Shakespeare, Beowulf and Chaucer through middle school had pretty much ruined her love of literature.

"I was never big on the modern poets," Marla rambled on. "Merrill, Ashcroft, Berryman... they all left me flat. Couldn't make much sense of their mindless prattle. That ain't poetry, it's just literary mush." The older woman fell silent and, as a guest in the home, Hazel wasn't sure whether she was obliged to add something to further the conversation. Problem was, she wasn't at all familiar with any of the contemporary poets her host had mentioned. "Now Robert Frost - there was a man with talent and a keen sense of the human predicament."

"We studied The Road Not Taken in school last year," Hazel offered.

"And Theodore Roethke - he was another first-class poet." Marla, who was resting on the arm of the sofa, bent over and adjusted the blanket up around Jorani's shoulders. The girl moaned - more like a deep sigh of contentment - shifting over on her side away from the conversation. "Did you know his family owned a greenhouse and nursery business?"

"I wasn't aware of that." Hazel had no idea who Theodore Roethke was. The girl was sleepy and could only just barely follow the meandering thread of Marla's late-night musings.

"Well anyway, many of the themes in his poems were dredged up from his youth working with the plants in the greenhouse, gathering moss for cemetery baskets, growing plants from seed, that sort of earthy reminiscence."

Hazel yawned. "That's so very sweet!" Her eyes were closed, the breath coming in shallow puffs. In the corner near the heater, the cat was cleaning itself, settling in for the night.

"A mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels."

"How's that?" The strange fragment momentarily jolted Hazel back to consciousness.

"It's from a Whitman poem," Marla clarified. "Probably from Leaves of Grass, but I'm not a hundred percent sure. All that talk about Roethke reminded me of it." Marla rose and drifted away in the direction of her bedroom. "Doesn't matter all that much, if we're talking mice, moose, or Cambodian girls with doting parents and eating disorders - they're all equally precious in their own right."

Finished with her physical hygiene, the tabby rested her head on her paws. "What about me?" Hazel blustered.

"Ditto," Marla added curtly, "on the infidels!"

\* \* \* \* \*

In the morning, Hazel awoke to the sound of a cell phone twittering. In the bedroom, Marla was alternately talking softly and laughing at some raunchy humor. She rolled over in the sleeping bag. Jorani was still dead to the world. A rooster began crowing. A half hour passed and Marla, dressed in flannel PJ's, came into the room. "Car's fixed."

"What?"

"Duane has one of those T-shaped tire irons with multiple socket settings. He stripped the flat tire earlier this morning and replaced it with the spare. Even ran the flat down to the garage where they cemented a rubber plug in the puncture hole." Jorani was wide awake now and sitting up on the couch. "A roofing nail... that's what caused the entire hullabaloo. A stupid, half-inch roofing nail." Marla drifted toward the kitchen. "I'm fixing breakfast. Nothing fancy just buckwheat pancakes and coffee, if you girls care to join me."

"What's buckwheat?" Jorani whispered.

"A special flower mixed with buttermilk." Hazel told her about Morris.

"A wild moose and you couldn't be bothered to wake me!"

"You were snoring... embarrassingly loud." Hazel threw a bucket of cold water on her indignation. "But more to the point, the car's fixed and everything is back to normal."

Well, not exactly. My parents are getting divorced and yours will manacle you to the radiator in the tenement basement when they find out what we did this weekend.

"We ought to leave money for the tire," Jorani said reaching for her wallet.

"That's already been settled," Marla clarified. She cracked an egg in a bowl of flour moistened with milk and a tablespoon of vegetable oil, mixing the ingredients with a metal whisk. "Duane says he'll take payment in free meals over the next month along with certain sexual gratuities to be named at a later date."

At eleven-thirty after retrieving the patched tire, the girls were back on the road headed south. "You realize something very special happened back there?"

"I may be a crybaby, but I'm not an idiot," the Asian girl replied softly.

"At breakfast you ate three helpings of flapjacks."

"I was hungry."

"You were hungry last night," Hazel corrected. "Today you were just a glutton."

Jorani smirked and licked her lips. "They were so good!" Marla peppered the pancake batter with wild blueberries picked throughout the summer from bushes in back of the cottage. The fruit was packed away in cellophane bags in the freezer and rationed as special treats during the frigid winter months. An hour later as they came up on the Portland exit, Jorani cleared her throat. "There's a rest area with a Dunkin' Donuts three miles down from here."

"How would you know??"

"I noticed it on the way up."

Hazel gawked at her friend. "It was pitch-dark when we passed through this section of highway last night, coming from the opposite direction."

"I saw it all the same. Maybe we could..."

"Yes, it's a long ride home," Hazel depressed her directional and shifted over to the far right-hand lane, "and there's no reason why we can't take a brief break."

Once seated in the restaurant, Hazel blurted, "A mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels."

"Sex what?"

"It's from a Whitman poem. With her free hand, Hazel caressed her friend's face. "Your Cambodian nose is just fine."

"What's my stupid nose got to do with a mouse or whatever you're prattling about?"

"Marla says not to worry because we're all damaged goods."

"She said that?"

Hazel sipped at her cinnamon cappuccino. "Well, not exactly, but some sweetheart of a guy is gonna go bonkers over Jorani, the radiant jewel, one of these days, and it will be sort of like Duane and Marla."

"That weird Whitman poem," Jorani's eyes clouded over. "Say it again."

"A mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels."

"Are you going to finish that apple cheese Danish?" Jorani indicated a half-eaten pastry that her friend had pushed to one side with the soiled napkins."

"Why do you ask?"

"No reason, in particular."

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## Simple Hearts

"A a dark-haired girl with a nice figure waitresses over at Guido's Pizza." Luther Buttafuoco was standing in his pajamas, an unwaxed strand of dental floss dangling from his left hand.

"Marna Copparelli," his brother replied. Drake, who baked, made deliveries and sometimes managed the counter at Guido's House of Pizza, had been sleeping on the couch at Luther's apartment since his wife caught him cheating and threw him out. That was a week ago last Tuesday. Drake had called Lois every day, but she left the answering machine on and refused to return his whiny messages.

"Is Marna seeing anyone?"

"Sort of," he hedged, "but it's a long-distance relationship."

"How long-distance?"

"The chump got picked up by the feds for loan sharking." Drake chuckled at his own, dry humor. "It was a second offense, so he's at a minimum security facility in Upstate New York. Three to five."

"I want you to fix me up on a date with the woman." Luther stood five feet six. In his early thirties, he was a skinny wisp of a man with a pencil moustache that never quite filled out no matter how long he left it untrimmed. His brown hair hung limp like a third-rate toupee, a bad joke of a hairpiece. Luther wasn't so much ugly as nondescript; he had a reasonably pleasant personality that no one outside the immediate family ever benefited from due to crippling shyness. "I've got feelings for the woman," Luther confessed.

"What feelings?" Drake exploded. "You don't even know Marna, for god's sake!"

There was a tense silence. "I misspoke."

"You misspoke." The tone was derisive, ridiculing. "What the hell does that mean?" Drake didn't know which was worse: being separated from his wife or living with his nutty brother. He needed a drink, but Luther never kept anything stronger than that sickly-sweet Manishevitz concord wine.

"What I meant to say," Luther corrected, "was that I have a very strong feeling about the woman."

"For, about... what's the difference?"

Luther waved a hand, a placating gesture. "It's not important. What matters is that I know the difference. Will you talk to Marna... see if she'll go out with me?"

Drake reached for the TV clicker. The screen blipped on just as the New England Patriots were kicking off. Gillette Stadium up the road in Foxboro, Massachusetts was filled to the rafters. "You wanna watch the NFL game?"

"I want a date with Marna Copparelli."

"Why do I always feel like I'm playing Oskar Madison to your Felix Unger?" Drake rose from the sofa, went and stood by the window. His brother had bought the condo in an upscale section Johnston, a twenty minute drive from downtown Providence, Rhode Island. Unlike Drake's ratty neighborhood, all the homeowners paid lawn care services to spray the grass with heavy-duty fertilizers and weed killer. Dandelions and crabgrass were considered extremely tacky. Drake wanted to take a ride to the city. Drop by one of the social clubs on Federal Hill to watch the Patriots take on the Colts. Or maybe visit the Foxy Lady - throw down a few Heinekens in the VIP lounge. But then, he was trying to avoid temptation, mend his errant ways.

Drake could just as easily watch the football game here at Luther's apartment while his brother corrected term papers, wrote book reviews or whatever literary scholars did on a Monday night. But watching the game with his brother was no fun. Luther didn't know a nickel defense from a split end, a linebacker from a wide receiver. Grabbing his cell phone, he dialed a programmed number. After listening to the recorded message, he mumbled, "Look, Lois, I know I'm an asshole. Just call me. We can work this out." Drake was still considering options when his brother's nasally monotone brought him up short.

"I want a date with Marna Copparelli."

First and ten. Tom Brady, the Patriot quarterback, was hunched over in the huddle. "I'll see what I can do."

At two in the morning, Drake woke from a fitful sleep. He checked his phone for messages. Nothing. In the kitchen, he wolfed down a bowl of granola infused with alfalfa and wheat germ - Luther didn't stock any 'normal' cereals - then went and sat on the lumpy sofa that was his bed now. His ankles hung off the far end and his back ached from early in the morning. His brother, who had never screwed anybody over and, subsequently, suffered no remorse, always slept peacefully through the night.

On the coffee table was a well-thumbed paperback, *Under Western Skies* by Joseph Conrad. Drake skimmed the introduction and slogged through a chapter and a half of turgid prose before abandoning the moldy text. Nothing made any sense - neither the book about bomb-throwing, Russian anarchists nor his pathetic life. And Luther, who devoured Joseph Conrad like a light repast, wanted Drake to fix him up with Marna Copparelli, the foul-mouthed, Italian love goddess from Guido's Pizza!

\* \* \* \* \*

"How are the spinach calzones?" The businessman leaned his elbows on the counter studying the menu.

At eleven-thirty, a handful of diners were already straggling into Guido's House of Pizza. "Real good," Marna shot back. "They're stuffed with fresh, hand-cut pepperoni, provolone cheese and vegetables, in a flaky crust."

"It's not too spicy, is it?"

"No not at all."

The middle-aged man, who wore an expensive looking tweed sports jacket and wire-rimmed glasses, rubbed his jaw. "Pigs in a blanket... that looks good, too." A line was forming behind the fellow who couldn't make up his mind.

"I'd go with the calzone," Marna replied curtly. Leaning over the counter, she whispered in the man's ear.

The fellow shook his head emphatically. "Yes, the calzone with a diet Coke." Marna wrote the order on a slip and turned to the next customer.

If that's not the best goddamn spinach pie you ever ate, come back and see me personally, and I'll refund your money twice over! Drake didn't bother asking Marna what she whispered to the customer. All procrastinators got the same preferential hogwash. Only one customer ever asked for a refund. "You ate the whole thing! I wouldn't give you the right time of day much less a refund," Marna hissed. Whipping around with a dramatic flourish, she disappeared into the rear of the restaurant. The disgruntled customer was too embarrassed to ask to see the manager.

Around two in the afternoon, a cell phone twittered and Drake reflexively reached into his pocket. "That's mine," Marna brought him up short. She placed a hand over her left ear and crooked her head to one side. "Yeah, six o'clock, Friday. It's no problem." Finishing the call, Marna announced, "I need a favor, Romeo."

"What favor?"

Friday night, my sister's going out with her devoted husband, who doesn't cheat on her and always honors the sanctity of the marriage bed. She needs me to watch the kids."

Drake winced inwardly. Marna never let him forget what a troll he was. He glanced at her and looked away. Marna had a fleshy, compact body. The skin was flawless with dusky, Mediterranean features, the jet black hair trimmed short. She wasn't cute or pretty in the traditional sense. Several younger girls who worked at Guido's were noticeably more fashionable, sexier even. But Marna exuded a refined classiness of a deeper order, a haughty, maternal good looks that left the other women, so to speak, in the dust. "Yeah, I'll cover, but I need a favor of my own." Drake pulled a single sheet of newspaper from his breast pocket and slid it across the counter to Marna.

"What's this?"

"It's a page from the New York Times literary review." He tapped the middle column a third of the way down. "That's my brother. He's an author."

Imagism and post-modern literary trends by Luther Buttafuoco. "Swell." Marna folded the article neatly without bothering to read beyond the title.

"You remember when my car wouldn't start last Thursday?" Drake asked. Marna shook her head up and down. "That was my brother who stopped with the battery cables."

"Short guy with the weird hair?"

Drake's eyes brightened. "Yeah, that's Luther. He wants a date with you."

"Aw, for Christ's sakes! I swore off men since Donny got sent away... took a vow of celibacy." Marna's features cycled through a series of unflattering contortions. "All men are shits. I got my nieces and nephew... that's all I need."

I got my nieces and nephew... Marna's sister dropped by for lunch earlier in the week. "My little angels!" She ran to greet the children, smothering them with sloppy kisses. "Bobby, you want Auntie should get you a slice of mushroom pizza?" She always infantilized the chubby, rosy-cheeked little boy. "Pigs in a blanket for Gina...a spaghetti and meatballs dinner for Denise." Marna became manic every time her sister stopped by with the children. Still beaming like a crazy woman, she ran off to place the order.

"Look," Drake reached out and grabbed Marna's wrist, "I'm not asking for a lifetime commitment. Just one crummy date, that's all."

"I dunno." She blew out her cheeks and screwed her pretty lips in a pouty frown. "All men are shits," she repeated with renewed vigor.

Drake leaned closer. "I'm a shit - guilty as charged. I'm a selfish, two-timing, worthless louse. But Luther's kind... a real decent guy. He don't gamble, or drink to excess. He eats healthy." Drake squirmed uncomfortably. "He's just painfully shy... doesn't know how to act around women."

"And that's my problem?"

"His experience with the opposite sex," Drake pawed the air fitfully, "is rather limited."

"How limited?" When there was no reply, Marna exploded, "Aw, for crying out loud! Give me a break!" The woman extended her hands and fluttered the fingertips suggestively. "This highly-educated brother of yours, who writes hoity-toity books that get reviewed in the New York Times, has he ever ..."

"I dunno."

"So he's a goddamn virgin?" The straightforward question was met with profound silence. "I hope you're not expecting - "

"One crummy date - that's all I'm asking."

"What do you hear from Lois," she said sourly, deflecting the conversation elsewhere.

"She won't return my calls," Drake replied morosely.

"That's because you're a shit. All men, with the exception of my nephew, Bobby, who is too young to know any better, are rotten shits."

"Thanks for reminding me. What about Luther?"

"Yeah, I'll go out with him. Once." She held up a finger - the middle one - in a rather impertinent gesture. "One fucking date."

\* \* \* \* \*

Drake told Luther about Marna's decision later that evening. "Don't wear argyle socks or those stupid Rockford shoes."

"What's wrong with them?"

"They look like a pair of gondolas." Drake began rummaging in his brother's closet. "Got any snazzy, casual shirts - something with a little pizzazz... style?" "No, I guess not," he answered his own question after surveying the wardrobe. "Maybe we could make a quick run to the Emerald Square Mall and pick something up. Remember, Marna is one fashionable chick."

"We'll go to the mall then." Shifting uncomfortably on the balls of his feet, Luther seemed to grow smaller, more fragile and inconsequential, by the minute. "I'm not so good with small talk. Since you know the woman, I was wondering..."

Drake thought a moment. "Two things you gotta remember. First, Marna's a nonstop talkaholic; once she starts blabbering, the bitch never comes up for air." He put a reassuring hand



on his brother's shoulder. "But you're the world's best listener, right?" Luther blinked and cleared his throat but didn't say anything. "All you gotta do is get Marna jibber-jabbering about some dumb-ass topic and the rest will take care of itself.

"Like what?"

"Oh, that's the easy part! Just mention you heard how devoted she is to her sister's kids." Drake waved a fist in the air for dramatic effect. "You see, here's the thing: the woman's gorgeous, voluptuous... a regular Italian sex goddess, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"The only thing Marna Copparelli really cares about is finding a mate so she can copulate and bear children. The male of the species is sort of incidental... nothing more than an anatomical means to an end. She wants a dozen babies of her own to cuddle and spoil rotten. So you schmooze with Marna about being a doting auntie and motherhood and all that sappy bullshit and everything will be peachy keen."

Luther reached for the car keys. "Maybe we should go pick out a shirt... something trendy."

"Yeah, yeah..." Drake gave his brother the once over. "We should also do something with your hair."

Luther reached up and patted the top of his head as though the scalp was hot to the touch. "What's wrong with my hair?"

"Well, nothing. Not really. It just sort of lies there... like it's in rigor mortis." Drake tried to assume a more upbeat tone. "Maybe an hour before the big date, wash it with a good shampoo and conditioner. Then blow dry it and try to fluff up the front."

"Details," Luther picked up on the thread of his brother's previous remark. "Everything in life is about getting the details right."

Ever so gently, Drake felt his spirits lifting. "That's a good way to put it."

\* \* \* \* \*

At the mall, Drake rejected every shirt Luther showed him. Finally, he went off by himself, collected an armload of designer originals and stood outside the dressing room. On the fifth try Drake announced, "That's the shirt."

"You don't think it's a bit loud... garish?" The wine-colored shirt featured coppery stripes zigzagging diagonally across the chest. The collar was done in a slightly darker, crimson shade.

"Remember who you're going out with," Drake counseled. "No, that's the perfect shirt - most definitely!" For good measure, Drake bought his brother a new leather belt with a wide buckle in the shape of a horseshoe. Afterwards, they went to the food court for supper. "My treat," Luther, all five foot six of him, was grinning foolishly as he reached for his wallet. His lumpy features that no one ever paid any attention to seemed more relaxed, though, now that his wardrobe was complete

"Flaubert," Luther blurted the solitary word as though in response to an ongoing conversation. They were still sitting in the food court at the mall. Drake was nursing a cup of coffee and jelly donut.

"Flow what?"

"Flaubert," Luther clarified. "He wrote Madam Bovary. I don't suppose -"

Drake waved him off. "Now don't go talking crazy when you're out on the town with Marna, or it's gonna be a very short night."

"Flaubert was a nineteenth century writer." Luther's expression had altered noticeably. The excitement having ebbed, he seemed more pensive, grim. "He wrote a short piece of fiction, *A Simple Heart*, about a French peasant woman, Félicité... a very kind and decent soul."

"Okay, okay..." Drake was only half-listening. He had called Lois five times since six-thirty in the morning. No luck! Should he try again? Did it make a difference?

"I'm a nice guy, don't you think?"

Again, there it was - that twisted doughy smile. Luther, the brainiac with an IQ of one hundred and twenty-four - it wasn't exactly genius level, but way the hell up there. He sure had the goofiest smile on the goddamn planet! "Yeah, yeah. You're one swell sonofabitch."

"She had a nephew who died travelling to America."

"Who did?"

"Félicité."

"The peasant woman in the stupid story from two hundred goddamn years ago?"

"Her mistress' young daughter caught pneumonia and passed while away at boarding school. Then Félicité found a lover but that didn't work out so well either." Luther cleared his throat. "Later still, she adopted a parrot named Loulou. The parrot caught a chill during the winter and keeled over in its cage so Félicité had the bird stuffed and kept, like a religious relic, in a place of honor in her cluttered room."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph! What the hell are you talking about now?"

"Félicité was one saintly sonofabitch, but. I don't want to end up like her." Luther crooked his head to one side. His hair that he had just washed the night before already looked dull and greasy "I don't want to end up like the heroine in Flaubert's masterpiece."

"Aw shit, Luther," Drake blustered, gulping down the last of his coffee. "I might be one pathetic loser, what with my philandering, but you run a close second."

\* \* \* \* \*

Monday afternoon, Drake took Marna aside. "How'd things go the other night?"

"Good. My nephew, Ralphy, peed the bed but it was no big deal, because I found a set of clean sheets in the bedroom drawer."

Drake stared at the woman incredulously. "My brother... I was referring to the date not you freakin' babysitting gig."

"Good. Real good." She went off to clean a mess left by a crew of DPW workers that rushed off after finishing their lunch.

Well. That was a relief! Drake had this fantasy - more like a ghoulish nightmare - of a first date that that resembled a wake with open casket rather than romantic soiree. "So you had a good time?"

Marna was refilling the napkin holders. "Your brother made dinner reservations over at the Blue Grotto. After the fancy-schmancy meal, he took me to a movie on the East Side."

"Which movie?"

"I dunno, some foreign flick?" She flashed a tepid smile. "The film was in subtitles... Mongolian or something. There was this baby camel. The mother wouldn't nurse it so the nomads, who lived in tents, had to feed the animal from a bottle."

"Then what?"

"Don't remember. I fell asleep after about the first ten minutes. Slept through the whole movie." "Afterwards we went over to the Pancake House for coffee and dessert." Finishing with the napkins, Marna grabbed a broom and began sweeping up the entryway. "Your brother's a swell guy. I bent his ear for a good half an hour about my sister's kids and he never interrupted once."

Drake knelt down and held a plastic dust tray while Marna steered the dirt up to the lip. "Luther isn't much of a talker."

"On the contrary, he held his own just fine."

"Is that so?"

"He was telling me all about this book he's giving a lecture on at some college gathering - Under Western Skies."

"The Conrad book?" Drake couldn't imagine Luther telling Marna Copparelli about bomb-throwing anarchists.

"This college student comes home one night from classes to find some guy who just assassinated a government minister in his room. He don't even hardly know the jerk but can't toss him out in the cold because maybe the asshole will finger him as an accomplice." She looked up. "You familiar with the plot?"

"Well, sort of." He eyed Marna uneasily. The poor slob, Razumov, cooped up in his tiny apartment with the murderer - that's how far as Drake got in the text before throwing the classic aside.

"The student runs to the authorities and tells them where they can find the shit-for-brains who threw the bomb that killed the official. But then, the college kid becomes a secret agent and travels to Switzerland where he meets the sister of the guy he just betrayed and they fall in love."

"I didn't read that far," Drake decided to cut his losses.

"Luther says it's not really one of Conrad's better novels."

"Really?"

"Yeah, he said the author should have cut the story short after the first hundred pages or so, because the ending was real draggy and dumb."

Draggy and dumb... Drake couldn't quite picture his brother using terms like that in an academic presentation but wasn't about to argue the point.

"So you had a good time?"

"Yeah and I learned a thing or two about current events."

"The story took place over a hundred years ago."

"Whatever," Marna shot back dismissively. "Luther says that, when Conrad began writing the book, Razumov was gonna marry the bomb-throwing nutso's sister, have a child and then confess to her years later, but the author changed his mind."

"So there's no happy ending."

"No," Marna confirmed. "Just like in real life, everything ultimately turns to shit."

"You got a succinct way of putting things."

"I only got my GED," Marna blurted, "but that don't make me no intellectual retard!" She leered at him as he stood up with the dust tray. "What's so funny?"

Drake didn't realize he was grinning. "You keep saying all men are shit. Maybe you'd like to reconsider."

Marna shook her head violently. "Nothing's changed. My nephew and you brother are the two exceptions that make the rule." She compressed her pretty lips in a pensive expression. "That sure was a smart looking shirt he had on and his hair didn't look quite so ratty."

\* \* \* \* \*

Back at the apartment, Drake found his thirty-two inch Pullman suitcase resting in the middle of the living room. The sofa bed was closed, the bedding heaped in a pile on the floor. "Since you weren't making any progress, I went over to plead your case with Lois," Luther said.

"And?"

"Your wife insists that you're still a deceitful, horny asshole, but the woman is letting you come back. Of course, you'll have to grovel and act the part of an indentured servant until you go on Medicare."

"Okay."

"And you only get one shot at the marital brass ring. Next time the one-eyed sailor goes missing in action, your marriage is caput."

Drake sat down and began to cry - a weepy, little-boy-lost-in-the-woods sobbing. "I learned my lesson," he blubbered, "I'll be good."

"I'm not finished," Luther spoke in a flat, business-like tone.

"What else?"

"I want another date with Marna Copparelli."

"The original arrangement was one date, no contingency plan."

"Yeah, well, I want to see her again."

"You don't need my permission, but it might help if you spoke directly to the party concerned." Drake wiped his eyes with a Kleenex. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a cell phone and dialed a number.

Luther took the phone and pressed it to his ear. "Hello, Marna? Luther Buttafuoco here... I had a real nice time the other night and was wondering..."

Drake cleared his clothing out of the hall closet then went and collected his shaving gear and toothbrush from the bathroom. He would have to stop by another time to recoup his cell phone as his brother was still gabbing away as he let himself out. Luther's hair had died again, gone totally flat and lifeless. But maybe it didn't matter. He could take the ravishing Marna Copparelli to Mongolian foreign flicks where the indigenous folk suckled baby camels; he could fill her head with nineteenth century Russian politics and that seemed to work just fine for the girl who loved her nieces and nephew to distraction. On the far side of the door, a burst of laughter was followed by a whispery-soft exchange. The last thing Drake remembered as he let himself out was the intricate filigree of wonder suffusing his brother's homely face.

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## The Reticent Storyteller

Parker Salisbury first met Lilly tending horses at the Cloverleaf Stables. The riding academy ran equestrian programs for beginners through advanced and boarded a handful of

horses for local families. Parker and his construction crew were renovating a barn adjacent to the stable. One day in early December he wandered over to the paddocks to look in on the animals before heading home for the night.

The privately boarded horses were generally cleaned up and set right for the night early on, but when Parker entered the barn he could smell the stench of horseshit and rotting, pee-soaked hay. A young girl he had never seen before was mucking stalls. The girl, who paid him absolutely no attention, quickly shoveled the mix of dung, fodder and woodchips into a wheelbarrow. Disposing of the soiled bedding, she swept and washed the floor with a stable disinfectant.

"What happened?"

"No idea," she mumbled without making eye contact.

With all those freckles, the pale-skinned dirty blond reminded him of an adolescent character out of Tom Sawyer. "I'm Parker." The lanky girl did not readily volunteer any additional information. "I didn't catch your name."

She nuzzled a brown quarter horse. With her short back and heavily muscled body, the beast was noticeably smaller in stature than the others, standing only sixteen hands high. "Lilly,... Lilly Truman."

The adjacent horse stall proved even dirtier. Worse yet, the water bucket lay upended. Before addressing the animal waste, Lilly hauled a compact, rubber tire from a neighboring, empty stall and threw it on the floor. Filling the dry bucket with fresh, cool water, she wedged it firmly in the center of the tire. Burying its muzzle in the metal pail, the spotted mare didn't raise her head for a good thirty seconds. Still ignoring the carpenter, Lilly scrounged up fresh carrots, dividing them equally between both horses.

Arnold, the boss's son, stuck his head in the barn. "Simon quit. No notice. That's why the barn is such a shithouse."

"You didn't think to pitch in and help straighten things out?" When there was no reply, she added, "The private-pay boarders will take their business elsewhere, if they think we're understaffed."

"You think I don't know that?" Arnold shot back.

"Got anyone in mind for a replacement?"

"I'm working on it."

Squatting down on her haunches, Lilly began scraping a sticky tangle of yellow bot fly eggs off the mare's lower legs with a folding pocket knife. "I'll hold back on grain until they finish eating their hay so the animals don't bulk up on the high-protein feed."

Arnold glanced at his watch, a purely theatrical gesture, before hurrying off. After he was gone, Lilly checked a Shetland pony that seemed to be favoring his left hind leg. "What's wrong with the horse?" Parker asked.

"Can't say just yet." She picked up the hoof and felt for defects but there were none, then she did the same with the coronary band. There were no dark spots indicating bruising or puncture wounds. She pressed down lightly on each frog with a hoof pick. The tissue was slightly spongy. Then she placed her freckled nose up close to the hoof.

"Is it infected?"

"There's no foul odor," Lilly confirmed. She cleaned all four hoofs with the curved metal pick, finding no cracks, rings, dishes or flares. The horse was moving about normally now. "Probably just a pebble."

Initially, Parker thought the fair-haired girl with the wan features morbidly shy, but by the third visit to the stable revisited his initial impression. To be sure, Lilly was aloof, disconnected from humanity, but there was nothing overtly pathological about her detachment. She doted on the horses, loving them to distraction.

"Would you like to go out some time?" Parker's heart was racing out of control as he blurted the words in a jumbled heap.

"A date?" She glanced at him with a stony expression. "Yeah, sure. Why not?"

Parker's eyes brushed over the bony, angular physique. "Give me your telephone number. I'll call later in the week."

She jotted her number on a slip of paper then did something outlandish. Even though Parker was standing no more than three feet away, she turned her attention elsewhere, effectively blotting him out of existence. Her queer response crept him out so bad that, reaching home, Parker flung the slip of paper with her phone number in the garbage. But in the morning he lugged the plastic rubbish bag outside, dumping the smelly refuse on the lawn. It took him the better part of half an hour to find the raggedy slip of paper stained with coffee grounds.

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On their first date, Parker brought Lilly to the construction firm's annual Christmas party at the Marriott Hotel. Pulling up in front of the moss green ranch house, the front door opened, and the young girl came down the brick stairs. "Pretty jacket," Parker noted.

The girl who mucked stalls for a living wore a camel-colored, wool blend coat with slight pleats under an empire waist. "It's very warm." Lilly glanced at him with a flat affect, rested her hands palms down on her lap and stared straight ahead.

When they reached the third intersection, Parker said, "Did you get the job at the stables after high school?"

"No, I attended college."

"Which one?"

"Brandeis."

"How many years?"

"Six."

"So you've got a master's degree." Lilly nodded distractedly but didn't bother to elaborate. "What was your major?"

"Victorian literature."

This tight-lipped girl attended one of the most expensive, Ivy League colleges on the east coast but worked an entry-level job for chump change! Parker felt slightly nauseous. He pictured the slip of paper blackened with coffee grounds and wondered if he might have been better off abandoning the crumpled sheet where he had tossed it several days earlier.

At the function hall, Lilly stripped off her stylish coat to reveal a black strapless dress with a sweetheart neckline and tiered satin band at the waist. She wore no jewelry. Her hair, though neatly brushed, hung limply about the bare shoulders. With her alabaster complexion and dusting of freckles the effect was stunning.

"Now who's this gorgeous creature?" Thelma Kowalski cornered Parker in the hotel vestibule. A frumpy blond whose amorphous body was forever expanding in myriad directions, Thelma was married to Rick, a journeyman carpenter. Parker genuinely liked the woman despite a fatal flaw: like a busted spigot, her garrulous mouth ran from morning until night. He introduced the ladies.

"God, you're such a skinny Minnie! Two of you would make one of me and just barely." Thelma laughed raucously at her own joke. For her part, Lilly seemed modestly pleased. She smiled, responding in monosyllables. But then, nobody, not even Rick, could hold their own once his chatty spouse had a couple of drinks to lubricate the perpetual motion machine that was her tongue. Lilly, who didn't care for liquor, nursed a Shirley Temple, sipping the bubbly liquid with the cherry, as though it had to last until New Years.

"Lilly works over at Cloverleaf Stables," Parker noted, "caring for the horses."

"Aw shit! I just love horses beyond all human comprehension," Thelma gushed. "When I was fourteen, my family vacationed at a dude ranch in Tucson, Arizona, and we spent every day from sunup to dusk riding..."

A half hour later, as the cocktail hour wound down, guests began moving through the buffet line. "Having a good time?"

Lilly spooned a helping of Swedish meatballs onto her plate. "Yes, why shouldn't I?"

Parker reached for a dinner roll. "You seem a bit quiet, that's all."

Lifting a chrome cover off a tray, she placed a dollop of butternut squash laced with brown sugar and cinnamon alongside the spicy meat. "It's just my nature. Some people like Rick's wife are more outgoing. I'm reserved, that's all."

Lilly Truman, Parker mused, was one step removed from catatonic - a zombie out of Night of the Living Dead. They ate in silence, the other people at their table picking up the slack with light conversation. Nobody seemed to care that the wisp of a woman in the strapless evening gown next to Parker contributed nothing - not a feeble word - and showed no interest making friends. "How's your meal?"

"Good. How's yours?" she replied.

A staggering four words, counting the contraction as two!

"Fine, although I think the chef was a bit heavy-handed with the pepper in the meatball gravy. You haven't touched your salad."

Lilly cut her scalloped potatoes into manageable chunks and speared a portion on the tines of her fork. "I'm saving it for last."

Six words under the previous rule.

"Did you notice the desert selection?" A separate table decked out with cheesecakes, éclairs, brownies, cherry Danish and assorted chocolates had been set up next to the coffee urn.

She paused, but only momentarily before negotiating the seasoned potatoes between her thin lips. "Everything looks scrumptious!"

A loss of three! After the meal, Thelma Kowalski took Lilly aside and began bending her ear. The woman was sloshed - sloppy drunk - confiding some teary-eyed story that neither her husband nor Parker were privy to, since the men were camped out at the bar.

"Pretty girl," Rick sipped at a Heineken. "She don't talk much, though."

"She doesn't talk at all," Parker replied morosely. It was a relief to have the mute creature temporarily off his hands. Normally, Parker might have indulged in a few more drinks, but he wanted to deliver Miss Truman to the family homestead without incident.

"You ain't gonna see her no more?"

"Lilly's not my type," Parker confirmed. "Not a bad girl, just..."

Truth be told, he hadn't a clue what she was and didn't much care.

Around eleven, the Christmas party wound down. On the ride home, as they reached the outskirts of Brandenburg, Parker observed, "You got a master's degree from one of the finest colleges in the country and shovel shit for a living... that makes sense?"

"It's a matter of perspective," Lilly replied obtusely.

She didn't seem to find his intrusiveness objectionable, which only riled Parker all the more. "Why not put your education to practical use?"

"Such as?"

"I don't know - teach college, take a job in publishing... write the great American novel." The silence that ensued suggested none of the choices represented viable options. "Okay then," he continued, shifting gears, "tell me something about yourself."

"I'm not much of a talker."

"We've just spent the evening together, and I feel like I hardly know you."

Lilly was sitting like a mannequin, her hands folded in her lap. "I read a short story the other night. I'll tell you that instead."

"I don't want creative fiction," Parker fumed. "I want to learn about your family, friends, hobbies, interests away from the stables..." Now he was really getting upset. "Do you have any vices? Maybe you're a compulsive gambler, germ freak or bulimic who goes on eating binges then sticks a finger down your throat to vomit." He shouldn't have said that, but they were only a few blocks away from the Truman residence. "That's what I want to hear."

"No," she replied evenly, not the least bit ruffled by his burgeoning hysteria, "we will do it my way."

Sitting there in the car with the motor running in the driveway, Lilly told Parker a tale about an elderly Russian couple, who hired a local official to write a letter to their married daughter several years after she moved to a distant province. The educated bureaucrat included nothing that the illiterate peasants told him to put in the letter. But in the end, the daughter was so overjoyed to receive news of her parents that her heart comprehended all the heartfelt sentiment and newsworthy gossip intentionally omitted.

The story having wound to an end, Lilly breathed out heavily and her hazel-flecked eyes were suffused with an inner radiance. "You see, in Chekhov's tale the local official had written utter foolishness, a jumble of unintelligible drivel, but the daughter only understood what her heart could grasp and, in the end was overcome with feelings of gratitude for parents too poor and sickly to make the trip."

The pale cloth curtain covering the bow window fluttered several times as Mrs. Truman surreptitiously glanced out. Once finished, Lilly let herself out of the car and remarked, "I had a swell time, Parker." Hurrying up the slushy walkway, she disappeared into the house.

"Good riddance!" he muttered, throwing the shift in reverse.

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New Years came and went. Thelma Kowalski asked, "Where's that kind-hearted Lilly? I so enjoyed our little chat at the Christmas party."



"What exactly did the two of you talk about?"

Thelma tapped the side of her cheek with a stubby index finger. "Funny thing is, I don't remember. She's a great listener, though."

"Yeah, that seems to be her strong point," Parker noted sourly.

Once rid of her, Parker had no intention of ever laying eyes on the dirty blond with the freckle-dappled skin. But a week passed, then another. They finished up the Cloverleaf Stable job and moved on to a condo project, part of the mayor's inner-city, gentrification program. At the time, Parker was too embittered to give the Russian tale much thought, but he wasn't so cocksure about humanity. Rick and Thelma separated. Following a horrendous blowout the second week in January, the husband moved into a studio apartment. "I can't live with that loudmouth bitch!" he confided. "She sucks all the oxygen out of the air."

Five weeks passed. Parker returned to the Cloverleaf Stables. "How you been, Lilly?"

"Good. And you?"

"Just fine."

"How is it that you can spend the better part of an hour telling me an elaborate, make believe story about Russians who lived a hundred years ago but can't string two sentences back-to-back about current events?"

Lilly shrugged. "I don't know."

"Do you ever feel an urge to unburden yourself... to spill your guts?"

She stared at him wistfully before running her tongue over her lips "Hardly ever."

"Well, that's an honest answer." The barn smelled sweetly of fresh hay. The horses were fed and settled in for the night. "That's a pretty horse," Parker gestured in the direction of a dappled animal with a cream-colored hind quarter.

"It's an Appaloosa. They were originally bred by the Nez Perce Indians near the Palouse River. The breed has four, distinct patterns: the spotted blanket, leopard, snowflakes and frost."

"I gather this one would be named Snowflake."

"You're a quick study." Lilly grinned. "They make excellent trail horses."

Okay so Lilly could talk expansively about two topics: Russian literature and horses. A weird anomaly! Parker pointed at a lone horse off by itself in a private paddock. "Why is that one separated from the others?"

"Parasites... bloodworms." They crossed the crushed stone path to get a better look. "The gelding was losing weight, its coat turning dull and rough. He was also rubbing his tale with hair loss. Arnold didn't want to call the vet,... claimed it was an unnecessary expense, but when I explained that a single parasite could lay two hundred thousand eggs a day and infest the whole stable, the jerk reluctantly placed the call."

As they headed back through the field toward the parking lot, Lilly knelt down and began tugging at a patch of star thistle. "This stuff's poisonous... brings on colic. Horses foraging might accidentally eat the weed along with clean feed and get sick." Parker also began tugging at the noxious plants. Ten minutes later all the weeds had been ripped up and hauled away.

They were back in the parking lot. The sun was fading, bleaching the landscape into various shades of gray and murky greens. Lilly was following a hawk circling the pines on the far side of the highway. "How do horses breathe?"

"How do horses breathe?" Parker repeated the question word-for-word in a deadpan voice. "I don't know... like humans I suppose."

"Horses can't breathe through their mouth," Lilly clarified. "That's why God gave them such huge nostrils. Also, their pricked ears can rotate a full hundred and eighty degrees, allowing the animals to listen to sounds all around them."

Parker's features relaxed in a tepid smile. "And why exactly are you telling me this?"

The hawk resurfaced, hovering lower now over a grassy meadow rimmed with maples and pine that bordered the Cloverleaf Stables. Maybe it had spotted a field mouse or plump rabbit. At any rate, the predator was minding its own business, fulfilling its intrinsic destiny. "I don't know. You don't like it when I'm quiet. I'm trying to be sociable the only way I know how."

Parker was engulfed by a wave of self-loathing. "There's no need to change things. I prefer you just fine the way you are, and wouldn't have it any other way." He stepped closer and grabbed her forearm. "Would you like to go out again?"

"Yes."

"How's this Friday. We could grab something to eat and catch a movie afterwards."

"What time can I expect you?"

"Around seven."

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On the fourth date Parker brought her by his apartment and they made love. In her phlegmatic way, Lilly took as good as she gave. "I read a wonderful story by Frank O'Connor, the Irish author."

"Really." Parker was lying naked on his back calculating how many pounds of anodized nails to buy over the weekend for a roofing job on Monday.

"A middle-aged man discovers that, years earlier, his wife gave birth to a child by another man ..."

Yes, there it was again! Lilly was slipping into that throaty storyteller's mode. The gabled roof under construction runs sixty by forty feet so, figuring five pounds of nails per square foot...

"Are you listening?" Lilly tapped him gently on the shoulder.

"Yes, of course."

"But you were snoring."

"No, I'm awake now."

"Anyway," Lilly shifted on her side, a forearm draped across his chest. "The husband decides to travel back to County Cork, to find his wife's missing child and..."

On Wednesday when the crew broke for lunch after installing the fascia trim on the new construction, Rick, asked, "How come you never say shit about Lilly?"

"What exactly did you want to hear?"

"I don't know... does she make you happy?"

"Yeah, she's good," Parker offered guardedly.

"Sometimes she acts like a deaf mute."

"Yes, that's true."

Rick gave him a tortured look. "Thelma's a freakin' talkaholic. She never shuts up. That's why I left... cause of her god-awful motor mouth. She don't never hardly give it a rest. Twenty-four-seven...blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. It's like Chinese water torture." Rick inched closer. "I

told Thelma she gotta put a rag in it or I'm gonna file papers... put an end to this farce-of-a-marriage once and for all."

Parker took a swig of ice tea and bit into a roast beef sandwich. He didn't hold out much hope that Rick's wife would 'put a sock in it' or much of anything else. Their marriage was doomed. But then, more people than Parker cared to admit confabulated, spewing their noxious, verbal diarrhea in a dozen different directions. They bullshitted you half to death - offered up a potpourri of half-truths, verisimilitude and misinformation - wasting time and grey matter.

"In the bedroom my wife's a goddamn prude." the carpenter was thinking out loud. "Thelma don't like to experiment - take liberties, if you know what I mean." Parker nodded and took another bite from the sandwich. "Nothing kinky... won't watch skin flicks. No nothing."

"That's too bad." Parker rose to his feet rather abruptly even though a slightly overripe banana lay nestled under a paper towel in his lunch box. "Gotta get back."

"One more question." Rick sounded like a frantic tourist, who had fallen overboard on a cruise ship and was watching the vessel laze off into the sunset. "Do you love Lilly?"

Parker grunted something unintelligible and shook his head up and down.

"Can you picture yourself living apart?"

"No, not hardly." He grabbed his steel-shank, Estwing framing hammer off the ground.

Rick flashed him a tortured look. "Lucky you!"

A year passed. Parker Salisbury slipped a felt ring box from his pants pocket, held the silver cube chest high, but didn't bother to show his future mother-in-law the modest stone. "I want to marry your daughter."

Edith Truman didn't rush forward to embrace him. Rather, the fair-skinned woman with the curly brown hair streaked with gray cleared her throat and observed, "She isn't like other girls. You'll have to accept Lilly on her own peculiar terms... just as her father and I have over the past twenty-six years." Mr. Truman had passed away a year earlier.

"I've dated my share of women since high school," Parker replied. "Lilly doesn't resemble much of anyone in the universe."

Most parents might have taken such a remark as a rebuff - a back-handed compliment if not flagrant affront - but Mrs. Truman only stared at him with genuine sympathy. Only now did her normally stoic features ease into a pleased expression. "And when were you planning to ask her?"

"Tonight, at dinner." They had been dating a year now. Parker was taking Lilly into Boston to celebrate. The girl would probably sleep over his apartment. "I'm at a distinct disadvantage," Parker confided.

"How so?"

"What I feel for your daughter far exceeds anything Lilly could ever experience for me." He scrupulously avoided the 'L' word. The first time he told Lilly how he felt she observed, "I'm sure Thelma and Rick loved each other once and now look at them."

"That's pretty damn cynical," he grumbled.

"Words come cheap," she replied harshly. "Treat me decent. That's all that matters."

A moment later the front door burst open and Lilly rushed in. "Traffic was awful," she explained, slipping off her jacket and scarf. "I'll just be a moment." She hurried upstairs to change out of her work clothes.

Mrs. Truman led him into the den that doubled as a family library. "Good luck tonight and, for what it's worth, I'd be honored to welcome you into our family." Hugging him briefly, she left the room.

An avid reader, Lilly's father installed floor-to-ceiling, mahogany shelves along three walls. Once when Parker asked Mrs. Truman, which of the hundreds of books in the library her daughter had read, the woman replied cryptically, "It might be easier to say which Lilly hasn't read."

Parker's future bride didn't so much read books as she devoured them, cannibalized the hardcover classics. As he perused the titles, several authors jumped out at him. There was a clever tale about a simple-minded servant with a parrot by Flaubert. Lilly served up the bittersweet story like an hors d'oeuvre before their last debauched lovemaking. And Guy de Maupassant - Parker vaguely recalled a tale about a prostitute who outfoxed a sadistic Nazi officer during the French occupation. On a shelf slightly above eye level he spied *Candide*. Voltaire, according to Lilly, wrote like a zonked-out hippy from the psychedelic sixties. Or at least that's how it seemed when she described the main character's hallucinogenic romp across sixteenth-century Europe.

On the far wall was a collection by Willa Cather. Did it contain *Neighbor Rosicky*? Lilly recounted that brief character sketch between strings in a duckpin bowling alley off route one in North Attleboro. A few rows down, Edith Wharton had been misfiled. Parker moved the nineteenth-century socialite to the opposite end of the collection, where she rightfully belonged. George Elliot - her novels ran a thousand pages or more. Lilly Parker ignored *Silas Marner* in favor of vignettes - some comical, others painfully sad - from each of Elliot's major works. And Turgenev, the Russian...

"I'm ready now." Decker out in the same stunning dress she wore their first date, Lilly floated into the room.

Reaching into his pocket, Parker rubbed a thumb reassuringly over the fuzzy surface of the ring box. "Come in and close the door. There's something I want to show you, darling."

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## The Herb Gatherer's Disciple

### I

Ruth Savage, the school psychologist, leaned back in her chair and studied the shrimpy girl with the lantern jaw and unruly mop of dark hair on the far side of the desk. "Your grandmother died."

Laurel Evers dark eyes focused on the moss-colored tendrils of a spider plant which reached almost to the floor. The teen, whose lips were frozen in a muted smile, affected an outmoded, hippy look with baggy, mannish corduroys and a plaid, flannel shirt. "She wasn't the easiest person to get along with."

Out in the hallway the bell clattered shrilly and a flurry of students scurried off to class. "You weren't nearly so tactful, when your history teacher, Mr. Peterson, offered his condolences," the school psychologist noted.

The sixteen year-old didn't seem the least bit contrite. Rather, she sat with a vinegary expression staring at her raggedy fingernails. "I told him that granny was a crumby, two-bit drunk and the world would be a better place without her." The words carried no rancor. Laurel was simply stating indisputable facts. Her paternal grandmother died. The woman wasn't particularly honorable and nobody mourned.

*My granny was a crumby, two-bit drunk.* The crudeness of the remark was compounded by the fact that Laurel blurted it in front of the entire class, setting off a stink bomb of hoots, jeers and bawdy encouragement. "Granny Evers had four husbands and cheated on all of them. She'd been arrested for shoplifting, driving an unregistered car, check and welfare fraud. Three of her four sons committed crimes and went to prison." Before Doctor Savage could cobble together a response, a guttural sound resembling a vulgar epithet welled up in her throat. "At least once a week, my father called her a crumby two-bit drunk in front of in the whole, goddamn family."

Ruth blanched. "And what did your grandmother do?"

Laurel leered at the psychologist then averted her eyes. "Laughed like a freakin' hyena." There was no hint of animosity in the girl's voice. That's just the way it was. The Evers clan was like something out of the sub-cultural backwoods of Appalachia where family kept their own counsel and the filth-encrusted laundry piled high as the treetops.

"Mr. Peterson's demanding a formal apology."

"I only told him the hard, cold truth."

"What if he calls your parents in for a conference?"

"Then I sure hope he's got medical coverage," The girl sniggered mirthlessly. "My dad's a vicious brute. He's been arrested more times than you've got fingers and toes. Most recently he did a six-month stint at the ACI lockup for manhandling my mother." Laurel cracked her knuckles and raised her eyes. "I ain't hanging around here any longer than I have to. I read a book this winter and it gave me ideas."

Again, Ruth was struck by the girl's blasé tone. "What book?"

"This one." She pulled a thin paperback from the backpack resting at her feet and handed it to the psychologist. *The Country of the Pointed Firs* by Sarah Orne Jewett - Ruth lay the book aside on the desk. "It's about a bunch of hayseeds from Maine," Laurel clarified. "It's real peaceful up there. None of this," she waved her thin hands desperately trying to organize her thoughts, "god-awful crap." Laurel pulled her chair closer and leaned forward over the desk. "The locals live off the land... hunt, fish, pick wild berries through the summer. It's so much nicer... like some modern-day Garden of Eden!"

"You see, I got this plan." Again, the girl reached down into her backpack and withdrew a motorist's map of Maine, which she unfurled across the psychologist's desk. "My folks are dead broke, and I got no interest in college. This spring, I'll sneak down to the bus station in Providence and buy a one-way ticket to Bangor... scrounge around for temporary lodging and look for work." Laurel ran her forefinger deftly over the surface of the map. "If nothing materialized, I'll head further north to Millinocket, maybe cut across to Sugarloaf or Moosehead Lake." The young girl even talked of traveling further north to the chilly Allagash Wilderness sandwiched between New Brunswick and Quebec. It was a grand adventure – Louis and Clark without the benefit of the Shoshone Indian guide, Sakakawea.

Ten minutes later, despite the psychologist's best efforts, there was no talking Laurel Evers out of her great escape. Once school was finished, the five-foot, black eyed pixie was heading north, every logical, coherent, reasonable and prudent argument to the contrary be damned!

Only now did Ruth crack open the glossy book cover and glance at the title page. "This novel's over a hundred years old," the psychologist protested. "The rustic way of life you described is all but gone now."

Laurel thought a moment. "Maybe it's more a state of mind than a clump of wild pennyroyal or scraggily firs."

Realizing that they had drifted off-topic, Dr. Savage threw the book aside. "If you don't apologize to Mr. Peterson," she repeated, "he'll call home and make a royal stink."

Laurel screwed her face up in disgust. "And my father's liable to crack his ugly skull." A morbidly-obese, freckle-faced girl stuck her head in the door with a note. Dr. Savage scribbled a message and sent the girl on her way. "Okay, I'll apologize, but just this once." Laurel folded her map with meticulous care and retreated to the threshold. "So what's my diagnosis?"

"I don't follow you," Dr. Savage replied.

"Adjustment counselors pick people's brains for a living. What's your verdict?"

Rut Savage possessed a bad habit, bordering on fatal flaw: feeling threatened or out of her element, the psychologist fell back on sardonic humor. The caustic tendency had cost her more than one friendship and alienated several teachers, who misconstrued her irreverent wit.

"Helene Deutsch 'as if' personality." Ruth blurted with clinical detachment.

The petite girl's eyebrows danced skyward and she jutted her lips in a questioning way. "A famous, Freudian psychiatrist," Ruth clarified, "Helene Deutsch, once treated a woman who assumed the beliefs and mindset of people she only recently met." For the first time since arriving in the psychologist's office, a look of vulnerability overspread the girl's limpid, brown eyes. "Needless-to-say, I'm pulling your leg," Dr. Savage continued affecting a gentler tone. "You're a sweet kid going through a rough stint at home. I'm just trying to dissuade you from acting on an impulse and making a bad situation worse."

"But there really *was* such a person?"

"Yes, it became a landmark case," Ruth replied. "Pseudo-neurotic schizophrenia - it's just another way of saying that someone, who appears relatively normal, is nuttier than a fruitcake."

\* \* \* \* \*

After third period the same grotesquely overweight girl reappeared with another note from Mr. Peterson, the history teacher. *Problem resolved. Thanks loads!* Still later in the day, Laurel Evers materialized in the psychologist's open doorway. "About that whatchamacallit, weirdo condition you described earlier... were you pulling my leg?"

Dr. Savage, who was writing up a report, was broadsided by a wave of self-loathing. "The psychiatric condition is real enough, but there's nothing 'as if' about you." Ruth came out from behind the desk and grabbed the girl by both wrists. "Helene Deutsch... it was a regrettable, dim-witted joke meant to drive home a point and nothing more."

*Pseudo-neurotic schizophrenia.* What Ruth neglected to mention, as Laurel vanished down the empty hallway, was a prevalent theory written up in several respected journals that Ms Deutsch may herself have been just such an emotionally disingenuous anomaly. The bulk of the psychiatrist's research, if it could be described as such, reflected the woman's *own* emotional

inadequacies and frigid, 'as-if' tendencies. As Ruth was getting ready to leave the office, she spied a slim volume jutting out from under a stack of Stanford-Binet IQ tests. Slipping the Sarah Orne Jewett book into her briefcase, she headed for the parking lot.

\* \* \* \* \*

*The Country of the Pointed Firs* chronicled the adventures of a backwoods matriarch, Elmira Todd, who concocted herbal remedies and let out rooms to earn enough money to support her rural, subsistence-level existence. The old lady tramped about the rocky, Maine wilderness collecting wildflowers, stems and roots. In one chapter toward the middle of the book, she took a boat trip to visit with a reclusive, agoraphobic brother. It was a hardscrabble existence in which people meandered about in horse-drawn wagons, fished, grew their own potato crops and made throat lozenges from locally-grown spearmint boiled in metal cauldrons over the stove. Women braided floor mats from swamp-grown rushes, and even fashioned sandals from those very same pliable plants. The Civil War was a recent memory not some moldy, historical trivia and neighbors were more 'civil' or at least it seemed that way.

Laurel Evers had a yen to go exploring - backwards to the tail end of the previous century not forward into a mechanistic future. Reading a book by some quaint, nineteenth-century writer, the vulnerable girl went haywire, seizing upon the author's credo as a personal message of salvation. When Laurel handed Ruth the dog-eared paperback, she did so with both hands cupped together, the way devout Catholics accepted the host during Holy Communion. Again, as she smoothed the map of Maine across the psychologist's desk, it was with the veneration one accorded a sacred talisman.

Through the spring Ruth kept an eye out for Laurel Evers. She looked for her in the school cafeteria during lunchtime, at holiday assemblies and in the bustling corridors. One day in late May, she caught sight of a stumpy, dark-haired girl sitting in the bleachers over by the track field. "I thought that was you." Ruth climbed to the topmost row and sat down. Far below on the field, a sprinter knelt down in set position at the starting block. "No more problems with Mr. Peterson?"

Laurel shrugged and cracked a tepid smile. "He's a horse's ass."

"Still planning your great escape?"

"Second week in July... already bought my ticket."

Ruth felt a dusky misery descend on her heart. "Why so soon?"

Laurel leaned back on her elbows raising her pale face to the stingy, spring warmth. "Around the holidays, my father beat up some rummy in a Central Falls barroom. He was on parole for a previous offense, so the judge revoked bail and sent him back to prison. I want to be long gone before that jerk leaves lockup."

"I keep forgetting to give you this." Ruth handed the girl the Sarah Orne Jewett book. "If you have trouble finding work in Bangor, there's a huge tourist industry along the coast. I'm sure you could find a job in Old Orchard Beach, Scarborough or Booth Bay Harbor."

On the track, the runner darted out of the starting block at lightning speed but pulled up after thirty feet and went back to try again. Further up the field, a black youth was leaping hurdles. Laurel flipped *The Country of the Pointed Firs* over in her hands and studied the cover absently. "How did you like it?"

"At first," Ruth said, "I found the book a bit dry, but after a while the characters sort of got under my skin."

"Think there are any Elmira Todds still poking around in the backcountry?"

The fictitious Elmira Todd wandered about the remote countryside collecting medicinal herbs – both wild and tended - that she boiled, chopped, grounded with a mortar and pestle for poultices, teas and medicinal salves. The bulky, rheumatic woman favored yarrow, sweet-brier, balm, sage and borage. There was mint, wormwood and wild thyme that, when accidentally trod upon, made its fragrant presence known.

*Think there are any Elmira Todds still poking around in the backcountry?* Ruth considered the question. The imaginary Elmira Todd was long dead, just like the author who created her. But a few of her progeny were sure to be wandering the back woods of Maine in search of the rare lobelia and elecampane for soothing syrups and elixirs.

"You're sure to rub shoulders with one or another of her great grandchildren," Ruth observed.

"I don't need much to be happy... just calm and quiet, that's all." A dogged wistfulness overspread the black eyes; a gritty obstinacy played out about the supple corners of the stunted girl's lips. "I'll send a postcard once I'm settled."

"Yes, I'd appreciate that."

Laurel Evers had been gone from the bleachers a good five minutes before Dr. Savage noticed the wetness on her cheeks and raised her glistening eyes to a perfectly sunny, spring day. Back on the field the sprinter was rearranging his limbs in the starting block. The weight of his body resting on arched fingertips, the arms hung almost vertical, buttocks angled a good six inches above the neck. It was a sublime balancing act.

## II

A month and three weeks later, Laurel stood behind the counter at the Majestic Diner in Scarborough, Maine. At seven-thirty in the morning business was picking up nicely. Laurel had just cashed out a table of lobstermen on their way out to the marina. Mrs. Davidson, an elderly widow who suffered from rheumatoid arthritis and favored a three-pronged cane, was nursing her poached egg and hash browns over by the picture window.

"You still hunkered down in that flophouse near the fire station?" Amber Flynn, the owner of the diner, edged up beside the young girl. The chubby brunette reeked of an odd mix of maple-cured sausages, fresh-brewed coffee and lilac body lotion.

"It's a rooming house, and I'm perfectly happy there."

Amber grunted a marginally incoherent objection. "Place caters to transients and chronic alcoholics."

Laurel considered the remark briefly. "Which is probably why I feel right at home."

When the Greyhound bus rumbled out of the station two months earlier heading north, Laurel breathed a huge sigh of relief and vowed never to look over her shoulder. Her parents had no idea where she had gone. The sixteen year-old girl had turned the page, gone off to rewrite the uncensored script of her new life. On the bedroom mirror she tacked a note – not so much a note as a declaration of spiritual sovereignty: Goodbye. Gone to a new life. Laurel.



She intentionally left out any hint of sentiment. Love, compassion, common decency – there had never been anything even vaguely resembling those hackneyed emotions. Why give truth to a bold-faced lie. Those seven meager words encapsulated in a pair of tidy sentences summarized everything that needed to be said.

“You’re a funny one!” Amber cackled good-naturedly. She lowered her voice several decibels. “If you’re ever looking for a reasonably nice place to live, the widow Davidson is renting out a room in her cottage, since her daughter married and moved to Tucson.” Amber nodded her head as though to confirm the efficacy of what she was saying. “She ain’t asking much and the neighborhoods respectable.”

“Not interested,” Laurel returned gruffly and went off to tend to a family of five that settled into a booth near the water cooler.

Later that night back at the rooming house, Laurel collapsed on the spongy mattress. Laurel kept to herself, preferring to take her meals at the restaurant. She had a hot plate for coffee and a claustrophobically narrow shower stall that spit tepid water when the boiler functioned. Out in the hallway several residents were arguing, the conversation virtually unintelligible. They sounded stupid, drunk and clueless. An angry accusation was followed by a barrage of foul language as a pair of heavy boots retreated toward the dusty stairwell. Amber’s original assessment was accurate. It was a seedy flophouse, but nobody bothered her and for the first time in her stultified life she felt totally at peace – unencumbered.

The herb gatherers of nineteenth century Maine – she hadn’t met anyone quite like the protagonist in the Sarah Orne Jewett novel, but the Majestic Diner was a sanctuary, a safe haven where nobody questioned her pedigree, her unsavory origins. The toxic waste dump of her childhood and formative years was dead and buried.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amber’s husband, dead five years now, originally started the business. When he passed away from a stroke, his son, Wally, returned to cook and manage the kitchen. Wally, tall and dark-haired with a Red Sox baseball cap flipped so that the visor hung down the nape of his neck, was an enigma. He seldom spoke and, on the rare occasions he opened his mouth, preferred monosyllables to simple sentences.

“Don’t mind Wally,” Amber counseled. “His father’s death hit him pretty hard. The boy... he’s painfully shy around women... doesn’t know what to say. Small talk was never his strong suit.”

“What’s with the clipboard?” Laurel parried the conversation elsewhere. A small clipboard hung from a sixteen-penny nail pounded into the wall near the grill. Every so often Wally stopped what he was doing to jot something down with a stubby pencil. He never lingered, simply scribbled a word or two and turned his attention back to the food sizzling on the hot grille.

“Wally taught English literature for a few years... wanted to eventually be a novelist.” She sighed and blinked the moisture from her eyes. “Now he fritters his free time away writing short stories.” Amber repositioned a set of salt and pepper shaker in the middle of a table. “Sometimes when he’s cooking up orders, a clever word or idea flits into his brain and he pauses just long enough to make a note so he won’t forget to include it in the finished piece.”

Amber's features brightened as she poked Laurel playfully in the ribs. "Wally... he's always searching for the *mot juste*."

"Moe what?"

"It's a French term... the exactly right word."

*A tongue tied author – it didn't make a shred of sense! Or did it?* Laurel had a cousin on her mother's side of the family, a gifted jazz singer, who, when she wasn't belting out lyrics, stuttered and stammered horribly.

Just the other day, Laurel was waiting for an order browning nicely on the grill. "Ever heard of Sarah Orne Jewett?"

Wally's lips curled in a reverential grin. "Just about the greatest story writer to ever emerge from the backwoods of Central Maine."

Laurel pointed at the clipboard hanging at a cockeyed angle alongside the grille. "Your mother told me about your writing."

"I'm just a hack... an amateur."

\* \* \* \* \*

Thursday a resident of the rooming house cracked a beer bottle over his girlfriend's head. The police carted the assailant off to jail and transported the injured woman to the hospital. When the victim died, the charges were upgraded to manslaughter.

"I gotta get the hell out of where I'm living," Laurel confided to Amber. "That old lady with the false teeth and gnarly fingers still looking to rent?"

Laurel moved into the widow Davidson's house the following Monday. The elderly woman cleared the middle shelf in the refrigerator. "You can store perishables here," she spoke in a crotchety monotone. Due to chronic pain, she tended to be a bit abrupt but was reasonable in most respects. "I always bathe in the early afternoon. You're free to shower anytime after the evening meal." She tapped a withered cheek with her swollen finger. "As the weather becomes chillier next month, I'll set out extra blankets, but you should be comfy for now."

When the widow finally retreated to her own room, Laurel surveyed her new digs. The twin bed seemed rather narrow. The mattress was firm and the maple bureau spacious enough to hold her meager wardrobe twice over.

\* \* \* \* \*

"That older man over by the door nursing the bowl of oatmeal is Vladimir." Megan gestured with her eyes. An angular man with bushy gray hair and walrus moustache, he was always polite, if somewhat difficult to understand because of his garbled speech and odd inflections. The man's clothes were tastefully clean but dowdy.

"His English isn't so good," Laurel observed.

"Vladimir's a recent transplant from the Soviet Union." As Amber explained it, Vladimir worked as a journalist for *Pravda*, the state-run Soviet newspaper, at the time the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia. The newspaper sent him to cover the occupation but, when Vladimir refused to write propaganda favorable of the Russian troops, the government sacked him, brought the man home in disgrace and banned him from ever working in the print media.

Outside the gray sky began spitting rain through streaks of brilliant sunshine – a late-summer sun shower. “So what did the Russian do when he couldn’t work as a journalist anymore?”

“Drove taxis.”

“For tips and minimum wage.” Laurel considered the elderly man’s professional fall from grace. “Sort of like being demoted from head chef at a gourmet restaurant to dishwasher.”

Five minutes later when Laurel cleared the table and brought the Russian his bill, he laid the money to one side on the table. “Is for you... teep.” He pointed at a pile of loose change heaped near the sugar bowl.

“Thanks.” Laurel felt a lump in her throat growing fiercer by the moment.

Vladimir, the former *Pravda* journalist who refused to write sappy propaganda praising the virtues of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia and ended up driving cab for twenty years, smiled broadly, displaying a mouthful of gold-capped teeth. “You goot gairl... I like much.” He sauntered out the door into the warm rain.

When he was gone, Megan said, “You didn’t happen to notice the sweater he was wearing.”

“The pale green one with the funny buttons?”

After loosing his job, the man lived hand-to-mouth. He had to satisfy immediate needs. There was never any money left over for future plans. Many Russians were in a similar bind. You owned a good sweater and an everyday sweater. You wore the good sweater only on special occasions. When the old sweater eventually wore out and fell to pieces, you bought a replacement and the previous ‘new’ sweater became the old sweater.

Amber seldom talked so freely. Sensing a hidden agenda, Laurel was beginning to feel uncomfortable. “And why are you telling me all this?”

The middle-aged woman disappeared into the supply room and emerged with a thirty-gallon, black garbage bag. The unwieldy bag was so heavy she could just barely lift it. “My niece, Veronica, married and moved away. She left these perfectly nice clothes behind. My sister was going to donate them to the Salvation Army, but I told her I had a better use for them.”

“I ain’t no beggar,” Laurel hissed.

“Neither was Vladimir when he lost his job.” She plucked a pair of designer jeans from the top of the pile. “My niece was your size... petite, all skin and bones, so they should fit nicely.”

Laurel rubbed the wetness from her cheek with the heel of a hand. “Thanks,” she whispered. “Thank you so much!”

“Veronica had a nasty vice,” Amber chuckled. “She was an incorrigible shopaholic... a regular fashionista. I ignored the bling-bling and garish crap... hand-picked the more modest pieces that I thought you might prefer.” Amber reached out and pulled the girl close. “Six months you been working here. You’re more like family than coworker.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Around two in the afternoon the lunch crowd subsided followed by a brief lull. Laurel retreated to the kitchen, where Wally was bent over the prep table mashing a stick of softened butter into a pulpy mass. Slicing a lemon in half, he squeezed the tart juice into the metal bowl

before reaching for a moss green herb on a foot-long stem. Inverting the sprig, he ran a taut thumb and index finger along the length of the plant and the needle-like leaves peeled away in a heap.

“Tarragon,” Wally announced in typical close-lipped fashion. He bunched the leaves together and minced them, chopping in rapid-fire strokes until all that remained left was a powdery mound of green. Mixing the herb into the butter, he added a dash of salt and pepper.

“Tarragon butter!” Holding the concoction under her nose, the short-order cook spooned a small dab onto the girl’s tongue.

“Tastes bittersweet... like anise with a spicy kick.” She rolled the butter over her tongue before swallowing. “And what do you do with tarragon butter?”

“Cook with it... steak, fish, whatever.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Mrs. Davidson’s cottage was three streets down from the public beach. On her days off from the diner, Laurel walked the beach. Armed with a birding book, *Feathered Friends of Coastal Maine*, that she found at a kiosk on the boardwalk in Old Orchard, she began to familiarize herself with the indigenous population.

There were terns – common, arctic and roseate. They laid one to three eggs in shallow depressions in the ground and frequently used debris that washed ashore to build nests. Razorbills and guillemots were ‘alcids – marine birds that spent the majority of the year at sea, only coming ashore to nest.

And seagulls were not just seagulls. There were great black-backed, herring and laughing gulls. All three species built their nests on the ground. The great black-backed were the largest gulls and could live upwards of twenty years. The herrings were the most common and could survive ten years longer than the great blackbackeds.

As she walked the beach, Laurel poked at the remains of a dried up horseshoe crab, examined a gelatinous jellyfish and picked over some ornate shells. Directly ahead a family of French Canadians had pitched a garish beach umbrella close by the shoreline. The children, two adolescent boys and a younger girl, were building sand castles. They laughed and bantered back in forth in an odd polyglot of French and English. All was right in the world. A comforting thought nudged her mellow awareness – a century earlier, Almira Todd, the heroine of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, may have strolled these same beaches when she wasn’t gathering wildflowers and medicinal plants or brewing up traditional herbal remedies.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ever finish that story?” Laurel gestured with a flick of her eyes toward the clipboard.

“A month ago.” Wally slid a spatula under a pair of eggs simmering on the grill and expertly flipped them upside-down. “Nine thousand words... a little under twenty pages.”

“And?”

“Sent it off to the Hudson Review, a literary magazine in New York.” He transferred the eggs onto a plate, added a scoop of hash browns along with four strips of bacon. In response to Laurel’s curious expression, he added, “Got the rejection letter earlier this week.”

“Thanks but no thanks.”

“Unsolicited manuscripts don’t get much serious consideration.” Wally slathered butter on several slices of Italian toast and handed the plate to Laurel. “Nine thousand words and all I merit is a form letter the size of a postage stamp.”

“So what do you do?”

“Keep plugging away.”

Later that afternoon before leaving, Laurel told Amber, “That literary magazine rejected Wally’s story.”

Amber blew out her cheeks in an attitude of despair. “My son... he writes and writes and writes and writes. He just sits at his desk with a number two, Ticonderoga pencil and bucket-loads of words pour from his soul.” “Unfortunately, when it comes to small talk... shooting the breeze, he ain’t nearly so gifted.”

The restaurant owner paused and glanced at Laurel, a conspiratorial gesture, drawing the girl into the woman’s circular logic. On rare occasion, Amber could be downright crude, choosing her mode of expression with the barbaric imprecision of a battering ram. “This is how I see it,” she cut to the chase. “You and my son... you both got issues. Since his father’s death, Wally’s all balled up in his emotions.” A steely undertone suddenly crept into her voice. “And you ain’t much better.”

“Excuse me?”

“With you, family’s a four-letter word.” “Just for the record,” she continued her wrecking ball approach, “if it’s meant to be, I wouldn’t mind having you as a daughter-in-law.”

\* \* \* \* \*

One day in late November, Laurel arrived early for work. “What are you doing?”

Wally was in the kitchen with a ten-inch clay pot and bag of potting soil. The cook spread a thick layer of the dark medium almost to the lip of the pot then sprinkled a smattering of tiny seeds across the surface. “Rosemary... I’m growing my own herbs to use in the recipes,” he explained without bothering to raise his head. When he was satisfied with the arrangement, he sprinkled a paper-thin covering of the soil over the seeds. Only now did he look up at the waitress. “Isn’t that my Cousin Veronica’s blouse?”

Laurel’s malleable features went through a series of disparate permutations before settling on a self-conscious smirk. “A woman with excellent taste.”

“Now things get interesting.” Reaching for a plastic spray bottle, Wally misted the surface until the soil was drenched and spread a sheet of transparent cellophane over the top of the clay pot, creating a transparent lid, which he fixed in place with a rubber band.

“What’s with the plastic?”

“Helps retain moisture and heat soaked up from sunlight.” He cleared his throat. “Now we wait.”

“How long?”

“The seeds should germinate in about a month, give or take a few weeks. He ogled his handiwork. “Probably won’t be ready to harvest herbs until sometime next year.”

“But winter’s coming.”

Wally placed the pot on the window sill. “I’ll put the rosemary outside once the seeds sprout and bring it back indoors over the harsh winter months.”

“What other herbs do you grow?”

“Dill, oregano, sweet basil, scallion, thyme...

Laurel studied the orangey pot with its moistened seeds – seeds of promise and hope. “I want you to teach me how to raise herbs... to become a disciple of sorts” She stepped closer. “I want you to teach me everything you know.”

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## The Stockbroker’s Cleaning Woman

Should I come back?” The cleaning lady stood on the far side of the threshold with her janitorial cart and a vacuum cleaner. Judging by the disheveled pile of frizzy gray hair and sagging jowls, the amiable, self-contained woman looked to be in her late sixties.

Allen Edgemont looked up from the pile of stock and municipal bond reports that littered his desk. It was well past six o’clock and most everyone at the brokerage firm had gone home for the day. “I’m just about done here. You won’t bother me in the least.”

The older woman negotiated the metal cart into the carpeted office, unraveled the cord and set to work. Surveying a list of assets in the topmost portfolio, Allen didn’t like what he saw. The fledgling companies – a mishmash of start-up ventures – promised high yield without bothering to mention risk. Risk was always the central issue. No prudent investment adviser would recommend such a collection of unproven, fledgling businesses.

Ten years he had been counseling investors, and no one had ever lost his shirt. Not one! Some clients did better than others, but at the end of the day, there was never cause for panic, no horror stories or compulsion to go out on the ledge of the thirteenth floor because of an unanticipated blip in the Dow Jones.

Finishing with the vacuuming, the cleaning lady stooped over to empty the trash basket alongside his desk. She smiled faintly before retreating to the opposite end of the room where she ran a dust rag over the mahogany bookshelf. “What happened to the other girl?” Allen pushed the paperwork momentarily aside.

“Which one?”

“The red-haired chatterbox.”

“Quit on short notice. The young ones don’t tend to last long.”

Allen wasn’t the least bit surprised. If the pretty young thing had worked half as hard as she jibber-jabbered or toyed with her cell phone...

There were only two types of cleaners that the agency routinely sent: the PYT’s – transient, careless and easily distracted. Everything done by the seat-of-their-pants, they never lasted beyond a handful of weeks. Then there were the older women. Over the years, Allen witnessed a steady stream of Irish Catholics. Most came from the shabby, three-decker tenements in South Boston. With huge silver crosses dangling from their necks, they spoke in a singsong, lilting Irish brogue, proved hard workers, tight-lipped and honest to a fault.

The chocolaty-skinned Haitians tended to mix their devout, Christian beliefs with an amalgam of voodoo and atavistic rituals involving small animal sacrifice. Allen had learned this from a coworker who had a short-lived affair with one of the former cleaning women. The Hispanics were equally conscientious, subsisting in a parallel universe to which Allen was never privy. During his tenure, over a hundred had traipsed through the office complex, come and gone, and Allen had never learned a single name. He lowered his eyes and rubbed at the bristly, five o'clock shadow inching up his cheekbone and turned his attention back to the business at hand.

\* \* \* \* \*

There had been an ugly incident when the investment counselor met with a husband and wife earlier in the day. The Foresters had arranged a retirement account a decade earlier and the portfolio was performing nicely. In fifteen years, Bob and Edith were on track to retire with a sizeable nest egg. There would have been no problem, if the Foresters hadn't caught wind of the fact that a neighbor who invested with Allen's firm around the same time had far outstripped the couple, compounding lavish profits into a small fortune.

"Why the hell can they walk away with all that goddamn money, while we poke along line a couple of ne'er-do-wells?" Bob seethed. In his early fifties, the husband was thin with a Vandyke beard and manic intensity that set Allen's nerves on edge.

"Your friends," Allen spoke in a placating tone, "put all their funds in volatile, high-risk investments."

"Bullshit!" The husband spit the word in the broker's face like a curse.

"We seldom recommend high-roller accounts," Allen could feel his control over the situation deteriorating by the moment. "You need a cast iron stomach when dealing with that level of unpredictability." Allen glanced at the wife, who had been glowering at him since arriving. Thin like her husband with a vapid temperament, clearly nothing Allen said was improving her disposition.

He leaned across the desk slicing the air with the palm of his hand and pleading for understanding. "For sure, people earn a ton of money, but they can also lose their shirt. It's a crap shoot." When there was no immediate response, he added, "On the bright side, both of you are on track to retire quite comfortably at sixty-five."

"We want to retire *now*," Edith shot back, "not fifteen freakin' years from now!" "The Iversons," the wife was quickly losing all semblance of control, "are retiring in June and they're the same age as us."

Allen couldn't believe his ears. Had the Foresters forgotten everything they originally discussed at their consultation and all the subsequent meetings over the ensuing years? "That was never the intent. We arranged your portfolio so -"

"The Iversons just booked a European excursion to celebrate their new lease on life, and what do we have to show for it?" Edith brought him up short.

Allen stared warily at the woman. Edith Forester was plain with coarse features rendered even more distasteful by a sphinx-like affect. Allen couldn't be sure if she had a bona fide brain of her own or simply regurgitated her husband's infantile pronouncements with parrot-like precision.

*'Polly wanna cracker! Foresters wanna early retire!'*

In a fury, Bob rose to his feet. “We’re finished here.” As the distraught couple drifted to the door, he suddenly wheeled about and wagged a finger menacingly in the direction of the investment counselor. “We’re through with you and your slipshod business practices, but I can guaranty that you haven’t heard the last of it. Hell no!” For dramatic effect, he slammed the door on the way out.

*You haven’t heard the last of it.*

Allen was mildly disoriented. He provided rock-solid advice and the Forester’s investments had burgeoned over the years. Greedy crackpots – that’s what they were - a couple of kooks, eccentrics, nincompoops. If Allen had been able to think just a tad bit quicker on his feet, he might have confided that the bulk of his *own* life savings was scattered about a similar collection of prudent bonds and mutual funds. But the Foresters didn’t want to hear that. They would have much preferred to join the Iverson on their exotic junket.

\* \* \* \* \*

“What are you reading?” Allen asked.

“Excuse me?” The cleaning lady had finished with her work and was heading for the door.

“The book.” He gestured with his eyes at a dog-eared paperback protruding at a cockeyed angle from a handbag on the bottom shelf of the janitorial cart.

The woman plucked the book from the bag and handed it to the broker. “Just some light reading while I’m travelling on the bus to and from work.”

“The Death of Ivan Illyich by Leo Tolstoy,” Allen read from the glossy jacket. “I wouldn’t necessarily call that light reading.”

She retrieved the book and, in response to his befuddled expression, added, “I taught high school English... thirty-five years.”

Allen’s lips curled in a muted smile. Old enough to be his mother, this anonymous cleaning woman had suddenly assumed a radically new persona. “What’s it about... the plot?”

“A wealthy Russian aristocrat wakes up one day with a nagging pain in his side, and things go steadily downhill from there.” She glanced absently about the room, checking to make sure that everything was sufficiently clean and tidy. “Once his family and business associates realize he’s dying, they write him off. No matter that he was politically influential, well-connected, rich and socially popular... none of that matters anymore.”

The older woman chuckled under her breath as though at some private joke. “At the wake, his widow intrigues with a local bureaucrat to increase Ivan’s pension and death benefits even though the poor slob isn’t even buried yet.”

“Sounds morbid as hell,” Allen observed.

“No just the opposite.” She shook her head emphatically. “Well, goodnight,” the woman said and slipped noiselessly out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You look tired,” Allen’s wife said, kissing her husband’s cheek when he finally wandered in the door a few minutes before nine. “Want anything to eat?”

“No, just coffee,” he replied. “I want to tell you what happened today.”



Allen told his wife, Cynthia, about his meeting with the Foresters, and after working himself into an emotional frenzy even mentioned the cleaning woman who read Russian literature while commuting to work. As he spoke in a plodding, pragmatic tone, Cynthia put the water on to boil and measured several tablespoons of coffee into a small French press. Once the liquid boiled, she poured it into a glass carafe and firmly pushed down on the plunger. “What a pair of buffoons,” she noted softly. “Mindless nincompoops!”

She poured the coffee and set a carton of cream in front of her husband. “Forget about the horrid Foresters. I’m more curious to know why a retired school teacher would be cleaning office complexes.”

Allen poured a dash of cream into his cup. “The woman’s husband took sick... colon cancer. Even with medical insurance, the endless bills drained their savings.”

“What a pity!” Cynthia sipped at her coffee. “The Foresters are indignant about waiting until retirement, while your cleaning woman, through no fault of her own, is forced to work in her old age.”

“Life sucks and then you die,” Allen offered irreverently.

The room fell silent, each caught up in their own, private reverie. As she was clearing the table bringing the cups to the sink, Cynthia observed, “You did the right thing by your clients. There’s nothing to worry about.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Tuesday morning, Phil Smithers, the regional accounts manager, called Allen into his office. He opened a cabinet on the far wall, revealing a private stash of whiskies and pricey liquors. “Like a drink?”

Not much of a drinker, the regional accounts manager only brought out the heavy artillery when an employee was being promoted or sent packing on short notice. Allen passed on the drink. The Manager reached for a bottle of apricot brandy but thought better of it and abruptly closed the door. “A formal complaint was lodged against you,” he opened the conversation in a mellow, unassuming tone. “The Foresters... they’re closing out their accounts with us and taking their business elsewhere.”

“I’m not surprised,” Allen countered.

“You made him a ton of money over the years. The guy’s a horse’s ass... an unappreciative jerk!”

“He needed an alchemist not a financial planner.”

Phil Smithers cracked a broad grin. “Someone to turn base metal into gold bullion.”

“So what do you suggest?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing at all.” The accounts manager returned to the cabinet and poured himself three fingers of the aromatic brandy along with a separate glass which he handed to Allen. “Drink up!” He raised the shot glass to his lips and threw the fruity liquor down his gullet. “Good riddance to the horse’s ass!”

\* \* \* \* \*

“I ain’t botherin’ yah, am I?”

The following Tuesday, a slinky, twenty-something blonde with a nose ring and Apple cell phone dangling from her hip pocket stuck her head in the doorway.

“No, not in the least,” Allen looked up from his work. “Where’s the older woman who usually cleans the office?”

“Dunno... they don’t tell us diddlysquat at the office, just where to go and what to do.”

Allen turned his attention back to an assortment of new investment opportunities arranged in tidy piles on a table that abutted his desk. There was a fledgling coffee plantation in Zimbabwe, the former Rhodesia. The country had gone to hell under the rule of Joseph Mugabe, the dictatorial thug who took over after the African National Congress victory. Why would anybody risk hard-earned money on a start-up venture in an unstable, the third world banana republic?

Next was an injectable treatment for liver disease. But Allen had no great love of salves, pills or potions. Biotech stocks were notoriously risky. Between eight-five and ninety percent of all new experimental drugs failed. When pharmaceuticals underperformed, they virtually lost *all* of their value. The stocks looked great at face value, but the risk was absurdly high. Promises of exorbitant profits lured greedy fools like the Foresters into a proverbial spider’s web of disastrous consequences. The likelihood of dying in a plane crash was 205,552 to one, while the probability of blowing one’s life savings in a pharmaceutical start-up venture was astronomical.

Another case in point: a health care franchise in Providence, Rhode Island was touting its expertise in parenteral feeding and inhalation therapy procedures, all cutting edge stuff. The venture sounded safe enough at face value, but the Rhode Island Department of Health was extremely heavy-handed with the home care industry. They had a ‘Certificate of Need’ law that allowed the state to figuratively shut the spigo, choking the number of business in any given health care specialty.

Allen was sure that the law violated federal anti-trust law, but businesses were powerless and had no recourse where the Mafia mentality prevailed. Worse yet, the market was saturated with similar medical endeavors, each nibbling away a slice of the ever-diminishing economic pie. One bad investment could wreck havoc. Just look at Eastman Kodak and Woolworth, a pair of extinct corporate behemoths from a previous era. No, Allen Edgemont would not recommend any health care franchise in Rhode Island, the tiniest state, regardless on the potential return on investment.

\* \* \* \* \*

The previous week, Allen experienced a rather peculiar tête-à-tête with the enigmatic, former English teacher. Hardly a word passed between them from the time she arrived to clean the office to when she was preparing to leave. “What’s your name?” Allen asked.

“Rosemary... my friends call me Rosy.”

“I’m Allen.” He rose and offered his hand. The woman gawked at him with a muddled expression, trying to decipher his intent. “About that Tolstoy tale... you never told me how the story ended.”

“Actually,” she corrected, “the lengthy piece is more novella than short story.”

“Yes, yes.” Allen wasn’t even remotely interested in parsing literary minutia. “The fellow becomes ill... friends and family desert him. Where’s the plot go from there?”

The woman cocked her head to one side, organizing her thoughts. “Tolstoy was a brilliant writer, who structured his stories with infinite care. The reader must understand what went before... the back story, in order to properly appreciate the *denouement*.”

“The what?”

“Resolution.”

Without warning the woman’s expression, which initially seemed congenial soured, and Allen had the distinct impression that she preferred not to say anything more. “Yes, I’m listening,” he prodded.

“It was a loveless marriage.” The cleaning woman sat down folding her rough and reddened hands in her ample lap. “When the wife became moody and difficult during her first pregnancy, the husband couldn’t handle it. He retreated into his work and cards.”

“He was a gambler?”

“No. He just played bridge. A man of few if any vices, he was likeable, smart, good humored, well-balanced, sociable and witty.”

“And successful in business.”

“Well, yes, of course.” “But then in his mid-forties the illness appears and there’s no way out... no escape from the inevitable.” Without warning the cleaning woman hastily rose to her feet and announced in a soft-spoken, unhurried manner, “I’m leaving now.”

Allen waved a hand fitfully in the air. “But you never explained how the story plays itself out.”

A bittersweet smile flitted across her placid features and once again the cleaning lady morphed into educator. “Tolstoy, the master storyteller, intended that his stories be comprehended in one’s heart of hearts. My telling you accomplishes nothing. It’s too easy. You don’t profit by being hand-fed a collection of skimpy details.” Without saying another word, she left the room, closing the door behind her.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Is that a book or a paperweight?” Having brushed her teeth, Cynthia entered the bedroom prepared for bed.

“Not to worry,” Allen tossed the heavy book aside and smiled sheepishly at his wife. “It’s the collected short works of Tolstoy, but I’m only reading one story.”

Cynthia slipped under the covers next to him. “The one the cleaning woman brought in her handbag?”

He nodded and turned his attention back to the book.

“Is it any good?”

“I’ve only read a handful of pages,” he qualified. “It’s very subtle... much more involved than I imagined, so I have to go back and reread certain passages several times in order to get the gist of things.”

In the morning Cynthia stirred and made a motion to rise but her husband grabbed her arm. “Why did God put us here?”

The woman yawned and stretched her limbs. “I don’t suppose this has anything to do with the book you were reading last night.” When there was no response, she added, “You’re an avowed agnostic. I don’t understand where this is coming from.”

“Just because I don’t believe in Biblical deities doesn’t mean I don’t acknowledge a higher power,” Allen protested. “Why did God put us here?”

Cynthia rolled over, nuzzling his ear with her lips. “God put us here to be happy.”

“Anything else you care to add?”

“No, that’s the whole shebang.” Feeling his fingers relax, Cynthia slipped off the side of the bed, wriggled her toes into a pair of fleece-lined bedroom slippers and shuffled off to start her day.

\* \* \* \* \*

A week later when the cleaning lady arrived, Allen watched intently as she shook the waste paper basket into the refuse bag dangling from the metal cart. A torn envelope fluttered to the carpeted floor. She teased the paper off the rug, depositing it in the plastic bag. “I missed you last week, Rosy.”

“My son in Florida had a baby girl and I went to visit.”

“Congratulations!” Allen stood up and gestured with a fluttering of the wrist that she sit alongside his desk. “That’s enough work for today.”

The woman seemed confused by the cavalier remark. “I still need to vacuum and dust.”

“The carpet’s clean enough and furniture can easily go another week without showing dust.” Again he gestured toward the plush chair. “Gerasim, the servant,” he began in a herky-jerky, stilted speech that evened out as he gained momentum, “is key to understanding the author’s intent.”

“You read the story!”

“Gerasim is different from that other character... that government official who begrudgingly attends the dreary wake and then rushes off to his club for drinks and entertainment. No one is deeply affected by Ivan’s illness except Gerasim, the lowly servant.”

“A Christ-like figure, to be sure,” Rosy confirmed. “All the great European writers had their fictional messiahs.” She spoke in a measured, unhurried tone. “Hester Prynne in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* was one such divinely-inspired creature, but she only emerges a saintly soul at the far end of the novel. Many readers unfortunately miss the analogy.”

Noise began bubbling up in the hallway. Phil Smithers had just finished a late-night training session with new staff, who were still lingering near the elevator. Allen went and closed the door, muting the momentary distraction.

“And of course,” Rosy picked up the thread of her previous point, “Count Myshkin in Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* is also an enlightened soul.”

“Grasim bends down on his hands and knees,” Allen redirected her attention back to the original topic, “and lets Ivan rest his legs on the servant’s back so his master can gain temporary relief from the excruciating pain, which –”

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The Kidnapped Bride

Paige Endicott, court reporter for the *Brandenberg Gazette*, arrived early and hunkered down with her notes on a hardwood bench in the back of the district courtroom. The town solicitor had been caught ‘soliciting’ something off the beaten path and was due for arraignment shortly. His defense lawyer was elsewhere in the building haggling with a representative from the district attorney’s office. Meanwhile, a young man in his early twenties, Norman Snyder, was standing before a rather irritated Judge Felicia Kirk

Judge Kirk’s weathered face offered little encouragement. When she attempted anything resembling warm emotion, the pendent bottom lip jutted forward in a disconcerting leer and a ribbon of crow’s feet dribbled away like a pair of dried up riverbeds above the cheeks. After years covering Judge Kirk’s courtroom, Paige had begun to wonder if the diminutive woman, who stood a tad less than five feet in her birthday suit, didn’t suffer a Napoleon complex with the accompanying, psychological excess baggage.

“You spent last night in the lockup, Mr. Snyder?” Judge Kirk noted.

In stark contrast to the judge’s shriveled physique, the blond-haired man sitting in the straight back chair twenty feet away was tall and muscular with broad, shoulders and a dusting of freckles around the hazel eyes. Paige recognized him from Brandenberg High School, where Norman was president of the honor society and ran long distance on the track team. The last time she saw him was at a senior awards banquet, where Norman won a scholarship to Brandeis College in Waltham, a short commute north of Boston. Norman attended college a scant three months. Rumor had it that he stopped attending classes after the first few weeks and returned home forfeiting the lavish scholarship. Despite the fall from academic grace, he still had that dreamy-eyed look of a poet – or unrepentant anarchistic.

“Yes, that’s right,” he murmured contritely.

“Would you like to tell the court, why you were arrested yesterday afternoon?” The judge spoke in a lilting drawl, calculated, like vaudeville shtick, to enhance both the courtroom drama and casual onlookers’ vicarious interest. Over the years, Paige had seen Judge Kirk bait defendants with a similar infantilizing tone.

The young man’s lips pressed together so hard they blanched white. The mouth twisted perversely as he stared at the tiny woman in the black robe elevated on the dais. But Judge Kirk had pivoted in her seat facing the far wall and never witnessed the defendant’s Jekyll and Hyde transformation. “I’d rather tell you what I did and work backwards.”

The bailiff, a robust man in his late thirties with a sleepy face, gawked at the headstrong man. Judge Kirk demanded discrete decorum in her courtroom, and God help anyone who, resorting to theatrics thought they could bend the rules. “So, what exactly *did* you do, Mr. Snyder?” The judge said peering over her bifocals.

“I didn’t murder anyone, prostitute myself, rob a bank or embezzle money from an employer.”

“But you did run up a tab of a hundred and eighty-five dollars in unpaid parking tickets.”

Norman breathed out sharply, expelling all the air from his lungs forcefully. “I do the bulk of my shopping downtown, but there’s never any on-street parking, and the computerized meters you installed last year eat up all my spare change.” “A crummy quarter buys fifteen minutes on a municipal parking meter,” Norman continued bitterly. “If town officials cared about local merchants, they’d do away with the meters altogether. It’s just legalized extortion.”

The courtroom doors inched open, and an emaciated, gray-haired woman slipped noiselessly into the room, choosing a seat at the rear. Paige recognized Norman’s mother. Even back to their high school days, Mrs. Snyder affected a chronically careworn, beaten-dog

demeanor. When the reporter looked again, the woman had slid strategically fifteen feet to the left on the oak bench and was hidden behind a thick column.

The judge picked up the mahogany-colored gavel and ran a finger over the broad head. "You're wasting the court's valuable time."

"I *am* the court."

Judge Kirk winced. She sat up straight, waving the gavel at the young man. "What did you just say?"

Norman Snyder rose to his feet behind the defendants' table. "As a citizen, my tax dollars provide for all this." He waved a hand in a sweeping gesture. "I don't pay your salary as a public servant so you can talk to me in that officious, condescending tone."

Danny Sullivan, the bailiff, leaned forward, crooked his head to one side and gazed at the judge trying to decipher her intent. Did the defendant need to be restrained? Removed from the court? No one had ever been so outspoken. They wouldn't dare. "That bit of histrionics," Judge Kirk returned coolly, "just cost you another hundred and fifty dollars added to what you already owe."

"Which is to say," Norman lowered his voice in a baiting tone, "you run your court like a cab company, where the meter keeps ticking until the patron reaches a final destination."

Judge Kirk chuckled, but it was not a terribly comforting sound. "You can debark, get out of the taxi right here by paying the various fines, if you like," she shot back, "or try my patience further and see where that gets you."

Now Danny Sullivan relaxed. The bailiff leaned back again and rubbed his wide, clean-shaven jaw with an oversized fist. Danny worked the district court, specifically Judge Kirk's courtroom, for the past fifteen years, and Paige doubted the court officer had ever seen anyone go at the judge like this spunky defendant.

"Welcome to the electronic age, Mr. Snyder." Like a theatrical entertainer, Judge Kirk was playing to the crowd. At the same time that she admonished the defendant, the woman was putting on a command performance. "You conveniently confuse progress with coercion," the judge rebuffed. "But this isn't a college debating team and civil law demands that you stop wasting the court's valuable time and pay the fine and fees." Judge Kirk spoke in a measured, off-hand manner, but it was clear that she had no intentions of allowing the spectacle to drag on much longer.

Paige was familiar with a broad range of miscreants, the flotsam and jetsam that flowed like human sludge through district court. There were the surly, inarticulate types too stupid to hold their own with the irascible judge. Most, a solid eighty per cent, were grungy lowlifes - gamblers, petty crooks, alcoholics, druggies and middle-aged, recidivists with anger management issues. Norman Snyder fit neatly into none of these categories. The robust defendant lowered his eyes and seemed lost in private reverie for the better part of a minute. When he finally raised his head, the body language was thoroughly relaxed, almost congenial. "There are two things," Norman spoke easily, measuring his words. "After spending a wretched night in jail, I entered your courtroom this morning with the intent of paying the parking tickets. But now I'd rather rot in hell than submit to your vindictive whims."

Dead silence.

Judge Kirk removed her glasses letting them slip down on a beaded, gold chain. She made a tent with her hands, flexing her knuckles in and out. "Two things... you said there were two things you had to say."

Norman glanced at the judge for a brief second then directed his words at the empty stenographer's chair. "Autocrats rules by decree. They are cruel, despotic, overbearing... value nobody's opinion but their own. You are a goddamn autocrat!"

A wave of jittery uncertainty swept over the courtroom. Danny Sullivan, who had been staring intently at the blonde-haired defendant, blinked violently and averted his eyes. Several visitors squirmed uncomfortably in their seats. Judge Kirk kicked at the floor sending her leather-padded executive chair spinning a full hundred-and-eighty degrees. As though she had disappeared behind an inch-thick, armor-plated shield, the woman lingered facing the wall for a solid minute before swinging back around.

"That sophomoric remark, Mr. Snyder, earned you another night in jail. I'll see you again tomorrow morning, and we will pick up where we left off." She lifted the gavel high in the air. "Additionally, I'm assigning your case to a public defender, who hopefully will prove savvier with judicial protocol."

She brought the gavel down with a resounding crash that startled several spectators, causing them to lurch disjointedly in their seats. Paige watched Norman as he was led in handcuffs from the courtroom. What had he accomplished by badgering the judge? The more Paige thought about it, Norman's surly nonchalance suggested that there might be even worse fireworks in the morning.

\* \* \* \*

The following Friday morning, Paige dropped by the Silver Palate Diner, where Norman had been working since his academic disintegration. Sitting at the counter, the reporter lingered over a plate of scrambled eggs and hash browns. When the waitress finally brought the check, she asked, "Is Norman working today?"

The waitress seemed momentarily flustered. "Norman's on indefinite leave."

"How indefinite?"

She pawed at the linoleum floor with the toe of her shoe. "I ain't at liberty to say," the waitress mumbled with lowered eyes, whisked the empty plate off the counter and hurried away.

From the restaurant Paige drove to the county courthouse. No cases were in session. Wandering about the building, she finally located Danny Sullivan sipping a cup of tepid coffee in the jurors' holding room. "That guy with the unpaid parking tickets...whatever happened to him?"

The bailiff's expression turned grim. Danny raised a stubby hand and directed an index finger at a stain on the oak floor between his legs. "He's still here... two floors down in the hoosegow."

"You can't be serious?" When there was no immediate reply, she added, "It's been a freakin' week!"

"He still refuses to pay and Judge Kirk won't give an inch."

"He called her an autocrat... a legal bully."

The bailiff cracked a close-lipped smile. "Despite his abundant shortcomings, Norman Snyder is an excellent judge of character."

"He won't pay?"

"Not a cent."

"Then it's a hopeless impasse." Paige watched as a lawyer sporting a blue, pin-striped suit sauntered down the hallway dragging an unwieldy thick briefcase. "Did Judge Kirk set a public defender?"

"Ernie something-or-other."

"Smoltz?"

"Yeah, that's it!"

Paige rolled her eyes. "A perfectly wonderful choice!"

Ernie Smoltz, Esq. was a trial lawyer who had been disbarred several years back for misappropriating an elderly client's funds. He had since made restitution in full and been reinstated. Ernie was considered semi-retired and generally held in very low regard by the other legal staff.

"Mrs. Snyder dropped by earlier this morning." Danny Sullivan's normally impassive features cycled through a series of violent contortions eventually settling on a comical grin. Edging closer, he positioned his lips within an inch of her left ear. "The woman offered to pay all her son's outstanding parking tickets plus the contempt of court fine."

"And?"

A steady trickle of prospective jurors began filling up the room. Some brought books or newspapers. One middle-age man carried a pair headphones and an MP3 player. A woman sporting a flowery print dress was channel surfing on a TV in the far corner of the room. "Norman said that, if she paid the court, he'd recite the Jewish prayer for the dead and never talk to her as long as she lived."

Paige winced. "I don't suppose that went over well."

Danny greeted a recent arrival, handing him a brochure describing court protocol as he entered the jurors' room. "Mrs. Snyder was an emotional wreck when she arrived and even worse when she left."

\* \* \* \* \*

A week later, Paige's mother stood outside her daughter's bedroom. "Mrs. Snyder's downstairs in the living room and wishes to speak to you." She wore a pinched expression as though the neighbor waiting at the bottom of the stairs was more intruder than guest.

"About what?"

"She wouldn't say."

"Have Mrs. Snyder come upstairs," Paige replied.

Her mother went off and a moment later Paige heard the creaking of the risers as the dour-faced woman with the lugubrious disposition trudged to the second floor landing. "Sorry to bother you on short notice," she remarked absently, her almond eyes flitting distractedly about the tidy bedroom. "How's everything at the newspaper?"

"Fine." For a fleeting moment, the thought occurred to Paige that Mrs. Snyder might pester her to find an entry-level position at the Brandenburg Gazette for her discombobulated son, but the woman quickly laid that unnecessary fear to rest.

"Norm isn't doing so hot these days." She made a sniffing sound and rubbed her longish nose. "I need a favor." The middle-aged woman threw formality out the window. "Someone with a head on her shoulders to talk horse sense with Norman."

"I don't follow you."



Mrs. Snyder picked at a piece of lint on the sleeve of her blouse. "My son's washing dishes in a greasy spoon."

"He's still employed at the diner?" Paige asked.

"Yes, of course. He went off to work six o'clock this morning," she confirmed.

Paige lowered her eyes. Norman was out of jail, and his mother clearly had no intention of mentioning anything about the parking ticket fiasco.

"In recent weeks, he goes away, disappears for days at a time." Mrs. Snyder jutted her flabby lower lip in a theatrical scowl. "I say, 'Norman, I tried to reach you a dozen times over the weekend. Where the hell were you?'"

"And?"

"He says he traveled north."

North - what did that signify? Up the road to Foxboro Stadium where the New England Patriots football team played, still further north to New Hampshire or Vermont... north to the polar latitudes? "So what do you want from me, Mrs. Snyder?"

"Norman's always been an impressionable soul. What with all the crazy books he reads and that god-awful German poetry, his brains got muddled something awful."

"Norman speaks German?"

"No, not a word," Mrs. Snyder clarified. She began to cry, making horrible snuffling sounds, her pendulous lower lip quivering under the burden of grief. Reaching into her purse, she withdrew a scrap of paper and handed it to Paige. "He reads this mystical gibberish in translation and then the poor boy doesn't know which end is up anymore."

Paige laid the sheet on the bed without looking at it. "You brought something that belongs to Norman with neither his knowledge nor consent."

Mrs. Snyder slumped down on the edge of the bed and shrugged dismissively. "It's just a poem by Rilke that he downloaded off the internet."

Paige lowered her eyes and read silently.

*Sometimes a man stands up during supper  
and walks outdoors, and keeps on walking,  
because of a church that stands somewhere in the East.  
And his children say blessings on him as if he were dead.*

Rainer Maria Rilke

"So what the hell is a church that stands somewhere in the East?" Mrs. Snyder rose and began pacing the room, becoming more agitated by the minute. "It's a lot of sappy malarkey, right?" She threw her arms up in an attitude of utter despair. "One lunatic rushes to the East in search of nirvana... some illusive pipe dream, while my son travels north on secretive missions. How can anyone to make sense of such unmitigated foolishness?"

"The church in the East probably refers to some spiritual quest or Holy Grail."

"Norman's agnostic. Holy relics don't figure in the grand scheme of things." When there was no immediate reply, the woman added, "The few times your name came up during high school, Norman always had flattering things to say about you. If he wasn't so painfully shy and tongue-tied around the opposite sex, my son might have even..." The woman cut herself short, abruptly sallying off in another direction. "Maybe you could drop by the diner after work and give the poor boy some moral encouragement. A kind word might lift his broken spirit."

Paige felt overwhelmed. With her gloom-and-doom pronouncements, Phyllis Snyder resembled an emotional pestilence; she sucked every molecule of nourishing oxygen from the air. "I'll go by after work tomorrow."

Mrs. Snyder reached out tentatively and squeezed her hand. "You're a kind-hearted soul." Without another word she retreated to the doorway and lumbered back down the stairs.

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*Sometimes a man stands up during supper...*

Later that night after supper, Paige located Rilke's poem on the internet. Mrs. Snyder had, in typical hysterical fashion, omitted the final refrain:

*Sometimes a man stands up during supper  
and walks outdoors, and keeps on walking,  
because of a church that stands somewhere in the East.  
And his children say blessings on him as if he were dead.*

*And another man, who remains inside his own house,  
dies there, inside the dishes and in the glasses,  
so that his children have to go far out into the world  
toward that same church, which he forgot.*

Yes, of course, Mrs. Snyder would miss what was most essential. Like a Zen koan, an inscrutable riddle, one had to work out the meaning on a personal basis. Turning his back on the hum drum, the adventurous narrator in the Rilke poem journeyed east. Norman Snyder, college dropout, jailbird and intellectual bubble brain, ventured in a hazy, northerly direction. To what end? What ultimate purpose? The forgotten church – where did that ambiguously foggy metaphor lead?

\* \* \* \* \*

At six-fifteen the following afternoon, Paige wandered into the Silver Palate Diner, took a seat at the counter and ordered coffee. A moment passed and Norman came bustling through the door from the kitchen with a plastic rack full of clean water glasses. Noticing his former classmate, he hurried over.

"What a nice surprise!" Norman stood on the far side of the counter grinning good-naturedly, his wavy blond hair cascading down over his ears. He could have passed for a West Coast beachcomber or hippy with mystical affinities. "I heard you got a plum job over at the newspaper." In no great hurry to stack the glasses, Norman rested his fists on the marble countertop.

Earlier in the day, Paige had rehearsed several, equally distasteful strategies for finessing the encounter. She would open with innocuous pleasantries and, once the conversation hit an awkward snag, cut her losses and slip out the door. Properly understood, the visit was nothing more than an empty formality, a bit of misplaced altruism foisted on her by a manipulative, blatantly neurotic and over-protective mother.

Mrs. Snyder had resorted to emotional subterfuge, whining and wheedling until Paige agreed to do her bidding. But Norman was neither morbidly depressed nor emotionally unhinged. He had apparently survived his week in the town lockup unscathed. "Actually, I'm here under false pretenses," Paige blurted.

"Excuse me?"

"I came under your mother's auspices, to talk you off the ledge... a mission of mercy."

She hadn't intended to say anything of the sort. Norman wagged his head in disbelief. "My mother came to see you?" Paige nodded. Norman reached out and patted her wrist, a reassuring gesture. "You're the fifth sacrificial lamb." His expression turned reflective. "Look, I go on break in ten minutes, if you don't mind waiting around."

"I came here expressly to see you," Paige reminded him. Norman cracked a boyish grin and went off to unload the drinking glasses.

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"In answer to your unspoken question," Norman noted, "I'm not quite sure what I'm doing bussing tables, scrubbing pots and pans. Think of it as an existential rite of passage."

"A dark night of the soul."

"Yes, something of the sort."

"But scrubbing pots and pans... how does that make sense?"

"Sometimes doing *nothing* can be proactive." His tone remained cordial if a tad flippant. "Say, what are you doing next weekend?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I'm heading north on a little adventure next Friday afternoon and was wondering if you'd like to join me."

There was nothing salacious in his tone or body language. Rather, it was the unsettling and ill-defined '*north*' that put Paige's nerves on edge. "How far north?"

"Scarborough, Maine.... on the ocean just over the town line from Old Orchard Beach and the boardwalk. I walk the sand dunes and contemplate my navel among other things."

"It's the middle of November, a week before Thanksgiving. Isn't it freezing up there?"

"Brisk... maybe a bit chilly," he countered, "but on the plus side, room rates are dirt cheap and coastal Maine is especially scenic this time of year."

"No, but thanks for the invite."

Behind the counter, a waitress was gesturing frantically. She needed Norman to finesse a five-gallon milk carton into the chrome dispenser. "If you have a change of heart, here's my cell number." He scribbled the digits on a napkin and headed back to work.

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A year earlier in celebration of her tenth year anniversary at the courthouse, the newspaper published a full-length article on Judge Kirk. The senior editor suggested that, rather than focus on her professional achievements, which had already been documented *ad nauseam*, perhaps Paige could take a human interest slant – research the early childhood years long before the diminutive woman ever considered a career in law. Paige called the middle-aged woman at home later that evening; Judge Kirk was ecstatic at the prospect of a feature article cobbled together with a lavish spread of full-color pictures in the Sunday supplement.

Felicia Gwendolyn Kirk was the only child of a neurosurgeon with a three-story brownstone in the posh Chestnut Hill section of Newton. The doctor owned a second, vacation home on Block Island. “We stabled horses. It was a bucolic existence, like something out of a Victorian novel,” the judge gushed.

“Pride and Prejudice,” Paige offered.

“Yes, exactly that same sort of rustic perfection.” As they chatted, a photographer scampered soundlessly about the living room snapping photos. Judge Kirk’s husband, who joined his wife for pictures, had since gone off elsewhere. “All summer long, I rode bareback through meadows filled with tiger lilies, salt spray roses and humming birds. From June when school got out straight through to Labor Day, I hardly ever wore a pair of shoes.”

Paige thought the last remark a bit of a stretch, but obviously the youthful Felicia Kirk lived a blessed life far removed from the humdrum monotony that most middle-class working stiff s endured. “Our summer home was a mile and a half from the Southeast Lighthouse. A favorite tourist spot, it draws thousands of visitors to Block Island each year.”

“I toured the structure during a trip to the island a few years back,” Paige remarked. The lighthouse featured a six-sided, red brick base leading up to a formidable steel enclosure which housed the light element. An attached, three-story building with scalloped windows was only slightly shorter than the massive light itself.

“There is so much history in the region,” Judge Kirk gushed. “The area around Block Island has been the site of numerous shipwrecks, including the *Larchmont*, in 1907.”

“I wasn’t aware – “

“And, of course,” she was almost tripping over her words, “the wreck of the *Princess Augusta*, also known as the Palatine ship which was later immortalized by John Greenleaf Whittier in his famous poem, *The Wreck of the Palatine*”. The judge sat up straighter on the sofa just as the photographer sneaked around the walnut coffee table to snap a flurry of additional pictures. Raising an arm in a theatrical gesture, she recited from memory in a stilted, breathy monotone.

*“Circled by waters that never freeze,  
Beaten by billow and swept by breeze,  
Lieth the island of Manisees, ... ”*

“Very nice!” Paige responded when the woman was done with the poem.

She felt like throwing up. This dwarfish gnome, who sat in judgment throughout the week and sent people off to jail with a resounding crash of her mahogany gavel, hadn’t a solitary clue how the other half lived. The woman spent her childhood summers galloping frenetically around an historic island off the Atlantic coast and clearly considered herself royalty, an aristocratic breed apart.

Paige wrote the puff piece, which appeared the third weekend in July. Readers found the story of Felicia Kirk’s early years bewitching, magical. As a child, Judge Kirk enjoyed a fairy tale existence. If she was an insufferable egomaniac with an atrocious sense of entitlement, it didn’t come across in Paige’s article. Or perhaps it did, but most people opted to ignore the obvious.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back at the *Brandenberg Gazette*, Paige checked messages and set to work on the lead article describing the horny town solicitor's fall from grace. The community would be outraged. A longtime, city employee, who received a generous salary plus benefits, caught betraying the public trust – the taxpayers would scream for blood.

Over the remainder of the morning into the early afternoon, Paige polished the article about the wayward town solicitor. Two more pieces had to be proof read before sending them off to the printer. Shortly after lunch, a group of students from Brandenberg High School had arranged to visit the paper on an informal walking tour, and Paige invited them back to discuss job opportunities in the print media and field questions.

*What did she like best about journalism?*

Journalism, at its best, was a rather glorified term for unearthing the subtle nuances hidden away in seemingly innocuous stories. What was it H. L. Mencken had said about the profession? Journalism provided its readership with hard facts while literature and poetry dealt with truth. Yes, something to that effect. A crotchety Felicia Kirk could ride bareback through the wildflower meadows of Block Island, recite Whittier's poems by heart and schmooze with politicians, but she was still nothing more than an autocratic fact, never a sublime truth.

\* \* \* \* \*

A week passed. Paige had all but forgotten about her clandestine visit to the Silver Palate Diner. In the kitchen the telephone clattered. "It's Mrs. Snyder," Paige's mother yelled up the stairs.

Paige blew out her cheeks and counted to ten before reaching for the phone. "Hello?"

"You saw Norman?" The tone was belligerent - borderline confrontational, as though the woman expected Paige to fax a twenty-page, confidential report after returning home from the diner.

"I met with Norman last Thursday and can assure you he's not the least bit distraught about his current lifestyle."

"Well, he ought to be, considering what that boy put me through these past few years." The sarcasm was palpable. Without skipping a beat, the woman demanded, "So tell me what he said."

"Certainly not! I don't appreciate the cloak and dagger intrigues or being blackmailed into becoming your surrogate. Goodbye, Mrs. Snyder." She hung up the phone and promptly burst into tears.

"Your fingers are shaking something awful." Mrs. Endicott pulled her daughter close and bussed her cheek, quickly rubbing the wetness away with the heel of her hand. "In the future when that horrid woman calls, I'll simply tell her you're not available."

"No, it's not Mrs. Snyder's fault." Paige insisted, blotting her eyes with a napkin. "There was some ugliness at the newspaper earlier today and I'm still feeling a bit shaky."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"No, it's over and done with." She pushed her mother away at arm's length. "What's the weather forecast?"

Mrs. Endicott eyed her uncertainly. "Chilly... below freezing overnight but warming into the low thirties by midday."

Paige retreated back upstairs.

She took a bath and steeped in the warm sudsy water for a half hour before finally washing her hair. Paige chose a pair of flannel pajamas and prepared for bed. Shutting the bedroom door, she reached for the cell phone. "Hello, Norman? Your mother's a royal pain in the ass, but that's not why I called." Perched in a lotus position on the top of her queen-size bed, Paige took a deep breath and blew all the air from her lungs in one sinewy thread. "That escape weekend you were telling me about... is it too late to reserve an extra room?"

"Probably not." His tone was relaxed, nonplussed. "I'll call and check accommodations." He hung up the phone. Ten minutes later, Paige's phone twittered. "I reserved two adjoining rooms on the first floor with baseboard heat. The place is rustic... no frills but very clean."

"Thanks." Paige could feel her mood brightening.

"I can pick you up at the newspaper after work if you like."

The girl flinched. "I'm calling in sick tomorrow. Drop by my house instead."

"Be ready around five and bring a warm sweater. Evenings can get downright frigid." The line went dead.

Paige studied her hands, the same hands that had been trembling violently only a few hours earlier. The supple fingers lay placidly in her lap. The worst was over, thank God!

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During the trip north, Norman avoided downtown Boston, swinging west of the urban center. The detour added another half hour to their final destination but proved a wash by avoiding the late afternoon, home-bound traffic. Reaching the New Hampshire state line in just over an hour, they cruised through Kittery with its bargain outlets a scant twenty minutes later. Close on to seven-thirty they reached downtown Old Orchard Beach. The boardwalk and theme park that normally bustled with thousands of bikini-clad tourists was boarded up tight, not a single shop or burger joint open for business.

"Where do we eat?" Paige's stomach began gurgling restively several miles back.

"There's a seafood restaurant within walking distance of the motel." Norman took a hard right onto East Grandview and skirted the ocean. The temperature had dropped another ten degrees since leaving Boston. Shortly they passed into Scarborough. The motel was three blocks down. "I'll check in and then we can grab dinner."

Paige followed Norman into the motel lobby where a matronly brunette assigned their keys and took the deposit. Norman headed back in the direction of the car. "Shouldn't we at least view the rooms?"

"The rooms are clean, tidy, small, dowdy and a bit old-fashioned. Let's eat!"

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At the clapboard restaurant, Paige ordered lobster, while Norman settled on the seafood medley with baked scrod, scallops and shrimp in a béarnaise sauce. "Maddie Etheridge got married last year," he noted in an off-hand manner.

"Really?" Paige vaguely remembered Maddie, a WASP'y blonde with translucent skin. The girl drove a fully-loaded BMW convertible to school her senior year, courtesy of her father, a stock broker with a firm on State Street in Boston.

"The wedding was held at the Park Plaza overlooking the Charles," Norman reported dispassionately. "Forty thousand bucks... that's what they spent on the wedding ceremony and all the trappings."

Paige tried to picture Maddie traipsing down the aisle in the swanky Georgian Ballroom of the Park Plaza, to the dulcet tones of a classical chamber orchestra. The waitress returned with a basket of warmed bread rolls and their salads. "Thirteen months and three days."

Paige spread butter on her roll and teased the onions to the side of her salad with the tines of her fork. "A little over a year... what does that time span represent?"

"How long the marriage lasted," Norman replied. "Maddie and Mr. Right are presently in divorce court undoing the irreparable damage done at the pricey Park Plaza." Norman speared a cherry tomato with his fork. "A hundred dollars a day over the life span of their glitzy marriage - that's what it ultimately cost." He wasn't being judgmental. On the contrary Norman's tone was laced with regret that Maddie's life had veered so badly off course and ultimately fallen to pieces.

When the meal arrived, he leaned across the table and thumped Paige on the forearm. "I read an article in *National Geographic* on bride kidnapping."

"Okay." Paige never quite knew what Norman was going to throw at her. Sometimes he tended to lapse into seemingly unrelated streams of consciousness, but in a perverse sort of way, that was half the fun.

"In the Asian republics such as Chechnya and Kyrgyzstan, the family of a young girl sets a bride's price and expects payment from prospective suitors."

"The opposite of a traditional dowry," Paige noted.

"If a man is poor and can't afford a wife, he may simply grab one off the street and take her home to his family, where they hold her prisoner until the fellow can meet with the girl's parents to negotiate an acceptable arrangement." Norman stared at his baked potato. "Apparently the practice is widespread throughout patriarchal, Moslem societies where women have little say in the matter. Half of all Kyrgyz marriages include bride kidnapping. Two thirds are non-consensual."

"What about the rest?"

"Sometimes couples fall in love, but the parents object to the marriage so they 'elope' under the guise of bride kidnapping."

"Romeo and Juliette," Paige interjected, "with a distinctly Asian twist." For the briefest speck of a moment, the utterly absurd notion that Norman Snyder might be planning a similar daring feat flitted through Paige's sleepy brain.

He raised a forkful of butternut squash laced with cinnamon and honey to his lips. "Yes, a perfectly good analogy."

"And how do these bride kidnappings work out?"

Sipping at his draft beer, he made a wry face. "A hell of a lot better than Maddie Etheridge's matrimonial fiasco."

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After supper they returned to the motel. "I'm going to walk the beach," Norman announced.

"It is pitch dark," Paige blustered, "with the temperature bottoming out in the low forties." The baseboard heating, which came up immediately when she adjusted the thermostat,

was making a ticking sound as forced hot water coursed through the metal fins. The room was warming nicely and she wanted to go to bed.

"I won't be long." He reached for a wool jacket.

Bone-weary, Paige had no desire to be left alone in the no-frills cabin. "On second thought, I'll join you."

A path through a cluster of salt spray roses and rubbery sea grass in back of the motel lobby led down to the beach only a few hundred feet away. Although the sun had gone down hours earlier, a harvest moon hung like a fluorescent bulb in the star-flecked easterly sky. High tide at night - neither the thought nor physical imagery had ever occurred to her before setting foot on the frigid beach, and yet the churning, wind-swept waves accompanied them, like a soothing prayer on their late-night stroll.

As wave after wave crashed down on the blackened sand, Paige felt infinitely happy. Even the chilly sea breeze couldn't dampen her newfound courage and sense of resolve. Certain unpleasanties needed attending to at the Brandenburg Gazette as soon as she returned home. What had seemed insurmountable - utterly hopeless just a few hours earlier - was suddenly of no great consequence. Without warning, Norman abruptly changed direction and sauntered down to the briny water's edge. With the incoming tide licking at the toes of his shoes, he confided, "I got arrested a couple of weeks ago."

"Yes, I know. I was in the courtroom covering another case that same day."

Norman chuckled sending a shimmery stream of warm breath into the frosty night. "The solicitor with a penchant for prostitutes?"

"None other," Paige confirmed. "Your sparring match with Judge Kirk reminded me of Thoreau's tract on Civil Disobedience."

Out in the distance a deep bass fog horn sounded and the lights of a cargo vessel heading out to sea blinked intermittently. A good minute passed in silence, before Norman cleared his throat and said, "Thoreau believed that governments are typically more harmful than helpful."

"In Judge Kirk's case that's fairly obvious."

Norman leaped back as an incoming wave skittered up the sand in the direction of his ankles. "Thoreau also said that judgments of an individual's conscience were not necessarily inferior to the decisions of a political body -"

"Or a municipal court," Paige interjected. She felt her heels sinking in the soggy sand as she rushed to catch up, "Thoreau also claimed that, when he was imprisoned for not paying the poll tax, he felt freer in prison than with people outside."

Norman reached out in the darkness and teasingly tousled her hair. "Yes, our neighbor from Walden Pond only spent a single night behind bars. Ms Kirk left me to rot for a solid week." Norman walked a mile and a half in the glistening sand before reversing direction and heading back. Feathery plumes of frosty air tumbled from his nostril. Several times he stroked his beard and she thought he might say something, but nothing came of it. When they were back at the motel, he said, "We'll breakfast around eight and then plan our day."

The room had warmed to a comfortable seventy degrees. "What do you think your mother would say if she knew I was aiding and abetting her deranged son?"

"Let's not go there," he quipped and retreated back to his own room, chuckling lightly while running a thumb and index finger along the wispy beard where it curled up under his chin.

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In the morning they doubled back through Old Orchard, which resembled a ghost town, and Norman veered right at a flashing yellow light. A half mile down, the parking lot at Michelle's Breakfast Nook was full to overflowing. "The locals eat here. Breakfast special's the best deal, but you choose whatever you want."

After breakfast, he drove to the Len Libby chocolate factory, a famous tourist attraction a few miles up the road back in Scarborough. In nineteen ninety-seven, the owner of the candy store commissioned an artist to fashion a seventeen-hundred-pound, life-size moose. Sculpted from milk chocolate, the antlered beast was constructed on premises in four weeks. From when they opened the doors at nine a.m. until closing, the store ran a video showing visitors how the candied creature eventually came to life

Len Libby featured dark chocolate prepared with pure butter and heavy creams. The glass display case held a huge selection of truffles stuffed with real fruit. There were marzipan honey almond, pecan buds, butterscotch squares, peanut brittle and a butter cream concoction laced with brown sugar. The girl behind the counter recommended the toffee molasses chips and Bordeaux dark nougat. Paige bought an assortment of chocolates, taffy and fudge.

Back in the center of town, the boardwalk was locked up for the season. Norman indicated an elderly woman sprawled on a beach chair. "That's Mrs. Bryant over there with the two Lhasa Apsos." The lapdogs were running amok in the shallows. Norman waved and Mrs. Bryant returned the greeting. "Her husband died a few years back. She has grown children in Bangor but prefers her independence."

Paige suddenly felt weary. Regardless how many new adventures Norman conjured up, they would still be heading back in less than a day - he to a dead-end, meaningless job and her to...

Paige wasn't terribly sure what she was heading back to, and the short-lived, manic buoyancy of the previous night had dissipated, gone to seed. "What's the matter?" Norman demanded. She was standing next to him with her head down crying, the wetness dripping on the powdery sand.

"The middle of the week when I realized that you still hadn't been released from jail, I approached the managing editor. I told him what Judge Kirk had done to you and that I had written up a rough draft, an exposé describing the judge's excessive behavior."

"Okay." Norman's eyes narrowed as he stared at her fixedly.

"The manager informed me that he sat on the board of several prominent corporations with the illustrious Judge Kirk and had no intention of publishing anything that might hinder her career." A seagull hovering over the receding tide got caught in an updraft and drifted further out to sea. "I handed him a copy of the text. He promptly tore it up and threatened to fire me if I ever broached the issue again."

"Never bothered to read what you wrote?"

"Not a word."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Quit." Paige smiled enigmatically and watched as the buffeted sea bird finally managed, despite the blustery weather, to gracelessly settle on a white-capped wave. "First thing in the morning, I'll tender my resignation." She began to giggle fitfully. "Maybe when the dust settles, I could become your understudy at the diner."

"In all seriousness, the Silver Palate is looking for a waitress three to eleven. I could put in a good word."

"I might just do that... at least until I get my nerves back under control and decide what I want to be when I eventually grow up." As she was standing there with the lapdogs in the distance and waves scudding across the sand, Paige reached out and placed a hand on his chest. "Why haven't you tried to kiss me?"

Norman's eyes narrowed. "Until a moment ago, I didn't know any upwardly mobile, journalists who dated dishwashers."

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Two hundred yards away, the dogs were becoming fretful and ill-behaved, yipping, yapping and lurching about aimlessly. Mrs. Bryant decided to head home. She folded the beach chair, harnessed and leashed the dogs before turning one last time to wave at the twosome, but, unfortunately, the young couple was preoccupied and missed the gracious gesture.

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